

# Mennonite Historical Society of BC

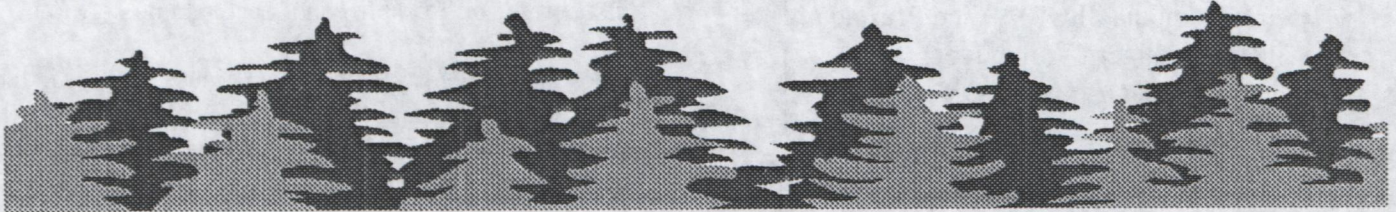
## NEWSLETTER

*What we have heard and known we will tell the next generation. Ps. 78*

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### COMING EVENTS

- ❖ May 6, 2000, at the Garden Park Tower,  
7:00 p.m.

Dr. Alfred H. Siemens, Professor Emeritus of Geography, UBC, Visiting Professor at the Institute of Ecology in Xalapa, Mexico, will be speaking on

*"Reflections on Pioneering - a consideration of the experience of the Mennonite Pioneering Generation in the Fraser Valley."*

*"When I first face my piece of bush on King Road I broke down and wept; then I spit in my hands and took up the axe."*

This was one of the members of the Mennonite pioneering generation in the Fraser Valley as quoted in a eulogy at his funeral. I have heard a good number of such eulogies in the last few decades. In them and in our Canadian histories the clearing of the forest was a very positive, indeed a heroic achievement. I also had the opportunity to watch Mennonite pioneering elsewhere in the 1960's, particularly in Mexico and Belize. Their fellow countrymen respected their efforts, they brought unused land into much needed production. Then I took a particular look at non-Mennonite pioneering in tropical lowland Mexico during the same decade.

In my interviews, I thought I heard the Fraser Valley pioneers talking: "We are clearing land, opening it to fields and pastures; we sacrifice our adult strength to give our children a better life." Recently I have had an opportunity to look again at the Mexican area in which

I investigated pioneering in the 1960's. Since that earlier study, we have all become very conscious of many environment issues; the expansion of agriculture and ranching at the expense of the forest is now highly controversial. Countless families still seek to escape from poverty and build a better life, but ecologists see them as a menace. Natural reserves are being set up here and there, but it is difficult to keep settlers out... And, in North America, including the Fraser Valley, much of the land that was cleared at great effort is growing back into the forest.

The point is to enhance the appreciation of pioneering by our people in our area and to put it into a historical context.

There will be a short business segment to this meeting which will be the Annual General Meeting. A financial report and budget will be presented and you will be asked to approve a slate of directors for the next three years. The Directors' report for 1999 will be handed out to members as they arrive.

- ❖ October 14, 2000 - Dr. John B. Toews will be the speaker at the annual fund raising banquet of the BC Mennonite Historical Society. Dr. Toew's topic will be: *"Russian Mennonite Women confront Stalinism."* What happened to them when...

Their men were arrested, exiled or shot during the 1930's?

They were subjected to collective farm labour?

There was no food for their children?

The last churches closed by 1935?

They were exiled to Central Asia & Siberia in 1941?

They were drafted into the Work Army in 1943?

The MHS Newsletter is produced periodically to inform and promote the work of the BC Mennonite Historical Society. The newsletter is mailed to people who contribute \$25.00 or more to the work of MHS. It is edited by Henry Neufeld with the assistance of Hugo Friesen and Loretta Krueger. Contributions are welcome. Direct correspondence to: Newsletter, BCMHS, 211-2825 Clearbrook Rd. Abbotsford, BC. V2T 6S3. Tel: (604) 853-6177



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- ❖ William Riediger (Vancouver),
- ❖ Lillian Toews (Vancouver).

