“A people who have not the pride to record their own history will not long have the virtues to make their history worth recording; and no people who are indifferent to their past need hope to make their future great.”
— Jan Gleysteen
In this Issue

Many of the cultural and religious sensibilities we recognize as distinctive for Russian Mennonites come to us from the Polish-Prussian period of Anabaptist history. This issue of Preservings features a number of articles that explore that history. Peter Klassen, a long time student of the Polish-Prussian experience, leads the feature section with his thoughts on the Polish period of Anabaptism, a period he feels has been sorely neglected by scholars. Preservings co-editor, John J. Friesen reflects on Klassen’s work with his own thoughts on the theological importance of the Polish-Prussian period and the legacy of that experience among Russian Mennonites to this day. Dan Stone, a now retired historian from the University of Winnipeg adds to our understanding of the context of Mennonites in the Vistula Delta with his overview of the Teutonic Knights who conquered the area in the centuries before Mennonites arrived. In our family history section Walter Epp shares his odyssey of looking for his Prussian heritage and showcases some of the maps that he uncovered in his quest.

A second focus of this issue is the East and West Reserves of Manitoba. Ron Friesen completes his overview of the cheese factories of the East Reserve by looking at the cooperative period that began in the 1930s. The West Reserve is featured in three articles: Arnie Neufeld’s recollections and history of Horndean and John J. Friesen’s article on the non-Mennonites of the West Reserve both deal with the ‘edges’ of West Reserve life. Bruce Wiebe offers us the first detailed look at how the sale of West Reserve lands took place after the move to Mexico by the Old Colony people. Blumenort, Gnadenthal and Hamburg illustrate the complexity of selling the land when an entire community decides to leave at the same time.

Two reports of travels are striking in how they illustrate the widely dispersed, but similarity of Low German peoples. Put together Kennert Giesbrecht and Waldfried Klassen’s adventure driving from Steinbach to Paraguay and visiting Low German people on the way and my experience of talking Low German with people who live in the vast steppe of Siberia show us the importance of language in creating and sustaining a community.

In addition to Walter Epp’s story of looking for his roots in Prussia our family history section explores both ends of life. Katherine Martens tells of the experiences of giving birth, while Roland Sawatzky paints a picture of Mennonite practices surrounding death. The second and final installment of Tim Janzen’s work on the Bergthal Colony genealogical records, and the biography of the multi-faceted Cornelius Ens from Saskatchewan complete this issue’s foray into the vagaries of family life.

A report from a visiting graduate student who is Ukrainian, but studies Mennonites in Manitoba, Bruce Wiebe’s interesting report on the Waisanamt Records in Mexico, and our usual book reviews, news and letters make this what we think will be an engaging and interesting issue.

Hans Werner, co-editor

PRESERVINGS 2010

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Our Cover: The photo on the cover of this issue is that of an arcaded house built by Mennonites, in the village of Lubieszewo, the former Ladekop, Poland. It was taken by Elfrieda Toews while on a tour of the Vistula Delta.
A serious issue facing Mennonites in Mexico is lack of security due to the drug trade. In December 2006, after considerable pressure from President George W. Bush, the Mexican President Felipe Calderon agreed to step up his government’s efforts to reduce the flow of drugs from Mexico into the United States, and to reduce the flow of guns and cash into Mexico from the US. This decision resulted in a war on drugs, which has caused widespread violence, engulfing, in particular, northern Mexico.

The character of the Mexican war on drugs has been primarily shaped by the United States’ long standing war on drugs, carried on both within and beyond its borders. This American war has been brutally violent, has cost many lives, has sapped the country of huge financial resources, and resulted in hundreds of thousands of people being imprisoned. Despite this effort, the war on drugs has been a failure.

When President Calderon agreed to increase the pressure on the drug trade, it quickly became evident that many local officials and police were under the control of the drug lords, and not willing or able to stop the trade. Some police were arrested by the government, others were killed by the drug people, and many simply resigned because they were in an impossible situation, and feared for their lives. At the local level in Mexico, the war on drugs has largely been lost.

In some parts of the northern Mexican states, the drug cartels are the “de facto” local governments. They collect “taxes” from local businesses. The press is being intimidated so that many crimes are not being reported. The local press is even asking the drug cartels publicly what they can or cannot publish, as happened in Ciudad Juarez a number of weeks ago, after some reporters and editors were killed.

In the recent Mexican election, it became evident the drug war is also affecting politics. A number of candidates for office were killed, and the suspicion was that they were not acceptable to the cartels.

This has left the federal police and army to carry most of the battle against the drug trade. The result has been much violence with many killed on both sides. Since the war on drugs began in 2006, almost 30,000 Mexicans have died in drug related violence.

As the federal forces have caught, executed or brought to trial some of the drug lords, another aspect of the war has intensified, namely, between drug cartels who are fighting for control of turf. In cases where drug lords have been captured or executed, neighbouring drug lords have tried to gain control of their territory, or minor players have seized the opportunity to expand their influence and income.

Large sections of the Mexican society have become desperately poor, especially after the NAFTA agreement forced many small farmers off their land, and into unemployment. The lure of money is one of the reasons why the drug people are able to find virtually endless recruits among the unemployed.

How will this violence affect Mennonites in Mexico? So far it has affected them only marginally, primarily those with some connection, in the past or present, to the drug trade. But overall, the violence is spreading and intensifying. Car travel is ever more dangerous, especially at night. Expensive cars and pick-ups become targets for theft. Kidnappings for ransom are increasing. Police may refuse to investigate vehicle thefts, fearing drug people are involved. Some fear that Mexico may devolve into civil war with the established powers of the federal government, army and police on one side, and the drug-related people on the other.

How will Mennonites, who have historically been non-resistant, and who moved to Mexico because they were promised exemption from military service, respond to this violence? How will Mexican Mennonites, who have seen themselves as separated from the political system, but negotiate with it at many levels and over many issues, fare in a situation in which the various levels of government are either controlled by drug cartels, or are using violence to confront the drug situation?

The future looks murky. How will this dangerous and violent situation be resolved? Will it become ever more dangerous? Will Mexico continue to be a safe home for Mennonites? What will the future hold for Mennonites in Mexico?

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**News**

**Ens Homestead becomes Heritage Site.**

Some 150-180 people attended the Ens Heritage Homestead dedication and plaque unveiling service in Reinland on Sunday, August 8, 2010. This homestead is the first municipal heritage site declared by the RM of Stanley. Adolf Ens, in his presentation and dedication address, took listeners back to when the settlement of the West Reserve first began. He spoke of some of the hardships and heartaches of the early families that had lived in this homestead, and reminded that we were heirs of a rich history of faith. Abe Ens, the former owner of the homestead, presented a brief history. In 2008 the site was designated as a municipal heritage site and now serves as a museum. Dignitaries Portage-Lisgar MP Candice Hoeppner, Stanley RM Reeve Art Paetkau, and Winkler Mayor Martin Harder brought greetings and extended congratulations. The Boundary Trail Heritage Region was represented by secretary, Penny Burton, who also presented a financial contribution for the erection of the plaque/cairn at the Ens Heritage Homestead to emcee George Ens.

Coffee and dainties served in the comforts of the Reinland Community Centre just across the street concluded the dedication event.

...news continues on page 99
In October 2009, news reports from Northern Poland reflected a situation that must have reminded students of history that the past is ever with us. Television and newspapers reported severe flooding in the Vistula Delta. Heavy rains and strong winds combined to push water upstream in rivers in the Delta. Sand-bagging helped to hold back water in some areas, but many farm and village homes were left standing in water. This sounds much like what happened early in the 1500s when extensive flooding destroyed homes and villages in the Vistula Delta. Some years later Mennonites were invited to come reclaim land that had been flooded. At that time, war and flooding created devastation and loss for those who lived in the region; not surprisingly, landlords soon began intensifying their quest for persons who could drain the flooded lands and make them productive. A number of them looked toward the Netherlands, already noted for its skillful water engineering techniques.

Among those who responded to opportunities to seek a better future on the lands along the southern shores of the Baltic were a number of Mennonites in the Netherlands and nearby regions in Germany. For them, there could hardly have been a more propitious moment. The central decades of the 16th century were not friendly to those who were critical of current religious structures. The centuries-old practice of using the power of the state to enforce official religious belief was well entrenched. When Luther called for dramatic religious change, he was quickly condemned. He in turn decided to call for a reformation that demanded dramatic change in religious landscape in the upheaval of the Reformation. Most reformers, such as Luther, Zwingli and Calvin, tried to bring religious change without challenging or upsetting traditional political, social and economic structures. But not all advocates of change were content to preserve the old order, and instead championed radical views that challenged entrenched power and its supportive political and social systems. For such advocates there was little tolerance.

When Anabaptist-Mennonites began to call for major change, such as a church free from state control, or baptism as a symbol of voluntary identification with a faith community, they found themselves the objects of determined, destructive opposition, both from the Catholic and newer Protestant churches. Expulsion, confiscation of property, prison or death were considered appropriate punishments for those who dared to call for a reformation that demanded dramatic change in traditional practices. The interested observer can “read all about it” in the Martyrs’ Mirror.

If this were a college class, I might well ask, “In such an age of intolerance, which was the first large state in Europe that declared “We will not kill people because of what they believe?”

1. Remember that Switzerland, often seen as the cradle of Anabaptism, still burned “heretics” in the 17th century.
2. Germany, then known as the Holy Roman Empire, adopted policies asserting that only state-approved religions would be tolerated.
3. France had a series of religious wars and events such as the St. Bartholomew’s Massacre, and eventually in 1685 declared that no Protestant worship was to be permitted in the realm.

There was one major exception: POLAND.

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There was one major exception: POLAND.
This kingdom welcomed Mennonites even while they were vigorously opposed elsewhere, enticing many immigrants to settle in Royal or Polish Prussia. For clarification, let me state that the term “Prussia” can be confusing. In the 16th century, and until the partitions of Poland in the late 18th century, the northern part of Poland, where many Mennonites lived, was under the Polish crown, and thus a part of Poland. A neighboring state, called East, or Ducal Prussia, was not part of Poland.

It was in Royal Prussia, then a part of Poland, that Mennonites found a large measure of religious toleration and economic opportunity. Poland’s openness to various faiths and peoples in early modern times has often been overlooked by historians. Yet virtually from the beginning of the Mennonite movement until the partition of Poland, Mennonites enjoyed toleration and relative freedom in the kingdom of Poland.

Seeking a Newer World

The story of Mennonites fleeing persecution and finding a new home was recorded in a number of contemporary chronicles and martyrologies, such as the Martyrs’ Mirror and The Hutterite Chronicle. Seldom, however, has such a motif been so compellingly portrayed as in a drama by the noted playwright, Joost van den Vondel, then the most famous person of letters in the Netherlands. Early in the 17th century he wrote a drama with such deeply-rooted appeal that it was performed annually for centuries in Amsterdam. In it, Mennonites saw their own story. The drama, Gijsbrecht van Aemstel, depicts a people in great danger and distress, uncertain about their future and unsure about an effective response. The archangel Raphael appears in a vision to their leader, Gijsbrecht, and presents a plan for their escape from peril and difficulty in this way:

Depart, go to the fertile Prussian soil
Where the Vistula rushes down from the Polish mountains
And pleasantly washes its fruitful, luxuriant banks.

There build a city, called New Holland. . . .

Vondel, the author had been born into a family that fled Antwerp in the 1580s ahead of the armies of Philip II, which were trying to rid the area of “heretics.” His family later came to Amsterdam, where they joined a Mennonite church. For a time, Vondel even served as a deacon in this church. By the time Vondel wrote this drama in 1638, times had changed dramatically in the Netherlands, which was now celebrated for its liberties. Mennonites there were tolerated and becoming well-established. Vondel’s drama, however, continued to reflect contemporary events in much of Europe. Its viewers could not be unaware that the terrible Thirty
Years War, born largely of religious differences, still raged in Germany, or that Swiss Anabaptists were still being hunted and expelled, or that severe tensions between Catholics and Calvinists in France still persisted long after the nation ended its fierce Wars of Religion. Vondel’s drama continued to play to people who recognized the parallels between Mennonites who had found a new home in Poland and the followers of its hero Gijsbrecht.

The literary images of Poland created by Vondel were vigorously reinforced by strong economic ties between the Netherlands and Poland, especially between the powerful commercial dynamo Amsterdam and Danzig (today’s Gdańsk), the dominant trading center recognized as the proud “Queen of the Baltic.”

**Quest for Religious Change Without Warfare**

By the early 16th century, Danzig had become an important economic and commercial center for Poland and the Baltic. It was into this region of new political structures and vibrant economic development that religious movements of reform came. The guilds and other members of the middle class in Danzig, Elbing and Thorn proved receptive to Luther’s call for reformation. Most of the traders who settled in the commercial bastions were German; the language of the cities, of government and of commerce in the region was largely German, so Luther’s writings were easily disseminated and understood. Despite strong opposition from the Catholic hierarchy and much of the general populace, Danzig embraced Luther’s teachings. Other cities soon followed. The Catholic king and hierarchy were powerless to stop the spread of the new faith.

Elsewhere in Europe, religious and political struggles also produced new power structures to regulate relations between governments and movements, such as the Lutheran and the Reformed faiths. There was, however, no room for those groups who rejected a state religion. As the savage efforts of Charles V and his son Philip II brought prison and death to many Mennonites in the Netherlands and elsewhere, many sought new homes where they could live out their faith. The Vistula Delta, already closely tied to western Europe by trade, was one of the few regions where they found relative toleration. In the delta, several reform movements spread and did so without plunging the region into war.

Starting in the late 1530s, Mennonites from the Netherlands settled in the delta’s fertile lowlands. At the end of the second quarter of the 16th century, Mennonites were still found in substantial numbers in several states of the Netherlands, but the policies of Charles V, his son Philip II and their generals, especially the Duke of Alva, were designed to change that. Alva resolved to carry out Philip’s demands to rid the land of heretics, including Lutherans, Calvinists and the large Mennonite and other Anabaptist communities in the southern Netherlands, such as Flanders. Some of the Anabaptists were fortunate enough to escape with their lives; but the fate of many others is chronicled in van Braght’s *Martyrs’ Mirror.* Despite this harsh persecution, Anabaptism was not exterminated in this region. Because Calvinism had not yet been embraced by a broad spectrum of the population, a recent study has concluded that it was the “Mennonites... (that) kept Protestantism in the Netherlands in existence during the dark years of Hapsburg persecution in the 1540s.”

When the Netherlands rose in revolt against the Spanish overlords, and turmoil swept much of the area, hundreds of Mennonites fled from Flanders and its surroundings to the northern provinces, where the Spanish control was weak. In 1581, a bold declaration of independence became the foundation of what emerged as a new, independent nation. By then, however, a good number of people from the Netherlands and nearby lands had already determined to seek a place that would provide refuge and hope for a peaceful future. For them, as with Vondel’s Gijsbrecht, that place was Royal Prussia, or northern Poland.

**Political and Economic Factors in Mennonite Migration**

The lively and highly profitable sea trade between Amsterdam and Danzig provided many opportunities for Mennonite emigrants to reach the shores of the Baltic, although land transportation was also used. The two cities shared a cosmopolitan flavor. Furthermore, both enjoyed the prominence that, at least in the last half of the 16th and first half of the 17th centuries, bordered on dominance in their respective regions.

Poland’s extensive trade with other countries gave cities such as Danzig a cosmopolitan population that helped to open doors for new religious movements. Both Lutheranism and Calvinism soon gained a following in Danzig, Elbing and other commercial centers, as well as in the lowlands of the Vistula Delta.

An analysis of the shipping statistics between Amsterdam and Danzig from 1550-1650, demonstrates a vibrant economic relationship that was the lifeblood of both cities. During the latter part of the 16th century especially, the number of Dutch ships sailing into Danzig increased dramatically. Commercial activity in Danzig created a wide range of opportunities for entrepreneurs merchants, artisans, laborers, and farmers.
Although some settlers came from Sweden, Scotland, Germany and France, most came from the Netherlands or Low Countries, a term which at that time approximated the territory of today’s Belgium and the Netherlands.

Land ownership was an issue from the beginning. In their earliest days in Royal Prussia, Mennonites established communities of faith, yet were not allowed to have their own church buildings. They met in small groups so as to be unobtrusive. In this, Mennonites were not alone, for early Lutheran congregations faced similar opposition from Catholic authorities and local priests. Permission to build churches had to be obtained from ecclesiastical authorities and involved a great deal of negotiation. Land ownership varied, with some belonging to the crown, some to the Catholic Church, and yet more to cities or nobles.

In Danzig itself, the Frisian Mennonites were not allowed to build a church until 1638 and the Flemish group was forced to wait until 1648. Even then, the city instruction was that the church had to have the outward appearance of a house, since Mennonites were not “officially recognized” as religious movements. Nonetheless, ecclesiastical authorities such as the abbot of Pelplin, the bishop of Wloclawek (Leslau), and the abbess of St. Bridget’s convent in Danzig invited Mennonites to settle on their lands adjacent to the city and allowed them to set up craft and merchant centers.

Ultimately Mennonites were permitted by various authorities to settle in most areas of the Vistula Delta, including the Danzig Werder (west of the Vistula), the Large Werder between the Vistula and Nogat Rivers, the Little Werder southeast of the Nogat. Much of this land was low and marginally useful. Soon Dutch windmills dotted the countryside, while canals, dikes, and drainage ditches transformed swamps into fertile fields. Although these lands might have been part of the royal domain, a lord’s estate, owned by a town or church, economic advantages were far more important to most of these owners than adherence to prescribed religious dogma.

Like Danzig, East Prussia, (east and north of Elbing), also attempted to address the Anabaptist issue after the state had become officially Lutheran. When its Lutheran bishop, Paul Speratus, complained to Duke Albert that the duchy harbored Anabaptists, whom the bishop regarded as heretics, the duke ordered their expulsion. Subsequently, in 1545, the duke, warned by Melanchthon that Anabaptists were again settling in his duchy, responded, “We are of one mind with you; if Anabaptists will not convert [to Lutheranism], they cannot live here.” Consistent with his declarations, Albert issued expulsion edicts. Despite these orders, when Albert’s officials warned him that Mennonites and their businesses were vital

Wharf in Danzig (Gdansk), once a busy port of call by ships from northern Europe, especially from Amsterdam. Photo Credit: Peter Klassen.
to the economy, Albert permitted exceptions to meet these practical considerations. Religious uniformity might be highly desirable, but for this duke, a healthy economy was even more important.

As religious diversity grew, some officials felt it would be good to develop a national policy providing guidance in religious issues.

As Lutheran beliefs gained ground, and as, in addition, the Reformed or Calvinist faith claimed ever more adherents, especially in the cities, Poland gradually adopted a policy of broader toleration. In the middle of the 16th century, the number of non-Catholic nobles in the national Sejm equaled and briefly exceeded the number of Catholic nobles. Both of these groups, however, were committed to religious toleration. Dramatic demonstration of such a commitment occurred in 1573 in Warsaw. Assembled nobles, meeting to elect a new king and to chart a course that would prevent the religious strife such as was clearly observed in other realms, signed an agreement not to engage in war “for differences of faith or church.” This declaration of toleration, signed by the “Confederation of Warsaw” in the shadow of events such as the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre in France, vowed that warfare would not be part of Poland’s struggle with religious change. Even though the Pope and many members of the church hierarchy condemned this action as giving freedom to heresy, the Confederation of Warsaw marked a turning point in Polish history, and highlighted a dramatic moment in the long struggle for religious toleration. So long as Poland existed as a free monarchy, its kings were required to uphold this affirmation of toleration:

Since there is in our Republic no little disagreement on the subject of religion, in order to prevent any such harmful strife from the beginning among our people on this account as we plainly see in other realms, we mutually promise for ourselves and our successors forever, under the bond of our oath, faith, honor, and conscience, that we who differ with regard to religion will keep the peace with one another, and will not for a different faith or a change of churches shed blood nor punish one another by confiscation of property, infamy, imprisonment, or banishment, and will not in any way assist any magistrate or office in such an act.

This document adopted by the Confederation must surely be seen as one of the most inspiring highlights of the Reformation era. Differences of religion were debated “with word rather than sword.” Signatories vowed to “keep the peace between ourselves and shed no blood.” This remarkable statement, as Professor Janusz Tazbir has shown, inspired hope in Poland and in many other countries. Echoes of this dramatic development were heard in France, where it was a factor in convincing the king to lift the siege of La Rochelle, where the king was trying to crush French Calvinism, and in encouraging French Calvinists to seek the same rights that their co-religionists had in Poland. Movements of reform elsewhere found inspiration in this remarkable triumph of the human spirit. Just six years later, in 1579, as the northern provinces of the Netherlands united to throw off Spanish control, their Union of Utrecht echoed the sentiments of the Confederation of Warsaw with a staunch defense of religious toleration. It is interesting to note that in their struggle for independence and religious toleration, the Remonstrants (a movement that objected to rigid Calvinism in the Netherlands) appealed to the Polish example. Significant, the basic document of the Union of Utrecht has been described as an inspiration for Benjamin Franklin’s philosophy of government. Later, scholars such as John S. Wise, noting that much of the American Declaration of
Independence was not of English origin, contended that the
Union of Utrecht of 1579 had been an important model for the
American colonies. In 1581 the ideas of the Union of Utrecht were incorporated
into the Dutch Declaration of Independence, also called the Act of
Abjuration. In turn, the Dutch Declaration of Independence has also been suggested as an important source of inspiration for those who drafted the American Declaration of Indepen-
dence.23 John Adams wrote that “the Dutch charters had been
particularly studied, admired and imitated” in America, and the
“analogy between the means by which the two republics
particularly studied, admired and imitated” in America, and
the “analogy between the means by which the two republics
arrived at independency . . . will infallibly draw them togeth-
er.”24 Similarly, in his autobiography Jefferson noted that the
“Dutch Revolution” gave confidence to the second Continental
Congress that the American Revolution would likewise suc-
cceed.25 Professor Stephen Lucas has written that “of all the
models available to Jefferson and the Continental Congress,
none provided as precise a template for the Declaration as did
the Dutch Declaration of Independence.26

All of this suggests that the statement issued by the Confedera-
tion of Warsaw may be regarded as being dramatically
progressive when seen in historical context. And what about
other countries in Europe? Usually, there was little room for
anyone not willing to join the state religion. In Germany, the
Peace of Augsburg in 1555 had simply declared the ruler's right
to determine a state’s religion; then, some decades later, the
catastrophic Thirty Years War engulfed Germany in a struggle
that left a legacy of destruction - but not religious freedom.
Similarly, the French Wars of Religion brought widespread
destruction and only a limited Edict of Toleration, which was
revoked almost a century later. Switzerland still executed reli-
gious non-conformists in the early 17th century, as did Spain
and a number of other countries.

And what about the heirs of Magna Charta? After decades
of upheaval, England finally in 1689 had its own act of tolera-
tion, but it left Catholics and non-Anglicans largely outside its
limited provisions.

While the power of Polish kings was constrained by the
Confederation of Warsaw, it should be noted that the autonomy
of local authorities remained powerfully entrenched. Danzig
in particular insisted that it would follow its own course and
maintain its traditional large measure of independence, even if,
as in the case of Stefan Bathory, the king took up arms against
the city to enforce recognition of royal authority.27

Such incidents did not necessarily mean the city disagreed
with the crown; it simply meant that Danzig was determined
to retain as much independence from the Polish crown as pos-
sible. Interestingly, when Calvinists in Danzig felt they were
not being treated fairly, or being granted the rights implied by
the Confederation of Warsaw, they appealed to the Netherlands
States General for support. This was less surprising than it
might seem. The Polish king had little direct political power in
Danzig; the Netherlands, however, as Danzig’s major importer of
a variety of products, had economic muscle, and the Danzig
city council had no desire to alienate its major trading partner.

At the same time, efforts to restore the former dominance of
the Catholic Church in Royal Prussia and beyond continued.
Thus, in 1610, some representatives in the provincial sejmik or
Parliament of Royal Prussia urged that a mission be sent to East
Prussia to urge authorities there to expel “Zwinglians, Calvin-
ants, Mennonites and other sectarians.”28 The suggestion was
quickly squelched, but it does indicate that religious toleration
could never be taken for granted.

It should be noted that the Confederation of Warsaw did not
address the issue of religious equality, but rather of toleration,
and so a large measure of local autonomy in religious matters
prevailed. Lutheran city councils, Polish kings, Catholic nobles
who owned land or had been appointed royal administrators
in charge of royal domains, and Catholic clergy who held land
in trust for the church all allowed Mennonites to settle on
their lands, even though policies of toleration were not always
consistent. Kings, lords, cities and state churches might allow
Mennonites to settle on their lands. Official policies might
change as administrators changed; or there might be a wide
divergence of policy among different bishops, city councils,
and other authorities. Despite changing attitudes of various
secular and religious authorities, the position of the royal court
was usually one of support for Mennonites.

The position of Polish kings in matters of toleration was
forcefully stated by King Władysław IV in 1642 when he
declared Mennonites had been invited to come to the Vistula
Delta:

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
(1548-72), 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 very productive.
They cleared out the brush, and, in order to drain the water
from these flooded and marshy lands, they built mills and
constructed dams to guard against the Vistula, Nogat, Haff,
Tiege and other streams.29

Later monarchs echoed these sentiments and often came
to the support of the Mennonites. Although policies toward
the Mennonites generated by the monarch or other governing
body were not always consistent, and though Mennonites were
sometimes the subject of adverse directives, the fact that no
Polish monarch ever expelled Mennonites from his realm does
indicate a measure of continuity in royal policy.

A contemporary quotation from a city council record il-
ustrates the impact Mennonites had on the region:

“Villages in the Danzig Werder that used to have 15, 16 to
20 farmers (before they were devastated by flooding). . . .Then
some people from the Netherlands. . . . came to us. . . . In short
time they have created wonderful drained land, so that instead
of the desolate acres we now have 27 rent-paying farms. . . . and
have increased our income from 39 to 108 Marks.” The council
statement went on to say that charges against the Mennonites
arose mostly out of envy. Mennonites should be welcomed,
the council declared.

At another meeting of the regional sejmik, or diet, one
official, a voivod, or governor, denounced Danzig for becom-
ing “a nest of Mennonites.”30 God had punished the Vistula
Delta by allowing the dams of the Vistula and Nogat rivers
to break; the result was untold misery and flooding. For this,
Danzig’s tolerance of heretics was to blame. Not surprisingly,
the proud city, easily the strongest economic power in the
diet, vigorously rejected such historical interpretation. The
city of Elbing joined Danzig in asserting that Mennonites had

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been especially helpful in rebuilding the dams. Furthermore, any observer visiting the lowlands would quickly be able to see where “a lazy and drunken peasant lived, and where the industrious, sober Mennonites lived.” Then, showing their disdain for the voivod’s position, the representatives of Danzig and Elbing suggested that, not only should Mennonites be allowed to remain; but more should be invited to come. In view of such strong opposition, the president of the sejmik concluded that deliberation would now continue to the next agenda item.

This tolerant policy, however, was not necessarily reflected in the centers of ecclesiastical authority. The Bishop of Warmia (Ermland), for example, emphatically opposed all efforts by Mennonites to settle in lands under his jurisdiction, and repeatedly urged others, both religious and lay leaders, to refuse settlement rights to “heretics.” Sometimes, also royal policy wavered. In 1556, King Sigismund II Augustus requested suggestions from the provincial sejmik (diet) meeting in Marienburg for stopping the “destructive activities of the Anabaptists (Mennonites).” That same year, the castellan (governor) of Elbing presented a royal mandate in which the king expressed concern that “Anabaptists, Picards and other heretics” were being permitted to settle freely in the region. Indeed, he charged, not only were officials allowing such settlement; they were actually inviting and supporting “these destroyers of the general welfare.” It must therefore be recognized that settlement of Mennonites in the region sometimes led to serious debate and dissension in the regional sejmik of Royal Prussia, as well as in the national Sejm. Bishop Hosius of Warmia, a leader in the counter-reformation, could always be counted on to support denunciations of religious dissidents, and he constantly urged the expulsion of “heretics.” But these pronouncements could be described as “promising everything, delivering nothing.” Similarly, when the diet of Thorn in 1594 declared that no Scottish merchants should be permitted to live in cities or on the land, the decision meant little, since it lacked support from local government officials.

Toleration Without Equality

In some instances, however, the bishop of Warmia was successful. He hoped that by inviting the Jesuits to Royal Prussia, territory lost to Protestants would be regained. He warned that the history of the church showed that toleration of religions deviating from the Catholic Church, which alone held the true faith, had all too often brought tragic results. He was largely successful in implementing such a policy in his own diocese. Later bishops of Warmia repeatedly echoed similar sentiments. Lacking nationwide support for this position, in 1648 the bishop urged that toleration in Royal Prussia should be extended to Lutherans only, in addition, of course, to Catholics. At the same time, the bishopric itself was to harbor no Protestants at all; Warmia was to remain purely Catholic. By now, his words fell on deaf ears.

Sometimes, the city council of Danzig took a similarly exclusivist position, but in this case the intent was to uphold and protect the Lutheran faith first and Catholicism second. In 1573, as Danzig prepared to send its representatives to the Sejm (Diet) in Warsaw, it instructed its delegates to be cautious in religious issues. Lutheranism and Catholicism should be the only accepted religions. To allow religious freedom would open the door to “Anabaptists, Calvinists and other sects.” This position gained little support, and was a brief aberration from Danzig’s usually tolerant position.

The Mennonite Struggle for Greater Equality

But since official policy sometimes wavered, both Calvinists and Mennonites were prepared to take advantage of their connections with the Netherlands. When various authorities in Royal Prussia imposed arbitrary restrictions and conditions upon Mennonite communities, Mennonite leaders might appeal to the royal court in Warsaw or to the government in the Netherlands. Royal Prussian religious or secular bodies sometimes called for more restrictive measures against Mennonites, including expulsion. In 1676, for example, the voivod of Pomerellen launched a propaganda attack on Mennonites. His views were ridiculed.

Mennonites always had their defenders in the Royal Prussian sejmik, although supporters might change from session to session. The city of Elbing was only one of many entities that demonstrated a remarkable elasticity in adapting its policies of toleration to changing economic and social conditions. Starting in the 1560s it leased large parts of the Ellerwald, a marshy area immediately to the west of the city, to Mennonites from the Netherlands. A few years later, some city officials complained about the growing number of heretics in the region, and warned against granting them citizenship in the cities. Yet in 1586, Elbing became the first major city to grant citizenship to Mennonites, admitting two of them to the ranks of the city’s burghers, and in the 1590s, Elbing allowed Mennonites to have their own church in the city. In contrast, Danzig denied citizenship to Mennonites until 1800, but it allowed Mennonites to settle and build churches outside the city walls in Neugarten and Petershagen. Danzig’s laws stipulated that burghers had to be willing to bear arms to defend the city; since Mennonites declined to bear arms, they could not be allowed to acquire citizenship in the city.

Mennonites, City Council and Guilds

In view of the often contentious issues associated with groups who were neither Catholic nor Lutheran, Mennonites were usually required to maintain a low profile, at least in religious, political and economic matters. Danzig offered economic opportunity, but this was limited. City regulation stipulated that only members of Lutheran or Catholic, and later, also Reformed, churches could be recognized as masters of their profession,
craft, or other work. This regulation created some awkward situations, for Mennonites introduced the art of making lace, braid and other forms of elegant cloth. When this industry became important and profitable, guilds tried repeatedly to exclude Mennonites from a profession they had brought to the city. When the city council took little action, the guilds turned to the king to support their request. A contemporary chronicler reported that when King Sigismund III visited Danzig in 1623, the guilds made their plea. However, the chronicler noted, “up to the present time [1688], nothing has been done.”

Evidently, the guilds made their plea. However, the chronicler noted, “up to the present time [1688], nothing has been done.”

Evidently, the royal court was not noted for speed – this was 65 years later! Throughout this period and beyond, the city council usually defended the Mennonites. The profits Mennonite craftsmen brought to the city were simply too important to be cut off, although at times the city council required Mennonites to make extra payments to the city coffers.

Tensions were relatively few in agricultural pursuits, for here the Mennonites brought skills that turned wasteland into what an observer described as “gardens.” In the delta, where much of the land was held either by the crown, nobles, the Catholic Church, or cities such as Danzig and Elbing, Mennonites were welcome as productive and skilled farmers. While some objected to so much land being made available to Mennonites, officials vigorously defended Mennonites.

Productive developments were noted in numerous other places in the delta where Mennonites settled: Reichenberg, Käsemark, villages near Tiegenhof or in the Ellerwald, Heubuden, Orloffefelde, and many others. Repeatedly, landlords praised the new productivity of formerly flooded or deserted lands.

Mennonite successes in the delta drew the attention of religious and secular authorities further up the Vistula; soon cities such as Kulm and its bishop, as well as nobles and administrators of royal or church property, invited Mennonites to settle on their lands. The resulting contracts indicate clearly that the settlers were granted not only personal freedom and a great deal of liberty in developing the land leased to them, but also the right to conduct trade, develop their own crafts, exercise local autonomy, and practice their own religion.

A ‘New Holland’ on the Banks of the Vistula

Let me add one cautionary note. Not all settlers who came to Poland came because of religious persecution. By the latter part of the 16th century, the northern Netherlands, which had successfully resisted Philip II’s efforts to crush the movement for independence, provided a relatively free and tolerant home for Mennonites, yet many continued to seek new opportunities in Poland long after religious persecution was no longer a serious issue there. Calvinists from a number of countries where they enjoyed full political and religious rights, also came to take advantage of economic opportunity. They brought with them a wide range of skills, so that by the end of the 16th century Danzig had established itself as the largest manufacturing and business center in the Baltic and in all of Poland.

These immigrant artisans and craftsmen soon made Danzig famous for its fine furniture, textiles, leather goods, glassware, precision instruments such as watches and navigation instruments, paper, and other products. Luxury items made by gold and silversmiths, as well as artisans working with amber, bore evidence to the growing wealth of the Renaissance city. Immigration records show that a large proportion of these skilled settlers came from the Netherlands, and a good number were Mennonites.

By 1600, the city was alive with the activity of an almost incredible number of guild masters – more than three thousand – and as many as several thousand work places employing a dozen or more persons. By comparison, Krakow, Poland’s second largest city, could boast of only 700. In addition, Danzig provided homes and employment for hundreds of craftsmen and laborers not belonging to a guild. With its strong commercial ties, its international community, its robust economy, the city became a prosperous, enchanting cosmopolitan capital of the Baltic. Mennonites shared in that prosperity and continued to enjoy the religious freedom that had earlier brought them to this land of substantial religious freedom and toleration.

Endnotes

1 The quotation is from “Ulysses,” by Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

The priest, Gysbrecht van Aemstel, who had been a member of the Vondel theater company in Amsterdam since Vondel wrote his major play, Gysbrecht van Aemstel, (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1867), v). Near the end of the drama, Gysbrecht receives the following advice:

Zijn wil is, dat ghy treckt na‘et vette land van Pruissen, Daer uit het Poolsch geber Zijn wil is, dat ghy treckt na‘et vette land van Pruissen, 

Daer uit het Poolsch geber. 

Die d’oevers rijk van vrucht genoeghelijck bespoelt. 

Die d’oevers rijk van vrucht genoeghelijck bespoelt. 

Verhou u daer, en wacht tot dat de wraeck verkoelt. 

Verhou u daer, en wacht tot dat de wraeck verkoelt. 

Ghy zult in dit gewest een stad, Nieuw Holland, bouwen, Ghy zult in dit gewest een stad, Nieuw Holland, bouwen, 

Een in gezonde lucht, en weelige landouwen, Een in gezonde lucht, en weelige landouwen, 

Vergeten al uw leet, en overbroegen druck; Vergeten al uw leet, en overbroegen druck; 

Waar door uw naazet klimt den bergh op van’t geluck. Waar door uw naazet klimt den bergh op van’t geluck.

An English translation has been prepared by Kristaiaan P. Aercke, Joost van den Aergeten al uw leet, en overbrogten druck;
Polish and Prussian Mennonites: An Enduring Legacy

John J. Friesen, Winnipeg, Manitoba

This article was presented at the Believers’ Church Conference in Fresno, California in October 2009, to celebrate the publication of Peter Klassen’s Mennonites in Early Modern Poland and Prussia.

Peter Klassen’s excellent new book Mennonites in Early Modern Poland and Prussia brings to light a part of the Mennonite story that has been neglected far too long. In the recent past little research has been directed at this history.

This lack of material was particularly evident for English readers. The only major recent English language publication about Mennonites in Poland was a translation into English in 2007 of a 1919 book by H. G. Mannhardt, The Danzig Mennonite Church: Its Origin and History 1569-1919, by Bethel College and Pandora Press.

Even in German, most of the publications are of some years ago. H. G. Mannhardt’s book, as mentioned above, was first published almost a century ago. Wilhelm Mannhardt’s book, published in 1863, about the Polish and Prussian Mennonites’ history of nonresistance and rejection of war, is even older. A more recent resource is the four-volume Mennonitisches Lexikon, of which the first volume was published in 1913, the second in the 1930s, and the final two volumes after World War II.

In the 1930s, Herbert Wiebe, a fine young Mennonite scholar from West Prussia, wrote his doctoral dissertation about Mennonites who lived near Danzig and in the Vistula and Nogat river deltas, this study broke new ground in that it included

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communities that had received little research attention up to that time. Unfortunately, Wiebe was killed in World War II and the Mennonite community lost a most promising young historian. In 1952 his dissertation was published in Germany by Dr. Kurt Kauenhoven.

The most recent and most comprehensive study of Mennonites in Poland and Prussia in the German language is the two-volume set by Horst Penner, a Mennonite scholar born in West Prussia who spent his academic career and writing days in West Germany. His two-volume study is entitled, Die ost-und westpreussischen Mennoniten. Volume I, published in 1978, deals with the history up to the Polish partitions, and Volume II, 1987, focuses on events after the partitions.

Now Peter Klassen has provided a carefully researched study in English. The book primarily covers the history up to the Polish partitions at the end of the eighteenth century, and then briefly surveys the rest of the history up to 1945 in the final chapter. Klassen spent decades doing research in the various archives in Gdansk and in cities along the Vistula River. Many records were lost in World War II, but from what remains, he was able to find much that illuminated the Mennonite story during the Polish era. His careful research gives the study a remarkable depth.

One of the strongest features of this book is the context it presents. The Polish Mennonite story is placed within the larger historical developments in the Low Countries, Poland and Prussia so that the reader feels the influence of the political and cultural movements of the day upon the Mennonite communities.

Polish Mennonite history began within the Anabaptist reforms of the sixteenth century. Klassen briefly tells the fragmented Dutch Anabaptist story, including the events in the Westphalian city of Muenster. Here one of the Anabaptist leaders, Jan van Leiden, believed he was called by God to be a King David to rule over a New Jerusalem, Muenster, in which God called him to implement polygamy, community of goods, and to use violence to repress dissent and to protect itself from outside threats. After the Anabaptist movement in Muenster was destroyed in 1535, three quite different Anabaptist forms emerged.

One was a spiritualist form of Anabaptism that minimized the importance of outer forms, including baptism, communion, and even congregational life. This movement emphasized a right inner, spiritual relationship to God. In the externals of life and faith, the leaders of this movement advocated conformity to the demands of the state church and thus avoid persecution.

A second form of Anabaptism was the violent revolution—ary version whose members were defeated at Muenster, but a remnant of which continued for a number of years. This movement believed that God spoke to them directly and was calling them to a radical, violent reform. This reform, they believed, was in preparation for Christ’s imminent return when he would unleash a great battle of Armageddon against the ungodly. The saints, that is, the Muensterites, would fight alongside Christ in this great battle against evil, and the saints would of course win, with Christ’s help.

These two alternate forms frame the third kind of Anabaptism of which Menno Simons became the most visible leader. In contrast to the spiritualism, quietism, and violence of the other options, Mennonite Anabaptism was firmly rooted in the Bible, emphasized discipleship, peace, sharing with those in need, and saw the church as the context for teaching, worshiping, and living the faith.

After the destruction at Muenster, persecution against Anabaptists in the Low Countries (present-day Netherlands and Belgium) increased in ferocity. To save their lives, thousands of Mennonite Anabaptists fled east to the Danzig and Elbing areas (today’s Gdansk and Elblag) and settled in the valleys of the Vistula and Nogat rivers, all within the Kingdom of Poland. The process of settling, and the reason why Polish authorities were willing to grant toleration to Mennonites, is told by Klassen in considerable detail.

Mennonites who migrated to Poland gave the vision of the “Menno” faction of Anabaptism organizational and community forms that lasted for centuries. They organized churches, founded schools, set up organizations to care for widows and orphans, established fire insurance institutions, and built homes for the aged. These institutions and organizations met the needs of the day and continued through future generations.

