

MENNONITE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF BC

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

April 1998

ONE PEOPLE, MANY STORIES: CHARTING THE NEXT GENERATION OF MENNONITE HISTORICAL STUDY IN THE U.S. AND CANADA

MAY 7-9 AT COLUMBIA BIBLE COLLEGE

The conference will bring together about 30 Mennonite historians from Canada and the U.S. It will also be a time to celebrate the completion of the three-volume "Mennonites in Canada." Series as well as the four volume "Mennonites in America" series. The authors of the concluding volumes, Dr. Ted Regehr and Dr. Paul Toews respectively, will be presenters at the conference.

Sponsored by the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada, various U.S. historical societies, and M.C.C., the conference sessions will be held in the CBC chapel. The public is invited to attend; Admission is free.

BANQUET AND LECTURE

The conference will conclude with a banquet hosted by the BC Mennonite Historical Society on Saturday, May 9, at 6:00 p.m. at the Garden Park Tower in Clearbrook. Tickets are available from the MHS at office 853-6177 (\$12.00); call between 9:00-noon. Parking is available underground.

The banquet speaker will be historian Dr. Theron Schlabach from Goshen College speaking on "Discipleship, Generational change, and the Practice of Mennonite History." We hope to be able to seat historians from the conference at the various tables. Don't miss this opportunity.

BC MENNONITE HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL MEETING

The annual meeting of the BCMHS will be held on **Saturday, May 9, 1998 at 4:00 p.m.** in Room 101 at Columbia Bible College. The public is invited to attend this meeting just prior to the above mentioned banquet.

MENNONITE INHERITANCE PRACTICES-Henry Neufeld

Inheritance has not often been a topic of study among Mennonites, said historian Roydon Loewen in his February 28 lecture to the BC Mennonite Historical Society. Loewen, Chair of Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg, said Mennonites have an uncommon inheritance system developed in Flanders and Friesland. Speaking to about 120 people, Loewen said the Mennonite inheritance system is unique in the sense that both sexes, not only boys, inherited equally." Also, at the death of the first spouse, farms were partitioned between survivors. This was unlike the English system in which the eldest son inherited the whole farm, said Loewen.

"It was uniquely Mennonite in the sense that Mennonites practised it, Dutch and Swiss, and unique in that only a minority of Europeans, small pockets here and there, did," said Loewen.

Mennonites in the past spent a lot of time thinking about inheritance, he said. "We may say that church institutions and religious faith are more important than mundane economic issues like economic succession; our Mennonite forebears did not; they...saw religious and economic issues as intricately linked, inseparable," said Loewen.

When Dutch Mennonites moved to the Danzig area one of the concessions they received included provision that "even rented land could be passed on to children and divided into smaller parcels," commented Loewen.

During the migration to Russia the government offered Mennonites "military exemption and autonomous colonies" but there was disagreement on inheritance practices. In 1810 the Chortitza colony stated that "the operating principles of Mennonite inheritance are biblically based, seeking to follow Isaiah's charge to be 'just and righteous' and oppose those who would 'take away the right from the poor.'"

This document stated that in disposing of property the surviving spouse "retains one half and the other half goes to the inheritors (the children) in equal amounts." There was no distinction about gender, said Loewen.

Joint heirs

This practice of sexual equality and equal distribution among children was brought to Manitoba by the Russian Mennonites, said Loewen. This was a radical departure from the larger Manitoba society. Since prairie women had no rights over homestead property until the 1918 Dower Act was passed in Manitoba.

Loewen described a 1902 Manitoba Surrogate Court action where Sommerfelder Mennonite elders argued that "inheritance had to recognize both men and women, not only men as English common law had it. And the reason for this...was that if, as the apostle Peter writes, men and women are 'joint heirs of the grace of life, how much more of the temporal good.' Mennonite leaders had no doubt that inheritance and religion were linked, said Loewen.

"We consider it right, that...all children, both sons and daughters, shall be joint heirs and share alike of the..estate," Mennonites told the Surrogate Court.

These practices did not continue, said Loewen, because of church schism, farm commercialization, the 1918 Dower's Act, and the great depression. The greatest changes to a 400 year inheritance practice were the provincial laws. Churches began using state laws as their guidelines.

"This (1918) Act still fell short of traditional Mennonite customs," said Loewen. Under this Act a widow was entitled to only one-third of the property. Manitoba Mennonites continued enforcing their own inheritance practices, but not for long.

By the middle of this century the "scriptural

rationale for ordinances shifted from a social imperative of 'justice and protection' to moral virtues of 'guarding against avarice' and 'avoiding the law courts of the unjust,' said Loewen.

Recent Mennonite strategies include encouraging will making, avoiding provincial succession duties, and seeking bequests to church organizations.

Loewen examined wills probated in Manitoba between 1936-1962. He noted that estates were distributed equally among descendants. "Rarely, amongst these wills, was there a hint...of privileging sons over daughters," said Loewen. If gender played a part in these wills, said Loewen, it was to repay daughters for services to elderly parents.