### IN THIS ISSUE...

The teachings of Jesus about responding to violence were clear to our Anabaptist forebears. In 1561 Menno Simons wrote *"They who are baptized inwardly with Spirit and fire, and externally with water, according to the Word of the Lord, have no weapons except patience, hope, silence, and God's word."*

The article by John Rempel reminds us that this teaching of our faith heritage should be evident in how we live, and in how we work through hard issues in our congregations and communities. We are reminded that Martin Luther King took nonviolence to the streets and overcame evil with good. These teachings of Jesus can easily be lost by congregations and individuals.

Peter Unger's article illustrates the cost of living by Jesus' teachings. He could have agreed to four months of basic training, instead he held to his Christian principles and was required to perform over four years of alternative service. We believe many of our readers have similar or other stories of their past which should be shared.

We also report the results of the questionnaires sent out with our fall 1999 Newsletter. It is encouraging to hear that the majority of readers read the entire newsletter. Perhaps we should have asked if you know someone who has a story that would be of interest to Newsletter readers. Take a moment, think about the friends and acquaintances and drop us a note with a story idea. The article by Peter Unger in this issue is an example of the type of account we are pleased to publish. Suggestions for articles are welcome.

### Do You Promise to Follow Jesus the Lamb?

by John Rempel.

*John Rempel is minister of Manhattan Mennonite Fellowship and MCC liaison to the United Nations in New York City.*

*This article appeared in the MCC Peace Office Newsletter, January - March 1999 and is reprinted here with permission of MCC and the author.*

Included in the new Mennonite *Minister's Manual* is an old set of baptismal questions from the 1700's. Question number two reads, "Do you promise, by God's grace, to follow Jesus the Lamb, all the days of your life, ready to love your enemies and suffer wrong nonresistantly?"

It is a breathtaking question. It would be folly to risk answering it except for the three crucial words, "by God's grace." Even then, the thought of being asked that question just before you're baptized is breathtaking.

Question number two is based on Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). There he asks those who would be his disciples to yield mastery over their own lives to him. They are to abandon themselves to God's kingdom and its righteousness.

In order that they might do so, Jesus promises that he will free them from worries about their security. He goes so far as to say that they are not to defend themselves - even when their lives are in danger.

### By the grace of God

It is impossible to hear that demand of Jesus without crying out in protest: "What about my child when someone threatens it? What about my country when it is under attack?"

Mennonites are among a cloud of witnesses - individuals and communities - throughout church history who have said, "By the grace of God, I will offer forgiveness rather than revenge when I am wronged." "By the grace of God, I am willing to die rather than kill."

This conviction is endangered among peace churches at the very time when other Christian groups are reconsidering it.

My first intention is to suggest briefly why our peace conviction is hard to hang onto. My second and more important purpose is to make better known the movement toward non-violence.

### The hard gifts of peace

During this century Mennonites in North America have become more and more a part of the society around them. Culture and money have attracted us to mainstream society, but so has a sense of responsibility for the people around us. That's why we sponsor soup kitchens and evangelize our neighborhoods.

We see hatred and violence all around us. People's families break down; they lose their jobs. Our society is frantic for nonviolent alternatives to the conflicts that abound.



Mennonites have contributed significantly to the development of conflict mediation skills. We've discovered that trying to transform conflict often involves working with courts and even with the police; relationships Mennonites have traditionally shunned. Before we know it, we're entangled with the force of law and protection that comes from the barrel of a gun.

On the one hand, we ask ourselves if we're no longer willing to "suffer wrong nonresistantly" as the baptismal question asks us to do. On the other hand, we wonder if it's irresponsible to let others do the dirty work, whether it's with the court system or in the army.

