

MENNONITE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF BC NEWSLETTER

WHAT WE HAVE HEARD AND KNOWN WE WILL TELL THE NEXT GENERATION.

PS.78

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*HOURS-MON-FRI -9AM-4PM

Volume 5, Issue 3

June, 1999

TELL ME WHO YOU ARE...

KEN REDDIG

Ken Reddig is the director of the Mennonite Heritage Centre, Winnipeg. He spoke recently at the 25th meeting of the Saskatchewan Mennonite Historical Society.

Some years ago William Least Heat Moon wrote a book called *Blue Highways*. In the book he describes his new understanding of geography as he circles the USA by taking maps and driving on the blue highways instead of the red highways. The red highways are those that get you quickly from one place to another. The blue highways – side roads – take you to the sights, sounds, smells and culture of the people who surround that fast lane of traffic.

In the book, Least Heat Moon – who is part aboriginal – finds all kinds of people who have not even found themselves. He explores their lives, captures their language and recreates their works and monuments. In short, he makes the US and its people seem new.

continued on page 2

A HISTORY OF MENNONITE WOMEN IN CANADA

The Mennonite Historical Society of Canada has commissioned Marlene Epp to write a history of Mennonite women in Canada. Marlene is the daughter of Frank H. Epp and has a doctorate from the University of Toronto. She lectures at Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo.

The cost of writing is estimated to be \$12,000.00 and the Society is asking for financial support. Your cheque should be made to the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada and sent to T.E. Friesen, PO Box 720, Altona, MB, R0G 0B0

Singing at the Fire, a CD featuring 11 martyr hymns sung by the Eastern Mennonite University Chamber Singers. Included is a 16 page booklet with the words to the hymns and poems. This CD can be ordered toll free from 1-800-743-2484; some copies are available from our Centre (604)853-6177 for \$22.75.

There is a **selection of books for sale** at our Centre. Our office hours are from 9am-4pm, Mon-Fri. Visitors are welcome to browse through the material, engage in historical or genealogical searches, or view our displays and the Memorial Wall plaques.

The **Memorial Wall Project** provides an opportunity to purchase a memorial plaque in honor of someone whose legacy you wish remembered. The plaques will be displayed publicly. Each plaque purchaser will submit a written testament of the person named on the plaque. Please consider buying a plaque (\$500.00) to honor a person or a couple for their legacy to the BC Mennonite Community. This is also one way to contribute to the work of the BCMHS.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

3 EDITORIAL

4 ANNUAL MEETING

5 TWO LEGACIES

7 DONORS OF 1998

MENNONITE HISTORICAL 1

The MHS Newsletter is produced periodically to inform and promote the work of the BCMHS. It is mailed to those who contribute \$25.00 or more to the work of the MHS. It is edited by Henry Neufeld with assistance of Hugo Friesen and Loretta Krueger. Correspondence can be directed to our office address listed in the heading.

He wrote another book – *PrairieErth*. In this book he describes the flint hills of central Kansas – Chase County in particular. Chase County is about 15 miles from where I grew up. In the 600 page book *Least Heat Moon* describes virtually every inch of that county in a way that makes one wish to take that book and sit on the hills and read passage after passage as you soak in the natural beauty and the stories of people who have made up that county for over 175 years.

Another similar book is Kathleen Norris's *Dakota*. She describes moving from New York city to Lemmon, a small town on the border of North and South Dakota. The community, the landscape, begins to redefine her thinking and her self-understanding. With a poetic voice and yet unsentimental description she weaves together the lives of farmers, townsfolk, aboriginals, and a community of Benedictine monks. The book ends on a spiritual high and resulted in another book, which describes her spiritual journey.

These books tell stories – many stories. But they do more than tell the story – they interpret who the people are and what the landscape is. They are a kind of local history in a new and good sense and are proof that local history is interesting and can be a best seller.

TELL THE STORY

This is the task of the Historical Society – to tell the story and then to tell who the people are – past, present and future – to place them in their landscape and to describe the events that have affected them.

It seems so simple. When you read *Dakota* or *Least Heat Moon* it sounds so effortless. The way these two writers tell stories they just seem to flow one into the other. Throughout their books they eventually come to crescendos which fill you with an understanding of what they are describing as well as an urge to be there and experience it yourself. You are invited as a guest. You can walk down the street of Cottonwood Falls, Kansas – as our family did – and as you meet people on the street you seem to already know who they are. That is good story telling. That is perhaps not classical history but it introduces people to a sense of place, people and time.