Mennonites in this study, while ensuring equality reigned among their children, "were less eager to maintain the 500 year tradition of granting wives an equal stake in the farm." Increasingly wills dictated the "the widow was to receive considerably less than half the estate as in Mennonite tradition," said Loewen.

Historically Mennonites were dedicated to equality in matters of inheritance; they were ahead of their times in but that is no longer the case.

In thanking Loewen for his presentation MHS Board member Lorne Dyck noted that history helps us bring our past into focus; he expressed appreciation for the Christian spirit of justice that guided inheritance practices.

The evening included music by Wilmer Neufeld and refreshments provided by Frieda Toews. MHS Board member Lillian Toews invited participation in the Memorial Wall Project.

From the President

Only a few years ago, we had all but given up hope that we would ever find out what

happened to our people in the dark Stalinist days of the USSR. Many prayers went up to God for family and friends who were left behind in the 1920's and whose fate was unknown. Then we learned of survivors here and there and of incredible hardships they endured as they tried to rebuild their lives. Later many were able to emigrate to Germany often with failing health where they could resume their church and community life and provide their children with new opportunities.

Then with Perestroika, the veil was withdrawn and the archives and police files opened to public access. It is remarkable that records were kept in the turmoil and aftermath of the revolution of the fate of our people even of individuals who perished during forced marches and in work camps. It is even more remarkable that the authorities have in recent years declared those executed innocent even though they were condemned for counter-revolutionary activities.

My reason for reflecting on these dark times is not to relive this evil era but to draw attention to the unprecedented opportunity we have to access sources now open to us and to shed light on this troubling period of our history. I say a short period of time because there is now a confluence of factors that will unlikely persist into the future. These are our own Mennonite scholars who are highly motivated to pursue this research, a number of young Ukrainian and Russian scholars who are focusing on this aspect of Russian history and a significant number of people like us who care and have the means to support this research. Our society is deeply committed to these research projects and we ask you to give generously to this cause.

The Wall of Remembrance

The Historical Society is establishing a memorial wall at the MHS offices. The wall is an opportunity to honour and remember our ancestors who despite hardships, limited

means, and tragedies built homes, churches, schools, and benevolent societies.

The memorial wall is our opportunity to pay tribute to our forbearers by purchasing a mounted plaque which will be publicly displayed at the MHS offices. Information on a plaque includes the name of the person honoured, the date they arrived in Canada (if applicable), their place of origin, and the names of the donors.

A plaque can be purchased for \$500.00. Most of the funds received will be placed into the Historical Society's Endowment Fund. A tax deductible receipt will be issued. The Endowment Fund will assist in funding MHS projects and will ensure that future generations will be able to learn about their rich heritage.

Please consider purchasing a plaque. For more information contact our office at 853-6177.

Book Review

The Taken by Naomi Reimer. Birch Bay Books, 69pp, \$12, softcover.
Reviewed by Barbara Nickel

Our Mennonite historical landscape is crowded with abandoned cemeteries and unsung deaths, including thousands taken during the brutal Stalinist era. In her book of poems, *The Taken*, Naomi Reimer turns up the face-down gravestones of those and other Mennonites from her own past, uncovering names and stories to mourn an "unfunerated" people.

In Reimer's poems, "the gravid quiet of Mennonite dead/becomes a clamour, /like the silent spinning of wheels." While in the first two sections she briefly introduces many characters from the Ukraine and Poland, she reveals the suicidal death of her own grandfather in the book's core third section. In these elegies, Reimer convinces with vivid imagery and irony: "But Grandfather, the family suicide, / Put in a corner grave near a fence/ where cows reached across a wire to

graze uncut grass -- next to three/ strangers designated unredeemed."

As the book moves to its close, the reader moves closer to the poet, encountering her father and her mother, both near death in nursing homes. In a beautiful poem, "Spirit", Reimer describes the light and spirit leaving her mother "as if her borders are sieved".

Reimer leaves us with images of life and hope, like the alder in the penultimate poem whose rings bear the patterns of the seasons. Reimer's poems are like this tree, revealing and singing the lives and deaths of those who would otherwise be silent.

Barbara Nickel is a Vancouver writer and musician. She is the author of *The Secret Wish of Nannerl Mozart* (1996) and the recently published *The Gladys Elegies*.

From the Archives

Living history

A grade 5 class at W.A. Fraser elementary school in Abbotsford recently read Barbara Claasen Smucker's *Days of Terror*. The teacher wanted the students to speak with someone who experienced the Russian revolution and contacted the MHS office for assistance. Former pastor Gerhard Peters, now over 90 years of age, described his experiences during those turbulent times in Russia. His presentation was well received by the students.

Yarrow

Our Paper was an independent weekly newspaper published by C.J. Plett of Yarrow that used English and German. The February 28, 1948, issue describes Jacob A. Dyck of Yarrow, also known as "Long Jake" who owned the only gum boots in the area. Long Jake used to carry women and children through sloughs on their way to church. The paper also reported in the April 29, 1948 issue "Menno Giesbrecht, driver of the Little Mountain Dairy Milk Truck accidentally ran into the white picket fence along the highway

east of the city (Abbotsford). Damage amounted to \$200.00 The driver was not hurt."