In the midst of our hand wringing about the hard gift of peace, Christians from nonpacifist churches around the world are turning to pacifist denominations and to their understanding of Jesus' way of forgiveness and reconciliation. Churches who have long claimed that war could be just are now willing to reexamine Jesus' teaching and the practice of the early church. It is an inspiring story we know very little about.

#### **Questions that will not go away**

Let me recount the background that has led to this change of heart and then mention a few of its highlights. The twentieth century is the most violent one in recorded history. In WW I the British slaughtered the Germans who slaughtered the French. Seven and a half million people were snuffed out by the madness of national arrogance.

Churches in each country blessed the butchery; each of them claimed that God was on their side. After the madness subsided, Christians in all of the countries who had made war on each other asked themselves how they could have put loyalty to the nation in which they lived before their loyalty to the body of Christ. Then came World War II and (almost) everyone blessed the butchery again.

After that war, Protestant denominations from around the globe formed the World council of Churches (WCC) to seek reconciliation and unity of the body of Christ beyond confessional and national boundaries. The WCC dared to ask two hard questions: "Can war be the will of God? Can Christians kill?" The disagreements among its members on these questions were so fierce that they remained unanswered....

#### **Thinking together about peace**

The Holy Spirit was unmistakably at work inspiring novel ways of thinking and acting around the world. Christians whose traditions had always taught that the church was society's chaplain, and had to stand behind everything their country did, began to understand the church as the universal body of Christ which could not be divided by the wars of nations.

They started to see the New Testament in another perspective: Jesus did not avenge himself when he was abused by his enemies; he forgave the people who crucified him. In fact, he died for them. The church, according to Ephesians, is a new humanity, a place where strangers, antagonists and enemies are made one.

In the late 1980s the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches in the United States called for high-level consultations between representatives of all nonpacifist denominations and the Historic Peace Churches (Quakers, Church of the Brethren and Mennonites). For centuries those who took Jesus' peace teaching literally had been accused of being unrealistic and irresponsible. Now our former accusers were asking us to talk to them about our convictions!

The goal of these gatherings was twofold. First was a deepening of the conviction that the message of Jesus and his work on the cross had brought peace into the world and made it possible to choose forgiveness over revenge. Here there was inspiring agreement. Second was an exploration of current denominational thinking on peace to see to what extent pacifist and nonpacifists were coming closer to each other.

Representatives of two sets of American-born denominations reported (to the astonishment of many) that a pacifist understanding of Jesus' teaching had originally been part of their vision of a restored church. The Disciples of Christ, Churches of Christ and similar groups emerged from an early nineteenth-century revival which sought to restore the church to what it had been in the generation after Jesus' resurrection. Reading their way back into the life of the apostolic church convinced the revivalists that a spirit of peace, which expressed itself in the refusal to take up arms, was part of the sanctified life.

A century later a new movement of the Spirit led people into ecstatic experience, including speaking in tongues. For many Pentecostals, black and white, life in the Spirit meant a life of nonresistance to evil. During World War I leaders of the Assemblies of God even issued political protests against the bloodthirstiness of politicians, and especially of arms manufacturers, who profited the most from war. So often, across the centuries, have pacifists been told that we were irresponsible and unrealistic that we've lost confidence in the gospel possibility of responding to violence without more violence. We have more company in our conviction than we're aware of! Seekers of God who had pored over the Scriptures and asked for a new presence of the Spirit, like the Anabaptists, received a vision of the kingdom and an experience of forgiveness in which hatred and warfare were overcome.



### Rekindling the vision

Now people from these one-pacifist churches, as well as from older denominations, wanted to rekindle the vision of peace. Many agreed that in the age of modern weaponry there could be no such thing as a just war. For example, according to the just war theory, civilians must remain immune from attack. We know that both atomic and conventional warfare today kills primarily civilians.

In fact, some of the churches represented at the consultations, like the Roman Catholic and Episcopal, declared - in this spirit - that the Gulf War was not a just war. These declarations did not mean that a score of denominations had suddenly become pacifist. But there is in them a unique openness to the possibility of nonviolence as a way of life for the whole church.