While Mennonites in Poland and Prussia, over the centuries, were not actively persecuted, they were, however, often under legal and financial restrictions, and periodically even threatened with expulsion. In such times, there was usually some official who came to their defense, be it Catholic bishops, the Polish king, or some local officials. Mennonites were valued for their economic contributions, but their minority religious status continued to create suspicion and opposition.
Usually Mennonites’ economic contribution to the region made them too valuable to expel. They had the skills necessary to drain the marshy lowlands and make the delta productive. They introduced trades like Brandwein production, lace making and other aspects of the cloth making industry that they had learned in Flanders. Klassen shows well the struggle between those who valued Mennonites’ economic contribution, and those who saw Mennonites as unwanted economic competitors or religious undesirables.

Given the important role that the Polish and Prussian story has played in Mennonite history, why has it been largely overlooked? One of the reasons has been the strong research focus during the last three quarters of a century on the sixteenth century Anabaptist story. This emphasis, started by Harold S. Bender in the 1920s, has given Mennonites a sense of being part of a rich theological heritage. As Bender pointed out in his article “The Anabaptist Vision,” Anabaptists were Christians who based their faith on the Bible, and were committed to discipleship, peace, non-violence, and the church as a visible community of faith. Anabaptists were willing to suffer for their faith and even to die for it if necessary. By the 1950s, Mennonites had accepted much of Bender’s emphasis, and saw the sixteenth century Anabaptist movement as the basis for renewal. Many Third World Mennonite churches also enthusiastically accepted this Anabaptist vision of being the church.

This strong, positive emphasis on the sixteenth century has tended to cause some of the subsequent sections of the Mennonite story, like the Polish and Prussian eras, to be neglected or overlooked. In some cases this history has even been viewed negatively, as merely traditional, or as the time where Mennonite “culture” was developed. Culture, in that context, is seen as something negative, as something that drew Mennonites away from their purer Anabaptist theological source. The sixteenth century was seen as providing the theological compass, and the intervening years, including the events in Poland, Prussia and Russia, as the cultural distortion of a great theological vision.

Klassen’s book may help correct that misconception, and help us see that the Polish and Prussian Mennonite eras were creative in their own right. They built on the visions of the sixteenth century and reshaped them into new visions that included building institutions and communities. What they built has continued to shape subsequent history, and it is evident that many contemporary Mennonite characteristics have their roots in the Polish and Prussian Mennonite experience. Let us identify some of them.

One characteristic was the Mennonites’ struggle to survive. As Klassen has pointed out in his book, Mennonites left the Low Countries because of serious persecution. The Spanish overlords in the Low Countries saw every attempt at reform as a threat to their authority.

When Mennonites came to Poland, they were not welcomed. They had to learn to negotiate with land owners, government and church officials, and eventually with the king of Poland for the right to reside in Poland. It was in 1642 that they negotiated their first Privilegium with the King of Poland, but they had been negotiating with many local officials during the preceding century. Mennonites became skilled at dealing with restrictive laws, and unsympathetic church and government officials. This skill, and the determination to survive and even to succeed against great odds, became a Mennonite characteristic that is evident among Mennonites in many countries, including Russia, Canada, USA, Mexico, Paraguay, and Bolivia.

In this context, Mennonites developed the view that they were not tied to any land. If one place or country did not work out for some reason, they are willing to move. They moved from the Netherlands to Poland, to Russia, to Canada, to the USA, to Latin America, and back again to the USA and Canada. They sent missionaries, and founded churches in Asia, Africa and Latin America. This lack of attachment to any one land or country provided the context for fresh readings of the New Testament teachings on peace, loving the enemy, forgiveness, and not killing. Because Mennonites did not need to create a justification for military service to defend some homeland, they were free to develop a view of Christian discipleship that rejected the necessity of war.

Central to Menno Simons’ view of being Christian was the church. It was in the church where members discovered faith in God, studied the Bible, found their identity, learned to forgive and be forgiven, and to share with each other. It was in the church where the members’ character and faith were shaped and given form.

In the modern world of the enlightenment and post-enlightenment, Christian faith is often seen more individualistically. People speak about a personal faith in Jesus as though the...
Leaders were elected, not appointed. They came from within the church. The congregations elected Aeltester, Lehrer (ministers, or literally teachers), deacons, and song leaders. Leaders where unsalaried. They were farmers, crafts people, or businessmen. The crucial leader was the Aeltester, loosely translated as bishop, but literally meaning the elder one. This person lead the church, gave it spiritual direction, kept the church membership books, served communion, baptized new members, and ordained ministers and deacons in their offices.

Many aspects of this understanding of church characterize Mennonite churches today. For churches described as “conservative” or “conservers” in Canada, the USA, and in Latin America, these offices, including unsalaried lay ministers, are still used. Other churches today may have salaried ministers, but in most the pattern of members volunteering for a myriad of tasks within the church is still alive and well. In Fort Garry Mennonite Fellowship, in Winnipeg, where I worship, we have five unsalaried lay ministers, three men and two women. Regardless of the leadership patterns, all Mennonite churches believe that authority resides in the local church. Church is people, not hierarchy.

In Poland, deacons addressed the financial needs of the members. The church did not only provide spiritual fellowship, but financial support as well. Thus the churches assisted the poor, the widows, those with illnesses, and others who needed help. Mennonites today express this part of the early vision in many forms of assistance: institutions for the elderly, health care centers, relief and development organizations like Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Economic Development Associates, Mennonite Disaster Service, Canadian Foodgrains Bank, and others. Mennonites have gone far beyond their local congregations in providing assistance, but the principal of assisting those in need has continued.

Mennonites in Poland saw the Bible as central to faith and life. Anabaptists in the sixteenth century discovered the excitement of reading the Bible. They believed it should be a guide for the life and faith of individuals and the church. As such, all members needed to be familiar with the contents of the Bible. When captured, Anabaptists quoted scripture at their trials. Many stories in the Martyrs Mirror witness to this strong emphasis on the Bible.

Dutch Anabaptists had learned through painful experience in the Kingdom of Muenster, that a personal, individualistic spiritualism not tested by the Bible was destructive of faith and church. That kind of an aberration Mennonites in Poland avoided. Instead, they left a legacy of discerning faith and discipleship in accordance with their understanding of the teachings of the Bible. Emphasis on the Bible as the basis for faith and life continues to shape Mennonites today.

Mennonites spoke Dutch or Flemish when they came as immigrants to Poland and Prussia in the sixteenth century. Over the years their language of conversation and worship changed to Low German and later to High German. By 1700, church leaders where complaining that their young people no longer could speak Dutch. As Peter Klassen points out, the language change happened more rapidly in rural areas, and more slowly in urban areas where more contact with the Netherlands was maintained.

Low German was the language of the local German people in the Vistula River area, and this is what Mennonites learned. Today we see Low German as a Mennonite
language, but it wasn’t so initially. Mennonites have simply continued to speak it long after the people from whom they learned it gave it up in favour of High German.

For many tens of thousands of Mennonites in Canada, in the USA, and in Latin America, Low German is still their first language – the language of everyday conversation. Its word imagery of a rural, family-centered life, its rich and multi-layered humour, its vivid descriptions of relationships, its indirect references to sensitive topics like sex, birthing, and elimination, and its concrete descriptions of life as everyday discipleship continue to nurture these people. Many Mennonites have moved on to become part of an English-speaking world, and in the process have lost something special. Low German, as does every language, has its unique genius, and to know it is to multiply our understanding of the world in which we live. For many the beauty and genius of the Low German language continues to nurture faith and life.

Sometimes the use of Low German is seen as characterizing those Mennonites who use it as merely “cultural.” This is inaccurate because it misses the profound importance of language – all languages. People’s identity is largely expressed through language. Words give voice to our thoughts, beliefs, hopes and aspirations. Those who lose their language lose their world of meaning, ritual, and discourse. Thus people who tenaciously hang on to their language are to be admired, not chastised.

A second problem with labeling those who speak Low German as cultural Mennonites is that we are all cultural Mennonites. We are all within a culture, use a language, and eat particular foods. A church that uses the English language, resides in Canada or in the USA, and uses typical American food is just as “cultural” as the church that uses the Low German language. Culture and language are the vessels, the vehicles, by which we live our daily lives and express our faith in Jesus Christ.

Mennonites in Poland and Prussia were concerned that their children learn to read and write. Since there were no government schools in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Mennonites organized their own schools and paid for their up-keep. These schools were co-ed. All girls, as well as boys, learned to read and write.

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Why did they believe so strongly in education? One reason was their belief that all members needed to be able to read the Bible and search the scriptures for the truth. In many interrogations of Anabaptist/Mennonites in the sixteenth century, the court records indicate that they were able to read the Bible, knew it well, and could defend their beliefs. Secondly, education of all members was necessary in a church where all members were potentially leaders. At their baptism, members implicitly committed themselves to accept leadership if called upon. This meant that all members had to learn to read and write so they could take up their roles as Aeltester, Lehrer, deacons, song leaders or Vorsteher if elected.

A third reason was their belief that the home was crucial for their children’s education and nurture in the faith. For this to happen, both parents had to be able to read and write.

The result was that schools were established in every community, village or district in Poland. This commitment to education has been one of the most enduring Mennonite legacies, and was taken to Russia, Canada, the USA, and continues today. In Fresno the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary and Fresno Pacific University are two expressions of this commitment to education. On the web site of Fresno Pacific University, one of the lines says: “Fresno Pacific University believes that knowledge and understanding are formed in community.” That conviction of education and the importance of it within community dates back to the Polish Mennonites.

Mennonites are known as people of peace. During World War II, the majority of Mennonite men in both the United States and Canada did alternative service rather than join the military. In the United States they served in Civilian Public Service (CPS) projects, and in Canada they worked as COs in alternative work camps, received farm deferments, or served in hospitals. This continued a long history of rejecting military service, a practice that began in Poland. (In the sixteenth century, Menno Simons also rejected the use of violence, although, military service was not the issue since the Dutch and Spanish armies were professional and did not recruit citizens.)

Within this peace tradition, Mennonites in the twentieth century not only rejected going to war, they also contributed

The young girls in the village of Mirolyubovka in Siberia and the Guenther family from Colonia El Sur, Bolivia speak fluent Low German even though they live across from the world from each other and are separated by 130 years of history. Photo Credit: Hans Werner and Royden Loewen.
to building up destroyed communities. After World War I, Mennonites in the USA organized Mennonite Central Committee that assisted both Mennonites and others in Ukraine. Mennonites in Canada organized the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization (CMBC) that brought more than 20,000 Mennonites from the USSR to Canada.

After World War II, Mennonites in Canada formed MCC Canada, which absorbed the CMBC and other Canadian Mennonite relief organizations. Through the two MCCs, the Canadian and American, Mennonites have responded positively to needs around the world with relief and development assistance.

Mennonite Disaster Service was organized by Conscientious Objectors after World War II as a positive response to needs in North America. Mennonites in Canada organized the Foodgrains Bank in 1976 in order to ship grain to hungry people in countries around the world, including so-called enemy countries like North Korea. Mennonites have shown that they, as believers in Christ, are called to address the needs of all people, thus emphasizing that Christ as the prince of peace is Lord of all, not just of Canadians and Americans.

The vision for this view of peace and service is in the Bible, and rediscovered by Anabaptists in the sixteenth century. Menno Simons made this conviction one of the central planks of his preaching. A Christian community, he said, is a community of peace, reconciliation and mission. If we are a community in mission, we cannot hate the brother, nor kill him, he said.

How to express this in an ongoing way in the society was worked out in Poland. After Mennonites had settled in the Danzig and Vistula River region, they discovered that both Poland and Danzig frequently went to war and demanded that Mennonites also participate. Mennonites refused, saying they believed in peace. To kill was to deny their faith in God. It was contrary to their character as followers of Christ.

So in lieu of military service the government demanded money. These payments became repeated extortions. Then, in 1642, in the Privilegium mentioned earlier, Mennonites negotiated the payment of a regular sum of money in lieu of military service, and thus were largely freed from religious extortions.

This conviction that war is wrong has characterized Mennonites from then on. However, those who stayed in Poland when it became Prussia, eventually accepted military service. In the twentieth century, when Hitler’s regime came along, they no longer had the community ability, or fortitude, or biblical insight, to question the direction of the Nazi regime, and so they served in the German army.

Are Mennonites in Canada and the USA today in a similar situation? Do we still have the ability to look beyond the war propaganda of our governments and see the inhumanity of war? After 9/11, are we so concerned about security that we allow our governments to trump the Bible?

Even our church architecture is influenced by Mennonites in Poland. As Klassen points out, a few Mennonite groups, e.g. in Elbing, were able to build churches as early as the late sixteenth century. In most areas, however, Mennonites were not able to construct meetinghouses until the eighteenth century, two hundred years after they had settled in Poland. When permission was granted, the stipulations were that their church buildings had to be plain, look like houses, and have no bell towers or steeples. The government feared that Mennonite churches, if they appeared too prominent, would attract members from other churches.

The result was that Mennonites made a virtue out of necessity. They continued to build simple, plain churches long after they had moved out of Poland. They followed similar patterns in Russia, Canada, the United States and beyond. Very few Mennonite churches even today have bell towers or steeples. The interiors are often quite plain and unadorned. In many subtle ways, the Polish Mennonite experience in architecture lives on in our church buildings today. In many of the conservative, or conserving, churches, in Canada, the United States, and in Latin America, the church buildings look very much like those of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

In 1951 H. Richard Niebuhr wrote the book Christ and Culture. It has become a classic in defining the options that Christians throughout history have chosen in relating to the culture within which they find themselves. The options he described were Christ against Culture, Christ of Culture, Christ over culture, Christ and Culture in Paradox, and Christ the Transformer of Culture.

Niebuhr’s use of the term “culture” is problematic since every church also has a culture, namely a language, practices, and mores. A more helpful term might be “host society.” Despite the problem with the term, the issue that he describes is a real one. There are always some tensions between a church that commits itself to live by the teachings of Christ, and its host society that lives by different standards and commitments.

Mennonites in Poland and Prussia also faced this issue. The different ways they chose to relate to their society created a divide within their communities, a divide that got bigger as the centuries went on, and still exists today.

Let’s set the stage. Mennonites were refugees in Poland and Prussia. They were Dutch people in a German and Polish region who only gradually learned the local language – Low German. They were foreigners.

Life was hard. Mennonites struggled to make a living. Some officials tried to get rid of them. Mennonites were allowed to rent land and make it productive because they were skilled at draining the marshy lowlands. They set up businesses, like making lace or brandy. Taxes from these products provided much-needed revenue for local governments. With these activities they “bought” their right to settle in the various areas along the Vistula River. In some areas of the lowlands, up to eighty percent of the first settlers died in the process of draining the land and making it arable.

In a Lutheran and Catholic land, Mennonites were regarded as heretics. Even though Poland was the most tolerant country in all of Europe, Anabaptist Mennonites were still looked upon with suspicion.

Then, to make matters worse, around 1600, a Socinian movement developed. This was a Polish religious reform movement that in many respects was similar to the Mennonites, except that the Socinians rejected Jesus as divine. Socinians were anti-trinitarian, that is, they believed that Jesus was a great teacher and model, but not the divine son of God. For more than a century, Mennonites were suspected of being Socinians, and repeatedly had to defend themselves against accusations that they denied Jesus as the Son of God. Had the accusations of heresy stuck, they would have been expelled.

Their pacifism also got them into difficulty. Because Mennonites were exempt from military service, people from other faiths, like Catholics and Lutherans, were not allowed
to join the Mennonite church. The government feared that too many people would join Mennonite churches simply to gain exemption from military service. The government thus decreed that in case of a mixed marriage, Mennonite and non-Mennonite, the children would not be exempt from military service. So, some Mennonite groups forbade mixed marriages. Marriage had to be only with another Mennonite, they argued, otherwise the peace theology could be lost and the church’s future would be jeopardized.

Most Mennonites lived in the countryside and were farmers. In the early years, relatively few families moved into the cities of Danzig, Elbing, or one of the other cities further south along the Vistula River. As farmers, they lived in agricultural villages alongside Catholics and Lutherans. Intellectually and culturally they lived far from the urban world of the nearby cities.

The divide that developed within the Mennonite community was between those who saw the world, the host society around them, as a threat and danger to their faith, and opposed it at many points, and those who were less critical of the host society, and were willing to relate to it more closely.

The first group tried to keep separate from the world as much as possible, for to compromise with it was to endanger the church. The second group allowed inter-marriage with non-Mennonites and engaged in businesses. Members of this group moved into cities, became successful merchants, and even entered the cultural life of Danzig and Elbing. Over the years, some of these more acculturated Mennonites left the Mennonite church to join a Lutheran or Calvinist church, because this furthered their cultural or business pursuits.

One could identify these two factions as conservatives and progressives, with the conservatives suspicious of society, and the progressives willing to relate more closely. These two factions largely divided into the Flemish who were the conservatives, and the Frisians who were the more progressive, liberal group, even though both groups had a range of views on this issue.

At the end of the eighteenth century, when the migrations to Russia started, and then continued for almost a century, more conservatives than progressives migrated. Since pioneering in a new land takes courage and daring, I hesitate to call these people conservative. A better term is “conservers,” because they were concerned to conserve their faith heritage in the face of threats from the society. They were not conservative in outlook, but rather bold, and willing to risk the trials and tribulations of pioneering in a new territory in Russia.

This divide continued in Russia. In general, the larger churches were the conservers, and the smaller groups were the progressives. Some of the reform groups, like the Mennonite Brethren who formed in 1860, were progressive. Others, like the Kleine Gemeinde, who formed in 1812, were conservers. Later, it was the conservers who led the migrations to Canada, to Mexico, to Paraguay, and to Bolivia. They were usually the first to risk new settings.

In the 1870s migrations to North America, many of those who settled in the American states of Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota and Minnesota were progressives. Most of those who settled in Manitoba were conservers. In the 1920s, when about 20,000 immigrants arrived in Canada from the Soviet Union, most of the immigrants were progressives.

In the 1920s, many of the conservers, including the Old Colony, Sommerfelder, Chortitzer, and Saskatchewan Bergthaler Mennonite Churches, emigrated from Canada to either Mexico or Paraguay. A few conservers from Kansas also joined the Old Colonists in Mexico. Again the conservers lead the way in forming new Mennonite communities in these countries. (In the Swiss Mennonite tradition, the conservers are the Old Order Amish and Old Order Mennonites.)

In both the Swiss and the Polish/Prussian Mennonite traditions, the conservers have a long history of emphasizing separation from the world, the importance of community, and a simple life style. They reject progress for its own sake, even though all gradually and selectively accept new ideas and innovations as long as they do not threaten community. The conservers have to some extent been willing to accept voluntary poverty, or at least a simpler life-style.

Progressives have often viewed the conservers as not quite legitimate inheritors of the Polish and Prussian legacy. They have directed mission efforts at the conservers to convert them from their errors. However, even though they are different from the progressives, the conservers are legitimate inheritors of the Polish legacy. They have emphasized different aspects of the Anabaptist Mennonite heritage, e.g., separation from the world, the church as including social and economic dimensions of our life together, and the importance of community even at the expense of individual freedom. In these areas, as well as in their efficient use of scarce resources, they may be able to teach others.

Also, when we saw the response of the Amish in Pennsylvania a couple of years ago to the murder of their children by forgiving the murderer, the Christian witness that this provided to our societies was profound. The message of the forgiveness of Christ was proclaimed in those simple deeds in a very powerful way. It was evangelism at its best. It made one think that maybe being for or against society is not the issue. What is at issue is whether one has “caught,” or absorbed, or nurtured in oneself individual and collective character the message of the cross of Christ. And, this seems to be happening very well in many conservers communities, maybe exactly because they nurture faith in community.

This Polish and Prussian Mennonite story, which Peter Klassen has so eloquently presented in this book, has a powerful enduring legacy. It has shaped much of the Mennonite story up to the present, both in churches that trace their lineage back to Poland, and in the mission churches founded throughout the world. I am confident that this legacy will continue to shape these communities as they go forward.
The Mennonites who moved to the Vistula (Wisła) Delta in the 1500s came to a land that was already multicultural and had undergone tumultuous changes. By the time Mennonites arrived, however, matters had settled down and life had become reasonably peaceful despite the occasional invasions and wars. Mennonites were able to benefit from the policies of the Old Polish state that accepted diversity in religion and language in part because of the Protestant Reformation which had a powerful impact on the Polish-Lithuanian state.

Many townsmen, primarily of German origin, converted to Lutheranism without significant interference from the Catholic Church or the state, perhaps because as many as 30 percent of Polish nobles also converted, although they preferred Calvinism. A minority of Calvinist nobles adopted pacifist and socially egalitarian views. In order to protect their rights to free choice, the nobles in the Polish-Lithuanian parliament enacted laws to protect freedom of religion. Despite some erosion over the centuries, these laws protected the religious freedoms of Mennonites and other non-Catholics such as Lutherans, Orthodox Christians, Ukrainian Catholics, Jews and Muslims.

The original settlers of the Vistula delta were not Germans or Poles, but Prussians, sometimes called Old Prussians. They were a group of Baltic tribes people who spoke an Indo-European language related to Lithuanian and Latvian. The Prussians lived in what was then swampy terrain on and near the Baltic coast of modern-day Poland, Lithuania and the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad (Königsberg). Over many centuries individual settlements grouped into about a dozen loosely organized tribal duchies. Their relative isolation, however, allowed the Old Prussians to avoid the regimentation of statehood.

The Old Prussians remained loyal to their nature gods and rejected the attempts by Adalbert, Bishop of Prague, who was sent by Bolesław I of Poland, to convert them to Christianity. In fact, the Prussians killed him when he tried to cut down the sacred grove of trees where they worshipped. The Catholic Church canonized Adalbert as a martyr and authorized crusades to force the Prussians to convert. Protected by the difficult terrain, the tribes defeated armed incursions by Poles and Germans, and undertook retaliatory raids against nearby Polish and German settlements. More than a century of endemic border raids ensued before a more modern force, the Teutonic Knights, took advantage of the Prussian tribes’ lack of national unity to defeat them piecemeal, convert them forcibly, and create an independent Teutonic Order State.

The Teutonic Knights gladly accepted the invitation by Konrad I, Duke of Mazovia by Jan Matejko. Konrad invited the Teutonic Order to his lands in 1226 to help him conquer and Christianize the Old Prussians that inhabited the Vistula Delta. Photo Credit: Wikipedia Commons.

The Order of the Teutonic Knights of St. Mary’s Hospital, commonly called the Teutonic Knights, was created in 1198 in Acre (Akko, Israel), a port in the minuscule Latin Crusader Kingdom in the Holy Land that survived for a while after Saladin reconquered Jerusalem. Lacking opportunities there, the Order accepted an invitation to go to Hungary in 1211 to protect Transylvania against a Turkish invasion. In 1225, King Andrew of Hungary used armed force to expel them when they tried to carve out an independent state. The Knights soon found another base of operation when Duke Konrad of Mazovia, a relatively backward dependency of the Polish kingdom, invited them in 1226 to protect his lands against Prussian raids.

The Teutonic Knights, Winnipeg, Manitoba

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The Teutonic Knights gladly accepted the invitation by Duke Konrad, since converting some of Europe’s last pagans would be a great achievement for the Catholic Church. The Order’s Grandmaster proclaimed a crusade and recruited both religious and secular knights across Germany to serve in the east. A powerful joint force of Germans, Poles and Mazovians invaded Prussia in 1230, and over the next fifty years defeated the Old Prussian tribes completely. The Teutonic Knights conquered the Prussian heartland, while Mazovia and Poland took the southern and eastern edges of their territory. Prussians who resisted were killed and their villages burned, particularly during later revolts against the Knights. Prussians who surrendered were allowed to farm peacefully, although some were relocated to other parts of the Prussian area. Conversions often followed, sometimes by force and sometimes peacefully. After all, the Christian God had proved himself stronger than Prussian pagan gods and most people like to be on the winning side. The Old Prussian language declined and died out completely by 1800, leaving only a few texts recorded by Catholic monks.

Duke Konrad had expected the Knights to turn over the Prussians lands to him, but the Knights kept them on the grounds that pagan lands had no owners. The Teutonic Order

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solidified its position by accepting the Holy Roman Emperor as its overlord and protector. It also subordinated itself to the Pope. This allowed the Knights to reject Mazovian and Polish claims. The Poles and Mazovians could only watch jealously as the Order developed a rich, powerful state. They were, however, able to hold their own and keep the Knights from expanding too far south at their expense.

Having established itself on Prussian land, the Teutonic Order went about expanding. In 1309 it took the disputed city of Gdańsk (Danzig) at the mouth of the Vistula River and then secured control over the rest of the Baltic coast (Pomerania) to link up with the Holy Roman Empire in the west. On the eastern side, it consolidated control over the nearly-defunct Livonian Knights in modern Latvia and Estonia, and then tried to link the two territories by capturing intervening territory from the mostly pagan Lithuanians.

This proved more difficult than the Order expected since the Lithuanians were much stronger than the Old Prussians. Starting in the mid-1200s, the Lithuanian tribes unified their lands to create a state and built a great empire through conquest of their Slavic neighbours in what is now Belarus, northern Ukraine and western Russia. The governing families remained pagan, but their Slavic subjects kept their Eastern (Russian) Orthodox religion. They provided much of the manpower needed to build the Lithuanian state and contributed superior skills in administration. Some Lithuanian nobles converted to Orthodoxy to make it easier to rule their Slavic duchies. The Lithuanians began to struggle with the Poles for control over western Ukraine, but the conflict did not become too bitter because they had a common enemy in the Teutonic Knights.

Poland and Lithuania joined forces. In 1386, Princess Jadwiga of Poland married Grand Duke Jagiello of Lithuania (Jogaila, in Lithuanian) to cement a treaty of alliance between the two states. The Duke converted to Roman Catholicism and moved to Poland to rule. He left the Lithuanians free choice of religion, although his introduction of Catholic priests, appointment of bishops, construction of churches, and sponsorship of missionary activities gradually converted most Lithuanians. As a result, modern Lithuanians are Roman Catholic. The east Slavs remained Orthodox.

The Teutonic Order continued its military campaigns to control the Lithuanian coast (Samogitia), claiming that Jagiello’s conversion was insincere and that Lithuania was not a Christian country. The Lithuanians fought back with the help of their Polish allies. The conflict came to a head in the great campaign of 1410 and the battle of Grunwald.

The Teutonic Order state was a formidable foe whose military superiority rested on the lances of its heavy cavalry – knights in armour – a shock force that cut through the less-well developed Prussian, Lithuanian, and Polish armies like modern tanks. The Order could count on recruits from western Europe because it had many chapters in Germany that offered
opportunities for underemployed knights to support the Christian religion, enjoy adventure, and get rich through conquest. The Order also defended itself with heavy fortifications at castles such as the capital, Marienburg (Malbork, in Polish) that its Polish and Lithuanian opponents were unable to capture due to lack of equipment and training.

The Order state financed this expensive military establishment through its efficient economic administration that collected taxes and duties from the productive Prussian lands. Prussian farms supplied grain exports to western Europe through Vistula basin cities such as Toruń (Thorn) and Bydgoszcz (Bromberg), which emerged as trading and manufacturing centres. The chief Prussian city, Gdańsk, at the mouth of the Vistula River, became a great port that controlled trade from the entire Vistula basin including Mazovia and Poland, and was a member of the Hanseatic League, a group of cities that extended from London to Riga and Novgorod, and promoted Baltic trade. The Order developed an unusually effective bureaucracy of priests to collect duties and taxes. Noble landowners and townspeople grumbled about the high taxes, but they lacked any mechanism to resist these demands. They had no equivalent to the infant parliaments that were emerging across Europe and in independent city states.

The Teutonic state enjoyed strong diplomatic support from the Holy Roman Emperor, who encouraged recruits from across the German states to join the Order during its military campaigns. The Popes also leaned towards the Order, although they also needed to show some regard for the needs of the Catholic Poles and Lithuanians.

The Order itself comprised a mixture of religious and secular members. Monastic brothers, some of whom were knights, joined to pursue a religious vocation and improve their standing in society. Lay brothers, mostly knights as well, spent part of their time in the Order’s castles and lived secular lives at other times. The Order required both elements to follow monastic discipline and chastised or punished them for sinful activity. Based on the many regulations which the Grandmasters of the Order issued and re-issued, some brothers must have failed “to live with each other in brotherly love, harmoniously and amicably, in the spirit of brotherly love,” as the rules required.

In addition, many ignored their obligations to be sober, chaste, and decorous. There were many recorded punishments of Teutonic Knights who committed minor infractions such as hunting with falcons, and major crimes, including kidnapping and murder. At their worst, the knights behaved like the Knights Templar that Sir Walter Scott portrayed vividly in his classic novel of England, Ivanhoe.

The first serious check to the power of the Teutonic Order came in 1410 as a result of war against the Polish-Lithuanian army over control of the borderlands. The Poles, Lithuanians (including ethnic Lithuanians, Slavs, and even Tartars) turned out in force, strengthened with hired mercenary knights from what is now the Czech Republic. The great battle of Grunwald (Tannenberg) on July 15, 1410 resulted in complete victory for the Polish-Lithuanian forces. A last desperate charge by the Teutonic heavy cavalry failed and the leading Teutonic officials, Grand Master Ulrich von Jungingen and Grand Marshal Friedrich von Wallenrode, were killed. More than three-quarters of the Teutonic army was killed or captured. King Jagiełło failed to exploit his overwhelming victory by marching immediately on Malbork, the Teutonic capital, before a defence could be organized, so the Teutonic Knights were able to regroup and even recruit replacements in Germany. As a result, the Poles were unable to help the nobles and city dwellers of the region who asked him to take over their territories, because they resented the high taxes and absolute power of the Teutonic Order. Most of these would-be rebels were German-speakers. In 1411, the Treaty of Toruń returned most of the conquered territory to the Order in return for a very heavy indemnity.

Over the following decades, Polish-Lithuanian power grew while the Teutonic Knights found it increasingly difficult to control their subjects. As they grew wealthier, German-speaking nobles and cities continued to resist exploitation by the Teutonic Order. When no concessions were offered, they revolted in 1454, calling on Polish King Kazimierz IV Jagiellonczyk (Casimir the Jagiellonian) to protect them. After a thirteen year destructive war, the Second Treaty of Torun (1466) made western Prussia, called Royal Prussia,
a semi-autonomous part of the Polish state with its own diet (legislative assembly) and treasury. Eastern Prussia with its capital at Königsberg, remained the property of the Teutonic Knights subject to nominal Polish overlordship. The last Grand Master of the Teutonic Order, Albert von Hohenzollern, took advantage of the spread of the Protestant Reformation to convert to Lutheranism and take over the Order’s property. Polish King Zygmunt I granted him the title of Duke and recognized so-called Ducal Prussia as a dependency of Poland. Through a series of dynastic accidents and mistakes by Polish kings, the Prussian Dukes renounced their Polish connection in 1618 and united with their Hohenzollern cousins in the Duchy of Brandenburg, a German state with its capital in Berlin. In 1701, the Dukes of Brandenburg gained the right to call themselves Kings in Prussia and quickly became known as Kings of Prussia. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the state of Brandenburg-Prussia grew into the large and powerful German state that, under Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, engineered German unification in 1871. The Prussian army and its officer corps became the nucleus of the German army. For many, Prussia became synonymous with Germany with a reputation for militarism and authoritarianism.

The Teutonic Order had little to do with these developments. It continued to exist only in Catholic regions in southern and western Germany and in the Austrian Empire where some of its leaders served as battlefield commanders in seventeenth and eighteenth century wars, especially against the Turks. Napoleon dissolved the Order in Germany in 1809 in retaliation for its military opposition, but the Austrians kept the Order going and it revived in Germany after Napoleon’s defeat. Hitler abolished the Order in 1938 as part of his conflict with the Catholic Church, although it continued to exist in Italy and was reconstituted in Germany after World War II as a purely charitable organization.

Hitler’s dissolution of the Teutonic Order was particularly ironic, because nationalist Germans identified the Teutonic Knights with Germany’s eastward expansion. The great nineteenth century German historian, Heinrich von Treitschke, a vehement nationalist, saw the Knights as leading a German mission to civilize backward regions of eastern Europe. He declared that “the civilizing of a barbarian people is the best achievement” and praised the Germans for giving “the primitive Prussian tribes” the choice of “whether they should be put to the sword or thoroughly Germanized,” since “it makes for health that the nobler race should absorb the inferior stock.” Kaiser Wilhelm II, among others, endorsed that sentiment as he posed for pictures dressed in the Order’s robes while visiting East Prussia in 1902. Nationalist Germans wrote favourably of the Teutonic Knights in the interwar period, and Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler saw the SS as a modern version of the crusading Teutonic Knights.

Slavic authors reversed the German stereotype. Henryk Sieniewicz, the Polish Nobel Prize winner in 1905, wrote his novel, Knights of the Cross, to portray the Knights as villains who tortured and maimed innocent Poles in order to take their lands. In a typical passage, a priest described how the Knights attacked a Polish “town by night and immediately set it on fire.” He went on to say:

We watched from our [castle] walls how they cut down men, women, and children in the marketplace with their swords and how they threw infants into the fire. . . . I saw even priests slain, for in their fury they did not spare anyone.

Similarly, the great Soviet cinematographer, Sergei Eisenstein, filmed his thirteenth century epic, “Alexander Nevsky,” in 1938, showing the heroic and victorious battle of a Russian Prince against the Livonian Knights, a branch of the Teutonic Knights. The Knights were pictured with Nazi symbolism. Film enthusiasts can see the Youtube version of Sienkiewicz’s novel (Krzyżacy, in Polish) and Eisenstein’s film with Sergei Prokofiev’s brilliant score.

Contemporary historians have mostly abandoned crude nationalist stereotypes. German and Slavic historians now recognize that medieval loyalties were based on region and family connections more than linguistic and ethnic differences. They show that many Poles and Lithuanians allied themselves with the Teutonic Knights in their efforts to improve their position at home, and that Prussian Germans actively sought Polish protection against their Teutonic overlords. After their initial bloody defeat, Old Prussians were peacefully assimilated by Germans and Poles. The groups traded peacefully among themselves. While medieval history helped shape the nationalistic battles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the motivations of the medieval players were different, and their complex views of diversity set the scene for the peaceful life of Mennonites in the Vistula basin.
The early 1920s had seen the collapse of the cheese industry and, with one or two exceptions, the demise of the privately-owned rural cheese factories. As distant as it may seem, the collapse of European currencies had an impact on cheese production all over Manitoba. This difficult period was followed by a general Depression, an even more challenging period in agriculture. At the worst point of this economic crisis there emerged in Blumenort a cadre of resolute farmers with an economic plan.

Blumenort Cooperative Dairy Society (1932)

Following an organizational meeting in early 1932, the mixed farmers of the area agreed to build a local cheese factory on a cooperative business model. It was built on land provided by Peter R. Penner and situated on the west bank of a traversing creek. This new factory shared the footprint of its predecessor at this location.1

A former manager, Peter F. Unger, was recruited to assist with the development of a financial plan, a proposal so complex few non-farmers could understand its details. However, historian Dr. Royden Loewen has noted Unger understood its intricacies and successfully implemented it.

Some of the first directors on the board of the Blumenort Cooperative dairy were C. P. Reimer, Isaac P. Loewen, John R. Toews and Jacob G. Barkman. A cohort of eighty shareholders from Blumenort and Blumenhof ensured a strong milk supply for the factory and such support augured well for the future of dairying in the area.

In its first year of operation, the Blumenort cooperative produced 51,200 pounds of cheese. A long term cheese maker for the local factory was C. U. Kornelson, a man who undertook a hurried-up course in cheese making with Albert Carriere, an experienced instructor from St. Boniface. Kornelson’s success in subsequent cheese competitions confirmed that the accelerated tutorials offered by Carriere were worthwhile.

The graph below provides an overview of Blumenort cheese production from 1932 to 1940.2

Production Characteristics

In 1933 the Blumenort cooperative cheese factory had the highest production of any plant in Manitoba. Its average output from 1932 to 1940 was 221,700 pounds per annum, but in two of those years it exceeded 300,000 pounds, reaching 368,003 pounds in 1940.3 Because overall cheese production peaked in 1942 it is most likely that the Blumenort plant exceeded its previous high mark in 1942 and reached 400,000 pounds. Cheese production during World War II dwarfed the production of the first generation of Manitoba cheese factories.

Milk vats were fabricated at a local factory owned by Plett Bros., as were the ubiquitous cheese boxes. There is a consensus that the Blumenort cheese factory was configured with a minimum of four milk vats and possibly five. Such equipment...
would have been consistent with the levels of production reached at the factory.

**President Ben L. Reimer**

This dynamic farmer and progressive businessman from Twin Creek served as the president of the Blumenort cooperative during the 1940s. In 1947 he also was elected to the Manitoba Dairy Association, remaining in office until 1952. During his tenure he was appointed to serve on the resolutions committee and the program committee, the two most influential committees. These appointments confirm that Reimer, and perhaps Mennonites in general, were no longer averse to formulating policy in the agricultural forums of the province. Ben L. Reimer also held an executive position with the Manitoba Cooperative Cheese Manufacturers Association, the marketing agency for all cooperative factories in Manitoba. His reputation as a supporter of new ventures was further enhanced when he signed on as an incorporator of the new Steinbach Cold Storage Ltd. in January 1943. At the local cheese factory he was exhorting milk shippers like John K. Plett, Ben C. L. Penner, D. R. Plett and others to support the cooperative.

Perhaps Reimer’s community-oriented perspectives were most clearly on display when he attempted to save the R. M. of Hanover cheese factories with an amalgamation plan in 1953. He took it upon himself to address various shareholder meetings with a plan which might ensure the survival of the cooperative cheese factory. That the plan ultimately failed did not detract from the effort he put into it.

**C. U. Kornelson Retires**

In contemplation of leaving his cheese factory employment, C. U. Kornelson purchased the farm of H. H. Enns in 1945, some 13 years after he began his career in Blumenort. Following a few years of farming, he moved with his family to Mexico in the large exodus of Mennonites in 1948. Following Kornelson at the production helm was Cornelius P. Unger, a cheesemaker with a number of brothers in the same profession. During a seven year career at the Blumenort cooperative, Unger was assisted by Jacob F. Doerksen, John N. Koop, Peter R. Barkman and Ben Brandt.

**Closure**

Quite clearly the Blumenort cheese factory remained a vigorous business from its 1932 inception until its closure in July 1953. This favourable assessment is derived from noting the high levels of cheese production each year, including the impressive output of 171,000 pounds in its last six months of operation. What factors then were paramount in the decision to close an apparently viable enterprise? It would be legitimate to point to an expanding market for table milk, one factor which negatively impinged on the cheese industry. Labour costs were rising in the post-war period, affecting all labour-intensive industries. However, it was likely the proposed conversion to a pasteurized product which proved decisive in Blumenort. This revamp of the industry, soon mandated by law, required new capitalization and upgrading at the factory. It seemed the intent of government and vested interests was to bring about the rationalization of the cheese industry in Manitoba.

When some rather belated itineration by Ben L. Reimer and John H. Neufeld on behalf of amalgamation did not prove successful, the Blumenort cheese factory ceased production. In July 1953, it left the field to a burgeoning group of contract milk shippers in the community. The nostalgia of a receding era still causes older people to look northward as they cross the creek where the cheese factory once stood.

**Landmark Cheese Factory (1932)**

A second cheese factory that began in 1932 was built near Landmark on S11-8-5E in the R. M. of Tache, one mile south and one mile east of present-day Landmark. The site was on a diagonal road leading to Ste. Anne and was colloquially referred to as the Ste. Anne Road. This factory, together with...
two other new plants in St. Boniface and Blumenort, increased cheese production in the province by 20 percent and brought the total number of cheese factories in Manitoba to seventeen.

During the construction phase John M. Penner assumed responsibility for its development. His brother Cornelius M. Penner was elected the first president of the cooperative and Peter P. Wohlgemuth, a former school teacher, was chosen as secretary-treasurer. Other directors were: Erdman Peters, Peter N. Plett, George K. Wiebe, Henry Neufeld and Abram C. Penner. The residence of the cheesemaker was situated on factory land and a general store owned by Frank D. Reimer was located across the road from the plant.

Cheesemakers

On the record as first cheesemaker at Landmark is John J. Barkman, whose term of employment was from 1932 to 1934. Following Barkman in the position was Abe P. Unger who moved into the available residence in late 1934 or 1935. Unger had been employed at the Blumenort cheese factory before making the transition to Landmark. Like many others, he was helping to develop a new area for Mennonite settlement. Remarkably, Abe Unger excelled in his first years on the job at Landmark, winning the Manitoba Dairy Association award for top performance in 1935. The Silver Cup trophy he won remains in the possession of his family as does another Cup he won a few years later. In fact, a display of ribbons and photographs covering Unger’s cheese making career is a valued memento within the family.7

Largest Cheese Factory

The Landmark plant drew its milk supply from an area described by the school districts of Shakespeare, in which it was located, Linden, Willow Ridge, Prefontaine, Greenland and Landmark. Because of an expansion in mixed farming and milk production during the Depression, the establishment of the Bothwell cheese factory in the southwest corner of the Landmark catchment area in 1936 did not negatively affect their milk supply.