Our Paper contains local and world news, and advertisements. If you have copies of this newspaper, we would be pleased to add them to our collection for safekeeping and for the interest of others. We have one 1946 issue and a number of 1948 copies. Please contact Hugo Friesen at the Archives, 853-6177.

Family history

Henry Voth and his sister Erna Schmidt recently checked their family history record on our GRANDMA CD-Rom computer program and were pleased to find information on their family. This program contains more than 267,000 names plus other genealogical information. You are invited to use this resource in doing your family research.

Chortitza to Clearbrook

Many are familiar with the centuries old oak tree in the Russian Mennonite village of Chortitza. The first Mennonites who came to Chortitza area from Prussia built their homes near this tree.

In 1993 a seedling from that oak tree arrived in Canada. It is now growing on the Columbia Bible College grounds between College Hall and Redekop Hall and is over two metres in height. BCMHS board member and CBC librarian David Giesbrecht can point out the tree which will eventually be identified with a plaque.

Archives - Recent Acquisitions

Mr. G.I. Peters recently donated a list of the names of 12,000 people who left Gnadenfeld, Russia, for Canada in 1925. Mr. Peters has translated this list into English. He describes how he came to have this document:

This past January we went to the funeral of my wife's brother, Menno Gerbrandt of

Drake, Saskatchewan. We stopped in Saskatoon to visit Mr. and Mrs. Wiens - we had come to Canada on the same boat as the Wienses in 1925 on the Mountnairn. He mentioned that a he had some old papers from his father written in Russian and German. I was excited to find it was our immigration list from Gnadenfeld. Residents of that village left Russia in two groups in 1925. Mr. Wiens gladly gave me all the papers and I have translated them into English and intend to hand them to our archives for future generations.

The Mennonite Historical Society thanks Mr. Wiens and Mr. Peters for this valuable contribution to our archives.

Mennonite Encyclopaedia

Our archives is seeking a set of Mennonite Encyclopaedia...if any of our readers would like to donate a set for public use at the Archives, please contact Hugo Friesen, 853-6177.

BCMHS Newsletter

The MHS Newsletter is produced periodically to inform and promote the work of the B.C. Mennonite Historical Society. The newsletter is mailed to those who have contributed financially to the work of the MHS. It is edited by Henry Neufeld with assistance from Hugo Friesen and Loretta Krueger. Correspondence can be directed to: Newsletter, MHS.

MHS Board Members:

Lorne Dick (Abbotsford), David Giesbrecht (Abbotsford), Edward Hildebrand (Vancouver), Agatha Klassen (Abbotsford), John Konrad (North Vancouver), David Loewen (Abbotsford), Peter Neudorf (North Vancouver), Henry Neufeld (Delta), Jacob Quiring (Abbotsford), Henry Rempel (Chilliwack), William Riediger (Vancouver), Lillian Toews (Vancouver)

Anabaptism in Dialogue

An Interdisciplinary Lecture Series on Issues of Faith, Past and Present

The Menno Simons Centre is an ideal place in which to engage issues of faith in a variety of disciplines. Just as the Centre seeks to bridge the Anabaptist/Mennonite faith and heritage with the modern secular world of university study, this lecture series is aimed at bridging the Anabaptist past with the Mennonite present, the world of faith with the contemporary arts and sciences. The purpose of this series of meetings is to provide a forum for Anabaptist/Mennonites and other Christians to integrate their faith with important current research, experiences, or issues encountered in academia and beyond, in business, the arts, the sciences, and in other areas of endeavour.

Lectures will range from issues of historical to contemporary interest, with an underlying attempt to relate the Christian faith to the chosen topic in an accessible and broadly relevant format. Speakers are recognized leaders in their fields of inquiry, and the papers presented will be collected and published in a series, available by subscription.

There will be at least two such lectures per academic semester, to be held at the Menno Simons Centre, 4000 West 11th Avenue, Vancouver, normally on Tuesday evenings. Lectures begin at 7:30 p.m. sharp and last for approximately 40-60 minutes. There is a break immediately after the lecture for refreshments. After the break there will be ample time for questions and discussion of the presentation.

For more information contact members of the Pacific Centre for Discipleship Academic Committee: Benjamin Redekop (946-6767; bredekop@icicomputer.com), Paul Martens (224-4745; pmartens@interchange.ubc.ca), Doug Shantz (850-2656; shantz@twu.ca)

First Lecture in the Series:

Calvin W. Redekop

Mennonite Sociologist and Professor Emeritus of Conrad Grebel College

“A Pilgrim’s Progress: Searching for God’s People”

Tuesday, May 12, 1998
 Menno Simons Centre
 4000 W. 11th Ave.
 Vancouver
 7:30 p.m.