This is the case not only in United States but around the world. The World Council of Churches has seen the inseparability of peace and the unity of the church: Only where churches are reconciled with one another across national boundaries is the body of Christ one.

The unspeakable horror of modern warfare and the desperate conflicts in our towns and cities have made people see the futility of violence. Whoever takes up the sword is likely to perish by it. The good news is that Jesus has overcome fate. We are not doomed to extract an eye for an eye from one another. Are we as Mennonites so persuaded of this truth that everyone can see it in how we live? When we work through hard issues in the congregations, when we respond to people in other countries our government calls enemies, when we first introduce people to Christ through evangelism?

The stakes are high. Churches to whom nonviolence has never made sense are watching us. Churches which once had a vision for peace are wondering if we still have it.

Do you promise, by God's grace, to follow Jesus the Lamb?

### HISTORY OF THE BC CONFERENCE OF MENNONITES by Louise Price

Louise Price is a Board Member of the MHS of BC and an Abbotsford area resident.

"We must not die before we have told the next generation what our fathers and mothers have taught us." Cornelia Lehn wrote these words in 1989 in her preface to *Frontier Challenge: A Story of the Conference of Mennonites in British Columbia*. On February 12, she repeated this challenge at a lecture presented by the Mennonite Historical Society. Lehn had also invited Helen Franz, Leni Epp and Peter Unger to share their experiences; these were interspersed in the lecture and brought a personal dimension to the story of the Conference of Mennonites in BC.

Lehn drew on her own vivid memories to describe the reasons why large groups of Mennonites moved to British Columbia in the late 20s and early 30s. She described how her father turned the cattle onto the wheat field of their prairie farm after it became apparent that the crop was to be ruined again; how she begged him to wait a few days - perhaps it would rain?

As the drought intensified, half of the Mennonites who had emigrated to the Canadian prairies in the 1920s from Russia, lost their farms. Some of these immigrants then moved to Ontario, others to the north; many came to British Columbia, and founded settlements in places like Yarrow, Greendale, Clearbrook, and Agassiz.

The settlements in BC were isolated; the roads poor. Only lay ministers served the groups. Some groups had no ministers, and drifted away from the faith, or became absorbed in other groups. Elder Jakob Janzen realized something had to be done, and quickly. On October 6, 1936, he invited all groups to organize to form a provincial conference. The main concern was to provide for ways that all groups would be able to have regular worship services, and that those who had strayed could be drawn back to the fold.

One of the major concerns of the new conference was establishing a Bible School. Bethel Bible School grew out of this vision. Helen Franz attended Bethel from 1950-1954. At Bethel she studied church history and missions, and also learned how to read and write English, a skill vitally important to post-war immigrants.

The Girls' Home in Vancouver was another important ministry set up by the new conference. Many young Mennonite women were employed as nannies and housekeepers in Vancouver households. The Girls' Home was a place these young women could go on their Thursday and Sunday afternoons off to visit, eat together, and worship together.

Leni Epp talked about the importance of the Maedchenheim to these young women - a real home away from home. Where their bodies could rest, their faith nurtured and their tongues, released from the strictures of unfamiliar English, could chatter in German again.

The outbreak of World War II brought further challenges. As anti-German sentiment grew, it became important that alternative service opportunities be provided. Mennonite leaders negotiated with the Federal government, and suggested service in forestry and agriculture. This was accepted. During the war years, there were 740 conscientious objectors in BC; most of these were Mennonite.



Peter Unger, a CO from 1941-1946, reminded us of the possibility of another war and asked: "Will our younger people be well prepared should another war come?"

In closing, Lehn challenged us to study the past and learn from it to glorify God and to build God's kingdom here on earth; to explore the 'spiritual frontier.'

The evening also included a light Faspa, and music by "Three Score Plus", a trio who treated us to several low-German songs, as well as other country and gospel tunes.