As the largest cheese factory in Manitoba, Landmark was equipped with six milk vats, fabricated by Plett Bros. of Blumenort. It was necessary that capacity be large enough to accommodate Monday morning surges of milk.8 A wood-burning steam boiler was the heart of the factory and it required massive amounts of firewood, stored near the boiler annex. Excess whey, that nemesis of the early industry, was initially stored in an underground tank but a new above-ground tank was installed in 1936. Even so, the nearby ditch had to contend with the odorous by-product as well.

Although the Landmark cheese factory became the most productive in Manitoba, its initial output in 1932 was a modest 25,000 pounds, and in 1933, an unremarkable 99,366 pounds.9 Prices paid to producers of industrial milk in this period were 90 to 95 cents cwt. It was in 1935 that the output from this plant began to surpass the provincial average, coinciding with the employment of Abe P. Unger as cheesemaker. By 1937, a prosperous year for dairying in Manitoba, cheese production at the Landmark factory exceeded 400,000 pounds.10 This figure was 25,000 pounds, and in 1933, an unremarkable 99,366 pounds.10 Prices paid to producers of industrial milk in this period were 90 to 95 cents cwt. It was in 1935 that the output from this plant began to surpass the provincial average, coinciding with the employment of Abe P. Unger as cheesemaker. By 1937, a prosperous year for dairying in Manitoba, cheese production at the Landmark factory exceeded 400,000 pounds.10 This figure was 25,000 pounds, and in 1933, an unremarkable 99,366 pounds.9

By 1939 the Landmark plant surpassed 500,000 pounds, again establishing a new benchmark in Manitoba cheese production.11 The 567,259 pounds in 1940 dwarfed the provincial average of 196,769 pounds. Unfortunately the 1942 figures for the Landmark cheese plant are not available. It was in that year that most cheese plants in Manitoba set their all-time records and it is likely that Landmark production exceeded 600,000 pounds that year.

Like virtually all rural cheese factories at the time, the Landmark plant was structured as an agricultural cooperative, funded by the equity shares held by the milk producers. It is of interest that a search of the Manitoba Gazette for the period 1932 – 1942 has not yielded any record of legal incorporation of this cooperative. If such a formality was not pursued, it may be assumed a cultural conservatism was the basis for it. However, when a provincial cheese marketing agency was incorporated in 1941, Cornelius M. Penner of Landmark joined George Prefontaine, John R. Friesen, N. Fournier, J. F. Loewen and Frank Giesbrecht as the legal incorporators.

Summation

As the largest producer of cheddar cheese in Manitoba for more than a decade, the Landmark factory set standards of both quantity and quality in the cheese industry. The community contributed a number of select craftsmen to cheese factories in both the East and the West Reserve as well as to plants in Winnipeg. Its closure around 1949 reflected the larger trends affecting the dairy industry at that time. The current residents of the town may, if they wish, cast a retrospective glance to their past and take much satisfaction from the success and diligence of their remarkable pioneers.

Table VI - 1937

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factory</th>
<th>Production in Pounds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Landmark</td>
<td>406,757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blumenort</td>
<td>243,771</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bothwell</td>
<td>218,853</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kleefeld</td>
<td>198,212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steinbach</td>
<td>192,271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanover</td>
<td>165,570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barkfield</td>
<td>12,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grunthal (City Dairy Ltd.)</td>
<td>N/K</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Annual Reports to the Minister of Agriculture 1938

Kleefeld Cooperative Dairy Ltd. (1933 – 1957)

The general decline in the Canadian rural economy reached its lowest point in 1933.12 Cheese which had sold for 23 cents a pound in 1928 declined to 12 cents a pound in 1933 and this decline reflected the overall agricultural economy. It was in July 1933 that the Kleefeld Dairy Society was formed, first as a concept and then as a functional cooperative business. Early records reveal that a board was elected to deal with the practical steps necessary to form a cooperative. John R. Friesen was...
elected president, John I. Penner served as secretary-treasurer and Jacob B. Koop and Henry D. Fast became directors. Shares were distributed at $3.00 each and an amount of $270.00 was raised in the initial share offering.\textsuperscript{13} Because Friesen provided the three acres of land for the project, it is likely he accepted shares in exchange for his real property.

A New Facility

In the spring of 1936 funds from another share offering were available to build a new, more modern factory. In equipping the factory, the board of directors bought used items whenever possible, saving up to 70 percent of the new item price.\textsuperscript{14} A protocol for 100 tons of production per annum was followed at the start-up of the factory. Daily shipments of 9,000 to 13,000 pounds of milk arrived at the plant in traditional milk cans, delivered by both horse-drawn and automotive vehicles. In one instance in the 1930s, shipper Abram Teichroeb pulled up to the receiving platform with a two-wheel trailer in tow to deliver his morning milk. His car was full of school children who enjoyed the brief layover on their way to Gruenfeld School. When the farmer emerged from his car he noticed an empty trailer; he had forgotten to load the milk that morning, causing him mild chagrin and his charges much merriment.\textsuperscript{15}

Table II reflects the gains in milk and cheese quality in a four year period at the Kleefeld plant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Grade 1</th>
<th>Grade 2</th>
<th>Grade 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>91.4%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>93.8%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>94.2%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>94.0%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textit{Source: J. R. Friesen Account Books 1934 – 1937}

Brokers and Buyers

Winnipeg brokers were pleased with the quality of cheese from the new factories of southeastern Manitoba. In this four year period Swift Canada was the leading buyer of Kleefeld cheese at 76 percent of sales. Canada Packers Ltd. and Burns Company also purchased significant volumes. At various times in the 1930s, smaller lots were sold to the T. Eaton Company, J. Coyle and J. H. Escotts. The latter company is still in business at 95 Alexander Avenue in Winnipeg.

1938 Incorporation

The optimism felt by the board of directors in 1937 resulted in the incorporation of the cooperative in 1938. An authorized share capital of $15,000 was specified with each share priced at $10.00. Seven men became the incorporators of the new business, namely: George S. Fast, John R. Friesen, Dan F. Isaac, David L. Isaac, Frank L. Isaac, Jacob B. Koop, and Abe D. Teichroeb. Their signatures were all witnessed by Henry D. Fast, secretary-treasurer, whose affidavit was taken by Steinbach notary John D. Goosen. Approval of incorporation by Provincial Secretary J. I. McDiarmid was given shortly after.

As the first president of the cooperative, Friesen assumed responsibility for the business affairs of the company. His dealings with government regulators led him to occasionally consult with Edmond Prefontaine, M. L. A. in St. Pierre and the Minister of Agriculture, D. L. Campbell. Henry D. Fast assumed an expanded role in the incorporated business as secretary-treasurer. He co-signed all company cheques and banked the money received from the buyers of cheese. Fast remained in his secretarial post until 1952 and the tenure of J. R. Friesen, begun in 1933, ended in 1945 with his election to the church ministry in Kleefeld.

The 1940s

In 1949 some 2,800,000 pounds of milk were processed into 274,309 pounds of cheese at the Kleefeld cheese factory, a new record of production. In 1941 there was an unexpected decline with a cheese output of 203,721 pounds. It is probable that farming conditions were not optimal for dairying that year as the overall provincial production also fell by 18 percent. To produce the 2.2 million pounds of milk in 1941 there were 118 shippers of record whose annual deliveries averaged about 20,000 pounds. These figures suggest a large number of small farmers were delivering milk to this plant, a situation not usually conducive to achieving a quality product.

A significant increase in milk shipments and cheese production occurred in 1942, a year of exceptional milk production and a golden age of cooperative cheese factories in Manitoba. At the Kleefeld plant, milk receipts were 3,374,468 and cheese output was 308,665 pounds. Augmenting these sales of cheese were 6,219 pounds of whey butter and 1,219 pounds of creamery butter. In this ebullient year the milk price was $1.77 cwt. and cheese attracted a wholesale price of 21 cents a pound. In 1942 the Kleefeld Cooperative Dairy had aggregate sales of $70,866.29. Based on the large increase in volumes, producers would have noticed a 50 percent increase in their income from 1941.

In both years 1941 and 1942, P. J. A. Braun was hired to conduct the financial audits at the cheese factory, and in 1942 he certified a profit of $2,569.04 payable as dividends to shareholders of record. The gross profit of operations was $9,148.24, a high figure not achieved before.\textsuperscript{16}

This robust economic activity at the business in 1942 brought in another staff member in 1943. A young local man, Edward Isaac, had his employment approved by the wartime Alternative Service authorities in Winnipeg. Also pursuant to the record-breaking performance of 1942, Arnold Fast married Anne Kroeker of Steinbach on May 2, 1943 and carried on with his cheese factory career in the home community.

Health Inspections

To comply with health regulations employees at the cheese factory wore white uniforms and a wedge cap, underpinned with thick-soled black boots designed to tolerate a wet concrete floor. Health inspections were routinely performed by inspector I. Villeneuve, dressed in a suit on his rural visits as a symbol of his authority. His primary roles were to ensure the production facilities, products and processes met provincial standards by taking milk samples for bacterial counts and cheese samples for assessing quality factors. The cheese inspector frowned malevolently on protruding nails in factory walls. Some ironic humour arose when he joined the men in stirring cheese curd, only to ask “where do I hang my coat?” on surveying the nail-less walls.

Issues of milk quality were addressed at the receiving platform where employees administered the smell test. Reputations
for milk quality were made and lost at this early stage and being related by birth or marriage did not alter that fact.

A Cheese Factory Fire

A major night fire destroyed the Kleefeld cheese factory on December 13, 1948. It originated in the boiler room. Regrettably, all company business records were lost. Insurance adjusters calculated the loss at $5,017.93 but the actual loss was double the adjusted amount when it was rebuilt in 1949. After the fire, the directors arranged for a special shareholder’s meeting early in 1949, at which time approval was given to rebuild the factory immediately with assistance of a loan. With one of the directors acting as general foreman, a more modern and spacious factory arose at the same site equipped with mechanical refrigeration and other features.

Factory Staff

Early cheesemakers John D. Fast and George U. Kornelson took this factory forward from its inception in 1933 to 1936 when Kornelson left to take up employment at the Hanover cheese factory. J. D. Fast remained at the Kleefeld factory until 1940 when he moved on to Grunthal. Following Kornelson’s departure in 1936, Jake K. Dueck began a 22 year career in cheesemaking, holding the position continuously until April 15, 1957, the last year of operations.

In addition to the cheesemakers at the factory, there were other staff on the production teams. In Kleefeld, Albert K. Friesen had a career which, in many ways, paralleled that of Jake K. Dueck. Friesen worked with cheese for 12 years before transferring in 1952 to the feed store and egg grading station.

Working at the cheese factory for varying lengths of time were Fred Wiebe, Edward Isaac, Jake Thiessen, Leonard Reimer and John K. Fast. From January 1954, John Koop served as an assistant cheesemaker and for an 8 month period, John K. Fast worked as cheesemaker.

Awards

Jake K. Dueck was a frequent winner of awards at M.D.A. conventions. Of these the most prestigious were the Silver Cups he captured in 1942 and 1945, a trophy donated by the Banque de Nationale, which recognized all aspects of performance. John D. Fast, the first cheesemaker of the cooperative, also won a number of awards during his tenure and other assistants were also recognized in specific competitions.

A Second Crest

After rebuilding the cheese factory in 1949, the industry in Kleefeld had another fine period of local cheese production. Although other factories were closing down around them, the
board of directors had gained motivation from the experiences of the fire and from reconstruction of the plant. In this second burst of strong cheese production, culminating with 269,233 pounds in 1954, the Kleefeld plant accounted for 22 percent of Manitoba cheese output. Table IV provides some details of this period.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1951</th>
<th>1952</th>
<th>1953</th>
<th>1954</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Milk receipts (lbs.)</td>
<td>1,857,688</td>
<td>1,749,000</td>
<td>2,230,320</td>
<td>2,826,951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheese sales (lbs.)</td>
<td>176,922</td>
<td>166,592</td>
<td>212,411</td>
<td>269,233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheese sales ($)</td>
<td>65,114</td>
<td>50,700</td>
<td>60,528</td>
<td>80,621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheese price (lbs.)</td>
<td>$0.368</td>
<td>$0.304</td>
<td>$0.285</td>
<td>$0.298</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kleefeld Cooperative Dairy Ltd. Records MHC Archives Vol. 4109, Acc 88-170

However, the issues of amalgamation and pasteurization which had deterred other Hanover cheese factories also had a similar effect in Kleefeld. On December 20, 1957 it ceased all cheese production. This cooperative enterprise engaged in other agricultural business until 1976, when its incorporation was revoked and all its assets were sold.

Steinbach Cooperative Dairy Society Ltd. (1936)

A group of Steinbach area farmers also re-entered the cheese industry during the Depression. One of the first public announcements about this development came in April 1935:

At a meeting in Steinbach it was decided to construct a cheese factory as soon as enough shares can be sold. The shares do not need to be paid in full. They are 10 dollars.17

Share capital to be authorized was set at $15,000 and the incorporators were Klaas D. Reimer, K. R Toews, J. P. Wohlgemuth, H. T. Reimer, J. G. Friesen, Karl Hollander and P. B. Thiessen.

A location was found at the north end of town on the banks of a north-flowing creek. At the factory’s inception, the board president was John G. Friesen and the cheese maker was Cornelius P. Penner.

By the late summer of 1936 Die Post announced with justifiable pride that the production of cheese was a reality.18 Later in fall other news articles apprised an interested public of further developments. A September account noted:

The Steinbach cheese factory is in its second week of operations. The 3000 pounds of milk per day at start-up is now up to 6000 pounds per day. The cheesemaker is C. P. Penner with Abe D. Reimer as the helper.19

It is probable that John D. Reimer also worked with his brother at the Steinbach plant in order to learn the trade, because he was hired by the Rosenhoff cheese factory as lead hand in 1940. Another brother, Benny D. Reimer, can recall delivering milk to the Steinbach plant from the family’s farm north of town.20 Production values at the Steinbach cheese factory in 1937 quickly climbed to 192,271 pounds, of which 91 percent graded No. 1. This was an acceptable result but well below the 94 percent objective set by the cheese inspector, or the 98 percent achieved by George U. Kornelson at the Hanover cheese factory, or by C. K. Unger of the New Bothwell plant.21

Further refinements were needed throughout the production process, including the methods employed on the farm.

Cheesemaker C. P. Penner served in that capacity for about seven years and built a residence near the cheese factory in 1937 for work convenience.22

In 1938 Steinbach, St. Pierre and Kleefeld cheese factories all built additions to their buildings in order to accommodate an extra vat for skimming whey, while the New Bothwell plant added separator equipment for whey butter production. In recognition of such further progress the newspaper opined:

The cheese factories are coming into their own again. Not only have existing ones full employment but new ones are being built. The Kleefeld cheese factory has for a while worked day and night, processing 24,000 pounds of milk a day. In Blumenort and other places (Landmark) they likely are doing the same.23

Growth in Production

There were concerns in 1939 about the quality of Manitoba cheese. That year there was a drastic drop from 94 percent of No. 1 grade to only 88 percent. Cheese inspector Villeneuve attributed the decline, in part, to the use of old and rusty milk cans and ordered an immediate cull of defective cans. Despite the poor results generally, the factories in the R. M. of Hanover maintained an acceptable standard, winning most of the awards at M.D.A. competitions, including the Silver Cup, emblematic of the best cheesemaker in Manitoba.

Cheese production had been gaining momentum throughout the Depression but it grew even more rapidly with the outbreak of World War II in September 1939. In Steinbach, output increased in 1940 to 353,819 pounds and then soared again to set another record of 480,000 pounds in 1942.24 In this year of record production, the Steinbach factory was second only to Landmark in Manitoba and together these two plants produced 20 percent of Manitoba cheese.

The 1940 cheese aggregate of the East Reserve represented 50 percent of Manitoba production, a ratio which had been as high as 62 percent in 1937 and as low as 30 percent in some other years. These are some of the empirical results which have generally been overlooked or inadequately weighted by some historians in their assessment of the cheese industry in the East Reserve during the Depression and in World War II.

It was fortunate that the board of directors in 1936 had adhered to government specifications when constructing the factory, thereby allowing for ramped-up production during the war years.

Postwar Changes

Postwar changes came to Steinbach rapidly and soon the town exhibited a number of urban characteristics. Milk was processed and pasteurized at a local creamery with its public
health benefits advertised to the modern homemaker in the Steinbach Post and the Carillon News. Home delivery of milk in quart-sized glass bottles was a customer convenience available in Steinbach just like in the big city. In 1947, the town achieved incorporation as the Town of Steinbach, further promoting the trend of urbanization.

Evaluation
In its cooperative phase, 1936 to 1949, the Steinbach factory had a history of fluctuating production. While operating at below capacity levels in some years, it showed good strength in years like 1940 and 1942. On balance, its production values placed it third in the East Reserve behind Blumenort and Landmark cheese factories.

After many changes in the dairy industry and oscillations in local activity, the Steinbach Cooperative Dairy closed its doors in 1949. Its production equipment was offered to other area facilities and its land and buildings were also divested.

Hanover Cooperative Dairy Society Ltd. (1936)
The district was known as Ebenfeld by its Mennonite residents, but the cheese factory was the Hanover Cooperative Dairy Society Ltd. from its 1936 inception. Located one mile north and a half mile east of Mitchell, it bore the legal description SW8-7-6E in the R. M. of Hanover and had a trading area which embraced the settlements of Neuanlage, Eigenfeld, Chortitz and Reichenbach as well as Ebenfeld.

When the time came to incorporate the business, the following men were willing signatories: Jacob B. Loewen, J. H. Peters, Alfred Stahn, Peter W. Peters, Jacob B. Peters and Abram L. Friesen. At the time the first company return was filed, there were 53 shareholders owning 102 shares. Letters Patent were granted on April 6, 1936 authorizing share capital of $15,000.00. Following the incorporation the board consisted of five local men, namely Jacob F. Loewen, president; Jacob H. Peters, secretary-treasurer and Alfred Stahn, George S. Kehler and P. W. Peters as directors.

Cheesemakers
An assistant cheese maker from Kleefeld was hired to direct production at the new Hanover plant. George U. Kornelson constructed a house at the factory and immediately rented out a room to a young storekeeper, Peter J. Loewen of Ridgewood. On July 1, 1936 the Steinbach Post carried the following notice:

The cheese factory at Ebenfeld is now in full swing. A co-op store nearby is in business as well with P. J. Loewen behind the counter.

Kornelson’s remuneration was correlated to cheese production and set at 75 cents a hundred weight. This cheese factory did not aspire to be the largest in the region, but its production was above the provincial average. In 1937 it produced 165,570 pounds, in 1938 it was 192,000 pounds and in 1940 it stood at 238,216 pounds, a strong performance. George Kornelson had a successful career as cheesemaker of the Hanover plant from 1936 to 1948. In both 1937 and 1939 he was the winner of the Silver Cup trophies donated annually by the Banque du Nationale. When he resigned in 1948 to move with his family to Mexico, the Hanover factory lost a skilled craftsman.
evidence of his well-earned reputation there was the fact that the Hanover cheese factory had 99.2 percent of its 1939 cheese production graded No. 1, an achievement most difficult to replicate. During its 19 years of production, the Hanover facility made over 3,000,000 pounds of cheese and was recognized as a stable, well-managed business concern. From the start the Hanover board had applied for federal certification, apparently to facilitate the export of its cheese. The table below illustrates the comparative strengths of southern Manitoba cheese factories, based on comprehensive measurements, in 1937.

As the production volumes increased at the Hanover plant, other staff was hired. In 1943 a 15 year old farm boy, Cornie G. Peters, came to work at the Hanover factory. When G. U. Kornelson emigrated to Mexico, Peters was qualified to assume his position, a post he held only until 1952 when he was recruited for a similar job at the Bothwell cheese factory. Peter R. Peters then became the lead cheesemaker at Hanover until it ceased production. In 1952 he was awarded First prize for having the highest ratio of No. 1 cheese in the province.

Factory Refit

A major development in the life of the Hanover cheese factory was the installation of refrigeration equipment in 1949. Secretary J. H. Neufeld requested tendered bids for the job and the successful bidder was the Linde Canadian Refrigerator Co. Ltd. of Winnipeg and Montreal with a quote of $767.00. The company, still extant, provided an air conditioning unit with 9600 BTU capacity. A thermostatically controlled temperature of 58 degrees F and a relative humidity of 76 percent were warranted by the company. Because of the financial contributions by the federal government, their office also had to approve the project. As it turned out, the cheese factory obtained only five years of use from the equipment before it ended operations.

When the Hanover cheese factory ceased production after 1954, it began to liquidate its assets. Shareholders turned in their shares for equity redemption. Two company buildings were bought by board president Alfred Stahn and moved to his

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factory</th>
<th>Cheesemaker</th>
<th>Aggregate Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Hanover</td>
<td>George U. Kornelson</td>
<td>442.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Bothwell</td>
<td>C. K. Unger</td>
<td>441.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Ste. Anne</td>
<td>Geo. Frechette</td>
<td>438.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) St. Pierre</td>
<td>E. Caya</td>
<td>436.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Reinland</td>
<td>John P. Unger</td>
<td>431.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Otterburne</td>
<td>Donat Robidouix</td>
<td>428.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Blumenort</td>
<td>C. U. Kornelson</td>
<td>428.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8) Landmark</td>
<td>Abe P. Unger</td>
<td>427.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9) Arnaud</td>
<td>J. J. Wiebe</td>
<td>427.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10) Kleefeld</td>
<td>John D. Fast</td>
<td>418.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11) Steinbach</td>
<td>C. P. Penner</td>
<td>417.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Annual Reports to the Minister of Agriculture, 1938

An aerial view of the Hanover Cheese Factory. The building nearby is likely the Coop Store referred to by the Steinbach Post in 1936. Photo Credit: Bernie Stahn.
farm. The residence of George Kornelson had earlier been sold and moved off the premises. The factory acreage was sold to the Town of Steinbach for use as a sewage lagoon. All traces of the cheese factory have vanished from the site; however, in a sequel of continuing development, Alfred Stahn created the village of Mitchell, subdividing the parkland and pasture into a modern commuter haven with a population of 1500. A younger son, Bernie Stahn, resides in Mitchell with his family.

Bothwell Cooperative Dairy Society Ltd. (1936)

Production of cheese was on the ascendency in Manitoba when the Bothwell cheese factory applied successfully for a cheese manufacturing license in May 1936. With its operating license, the new cheese factory soon became the economic centerpiece of the community, a position it has never relinquished. The cooperative enjoyed such a degree of support and credibility that it favourably affected other aspects of community life. With the influence of the cheese cooperative in the 1960s, the community made a successful case for locating a new school in the village at a time when the trend was toward school closures and regional consolidation. Two Bothwell men, Frank H. Giesbrecht and Bernhard Dueck, were in the vanguard of a plan to build a cheese factory in the community, though none had operated there before. These men provided the inspiration which persuaded others to become shareholders in the proposed enterprise. With the construction of the factory underway, the provisional directors applied for a charter and soon New Bothwell became the second cheese factory in the R. M. of Hanover to be incorporated.

In the organizational meeting which followed, a board of directors was elected. Named as the first president was Frank H. Giesbrecht and accepting the position of secretary-treasurer was Peter H. Hildebrandt. Other early directors were Abram L. Hiebert, Gerhard Loepky, Isaac Hildebrandt, Jacob H. Hildebrandt and David D. Peters. Local records indicate Giesbrecht held the position of president from 1936 to 1944. There is, however, separate evidence that he was in that position as late as 1946 when the Villeneuve Cup was presented to him as the presiding officer of Bothwell Cooperative. At incorporation the authorized share capital was set at $15,000 with each share costing $10.00. While some gaps exist in the record, it is clear that William F. Giesbrecht and Henry J. Poetker also served as presiding officers of the company before 1960. After the cheese factory opened for business and a milk supply had been established, its development was rapid. In 1937, the first full year of production, the Bothwell plant manufactured 218,853 pounds of cheese and with those numbers vaulted into fourth place among 17 Manitoba factories.

First Bothwell Cheesemaker

Cheesemaker Cornelius K. Unger came to work at the Bothwell cheese factory in 1936 following a recommendation from inspector Villeneuve. It seems the board of directors had obtained his professional advice on the personnel matter. Being a married man with a large and growing family, Unger required reasonable accommodation. What was available, however, was a modest, old house located on factory grounds.

Unger negotiated a salary based on volume of production and business profitability, an arrangement with sufficient mutuality to lead to seven years of employment. By living in close proximity to the cheese factory, Unger was expected to provide basic factory maintenance and to service the steam boiler each day. Such close integration allowed the family to obtain its domestic water requirements from the cheese factory where hot water was a plentiful commodity.

A Local Nuisance

Almost every cheese factory of that era created a public nuisance by disposing of its whey into nearby waterways. In the case of Bothwell there was another issue. Large quantities of steam emitted from the factory obscured the vision of drivers on the adjacent market road. On one occasion an even more acute hazard was created when wood smoke from a factory fire mingled with the clouds of steam to obscure the road. However, the damage from the fire was minimal and factory staff soon resumed production. After this event, the board of directors addressed the steam problem and obtained some unspecified remediation for it. A higher chimney was sometimes necessary for better dispersion of factory exhaust.

Factory expansion

In 1947 the Bothwell board recommended a plant expansion to their shareholders. The south side of the factory was remodelled to facilitate the milk receiving process. At the same time the yard was gravelled to ensure access in wet weather by all vehicles. Capacity of the factory was increased with the addition of another milk vat, a modification which had been long in coming.

The Bothwell Brand

In an effort to promote their markets and further enhance the Bothwell cheese brand, the company in 1954 hired George Funk as its regional sales representative. This decision resulted in a rapid growth in sales as Funk turned the Bothwell brand into a household name during his 38 years in the job. The era of pasteurized cheese production is beyond the scope of this survey but it is clear that great strides have been taken at this factory after its conversion to a pasteurized product.

In 1970 the Bothwell community mounted a centenary celebration, referred to as the Bothwell Centennial Cheese Festival, a party with parades and beauty queen contestants which gave ample evidence that cheese remains central to the Bothwell community.

By 1969 over a million pounds of cheese annually were produced at the Bothwell factory, a business which retained a cooperative ownership model until 2003. Following its sale to a private investment group, it has continued to show progress and build on its inspiring, historic traditions.

Grunthal Dairy

It took until 1937 before cheese making resumed in Grunthal after the collapse of the cheese making industry in the 1920s. City Dairy of Winnipeg enlarged the plant they had purchased in 1937 and brought in a cheese maker from Winnipeg to begin making cheese there.

A change of ownership at the Grunthal cheese factory involved a sale from City Dairy Ltd. to Grunthal Farmers Cooperative, a transaction recorded for March 15, 1943 though de facto possession may have preceded that date. With this change to cooperative status, C. H. Friesen was installed as president and Peter H. Janzen as cheesemaker and board secretary. Incorporation of the farmer-owned business occurred
on March 2, 1943 with authorized share capital of $30,000.00. The incorporators of record were: C. H. Friesen, J. Dulder, P. P. H. Janzen, David M. Epp and J. F. Braun.

Sale to Kraft and Others

After three years of production, the factory was sold to Kraft Foods Inc., a Montreal-based food conglomerate. By 1948 the Kraft Company had completed construction of a new, modern plant, one designed for the manufacture of pasteurized cheese. In 1956 the Kraft plant was sold to J. W. Spiers of St. Boniface who operated it under the Medo-Land label. Though never discontinuing cheese production entirely, a low ebb was reached in 1961, a year when a mere 39,455 pounds of cheese were produced. From that point on, production of cheese increased again until 1973 when 1,156,143 pounds were produced.39

During the 1950s many southeast cheese factories closed their doors, resulting in staff moving on to larger facilities or leaving the industry for other opportunities. Plants such as that in Grunthal absorbed workers from the Kleefeld cheese factory with both John Koop and John K. Fast joining the Medo-Land firm. A greater variety of dairy products was produced at the Grunthal plant than before. One specialty product was whey powder, an item utilized in the manufacture of the Blue Boy brand of premium ice cream. This food was packaged in a light orange-coloured container featuring an image of the Blue Boy from the 1770 Gainsborough painting. In this period there was some coordinated production with the St. Claude dairy plant, a facility also owned by Medo-Land Dairies.

Today Grunthal is still one of the premier dairy towns of Manitoba. With the multi-national dairy giant Parmalat now at the helm, the milk producers of the area are fully integrated into the fluid milk industry in Canada. Pete Janzen, former factory manager, was recognized by the company for running an efficient, profitable operation at Grunthal, an achievement which garnered awards at international conventions.

Niverville Cooperative Dairy Society Ltd. (1940)

Deep in the recesses of dairy archives there is a cursory reference to a dairy education course conducted in Niverville in 1893 by provincial instructors Scott and Herbison.40 Some years later, circa 1910, a cheese factory is mentioned with the name Peter Neufeld appended to it.41 In conjunction with this reference is a statement by one David Stoetz in the Niverville history book of 1986:

My father purchased an old abandoned cheese factory which became our home for the next thirty or forty years.42

Taken together, these fragments of information point to a pre-World War I cheese factory in the Niverville area. However, nothing is known about it beyond an allusion to its existence.

Organization

It was 1940 before a farmer-owned cooperative cheese factory emerged from the wheat fields of Niverville. There are, fortunately, descendents of the original planners and builders still available to assist in its documentation and historical reconstruction. This wartime factory was located one mile north and a half mile west of the junction of PTH 59 and PR 311, a unique location because the municipalities of Hanover, Richot and Tache all converge at the cheese factory site. As the factory was situated on the north side of Road 42, it belonged to the R. M. of Richot, specifically SW4-8-4E.

A one acre lot had been purchased from area farmer Henry Tiffenbach, a lot contiguous to a natural creek flowing in a north-westerly direction. Fred Tiffenbach, a son, lived with

The Niverville Cheese Factory. Photo Credit: C.N. Stoetz.
his young family across the road in the R. M. of Hanover and a brother August also lived in the area. Some local residents referred to the cheese factory as the Tiffenbach factory. The Niverville Cooperative Dairy Society Ltd. was incorporated under Part XVIII of the **Companies Act** and was granted **Letters Patent** on September 25, 1940. In those early days Jacob G. Stoesz provided leadership as the board president and John D. Enns served as secretary-treasurer. Other incorporators and directors were Henry H. Toews, Frank S. Schroeder, Aron S. Schultz, Peter D. Enns and Henry G. Stoesz. The company’s authorized share capital was $15,000.00 with share prices at $10.00.

**Equity and Debt**

During the organizational phase of the enterprise, directors Jacob G. Stoesz and John D. Enns sold shares for the company. Some 70 farmers subscribed to the share offering with the result that $1880.00 was raised in the first two years. Because this amount of share equity did not adequately capitalize the venture, the board of directors authorized the issuance of debt in the amount of $2000.00. Of that $1000.00 was borrowed from shareholder Abram K. Friesen. Financial statements in 1943 list cheese sales at $25,527.00 and milk purchases at $21,403.00, providing $4,124.00 to cover all other expenses. With such low margins allocated to operational costs, the salaries of employees were usually low. The Niverville co-op paid about 85 percent of its revenue to the milk producers and about 5.7 percent to the staff. This ratio, if accurate, reflects an orientation toward producers, not unanticipated in a farmer-owned enterprise.

By the 1950s labour benefitted from more employment opportunities and so their pay began to reflect such competition. As an example of the trend, one might cite the practices of the Hanover cheese factory which in 1954 directed 73.6 percent of gross revenue to its milk producers and 10 percent to production staff.

**Cheesemakers and Production**

J. H. Steingart was employed as the first cheesemaker in 1940 and remained in that position until late 1948. At various times the men Dan Doerksen, Martin Friesen and Cornelius Bergen were also employed. When J. H. Steingart began to favour a commute from his home, Dan Doerksen took up residence in the house on factory land. In the first year of operation Steingart took a prize for the best cheese entry in the Class B group of factories, admittedly a small cohort. The truncated production runs at Niverville, less than 5 months a year, allowed Steingart to obtain occasional employment at the Landmark and Bothwell cheese factories. There was some reciprocity in this arrangement as both Abe P. Unger of Landmark and C. K. Unger of the Bothwell plant took occasional shifts at the Niverville factory in 1943. It is a possibility that both these men were no longer employed by their respective factories at that time.

With an established trend line of decline evident in 1948, Steingart left the cheese making position to Cornelius Stoesz in late 1948 or early 1949. Stoesz has noted farmers brought their milk to the factory in either automotive or horse-drawn vehicles on roads which had a limited gravel base. The cheese factory was not equipped with electricity during his term, so...
the cheese curing room relied on air circulation from outside vents, thick wall insulation and controlled public access. Cheese inspector Albert Oullette made monthly visits to the factory, during which times he worked alongside Stoesz and established a favourable rapport with him.

**Sale of Cheese Factory**

A shareholders’ meeting held at the Prefontaine School, now the retrofitted Village Inn, ratified the sale of the cheese factory for a price of $2,500.00. The building was sold to William Dyck and Sons of Niverville, a firm which converted it to a chicken hatchery. A later sale to George Dyck and Sons resulted in its use as a poultry abattoir. The closure of the cheese factory and the revocation of Letters Patent were announced in the *Carillon News* in 1951. Acting as counsel for the cooperative in the wind-up of its affairs was A. M. Monnin, a future Chief Justice of Manitoba. His tariff of $100.00 was one of the larger expenses at dissolution.

**Evaluation**

A case could be made that the Niverville cheese factory was not as central to the economic welfare of the area as were the factories of Bothwell, Kleefeld, Grunthal, Hanover and Blumenort to their districts. A stronger grain economy, as represented by the town’s iconic grain elevator of 1879, set the area apart from the marginal districts of the East Reserve. Niverville’s position on the railway and its proximity to Winnipeg via St. Mary’s Road and the Piney Highway further amplified the natural advantages of its agricultural land base. Niverville’s anglophone settlers had the advantages of an Ontario backdrop which offered capital and expertise within a Canadian agricultural context. For these and other reasons, the cheese factory in Niverville appears to have led an understated corporate life, one that has escaped the notice of numerous area residents.

Formed in 1940, the enterprise had support in the policies of the Canadian government during World War II. All sectors of agriculture were encouraged to produce commodities for export to Europe and cheese was a desirable product. Most cheese factories in Manitoba reached their highest production during the war years.

This cheese factory’s legacy is an important one, as its formation grew out of a spirit of cooperation and local leadership. For those residents touched by its sturdy presence and unique character, it will remain a well-regarded institution.

**The Cooperative Phase of the Cheese Industry**

Underlying the development of cooperative cheese factories in the Mennonite East Reserve in the 1930s was an economic philosophy which had within it the attributes to become a divisive force among Mennonite people. At its core it embraced views and principles antithetical to the free market system and a number of its national leaders were comfortable within political parties of the left. This movement did briefly cause tensions among Mennonites, especially where their own leaders in the co-op movement became dynamic public figures who rivalled the influence of traditional church elders.

In the Mennonite East Reserve the cooperative movement was essentially apolitical, not aligned with any political party and grounded in economic pragmatism and Christian ethics. Its leaders were oriented to their local communities and did not engage in political debate or hold to exclusive ideology. These limitations have been viewed as weaknesses by some scholars who have applied wider criteria of leadership. Prof. J. H. Warkentin has identified a dearth of cooperatively-minded leaders in the East Reserve which held back economic development in the era of cooperative cheese factories. He states:

*It would appear that the cooperatives were of relative insignificance in the East Reserve of the 1930s... because no co-op minded leaders emerged in the area.*

This assessment would need to be viewed in conjunction with the evidence here adduced, that no other area of the province created more wealth from the cheese and dairy industry than was created here. By the 1930s the East Reserve cheese factories were the dominant producers of cheese in Manitoba.

The ‘soft’ form of cooperative economics as practiced in the East Reserve likely reflected the values and the collective personality of its residents and did not denote an absence of effective leadership. When examining the co-op movement of the Depression one may recognize that its pragmatic mechanisms were at least as beneficial as its philosophical constructs in the lives of ordinary people in the East Reserve.

**Endnotes**

3. Ibid, 1941.
7. “Landmark Display,” courtesy Stan and Rose Penner, Landmark, MB.
10. Ibid, 1938.
11. Ibid, 1940.
16. Dueck “Interview.”
17. Steinbach Post, April 10, 1935.
18. Post, August 26, 1936.
25. “Minutes of Council,” July 10, 1945, R. M. of Hanover, Steinbach, MB.
27. “Annual Reports,” 1940.
31. Ibid, 125.
33. New Bothwell, 369.
34. Ibid, 104.
The Move to Mexico:
The Sale of Three West Reserve Villages

Bruce Wiebe, Winkler, Manitoba

Blumengart: From Mennonite Village to Hutterite Community

The 1922 emigration to Mexico of many Old Colony (Reinlaender) Mennonite Church members necessitated a significant transfer of real estate to various purchasers by those emigrating. Despite initial planning in 1921, large block sales of these West Reserve lands did not materialize and transfers to individuals and speculators began. In 1918 Schmiedeleut Hutterites from South Dakota began relocating to Manitoba establishing six communities that soon were in need of more land for expansion. Among them was Milltown Colony at Benard Siding near Elie, Manitoba. It was at this point that Winnipeg Lawyer Ernest Fletcher of the firm Monteith, Fletcher, and David, which also had offices in other communities including Altona and the newly opened one in Winkler, became actively involved in both of these issues: the Hutterite need for land and the Mennonite need to sell.

A matter that complicated sales was the traditional Mennonite settlement pattern that consisted of a row village with several smaller arable parcels allocated to each household distributed outside the village itself. Actual ownership of the parcel of land on which people lived, or which they cultivated, was irrelevant. For a land owner to sell the property described on his deed or title could mean sale of land cultivated by others, common pasture, or the village itself where other owners’ homes were located.

In early 1922 when the Mennonite lands, including many village farmsteads, became available, Ernest Fletcher began “dealings” that would see him acquire the entire village of Blumengart with most of its lands for transfer to the Milltown Community. Despite the pooled nature of their village settlement and its cultivation, the Mennonite vendors were private owners as opposed to the communal ownership in Hutterite society. The cooperation and participation of the entire Mennonite village was required to facilitate this transaction while only three men acted on behalf of the Hutterite purchasers.

Record of Ernest Fletcher’s overtures and purchase proposals made to the Blumengart villagers is unavailable or nonexistent. During March and April of 1922 the Morden Law Firm of McLeod, Black, and McAuley was still active in obtaining Certificate’s of Naturalization for residents in anticipation of...
their emigration to Mexico.1 By early May, Fletcher was already assisting in the preparation of applications to bring individual properties under the Real Property Act which would allow the issuance of Certificates of Title. On May 16, nine more applications were brought to the Morden Land Titles Office by villagers themselves with instructions to the Registrar that he should retain the Titles on file once issued. However, on June 27, the Registrar forwarded them directly to Fletcher noting, “I understand from you that you are authorized to receive the certificates.” The agreement between the villagers and Fletcher concerning costs was that Fletcher would pay the costs if he was successful in the sale of the lands. If not, the villagers would be responsible.

Blumengart village had been founded in 1875 and consisted of 18 quarter sections on Township 2 Range 3 West: Sections 15, 16, 21, 22, and the South half of Section 28. Seventeen of these quarters were acquired through homestead and one was a pre-emption.2 By 1922 only five of these properties were still owned by the original homesteader or their spouse, four were in the possession of only the second owner, and the remainder had seen multiple transfers. That year the original village lands were owned by 15 individuals some of whom also owned lands outside those parameters. Additional outside lands were owned by others who gave their locations as Blumengart. The actual number of farmsteads in the village was at least 15 with several Anwohner homes occupied by those without property titles, or by those who clearly owned land outside the village.

On August 1 and 2, 1922 Frank Martin Bastin from the Winkler office of Monteith, Fletcher and David was in Blumengart obtaining signatures from fifteen villagers on documents transferring their properties to Ernest Angus Fletcher personally. One further signature, that of Abram Rempel, was obtained at Plum Coulee. Although Rempel was the registered owner of NE 21-2-3 his village property was occupied by Herman Neudorf. In total 3,920 acres of land, including the village farmsteads and buildings, were signed over to Fletcher for the combined sum of $84,306.80. Lands outside the original village parameters included in these transfers totalled 1,200 acres. However, the South East Quarter of Section 22 owned by Diedrich B. Boldt, although situated within the village lands, was deeded separately to John H. Unger on October 3, 1922 for the sum of $4,160.00 and said transfer was registered on October 11. The transfers to Fletcher were not immediately registered, but the signatures thereon enabled him to continue putting together the “deal.”

Fletcher’s communications with the Milltown Community are likewise unavailable, but on October 31, 1922 he signed a document transferring a total of 3,560 acres including the Blumengart village farmsteads to John Hofer, David Hofer Senior, and Jacob Hofer all of Milltown Colony at Benard Siding in Manitoba for the sum of $72,000.00. The remaining 360 non-contiguous acres of the total 3,920 on the signed transfers from the villagers were part of the 1,200 acres situated outside the village parameters.

Evidence of actual payments as indicated on all of the transfers is only circumstantial, but partial financing arrangements were made. Ernest Fletcher as mortgagee signed two mortgages for the identical sum of $31,141.80. The mortgagees on one were the Blumengart villagers Abraham I. Friesen, Jacob Harms, and Abram Rempel and the property mortgaged was the 3,560 acres that Fletcher transferred to the Hofers. The mortgagees on the other were John Hofer, David Hofer Senior, and Jacob Hofer and the property mortgaged was the 360 acres Fletcher did not transfer to them. This appears to indicate that $53,165.00 did change hands.