I believe we need more such writing. Historical societies concentrate too much on mere recitation and gathering of data. And that is important. But societies must move beyond that

stage if they wish to capture the imagination and the needs of the next generations. The story needs to be told in a way that it becomes intimate and approachable. It needs to be given expression, a new life, in a way that the reader can identify.

It means placing the story in context. This requires good research and the end result of good research is interpretation. Interpretation builds a road to the future. All one needs to understand this is to look at the biblical prophets. They knew their story and they knew the landscape. They built upon this foundation and through their intimate relationship with God brought forth the word of God to warn or direct people.

Collecting is fine and good and should be done. Retelling and interpreting is however the real challenge. Let me give you an example from my home state of Kansas and the community in which I grew up.

First I will provide the context. I was raised on a small dairy farm on the outskirts of the town of Lehigh 7 miles from Hillsboro. Lehigh was a small has-been community. The community became intolerant of anyone or anything that seemed to have the potential of harming. The community was on the edge of survival and everyone knew it.

Jake – Story 1

An example was Jake Meyer. The story of Jake as recited in local history writing is very brief. Jake was an eccentric who lived with his sister Sophia in a ramshackle house in Lehigh. Jake was a retired farmer who owned land in various parts of Kansas. This is what they said because they did not want to say more, but to say more gives the real context of the story.

Jake – Story 2

As Paul Harvey says, "Here's the rest of the story." Jake was a loner. Everyone knew Jake – and they did not like who he was. Jake never painted his house, drove a beat up Model A and never took a bath. Sophie was only slightly cleaner. Jake was a bright though withdrawn person. Sophie was somewhat mentally challenged. The two lived in filth and became a cause of great embarrassment and downright anger in the community.

Lehigh still had a tank in the middle of Main Street, a vestige from an earlier horse and buggy era. The tank was always full of water. In the wisdom of the elders of this town of 250 it was decided that Jake would get a bath – whether he like it or not. It was a fun thing for the community and many came to watch. A time was set and when Jake arrived at the grocery store they grabbed him, tore off his clothes, held him in the water, soaped him and cleaned him. They then put something over him so he could go home and put on a new set of clothes.

Continued on page 3

MENNONITE HISTORICAL 2

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Not a good experience for Jake. I'm proud to say it was my father who avoided having this repeated. He made a deal with Jake and every few months he would wash his clothes. Of course my mother would not let it happen in our washer. So in a galvanized tub outdoors, the clothes of Jake were washed. Finally my father got Jake to clean himself up a bit to avoid the wrath of the community but there is more to the story.

You see, my father found out something about Jake. Jake had been a well-to-do farmer in another Kansas community. He had been happily married for a number of years and then his wife had run off with another man. Jake became withdrawn and moved to our community. He lived his solitary life with his handicapped sister. When he died it was discovered he owned 10 quarters of prime farmland in another Kansas community, had dollars in the bank and had thousands of dollars stashed in his house.

No one cared to know his story – they cared only that he smelled and was a sorry sight. He embodied something that the town did not want to be known as. He was the picture of a dying community – precisely what the community was trying so hard not to be.

You can see the difference between the two stories. Both are true as they are written. One gives the correct details but the other provides an interpretation. It takes times, energy and research, but a creative energetic historian writer gets behind the basic facts and uncovers more of the story. You work at the story until you see who the person is and what the landscape is.

Borscht

To communicate well is something like making good borscht. You bring tomatoes, potatoes, onions, cabbage, meat, spices together and you cook it just right and it is to die for. But you can take those very same ingredients, change the proportions, not cook it well enough, and the soup must be thrown out. You have not brought all the ingredients together in a way that tells you what good borscht is. The flavors do not mix well. Creative story telling invites the reader to willingly want to explore the people and the landscape. It is not just stories it is a well-crafted pot of borscht. It leads the reader through the complexities of a place and its people during a particular period of time. ☺

FROM ALBERTA

The recent reactivated Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta has issued two newsletters and held several public workshops. They can be contacted through their secretary, Judith Rempel, 2416 Bowness Rd., Calgary, Alberta, T2N 3L7

EDITORIAL

Henry Neufeld

Our Historical Society seeks to promote the awareness of the rich heritage of faith of Mennonite Christians. The BCMHS is an independent organization with no formal ties to any church or conference.