## **ALTERNATIVE SERVICE - A PERSONAL ACCOUNT** by Peter A. Unger

*At the Cornelia Lehn lecture Peter Unger described some of his experiences during World War II. We are pleased that he agreed to provide us with the following expanded account of his experiences. Peter lives in Chilliwack.*

I thank the Lord, my parents, my church and my country, Canada, for the privilege of Alternative Service during World War II, 1941-1945. At the outset of the war ministers of our congregations had not instructed us in matters of biblical nonresistance to war. In the course of time I realized they had little time for such teachings. They were unsalaried and in addition to serving their congregations they had to work for the daily sustenance of their families.

On Sunday, September 10, 1939, my friend and I listened to the news. "Canada declares war on Germany. My initial response was "Let's join up!" But God interposed.

In spring 1941 we received our official calls to enlist. I responded to the Department of War that I was prepared to go to the front as a stretcher bearer. They replied that they had no accommodations for such service.

Soon we had to present ourselves to Judge Harvey of the Supreme Court in Lethbridge. With him were two austere gentlemen and a secretary to record the proceedings. Behind me stood an RCMP officer in full dress uniform.

At the time we received our call we had to have a medical. Because of a severe defect in my left eye Dr. David Epp classified me as "E" category - unfit for military service. The judge suggested I enlist in the four months of basic training and then receive an "honourable discharge." I replied, "If I'm trained for that I expect I will be used for that." The judge said, "Then you go into Alternative service."

One of the other judges spoke up and "let me have it," and he spoke of cowardice, disgrace, etc. Some time later I realized that had I accepted the judge's suggestion I would

have belied my conscientious objector position and the Lord. The Lord had intervened in His amazing way.

On August 6, 1941, 36 young fellows left Coal Dale by bus for Jasper. Near midnight we had a stop in Calgary. As one of the fellows walked about he offered me a smoke. He knew I had toyed with this luxury. It struck me at that moment that whatever I did as a CO was to be a witness to my Lord in every respect. So I declined. Later again I sensed God's leading. In the morning we arrived in Jasper Park to do our "basic training."

In 1942 I and others were inducted for the duration of the war in the BC Forest Service on Vancouver Island. I enjoyed working in the woods: falling snags, fighting fires, planting trees, cooking. I always sensed that we were to be witnesses as CO's. Not always did I honour our calling to be CO's. We worked in all kinds of weather. Once we were falling snags when a snowstorm hit. This made falling trees dangerous; the wind could twist and turn them in unpredictable ways. So my partner and I decided to take the men into camp. Our subforeman should have made that decision - they were Prevailing Rate (PR) men. Though glad to be out of the storm, they said nothing when questioned by the foreman about who made that decision.

In retrospect I felt I failed in this because the men in the trenches were not granted the luxury of ducking out because of bad weather. I felt I had failed to witness to our superiors and failed the Lord.

While stationed at the Lethbridge Experimental station in 1944 as part of my alternative service, my boss's son, a soldier on leave and working alongside me told me, "I don't mind at all you being a CO." I was glad for this commendation. During that time I had contact with German prisoners of war. One Sgt. Major told me, "in Germany you would be put up against the wall." Other prisoners were more open to my position.

My hope and prayer is that those pastors who still affirm the Scriptural position of non-resistance will instruct their congregations, their young people on this issue.

History has the unpleasant knack of repeating itself; war will come. There is just too much money to be made by war.

Recently a young mother from our congregation described how her son had been strongly encouraged to go into the military by a recruiting officer who visited his school. Will our young men and women be equipped to make a "soldierly" decision? There will be price to pay.

The Alternative Service experience eventually influenced me to enter full time ministry. To the Lord be all honour.



## BOOKS

**From the Inside Out**

*From the Inside Out: The Rural Worlds of Mennonite Diarists, 1963 to 1929, edited and with an introduction by Royden Loewen*

The University Press, 1999, 350 pages, \$24.95 paper  
reviewed by Edith Friesen

*Edith Friesen is a freelance writer living in Winnipeg, with a passion for lifewriting. This review initially appeared in Rhubarb, and is reprinted here with permission of the author.*

I was a love-struck 16-year-old when I made the fatal mistake of leaving my diary on my bed. My romantic accounts were mainly fantasy, but my mother, who found and read the diary, believed every word. Mortified and haunted by the experience, I haven't kept a diary since.