All of the signatures had been obtained earlier, but November 2 and 3, 1922 was when the actual registration of all the documents occurred to finalize the “deal.” Firstly, title to the Blumengart villager’s properties, 3,920 acres, was transferred to Ernest Fletcher. Secondly, the Fletcher mortgage to the Hofers was registered on the 360 acres now in his name. Thirdly, the Fletcher mortgage to Friesen, Harms, and Rempel was registered on the 3,560 acres also now in his name. Lastly, the title just issued to Fletcher’s 3,560 acres was now transferred to John, David, and Jacob Hofer, but remained subject to the $31,141.80 mortgage by him in favour of Friesen, Harms, and Rempel. From the continuing validity of the two mortgages it could be interpreted that Fletcher still owed the Blumengart villagers the sum of $31,141.80 on his purchase from them, and in order to better secure the position of the Hutterites who purchased from him subject to said mortgage, he had given the latter an offsetting mortgage on the 360 acres to which he still held title. However, subsequent registrations suggest the alternate explanation that the Hofers assumed from Fletcher the obligation to the mortgage of Friesen, Harms, and Rempel and that the 360 acres still in Fletchers name were being held by him in trust. On May 31, 1923 the Hofer’s 3,560 acres was mortgaged by them to the Great West Life Assurance Company for $33,000.00 and subsequently on June 7 the $31,141.80 mortgage to Friesen, Harms, and Rempel was discharged. Later that month on June 29 Ernest Fletcher transferred to the Union Trust Company Limited for the token sum of $1.00 the 360 acres which was valued by them at $10,800.00. This land was still subject to the $31,141.80 Fletcher mortgage to the Hofers. The following year on April 15, 1924 the Union Trust Company Limited acting in its capacity as Trustees for John Hofer, David Hofer Senior, and Jacob Hofer exchanged from the 360 acres the W ½ of W ½ of NW ¼-17-2-3 for the W ½ of E ½ of the same quarter owned by Cornelius C Wall. These 40 acres were adjacent to lands already owned by the Hofers and the new title was issued in their names. Later that year on November 22, 1924 the Union Trust Company Limited for $1.00 transferred back to Ernest Fletcher the 320 acres which still remained of his original purchase from the Blumengart villagers. It seems apparent that these lands were now considered personal assets because he mortgaged them and resold them in subsequent years.

Of personal interest to this author is that the $33,000.00 mortgage from John Hofer, David Hofer Senior, and Jacob Hofer to the Great West Life Assurance Company was transferred by the latter mortgagee to my Great-grandfather Jacob Friesen of Reinfeld on December 31, 1928.

As was mentioned, there were residents who did not have title to village property but who resided therein and were part of the community. Peter Boldt, son of the village Diehrich Boldt Sr., was one of these persons. In 1917 he had purchased the S ½ of the SE ¼ 27-2-3 from Isbrand F. Friesen and was the owner of a modest set of buildings in Blumengart village. In February 1922, just prior to emigration, he resold to Plum Coulee implement dealer John H. Unger. Diedrich Boldt’s other son was Diedrich B. Boldt, a village landowner, with village buildings who had sold his SE ¼ 22-2-3 to the same John H.
Unger. Although this latter transfer only took place in October 1922, there is evidence that it was agreed to earlier. It appears that Diedrich B. Boldt’s modest village farmstead was part of the sale, and because it was not included on his own title but actually located on NE 16-2-3 of the quarter section owned by Abraham Knelsen, to protect his interest Unger temporarily registered a Caveat against Knelsen’s property. This caveat was registered with a week of Knelsen’s signature on the transfer to Fletcher, but apparently some agreement was concluded because it was withdrawn September 1, a month before the actual registration of the transfer at the beginning of November. Both Diedrich and Peter Boldt as well as other Blumengart villagers left for Mexico on the March 1 train.3

It appears that not all villagers were certain that they would emigrate. Prior to that date they had agreed that anyone wanting to withdraw their lands from the village system could only do so as contiguous 160 acre squares at the edge of the village parameters so as not to disturb the village community. Because this was before Ernest Fletcher began his “dealings,” for those villagers still remaining in Manitoba the uncertainty surrounding sale possibilities caused them to write a letter on April 12 to Blumengart, Mexico reminding those that left of that decision.4 How they envisioned the land ownership swaps occurring that would be required to facilitate this process is not evident.

The acquisition of the original 18 quarter sections of land belonging to the former Mennonite village of Blumengart, was finally completed in 1938 when the Hutterite Community entered into a $4,000.00 agreement with John H. Unger for the SE ¼ -22-2-3. They agreed to pay him an immediate $1,000.00 and half of each crop plus 5 percent interest annually thereafter. The Deed was only registered in 1942 to finally complete the transition from Village to Colony.

Due to the absence of agreements concerning particulars of sales one must infer from the known data. Since Ernest Fletcher was successful in putting together a sale package for Blumengart he was responsible for payment of Land Titles Office fees for registrations under the Real Property Act. This amounted to $44.30 in the case of Jacob Harms and $45.30 in that of Johan Knelsen, and projecting this for 16 owners, totalled in excess of $700.00. Although the individual property transfers to Fletcher were signed at the beginning of August, they were only registered in early November leaving sufficient time for the current year harvest to be completed by the owners.

The negotiated prices for the properties as evidenced by the transfer documents average out to $21.50 per acre with value of buildings and village farmsteads included, although no specific reference is made to them. Building appraisals appear to have been a factor because prices per acre are not consistent for similar sized properties. In general 160 acres ranged in price from a low of $3,549.00 to a high of $4,067.00 or $22.18 to $25.42 per acre. Larger parcels varied similarly from $19.91 to $20.68 per acre, the lower average price no doubt being an indicator of the larger proportion of cultivated land as compared to village buildings. One smaller 40 acre property sold for $1,389.00 or $34.73 per acre which could only be explained by inclusion of a village yard with buildings.

Given the higher values assigned to real property only several years earlier, the sellers will have been disappointed by the current prices. Jacob Friesen received only $7,244.00 for his 360 acres including farmstead with buildings. In December of 1918 the same property had been valued at $15,000.00. His 160 acres on the NE 22-2-3 within the village parameters including his buildings within the village itself were then valued at $8,000.00, and his 200 acres on Section 17 outside the parameters at $7,000.00.5

The buildings vacated by the emigrating Blumengart Menonites were quite numerous and substantial in size as indicated in a 1926 inventory. All houses were considered to be of frame construction, a designation that would have included those with stacked lumber walls. The barns were framed and featured an interior post and beam main framework. The roofs on all buildings were sheathed with wooden shingles. Seven of the dwellings were between 800 and 1000 square feet in size and four were between 1100 and 1200. Two were 600 square feet or less and two much larger at 1400 and 1800 respectively. Most had widths varying from 27 to 30 feet and lengths between 35 and 44 feet. Most common barn dimensions in Blumengart were widths varying between 30 and 35 feet and lengths between 40 and 65 feet. Two, however, were double the average size at 120 feet in length. Large granaries were also in evidence.6 Brandordnung records also list machinery sheds and smaller buildings such as summer kitchens, hog barns, chicken barns, home blacksmith shops, a meat curing smoke house, a school, the village herdsman’s house, as well as the many less substantial buildings of the Anwohner? The Old Colony (Reinlaender) Church building is not identified in any of the documents.

Since 1906 the Mennonite villagers had benefited from drainage efforts undertaken by the Rhineland Municipality. The per-acre benefit was estimated to be $5.00 for every acre in Sections 15, 16, 21, and 22. Taxes were levied annually to

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A 1948 aerial photo of Blumengart Hutterite Colony with the Middle Plum Coulee visible. Photo Credit: Bruce Wiebe.
cover Debenture payments and in 1922 a further 21 years of payments became the responsibility of the new owners. They were also the ongoing beneficiaries of the improved drainage. The creek which flowed past the south-east corner of the village was known as Middle Plum Coulee and it drained north-eastwards into a dredged channel north of Rosenfeld.

The Hutterite purchasers of the Blumengart properties in whose names the Certificates of Title were issued were David Hofer Senior and his two sons Jacob and John. David was born in Russia in 1853 and immigrated to southern Dakota Territory in the United States after 1873. In 1918 he and 20 other families including those of his sons immigrated from South Dakota to found Milltown Manitoba at Benard Siding. They established their community on the South West Quarter of Section 17, Township 11, Range 3 West near Elie. All three families subsequently moved to Blumengart. David Hofer Senior and John Hofer remained here and are buried in the Colony Cemetery. Jacob Hofer later moved to Crystal Spring Colony.

The financial return to Ernest Fletcher on the Blumengart “deal” that he assembled cannot be precisely calculated. His purchases totalled $84,306.80, his known RPA expenses at least $700.00. His sale to the Hofers returned $72,000.00. In 1925 he sold the 240 acres on Section 26 to Peter Schroeder, a Russian Mennonite immigrant of that year, for $1.00. He also took back a mortgage on this land that was valued at $7,000.00 which would likely indicate a return to him of that amount. In 1928 he finally sold the 80 acres on Section 33 to John Jackman of Plum Coulee for $2,500.00. After 1922, Ernest Fletcher went on to provide valuable services to the other Hutterites in Manitoba as well, acting as Solicitor for their Colonies and their Hutterian Mutual Corporations. He was a frequent guest at special occasions in their various communities and to this day his memory is still preserved at Blumengart in that the West Half of Section 26-2-3 West is referred to as “Fletcher.”

Municipal tax assessments reflected possession but not necessarily ownership. The village Brandordnung recorded insured buildings. From these two sources it appears that the following were 1921/1922 Mennonite residents of Blumengart without ownership title to village or other property.

In addition, the Blumengart Village Register and the Village Brandordnung record another five families with modest buildings, but no property: Heinrich Harms, Abram A. Friesen, Herman Peters, Johan A. Friesen, and Jacob Banman Jr. The possible total of Mennonite village residences at the time of sale to the Hutterite community could have been 26, consisting of 16 landowners and 10 Anwohner.

### The Mennonite landowners of Blumengart whose properties were first transferred to Ernest Fletcher.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Acreage</th>
<th>Land Location</th>
<th>Village Buildings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jacob Banman</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>SW 20-2-3</td>
<td>Modest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Boldt</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>SW 33-2-3</td>
<td>Modest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>53</td>
<td>SW 20-2-3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>80</td>
<td>SE 27-2-3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac Boldt</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>SW 20-2-3</td>
<td>Modest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(July 27, 1918 the above three heirs of Diedrich Boldt filed a caveat against their father’s property SW 20-2-3 and withdrew it on September 1, 1922 to enable the transfer to Fletcher. It is probable that this one-third share each had in said quarter was part of the distribution of their maternal inheritance after their mother’s death in 1916, and their father’s remarriage. Therefore they will have been recipients of a portion of the sale proceeds.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Acreage</th>
<th>Land Location</th>
<th>Village Buildings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Herman Neudorf (Neuman)</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>NE 21-2-3</td>
<td>Substantial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Herman Neuman adopted the surname Neudorf. He occupied the buildings and land belonging to the non-resident Abram Rempel.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heinrich F. Dyck</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>NW 20-2-3</td>
<td>Modest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johan Gerbrand</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>NW 26-2-3</td>
<td>Modest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Totals $84,306.80 3920 Acres

Of the above properties those which Fletcher did not transfer to the Hofers were the SW 26-2-3, S ½ NW 26-2-3, S ½ NE 33-2-3, and the W ½ of W ½ NW 17-2-3 for a total of 360 acres.
Gnadenthal land transfers – A clarification

The 1982 published history of this West Reserve village speculates on the transactions that occurred between 1922 and 1924 that resulted in the disposition of properties belonging to the Mennonite emigrants to Mexico. One is left with the impression that Morden Realtors A.C.D. Pregitt arranged the sale of the village lands to the law firm of Monteith, Fletcher, and David who purchased from the owners for $28.00 per acre, but also that some lands were sold by owners directly to individual purchasers in 1924, and that these subsequent owners of the properties belonging to Gnadenthal were Russian Mennonite immigrants.

A review of random and certain selected property transfer documents and Certificates of Title provides details about actual events. In February 1922 the Morden Law Firm of McLeod, Black, and McAuley was still acting on behalf of some Gnadenthal residents in obtaining Certificate’s of Naturalization needed for emigration. Early that same year the Winnipeg firm of Monteith, Fletcher, and David (Later Monteith, Fletcher, David, and Bastin) also opened an office in Winkler and provided services related to property title transfers. On May 2, 1922 Ernest Fletcher himself was present in Gnadenthal obtaining villager’s signatures on applications to bring individual properties under the Real Property Act which would allow Certificates of Title to be issued to the owners. For this service he charged 26 owners a total of $1,539.50 including fees and disbursements. No Gnadenthal properties were purchased by Fletcher or his Law Firm nor were any transfers to them registered as was the case in Blumengart. Over the next several years others who provided assistance in the numerous transfers of Gnadenthal area titles included A.A. Harder of Plum Coulee and J.A. Kroeker of Winkler. Interestingly, to enable such later transfers for the emigrant community in general, several Mennonites who emigrated to Mexico were designated as “A Commissioner for taking Affidavits outside the Province of Manitoba for use within said Province.” These persons included former Colony Vorsteher Johan W. Rempel, Cornelius Wall, and Peter Neufeld.

Many Gnadenthal villagers appear to have left for Mexico early in the emigration process during 1922 and 1923, but actual property sales only began in 1924 after the Gemeinde’s attempts at large block sales were abandoned. Lawyer John Black’s January 1924 letters to Vorsteher Franz Froese of Reinland still convey some optimism about concluding such a deal, but by March 11 his letter to Waisenvorsteher Peter Neufeld at Hochfeld merely refers to having the balance of the year “to clean up the sale of the Land and the business of the people here.” The Gnadenthal villagers retained unity with the Gemeinde and to enable sales after their departure, for the nominal sum of $1.00, transferred their property titles to others not yet prepared to leave. Those persons so entrusted were mainly Cornelius C. Rempel, Bernard Penner, Johan Wall, and

Village of Gnadenthal - Plan No. 266 registered November 29, 1924.
The village itself spanned both NE ¼ 4-2-3 and NW ¼ 3-2-3, and was situated on property still owned by the original homesteaders Johan Bueckert and Abram Froese respectively. On May 29, 1922 for $1.00, Froese signed a transfer of all his property including the NW 3-2-3 to Cornelius C. Rempel. This transfer was registered March 13, 1923. Also on May 29, 1922, Bueckert had signed a transfer of his property which included the NE 4-2-3 and W ½ of SW 11-2-3 to Bernard Penner for $1.00 and this also was registered on March 13, 1923. On August 9, 1924, Penner sold Bueckert’s property except for the easterly 210 feet in width of NE 4-2-3 to Cornelius C. Rempel for $3,977.00, and this also was registered on March 15, 1932. On November 17, 1924 he sold the remaining 210 feet to him as well for $325.00. These transfers were registered on August 18 and November 26 respectively. Rempel now had title to both quarter sections and proceeded to have the village Lots surveyed. November 29, 1924 Plan No. 266 was registered showing Lots to the east on Section 3. Two weeks later on December 5, 1924 Plan No. 266 was registered showing Lots to the west on Section 4 and Block 2 with 15 Lots to the east on Section 3. Two weeks later on December 12 at lawyer John Black’s Morden office documents were signed transferring title from Rempel to the as yet untitled owners of 25 of these properties. Amounts paid varied from under $100.00 to over $200.00 per lot depending on size, about $25.00 per acre, but obviously disregarding value of buildings. Projecting these prices for all the lots would indicate a return to Rempel of an amount equivalent to what land values were at the time.

It appears obvious that sale of surrounding lands included the pertinent village property with buildings and that the owner of the lands upon which the village was situated needed only to be compensated for the value of the acreage. Not included in the 1924 registration of Plan 266 were 2 lots on NW 4-2-3 adjoining the west end of the village. The northerly lot was 283 feet wide and 1,526 feet deep which Rempel sold to Abram J. Dyck for $250.00 in December 1924, while the southerly lot was 167 feet wide and 1,042 feet deep. This latter 4 acre parcel had been sold in October 1921 by Abraham Froese to the Plum Coulee grain buyer Barney Alt for $200.00. No explanation is given as to why this was sold to a non-Mennonite, but the first Certificate of Title issued in 1925 was in the name of Jacob A. Kroeker of Winkler.

Among the various properties which Abraham Froese also transferred for $1.00 to Cornelius C. Rempel in 1922 was the NW 4-2-3, except for the 4 acres belonging to the Plum Coulee grain buyer Barney Alt. As mentioned, Rempel had sold 10 acres along the northern boundary to Abram J. Dyck in 1924 and he proceeded to sell Diedrich Froese a 352 foot strip, 20 acres, along the southern boundary as well. April 1925 the quarter section less these

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### Initial transfers of Gnadenhutten Lots by Cornelius C. Rempel:

#### Block 1 (West portion of village on NE 4-2-3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lot #</th>
<th>Date signed</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Transferee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mar 25, 1925</td>
<td>$235.00</td>
<td>Jacob J. Reimer of Lowe Farm P.O.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Dec 12, 1924</td>
<td>$181.50</td>
<td>Gerhard A. Konrad of Gnadenhutten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Dec 12, 1924</td>
<td>$204.00</td>
<td>Abraham J. Dyck of Gnadenhutten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Dec 12, 1924</td>
<td>$212.50</td>
<td>Jacob Froese of Altona P.O.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Dec 12, 1924</td>
<td>$213.00</td>
<td>Peter P. Redekop of Gnadenhutten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Dec 12, 1924</td>
<td>$217.50</td>
<td>Jacob A. Kroeker of Winkler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Dec 12, 1924</td>
<td>$226.50</td>
<td>Paul D. Peters of Gnadenhutten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Dec 12, 1924</td>
<td>$221.50</td>
<td>Diedrich A. Reimer of Gnadenhutten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Dec 12, 1924</td>
<td>$6.00</td>
<td>Julius Letkeman of Gnadenhutten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 (Part)</td>
<td>Oct 15, 1932</td>
<td>$1.00 plus</td>
<td>Widow Katarina Fehr of Reinland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>June 27, 1935</td>
<td>$70.00</td>
<td>The School District of Wells #1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Apr 22, 1925</td>
<td>Title issued in name of Cornelius C. Rempel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Dec 12, 1924</td>
<td>$290.50</td>
<td>Heinrich Kuhl of Gnadenhutten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Nov 23, 1924</td>
<td>$1.00 plus</td>
<td>Heinrich Thiessen of Gnadenhutten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Dec 12, 1924</td>
<td>$86.00</td>
<td>Johan J. Janzen of Gnadenhutten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Dec 12, 1924</td>
<td>$90.00</td>
<td>Peter J. Friesen of Letellier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Dec 12, 1924</td>
<td>$98.00</td>
<td>Peter P. Peters of Gnadenhutten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Dec 12, 1924</td>
<td>$98.00</td>
<td>Peter Labun of Myrtle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Dec 12, 1924</td>
<td>Unspecified</td>
<td>Diedrich Froese of Altona P.O.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Dec 12, 1924</td>
<td>$110.00</td>
<td>Franz F. Sawatzky of Gnadenhutten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Dec 12, 1924</td>
<td>$115.00</td>
<td>Abram P. Bueckert of Gnadenhutten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Mar 25, 1925</td>
<td>$110.40</td>
<td>Peter Dyck of Winkler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Dec 12, 1924</td>
<td>$175.00</td>
<td>Peter Livingstone of Morden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Dec 12, 1924</td>
<td>$175.00</td>
<td>Peter P. Hildebrand of Altona P.O.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Lots in Block 2 (East portion of village on NW 3-2-3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lot #</th>
<th>Date signed</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Transferee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 &amp; 7</td>
<td>Dec 12, 1924</td>
<td>$472.00</td>
<td>Cornelius H. Pauls &amp; Johan Ratzlaff, Gnadenhutten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 &amp; 8</td>
<td>Dec 12, 1924</td>
<td>$478.10</td>
<td>Cornelius Wall of Blumenort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 &amp; 9</td>
<td>Dec 12, 1924</td>
<td>$482.90</td>
<td>Bernhard C. Rempel of Gnadenhutten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 &amp; 10</td>
<td>Dec 12, 1924</td>
<td>$488.15</td>
<td>Jacob Dyck of Gnadenhutten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 &amp; 15</td>
<td>May 12, 1924</td>
<td>$1.00 plus</td>
<td>John Letkeman of Gnadenhutten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 &amp; 14</td>
<td>Dec 12, 1924</td>
<td>$477.65</td>
<td>David D. Krahm of Plum Coulee P.O.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11, 12 &amp; 13</td>
<td>Dec 12, 1924</td>
<td>$944.60</td>
<td>Johan J. Friesen of Plum Coulee P.O.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Where price is unspecified, the Lot was included in a transfer together with other properties and not valued separately. Where price is given as “$1.00 plus” there were other unspecified considerations unknown except in the purchase by Katarina Fehr who traded property she owned in Mexico to Rempel for part of Lot 9 and the SW 33-1-3.
three parcels was transferred by Rempel for $3,175.00 to 13 individuals, the majority of whom it appears were owners of
Lots in Block 1. These purchasers were: Diedrich A. Reimer,
Paul D. Peters, Franz F. Sawatzky, Heinrich Albrecht, Gerhard
A. Konrad, Johan J. Janzen, Heinrich Kuhl, Peter J. Friesen,
Peter Labun, Johan J. Doerksen, and Franz Enns, all farmers
of the Plum Coulee Post Office area, and Jacob A. Kroeker,
merchant, and Peter Dyck, farmer, both of Winkler. In December
1937 there is note of a sale for taxes, and subsequently in
February 1940 joint title was issued to Peter P. Redekop, John J.
Schellenberg, and Diedrich P. Peters. This 126 acre parcel was
initially a communal pasture for at least the western part of the
village, which would explain the numerous owners in 1925.18
In November 1924 Samuel Kuhl of the Burwalde area
purchased 480 acres from Bernard Penner for $12,000.00.
For $1.00 Penner had been entrusted by Cornelius Martens
with the E ½ of SE 9-2-3 and he personally owned W ½ of
Penner extended $6,000.00 in financing through a mortgage
which was discharged in 1931. Kuhl’s son Henry acquired the
village lot in his own name.
In July 1922 Abraham Dyck transferred his Gnadenthal
properties consisting of the NW 27-1-3 and S ½ of SE 28-1-3
to Cornelius C. Rempel for $1,000. A single woman, Lena Peters
of Winkler, purchased these 240 acres including Lot 11 Block
1 for $6,238.00 in April 1925. $4,488.00 was financed by a
mortgage to Rempel.
Johan L. Wall signed a transfer of the SW 4-2-3 to Johan
Wall for $1,000 in May 1922. In March 1923 this was regis-
tered and in November 1924 the property was sold to Franz F.
Sawatzky for $4,100.00. The entire purchase was financed by
two mortgages, a first mortgage to Johan Siemens for $1,600.00
and a second mortgage to Johan L. Wall for $2,500.00. The
latter was discharged in August 1933.
Peter Labun of Myrtle was also purchasing Gnadenthal
properties. In 1924 for a total of $3,496.00 he managed to ac-
quire three parcels belonging to the Reimer brothers Diedrich
A, Isaac A, and Abraham A. forming the northerly 2,227 feet
(135 acres) of SW 5-2-3. In 1927 for $875.00 he acquired from
Afram J. Dyck the remaining southerly 413 feet which had
once belonged to Johan A. Reimer. In 1924 he also purchased
W ½ of NE 28-1-3 for $2,160.00 and E ½ of W ½ of SW 7-2-3
for $1,080.00 from Diedrich A. Reimer. His total known
purchases from Diedrich A. Reimer in 1924 were $5,049.00.
Reimer financed $4,277.00 for Labun via a mortgage which
was discharged in September 1926.
An unexplained transaction occurred in 1936 when Labun
transferred the easterly 440 feet width of the northerly 2,227
feet depth of SW 5-2-3 (22 ½ acres) worth $500.00 to Abraham
A. Reimer of Gnadenthal, Mexico for $1.00. Six months later
Reimer then resold this parcel for 1,250 Pesos, or about $335.00
to Cornelius Wall of Blumenthal, Mexico.
Peter P. Peters was the owner of SW ¼ 10-2-3 and had
several other properties transferred to him in 1922 for later
disposition including Jacob A. Wall’s 120 acres, the W ½ of
SE 4-2-3 and W ½ of E ½ of SW 35-1-3. In October 1924 he
sold his own quarter section and Wall’s 80 acres on SE 4 to
Peter Livingston of Morden for $5,880.00. Livingston thereby
also acquired the right to the village property, and Lot 22 in
Block 1 was transferred to him in December by Cornelius C.
Rempel for $175.00. In January 1928 Livingstone resold this
property to siblings Cornelius, Anna, and Maria Hiebert of
Gnadenthal for $6,300.00 and realized a profit of only $245.00
in the three years.

That not all Gnadenthal lands were sold, or paid for, im-
mediately is evidenced by the 40 acres, W ½ of E ½ of SW
35-1-3, which Jacob A. Wall had transferred to Peter P. Peters
in 1922. In July 1936 Peter P. Peters, while residing at Gna-
denthal, Mexico signed a transfer of this property to Diedrich
P. Peters of Gretna for $800.00.
Bernhard C. Rempel and Peter J. Froese, also residents of
Gnadenthal, Mexico transferred three properties to Julius Let-
ke man of Gnadenthal, Manitoba in April 1938. Froese sold the
westerly 60 Rods width of the E ½ of NW 32-1-3 for $1,200.00
and Rempel the E ½ of SW 11-2-3 for $1,600.00 and his Lot 3
Block 2 in the village for $800.00. Partial financing for these
purchases by Letkeman was provided by a $1,134.15 mortgage
extended by Klaas Heide.
Before his departure for Mexico, widower Peter Giesbrecht,
who owned 200 acres and a village property, transferred the
land, NW 34-1-3 and W ½ of W ½ of SW 2-2-3, for $1.00 to
Diedrich A. Reimer. On November 20, 1924 Reimer sold them
to Johan J. Janzen for $3,680.00 and $520.00 respectively.
Janzen acquired the village Lot 14 Block 1 for $860.00 from
Cornelius C. Rempel on December 12, 1924. Partial financ-
ing of $2,600.00 was provided by a mortgage to Reimer who
transferred same to Peter Giesbrecht on May 14, 1926. This
was discharged October 25, 1938.
Aram B. Bueckert arrived from Russia in August 1924 and
on November 21 purchased the NW 9-2-3 for $4,000.00 from
Bernhard Penner who, for $1.00, had on May 29, 1922 been
entrusted with its sale by owner Peter Penner. Bueckert
acquired Lot 20 Block 1 for $115.00 from Cornelius C. Rempel
on December 12 of the same year. Interestingly, the transfer of
the quarter section on NW 9-2-3 from Penner to Bueckart was
only registered on July 26, 1934, ten years after its signing.
A substantial sale of Gnadenthal, Manitoba properties
was executed by Diedrich A. Reimer of Gnadenthal, Mexico
on November 12, 1926. The purchaser was Herman H. Voth
of Gnadenthal, Manitoba who acknowledged the transfer to
himself of 320 acres plus Lot 8 Block 1 for $8,800.00. Reimer
had been entrusted with these lands by their owners who were
departing for Mexico, but he too emigrated before a sale had
been finalized and his signature was only affixed in Mexico.
An agreement for sale will have been agreed to earlier because
in December 1925 Voth had registered caveats against these
properties, SE 10-2-3, E ½ of NE 5-2-3, W ½ of SE 9-2-3, plus
the village lot. To finance this purchase Voth indebted himself
under the following mortgages subsequently registered against
the properties:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mortgage Date</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Mortgagor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>43495 Dec 9, 1926</td>
<td>$5,300.00</td>
<td>The Sommerfelder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Waisenamt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43486 Dec 9, 1926</td>
<td>$1,500.00</td>
<td>Aron Cohen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45250 Feb 17, 1928</td>
<td>$892.45</td>
<td>Jacob A. Kroeker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46854 Mar 12, 1929</td>
<td>$750.00</td>
<td>Christian Pieper</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Payments of $662.50 plus 6 percent interest were due an-
nually to the Waisenamt. Aron Cohen of Winnipeg required 8

Preservings No. 30, 2010 - 41
percent interest plus principal of $400.00 in 1927, $500.00 in 1928, and $600.00 in 1929.

As early as 1930 and again in 1932 there is record of a sale for taxes owing. In April 1933 the Sommerfelder Waisenamt acquired title to the property in their name. Chris Pieper attempted to secure his $750.00 by registering caveats against the Waisenamt titles in 1935. Voth had also purchased the S ½ of SE 32-1-3 from Cornelius H. Pauls and Johan Ratzlaff for $1,760.00 in April 1926, but this parcel was subject to their mortgages of $5,000.00 to lawyers Alexander McLeod, and John Black, and $4,550.00 to Jacob Dyck. In September 1931 McLeod and Black acquired title to this latter property through foreclosure.

On October 31, 1924 Jacob Dyck of Gnadenhal sold the NE 33-1-3, S ½ of SE 32-1-3, E ½ of SE 7-2-3, and W ½ of SE 17-2-3 to the recently arrived Cornelius Pauls and Johan Ratzlaff for $10,500.00. In December they acquired village Lots 1 and 7 in Block 2 from Cornelius Rempel for $472.00. Financing of $9,550.00 was provided by a first mortgage of $5,000.00 to Morden lawyers Alexander McLeod and John Black and a second mortgage for $4,550.00 to Jacob Dyck, both of which were secured by the five titles. Details of the first mortgage are unknown, but Dyck was to be paid $500.00 principal plus 4 percent interest annually on each November 1 from 1925 through 1931, and the remaining $1,050.00 in 1932. In the event of a crop failure, Pauls and Ratzlaff could defer payment to the following year, or if they made any principal payments of $100.00 or more in advance they would be allowed a 10 percent reduction of said principal amount. In 1926 the S ½ of SE 32-1-3 was transferred to Herman H. Voth as noted previously. In June 1926 a transfer of the easterly 335 ½ feet of NE 33-1-3 to Gerhard I. Matthies for $440.00 was signed. Matthies purchase was still subject to both mortgages, but McLeod and Black discharged theirs in 1928. Johan Ratzlaff fully divested himself of the remaining properties when he and Cornelius Pauls transferred them to Pauls alone in April 1926 for $9,280.00, still subject to the two mortgages. Pauls thereupon sold Heinrich J. Adrian Lot 1, Block 2 plus a total of 103 acres in the 3 different parcels for $3,800.00.

The mortgages to McLeod and Black and to Jacob Dyck remained, and Adrian took out a third mortgage of $1,000.00 to Jacob H. Dyck and Herman H. Voth repayable over the next three years with 6 percent interest. The end result of all these transactions was that in 1931, through a Final Order of Foreclosure on their mortgage, title to these properties belonging to Voth, Pauls and Adrian was issued in the names of Alexander McLeod and John Henry Black. In 1939 new certificates of title were issued to The London and Western Trust Company Limited as Administrators of both men’s estates and eventually these properties, S ½ of SE 32-1-3, NE 33-1-3 except easterly 335 feet, E ½ of SE 7-2-3, W ½ of SE 17-2-3, Lots 1 and 7 in Block 2, were sold to local Mennonites.

The most intriguing set of transfers concerns the property owned by Franz Enns. At Gnadenhal on May 2, 1922 he signed an application to bring his 340 acres under the Real Property Act and was issued Certificates of Title numbered 23780 through 23784 for the five parcels. He also owned an additional 80 acres which had previously been issued Title 20210. On May 29, 1922 at Winkler for $1.00 he signed a transfer to Johan Wall of the six titles, consisting of 420 acres, valued at $8,400.00. This transfer was only registered on March 13, 1923 and Wall was then issued Titles 24433 through 24438. More than a year later these properties were then sold to the Russian Mennonite immigrant Peter P. Redekop. The Redekop family had arrived in 1923 and moved onto the Enns property the following spring.19 On November 21, 1924 Johan Wall signed individual transfers to Redekop for each parcel which was valued separately, but the total sum was $10,960.00. Financing was provided by two mortgages, a first mortgage for $4,300.00 by Redekop in favour of Abram Harder and a second mortgage for $7,112.00 by Redekop in favour of Franz Enns. The transfers were registered January 6, 1925 and the two mortgages were registered on January 7 and 12 respectively. Enns also owned an untitled village property located on the NE ¼ 4-2-3, the quarter section first registered in the name of Johan Bueckert where the westerly portion of the village was situated. After it’s subdivision by Cornelius C. Rempel, a transfer dated December 12th, 1924 of Lot 5, Block 1, Plan 266 was made to Redekop for the sum of $213.00 and registered on January 6, 1925, the same date as the other Enns properties. All were included under the

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MORTGAGE SALE OF VALUABLE FARM PROPERTY

Under and by virtue of the powers of sale contained in a certain memorandum of Mortgage, which will be produced at the time of sale, there will be offered for sale by public auction by J. A. KLASSEN, Auctioneer, at The Queen’s Hotel, in the Village of Plum Coulee, in the Province of Manitoba, on Tuesday the 23rd day of June, A.D. 1931 at the hour of 3 o’clock in the afternoon, the following property:

The SOUTH HALF of the SOUTH EAST Quarter of Section THIRTY-THREE (33), excepting thereout and therefrom the most Easterly Three Hundred and Thirty-five and One-half (335½) feet in width thereof, both to the One (1), and Range THREE (3), and the East Half of the SOUTH EAST Quarter of Section SEVENTY (77) and the WEST HALF of the SOUTH EAST Quarter of Section SEVENTY (77), (both in Township TWO (2), and Range THREE (3), and Lots ONE (1) and SEVENTY (77), in Block TWO (2), as shown on a Plan of Survey of the Village of Gnadenhal registered in the Morden Land Titles Office, No. 24438, all West of the Principal Meridian in the Province of Manitoba.

The title to said property is under The Real Property Act.

The property is situated near the Village of Gnadenhal, about six miles South-West of Plum Coulee on the Canadian Pacific Railway and the Vendor is informed that practically all the above land has been brought under cultivation and that there are situate on Lot ONE (1), in Block TWO (2) a frame dwelling house 20x24; a cow barn 72x27; a frame granary 34x20; a frame chicken house 6x12; a frame pig building 26x12; a frame grain elevator 19x19; a frame machine shop 52x26; and a frame lean-to 19x19.

The property will be offered for sale subject to a rented reserve bid and subject to a lease for the present season expiring on the 1st day of October, 1931.

TERMS OF SALE—Twenty per cent of the purchase price is to be paid in cash at the time of sale and the balance in accordance with terms and conditions to be made known at the time of sale.

For further particulars and conditions of sale apply to:

McLeod, BLACK & MACAULAY, Vendor’s Solicitors,
Morden, Manitoba

DATED at Morden, in Manitoba, this 16th day of May, A.D. 1931.

Notice of Mortgage Sale affecting the Voth, Pauls, and Adrian properties as it was published in the Morden Times issues of June, 3, 10 and 17th, 1931.
above mortgages. Enns had of course moved to Mexico and was residing there in Blumenort village. Peter P. Redekop had been issued Titles 26309 through 26314 plus 26317 against which the two mortgages totalling $11,412.00 were registered. Repayment records do not exist, but subsequent events would suggest that a cancellation of sale and arrangement for rental were made between mortgagor and mortgagee because on March 18, 1930, Enns was in Manitoba to document a transfer of all the property from Redekop back to himself. Again, each of the seven parcels was valued separately and transferred individually for a total of $11,000.00. On March 21 the documents were registered and Enns was issued Titles 31806 through 31811 plus 31824, but all were still subject to the Redekop mortgage to Abram Harder. Several days later on March 25, Enns signed a transfer of Title 31807 to Peter Letkeman of Gnadenhut for $600.00. This 20 acre parcel comprised of the S ½ of N ½ of S ½ of NW 11-2-3 was still subject to Mortgage 40536 to Harder.

Six years later in the summer of 1936 Klaas and Susanna Heide moved back to Manitoba. The Peter P. Redekop family had continued their residence and occupation of the former Enns property as renters from Heide and the Heide family now came to Gnadenhut. A sale was then made to his Blumenort co-villager Klaas Heide Junior, son of the delegate Klaas Heide. In Mexico on September 22, 1930 Enns signed transfers of his 400 acres plus the Gnadenhut village property to Heide and his wife Susanna for a total of $11,000.00.

Hamburg - the Loewen family

By 1922 when the emigration to Mexico began, Hamburg (known as Loewesdarp) was at the margin of the Old Colony (Reinhaender Gemeinde) membership area. Although it was the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enns Title</th>
<th>Legal Description</th>
<th>Acres</th>
<th>Purchase Price</th>
<th>Registration Date</th>
<th>Heide Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31806</td>
<td>W ½ SE 7-2-3</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>$2,000.00</td>
<td>Nov 6, 1930</td>
<td>32216</td>
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<tr>
<td>31808</td>
<td>NW 10-2-3</td>
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<td>$4,000.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>31809</td>
<td>S ½ of N ½ SE 32-1-3</td>
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<td>$1,000.00</td>
<td>Nov 6, 1930</td>
<td>32215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>N ½ of N ½ SE 28-1-3</td>
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<td>Nov 6, 1930</td>
<td>32214</td>
</tr>
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<td>31811</td>
<td>E ½ SE 17-2-3</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>$2,000.00</td>
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<td>32217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31824</td>
<td>Lot 5, Block 1, Plan 266</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>$1,000.00</td>
<td>Nov 6, 1930</td>
<td>32218</td>
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</table>
site of a church building and minister Julius Loewen resided in the community, its location was somewhat of an island located to the north and east of most church adherents. The majority of landowners were part of the extended Loewen family, descendants of Wilhelm Loewen and Katharina Teichroeb who moved here from Neuenburg in 1891. Their son Daniel Loewen had earlier homesteaded SW 22-3-3 and by 1908 Wilhelm and his six sons owned 8 contiguous quarter sections. Of the 2,920 acres minimum sold at the time of emigration, only 320 were not owned by a Loewen, although the actual parameters of village cultivated lands are unclear. In 1906/1907 the Midland Railway of Manitoba extended a line from Plum Coulee to Roland which crossed the villagers’ lands on a diagonal through NW 11, SW 14, SE & NE 15, and SE & SW 22 of Township 3, Range 3 West. The Railway Right of Way was 100 feet in width, but provision for a station, which incidentally was never built, extended this to 250 feet on a portion of SW 14 and SE 15.

As was the case at Blumengart and Gnadenthal, lawyer Ernest Fletcher and his firm provided some legal services with Fletcher personally in attendance at Hamburg on April 26, 1922, obtaining signatures on applications under the Real Property Act. Coinciding with the emigration to Mexico, individual land sales began in 1922. No third parties were involved to allow a possible block sale of all the lands in the village at a later date.

Minister Julius Loewen, a proponent of emigration, had been a member of the 1921 Mennonite delegation that first inspected lands in Mexico. Owner of at least 680 acres, he also had the largest landholdings in the Hamburg community. He was able to sell only 280 acres in late 1922 before his own departure. Exact dates are unknown, but in October 1922 the following Hamburg residents are known to have declared their intention to leave that month: Bernhard D. Loewen, Jacob D. Loewen, Gerhard D. Loewen, Abraham D. Loewen, David Loewen, Abraham J. Reimer and Heinrich A. Reimer. On September 7, 1923 the Hamburg emigrants listed are Reverend Julius Loewen, Wilhelm Loewen, Diedrich Reimer, and Heinrich Wiebe. Indications are that, with the exception of son Gerhard, Wilhelm Loewen Sr. and five of his sons and their families left for Mexico. Their prosperity was reflected in the amount of freight transported with them. Both Reverend Julius Loewen and his brother Abraham each had three rail cars while some of the others had two each.

Oral history recalls that several years after his emigration to Hamburg village in Mexico, Reverend Julius Loewen visited Manitoba and preached at an Old Colony church. Documents prove that he returned in 1924, 1926, and 1928 to transfer his remaining 400 acres of land to various purchasers. As well, in 1922 he had extended financing via mortgages to Jacob Diamond and Daniel Hildebrand who each purchased land from him. Hildebrand repaid his mortgage directly, but Diamond still owed money and on the 1928 trip Loewen transferred his interest as mortgagee to Dora Brownstone. It seems ironic, but in 1926 Reverend Loewen, who had emigrated in part because
of the Mennonite desire to maintain church control over its own private schools, sold a three acre parcel of his own land for $120.00 to the public “School District of Hamburg No. 2139.”