As a relatively small organization, we rely on volunteers for most of our work. We appreciate the many volunteers who work at the archives organizing files and photographs and assisting people with genealogical research.

Our major expenses include the support of research projects in St. Petersburg and Zaporoshje and maintaining our archives and office facilities.

We need your continued support. Elsewhere in this issue you will find a description of the various ways you can participate in the work of the BC Mennonite Historical Society.

One of the ways we attempt to communicate with our members is through the Newsletter. Some of our guiding principles for content in the newsletter include articles that promote our Society and inform readers of our work, articles that have some connection to the Mennonite world, whether on a local, national or international scale. We want to inform readers of events of interest such as church anniversary celebrations, and new books, etc.

In this issue, for the first time, we include obituaries in our Newsletter. The stories of a person's life and experiences are of significant historical interest. These stories remind us of similar accounts we have heard, and they inform us of the life experiences of our sisters and brothers. They point to the faith in God, which carried people through difficult times.

The two life stories in this issue touch on the sagas of personal faith and life, death, fleeing in wartime, loss and the contribution made to individuals, families and church communities. These two legacies are not about church and conference leaders; rather they are about ordinary people who left a lasting influence. They are stories common yet unique to the Mennonites who came to Canada during the post WW2 period. These stories remind us that the ravages of war, the destructiveness of bombs, and hatred continue to this day. We still have refugees fleeing for safety.

Should obituaries be included as a regular Newsletter feature? How do we select which ones to print? Should the BCMHS commit itself to publishing the life stories of its members? Should we be asking our members to provide us with their life stories? We need to hear what you want to see in these Newsletters - please write, or call our office or Board members. ☺

MENNONITE HISTORICAL 3

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David Giesbrecht (Abbotsford), Secretary

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John Konrad (N.Vancouver), President

Peter Neudorf (N.Vancouver),

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Henry Neufeld (Delta). Newsletter,

Louise Price (Abbotsford),

Henry Rempel (Chilliwack), Vice-President

William Riediger (Vancouver),

Lillian Toews (Vancouver)

MHS ANNUAL MEETING

The annual meeting of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC was held on May 1, just prior to the lecture by Dr. Paul Toews.

Highlights from the 1998 annual reports include the completion of the move to the new offices in the Garden Park Tower, expanding the newsletter, and increasing the number of volunteers and office hours extended to five days a week.

Heritage lectures in 1998 included Dr. Roydon Loewen on inheritance practices among Mennonites, Dr. Theron Schlabach on discipleship, generational change and the practice of Mennonite history, and Dr. Al Reimer on the price of non-resistance to the Mennonites in Imperial Russia and Canada.

Progress is being made on the project to mount the memorial plaques on an appropriate display exhibit. A model of the proposed exhibit will be available shortly.

Zaporoshje Project. In 1998 the last installment of our financial contribution to this project was submitted. Our support helped Dr. Harvey Dyck bring about 110,000 pages of microfilmed material to Toronto and another 30,000 pages should arrive shortly. We expect to receive copies once the material had been indexed so it will be available for use here.

The archives are now open daily from 9AM-4PM, thanks to Hugo Friesen and a number of dedicated volunteers.

Directors elected to the Board of MHS are John Konrad, Peter Neudorf, Louise Price, and Henry Rempel.

Financially, 1998 revenues are not enough to cover our project costs, such as the Zaporoshje materials and the exhibit for the memorial wall. We continue to need additional donations from our members and friends.

WE NEED YOUR HELP

As a volunteer organization the BC Mennonite Historical Society cannot function without the support of many people. Here are some of the ways you can become involved in working with us.

Volunteer workers.

We need people with an interest in genealogy and history who are willing to work at our centre. In 1998 more than one thousand hours of volunteer work were contributed. There are options for some variety of work: helping individuals in genealogical research, cataloguing photographs and documents, answering phones, etc. If you are interested in spending a few hours a week at our centre, please contact Hugo Friesen at 853-6177.

YOUR STORY

Last fall Dr. Al Reimer spoke about pacifism during the last war. After the lecture one man told me about serving time in a British jail because of his refusal to fight. We did not get his name; but his story should be told and we'd like the gentleman to contact us with his story. Similarly, many of you had experiences that could be recorded and printed. If you need help with the actual writing we'd be pleased to assist. Contact Henry Neufeld at the MHS office - 853-6177 or at his home - 946-3961.