Yet, like my mother, I'm curious about what other people write in their diaries. Do they disclose their secrets, thoughts and true feelings? Let their imaginations run wild? Or do they primarily record the rhythm and routine of daily life, like the diarists in *From the Inside Out*? And if that is the case, what's the point?

By way of introduction, historian Royden Loewen puts this collection of Mennonite diaries, written between 1863 and 1929, into perspective. "To know what they chose to record is also to know something of their culture, that is, the symbols and systems of meaning constructed by ordinary people in their every day lives to make sense of life, and particularly to make sense of changes and inconsistencies of life."

Between the covers of *From the Inside Out*, I catch a glimpse of 21 ordinary Mennonite farm women and men. They are a diverse group, as Royden explains: "the young and the old, the women and the men, the married and the single, the church leaders and the community derelicts, farmers and merchants, the Manitobans and the Ontarians, the pietists and the communitarians, the settlers and the visitors." These diarists come from two distinct Mennonite communities in Canada.

They include Swiss-American Mennonites facing rapid urbanization in Waterloo County, and Dutch-Russian Mennonites maintaining a more rural lifestyle in southern Manitoba.

Fortunately, Royden introduces me to each one of the diarists before I read their words, bringing them alive with a brief biography and some background information. This makes it easier for me to appreciate the diaries, which often reveal a preoccupation with the hum of daily life - work and weather; social interaction; weddings, funerals and worship services.

Royden warns me not to expect much emotion or personal analysis or inner revelation.

Does this mean that Mennonites at the turn of the century had no interior life? I remember my grandmother saying: we never thought about ourselves; we were too busy making a life. And that is exactly what *From the Inside Out* is about - rural Mennonites making a life - in the context of their households, their kinship networks, and their congregational community.

Even so, I am curious about what is not included. Take Cornelius W. Loewen's diary. While he gives a detailed chronicle of his financial transactions, including the probating of his wife's will (a prerequisite for remarriage), he is completely silent about her death. Then there are Laura Shantz's entries about two shocking events - an unwed Mennonite mother who causes her baby's death and a woman who commits suicide - that read like weather reports.

Not so Margaretha Janzen, a spirited young woman who reveals her thoughts and feelings with dramatic flair. Her world revolves around social interactions and relationships and she worries incessantly about her brother's spiritual welfare and her parents' health. How eerie that she dies six months after her last selected entry.

Another young woman, Marie Schroeder, discloses her inner thoughts and her secret desire to become a writer. In a diary that sounds like a letter to a friend, she confides: "I may write things that have a real worth someday; things that are worth printing, and things that other folks would love to read and pay for." Then there is 19-year-old Ezra Burkholder who could pass for a budding travel writer. On a trip from Waterloo County to Kansas, he gives a vivid account of the places he visits, impressions of people he meets, and every penny that leaves his pocket.

The cast of characters includes an elderly grandfather, Abraham F. Reimer, who is viewed as a slackard among his fellow villagers because he doesn't contribute much in economic terms.

However, as Royden points out, "he has left one of the most detailed and intricate records of daily life in the Mennonite communities during the 1870's, both in Russia and Manitoba."

*From the Inside Out* is a treasure trove for anyone interested in the basic activities and concerns of turn-of-the-century rural Mennonites. Although most of these selected diary entries have been translated from German, the voices ring true.



History and sociology enthusiasts will likely appreciate glimpses into a community's social structure, collective mindset, their history as a people, and social networks. If you are a Mennonite, you might even gain some insights about your ancestors. However, if you are looking for a quick, intimate or sensational read, you won't find it here. Rather, you will feel the pulse of rural life through the private words of Mennonites who haunt these pages.