After the emigration, the Hamburg Old Colony Mennonite Church, located in the middle of Section 21, was no longer used and in 1926 Henry J. Banman acquired ownership. He arranged with William Enns to have the building moved several miles North-West to the railway siding of Kronsgart. Enns sawed the building in half and after transporting each half separately to North-West to the railway siding of Kronsgart. Banman opened up a General Store and added a lean-to in back as a residence for his family, and a side lean-to for storage. The venture was not profitable, and in 1932 he traded the building to John J. Toews of Kane in exchange for a Fordson tractor, a 20 run drill, and a harrow. Toews had the building transported to Kane either in sections, or disassembled, where it continued to be used as a repair garage. The following are some Hamburg area land sales at the time of the emigration to Mexico. The three villages selected for this examination of property ownership transfers during the emigration period had in common that each was essentially depopulated by its residents.

### The following are some Hamburg area land sales at the time of the emigration to Mexico.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vendor</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Legal Description</th>
<th>Sale Price</th>
<th>Purchaser</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Julius Loewen</td>
<td>Sept 27, 1922</td>
<td>SE 16-3-3</td>
<td>$4,000.00</td>
<td>Daniel Hildebrand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oct 3, 1922</td>
<td>N ½ SE 10-3-3</td>
<td>$2,160.00</td>
<td>Isaac Diamond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oct 3, 1922</td>
<td>N ½ S ½ SW 11-3-3</td>
<td>$1,080.00</td>
<td>Jacob Diamond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oct 24, 1924</td>
<td>Part of NW 10-3-3</td>
<td>$3,000.00</td>
<td>Gerhard Loewen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jan 28, 1926</td>
<td>3 acres on NE 16-3-3</td>
<td>$120.00</td>
<td>S.D. of Hamburg No. 2139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oct 15, 1928</td>
<td>Balance of NW 10-3-3 &amp; NE 16-3-3 less 3 acres</td>
<td>$6,399.99</td>
<td>Franz Janzen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oct 17, 1928</td>
<td>W ¼ NW 15-3-3</td>
<td>$2,800.00</td>
<td>Heinrich H. Hildebrand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernhard D. Loewen</td>
<td>Oct 21, 1922</td>
<td>SW 22-3-3</td>
<td>$2,200.00</td>
<td>Sam Cohen</td>
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<tr>
<td>Daniel D. Loewen</td>
<td>Oct 3, 1922</td>
<td>NE 10-3-3 (less 5 acres)</td>
<td>$3,875.00</td>
<td>John P. Heinrichs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abraham Loewen</td>
<td>Oct 3, 1922</td>
<td>S ½ of S ½ of SW 11-3-3</td>
<td>$1,080.00</td>
<td>Jacob Diamond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oct 3, 1922</td>
<td>N ½ of NE 9-3-3</td>
<td>$1,800.00</td>
<td>John H. &amp; Henry Dyck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sept 27, 1922</td>
<td>NW 11-3-3 &amp; N ½ of N ½ of SW 11-3-3 &amp; S ½ of SW 14-3-3</td>
<td>$7,290.00</td>
<td>Peter B. Froese</td>
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<tr>
<td>David Loewen</td>
<td>Oct 2, 1922</td>
<td>NW 14-3-3</td>
<td>$4,000.00</td>
<td>Jacob H. Wiebe</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dec 27, 1922</td>
<td>NE 15-3-3 &amp; N ½ of SW 14-3-3</td>
<td>$4,098.43</td>
<td>Jacob J. Reimer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Daniel Loewen</td>
<td>Oct 3, 1922</td>
<td>S ½ of SE 10-3-3</td>
<td>$2,160.00</td>
<td>Isaac Diamond</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wilhelm Loewen</td>
<td>Oct 12, 1922</td>
<td>Part of SE 15-3-3</td>
<td>$468.75</td>
<td>Jacob H. Wiebe</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Oct 20, 1923</td>
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<td>Epp</td>
<td>Oct 23, 1923</td>
<td>Part of SE 15-3-3</td>
<td>$1.00</td>
<td>Jacob J. Reimer</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sept 22, 1923</td>
<td>E ½ of NW 15-3-3</td>
<td>$800.00</td>
<td>Heinrich Hildebrand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aug 27, 1923</td>
<td>SW 22-3-3</td>
<td>$3,400.00</td>
<td>Johan Braun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sept 24, 1923</td>
<td>SE 22-3-3</td>
<td>$4,000.00</td>
<td>Diedrich W. Loewen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerhard Loewen</td>
<td>Nov 4, 1922</td>
<td>W ½ of SW 15-3-3</td>
<td>$2,000.00</td>
<td>George J. Dyck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>April 27, 1927</td>
<td>¼ Acre on E ½ of SW 15-3-3</td>
<td>$55.00</td>
<td>Franz Janzen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nov 8, 1928</td>
<td>E ½ of SW 15-3-3 &amp; Part of NW 10-3-3</td>
<td>$5,000.00</td>
<td>Wilhelm F. Enns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abraham J. Reimer</td>
<td>Oct 6, 1922</td>
<td>SW 10-3-3</td>
<td>$3,920.00</td>
<td>Jacob &amp; Gustav Porte</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heinrich Hildebrand</td>
<td>Sept 8, 1922</td>
<td>NE 14-3-3</td>
<td>$5,500.00</td>
<td>Peter Peters</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**

The Midland Railway Right of Way described in Plans 167 and 176 was excluded from sales where it traversed a parcel.

Gerhard Loewen did not emigrate to Mexico and his sale to Enns included part of NW 10-3-3 which he had purchased from his brother Julius in 1924.

Numerous village lots (at least eight) appear to have been located on SE 15-3-3 and NE 10-3-3.

The $1.00 transfer to Jacob J. Reimer was for a 3 acre village lot which logically was included as part of his purchase of NE 15-3-3.
This wholesale departure provided a much fuller insight into the events that allowed for such a major shift in ownership to happen. In contrast, reviewing more limited documents from other West Reserve villages from which a smaller number of individual Old Colony members emigrated would have provided a less clear picture.

It is obvious that sale negotiations were ongoing and complex. Intermediaries played a role, the sheer volume of legal documents to be prepared and filed was enormous, financing arrangements were major factors, the emigrating Old Colony people did not receive full value for their properties, many assumed significant financial risk, and despite all the foregoing, not all deals were successful. Ultimately, however, Blumengart became a refuge for Hutterites who had left the United States after their negative experiences during World War One. Gnadenthal, as its name implied, became the “valley of grace” for some Russian Mennonite immigrants, and Hamburg changed from a kinship based community to a more diverse group whose geographic identity centered on their Public School.

Endnotes
Other than the endnotes listed, the sources for all data are the Abstracts, Old System Files, RPA Files, Transfers, and Certificates of Title at the Morden Land Titles Office affecting the legal descriptions cited.
1 Mennonite Heritage Center Archives – Homestead Files for Township 2 Range 3 West on Microfilm.
2 MHCA – Homestead Files.
3 MHCA – Mexico Mennonite Records Collection, Microfilm Project 158.
4 This author’s personal files of documents copied in Mexico.
5 Manitoba Hochfeld Waisenamt Collection photographed in Mexico by this author.
6 The Home Insurance Company Policy 14476 in the possession of this author.
7 Brandbuch zum Dorf Blumengart photographed in Mexico by this author.
8 Information compiled from various Hutterite sources.
9 Personal interview with Blumengart resident.
10 Provincial Archives of Manitoba – 1921-1922 Rhineland Municipality Assessments. GR 9178.
11 Brandbuch zum Dorf Blumengart.
12 Kirchen Register Buch zum Dorf Blumengart photographed in Mexico by this author.
14 MHCA – Homestead Files for Townships 1 and 2 Range 3 West on Microfilm.
15 City of Winkler – January 3, 1922 Village Council Minutes.
16 MHCA Gnadenthal Files, Vol. 2199.
17 Manitoba Hochfeld Waisenamt Collection.
18 Personal communication from John W. Kuhl, Winkler.
19 Personal interview with John Redekopp, Winkler.
20 Personal communication from Jacob W. and Susanna (Heide) Thiessen of Schoenwiese, Manitoba.
21 Personal interview with Anne Falk of Winkler and John Redekopp.
22 MHCA Homestead Files for Township 3 Range 3 West on Microfilm.
23 MHCA Homestead Files.
24 MHCA Rosenort Files, Vol. 1099, Gebietsamt Bekanntmachungen.
25 MHCA – Mexico Mennonite Records Collection – Microfilm Project 158.
26 Personal interviews with George Banman and Jake P. Derksen, and communication via Ed Falk from Sadie Falk, all of Winkler.
27 Personal interview with Annie Derksen, Winkler.

History of Horndean, Manitoba

Arnie Neufeld, Winkler, Manitoba

Manitoba became a province of Canada by an act of Parliament in Ottawa on July 15, 1870. To insure orderly growth and development, the federal government, led by Prime Minister John A. Macdonald, dispatched troops to Fort Garry, ordered the arrest of “renegade” Métis leader Louis Riel, and offered development, the federal government, led by Prime Minister

Meanwhile, also in 1870, residents in the far-off Mennonite villages of southern Russia were growing uneasy about political developments in their part of the world. Czar Alexander II announced a series of comprehensive government policy changes that would recognize Russian as the only language suitable for all business, governmental and educational matters. Local governments would become more directly accountable to the Russia’s central government, and military service would be expected of all Russian men.

When William Hespeler, a Canadian government immigration agent, arrived in Russia in July, 1872, Mennonites received him warmly and gave him an enthusiastic hearing.

At Hespeler’s invitation, a delegation of twelve Mennonite and Hutterite leaders from Russia visited Manitoba and several communities in the United States, in the summer of 1873. In the same year, on November 8, 1873, Winnipeg was incorporated as a city by the newly-formed Province of Manitoba. The following year, in 1874, residents of Winnipeg elected their first city council. The population in June, 1874, was 1,869.

In 1875 an additional 3,261 Mennonite residents arrived, with most settling in an area south-east of Winnipeg in what came to be known as the “East Reserve.” In 1875 an additional 3,261 Mennonite residents arrived, with most moving to an area west of the Red River.

Historian James A. Jackson, writing in The Centennial History of Manitoba maintains that the arrival of the Mennonites was an important event in the development of Manitoba. He makes...
reference to the Mennonites’ “... strange language, outlandish dress, and Yankee-like hard bargaining.” Jackson continues:

There were one or two instances of open violence against the unwelcome strangers, but the Mennonites paid in gold, and money is welcome everywhere. Thus, they were quickly accommodated with equipment and animals, and were soon busy building their closely-knit villages and setting an example of diligence which should have been a lesson to other Manitobans. They did set one example that was eagerly, if not gratefully, followed. They were the first to farm successfully on the open prairie. They knew the technique of dry farming from their Russian experience, and that knowledge placed all prairie farmers in their debt.

The publisher of a local community newspaper in nearby Morden wrote in 1900:

All in a day, as it might be, the Mennonites appeared on the scene, and a great belt of bald prairie, fifteen miles wide from the boundary line, and reaching away from the bounds of the little settlement eastward nearly to the Red River, became teeming with human life and activity. This was in the summer of 1875.

The Governor General of Canada visited Manitoba, including Mennonite villages, in 1877. At his farewell banquet in Winnipeg, later in August, Lord Dufferin was unrestrained in his praise of the Mennonite communities:

... in a long ride I took across the prairies which but yesterday was absolutely bare, desolate, and untenanted, and the home of the wolf, the badger, and the eagle, I passed village after village, homestead after homestead furnished with all the conveniences and incidents of European comfort and a scientific agriculture ....

One of the families that arrived in Manitoba during this time was Johann and Margaretha Wiebe. They crossed the Atlantic on board the S.S. Sarmatian and arrived in Quebec City on July 6, 1875. Almost two years later, on April 3, 1877, a baby girl named Anna was born into their family. Some thirty-two years later Anna became the mother of my dad, George W. Neufeld.

Initially all of the administrative issues faced by the newly-arrived Mennonite settlers were dealt with by church leaders and councils elected in the villages. However, the situation began to change when the area known as the West Reserve was incorporated by the government of Manitoba as the Rural Municipality of Douglas in 1884. At the time the population of the area was 1,895. (In the year 1891 the R M of Douglas was renamed the Rural Municipality of Rhineland.) At first church leaders in the Mennonite villages announced that anyone who would vote in the council elections, or co-operate with the newly-created municipal government, would be excommunicated from the church. When members of the community voted, despite these harsh warnings, the church leaders were forced to busy themselves with other issues.

During the first 25 years of Mennonite settlement in the West Reserve - especially in the eastern half of the reserve - most of the villages were located south of present-day provincial highway 14. The area north of highway 14 was plagued with heavier soil and poor drainage. This was certainly the case in the area that would eventually become the community of Horndean. According to sociologist Dr. E. K. Francis:

The area around Horndean had been uninhabitable before the drainage system was organized, and was without any source of fresh water. The first settlers had to dig up sod walls around their farms as a protection against north winds and floods.

The arrival of the railroad was a major factor in the creation of towns and trading centers in the region. According to local historian Frank Brown of Winkler, the Canadian Pacific Railway first arrived in southern Manitoba in 1882. The village of Plum Coulee was created in 1884 and had a grain elevator by 1888. By 1894 the village had a population of 200 people. The village of Rosenfeld, located approximately 8 miles east of Plum Coulee, was founded in 1883 when the CPR reached that area.

The train became a convenient and valuable link to the rest of the world. Letters, magazines, newspapers, parcels and merchandise all arrived by train. Horndean area farmers, in turn, would bring their farm products - eggs, cream, and animal hides to be shipped to Winnipeg by rail. The train also provided a pleasant and inexpensive way to travel, stopping in communities like Horndean twice every day. The train also brought news from distant parts of the world. On one of my

J.W. Wiebe’s “Horndean Traders” Store when it was operated by his stepson Isaac Schroeder. To Schroeder’s right are clerks Sarah Heide and Henry Dyck. Photo Credit: Horndean Heritage.
grandpa’s trips into Horndean in November, 1918, Grandpa was in town as the train stopped at the small station, and the conductor poked his head out of the locomotive window and announced with a smile: “The war is over!”

In 1904 a large drainage canal was constructed in the area north of highway 14, making the area much more desirable for agricultural purposes.

In 1907, one of the area farmers, J. W. Wiebe purchased the quarter section of land on which the village of Horndean was later located. The following year, in 1908, Wiebe and other area residents, took a petition to the CPR and requested that a siding be located on the SE 1/4 - 9-3-2-w. In 1911 the CPR responded, built the siding, and named it Horndean. Wiebe was glad to see the siding constructed, but was annoyed to learn that it would not be named “Wiebe.”

By 1911 (Wiebe) ... succeeded in having a flag station set up in front of his cow barn, which afterwards was used as the first store and post office of Horndean. Other businesses were added gradually, namely, a grain elevator in 1914, a garage in 1919, a lumber yard in 1917, a co-operative store in 1936, a second and third garage in 1938 and 1940, and a café in 1945, when the population of the town and its hinterland was about 200.

By 1918 a new store was built on the east side of Main Street, immediately to the south of the CPR tracks, by John Bueckert. The J. W. Wiebe family had moved to Winnipeg in 1914, but returned to Horndean again in 1921. In 1926 Wiebe purchased Bueckert’s store, renamed it “Horndean Traders,” and continued to operate the business until 1936.

For many years the John W. Wiebe store was the only store in Horndean. They stocked everything their customers might ask for: galvanized pails, nails, bolts, horse collars, fleece-lined underwear, denim pants, groceries, boots and shoes, hardware, paint and yard goods, men’s shirts and pants, grease and oil, but no women’s clothing! They were either homemade, or ordered from the Eaton’s catalogue! And the post office was under the same roof as all the other supplies.

J. W. Wiebe launched several additional commercial enterprises. In 1922 or 1923 he purchased a theater and had it moved to Horndean on a railway flatcar. Once the structure arrived in Horndean it was dismantled and the lumber used to construct a residence and a commercial garage. (During my years in the community the garage was operated by John Wall.) When the Wiebe’s oldest daughter, Tena was planning to marry Ben Siemens, Horndean still did not have a church building. To rectify the problem, the garage was cleaned, some benches were placed in the building, and the wedding took place without a hitch.
In 1936 the Wiebe store was purchased by Isaac Schroeder, Wiebe’s step-son. The Schroeders owned the business until 1952, when they retired and moved to Portland, Oregon where Isaac died in 1972. I am old enough to remember Mr. Schroeder and his store. I can still visualize his broad smile and his large generous hands. I remember that he reached his hand into a large candy jar, sitting on the main service counter in his store, and giving the candy to me. My mother was holding me at the time and I remember her saying to me, “Well, what do you say?” I believe (hope) I responded with, “Thank-you.”

A number of new businesses were opened in Horndean in the 1940s. Herb Derksen opened a café in 1946. In 1949 the business was sold to Lawrence and Helen Hiebert, who relocated the business to the east side of Main Street, and added groceries and meats to the products offered in their store.

In 1949 Mr. John Doell opened a blacksmith shop on a side street east of Main Street. In addition to providing welding service to area farmers, Mr. Doell also manufactured snow blowers. My father was very thankful for his snow blower, built by Mr. Doell.

In 1949 Pete Heide launched his trucking, gravel and snow clearing business. His business was known as “Heide Cartage.”

In 1950 a new Federal Grain elevator was constructed in Horndean. The old elevator was converted into a grain annex.

Many bushels of grain were bought and shipped through the Horndean terminal. In my time Hiebert, later of Morden, and Bill Harder, now living in Winkler, served as Horndean elevator agents. Both men were appreciated and highly esteemed in the community.

There were numerous other businesses. Horndean had an egg grading station, a barber shop, several garages, a beet loading dock, an Esso fuel and oil distributor, and a post office. Brothers Jake and Henry Neufeld operated a construction company and completed road and railway bed contracts in Manitoba and as far away as Grande Prairie, Alberta.

For a number of years, starting in 1932, non-denominational worship services were conducted in the Horndean school. For some years a number of established churches in the area took responsibility for the services in Horndean. In 1952 the Manitoba Mennonite Brethren Conference moved a chapel into Horndean from Altona. The first full-time pastor couple to serve the congregation was Abe and Annie Quiring, originally from Namaka, Alberta.

On October 22, 1964 the Grossweide Mennonite Brethren Church - located four miles north of Horndean - was moved into Horndean. The Grossweide and Horndean Mission congregations combined and created a new congregation - the Horndean Mennonite Brethren Church. In 1983 the church was closed due to a declining membership.

The first school to serve Horndean-area children was the rural school in the district of Steinreich, situated approximately one mile south of Horndean. On New Year’s day, 1932, the two-classroom building was moved into the village of Horndean.

In the fall of 1940 grades 9 to 11 were added, creating the new Horndean High School. The high school classroom was located in the school basement. The high school closed in 1964. Through the years the school activities included a garden club, numerous drama productions and musical presentations. Horndean’s history book, edited and largely written by community newspaper correspondent Cleo Heinrichs, includes a 1970 photo of Horndean’s orchestra directed by local school teacher, James Janzen (page 175). In 1961 the high school held its graduation exercises in the Grossweide Mennonite Brethren Church and had nine graduates.
I was a student in the Horndean High School starting in the fall of 1960. I took my grades 10 and 11 with Mr. Hardy Kehler as our teacher. One of the highlights during my time in the school was the construction of a new three-classroom school building during the school year 1959-1960. The official opening took place in the fall of 1960. I remember serving coffee to the honored guest, Manitoba’s deputy Minister of Education. I still proudly display my Horndean High School diploma dated May 26, 1962.

The Horndean that I remember was a peaceful pleasant place. When I was a boy we shipped all of our grain to the Federal elevator in Horndean, took our eggs to John Wall’s Egg Grading Station, picked up our mail at the post office operated by Mary Wall, had our vehicles repaired at Wall’s Garage, and took our welding jobs to John Doell’s blacksmith shop. My grandpa, Abraham Neufeld, had rented box number 25 at the Horndean post office when it first opened back in 1912, and my dad continued to use the same box until my parents’ move to Winkler in 1974. Horndean was our hometown.

I have never met anyone who claimed to know the origin of the name Horndean, but I have my own theory. We know that the name was chosen by Canadian Pacific Railway officials when J. W. Wiebe and area residents requested a siding be built next to the railway track. I suspect that one of the railway employees had immigrated to Canada from the community of Horndean, Hampshire, in England. I found the community’s web page on the Internet.

Horndean made the news in 1962 when a spring flood covered most of Main Street and the banks of the Hespeler Canal overflowed. In fact, spring floods hit the community frequently. Newer homes were built on higher ground so that they would be spared any damage.

The community staged a Reunion on July 1-2 in 1978. Many folks had moved away and businesses had closed. A program of music, readings, dramas, a Sunday worship service and lots of reminiscing and food created an enjoyable time with friends. A large tent had been erected on the school grounds for the occasion.

At the end of the celebration I recorded some of my thoughts:

... we drove to Horndean and were present for some of the reunion activities. ... I took (my family) and briefly reminisced about Horndean as it was back in my student years. ...

Horndean had several service stations and auto repair garages. Wall’s Garage on Main Street repaired many of our tractors and farm vehicles. Mr. D. Friesen serviced many cars in his shop, while his son John - operating Horndean Motors adjacent to highway 14 - tackled more challenging mechanical jobs. John also sold cars and gasoline....

Three grocery stores were in operation at the time of my high school days ... The store operated by the Lawrence Hiebert family, known as Larry’s Lunch (they served full-course meals in their restaurant area of the store) was open every night of the week. The Co-op Store, a branch of the Altona Co-op, did the largest amount of business. They also carried a full line of dry and hardware goods. The third store was known as Wiebe’s General Store and was situated in the building in which Mr. Isaac Schroeder had done a flourishing business back in the 1940s. In later years this same building was converted into a feed-mill by Mr. P. Thiessen and Mr. Henry Stoesz. ...

Today I remembered the flood of the early 60s which brought wide-spread attention to Horndean. I remembered the crowds of people gathered at Larry’s Lunch in warm summer evenings following a good fastball game. I remembered the blizzards in winter which sometimes forced students to stay with friends in town for the night. ...

We cannot turn back the pages of time. Nor would we if we could. Not only do villages ... change. People change too. It was good to see old friends and familiar sights today. ... We appreciate all that we have. We are grateful for what we once had and were able to enjoy - and wonder what may lie ahead.18

Endnotes
1 The “Manitoba Act” was passed by parliament on May 12, 1870 and came into effect on July 15, 1870.
3 *www.winnipeg.ca*
5 Ibid.
Mennonites and their Neighbours
on the West Reserve 1874-1920

John J. Friesen, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Presented at a meeting of the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society in Rosenfeld, Manitoba on the occasion of the 135th anniversary of the settlement of the Mennonite West Reserve.

Settlement

The story of the Mennonite immigration to Manitoba is well known. The story of who the Mennonites’ neighbours were is less well known. This article will identify and discuss the numerous groups who were the Mennonites’ neighbours in and around the West Reserve in the years up to 1920.

Mennonites came to Manitoba in the 1870s hoping it would be a land where they could enjoy the freedoms that were threatened in Russia. What they were searching for in particular was the right to have their own schools and be free from military service. They were also looking for ample, inexpensive land for their large population, most of which had become landless in the overcrowded Russian Mennonite settlements.

A fourth reason for emigration was the desire to find a location that would be isolated enough that they would be able to create the kind of communities that would best express their faith and beliefs. They desired some distance from the “world,” which in Manitoba included both the French and English communities. They also wanted some distance from those Mennonites who were moving to the United States, who they felt had made too many compromises and changes. In Manitoba they hoped to find the freedom to establish the kind of communities, schools and churches that would express their views of biblical faithfulness.

So, when the Russian Mennonites’ delegates came to Manitoba in 1873, saw the land, and received a twelve point letter from John Lowe on behalf of the Canadian government, promising control of their schools, exemption from military service, and ample land, people from four colonies decided to move to Manitoba. Virtually the whole Bergthaler settlement, consisting of about 2,800 people, and about two-thirds of the Kleine Gemeinde settlement at Borosenko, about 800 people, moved to Manitoba. Sizeable portions of both the Chortitza and Fuerstenland colonies moved as well. Upon arrival, they formed one church, the Reinlaender Mennonite Church, consisting of about 3,500 people. Thus the number who migrated to Manitoba totaled about 7,000 people.

In 1874, settlers from both the Bergthal and Kleine Gemeinde settlements arrived and established what became known as the East Reserve. This was the original land that the Canadian government had set aside for Mennonite settlement. In addition, some Kleine Gemeinde settlers established the Rosenort-Rosenhof settlement north of Morris.

In the 1873 letter from John Lowe, Mennonites had been promised land in addition to the East Reserve, if they so desired. So in 1875, in the second year of immigration, when large contingents from both the Chortitza and Fuerstenland settlements arrived, the new arrivals requested land west of the Red River, namely, in the flat, treeless prairie between the river and the Pembina escarpment.

Since this tract of land was as still unsettled, the government granted Mennonites’ request. So on 25 April 1876, the federal government, in an Order-in-Council, established the West Reserve. The reserve consisted of seventeen townships of land comprising an area extending from about five miles east of the Red River almost to Mountain City on the slopes of the Pembina escarpment. The reserve extended eighteen miles north of the American boundary, that is, five miles north of the present PTH #14 highway.

When the Reinlaender Mennonite Church formed, it chose Johann Wiebe as its leader. Wiebe had been the Aeltester (bishop) of the Fuerstenland Mennonite Church in Russia. It chose Isaac Mueller as its civil administrative leader (Vorsteher). Mueller was a very capable person, who shaped the formation of villages and communities in the Reinlaender (later called Old Colony) Mennonite Church. He had been the community leader in Fuerstenland, Russia.
The Reinlaender villages lay on the western half of the West Reserve, that is, west of a line from Plum Coulee to Blumenort, plus the village of Rosenfeld. This isolated village lay a mile and a half south of the present unincorporated village of Rosenfeld. When the Bergthaler settlement formed a few years later, the village of Rosenfeld was transferred to the Bergthaler church. It was too hard for the Reinlaender Church to administer this isolated village from the rest of its villages, which lay south of present-day Winkler.

The eastern part of the West Reserve was settled by immigrants from the Bergthalar colony in Russia. The Bergthaler had initially settled on the East Reserve, but when much of that land turned out to be of relatively poor quality, many moved to the West Reserve. Much of this movement westward occurred in the years 1878-82. At first the Bergthaler members on the West Reserve were served by Bishop Gerhard Wiebe, who was resident on the East Reserve. Because of the difficulty of traveling from one reserve to the other, a new bishop, Johann Funk, was ordained on the West Reserve.

Thus, both churches, the Reinlaender and the Bergthaler, organized churches with a bishop, ministers, deacons and song leaders. Villages were laid out, community and village leaders were elected, and schools were established in each village. Each church’s Orphans’ Bureau (Waisenamt) took care of the estates of orphans and widows, provided for orphans who were placed with new families, and served as the local bank. Fire insurance organizations were established, and household fire regulations were enforced. Before long, the basic organizations for well functioning communities were in place.

In the first few years, Mennonites on the West Reserve were relatively isolated. Communication with the outside world was slow, tedious and infrequent. In summer, in order to go to Winnipeg, Mennonites had to travel along the post road to West Lynne on the Red River, and take a boat to Winnipeg. Products, both imported goods and produce to be marketed, were transported in the same way. People could, if absolutely necessary, make the long trip to Winnipeg on sleighs in winter and by ox-cart in summer. But the distance was prohibitive. Even from Rosenort near Morris, to Winnipeg and back, was a multi-day trip.

**Neighbours before the Railways**

Mennonites were, however, not completely isolated, even in the early days of settlement. Treaty One had been signed with the Aboriginal people in 1871, and Treaty Two the year after. So by 1875, when the first Mennonites arrived on the West Reserve, Aboriginal people still occasionally migrated through the reserve. They provided Mennonites with much needed advice about how to survive in the harsh climate. They taught Mennonites about proper foot wear, what animals to hunt and what berries to eat. The book *Haskett Centennial*, written by Peter Dyck and Peter Letkeman, relates some of the oral history about Aboriginals in the area.

The French Metis, the other Aboriginal group in Manitoba, did not play a major role in the life of the West Reserve. Some Metis lived west of the present-town of Morden in the valleys on the escarpment. However, most Metis who remained in Manitoba after the Riel provisional government was forcibly crushed settled near the Red River, taking up river lots from Winnipeg south to Emerson.

Even though Mennonites were isolated in relationship to the urban centre of Winnipeg, which in 1876 was hardly larger than the total Mennonite immigrant group, they had numerous neighbours who ringed the West Reserve Mennonite community. Right from the start, Mennonites interacted with these neighbours in a variety of ways. Then, when the CPR railways crossed the reserve starting in 1882, railway stations were established every six miles from Rosenfeld south to Gretna, and from Rosenfeld west to Morden. Various ethnic and religious groups settled at these stations, and soon these stations became multi-ethnic towns. Mennonites were now connected with the larger Canadian society.

First, let’s look at the neighbours around the edges of the Mennonite community before the railways came. When Mennonites arrived in 1875, and were housed in the immigration sheds at West Lynne for some time, they met the local people. West Lynne had a Customs House which had opened in 1871, with F. T. Bradley as the first collector of customs. He was also the first Grand Master of the local Masonic Lodge, and later a director of the Emerson and Northwestern Railway.

The population around West Lynne had expanded considerably in 1873, two years before Mennonites arrived. That year two Americans from Wisconsin, Thomas Carney and William Fairbanks, came to West Lynne, and established a town on the east side of the river. Fairbanks named the town Emerson after his favorite author, Ralph Waldo Emerson (d.1882). Carney and Fairbanks brought in about 100 settlers from the United States, who homesteaded in the area east of Emerson. It is likely that in the next few years, this group also spread westward to take up land up to the borders of the West Reserve. (Since the Mennonite reserve included range one, township one east of the prime meridian, that is, the township long the American border, the most easterly Mennonite settlers lived only about five miles from West Lynne.)

An Anglican church was established in Emerson in the late 1870s. It appears that the town and immediate surrounding area consisted largely of Anglo-Saxons from the United States. The other major settlement, upon immigration, was along the Pembina escarpment on the west side of the West Reserve. In 1874, Alvey Morden, together with his four sons and one daughter, arrived from Walkerton, Ontario. The Mordens settled near the escarpment in the area of present-day Morden because the open, treeless valley was considered unsuitable for settlement. This view was based on a report by John Palliser, an Irish explorer, who in 1860 described the land between the Red River and the Pembina escarpment as worthless for settlement since it had no trees, nor source for water.

During the next few years, the Mordens were followed by a steady stream of settlers from Ontario. Two towns were created; Mountain City on the slopes of the escarpment about five miles south of the present town of Morden, and Nelson, or Nelsonville, about five miles north of Morden. To accommodate the settlers from Ontario, a Land Registry Office was established in Nelson. This government office formed a magnet for other businesses and offices, so that by 1881 Nelson had a population of about 1,000 people.

When Mennonites arrived in the summer of 1875, the federal government, as indicated above, agreed to grant them a new reserve of seventeen townships. The Order-in-Council, granting them land in the Red River valley was, however, not passed until April of the next spring. This delay allowed a
land dispute to arise in the western-most townships, that is, on townships two and three in Range five west.14 English speaking migrants from Ontario settled on land for which Mennonites had taken out homesteads, or at least was reserved for them by the government grant. When the Ontario settlers were challenged by Mennonites, the Ontario replied that they needed more land in order to create communities large enough to sustain schools and other local organizations. They took their complaints right up to the Prime Minister’s office.

Mennonites complained that the Ontario settlers were threatening to tear down villages on the edge of the reserve, and were forcibly preventing Mennonites access to timber on Mennonite reserve lands that was needed for fuel and building purposes.

John Lowe, from the Department of the interior, whose letter provided Mennonites with their terms of immigration, plus the Minister of the Interior, and the Surveyor General met and appointed a commission to make a recommendation about how to resolve this land dispute.15 The commission they appointed consisted of William Hespeler, representing the Immigration Department, William Pierce, Dominion Lands Surveyor, and Donald Codd, Dominion Lands Agent.

The Commission met with both the Ontario settlers and the Mennonites. It found that the records of the Land Titles Office in Nelson were untrustworthy, and differed from the records in Ottawa at many points. In 1878 it recommended that some of the titles of the Ontario settlers be recognized, at least those that seemed legitimate. This involved about half of the land in townships two and three in range five west. In exchange, Mennonites would receive two additional wooded townships along the American border, namely, township one in both range seven and eight. Thus the West Reserve was reduced by one township to sixteen, and increased by two townships to eighteen.

The commission made its recommendation to the Dominion Land Agent at Emerson for implementation.16 Mennonites accepted its recommendation, and thus had access to this additional timber. They, however, lost some farmland.

The Ontario settlers refused to abide by the recommendations, and continued to encroach on Mennonite reserve lands. The problem became increasingly difficult when the Ontario settlers used force against Mennonites, preventing them from getting wood, and making settlement of the reserve lands difficult. A new commission was appointed in 1881, which made further recommendations.

The new commission was unable to resolve this problem. The problem continued to be compounded by the unreliable Nelson Land Titles Office records. The land problem gradually resolved itself as more land became available for settlement.

The effects of this conflict, however, lived on in bad feelings between the Mennonite settlers and the town of Morden, when it was founded after the railways came in 1882, The Old Colony villagers took their retail business to Plum Coulee rather than to Morden, even though Morden was closer for quite a few villages. What aggravated this situation was that the English businessmen, professionals and government officials in Morden projected an attitude of disrespect and contempt toward Mennonites for many years.

In the early days of settlement, the area north and east of present-day Rosenfeld was swampy. The Mennonite village of Rosenfeld was located just south of the mouth of the Buffalo Creek which emptied out onto the plain east and north of Rosenfeld and flooded the area every spring. The land remained wet throughout the summer, and was too swampy to be arable.

The first settler in Rosenfeld was an English Irishman by the name of Alexander Acheson. He purchased the land on which the railway town site was located. Acheson and his wife came from Donegon, Ontario, and had moved west in search of a new home. The Acheson family arrived in Rosenfeld, likely around 1882. After the CPR had surveyed the railway site, two elevators and a warehouse were constructed. Rosenfeld soon had seventy residents. Acheson named a number of the streets in Rosenfeld.

In 1891 the first Lutheran, Hoffmann, arrived in Rosenfeld and was followed shortly thereafter by relatives and friends from his home area.17 Locally, the German Luthers were often referred to as Prussians. In fact their forebears had originated in Prussia, and then settled in Volfyna, Russia upon the invitation of the Russian government.18 At first they rented land, but when the Russian government reneged on its promise to allow them to buy the land they had rented and made arable, they left and came to Manitoba.

The first German Lutheran immigrants arrived in the early 1890s, and initially worked as labourers for Mennonites. Then in 1898, when the area north and east of Rosenfeld was drained with the construction of the Buffalo Channel, the Luthers took out homesteads of the newly available land. The St. John’s Lutheran Church in Rosenfeld was built in 1900. Rosenfeld thus became a mixed community of German Lutherans and Mennonites.

North of the Reserve, a railway line was laid in 1891, running west from Morris.19 Along this line railway stations were built every 6-8 miles, and thus Lowe Farm, Kane, Myrtle and Roland were established. Most of the land in this area had been taken up by English and Scottish settlers, like R. Reid, Alex McLaren, Wm. McIntyre and Bob McGinnis. All had been granted large tracts of land. One of the largest grants, however, had been given to John Lowe, the same person who had signed the 1873 letter to Mennonites granting them their terms of immigration. For his services to the Canadian government, Lowe received thirteen sections of land, totaling 8,320 acres.

Starting in the mid 1890s, after the rail lines had been laid, Mennonites began to move into this area north of the reserve. The land had to be bought from Lowe and the other owners of large tracts. The initial price was $5.00 an acre. The land was marshy and had to be drained before large-scale farming could occur. However, gradually this area filled in with Mennonite settlers, thus in effect extending the West Reserve north up to the present PTH #23 highway, and beyond.

As Mennonites moved into these areas, many of the Scottish and English settlers sold out and moved away. Some, however, remained, and so the communities in this area north of the Reserve were never quite as solidly Mennonite as those on the reserve.

Another group of neighbours were the French who settled the present communities of St. Joseph, Letellier and St. Jean Baptiste.20 The original French settlers in these communities were Metis who established river lots, but in the early 1870s, after the Riel Provisional government collapsed, most moved further west. Starting in 1876, French from Quebec, and French Canadians who had migrated to the United States, began to arrive in these communities, taking up the land vacated by the Metis.
This movement of French speaking immigrants into areas along the Red River was facilitated by the Manitoba Society of Colonization organized by Monsignor Tache of St. Boniface. This Society was organized, “for the purpose of bringing back to Canada French Canadians who had migrated to the United States.” They formed tightly knit communities. Many of them became active in local municipal and town administrations. However, there was little contact between them and the Mennonites on the West Reserve. Different language, religion and customs provided effective barriers.

One other area of contact was with Americans. Shortly after settlement in 1875, Isaac Mueller, the civil head of the Reinlaender Church, purchased wood lots on the American side of the border. The wood was designated for construction of houses and barns since the area around the villages had few trees. It appears that there were many formal and informal contacts between the Mennonites in Manitoba and their American neighbours near the international border. Travel across the border was relatively easy, informal, and did not always require crossing at formal border stations, nor reporting to customs officials.

What was the impact upon Mennonites of contacts with their neighbours in the early days? It appears that the earliest contacts, namely with people in the City of Winnipeg, in West Lynne and Emerson, and in Mountain City and Nelson tended to confirm for Mennonites the wisdom of separation from the “world,” as they viewed the larger society. The presence of a Masonic Lodge in Emerson, conflicts with the English settlers on the western edge of the reserve, and the “worldliness” of Winnipeg did not endear them to their neighbours. The result was that contact with neighbours was limited, mainly in the area of business.

In virtually all regions, schools followed ethnic and religious lines. Rarely did a school include both Mennonite children and children from other religious or ethnic communities. The few exceptions were schools at the borders of the Mennonite community, especially on the northern edge of the Mennonite community.

As early as 1879, attempts were made by various politicians and land agents to open up the East and West Reserves. Canadians as well as immigrants saw the potential in the fertile valley lands for settlement, or for speculative buying. Mennonite leaders were opposed to opening up the reserves because they wanted their growing population to have first option to buy the land. Mennonite leaders were able to drag out the opening up of the reserves until 1898, when virtually all the land on the West Reserve had been taken up by Mennonites.

The result was a solidly compact Mennonite community on virtually the whole West Reserve, except for a small corner north and east of Rosenfeld. Compact communities made for less contact with people from other religions and cultures. Had the reserves been opened up earlier, the situation might have been quite different.

Neighbours after the Railways Came

The situation regarding neighbours changed dramatically after the railways came into the area. The first rail line was laid in 1882. The railway stations of Rosenfeld, Gretna and Morden were established that year, and Plum Coulee in 1888, six years later. Three of these railway stations, namely, Gretna, Plum Coulee and Morden quickly became bustling towns, serving as business centres on the West Reserve. Elevators were built, retail businesses established and people from various cultures moved in.

When the town of Morden was established in 1882, it quickly replaced the two towns of Nelson and Mountain City. The businesses, government offices and private homes in the two towns were dismantled and moved to Morden, which quickly became a sizeable town. (Morden is included in this discussion. Even though it was off the reserve, it played a significant role in the western part of the reserve.)

Within a few years, each of the railway stations of Rosenfeld, Altona, Gretna, Horndean, Plum Coulee, Winkler and Morden had a number of elevators. Then in 1907, the Midland Railway Company built a rail line for the Great Northern Railway from Grafton, North Dakota to Morden. The station of Haskett just north of the American border became a small town, complete with numerous businesses and elevators. By 1909 there were about thirty-four grain elevators in the various towns on the West Reserve, representing the change from largely subsistence farming to growing grain for world markets.

Gretna was the first sizeable town on the West Reserve, and remained the largest town for many years. As noted, it was

The Erdman Penner house in Gretna. It was bought by J. F. Tennant in 1908. In 1919 it became the Old Folks Home. MHC Archives Photo Collection, 247.2.
founded in 1882, and by the following year, a number of businessmen had set up shop. Gerhard J. Ens, in his book the Rural Municipality of Rhineland, lists the following businessmen in 1883: W.H. Tyson, J.R. Hoffman, A. Goldie, W. Schramm, W. J. Potter, Levi William, Henry Ritz, R. Foster, Andrew Firsch, Philip Erbach and Otto Schultz. In the next year, the following businessmen began operations: P. Reid, Alexander Smith, R. B. Fischer, H. Braun, David Peters, Max Heydon, Marcus Long and H. Hellofs. By 1895 Gretna had 500 residents, consisting of these owners and many who were attracted because of the available jobs. Only a small number of the residents were Mennonite, and many of these were connected with the Mennonite Educational Institute, later renamed the Mennonite Collegiate Institute.

So, who were these new residents in the towns, and what kind of diversity did they bring to these communities that had been solidly Mennonite up to this point? The 1901 census indicated the following residents for Gretna, by church affiliation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Affiliation</th>
<th>Number of Residents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglican</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mennonite</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various Sects</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unspecified</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>666</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Plum Coulee was founded somewhat later, that is in 1888. It cut into the business area established by Gretna. However, Plum Coulee grew quickly and soon served much of the western part of the West Reserve, as noted above. Here too, the religious and ethnic diversity introduced by the towns is evident. In 1901, the number of people in Plum Coulee, by religious affiliation was:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Affiliation</th>
<th>Number of Residents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglican</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mennonite</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congregationalist</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various sects</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unspecified</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>394</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Initially, most businesses in these towns were established by non-Mennonites, since Mennonites viewed engaging in business as something negative. It was too competitive and resulted in too close a contact with the “world.” One of the notable exceptions was Erdman Penner, who owned stores even before the railways came, and when the towns formed, established a number of stores in various railway towns. The community’s displeasure in his business endeavours was expressed, though, when he ran for political office, and lost to a non-Mennonite. These newcomers also established churches. Thus in Gretna and Plum Coulee, various Lutheran, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic and other churches were formed. In Rosenfeld the German Lutheran Church was built in 1900, and its spire provided an architectural centre for the village.

The first Jewish merchant to arrive on the West Reserve was Adolphe Coblentz. He built a hotel in Gretna as soon as the railway arrived. The Coblentz family came from France, and was relatively well-to-do. Many of the later Jewish immigrants who settled in the West Reserve towns about a decade later, came from Russia, and were poorer. To gain a foothold in the business activity of the area, many started as peddlers. The peddlers gave the businesses in the railway towns competition by going directly to the customers in the villages. The newly established businesses in the towns were not amused, and tried to fight the competition, usually with little success. One way the businesses in the towns tried to limit the competitive advantage of the peddlers was to petition the municipalities to charge the peddlers a registration fee. This seems, however, to have had little effect in curbing the success of the Jewish peddlers.

Before long, likely when the peddlers had gained some cash, they set up businesses in the towns, or bought out existing businesses. At first they established niche businesses, but soon they bought out some of the main line retailers. Before long every town had a few Jewish merchants, with Plum Coulee having the largest number in the early twentieth century. It is not clear whether there was a synagogue in Plum Coulee, but in later years there was a synagogue in Winkler, and another one in Morden.
The towns of Altona and Winkler formed in the mid 1890s, well after Gretna and Plum Coulee had been established as business centres. Winkler did not surpass Plum Coulee in size nor business activity until Plum Coulee lost many of its most loyal customers in the migration of Old Colonists to Mexico in the 1920s.

So what effect did the coming of the railways, and the establishment of railway towns, have on the relationship to neighbours? As is evident even from this brief survey, after the railways came, Mennonites suddenly had many more neighbours living right in the midst of the reserve. In the early years, Mennonite leaders had successfully limited the number of neighbours living right in the midst of the reserve. However, the railways forced open the reserves, and Mennonites were powerless to stop this development. Each town became an island of the “world” right in the midst of the community.

The people in the towns represented the openness of the Canadian society. They provided an alternative lifestyle, and a new view of the world. They engaged in business, and exemplified competitive capitalism. This was in tension with the more communal, non-capitalist economics of the Waisenamt, fire insurance organizations and subsistence farming. The people in the towns set up schools that had a much broader curriculum than did the private village schools.

Those Mennonite churches on the West Reserve that had accepted more innovation and change, namely, the Mennonite Brethren and the Berghthaler after its split from the Sommerfelder Church in the early 1890s, were more attracted to district schools, capitalist economics, Canadian patterns of life style, and the values of the towns. For example, in 1898, the Mennonite Brethren Church in Burwalde was the first Mennonite church on the West Reserve to move its meetinghouse into a town, namely Winkler. Others followed before long. The Berghthaler and MB churches were in a sense privileged by these changes, and they became the acculturating vanguard within the Mennonite communities.

Despite this seeming advantage, however, both churches remained relatively small in comparison to the much larger Reinaelder and Sommerfelder churches, at least until the emigrations to Mexico and Paraguay in the 1920s. This indicates that until the emigrations, the majority of West Reserve Mennonites resisted the acculturating changes represented by the towns.

The coming of the railways also affected those Mennonites who opposed the influence of these towns, and the new neighbours that they brought into the communities. This was especially true of the two largest churches on the West Reserve, namely, the Reinaelder Mennonite Church, later called the Old Colony Mennonite Church, and the Sommerfelder Mennonite Church.

These churches were affected in that they built defensive mechanisms to protect themselves from the influences they felt could undermine church and community. In their view, the new influences were too individualistic, undermined the semi-communal village life and organizations, and promoted a more competitive spirit. All of this they felt would undermine community. So, for example, they rejected competitive sports, like baseball and tennis, which these newcomers introduced. They felt that the towns people violated principles of modesty and simplicity in their clothing styles and other signs of personal adornment. The so-called conservative, or conserving, churches also changed by becoming more conservative and defensive.

The ever increasing influence of the “world” represented by the towns was one of the factors that pushed the more conservative Mennonites to emigrate to Mexico and Paraguay in the 1920s. The neighbours had come too close and provided too great a temptation to the younger generation.

It is interesting to note Mennonites were not attracted to non-Mennonite churches in the West Reserve towns. Churches, both Mennonite and non-Mennonite, maintained rather strict ethnic and religious lines. Also, relatively few non-Mennonites joined Mennonite churches. The one exception was that some German Lutherans joined Mennonite churches in the Winkler area.

As this brief overview indicates, the relationship of Mennonites and their neighbours was dynamic and ever changing. From the early days when contact was slight and largely negative, influences increased to where they reshaped West Reserve Mennonites’ character and identity.

Endnotes

Around the Mennonite World

Connecting with Mennonites in Latin America

Kennert Giesbrecht, Steinbach, Manitoba

It’s 10:00 AM in the morning. The sweltering heat can be seen hovering over the asphalt. One more turn and we should be heading straight into Las Grullas, the one and only Mennonite colony in the state of San Luis Potosi, Mexico. To our right we see a huge landfill with all the garbage from the city of Rio Verde. As far as the eye can see plastic bags are spread out. Most of them are stuck in trees or tangled in the fences. So this is the road to Las Grullas? Well, the directions we received sure seem to be right so we just continue driving our 1997 Jeep Cherokee on this dusty and bumpy dirt road. Some stretches have been topped with ‘caliche’ gravel to make the driving a bit smoother.

About five minutes later we get the first signs of Mennonite presence. It’s hard not to recognize it, since it resembles the typical Mennonite farm yard: machinery with steel wheels, nice and cozy house, kids running around on the yard, and men working on the field. Yes, this has to be the new settlement of Las Grullas.

We turn the corner and then decide to talk to somebody on the yard to our left. It all looks so new, so .... well ... how should I put it? ... so like ‘not living.’ But that’s how these colonies start, and before you know it, they have blossomed into sparkling agricultural communities.

Mr. Bergen greets us warm-heartedly and is not at all surprised to see us. Although we’ve never met, he knows exactly who these two strangers are. Through our work with the Mennonitische Post most of the colony people have grown to know us. Because of our rather unique adventure-trip from Canada to Paraguay by car, even more people have become aware of our presence. For some days people in this new colony with about 150 families had been talking about our coming. “And if they do come to our colony, we want to welcome them with a good and hearty supper,” Vorsteher Jacob Wall had said to some of the neighbors in his village. Well, that is a chance he should have, since Mr. Wall noticed our arrival and was the first to welcome us after we had met Mr. Bergen.

Las Grullas is one of the many Mennonite colonies Wilfried Klassen and I (Kennert Giesbrecht) visited on our two-month trip to Paraguay. Las Grullas is a settlement that was started in 2007. Most of the families in that colony come from Yalnon and Chavi (Campeche colonies), or from the northern Mexico colony of Sabinal (Casas Grandes area). They have moved here to make a new beginning, hoping that the soils of this country will be better, and hoping that there will either be enough rains for their crops or they’ll find good and plenty of well

Mr. Bergen and some of his children in Las Grullas, San Luis Potosi, Mexico. Photo Credit: Kennert Giesbrecht.
water. But let’s move back even further before we continue our journey south. In 1922, and following, a large contingent of Mennonites from Manitoba and Saskatchewan moved to Mexico. In 1926 our grandparents and many others moved to the hostile Paraguayan Chaco and settled there to form the Menno Colony. Over the next decades, more and more countries in Latin America saw Mennonites come and settle down: Brazil, Bolivia, Belize, Costa Rica, Argentina, and others.

Starting in the late 1950’s Mennonites increasingly started coming back from southern countries and ‘made themselves at home’ in places their forefathers had left. They looked for new jobs and living opportunities in Canada and the United States. That’s why there are numerous groups of Low German speaking Mennonites in the different states of the US. Names like Seminole, Tigertown, Honeygrove, Sublette, and Storm Lake have a Mennonite sound to them now-a-days, because many returning ‘Dietsche’ have settled in those communities and have helped to revive them. Although many Mennonites live illegally in the US, they have by now found a way to make a living and call this great nation ‘home.’ Most of their children are US citizens because they were born here. But as stated, the parents are fighting for the right to stay in this country they have grown to love. In the last years it has become increasingly hard for them to cover up their status as ‘illegal citizens.’ They can’t renew their driver’s license if they are ‘illegals’ in the US. More and more are returning to Mexico, or trying to make a new start somewhere in Canada, where many of them have citizenship rights through their parents and grandparents.

On our trip Wilfried and I made several stops in Mennonite communities in the US and learned more about their history and daily life. Mountain Lake (Minnesota), Newton (Kansas) and Seminole (Texas) were just a few places where we saw a strong Mennonite presence. Especially Seminole has such a strong ‘Mexican Mennonite’ presence that you get the sense you’re somewhere in a Mennonite colony in Mexico. Although the large variety of churches suggests that it’s not Mexico, you hear the common Plautdietsch still being spoken everywhere. If you drive through the outskirts of Seminole you will hear the people saying this is ‘Taco Town,’ referring to the Mennonites as ‘Mexicans.’ Mennonite women also wear their typical conservative dress.

In communities like Seminole the visible contrasts between the many Mennonite groups/churches are as blunt as can be. If one wants to see many different churches in a small area then

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*Boys collecting water melons in Las Grullas. Photo Credit: Kennert Giesbrecht.*

*The first meeting at the Chicken Chef where the adventure had its beginnings. Photo Credit: Kennert Giesbrecht.*
visit Seminole. There are Reinländer, Old Colony, Gemeinde Gottes, EMMC, Berghthaler and many more. The Old Colony church still is the strongest and largest.

Also, often people in these communities have just jumped out of their conservative colony where they were still using the horse and buggy, and now they sit on a GPS steered tractor and live in a luxurious home in the outskirts of Seminole. What a change!

We left home on September 26, 2009. Five days later we drove into Mexico where we had planned to stay at least 10 days en-route to Belize and other Central American countries. In 1922 the first Mennonites from Manitoba and Saskatchewan settled close to Santiago de los Arenalanes in the so-called Bustillos valley. A mere two years later another group from Saskatchewan followed and started a colony close to Nuevo Ideal, Durango. Pioneers used to call this settlement Patos, but that has changed over the years. Today it simply goes by the name Durango Colony or Nuevo Ideal. This colony of some 7,000 Low German Mennonites plays an important role in the existence of numerous other colonies in Mexico, Bolivia, Paraguay and Argentina; it is the ‘mother colony’ of many settlements! Over the years I have been amazed when visiting Mennonite colonies how many people have relatives coming from the Durango colony. Almost everybody seems to have a connection to this small colony between the hills of Nuevo Ideal. Because this colony has no chance to grow and expand its territory, its people have had to move to Campeche, Bolivia and many other places.

On our route through Mexico we stopped in some fifteen Mennonite colonies: Oasis, La Bomba, Manitoba colony, Durango, La Honda, Las Grullas, Tamaulipas, El Temporal, and many others. We met with people, toured their colonies, watched them at work, and enjoyed the tremendous hospitality. If you want to find friendly people who open their doors to two tired men on a Jeep, just visit some Old Colony Mennonites. One example of this hospitality occurred while we were touring some colonies in Campeche with Johan Neufeld, a local Mennonite farmer who had moved to this area from the Buenos Aires colony in northern Mexico. Neufeld knows as much about Mexican Mennonites as anybody in Campeche. Traveling with him through the colonies was like having the best tour guide in your bus when visiting the Mayan ruins in the area. Neufeld does a lot of paper work for colony people.

But getting back to the issue of hospitality, have you ever visited Old Colony people as a friend? I’m not speaking about visiting them to change everything they do and believe in! I’m talking about simply going to a place that is set back in time and space, and accepting the Old Colony people as they are—with all their faults, virtues and values. On our trip Wilfried and I went unto the yard of total strangers in El Progreso. This colony was one of the first to settle in the Hopelchen, Campeche, area. When our Jeep finally stopped on the yard of these strangers, it did not take long for some friendly faces to look out of the window. We had reached the home of Heinrich Hieberts, Hiebert’s, his sons, and a couple of son-in-laws were busy making silage for their milk cows. But now it was time to visit. “All the work can wait,” Hiebert said with a wide grin. Had they heard of our trip? Were they familiar with the MENNONTISCHE POST? You bet! People in the colony had been talking about our trip for weeks and were anxious to get a glimpse of us. The Hieberts considered themselves lucky to see and meet us. It was only a matter of minutes before Mrs. Hiebert (born Anna Dyck) and two of their daughters, Greta and Tina, started preparing delicious ‘gordas’ for our lunch. The short time at their home was so uplifting and good that Wilfried and I have talked about this encounter several times during and after the trip.

This is the kind of reception we got in so many Mennonite homes, be it in the US, Mexico, Belize, Bolivia, or Paraguay. People were delighted to see us and we were excited to meet them.

The many visits to the colonies proved to us once more how widely spread out the Mennonites are now-a-days. They also showed us how much change is happening. In northern Mexico there is only one colony left that still uses the horse and buggy, and that’s Sabinal. All the remaining twenty plus colonies have motorized their transportation system, taken away the steel wheels on their tractors, and have electricity in their homes.

After passing Belize we traveled for weeks through unknown territory. Mountainous regions and roads were part of our daily traveling. Dozens of times we had to ask people at the road-side how to get out of the cities. We got lost in the mountains, we got assaulted in San Jose, Costa Rica, we got delayed for about two weeks between Panama and Colombia,
we had small mechanical problems with the Jeep, but after almost six weeks of traveling we finally made it to Bolivia. A few days later we arrived at our final destination, the Menno Colony in the Paraguayan Chaco. That was on November 12th.

Forty-seven days and 19,000 kilometers of travel lay behind us. They included fourteen border crossings, dozens of military and police check points, countless frustrations, many moments of joy, and hundreds of hours of driving.

One of our last joint highlights was the visit to El Palmar, a Mennonite colony in the south eastern part of Bolivia. These people came from the Durango Colony in East Paraguay and moved here some 10 years ago. We let one of the farmers, Gerhard Braun, know ahead of time that we would try to be at their place by 9:00 AM on a Wednesday morning. Upon arrival we saw that their yard was full of horses and buggies. Mr. Braun had invited people from their colony and the neighboring Bajo Verde colony to come and meet us. Dozens of people were waiting to hear about our travel adventures. Yet to our surprise, they knew almost everything. One of their Old Colony ‘Ohms’ (ministers) sat next to me and told me with a smirk on his face, that he had received weekly updates from our trip, taken from our travel blog www.footstops.com/vamoparaguay. Somebody from the colony had checked our site regularly, then printed out a copy and photocopied it for distribution in their colony. So this minister knew a lot of details of our trip and was totally excited to meet us.

After resting a couple of days in our native Menno colony I traveled on to visit some Mennonite colonies in East Paraguay: Rio Verde Colony, Mexico Colony, Santa Clara, Manitoba Colony, Bergthal, and Sommerfeld. Every visit to these colonies reveals the amazing changes they are experiencing.

On November 18 we finally made it home to Manitoba. It took us forty-seven days to drive to Paraguay, but only nineteen hours to fly back. Although our drive down south was nothing compared to what our forefathers went through when they moved to that isolated and desert-like place in the Chaco, it certainly was adventurous. What started in cold Manitoba ended in the ‘green hell,’ a nickname that the Paraguayan Chaco has acquired over the decades. We got to see the Chaco as many people fear it: dry and hot! This region had been going through one of its worst droughts ever. Ranchers were suffering tremendously and just didn’t know how they would survive. Many had spent tens of thousands of dollars to buy feed from East Paraguay. “But that’s the Chaco,” they told us. That’s the way it always has been and most likely always will be like.

After the trip we’ve given about a dozen reports in colonies, churches, and other places. People enjoy hearing about our adventurous drive and we enjoy connecting with thousands of colony Mennonites in this way.

Many people were there at a gathering in Colonia del Sur. People really wanted to hear about our adventures so we would invite people on a short notice and tell them stories of our trip. Photo Credit: Kennert Giesbrecht.

Finally arrived! After 45 days of traveling we finally reach the Menno Colony in the Paraguayan Chaco (November 12, 2009). Photo Credit: Kennert Giesbrecht.

Talking Low German in Siberia

Hans Werner, Winnipeg, Manitoba

For a few years a number of people had been working on planning a conference on the Mennonite experience in Siberia. In June 2010 those efforts finally were successful with a number of scholars from North America, Europe, Russia and Kasachstan coming together at the Omsk State University on June 1st, 2nd, and 3rd. The presentation of research about Mennonites in Siberia was not the only part of the trip. Most North American participants took part in tours before and after the Conference.

For a group of ten or so of us our Russian experience began when we landed in St. Petersburg for a few days of visiting the centre of power during Tsarist times. The city’s many names betray the chequered and troubled history of Russia. It was built by Peter the Great as St. Petersburg, and was to be the window on the West for Russia. After the 1905 Revolution it became Petrograd, then after the Bolshevik Revolution, Leningrad. After the fall of Communism it has again become St. Petersburg. It is a beautiful city and today it is again quite European and Western in its flavour. We visited many of the sites where the momentous events that would shape Russian history took place: the square where the Father Gapon led the peasants in the 1905 Revolution, the Cathedral built on top of the site of...
Alexander II’s assassination, the Peter and Paul Fortress where the Tsars are buried. We saw museums and art galleries and the elaborate displays of the wealth of the Russian Tsars.

From St. Petersburg we took the high speed train to Moscow where we visited the Kremlin and the centre of Russian Orthodoxy, the towns of Vladimir and Suzdal just outside of Moscow. Moscow is a busy place of some twelve million people. To someone growing up during the Cold War it is difficult to believe the modern shopping centres, new Audi and Mercedes cars, and the modern condominums and office towers.

On June 1st those of us who had toured St. Petersburg and Moscow were joined by the others in the North American group for the flight to Omsk. The S7 Airlines Airbus was painted a bright lime green, which was matched by the bright green uniforms of the flight attendants and the bright green boxes that contained a hearty meal. But otherwise the flight was much like any one would take in North America, even the announcements were in both English and Russian. When we arrived in Omsk there was a welcoming group that included the Russian professors with whom we would be sharing stories about Mennonites, but also Low German speaking Mennonites, now Baptists, who would be our hosts for our visits to some of the places in Siberia where Mennonites had lived, and where some of their Baptist descendents still live.

Other than the opening and closing plenary sessions the conference took place in the Ibis Sibir Hotel in Omsk, a very pleasant place to stay with friendly English speaking staff and very comfortable accommodations. It was hot; the beginnings of what would become a hot and dry summer throughout Russia were already present in early June. The papers presented at the conference covered the range of Siberian Mennonite experience; most of them dealt with the Communist period of banishment and exile, but there were also papers on the early Mennonite settlers who came to Siberia for land and opportunity. In some of the presentations our newly made Russian friends lamented the fact that the archives seemed to be closing again. The conference also featured opportunities to experience Russian culture. In keeping with the Russian style of academic conferences we also had performances by wonderful Russian tenors, folk dancers, and feasts that included Russia caviar. Although language was a barrier there were opportunities to connect with Russians scholars with an active interest in Mennonites. It was good to meet Andrej Savin, a researcher from the Russian Academy of Sciences who has been instrumental in digging in Siberian archives for the Mennonite story. Being able to converse with him in German was an added bonus. We could not have managed without Olga Schmakina and Paul Toews, Olga for her talent in translation, and Paul for the many contacts he has developed in Russia over the years. We also became deeply indebted to our Canadian Mennonite researchers who have learned to read and converse in Russian. Colin Neufeldt from Concordia University College in Edmonton and Aileen Friesen, a University of Alberta doctoral student became sought after dinner companions when it meant going out to eat in a local restaurant.

An important part of the experience of travelling to Siberia for the conference was the the opportunity to visit the Mennonite villages near Omsk, and for me particularly, the visits to the large former Mennonite colony near Slavgorod. Mennonites began purchasing and renting land along the Trans Siberian Railway between Petropavlovsk and Omsk in the 1890s. Peter
Wiens, probably the first Mennonite to try his hand in Siberia established a number of businesses in Omsk and some estate owners from Ukraine purchased land from the original Cossack owners at the turn of the century. Most Mennonites who came to the Omsk area established themselves on rented land. A number of villages were created that ranged from those similar in size and arrangement to the villages of Chortitza or Molotochna, others were just a collection of a few homesteads. The settlements were all near the railway tracks.

We boarded the bus in Omsk on a Saturday morning to begin a tour of a number of the villages where Low German speaking Mennonites lived. We travelled in a westerly direction along roads that were never far from the Trans Siberian Railway towards Issilj Kulj. The village of Mirolyubovka, formerly Alexanderkrone, was particularly interesting. The arrival of a large bus full of visitors brought scores of Low German speaking children onto the street. The village was still predominantly Low German speaking although like the other areas we visited their denominational affiliation was Baptist. We continued on to the former village of Waldheim, now called Apolonovka, just north of Issilj Kulj. Those of us comfortable with Russian or Low German were billeted in homes in the...
village. My hosts were the Jacob Peters family. Jacob was the choir director and on Saturday evening we went to a church service that began at 10:00 pm! The next morning we were back again for a two and one half hour worship service. After the service we enjoyed a wonderful picnic under the Birch trees that dot the steppe near Omsk.

After a refreshing sleep in the hotel, a smaller group left for Slavgorod, a full day’s trip south and east of Omsk over rough roads. The vast expanse of the Kulunda steppe stretched out before us, reminding us of southwest Saskatchewan with its occasional salt lake and unending treeless prairie. It was very hot and it made for a long day. In 1906 the Tsar released what were called the Cabinet lands in the Altai region of Siberia for settlement. Mennonite land seekers explored the land around what would become Slavgorod and chose approximately 50,000 desjatin (135,000 acres) for a new large Mennonite settlement. Settlers began arriving and planting their villages in 1907. The Slavgorod settlement would become the largest Mennonite colony but its late start would mean it would never achieve the development of its southern counterparts before the revolution disrupted Mennonite life all over Russia. We toured many of the villages in the closed German settlement northeast of the city. We visited Halbstadt, the administrative centre and present centre of the German Rayon where the German government has made large investments since the 1990s. The migration of many Germans and Mennonites to Germany after the fall of Communism has meant that many of the villages are now not Mennonite or German. While Mennonites and other Germans have migrated to Germany, their places have been taken up by Russians migrating back to the Russian Federation from Kasachstan.

Most of those who made the trip to Slavgorod had personal family connections to the area. We were very generously hosted by the Slavgorod Baptist Church whose members took us into their homes and went out of their way to drive us to the villages of our parents or grandparents. Alexander Weiss, an itinerant Baptist minister with a passion and knowledge for the history of the Low German speaking Mennonites of the area enriched our knowledge of the story of the Mennonites of Slavgorod. Alexander told us many horrible stories of the difficult years after the revolution. We visited with the older members of the congregation and exchanged stories about our histories. They invited us to speak in their worship service in the evening and fed and cared for us throughout our stay.

For me the trip was particularly memorable because my father was born in the village of Nikolaipol in the Slavgorod settlement. He later grew up in the Paschnaja villages, one of a number of what were called the *Randsiedlungen*, which were groups of four or five villages scattered on the periphery of the main settlement northeast of the city. My host, Nicolai Neufeld spoke Low German fluently while his wife had lost her facility in the language and their children spoke only Russian. When I mentioned that it would be nice to go to the Paschnaja villages he said that someone from one of the villages had called him to ask about a breed of dogs they both were interested in. He offered to contact him and the next day we were off to the village of Annanjewka, one of the Paschnaja villages near the Kučük salt lake. Jacob Wiens and my host exchanged words in Russian and then he turned to me and asked if we could carry on in Low German. It was a remarkable experience talking Low German to someone with whom I shared a certain history, but who for much of our lives may as well have lived on another planet. Jacob Wiens was the head of the Annanjewka Coop.
which had taken over from the collective farms after the fall of Communism. Both Grigorewka and Markowka, two of the Paschnaja villages my father had lived in were no longer in existence, but Wiens took us to the sites where they had been.

After the long bus ride back to Omsk, it was another night in the comfortable Ibis Sibir Hotel and the next morning the long way back to Winnipeg began. It had been a memorable time in Siberia. Those of us who were fortunate to make the trip learned much. There still are Low German speaking Mennonites in Siberia, but like in North America they are shrinking in numbers. Although Baptist in denominational affiliation, many of the folks we met still valued their Mennonite past and nurtured a sense of being peace loving people. They also maintain certain aspects of a conservative orientation.

Women’s heads are covered for the most part, church attendance is important, and family and work are the centres around which daily life is lived.

The German settlements in the Slavgorod area. Mennonite settlements are denoted by a circle with a dot in it. Source: Karl Stumpp.

The large German settlement area northeast of Slavgorod. Source: Karl Stumpp.

Nicolai Neufeld and Jacob Wiens on the site of the former Mennonite village of Markowka. Photo Credit: Hans Werner.

**Nickel is not a typical Dutch Mennonite name and likely originates in the Niederrhein area in and around the city of Aachen where in the 16th century a well-organized Mennonite church community existed. This Anabaptist church community, which had its own pastor and school, was under continual pressure from the authorities because they held church services in their homes and refused to baptize their children. In 1614 around 600 Mennonites were forced to leave family life and work.**

Walter Epp, Thunder Bay, Ontario
their homes due to sustained counter-reformation pressure and they moved eastward. In 1618 there is evidence that land in the Danzig area was rented to the Anabaptists and the Mennonite name Hans Nickel appears. During the latter half of the 17th Century the name Nickel begins to appear frequently in the Montau region. There are many different branches of Nickels and when Frederick the Great annexed that part of Poland in 1772 there were forty-four Nickel families with forty-seven sons and thirty-six daughters.1

The villages of Rudnerweide and Tragheimerweide in Canton Sztum, to which the Nickel family can trace connections, lie on the East Bank of the Vistula just before the Nogat branches off. It is this area where Pieklo (Hell in Polish) is found; “Pieklo” because during the last 400 years 170 floods have occurred in this part of the delta.2

Contributing to the decision of the Nickel ancestors to move to Russia in 1857 was the continuing militarization of Prussia, the difficult economic conditions of the time and perhaps the devastating flood of March 29, 1855 when due to ice obstructing the river waters in the Montau region rose seven feet higher than ever before (twenty-eight feet above sea level). Lives were
lost, many houses were destroyed, and up to 300 horses and cattle drowned.3

In tracing the Nickel family history I was able to locate the following:

**Peter Nickel**: died 1758

**Peter Nickel**: born February, 1746 Rudnerweide; died July 11, 1825 Nieder Gruppe

**Gerhart Nickel**: born October 23, 1788 Rudnerweide, baptized 1805 Tragheimerweide

**Jacob Nickel**: born January 6, 1819 Tragheimerweide, died 1870, Russia

**Jacob Jacobovitch Nickel**: born April 2, 1851, Marienburg, Graudenz, died Feb 27, 1930, Moelln Refugee Camp, Germany

**Jacob J Nickel III (Rev)**: born March 21, 1886 Lindenau, Samara, died January 13, 1977, Rosthern Saskatchewan

**Elizabeth Nickel**: born December 11, 1919, Krasikov, Neu Samara, died July 15, 2003, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

**Walter Epp**: born June 17, 1947, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

In order to provide a historical context consider the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nickels</th>
<th>Hollenzollerns</th>
<th>Main Events</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moved perhaps from Aachen or earlier from Switzerland or Southern Germany to northern Europe to escape persecution</td>
<td>1517 Protestant Reformation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>16th-17th C</td>
<td>The Nickels immigrate to Prussia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter I ?-1758</td>
<td>1701-1713 Frederick I</td>
<td>1701 Prussian state created</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter II 1746-1825</td>
<td>1740-1786 Frederick II (The Great)</td>
<td>1763 7 years war* - see appendix C</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gerhart I 1788-?</td>
<td>1786-1797 Frederick II</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Jacob I 1819-1870</td>
<td>1815 Defeat of Napoleon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jacob II 1851-1930</td>
<td>1854 Weaver's Revolt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elizabeth I 1919-2004</td>
<td>1924</td>
<td>Jacob Nickel III immigrates to Canada</td>
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<tr>
<td>Walter I 1947-</td>
<td>1939 – 1941 World War II, Cold War</td>
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Gerhart (1788-?) has no death date or place, but he was listed as being interested in going to Russia. Anna’s death “before 1847” may have prevented this. His son Jacob Nickel January 6, 1819 –1870 married the Widow Wall who was two years older than he. In 1857 “the group made the trip by way of Stettin. There they boarded a ship and sailed across the Baltic Sea to St. Petersburg. From there they traveled by train to Tver, a city just north of Moscow and from there they went down the Volga River by steamship to Saratov.5 It is possible that his decision to move to Russia was finalized by the devastating flood of March 29, 1855 when “due to ice obstruction waters rose 7 feet higher than ever before (28 feet above sea level) and in the Montauer region lives were lost, many houses destroyed, and up to 300 horses and cattle drowned.”6

**From the travel diary of Walter Epp, June 29, 2005**

Looking for Great Great Great Grandfather Gerhart Nickel’s landholdings in the 1820’s Poland.

Took overnight train to Berlin. Went straight to the Preussische Geheime Archiven. Arrived at 10:00.

“Kann ich die Eigentumslandkarten von den Preussischen Doerfern: Rudnerweide, Tragheimerweide, Rosenkranz, Schweingrube und Nieder Gruppe bitte bestellen?”

“Kein Problem Mein Herr.”

You have to lock your bags in a locker and then you get admitted to the Forschungshalle. The 8 maps I ordered arrived at 14:30 - 4 in canvas rolls and 4 on paper of varying thickness and quality.

Spectacular!! Exactly what I was looking for; clear maps with names - Gerhart and Peter Nickel along with many other Mennonite names. Accurate, beautifully preserved hand drawn colored maps from 1821 on canvas with Great great great Grandfather Gerhart Nickel’s land clearly identified at a sharp bend in the river. What a treasure! There is his garden, the house, the yard, the Wiese, the field a bit back, a couple of other fields around the area. And there is his brother Peter’s land.

“Ja - bitte alle 8 photocopieren - nur das beste qualitaet - Preis spielt keine Rolle.”

My favorite is the 1821 map of the area that shows Gerhart Nickel’s land and the canal having been completed to eliminate the loop and with it the flooding potential.

If I could find the canal channel I should be able to locate Great Great Grandfather Gerhart’s land.

**July 9, 2005**

I am waiting for the professional genealogist I met in the archives yesterday. He agreed to help me find the “Durchstich” canal that would give me an approximate location of the Nickel land.

My ride arrived and we drove around the villages with the goal of trying to find the “Durchstich” that would provide orientation to find the Grundstueck.
I was very disappointed not to be able to find the “Durchstich” - it might not even exist anymore and the challenge is to find out where it used to be.

The professional genealogist adheres to the following principles when searching for records:

• do a complete literature review before you go
• go to the place you are researching - give your intuition a chance to kick in
• talk to the Pfarrer, the Polizei and the Lehrer about your research interest
• talk to old people
• go to archives and establish a working relationship with personnel
• document thoroughly what you do
• cultivate the art of “Zufallsfinde”
• don’t hurry

He has no hesitation at approaching people. We were in a cemetery and he noticed a man leaning out the window and watching us from a nearby house. He called over to the man inquiring about the whereabouts of the “Durchstich.” The man shrugged and then directed us to a local woman of 78 years who had a map of Kreis Stuhm but it showed no clear evidence of the presence of the ‘Durchstich.”

I was then curious to know what existed in the form of land documents and was advised to visit the Malbork castle archives where I found fascinating family history documents. I visited local cemeteries always asking the local residents about the location as many are in sad state of disrepair. Gerhart Nickel’s head stone could not be located in the cemetery, however, Gertrude and Peter Nickel’s (Gerhart’s brother) were located.

Endnotes
2 Personal Communication, Dr. Arkadiusz Rybak, 2005.
3 Königlich Privilegirten Berliner Zeitung, Saturday, 31 March 1855.
5 http://www.kansasfolks.net/Genealogy/MFH/current_article.htm
6 Königlich Privilegirten Berliner Zeitung, Saturday, 31 March 1855.
Childbirth in a Small Sample of Mennonite Families

Katherine Martens, Winnipeg, Manitoba

The book In Her Own Voice: Childbirth Stories from Mennonite Women published in 1977 by University of Manitoba Press, is based on interviews conducted over 12 months, mostly in Winnipeg, Altona, Steinbach and Carman. Four women in Ontario were also interviewed. Thanks to a grant from the Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Citizenship Oral History Grants Program in 1988, I was able to interview about 50 women. I conducted the interviews and a few years later Heidi Harms transcribed them, and translated the German or Plattdeitsch interviews. The transcripts are stored both in the Heritage Centre and in the Provincial Archives, where the tapes are stored together with a summary of each interview. I am indebted to Heidi who suggested that we work on the interviews together to create the book. We co-edited the book.

During the time I was doing the interviews I also asked my mother, Susan Klassen, about her 15 births. At that time I did not think our interview was up to a certain standard I was trying to reach, so I did not include it in the book, but now I rather enjoyed reading the very brief notes I made which I have condensed even more. (i.e. I have not included all 15 births.)

My mother Susan said:

When our eldest child Anna was born, in 1921, we were newlyweds living with my parents. Dr. Wallace came from Emerson. Our baby was due towards the end of August so my sister Marie told me I should not go out after August 1st, but I told her we don’t have to stay home right up to the time the baby comes. Gossip had it that we would have our baby too soon. We had to wait for our first baby three weeks after our wedding. Two of my brothers’ wives had had babies before they were married nine months. All the gossip and all that got on my nerves. My first labour lasted 3-4 hours. I breast fed Anna about six months.

For Paul’s birth both sets of grandparents were there, as well as Mrs. Wall who had been a midwife in Russia. It was a three-day labour. At one point Grandpa Klassen said, ‘Ye weete aula toop nuscht’ [You altogether don’t know anything]. I thought I would die. Paul was born at three o’clock. Later I wondered why we had not called a doctor.”

Mother went on to have seven more births. My birth was the first one to take place in Concordia Hospital. Mennonites had formed a private health insurance fund that helped with the expense of a hospital birth. I believe my mother found the time spent in hospital a welcome relief from never-ending household responsibilities.

Of the interviews in the book there are nine with Mennonite women born between 1900 and 1918. They had a total of 77 children. The average works out to be 8.5 children each.

Secondly, there are 16 interviews with women born between 1928 and 1966 who had a total of 37 children thus averaging 2.31 children each.

When I looked at the birthdates of the women, I realized although it was not a conscious decision on my part, I did not interview any women born during the decade between 1918 and 1928. Not all interviews I conducted are included in the book.

I was not looking for a balance of women in all age groups; these numbers are simply the ones that turned up. However, the numbers do illustrate that in the six decades there was a shift from large families to much smaller families. No doubt the shift was due to a number of factors, namely, that the younger women went to school, they took time to establish a career, and they waited longer to get married or start a family. As well, they knew about and had easier access to birth control than the older women. For people living in urban settings, in contrast to farm families, large families were no longer an asset but more of a liability. The first woman I interviewed, Anna Thiessen, who had been a farm woman, was only seventeen when she had her first baby, in 1924. She then went on to have large house. It was an easy birth. We had hired a Russian girl and we also had a hired man. Neighbours came to see if the hired help were living together. [She laughs] They didn’t even like each other. Dad stayed in the room during Marie’s birth.

My mother left out Ed’s birth, but much later she remembered to tell me about it, but I can’t find those notes now. If she could not remember a birth it was because there was nothing difficult or unusual about it. My mother continued:

For Bill’s birth the midwives came early and had nothing to do so they had time to make kjoasche mooss [Cherry mousse] which we ate for dinner. But then they went home because they said, ‘We do not want to sit here all day.’ Then when Bill was born the midwives had not returned and Dad was the one who caught him. Dad rubbed me with rubbing alcohol to help the afterbirth to come out.”

When I was pregnant and waiting for Elsa, Dad was performing a wedding ceremony. I resented not being able to go to the wedding. But my mother said, ‘This won’t be the last time that you will have to miss something.’ Elsa was born on a Sunday at about 2:30 in the afternoon. The older children went to stay at the Peter Heinrichs.

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nine more babies, sometimes with a midwife in attendance. At other times a doctor, namely, Dr. Wiebe of Winkler, came to her house.

These were the days before universal health care and hospitals, thus many women had a midwife not because they preferred a midwife to a doctor, but because they could not afford the doctor or hospital fees. Gertrude Epp, who was an immigrant from Russia during the 1920s, and settled on the Manitoba prairies with a number of families related to her, talks about how she and her sisters-in-law got around the cost of having a doctor deliver her babies.

Annie was just one year and five months old, and then Ben came along. We were poor. None of us had any money, and we didn't have a telephone either. So my husband drove to the farm and phoned to Boissevain, to the doctor. And by the time the doctor came Ben had already arrived. So the doctor looked after him, and that cost us $30! It was very difficult to get that much money together for us on the farm at that time. We just had a few cows in the beginning and one of us would milk them and the milk was divided between the families, a cup of milk for each person. But when we had some money we wanted to pay our travel debt. We bought a cow, and so at least we had some milk. We bought a few chickens, and [on the land] where we lived there was a garage, and the garage was set up for us to live in, and that’s where Ben was born. And then later on, the land was divided up and we got the section with no house on it. So then our house was built, and a barn, that’s where Heinz was born.

Dr. C.W. Wiebe began practicing in Winkler in 1925 and over a career of 53 years is believed to have delivered more than 6000 babies. Photo Credit: Archives Manitoba.

We had no money to pay the doctor again, so my sisters-in-law came over [and we discussed it]. The midwife had explained a lot to me when she was with me for a week. And so when Heinz was born, I had prepared everything. I boiled some twine and put it into a little box, poor as we were, and then I told the women how they were supposed to bind and cut it off, [the cord] and everything went just fine. I was the youngest of all of them, the family I had married into.

So with Heinz we did it that way already, also with Gerhard and Gerdie, and Jacob - oh yes, when I was pregnant with Jacob - that was the winter we also had scarlet fever. Oh, I had a difficult winter then. Oh my, that was hard! And then the last two [children]. The doctor from Deloraine knew we could not afford the hospital so he came over. And so he attended Mariechen’s birth. And with Selma, [the last baby], I was in the hospital. Yes, by then we had a bit more money. [laughs] (p.98)

In the years before socialized medicine some small towns had enterprising women who set up small hospitals, birthing homes or lying-in homes. One such home in Gretna was run by two sisters, Helen and Sara Heinrichs, my mother’s cousins, who opened their home to women who came there to give birth. This was an improvement as it meant the mother could come
in close to her due date and not worry as much about whether
the doctor would make it on time, or worry whether the house
was tidy, and other concerns such as where to leave the older
children. The small maternity hospital usually had one woman
or perhaps two staying there at a time, as it was a private home
renovated for this purpose.

Margaret Sawatzky describes her experience in Altona.
There were houses where pregnant women could go and
have their babies. And when I came, there was a hospital in
Altona; it was a private home that had been renovated, and
on the second floor was the delivery room. I had to go up the
stairs. But that morning when we had just set out from home,
my pains stopped again and I said to my husband, in Low
German, “It’s going to be for nothing again.” He stopped the
car and we stayed there [on the road] and watched the sunrise
in the east....

[After the babies were born] we had to stay in the hospital for
such a long time, usually for ten days, but I was in for up to
twelve days.” (p.13)

The opening of hospitals in the 1930s in the towns of Altona,
Winkler, and Steinbach brought about a shift to hospital births
for the convenience of the doctors, who found it was easier to
have women come to them rather than that they had to drive
out into the countryside at all hours in all kinds of weather to
far flung farms to deliver babies. Women who had had most of
their babies born at home with a midwife had mixed feelings
about the change to the hospital: Margaret Sawatzky:

At first I thought it would be very cumbersome, going to
the hospital once labour had begun. But later we got used to
that, too; we gladly went to the hospital; it was good, it was
very good. Birth at home didn’t work out any more, the fam-
ily was bigger, you couldn’t take six or seven children out at
night. (p.14)

Margaret was referring to the practice of taking all the older
children out of the home to stay with a relative or neighbour,
so they would not be at home to witness the sights and sounds
of giving birth. It is interesting that later when younger women
planned home births one of the reasons was the reverse, namely,
that they would not have to find someone to care for their older
children, while they went to the hospital. Most of them felt that
it was important to involve their older children in the birth,
rather than shield them from the event.