### **A Look Back...The Invisible Hand,**

by Abraham Olfert

Printco Inc., Abbotsford, BC, 1999.

reviewed by Walter Paetkau.

*Walter Paetkau is the Executive Director at Abbotsford Community Services, an agency he founded 31 years ago. He plans to retire from that position this summer.*

Mr. Olfert tells of an experience he had in the late fifties when he was still working at Funks Super Market. A Mr. Schellenberg was asked by his wife to buy two loaves of bread. He enters the store in the morning and buys one loaf. "Why do you buy only the one loaf when you were asked to get two?" inquired Olfert. "I will buy the other in the afternoon", said Schellenberg, "so that I will have something to do then."

This incident stayed in Olfert's mind. "Is that all the retired folk have to look forward to?" he thought. "There must be a better way."

Upon his retirement in the nineteen sixties Olfert found another way. It began with bus tours, a shop to repair and sell used furniture, volunteering for projects at the Columbia Bible School and M.C.C. and a variety of other endeavours. Many older people joined in the activity affirming Olfert's resolution that older folk, given the opportunity, would respond with their time and skills. MCC was an early benefactor in receiving proceeds from the store.

In the early seventies, Mennonite Educational Institute moved to a new location. "Why don't we buy the old M.E.I.?" Olfert suggested. "Are you crazy?" was the quick response, "Where would we ever get the \$510,000?" Many scoffed at the idea but others rose to the challenge. The Society had \$10,000. That became the down payment. The government agreed to a matching grant of \$50,000. Olfert and colleagues divided Clearbrook into four quadrants, assigned solicitors to each quadrant and systematically visited every family. \$60,000 was raised in cash and pledges. The old M.E.I. was theirs. Over the next few years the total debt was covered.

The place became a centre of enterprising activity: food service, crafts store, book binding, Bible study groups, games, workshop, tours and a variety of endeavours providing an array of opportunities for men and women alike. Olfert gave leadership during the developing and maturing years.

Today there is a new complex where the old MEI stood, a Community Centre and a residential tower. But one thing has not changed. Older people continue to contribute time and skill as they did thirty years ago in the formative stages. They have many choices and few would have to buy one loaf of bread in the morning and one in the afternoon to fill their time.

I've always had high regard for what Mr. Olfert established in his retirement years. I first met him in the late 1960's when I was beginning my major career. Now I am about to retire and he resides in a small room at the Menno Home. He is 95 and still very alert and active.

When visiting him I found myself sitting forward in my chair and leaning towards him when I spoke. "My ears are as old as I am," he said. "But I don't have hearing aids." I noticed he wore gloves but I didn't ask about that. Later a nine year old great grandchild asked me, "Do you know what I call him?" "What" I asked. "Grandpa Gloves. His hands are always cold."

As we talked he pulled a book off the shelf. "Here," he said, "is the story of my life. You can have a copy. That will tell you what you want to know." I told him I had purchased it and read his story. "Yes," he continued, "a daughter helped me put it all together and a niece in Manitoba put it into story form."

"*The Invisible Hand*" is an account of Mr. Olfert's early years in Russia, Manitoba, and BC. Over and over he acknowledges the presence of God in his life in mysterious and invisible ways. He feels strongly about the Bible being the Bread of Life and about his relationship with the living Christ. He was always active in the church. A sixteen year old great granddaughter remarked how full of God her great grandfather seemed to be. She also talked warmly about his sense of humour, his ready smile and his need for real food - chocolates.

I asked two of his daughters about him. "It's all in the book." One talked about her father's fondness for pancakes and sausages. She sneaks them in from a local pancake house. A grandson remembers when Mr. Olfert was still at Funk's Super Market and would take grand children to the bulk cookie bin for a treat.



Another grandson remarked on his grandfather's alertness. "He's a guy of ideas and in his old age he works on his computer. When I visited Mr. Olfert I noticed the computer. "I'm not quite ready for internet yet, but who knows," he said. He still has an interest in music. Until recently he practiced on the organ in the dining room a half hour before lunch. Soon people came to listen to him practice; a pre-dinner concert. "Choruses should be for children," he emphasized, "Adults need foundation food."

Olfert has lived almost a century. His story is a reminder that life can truly be lived to the full to our final days.

### Bits & Pieces

- **Abbotsford's Central Height's Church** is celebrating their 50th anniversary this year. Twelve charter members still attend the church. *Celebrating God's Goodness... 1950 - 2000* is a history of the congregation. A weekend of celebration will be held May 20-21.
- **The Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society** reports on a meeting in Winkler to discuss plans for the 125th anniversary of the West Reserve in the year 2000. Gerhard Ens is providing a series of West Reserve History sketches in Low German, a program on Altona/Steinbach radio.
- **Cook Books??** We would like to establish a collection of cookbooks produced by Mennonite churches & other organizations in BC. Mennonites have been known for their cooking and baking with unique recipes ranging from Buttersoup to Vereneke and Zwiebach. If you have new or used cookbooks you can donate to the MHS we would be pleased to include them in our collection. Books can be mailed or dropped off at our office.
- **October 21, 2000 - Genealogical Workshop**  
Our second workshop with Dr. Tim Janzen. Plan to attend another interesting and informative day which will run from 8:30am-4:30pm.

### From our BC Past

*The following excerpt from Frontier Challenge, (1990) by Cornelia Lehn, p.187-188, describes the relationship between Mennonites in the Chilliwack area and their neighbours.*

Reaching out to neighbours was difficult, especially during the war when they often felt the enmity of their neighbours. Much has changed in intervening years. This was especially evident at celebrations in 1974 marking the centennial of the coming of Dutch-German Mennonites to Western Canada. Mayor W.G.R. Simpson of Chilliwack was invited to speak on Sunday, September 15, at the official Thanksgiving service in the Chilliwack Senior High School auditorium.

He surprised and deeply moved the gathered Mennonites

when he said, "I, along with others, more or less snubbed you, created a very frigid atmosphere, sold you non-productive land, and made everything just about as miserable as we possibly could.... The matter has been on my conscience and has bothered me for a long time." George Groening, chairman of the Centennial Committee responded in letter to the mayor that expressed appreciation for his participation... and for his very "manly and courageous confession." He assured him of the forgiveness he sought, and in turn asked for forgiveness for our own shortcomings, where we have lacked understanding, and where we have been closed and exclusive.

### Questionnaire Results

Thanks to those who returned the questionnaire included in the fall 1999 Newsletter. Twenty-eight were returned. Twenty three of the respondents had attended an MHS event in the past year.

Regarding future MHS events, 19 want to hear more on Russian Mennonite history; 11 would like a Low-German evening, 14 want events similar to those of the past; 10 said they'd like an evening of choral music; 10 want more events on BC Mennonite history; 8 would like lectures on Mennonite beliefs, and 9 said they'd like speakers on South American Mennonites.

Respondents also suggested specific themes for MHS events, such as: Russian history, Mennonites and Poland, the history of Chortitz to 1900, the experience of CO's in WWII, Anabaptist martyrs, Mennonites in Siberia, Fraser Valley Mennonites and the Sto:lo people, Anabaptism revisited in 2000, Dutch/Prussian history, and the history and future of denominationalism.

Regarding the Newsletter, 18 read all of it and the others read most of it.

When asked what kind of articles they wished to see in the Newsletter, 13 want the same kind of articles as in the past, 11 want articles about Mennonites in BC, 11 want articles about Russian Mennonites, 10 want to hear more about Mennonites in Canada.

Specific suggestions for the Newsletter included: life stories of Mennonites, especially elders, more family focus, unusual church decisions, interesting archival material, and tracing evangelism since 1860.

Nineteen of the respondents have visited our offices in Garden Park Tower and 16 have seen the Memorial Plaques.

We appreciate your response; the BC MHS Board will take these suggestions into consideration in planning future events. If you have suggestions please contact our office.