In the case of my family my mother, born in 1902, gave birth
to her first eight children between the years 1921 and 1934, at
home. The first one was with a doctor in attendance, then sub-
sequent births with a midwife attending. By the time the ninth
baby was due, in 1935, Concordia Hospital in Winnipeg had a
private health plan where families who paid a yearly premium
had their medical costs covered. My parents enrolled in this
plan in 1935 and so they drove the distance from Halbstadt,
MB for their first hospital birth. By 1935 my eldest sister was
14 years old, old enough to be entrusted with the household in
my mother’s absence. Thereafter, the next six children born
between 1936 and 1945 were also born in Concordia hospital.

Marlene Epp in her recently published book Mennonite
Women in Canada: A History, gives a good overview of the
changes in locale and style of giving birth. She includes stories
of some women in the early days when childbirth could end in
death for either the infant or mother, or both. In 1934 Maria
Poetker, living on a farm, hemorrhaged two months before
her due date and died. Her baby was stillborn. She left six

small children behind. There were two doctors in attendance,
but she was at home, far from a hospital where her life might
have been saved.

My list of questions for the women I interviewed did not
routinely include specific questions regarding their knowledge
of birth control, though now I wonder why not. In general I
did not want to be overly directive, so if the subject did not
come up I did not bring it up. One of the women expressed a
great deal of anxiety about the number of children she had,
mainly because one of their children had been born mentally
handicapped and the possibility of more caused her a great
deal of worry. It is not hard to imagine the anxiety that must
have resulted from lack of information and/or lack of reliable
methods of birth control. The belief that it was sin to control
the number of children God entrusted to you meant that large
families were the norm, rather than the exception.

Among the 1870s immigrants there were experienced mid-
wives. These midwives often trained other women. Mostly the
training was on the job. A woman who wanted to learn came
along with an experienced midwife to observe and serve as an
assistant. As well, women could go to the United States to take
a short course in midwifery. There are also records of doctors
learning from midwives. On the whole, however, many medical
doctors did not welcome the competition they faced in trying
to wean women from their midwives. Correspondence from doc-
tors to their professional association in the Provincial archives
can attest to that. John J. Friesen’s book Building Communities,
The Changing Face of Manitoba Mennonites has specific refer-
ces to Anna Toews in the Blumenort district who assisted at

Catherine Thiessen was a Winkler midwife who was taken to court
by Morden doctors in 1895. The charge was that she was practicing
medicine for a fee, which was a violation of the Manitoba Medical
924 births. Midwives, according to Friesen “dealt with birth and death, providing care and nurture, teaching and comfort.” (p.48) He also records that when Dr. Wiebe began delivering babies “he worked alongside midwives and made no effort to unseat the midwives.” (p.92)

Marlene Epp in Mennonite Women in Canada: A History quotes historian Wendy Mitchenson. “Midwifery lasted longest in cohesive communities that were isolated from the pressures of modern industrialized society as a result of geographic or cultural separation.” Mennonite communities fit those criteria. I did have informal talks with a midwife of the older generation who had served the Holdeman community near Steinbach and who was still working in the mid-1930s and into the 1940s, but she was ill and unable to do an interview.

After the middle ’30s, and for sure by the ‘40s, Mennonite women began to go to hospitals for birthing. Here, among other differences, they discovered the wonders of anesthesia, such as chloroform. One woman I interviewed, Peggy Regehr, says that she was partially drugged and describes her experience as follows:

Then every now and then they came to see how dilated you were, but I didn't know what they meant by “dilated” and nobody explained anything, then finally when they thought you were ready they wheeled you into the delivery room, they strapped you in and they gave you something, a mild amount of ether to keep you out of it. I don't know how to describe it. I'm having a very hard time thinking back not knowing how to describe it. Especially for the first [child] I was very uninvolved and a feeling like you were all alone, and nobody cared about you as a person, it was all very medical and very mechanical around you. That doesn't mean there weren't some fine nurses there, there were some. (p.158)

The doctor as expert became the rule, instead of a midwife who was with you throughout. There were nurses who came and went with their shifts, which resulted in a lack of continuity of care. Doctors were prone to go on trips to medical conventions just at the time their patients were due to give birth, at which time their patients were passed on to another doctor or, in one case defined as high risk, and sent to another hospital.

One interviewee describes her experience of telling a nurse that she was going into second stage labour and that she felt like pushing only to be informed by the harried nurse, “You can't push, you have already changed shift.” Mind you that is a lot of visiting, but that also helped to give you the time to get to know each other and ask a lot of questions that we might not otherwise have asked… and the really neat part was that the whole family was involved. When she would go to do the physical check-up usually the girls (Evelyn's older children) were right there on the bed with me and she would take a doll and show them the position the baby was in. (p.53)

In one case Evelyn was happy to have two opinions in order to make up her mind whether to follow her doctor’s suggestion or not. Near the end of her pregnancy her doctor said that he could not see any growth on her baby’s part and suggested she go for an ultrasound. The doctor’s concern concerned and worried her, but she asked him, How safe is an ultrasound? His answer was that ‘it hasn't been around long enough for anyone to really know … but it has been tested on – mice. I think he said there were no side effects that would cause any concern, no effects at all.’ Well that really helped me to make up my mind that I did not want to do it if I had any option not to do it. What I wanted to hear from him was that we are 100 percent sure there are no ill effects. So when I got home I called Darlene, my midwife, and she asked a lot of questions that he never even discussed with me. For example, what had been my weight gain, and my weight gain had been considerably more than in the past. And then she said that it usually takes one to two weeks for the baby to take on the weight gain that the mother takes on. And the other factor she mentioned was that the position of the baby can change and that can determine how much he measures just by the way he is lying.
In any case Darlene was able to reassure Evelyn, and she decided not to have the ultra sound. When her baby was born weighing in at nine pounds five ounces she knew there did not need to be any concern about his weight.

On reflection the older women who had home births first and then later looked forward to the hospital experience as a rest from household responsibilities viewed the hospital as a place where their anxieties about things that could go wrong would be put at rest. On the other hand, the younger women who chose home births did so to find individual attention within their own four walls and hoped for a minimum of medical interventions such as clock watching, anesthesia and episiotomies.

One of the greatest joys of the whole project was to hear women express their joy and satisfaction at being able to discuss their experiences. My mother-in-law who is now 104 years old told me when I was doing the interviews that her mother had never talked to her “about such things.” One day I was driving my mother-in-law back to her home in Cartwright and while we drove we listened to the tape of one of the interviews namely, Marjorie Neufeld’s description of the life events around her child bearing. She expressed her sorrow when an adopted daughter with a terminal illness died and then her joy at the birth of her only daughter later. My mother-in-law was astonished and envious that Marjorie could talk with so much feeling about the events in her life. Marjorie herself thanked me for interviewing her, with, “I’ve never before sat down and told the whole story of my births and deaths at one time to one person.”

I saw the lack of connection between the older and younger women in my sample, symbolic of the silence between mothers and daughters about an event in life that is at the core of their very being. Instead of emphasis on the spiritual and ritualistic in birthing it has become a medical event. Fortunately, most women experience the awe and wonder of it in spite of the medical interference in the process.

In my introduction to the book I tell parts of my own story of giving birth, and living through the death of our first baby one day after his birth. We were grief stricken and did not name our baby. I felt that my birthing process was halted when I was urged to take a drug, which stopped contractions. Though I had wanted a natural childbirth the reality of childbirth in a hospital was too much for me to fight alone. I only put the whole experience behind me after we had three living children. We have since then named our first baby Ariel. My lack of objectivity played a huge part in the way I went about collecting these interviews. First of all, I was trying to put my experience behind me by talking to and listening to others about their experiences. As I progressed I began to appreciate each woman’s unique approach and experience. When one woman told me that she had never sat down with anyone to tell the complete story of their giving birth at one time, I realized that neither had I. Collecting their stories was a gift to myself and to them.

All quotes, unless otherwise noted, are from the book Heidi Harms and I wrote, In Her Own Voice: Childbirth Stories from Mennonite Women.

Mennonite Funerals in Manitoba

Roland Sawatzky, Steinbach, Manitoba

Death is a part of life, and for Mennonites and most religious people it is a step towards a different kind of life. Among the religious, death is a passage from one kind of life to another; from within the community to outside that community. As Christians, Mennonites believe that if a person is saved through faith in Jesus Christ, he or she will be resurrected when Christ returns.

Death, and the funeral, is a rite of passage. Rites of passage, like birth, baptism, marriage and funerals are important for society because they make serious changes normal and recognizable, while encouraging social stability. Death is a threat to the predictable order of life created by society. The funeral as an event helps to process the experience of loss as a group, and normalizes the socially disruptive event of death by giving it predictable, ritualistic meaning. The order of a funeral service, the physical setting of the funeral, and the material culture surrounding the dead provide the symbols for grief, belief and remembrance.

So what makes Mennonite funerals unique? How are they different from other cultures? Mennonite views on death fall into the larger Christian beliefs of historical Europe, and Mennonite customs reflect this. However, for historical Mennonites there was an emphasis on simplicity, and like many Mennonite customs, their funerals sometimes reflected practices that were considered “old fashioned” in the larger culture.

Mennonites and Religious Views on Death

“Judgment is connected with death and the tree will lie as it falls.” Mennonite Articles of Faith (1766) – Article 32

“The end of life is death. God shall raise up the dead, by Christ Jesus.” – Mennonite Catechism, 1783

Funerals today often emphasize that the deceased has “gone to a better place,” or is with the Lord. Historically, this was not the emphasis. The belief was that the dead were lying in a period of waiting. Only during the Second Coming would their souls actually be judged by Jesus Christ, and be allowed into heaven. This is one reason why historically some Mennonite groups often emphasized “hope of redemption” rather than an iron clad belief that they had been saved. This affected some of their burial customs. When a body was buried, the head was at the west end of the grave, while the feet were at the east end, so that when Christ returned (in the East) and raised the dead, the person could rise up and face their Lord. The hands were placed over the pelvis, right hand over left, so that the person, when raised, could greet the Lord with their right hand.

Mortality

Mennonites saw the sickness and death of loved ones as the will of God. Funeral announcements sometimes referred to God as the “Lord of Life and Death.” Accidents and epidemics.
were common and child mortality rates were high. Life was considered fragile and fleeting, while death was seen as an unavoidable part of living. Disease and epidemics were difficult burdens for Mennonites and other Canadians on the prairies, and could wipe out half a family. Mennonites sometimes lived in crowded conditions that promoted high infection rates.

Diphtheria
A contagious bacterial disease, diphtheria took the lives of many Mennonite children, often in rapid succession. The bacteria attacked the throat and nose, but could create a poison that damaged the heart and nerves, killing its victim. A vaccine was created that prevented a resurgence of the disease.

Typhus
This bacterial disease is contracted from infected insects (mites or lice), and results in fever, headache, muscle pain and a rash. In fatal cases, the heart or brain swells until death occurs.

The Influenza Pandemic of 1918/19
Following World War I, influenza (or Spanish Flu) swept across the world killing more than 20 million people, twice as many as had died in the war. It was especially dangerous for people aged 20-40. The relative isolation of Mennonites on the prairies did nothing to protect them, and many were infected.

Child Mortality
Children and infants were vulnerable to many diseases, and early deaths were common. In 1899, in the village of Blumenort, near Steinbach, Manitoba sixteen children under the age of five died of typhus and diphtheria.

Deaths and funerals were more common than today, and even though they were considered tragic, they were also a normal part of life.

The Community Responds
In most cultures, after someone dies, the body of the deceased is treated ritualistically, according to a preset system that includes roles, time and drama. Even during very difficult times, ritual treatment of the dead is considered a necessity, and only when society breaks down utterly do the dead remain unattended. The following quote from The Kuban Settlement (1989:87-88), which chronicles the experience of Mennonites during the Russian Revolution, is a good example:

We became utterly poor, indescribably poor! I had no clothes for the deceased. So I went to our supervisor and asked him for some gauze. He shouted at me and chased me out because, as he said, I was lamenting the loss of such filth (the deceased person). Indeed, I should be glad that she was dead. Finally, however, I was able to obtain three meters of gauze, and we were able to dress the deceased in white after all. She lay on her right side in the coffin just as she had always done on her sick-bed. Since we had no other room her body remained in the corner until she was carried to the cemetery. It rained without ceasing during those days; it was almost impossible to bury the body. S. and I dug the grave. Only a few women had come to the funeral; not one man was present. We read a Scripture passage, prayed, sang several hymns, and then proceeded to the cemetery: the children with the corpse; I on the other wagon.

Among Mennonites there was a systematic transition of the body from the last moments of life to the moment of burial. This often began, if possible, with final goodbyes and prayers as the person was dying. Death was following by preparation of the body, public viewing, a service, the procession to the cemetery and burial. In all of these moments, the display of grief was publicly recognized. Death in a rural Mennonite settlement included a shared burden of grief; many people participated in a distinct set of community activities. The following descriptions of traditional, historic funerals reflect the general customs of Russian Mennonites settling in Manitoba after 1874. Variations existed depending on congregational background. It is important to stress that over time Mennonites adopted mainstream Canadian funeral customs. By the 1950s this was commonplace.

The Funeral Invitation
Mennonites living in villages announced a funeral by passing around a single invitation from house to house. The language of the invitation was formal and lofty, relating emotions of sorrow and hope. The tradition of announcing a funeral by passing around a single invitation from household to household began in Prussia over 300 years ago. There an Umbitter (one who invites) would personally walk to neighbours and announce the death and funeral of an individual. Over time this gave way to the written invitation, which also acted as a memorial to the person’s character.

A February 11, 1926 written funeral invitation announcing the death of David Enns, aged seventy-eight. The funeral service is to be held in the Enns home. Photo Credit: Mennonite Heritage Village (MHV), 984.24.1.

Midwife as Undertaker
Midwives were responsible for the births and health of rural people, and when someone died they assisted in funeral preparations as well. It was the task of Mennonite women to wash and clothe the body for the funeral, and often they learned this skill from their mothers. The deceased was dressed in a
long white shirt (chemise) and covered in a white sheet for viewing, which was done in the home. Measurements of the body were used to create the final shroud, and were passed on to the coffin builder.

It was only considered necessary to preserve the body for a day or two, and embalming was unknown until the rise of funeral homes between 1930 and 1950. One method of minimally slowing decay, and reducing the smell, was to rub the body vigorously in alcohol. A body could be stored in a cool area (like a shed or hole in the ground) and surrounded by ice or water.

The type of shroud and coffin dressing depended on the local congregational tradition. The use of white shrouds was considered based on scripture: “...and they shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy.” Rev. 3:4

Time was limited for this activity, and sewing was kept to a minimum. Instead, white fabric would be cut to the right length, pleated, and tucked onto the sides of the coffin over the body. In the Bergthal colony in Paraguay, this shroud material was bought by the church in rolls, and then divided up as needed. It can be assumed many churches provided the shroud materials in this way. The shroud came in various shapes, but was generally made in pieces:
1. the two sleeves were prepared separately by women and tucked under the main body shroud
2. the main body shroud was fitted to the body, but not sewn together in the back. It was more like a fitted blanket. The sleeves would be tucked under at the shoulders. In some traditions, the shroud became a covered, lower part of the casket that would be tacked to the casket.

Besides the white shroud, black ribbons were tied in bows onto the cuffs. Men sometimes had bows or kerchiefs tied at their necks, and evidently these could be blue or black.

Women wore their fanciest head covering of adult life. Usually this was black, but in one case at least it was white.

Building the Coffin

A local carpenter would sometimes work through the night to finish a coffin in time for the funeral. Coffin styles reflected congregational traditions, but they tended towards simplicity. There was nevertheless a great deal of skill that went into building an appropriate casket. They were often wider at the shoulders than at the feet, and, and instead of being a simple box, they could be built with six sides, plus the two ends, with the corners angled. Coffins were constructed of simple plank wood that was sometimes painted black.

Among the Kleine Gemeinde, caskets for children were painted bright yellow, while caskets for adults were painted black. The body was dressed in white, and fresh flowers were laid in the coffin. A jute bag mattress filled with straw was used to cushion the body. Glass panels were sometime used if someone died of an infectious disease, evidently to reduce the spread of the contagion.

Old Colony coffins were often left unpainted and had very little adornment. Often a simple layer of sawdust was strewn on the bottom, and a few wooden dowels were used to secure the lid. Sometimes a straight piece of white fabric was hung down over the edges of the casket during the viewing. The shroud among the Old Colony was not a separate suit, but became part of the coffin, the edges being tacked to the sides. Sommerfelder cut fringes or patterns into fringes of material hanging over the side of the coffin.

The Mennonites who remained in Ukrainian and Russian Mennonite colonies after 1874 adopted more elaborate coffins and dressings over time. By the 1900s this included wreaths with sayings, palm fronds, myrtle, white flowers, etc.

By the 1920s in Canada, coffins were becoming larger and more ornate, with handles on the sides for carrying, following the custom of many mainstream Canadians.

Preparing a meal

The women of the area would gather at the home of the deceased and make large amounts of dough, which they would divide and bake at their own homes for the funeral. Sharing
meals and visiting provided comfort at a time when death threatened familiar social bonds. A wagon would be sent to collect chairs and benches for the funeral. On the day of the funeral a noon meal of borscht, fruit stew and beef would be offered. After the funeral there was often a faspa, a late afternoon meal consisting of buns, coffee and sugar cubes (a delicacy of the time). Sometimes there would be a gathering and meal the day after the funeral as well.

The Funeral Drama

The funeral is a drama that is meant to capture the meaning of life while saying goodbye to the departed. The revulsion and fear of death is mediated by the funeral, which emphasizes love, condolence and social bonds. Mennonite funerals emphasized a person’s relationship with God and the importance of family and community. They tended to be simple, reflecting the Mennonite ideal of social equality and avoidance of costly display.

In most Mennonite communities, the funeral would take place in the home, with a viewing taking place before the funeral in one of the rooms. If there were too many people, it could take place in the school building as well, at least among the Sommerfelder and Old Colony. The church was not normally used for viewing, although the body could be outside.

The body was considered a polluting force for such a public place of worship, and would not be brought inside.

In Prussia and Danzig, people met in homes, not churches, for funerals. Singing songs was common. Before 1800, Mennonites in Prussia would compose and sing a single song about the deceased, and this could be very long, up to 28 stanzas, and the length of time could be as much as a sermon.

In Russia and Manitoba, a service in the home included a reading from the Bible, followed by a few hymns and a short word about the deceased. Some Manitoba Mennonites included a sermon in the service, but in most cases just a few words would be spoken about what the deceased had thought of the state of his or her soul. Kleine Gemeinde Mennonite leaders voted unanimously in 1901 that “Funeral sermons and all innovations at funerals except ordinary sermons are unscriptural. Also singing, praying and preaching at the tomb is not scriptural.”

After the “service” the body would be loaded into a wagon and a procession to the gravesite would commence. Often children were expected to sit on top of the coffin of a deceased parent. A short gravesite ceremony, with singing, was followed by the burial of the coffin. People would take turns shoveling dirt into the grave until it was completed. Funeral hymns were taken from the Gesangbuch (#648, “Was Gott thut, das ist wohlgethan!” was common).

Photographing the Dead

“The funeral is the finished picture of the person.” –Michael C. Kearl

Mennonites have a strong tradition of photographing the dead, usually in close proximity to relatives. While some people now find this custom disturbing, it was once widespread in Europe and North America, and Mennonites just continued this practice longer than most other groups.

By 1860 photography was a product created by professionals for sale to a growing middle-class in Europe and North America. People from Victorian England to middle-class Ukraine commonly used this art form to memorialize their dead. By the 1890s, Mennonites on both continents had incorporated the practice into their own culture.
The funeral photograph was a socially acceptable form of memory and grieving. Photographs helped make grief public rather than private, and transformed this pain into memory. For Mennonites, funeral photographs often included close family members, with children and spouses being nearest to the coffin. Community and family were central to the identity of the deceased. Some Mennonites still memorialize their loved ones with photography, and in some cases professional videos are made of funerals.

The Mennonite Cemetery

Mennonites, like other European settlers in Canada, dotted the landscape with resting places for their deceased. Some groups, like the Old Colony Mennonites, buried the deceased in the order that they died, with no gravestone to mark their place. The anonymity of their burial reflected their emphasis on humility and conformity in life. Other groups had their burials aligned with family members.

The dead were sometimes buried with their heads to the west and feet to the east. It was believed that when Jesus Christ returned on Judgment Day, he would arrive in the east and would resurrect the saved for their ascension to heaven. This orientation of burial ensured that at the Second Coming, the dead would rise whole and meet the face of their Lord. People who were excommunicated from the community, or who had committed suicide, were often buried outside the cemetery. Sometimes their bodies were laid out in the opposite direction of those in the cemetery, because it was assumed they would be damned.

Unlike some other societies, Mennonites did not consider cemeteries sacred ground alive with supernatural forces. Over time, settlers died or moved away, and some cemeteries were forgotten and reclaimed for agricultural purposes. While family and ancestors were very important to the society, the farm economy was also central to Mennonite identity. Agricultural pursuits sometimes took precedence.

Among Old Colony Mennonites, grave markers often did not include tombstones with epitaphs. Rather, a rough wooden cross, a stick at both ends of the grave, or some sort of border would be used to mark the grave without pointing out details of the person's life. This practice, combined with the order of burial (chronological rather than family oriented) insured the anonymity and thus the similarity of those who died.

The Modern Funeral Experience

Mennonite attitudes have changed greatly towards death. Deaths often occur in hospitals or nursing homes instead of in the home; the body is taken to a funeral home by employees, not family; morticians, instead of family and friends, prepare the body; the coffin is purchased instead of being made by friends; viewing and service occurs in the church or at the funeral home (if at all); the body is transported to the gravesite by a luxurious motorized hearse rather than a family vehicle; and the grave is closed by strangers rather than by family.

With medical advances over the last century, death is now viewed as abnormal and horrific. At the same time, funerals have moved out of the home and into the commercial funeral industry that follows regulated guidelines. People are no longer familiar with death. Modern funerals, while still serving important social and grieving functions, are tailored to highlight the life of the individual. Memorials, unique services, and even embalming express the importance of a single life. This change in funeral practices accompanied the movement of many rites of passage, such as birth or marriage, out of the home and into institutions.

Postscript

In 1995 a number of Mennonite burials in the former village of Schoenfeld, Manitoba were disturbed by excavation for gravel, the cemetery having been forgotten by most local residents. This event was mentioned in past Preservings articles (No. 6 pp. 29-30; No. 8 Part I, p. 30; No. 9, p. 17). The remains of three of the fifteen graves uncovered at the site required excavation due to the high level of disturbance of their burial plots. No plans to rebury these individuals were successful at that time, and the remains were stored at the Department of Anthropology at the University of Winnipeg under the authority of the Historic Resources Branch. The identity of these three people is not known, due to incomplete burial records and the lack of any headstones. In 2010 discussions were held between the Mennonite Heritage Village and the Chortitzer Mennonite Conference concerning the reburial of these remains, and it was agreed reburial could take place at the Randolph cemetery. A memorial service and reburial was undertaken on October 8, 2010.
The 1858 Bergthal Colony Revision List (Census)

Tim Janzen, Portland, Oregon

In 1998 Delbert Plett (1948-2004) acquired scans of the 1858 Bergthal Colony Revision List (Census) documents for the villages of Heuboden and Friedrichsthal from Aleksandr Tedeev, the director of the Zaporizhia Archives, in Zaporizhia, Ukraine. Delbert described his acquisition of these scans and wrote a brief introduction to the material in an article published in *Preservings*, #13 (December, 1998), p. 57. The original documents containing these lists are found in the Zaporizhia Archives in Fond 1, Inventory 1, File 752. Delbert Plett had the documents found in the scans translated from Russian circa 1999 by someone named Natasha in Winnipeg, Manitoba. In 2000 Delbert shared with me a copy of the translation. Unfortunately, Delbert had misplaced the scans of the documents by that time. I have made attempts to obtain duplicate scans from the Zaporizhia Archives since then in order to verify that the material was correctly translated, but I have not been able to obtain them. Therefore, it is difficult to know if the errors in the accompanying census data for these two villages are errors made by the translator or errors in the original documents.

Fortunately, Andrey Ivanov independently translated the census data for the first twenty-five families listed in the 1858 Census for the village of Heuboden circa 1999 during a visit to the Zaporizhia Archives. A copy of his translation was given to the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Fresno, California and is on file there. I was able to compare the two translations and made note of the discrepancies. The census data in the accompanying pages for these 25 families is the data that reflects what I believe is likely found in the original census documents since a comparison of the two translations reveals that both Natasha and Andrey made some errors in their translation of this material. Andrey’s translation of the census data for Heuboden notes that the census was compiled on April 8, 1858. Presumably the census data for the other villages was compiled approximately the same time.

In 2001 or 2002 Delbert Plett received from Aleksandr Tedeev a transcription in Russian of the 1858 Bergthal Colony Revision List (Census) documents for the villages of Bergthal and Schoenfeld. Aleksandr Tedeev reportedly made the transcription after reviewing the census documents pertaining to these two villages in the Donetsk Archives in Donetsk, Ukraine. The fond, inventory, and file number in the Donetsk Archives for the file from which this information was transcribed is uncertain at this time. In 2002 Delbert shared a copy of the transcription with me. Delbert and I had plans to jointly publish all of this census data in *Preservings*, but his untimely death in 2004 prevented us from following through with those plans. Over the past several years I translated the transcription of the census data for these two villages into English. I have attempted to retain the format of the data as it appears in the transcription as much as feasible.

I have inserted some information in brackets that are corrections to the census data. The information in brackets follows names or ages that I believe to be incorrect based on other sources, principally the 1843-1876 *Bergthal Gemeinde Buch*, a transcription of which was published in 1993 by the Hanover Steinbach Historical Society. For reference, I have added columns in the table for the page number (or numbers) in the 1843-1876 *Bergthal Gemeinde Buch* where the family is listed and have also added the record index number in the GRANDMA Mennonite genealogy database as published by the California Mennonite Historical Society in 2006 in the GRANDMA 5 CD.

It should also be noted that the patronymic names for the wives found in the census data are generally given but their maiden names are not given. Thus the male given name that follows the wife’s given name is the given name of her father. This practice was customary for wives listed in the 1850 and 1858 Russian revision lists.

The 1858 Bergthal Colony Revision List (Census) documents for the village of Schoenthal have not been located up to this point in time. The 1850 Bergthal Colony Revision List (Census) documents have also not been located, although some extractions from the 1850 Bergthal Colony Revision List have been found (see *Preservings* 29: 80).

At total of 1094 living people are recorded in the census in the four villages for which data is available. Bergthal, the oldest of the villages in that it was established in 1836, had the largest population with a total of 399 people listed. Schoenfeld, which was established in 1837, had a total of 329 people listed. Heuboden, which was established in 1839, had a total of 270 people listed. Friedrichsthal, which was established 6 years before the census was compiled, had a total of 96 people listed.

This census data is helpful from a genealogical perspective because it supplements other available sources pertaining to the Bergthal Colony, the most significant of which is the 1843-1876 *Bergthal Gemeinde Buch*. Unfortunately, no locations are given in the *Bergthal Gemeinde Buch* for the events recorded in that source. Thus the locations provided in this census are of significant interest in that they indicate where the families were in all probability living in 1858. Also of interest are the names of the fathers of the wives listed in the census. In some cases the names of the wives’ fathers are not recorded in the *Bergthal Gemeinde Buch* or in any other available sources.

I am grateful to Delbert Plett for having acquired this material and for his dedication to translating and publishing Mennonite historical and genealogical resources. Hopefully, the information found in this census will help enrich the lives of those people who are descendents of the Bergthal Colony Mennonites and will give us better appreciation of the lives and times of the Mennonites who lived in this important colony.
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**village of Bergthal**

| A4 | 7648 | 1 | 1 Gerhard Abraham Janzen | 44 | 52 | his daughters: Margaretha | 23 |
| | | | | | | Johann | 17 | 23 | Maria | 15 |
| | | | | | | Abraham | 13 | 21 | |
| | | | | | | Jacob | 11 | 19 | |
| | | | | | | Cornelius | 5 | 13 | |
| | | | | | | Heinrich | 3 | 11 | |

| A3 | 185528 | 2 | 2 Peter Martin Friesen | 37 | 45 | Peter Martin's wife: Anna Cornelius | 47 |
| | | | | | | Cornelia's son: Peter | 16 | 23 | his daughters: Sara | 19 |
| | | | | | | | Peter Martin's second son: Peter | b. in 1857 | 7 | 15 | Helena | 14 |
| | | | | | | | Peter Martin's third son: Martin | 3 | 11 | Cornelius Peter's wife: Anna Peter | 24 |
| | | | | | | | his fourth son: Johann | 1 | 9 | |
| | | | | | | | his fifth son: Heinrich | b. in 1851 | 7 | |

| A19, B12 | 69722 | 3 | 3 Wilhelm Wilhelm Rempel | 38 | 46 | Wilhelm Wilhelm's wife: Katharina Dirk | 45 |
| | | | | | | Wilhelm's sons: Wilhelm | 19 | 24 | |
| | | | | | | | Dirk | 1 | 19 | Agatha | 7 |

| A5 | 56647 | 4 | 4 Bernhard Gerhard Penner | 45 d. in 1854 | 26 | Bernhard Gerhard's daughters: Sara | 14 |
| | | | | | | Bernhard Gerhard's first son: Bernhard | 16 | 24 | Katharina | 10 |
| | | | | | | | Bernhard's second son: Gerhard | 13 | 21 | Bernhard Bernhard's wife: Katharina Jacob | 22 |
| | | | | | | | | his first daughter: Helena | 1 | |

| A6 | 146154 | 5 | 5 Heinrich David Falk | 51 | 59 | Heinrich David's wife: Anna Johann | 59 |
| | | | | | | Heinrich David's first son by his first wife: David | 30 | 38 | his daughter by his first wife: Helena | 21 |
| | | | | | | | Gerhard | 2 | 10 | David Heinrich's wife: Katharina Gerhard | 34 |
| | | | | | | | Heinrich | 1 | 9 | his daughters: Katharina | 13 |
| | | | | | | | Peter | b. in 1852 | 6 | 24 | Maria | 3 |
| | | | | | | | Heinrich David's second son: Heinrich | b. in 1856 | 2 | 33 | Peter Heinrich's wife: Helena Peter | 27 |
| | | | | | | | Heinrich David's third son: Peter | 24 | 32 | his daughters: Helena | 7 |
| | | | | | | | Peter Heinrich's son: Heinrich | b. in 1853 | 5 | Katharina | 3 |
| | | | | | | | Heinrich David's fourth son: Jacob | 20 | 28 | Jacob Heinrich's wife: Maria Jacob | 26 |
| | | | | | | | Jacob Heinrich's son: Jacob | b. in 1856 | 2 | his daughter: Maria | 4 |
| | | | | | | | Heinrich David's fifth son: Abram | 16 | 24 | Abram Heinrich's wife: Katharina Cornelius | 24 |
| | | | | | | | | his daughters: Maria | 2 | |
| | | | | | | | | Heinrich David's sixth son: Wilhelm | 10 | 18 | Katharina | 2 |

| A7 | 111142 | 6 | 6 David David Falk | 40 | 48 | David David's wife: Katharina Peter | 47 |
| | | | | | | David David's first son: David | 19 | 27 | his daughters: Anna | 21 |
| | | | | | | David David's son: David | b. in 1855 | 3 | Helen | 10 |
| | | | | | | David David's second son: Heinrich | 16 d. in 1852 | 2 | Sara | 24 |
| | | | | | | | his third son: Peter | 5 | 13 | David David's wife: Katharina Peter | 24 |
| | | | | | | | | his fourth son: Abram | 2 d. in 1852 | 7 | |
| | | | | | | | | his fifth son: Jacob | b. in 1851 | 7 | |

| A9 | 219645 | 7 | 7 Johann Peter Funk | 46 | 54 | Johann Peter's wife: Anna Jacob | 53 |
| | | | | | | Johann Peter's first son: Johann | 21 | 29 | his daughter: Elisabeth | 19 |
| | | | | | | Johann Peter's son: Johann | b. in 1853 | 5 | Johann Peter's wife: Gertrude Bernhard | 25 |
| | | | | | | Bernhard | 1 | his daughter: Peter | 1 |
| | | | | | | Johann Peter's second son: Jacob | 16 | 24 | Jacob Johann's wife: Sara Abram | 22 |
| | | | | | | | | his daughter: Margaretha | 1 | |

| A8, B11 | 176689 | 8 | 8 David David Dreger | 29 d. in 1855 | 3 | David David's daughter: Agatha | 10 |
| | | | | | | David David's son: David | b. in 1854 | 4 | his sisters: Justina | 21 |
| | | | | | | David David's brother: Johann David | 24 | 32 | Maria | 18 |
| | | | | | | Johann David's son: Johann | b. in 1852 | 6 | David David's wife: Katharina Johann | 36 |
| | | | | | | | | his daughters: Anna | 8 | Maria | 3 |

| A28 | 176630 | 9 | 9 data missing [Wilhelm David Falk] | 18 | 11 | Wilhelm David's daughter: Margaretha | 18 |

| A24 | 197025 | 10 | 10 Philipp Michael Keffer | 42 | 50 | Philipp Michael's wife: Helena Aron | 50 |
| | | | | | | Philipp Michael's first son: Aron | 20 | 28 | his daughter: Helena | 20 |
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| | | | | | | Philipp Michael's third son: Johann | 8 | 16 | Johann Michael's wife: Helene Martin | 21 |
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| | | | | | | Philipp Michael's brother: Jacob Michael Keffer | 38 | 46 | |
| | | | | | | | Jacob Michael's sons: Jacob | 26 | 36 | |
| | | | | | | | Johann | 6 | 14 | |
| | | | | | | | Martin | 3 | 11 | |
| | | | | | | | Peter | b. in 1854 | 4 | |

<p>| A20, B55 | 146134 | 11 | 11 Johann Johann Leike | 25 d. in 1851 | 20 | Johann Johann's sisters: Elisabeth | 18 |
| | | | | | | Johann Johann's brother: Abraham Johann | 20 d. in 1851 | 12 | Helena | 12 |</p>
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<td>Heinrich</td>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>2 daughters</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Peter's sons: Gerhard Peter</td>
<td>1856</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>2 daughters</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peter's sons: Abraham Peter</td>
<td>1856</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>2 daughters</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peter's third son: Heinrich Jacob</td>
<td>1856</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>2 daughters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Preservings No. 30, 2010 - 79
| Preservings No. 30, 2010 - 81 |

| Village of Schoenfeld |

**A100** 69740 33 **transferred from Nieder-Chortitza, Chortitza Colony, Alexandrovsk District, Ekaterinoslav Province:**
- Abram Abraham Friesen 42
- Abram Abraham's sons: Abram 19
- Johann 17
- Aron 10
- Peter b. in 1851 3
- Jacob b. in 1855 1

**A11a** 7662 34 **transferred in 1852 from Schoenwiese, Chortitza Colony, Alexandrovsk District, Ekaterinoslav Province:**
- Jacob Jacob Harder 46
- Jacob Jacob's sons: Abram 15
- Heinrich 13
- David 11

**A152** 266286 35 **transferred in 1852 from Neuenendorf, Chortitza Colony, Alexandrovsk District, Ekaterinoslav Province:**
- Johann Johann Löwen 41
- Johann Johann's sons: Johann 16
- Jacob 10
- Margaretha 13
- Katharina 1

**A56** 146159 36 **transferred in 1852 from Kronsthal, Chortitza Colony, Alexandrovsk District, Ekaterinoslav Province:**
- Johann Johann Schroeder 50
- Johann Johann's sons: Aron 25
- Johann 16
- Abram 13
- Gerhard 12
- Peter b. in 1851 7

**A140** 266757 37 **transferred in 1853 from Hückeckau, Molotschna Colony, Berdyansk District, Taurida Province:**
- Daniel Abraham Enns 31
- Daniel Abraham's wife: Anna David 45

| Total number of men: 215 |
| Total number of women: 184 |

**A48** 70202 1 1 **Gerhard Isbrand Wiebe 49**
- Gerhard Isbrand's first son: Gerhard 22
- Gerhard Isbrand's sons: Johann b. in 1853 5
- Gerhard 16
- Johann 13
- Gerhard 12
- Isbrand b. in 1857 1
- Gerhard Isbrand's second son: Johann 20
- Gerhard Isbrand's sons: Johann b. in 1855 3
- Gerhard 13
- Gerhard Isbrand's third son: Heinrich 10
- 1

**A30** 196307 2 2 **Jacob Jacob Derksen 45**
- Jacob Jacob's sons: Jacob 22
- Jacob Jacob's sons: Franz 20
- Jacob Jacob's sons: David 5
- Jacob Jacob's sons: Abram 2 d. in 1857 2

**A31** 69943 3 3 **Jacob Anton Heppner 56**
- Jacob Anton's first son: Jacob 37
- Jacob Anton's second son: Jacob 32
- Dirk Jacob's sons: Cornelius 6
- Dirk 14
- Johann 10
- Jacob b. in 1852 6
- Peter b. in 1855 3
- Johann b. in 1857 1
- Jacob Anton's third son: Anton 20 d. in 1851
- Anton 1 d. in 1852 1
- Anton b. in 1851 7
- Jacob Anton's fourth son: Johann 27
- Johann b. in 1851 7
- Jacob Anton's fifth son: Peter 23

**A47** 185458 4 4 **Dirk Dirk Teews 43**
- Dirk Dirk's sons: Dirk 20
- Dirk Dirk's sons: Johann 13
- Peter 11
- Jacob b. in 1852 6

**A34** 220327 5 5 **Franz Abram Harder 45**
- Franz Abram's first son: Franz 20

Preservings No. 30, 2010 - 81
| A55 66806 | 6 | Bernhard Bernhard Dyck | 44 | 52 | Bernhard Bernhard's wife: Anganetha Franz | 49  
|          |   | Bernhard Bernhard's first son: Bernhard | 20 | 28 | his daughters: Maria | 16  
|          |   | Bernhard Bernhard's second son: Isaac | 17 | 25 | Anna | 11  
|          |   | Isaac Bernhard's son: Isaac | b. in 1857 | 1 | Bernhard Bernhard's wife: Anganetha Gerhard | 24  
|          |   | Bernhard Bernhard's second son: Franz | 15 | 23 | his daughters: Aganetha | 7  
|          |   | Bernhard Bernhard's fourth son: Cornelius | 10 | 18 | Agatha | 5  
|          |   | his fifth son: Peter | 6 | 14 | Isaac Bernhard's wife: Katharina Bernhard | 35  
|          |   | Franz Bernhard's wife: Maria Johann | 20 |   | his daughter: Maria | 1  
| A42, B21 18666 | 7 | Jacob Jacob Derksen | 45 | 53 | Jacob Jacob's wife: Sara Jacob | 52  
|          |   | Jacob Jacob's first son: Jacob | 21 | 23 | (28) his daughters: Katharina | 23  
|          |   | Jacob Jacob's sons: Jacob b. in 1856 (1855) | 2 | 2 | Sara | 19  
|          |   | Jacob Jacob's sons: Jacob b. in 1857 | 2 | 2 | [1] Anna | 16  
|          |   | Jacob Jacob's second son: Johann | 17 | 25 | Jacob Jacob's wife: Anna Heinrich | 25  
|          |   | Johann Jacob's son: Johann b. in 1853 | 5 | 5 | Johann Jacob's wife: Elisabeth Aron | 3  
|          |   | Jacob Jacob's third son: Abraham | 13 | 21 |   |  
|          |   | his fourth son: Heinrich | 6 | 14 |   |  
|          |   | his fifth son: Abram | 2 | 2 |   |  
| A53 109067 | 8 | Gerhard Jacob Wall | 48 | 56 | Gerhard Jacob's wife: Helena Abraham | 51  
|          |   | Gerhard Jacob's first son by his first wife: Gerhard | 18 | 26 | his daughter by his first wife: Eleonora | 19  
|          |   | Gerhard Jacob's second son: Johann | 13 | 21 | Gerhard Gerhard's wife: Katharina Johann | 21  
|          |   | Gerhard Jacob's third son: Jacob | 7 | 15 | his daughter: Katharina | 1  
|          |   | Johann Gerhard's wife: Helena Johann | 19 |   |   |  
| A35 186853 | 9 | Peter Peter Funk | 44 | 52 | Peter Peter's wife: Helena Johann | 51  
|          |   | Peter Peter's first son: Peter | 16 | 24 | his daughters: Anganetha | 22  
|          |   | Peter Peter's second son: Johann | 12 | 20 | Margaretha | 9  
|          |   | his third son: Jacob | 9 | 17 | Peter Peter's wife: Maria Klaas | 22  
|          |   | his fourth son: Abram | 6 | 14 | his daughter: Helena | 1  
| A37, B103 21740 | 10 | Jacob Peter Heinrichs | 20 | 28 | Peter Ut's daughters: Katharina | 15  
|          |   | Jacob Peter's first brother: Peter Peter | 18 | 26 | Anna | 9  
|          |   | Peter Peter's son: Jacob b. in 1857 | 1 | 1 | Jacob Peter's wife: Maria Wilhelm | 25  
|          |   | Jacob Peter's second brother: Johann Peter | 15 | 23 | his daughters: Helena | 3  
|          |   | Jacob Peter's third brother: Heinrich Peter | 12 | 20 | Maria | 1  
|          |   | his fourth brother: Cornelius | 3 | 11 | Peter Peter's wife: Barbara Dirk | 23  
|          |   | his fifth brother: Abram 1 d. in 1853 Heinrich Peter's wife: Susanna Johann | 20 | 20 | his daughter: Katharina | 1  
| A38 109113 | 11 | Johann Johann Groening | 42 | 50 | Johann Johann's wife: Helena Peter | 43  
|          |   | Johann Johann's sons: Johann | 10 | 18 | his daughter: Maria | 2  
|          |   | Peter | 8 | 16 |   |  
|          |   | Cornelius | 5 | 13 |   |  
|          |   | Heinrich | 3 | 11 |   |  
|          |   | Abram b. in 1852 | 6 | 6 |   |  
|          |   | Jacob b. in 1854 | 4 | 4 |   |  
|          |   | Franz b. in 1858 | 1 | 1 |   |  
| A43 176620 | 12 | Cornelius Peter Epps | 46 | 54 | Cornelius Peter's wife: Maria Peter | 56  
|          |   | Cornelius Peter's sons: Cornelius | 12 | 20 | his daughters: Helena | 15  
|          |   | Peter | 9 | 17 | Agatha | 13  
| A49 186873 | 13 | Abraham Johann Hebert | 50 | 58 | Abraham Johann's wife: Helena Franz | 55  
|          |   | Abraham Johann's first son: Abraham | 26 | 34 | his daughters: Susanna | 22  
|          |   | Abraham Abraham's sons: Jacob | 1 d. in 1857 | 16 | Maria | 16  
|          |   | Abraham | b. in 1857 | 1 | Abraham Abraham's wife: Katharina Jacob | 31  
|          |   | Abraham Johann's second son: Johann | 21 | 29 | his daughters: Helena | 11  
|          |   | Abraham Abraham's sons: Peter b. in 1853 | 5 | 5 | Katharina | 6  
|          |   | Abraham b. in 1855 | 3 | 3 | Johann Abraham's wife: Helena Peter | 28  
|          |   | Abraham Johann's third son: Jacob | 16 | 24 | his daughter: Helena | 6  
|          |   | Jacob Abraham's wife: Anganetha Bernhard | 21 |   | his daughter: Anganetha | 1  
| A36 69418 | 14 | Jacob Abraham Friesen | 48 | 56 | Jacob Abraham's wife: Helena Peter | 50  
|          |   | Jacob Abraham's sons: Jacob | 16 | 24 | his daughters: Anganetha | 13  
|          |   | Abraham | 10 | 18 | Maria | 10  
|          |   | Heinrich | 7 | 7 |   |  
| A51 176723 | 15 | Abraham Abraham Dyck | 40 | 40 | d. in 1851 Abraham Abraham's daughters: Katharina | 21  
|          |   | Abraham Abraham's sons: Gerhard Johann | 5 | 13 | Maria | 10  
|          |   | Johann | 5 | 13 |   |  
| A32 185211 | 16 | Johann Johann Krahm | 14 | 22 | Johann Johann's sister: Anganetha Johann | 16  
|          |   | Johann Johann's brothers: Wilhelm | 8 | 16 |   |  
|          |   | Abraham | 6 | 14 |   |  
| A50 186286 | 17 | Gerhard Gerhard Kehler | 44 | 49 | Gerhard Gerhard's wife: Agatha Peter | 44  
|          |   | Gerhard Gerhard's first son: Peter | 14 | 22 | his daughters: Agatha | 18  
|          |   | Gerhard Gerhard's second son: Gerhard | 8 | 16 | Anna | 13  
|          |   | Gerhard Gerhard's third son: Jacob | 3 | 11 | Sara | 10  

82 - Preservings No. 30, 2010
<p>| Preservings No. 30, 2010 - 83 |
| A103 186937 | 1 Peter Cornelius Epp | d. in 1852, age 44 |
| A112 177725 | 5 Peter Peter Krause | his son: Johann |
| A116 177852 | 2 Cornelius Peter Peters | his son by his first wife: Peter |
| A120 180814 | 19 Johann Peter Reimer | his wife: Helena Jacob |
| A126 221031 | 14 Peter Bernhard Klippenstein | his wife: Anganetha Jacob |
| A129 104309 | 7 Peter Julius Toews | his wife: Agatha Abraham |
| A130 180814 | 19 Johann Peter Reimer | his daughter: Helena Jacob |
| A131 176537 | 15 Peter Philip Dyck | d. in 1853, age 47 |
| A132 265933 | 16 Peter Johann Rempel | his wife: Margaretha Johann |
| A133 266311 | 17 Peter Peter Elias | his wife: Margaretha Johann |
| A166 184622 | 29 transferred in 1852 from Schoenhorst: |
| A166 184622 | Abraham Johann Friesen | b. in 1852 |
| A166 184622 | Abraham Johann's son: Johann | 6 his daughters: Maria |
| A166 184622 | Abraham | b. in 1852 |
| A166 184622 | transferred in 1852 from Schoenhorst: |
| A58 54034 | 31 transferred in 1853 from Tiegenwiede, Molotschna Colony, Berdiansk District, Taurida Province: |
| A58 54034 | Johann Peter Abrams | d. in 1856 |
| A58 54034 | Johann Peter's first son: Johann | 29 his daughters: Anna |
| A58 54034 | Johann Johann's son: Johann | 6 Eva |
| A58 54034 | transferred in 1857 with his father: |
| A58 54034 | Johann Peter's second son: Jacob | 29 his daughters: Maria |
| A58 54034 | Johann Peter's daughter Anna's illegitimate son: | 1 Katharina |
| A58 54034 | Abraham Johann | 7 his daughters: Helena |
| Total number of men: 163 | | Total number of women: 166 |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preservings No. 30, 2010 - 85</th>
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<tr>
<td>Dirk Thomas' son: Peter</td>
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<td>Peter Dirk's sons: Dirk</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Johann</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aron           d. in 1855, age 9</td>
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<td>Nikolai</td>
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<td>Peter Dirk's son: Peter</td>
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<td>Johann Peter Rempel</td>
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<td>his son by his first wife: Franz</td>
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<td>Johann</td>
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<td>Jacob Gerhard Klassen</td>
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<td>his sons: Jacob</td>
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<td>Gerhard</td>
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<td>Franz</td>
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<td>David</td>
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<td>Jacob</td>
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<td>Jacob Gerhard Klassen</td>
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<td>Jacob Gerhard Klassen</td>
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<td>his sons: Jacob</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gerhard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Village of Friedrichsthal

**Total number of men:** 149  
**Total number of women:** 121

#### Franz Wilhelm Giesbrecht

- **Father:** Johann  
- **Year of Birth:** 1865  
- **Daughters:**  
- **Son:** Gerhard

#### Jacob Wilhelm Giesbrecht

- **Father:** Johann  
- **Year of Birth:** 1865  
- **Daughters:**  
- **Son:** Gerhard

#### Heinrich Heinrich Weins

- **Father:** Jacob  
- **Year of Birth:** 1865  
- **Daughters:**  
- **Son:** Gerhard

#### Johann Abram Peters

- **Father:** Johann  
- **Year of Birth:** 1865  
- **Daughters:**  
- **Son:** Gerhard

#### Bernhard Heinrich Wiebe

- **Father:** Jacob  
- **Year of Birth:** 1865  
- **Daughters:**  
- **Son:** Gerhard

#### Abraham Johann Flaming

- **Father:** Jacob  
- **Year of Birth:** 1865  
- **Daughters:**  
- **Son:** Gerhard

#### Andreas Johann Flaming

- **Father:** Jacob  
- **Year of Birth:** 1865  
- **Daughters:**  
- **Son:** Gerhard
A Grandson Remembers Cornelius A. Ens,

Alvin G. Ens, Abbotsford, B.C.

Homesteading

Cornelius A. Ens, merchant, farmer and clockmaker, was born Feb. 25, 1884, in Olgafeld, Fuerstenland colony in Russia (Ukraine) to Abram Ens and Elizabeth Redekop. He was the fourth child in a family of twelve. As a boy of fifteen he emigrated with his parents and family to Blumenort near Gretna, Manitoba where they lived briefly before moving to Hague, Saskatchewan.

Cornelius became a teacher, and in typical fashion of the time, rotated from home to home for his lodging. He also took out a homestead across the river. He paid $10 to register his first claim, SE 4-39-1-W of 3 (near Vonda) in June 13, 1902. In November, 1903, the claims office records that he wrote, “my father being an old man, I stayed with him to help on the farm in Manitoba, but I have now come up here with the intention of remaining and fulfilling my homestead duties.” On Feb. 12, 1904, he wrote, “lack of means and having no horses or plough has prevented me breaking any land, but during the summer I hope to have a house built and some land broken.” The claim was cancelled June, 1904. (I don’t understand the father issue because his father, Abram Ens, died in 1900. Was he referring to his stepfather? His mother remarried in March 3, 1901, to Abraham Schmidt.)

The Hague-Osler Reserve had twice been enlarged, once southward (August, 1898) to include a corner across the South Saskatchewan River at Aberdeen.2 Here Jacob Unrau with a widowed wife and family, founded a village named Edenburg, a mile south of the new CPR rail line in 1902. Unrau first homesteaded in Manitoba. The records show that he homesteaded on “N E 9-1-2-W of 1,” near Gretna, in May 15, 1883 and sold the property in 1902. In 1902 he moved west to found Edenburg in Saskatchewan (North West Territories, at that time), near Aberdeen.

Leonard Doell records further:

Age 49 in 1905
wife – 7 children
obtained entry Apr. 8, 1902
lives on land purchased from RR Co. on whole 15-39-3-3
became owner Mar. 1, 1902
built house frame 26 x 20, stable barn = $1500.00
sold 240 acres of total section in 1902
1902 – broke 10, cropped 10
1903 – broke 10, cropped 20
1904 – broke 10, cropped 30
1905 – 8 horses, 10 cattle. "

Unrau homesteaded the NW quarter of 14-39-3-W but purchased the section 15-39-3-3W to found the village. In typical Russian Mennonite village style, Unrau settled a number of his married children in strip lots of 40 acres along the north side of the road. In 1904 Cornelius Ens married Anna Unrau, Jacob Unrau’s daughter (May 20, 1885 - June 16, 1913). He was aged 20 and she 19. Jacob Unrau built Cornelius and Anna a house, with attached barn, that was to be Cornelius’s home until he died. He had five children with Anna before she died in childbirth.

Cornelius Ens tried homesteading again in 1905 on SW16-39-3-3W though he had no residency on the property, but lived in Edenburg. Apparently he must have come into some wealth because homestead records show that he cropped 30 acres in 1905, broke another 75 in 1906 and by 1907 was cropping 105 acres. He also built a house 20’ x 26’ for $135, a barn 24’ x 26’ for $150, and a granary 12’ x 24’ for $95. All the buildings were constructed of lumber. He also dug two wells for $40. He became a Canadian citizen on Feb. 22, 1908 and was granted title to his homestead on April 25, 1910.5

In 1915, two years after the death of his wife Anna, Cornelius Ens married Helena Fehr (February 23, 1890 –July 23, 1966) with whom he had six children. Cornelius was an entrepreneur, and though the farm was a mainstay, he left farming to hired hands and sons while he did other things. With the aid of a dictionary, he taught himself enough English to be called upon for assistance in dealing with English businesses or government. He ordered and regularly brought supplies for the small community. Later he built a store.

Cornelius Ens turned his hand to other enterprises. He bought a grinder and stationary engine to grind grain for people. He bought a steam engine and ran the Unrau threshing machine for a month or two each fall. He had one of the first trucks in the village. He engraved names on Bibles. He dabbled with photography. Already in his youth he loved to repair pocket watches and became the village clockmaker.

Cornelius was, for years, a Vorsaenger in the village’s Old Colony church. The village of Edenburg had its own Mennonite school, taught in German, and the village children did not attend the closest “English” school. After provincial inspectors found the school inadequate, Ens was fined several times in the late 1910’s and early 1920’s before he relented and sent his...
children to the public school. The records of the provincial
school two miles north, called River Park, show that his chil-
dren, Abram and Annie, first attended in 1920.6

Cornelius Ens brought entrepreneurship, progress and some
contact with the larger community to the little conservative
village. That he loved culture and refinement is seen in the
fact that as a young man he brought into the village a violin.
(Gerhard Rempel, Winkler, once wrote me “His father, Abram
Ens, also had been a good violinist.”)

I remember Cornelius Ens as a diabetic who had a small
kitchen scale on which he carefully weighed all his food.

The Village Store

In 1918 Ens built a small store and later a much larger one
near the road. The small store was demoted to a storage shed
for flour and other staples he might bring to sell, and in the days
I remember it, it was called simply the flour shed. His supplies
came from Hague, Rosthern and Saskatoon. He sold lamp
wicks, kerosene, Bibles, hymn books, flour and other staples.

Grandpa Ens minted his own coins for his store in the days
when he bought local produce. My parents sold him eggs and
butter. Others might bring him a gallon jug that had been
used for vinegar for canning or for kerosene for their lamps.
He, in turn, gave credit at his store. The coins soon traded up
and down the South Saskatchewan River Valley as readily as
Dominion of Canada currency did, so good was his reputa-
tion. “C.A. Ens, General Merchant, Aberdeen. Sask,” read the
coins. On the back it said, “Good for 50¢ in merchandise” or
10 or 25 or 1.00. The octagonal coins were still in his store
when the Dyck brothers, Abe and Jake, bought the store in
the early 1950’s.

On the front stoop of the store Ens kept gallon jugs until he
needed them for some sale. The story is told that he once no-
ticed that a local boy was bringing in jugs fairly often, perhaps
grandpa’s own jugs from the stoop. He marked the bottom of
every jug and waited. He caught the culprit soon after.

The new store was a linear building with a counter to the
left behind which grandpa stood or sat. At either end of the
counter was a huge roll of paper for wrapping merchandise
before the advent of paper bags. Dangling from the ceiling
through a series of hooks and eyes was a string used to tie the
bundled merchandise much as tape might be used today. The
store served also as the village post office.

What did he sell in a village whose residents were self-
sufficient on the land? He sold flour, salt, sugar and vinegar.
He sold Okanagan apples, axes, forks, rivets for harness-
making, coal oil for lamps, nails, fabric, thread, needles, tobacco,
matches, and cigarette papers. At Christmas time there was a
whole array of oriental oranges, peanuts, nuts and Halvah. In
1941 my mother’s ledger records my parents’ purchases: tins
of sardines, yeast cakes, coffee, L. Soap, oranges, toothpicks,
candy, rolled oats, rice, iodized salt, adhesive tape, corn starch,
sealer rings, shoes, shoe strings [laces?], flannel, cigarette
lighter, baby powder, insect powder, buttons and more.7

Kroeger Clocks

I watched in awe as my grandfather unscrewed the back of
a pocket watch to reveal a hair-like spring oscillating its way
to the tick tock of the watch. It was grandpa’s avocation turned
vocation. When he became the general merchant of Edenburg,
he became the clock repairman. In the store he had a drawer of
his tools: fine screwdrivers, chisel-like tools to pry with, files,
etc. A customer might bring him a watch that wasn’t working
for him to fix.

I remember him, in his later days, in a shed built onto his
house in which he had one wall dedicated to his hobby of
making Kroeger clocks. As I understand, Kroeger clocks were
made by a famous Kroeger family in Prussia. The skills went to
Russia with the Mennonite migrations to the Russian colonies.
My grandfather was fifteen when he immigrated into Canada.
How he became skilled in clock repairing I do not know.

My brother, Dennis, tells the following story. One day
someone brought grandpa a Kroeger clock. It took him a long
time to repair it. Rumour has it that thereafter he started to
make Kroeger clocks. Perhaps he took the clock apart piece by
piece to get his pattern. I remember he made the clocks from
scratch. The sprockets were sawed and filed by hand. The chain
was made by shaping wire into links. The face was made and
painted in his workshop.

He made nine clocks, presumably one for each of his
children. When his own clock stopped in 1960, grandpa was
My Grandfather Peter Wiebe was only four years old when his father died and fifteen when his first step-father also died. Although Grandfather became a successful farmer in Reinfeld Manitoba I wondered about the financial implications of those early deaths. No documentation existed in Manitoba that could clarify what happened but in early 1990s travels to the Mennonite Colonies at Cuauhtemoc in Mexico I made inquiries about the Waisenamt. This Institution was then and still is a functioning continuation of the Waisenamt that existed in Manitoba serving the Reinhaender (Old Colony) Mennonite Gemeinde from 1875 till its relocation to Mexico in 1925. The Waisenvorsteher were most helpful in allowing me to browse the records and borrow relevant ones for more in-depth research during my stay. During many subsequent trips I continued my research and advocated in Manitoba that the entire collection should be copied for preservation and thereby made available in Canada. Cost considerations and the sheer size of the project with the available technology, photocopying made it difficult. However, the development of digital photography and adaptation for use in preserving documents opened new possibilities and the approval by the D F Plett Historical Research Foundation of a Grant to cover expenses allowed it to become reality. I spent February 2009 at Cuauhtemoc photographing documents pertaining to the time period in Canada, a total of 17,550 images.

The Waisenamt kept meticulous records in duplicate of all financial transactions arising from its administration of the inheritance regulations. These Regulations specified in detail how estates were to be divided and anticipated all possible scenarios. After the death of a spouse a listing of assets (Aufnahme) was made and subsequently an agreement concluded dividing same (Teilungs Kontrakt). Until they reached the age of majority inheritances of minor children were deposited in the Waisenamt. The pool of funds that accumulated was then available as loans to other church members. At various times deposits not related to estates were also accepted. Interest was paid on deposited funds and charged on loans with calculations done annually.

What I found in these records concerning my Grandfather’s inheritance provided a great deal of information about my Wiebe family circumstances. After the death of his father Peter Wiebe Senior a listing of the family assets was made at Reinfeld on October 19, 1897. The 160 acre property including the buildings in the village was valued at $1,900.00 but this included an allowance of $300.00 for grain. Four horses and one foal were worth $150.00, a plough $35.00, the household furnishings $50.00. The total of all items listed was $2,333.00. Cash outstanding/receivable was another $85.00.

Not only did I now know what the family circumstances were, but from this document and comparing to others of that time one knew what land, animals, and farm equipment were worth at that point in history. January 12, 1898 the division of the estate was agreed to in writing wherein his mother Sara Wiebe promised each of her three children $402.00 and that she would deposit this sum into the Waisenamt by January 1st, 1900.

Now I knew what Grandfather inherited after the death of his father! The total of $1,206.00 belonging to the three heirs was deposited as one lump sum by the date specified and
Teilungskontrakts 1897 -1911. Image 3894. All of the images are from the collection of images of Waisanamt records photographed by the author in Mexico.

thereafter five percent interest was calculated and compounded annually. A record of all entries was kept on a page in the ledger showing the capital belonging to the heirs (Kapitalbuch). However, besides interest addition, in 1909 there was a deposit made of $12.35 forwarded from Russia from the estate of an unnamed relative. From other sources we know that this came from Grandfather’s deceased great-aunt Katharina nee Koop. So precise were Waisenamt regulations that the estate in Russia of the twice married sister of a grandmother would be distributed justly to all those entitled, even minor age fatherless children in Canada whose portion was forwarded to the Waisenamt at Hochfeld in Manitoba.

Upon majority in 1914 grandfather was eligible to receive his full inheritance but only withdrew it prior to his marriage in 1918, when he received $967.75.

Similar information existed in the records after the 1892 death at Hochfeld of his Grandmother Maria Wiebe, wife of Reverend Abraham Wiebe. The Waisenamt was requested to organize an auction sale for his grandfather Abraham and this sale took place on March 19, 1892 with the Waisenvorsteher taking responsibility. Each purchaser and his village of residence was recorded along with each item sold and it’s price. Jacob Fehr of Reinland paid $21.00 for a horse while another sold to Peter Knelsen of Friedensruh for $125.00. A wheel
barrow, a feed trough, and a baby crib were each worth $1.00. Total proceeds were $465.05.

Of this amount $398.28 was deposited to the credit of the now retired Abraham Wiebe in the Capital book to which he added another $1,500.00 from Peter Elias who purchased the land and buildings privately. From this account Abraham made periodic cash withdrawals for living expenses until his own death 8 years later.

He had also obtained credit from the Waisenamt beginning in 1879 and this was recorded in the ledger of debts (Schuldbuch). These were not cash loans but dollar transfers between his and other accounts. That year his $38.94 purchase at an Auction sale in Hochfeld and his assuming $16.73 of the debt of Cornelius Peters of Rosenort was followed by his repaying $1.60 in cash and transferring $38.94 of his own debt to Jacob Heinrichs.

Thanks to the record keeping of the Waisenvorsteher and the preservation of the ledgers and other documents by their successors in Mexico we today have comprehensive inheritance and financial information available about our families and a resource to consult for asset valuations.
From the Outside In

Helen Khodchenko, Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine

Ukraine was the home for Mennonites for more than hundred years and left an indelible trace on their historical path. Today, interest in the Mennonite historical past is increasing in the scholarly environment and among the Ukrainian public. On the campus of the Dnepropetrovsk National University there is an Institute of Ukrainian-German Studies which conducts research into Mennonite history.

My name is Helen Khodchenko, and I am a post-graduate student at the Dnepropetrovsk National University. My work deals with reconstructing the lives of the first Mennonite immigrants to North America. With the help of comparative methodology, I am comparing the adaptation processes of all Mennonite groups in Canada and the USA (1874-1923). I also study the specifics of mutual relations between Mennonites and their new environment and the features of their preservation of ethno-confessional identity.

Due to funding provided by the D.F. Plett Historical Foundation, Inc., I had the opportunity to work not only with documents of the Canadian government, but also to become acquainted with the modern life of the Mennonite communities in Canada during my stay in Winnipeg in September 2010.

My work is based on the collections of the Provincial Archive of Manitoba, the archives and library of the Mennonite Heritage Center, the library collection of the Universities of Winnipeg and Manitoba, and the archival collection of the D.F. Plett Historical Foundation. As part of my research I examined periodicals such as: Manitoba Free Press, Morning Telegram, Daily Nor’Wester, Mennonite Life, and the Journal of Mennonite Studies. I worked with the fonds of the Jacob Bergen, Leo Driedger, John Dyck, A. D. Friesen, Wilhelm Friesen, Jacob Gerbrandt, Peter Hoeppner, David Stoess, David Toews and William Janzen collections. Moreover, I reviewed the government documents (1874-1925) and microfilm collection.

The collected information will help me to illuminate more deeply the problem I am investigating and throw light on new historical events. The result of my work will be my thesis entitled: “Mennonite Immigrants in the Social and Cultural life of North America (1874-1923)”.

I want to express my gratitude to Dr. Hans Werner, Executive Director, D.F. Plett Historical Foundation, Dr. Royden Loewen, Chair of Mennonite Studies and Alf Redekopp, Director of the Mennonite Heritage Center for the assistance they provided for my research. I hope for their further cooperation. I also express huge gratitude for the hospitality provided by Christopher and Heidi Werner.

Book Reviews

A Prairie Pilgrim: Wilhelm H. Falk


Wilhelm Falk was a minister in the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church of Manitoba, one of the founding ministers of the Rudnerweider Mennoniten Gemeinde, and for seventeen years its bishop. Since his years as leader of a Mennonite church (1937–1954) spanned World War II, he was widely known in the province.

This biography, by one of Falk’s younger daughters – she was 13 at the time of his resignation from the office of bishop– narrates the story of her father while at the same time expanding and revising the public record of his service in the church. It is an ambitious project. On the whole, Mary Neufeld succeeds on both counts in this, her first historical writing project.

Part of the author’s motivation to write about her father’s public ministry stemmed from her growing conviction that he “deserved to be portrayed accurately.” (xiii) In the course of responding to inaccuracies and misinterpretations in both published historical works and some unpublished, but publicly available sources, Neufeld has gone through the records
more thoroughly than anyone has done previously. The result is a better understanding of some of the difficult events of the Rudnerweider Gemeinde (now Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference) than we have had to date, and probably also a more accurate picture of its long-time leader.

Some of the difficulties were made more problematic because they involved in-laws of Bishop Falk. The first foreign mission candidate of the young church was John Schellenberg, a brother of Falk’s second wife. This raised the possibility that he might therefore receive preferential treatment because of his relationship to the bishop. The matter became even more complicated when Schellenberg was required to withdraw his membership from the church over unacceptable theological views.

A similar possibility for misunderstandings to arise came about when the husbands of two of the older Falk daughters became ministers in the Rudnerweider church. Son-in-law B.W.Sawatzky, with formal theological training and an eagerness to use English in worship and evangelism had the potential for precipitating a rift between younger ministers and the older ones. When the momentum to give more autonomy to the various locals grew, it thrust Sawatzky into an informal leadership of the group wanting change. This led eventually to Falk’s resignation as bishop amid considerable pain.

By Adolf Ens, Winnipeg, Manitoba

The Hutterites in North America

Rod Janzen and Max Stanton’s book provides a major contribution to a better understanding of Hutterites in North America. Janzen, who teaches history and social science education at Fresno Pacific University, grew up in South Dakota where he first became acquainted with Hutterite communities. Stanton, an anthropologist, teaches at Brigham Young University in Hawaii, and has been writing about Hutterite life since 1988.

This book is the fruit of more than two decades of intense immersion in Hutterite studies and Hutterite life. Janzen and Stanton visited dozens of colonies, some repeatedly. They spoke to old and young, men and women, leaders and ordinary members in all four Hutterite groups. As Timothy Miller says in his tribute to the book, “That lengthy study has opened a wealth of personal sources that would not be available to most other scholars. This book will be a new standard on Hutterites.”

Because of their extensive research, Janzen and Stanton are able to show convincingly both the commonalities and the diversities of Hutterite life. To outsiders, Hutterites are often seen as all the same. The authors point out that there are considerable differences between the four groups, or Leut, (Lehrer, Darius, group one Schmiede, and group two Schmiede) and also within each of the Leut.

The book begins with a chapter on the history of the Hutterites from the sixteenth century to the present. In a concise manner they tell the story of the creative and turbulent early years, the rapid growth during the Golden Years to about 40,000 people, and the decline during the seventeenth century to about 2,000 due to persecution and war. The result of this trauma and decline was the loss of communal living. The authors show how the infusion of new blood from the Lutheran refugees from Carinthia in the eighteenth century allowed Hutterites to re-establish communal living, only to lose it again in Russia. Then, just before the move to South Dakota in the 1870s, communal living was revived by one third of the Hutterites, and has continued until today.

The chapter on history also includes a discussion about the 1992 division within the Schmiedeleut. The authors deal sensitively with the division, trying to represent both groups fairly. This is no easy task, since the division was acrimonious, and the wounds are still deep. The discussion of the division is so carefully written, though, that readers may not always be aware of the sharp differences between the two groups on some of the major issues.

The history chapter is followed by a discussion of beliefs and practices. Hutterite beliefs are based on the Bible, which is interpreted by the Lehren (sermons), and given institutional form in the Ordnungen (rules and regulations, based on biblical interpretations made by the leaders of each Leut). The Lehren were written in the mid seventeenth century, shortly after the devastation of the Thirty Years War. Some of the well educated and experienced leaders wrote the sermons, and these sermons have been recopied from that time to the present. The Lehren serve as a lectionary for all four Hutterite groups, so that the faith and tradition of the Hutterites is interpreted by the leaders of each group in light of the day-to-day community needs.

It is in sorting through these complex relationships that Neufeld’s objective distance is most strained. She continues to use archival sources meticulously and corrects published accounts. But in a few places the reader may feel that the “lady doth protest too much.” The evidence she presents is strong enough without the extra “protest.”

When I first read this book, I began with all the chapters relating to Falk’s public ministry. Having earlier read Jack Heppner’s history of the Rudnerweider/EMMC, I was looking for clarification on a number of developments. Prairie Pilgrim did not disappoint. Later I read through the chapters on family, and discovered those dynamics to be much more complex than I had imagined. This too broadened my understanding of the church issues I had understood largely from what appeared publically.

Readers whose first interest is in family history may well take an approach opposite to mine. But most likely they will discover, as I did, that the two are inseparable.

There are a few glitches in the book (e.g. Reinland instead of Reinfeld on page 83; P.P. Zacharias instead of P.S. Zacharias on page 119) but they do not mar an otherwise very interesting and informative history/biography.

By Adolf Ens, Winnipeg, Manitoba
As Ralph Friesen signals in his introduction, this book is “about families—their experiences, their interactions, and, where possible, even their inner lives.” It is remarkable the extent to which the author achieves that goal for the families of Steinbach, Manitoba. Along the way the reader also gains insight into the dynamics of church, commerce, agriculture and governance in a Mennonite village that becomes a town over a fifty year period.

*Between Earth and Sky* is a history of the Mennonite village of Steinbach located on eastern edge of the East Reserve in Manitoba. Steinbach is one of the few Mennonite villages that has the honor of having become a modern and bustling urban centre—a small city. The book is a history of Steinbach from its beginnings in 1874 to 1924 a date that seems not to have marked a significant break in time, other than that it was exactly fifty years later, and coincided with the arrival of a new wave of Mennonite immigrants from Russia. There are many photographs interspersed throughout the 548 page book making for an enjoyable walk through Steinbach’s past.

After an introduction, a brief account of the village of Steinbach in the Borosenko Colony in Russia, the immigration to Canada, and a lengthy portrayal of each of the first families, the book divides Steinbach’s past into five chronological periods. The themes of agriculture, commerce, religion, and governance appear most frequently in each time period.

The strength of Friesen’s story however is its rich portrayal of the families of Steinbach, no small undertaking for the local historian. Many local histories have simply resorted to compiling family histories or more correctly vignettes, written by family members and pasted into the text in alphabetical order. These vignettes are too often uneven and celebratory. Others have despaired when facing the inevitable question of who should be “in” and whose presence in the story of the place was too marginal, or too brief to merit reference. Here the stories of families and their interaction with the land, entrepreneurial capitalism, village and town politics and church are textured and authentic, although never harsh or judgmental. Friesen delves into the rich, the poor, the eccentric, the pious and marginal. Throughout, the reader comes away with a sense of what their lives were like, the challenges and struggles they faced, and the vagaries of weather, conflict, disease and death that were visited upon them.

It is apparent that what explains most coherently Steinbach’s rise from a village to an important southeast Manitoba service centre is that Steinbach was a place of business and commerce. As Friesen suggests in his final chapter “Steinbach’s guiding spirit” would not be culture, but “material progress, the buying and selling of goods and services.” (p. 528). More focused attention on why the economy of the East Reserve allowed for Steinbach’s prominence in the area would have been a welcome addition to understanding Steinbach.

Friesen’s leisurely style and obvious skills in understanding family dynamics make this not only an important addition to Steinbach’s story, but also an enjoyable read.

By Hans Werner
University of Winnipeg
Mennonites in the Cities of Imperial Russia. Vols. 1 and 2


Mennonites began their life in Russia as villagers and before long as estate owners as well. Since serious research on their life in cities began, it has been obvious that significant urbanization came next. The extent of the latter development has not been clear, but these volumes dramatically highlight that aspect of Mennonite life under the tsars.

In the first volume, formatted in 8 1/2 x 11” pages, the author covers eight cities of what is now Ukraine: Barvenkovo, Berdyansk, Melitopol, Millerovo, Orechov, Pologi, Sevastopol, and Simferopol. In Vol. 2 the cities of Alexandrovsk (with Zaporozhe), Ekaterinoslav (today Dnepropetrovsk), Kharkov, Nikopol, Odessa, and Tokmak, all also in today’s Ukraine, as well as the Russian cities of Moscow, St. Petersburg (Leningrad in the Soviet period) and Omsk in Siberia are added. If this research were extended to the Soviet period, a number of other names, notably from Central Asia, would undoubtedly, appear in this list.

The range of source material (mostly in Western languages) includes maps, many photos, genealogical information, memoirs, contextual historical data, dozens of short biographies, and other miscellaneous information. It is surprising how much relevant material can come from what are mostly secondary publications, and oral interviews. Russian language archival information would naturally enhance the picture, but even as it these volumes achieve a significant place in the growing literature on Mennonites in Russia and the Soviet Union.

City life often began with family business initiatives that emanated from the agricultural base which formed the bedrock of economic administrative and even social life for the Mennonites of Russia in the early years after 1790. In due time interests in higher education took young people to urban centers. These and related moves naturally brought questions of congregational organization with them. City churches were often relatively small in membership but would grow in time. Often these were home oriented worship groups with people coming and going to some extent, especially where students were a major component of the Mennonite community (as in St. Petersburg, for instance). Very detailed information can be found here on families who would still be the mainstay of urban Mennonite life together.

As indicated there may be more data that needs collecting on Huebert’s theme, but the current data base is already massive. The stage is set now for other related topics to be investigated. One of these would be the reciprocal impact of urbanization, i.e., how did this move affect urban Mennonites, and in return their much more numerous rural kinfolk, who remained in their village communities and forms of thought and customs. Other issues would be social questions such as life style and intermarriage, the development of church life, and thoughts about the future of the Mennonite community as a whole in Russia.

The author will undoubtedly applaud such ongoing historical research, and we are all indebted to him for inspiring similar and other research enterprises on Russian Mennonite life and thought underway.

By Lawrence Klippenstein
Steinbach, Manitoba

Letters

August 5, 2010
To the Editors of Preservings, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Dear Editors;

John Friesen has made a substantial contribution to the understanding of Mennonite history but I was saddened by his response to Harold Jantz in Preservings, issue 29, p. 85-88. To me it was not evident that Harold said all the things that John attributed to him.

The basic question appears to be about an approach or framework for looking at ‘conservative’ Mennonites. John saw one approach in Harold’s letter and he used most of his response to say that it flowed from an erroneous understanding of developments that led to the founding of the MB church 150 years ago. Near the end he called for an acceptance of “the Old Colony Mennonite historic view of faith” and for seeing “their shortcomings and problems” from within that framework. This is a significant point but he did not explain what it means.

I would suggest that whatever framework one uses it should be recognized that there are profound differences among groups that carry the Old Colony name, not only on whether to allow rubber tires and electricity, but on schooling for their children, the processes to prepare for baptism, whether to sponsor youth programs, whether to allow people to study the language of their host societies, helping the poor among them, the authority of the spiritual leaders in relation to that of other community leaders, on what issues to use the ban (excommunication), whether to give people a ‘release’ when they want to join a different church, how to relate to other churches and to society, certain theological teachings, etc.

The realities encompassed by the various groups include significant and often overlooked positive elements. I am grateful to Preservings for promoting a better understanding of them but it would be unfortunate if the shortcomings in a number of areas were downplayed too much. Of the thousands of people who have left Old Colony groups over the years - some scoffingly and others after much reflection - many would express concerns similar to those of Harold Jantz. A stance that shuts him out will also shut out many others. Is it possible, instead, to respectfully encourage such people to take a ‘second look’ at their history and to appreciate its positive aspects?

Regarding MB beginnings, in 1960 at the MB centennial, Erland Waltner, then President of the General Conference Mennonite Church (GC), said in part:
We, of this generation, do not really know the details of the events that led to separation. We are, however, sorry for all feelings, words, and deeds expressed by our fathers in an unbrotherly way and in a manner contrary to the spirit of Christ. We are sorry that these events resulted in such an intense break that for a full century two parallel lines of explanation have been advanced as to the historical facts...

Then he spoke of working, in a spirit of humility, for better mutual understanding.

Likewise in the world of Low German Mennonites, there are a number of developments about which there are ‘parallel lines of explanation.’ In my opinion to acknowledge that could be helpful in many ways.

Respectfully,
Bill Janzen, Ottawa, Ontario

Response to Bill Janzen
October 12, 2010

Bill, I appreciate your letter. Your long history working with Old Colony Mennonites, and your obvious concern for them, gives credibility to your comments and analyses.

You make the comment that it was not clear how a reinterpretation of the beginnings of the Mennonite Brethren Church could provide a new look at the Old Colony history. The connection is that the usual interpretation of the beginnings of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia as a revival and renewal movement reflected negatively on the rest of the Mennonite community. This negativity was applied in the intervening years especially strongly to the Old Colonists, as well as to other so-called conservative churches. By re-examining the start of that negative interpretation, it may be possible to also reinterpret the story of the conservatives in a more balanced manner.

Your observation that there are significant differences among the various Old Colony Churches in North and South America is a point well taken. There are huge differences. But this should also make people cautious about ascribing the weakness or problems of a few to all the Old Colony churches. Weaknesses can be identified and suggestions for improvement offered, but being conservative or critical of progress and modernity, in and of itself should not be seen as a lack of spirituality or of genuine faith.

You encourage me to “to respectfully encourage such people [that is, those who are from this heritage] to take ‘a second look’ at their history and to appreciate its positive aspects?”

This is what Preservings, and the D. F. Plett Foundation, is all about. The many articles, letters, diaries, and reviews in this journal are all designed to encourage people to get past negative stereotypes, and look at the legacy of the Kanadier, many of whom are Old Colonists, in order to see and appreciate the positives this legacy has to offer.

John J. Friesen

October 25, 2010

Dear Editors;

I was disappointed that yet another bad news story has been published on the peaceful, lovely Old Colony people in Bolivia. (Canadian Mennonite, October 2010) That the story on treating alcoholism and abuse in Bolivia appears under the words ‘good news’ is doubly disappointing. Imagine a headline announcing ‘good news? from one of our Canadian Mennonite communities and reading that a new institution is finally addressing the scourge of depression in our congregations, or responding to rising rates of marriage break up among Mennonites, or taking action against rising support for military service among Canadian Mennonites.

The ‘good news’ from Bolivia is that there are 60,000 ‘horse and buggy’ Mennonites living mostly peaceful lives with virtually no policing and general familial harmony. They are a people who leave a tiny carbon foot print on God’s earth and are not given to unsustainable consumption. Independent studies have shown that children’s farm activity in ‘horse and buggy’ communities produce a sense of self worth and good health, that the vast majority of women and men have a profound respect one another and that the elderly live dignified lives on family farms until the end of their day. Those studies record a people of God who live with a profound sense that sacrifice in this life will bring hope for eternity; faith is not individualized and feelings of loneliness are not common. Without a doubt the Bolivian Old Colony Mennonites have their share of social problems, but so do we in our rich North American society. Is it possible that we are judging an entire people on a different standard than we judge ourselves? Is it possible that we have learned sophisticated ways of hiding our problems, while the Bolivian’s insistence on practicing a ‘visible’ form of Christianity has made them the subject of our scrutiny?

Royden Loewen
Winnipeg, Manitoba

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Dear Friends:

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

There are of course considerable costs incurred in preparing, editing, printing and mailing this journal. We invite all readers to assist in covering the costs by subscribing on the form attached below. The subscription fee is $20.00 per year.

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

Blessings to you.

Sincerely,

John J. Friesen and Hans Werner,
co-editors for Preservings

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Steinbach History Receives Award

Ralph Friesen’s history of Steinbach, Between Earth and Sky was the 2009 winner of the Margaret McWilliams Award for local history. Ralph is a native of Steinbach and a member of the D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation, Inc. Board. The award is given annually by the Manitoba Historical Society for the best local history published in the year.

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Contributors:

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Email</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Walter Epp</td>
<td><a href="mailto:wepp@lakeheadu.ca">wepp@lakeheadu.ca</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolf Ens</td>
<td><a href="mailto:aaens@mymts.net">aaens@mymts.net</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alvin Ens</td>
<td><a href="mailto:aiens@shaw.ca">aiens@shaw.ca</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John J. Friesen</td>
<td><a href="mailto:jjfriesen@cmu.ca">jjfriesen@cmu.ca</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ron Friesen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kennert Giesbrecht</td>
<td><a href="mailto:mpeditor@mts.net">mpeditor@mts.net</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Janzen</td>
<td><a href="mailto:janzenw@sympatico.ca">janzenw@sympatico.ca</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim Janzen</td>
<td><a href="mailto:mennonities@timjanzen.com">mennonities@timjanzen.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen Khodchenko</td>
<td><a href="mailto:floresca@ua.fm">floresca@ua.fm</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter J. Klassen</td>
<td><a href="mailto:peterk@csufresno.edu">peterk@csufresno.edu</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawrence Klippenstein</td>
<td><a href="mailto:lawrenceklippenstein@mts.net">lawrenceklippenstein@mts.net</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine Martens</td>
<td><a href="mailto:gettmart@mts.net">gettmart@mts.net</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arnie Neufeld</td>
<td><a href="mailto:armieneufeld@mts.net">armieneufeld@mts.net</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roland Sawatzky</td>
<td><a href="mailto:rolands@nlb.ca">rolands@nlb.ca</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan Stone</td>
<td><a href="mailto:danielzstone@yahoo.com">danielzstone@yahoo.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hans Werner</td>
<td><a href="mailto:h.werner@uwinnipeg.ca">h.werner@uwinnipeg.ca</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce Wiebe</td>
<td><a href="mailto:fraunzwiebe@hotmail.com">fraunzwiebe@hotmail.com</a></td>
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</tbody>
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The Girls of Mirolyubova, Siberia. Photo Credit: Hans Werner