DOCUMENTS

We are always interested in receiving histories, documents, photographs and other items of historical interest. If you have material that is of historical interest please contact our office at 853-6177.

HERITAGE LECTURES

Bring friends to our heritage lectures and introduce them to the work of our Society.

MENNONITE HISTORICAL 4

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GIFTS OF SHARES

Gifts of Shares listed on a Canadian or foreign stock exchange may be made to a charitable organization like the Mennonite Historical Society. Such donations, because they are made to a charitable organization, are subject to a capital gains rate of only 37.5% instead of 75%.

An example is a purchase of shares costing \$2,000. Over the years those shares increased in value and are now worth \$6,000. Selling them results in a capital gain of \$4,000. The government considers 75% of this \$4,000 as income. For a person in the 50% tax bracket, the government would require a payment of \$1500 in tax.

However if those shares are donated to a charitable organization like MHS, the tax rate drops to 50% and the tax payable to the government is only \$750.

To benefit from this reduced capital gains rate and to consider making a donation of shares to the MHS, please contact Board member Bill Riediger, (604) 222-9650 (home) or at his office (604)691-7207.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Our heritage lectures and fund raising dinners do not produce enough revenue to balance our books. We continue to rely on donations to sustain our projects. For more information contact our treasurer Ed Hildebrand (266-9379). Please use the envelope included in this newsletter to make a contribution to our work.

UPCOMING EVENTS

OCTOBER 30, 1999, 7 PM

OUR ANNUAL FUND RAISING BANQUET AT
GARDEN PARK TOWER.

DR. WALTER UNGER, COLUMBIA BIBLE COLLEGE
PRESIDENT WILL BE SPEAKING ON

"MENNONITES MILLENNIAL MADNESS: A CASE
STUDY."

MUSIC BY INGRID SUDERMAN

OCTOBER 16, 1999

GENEALOGICAL WORKSHOP
DETAILS TO FOLLOW

FROM MANITOBA

COMMEMORATING THE 125TH ANNIVERSARY OF
Mennonites arriving in Manitoba includes a sunrise
church service on Sunday, August 1, 1999, at the
Forks of the Assiniboine and Red Rivers. Later the
same morning another anniversary service will be
held at the Mennonite Heritage Village in Steinbach.

OUR HERITAGE – TWO LEGACIES

In memory of the arrival of many Mennonites from Europe 50 years ago, we present tributes to two such people who died recently. We thank their families for making this information available to us.

Elisabeth Neudorf (1912-1999)

Her children and grandchildren remember her for her loving care, and for her example in how to artistically and tastefully create good food, a comfortable home, and a beautiful garden. Though she had health problems, she enjoyed singing hymns; her songs often reflected her mood.

Life was not always easy for her. Elisabeth was the second of four daughters born to Elisabeth (nee Wedel) and Johan Rempel, on September 1, 1912, in Osterwick, Ukraine. Her father died when Elisabeth was seven years old. Rev. David Epp baptized her in June 1931.

Elisabeth married Johann Peter Neudorf on January 17, 1932. They lived in Osterwick where three of their children were born. Their youngest son was born in Germany.

"We have experienced much hardship in our life but even more the enduring grace and faithfulness of God. Although my husband and I were separated a number of times (during the German invasion of Ukraine) we were always reunited. We had each other and we lost no child on our flight from Communist Russia as so many other families did."

In fall 1943 the family reached Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia; they also lived in Bavaria. While on a train destined for Dresden the Neudorf family was persuaded by a Red Cross official to disembark less than 100 km from Dresden. That night Dresden was bombed and burned.

They immigrated to Canada in 1948 and settled in the Aldergrove area. *"Here we found a new home, with many possibilities and were finally able to find fellowship in a Mennonite church."* (Bethel Mennonite)

In later years their son John took over the farm and the Neudorfs moved to Clearbrook in 1972. Elisabeth's husband died in 1979. In 1996 Mrs. Neudorf moved into the Tabor Pavilion. She died in her sleep on May 1, 1999. The funeral service was held at the Clearbrook Mennonite Church on May 5, 1999. Harp music at the funeral was performed by one of her granddaughters at her request.

MENNONITE HISTORICAL 5

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She is survived by her five children: Elisabeth Redekop (Abbotsford), Peter (Maple Ridge), Margaret Shaw (N.Vancouver), and Johann (Aldergrove) and eleven grandchildren.

"My mother and sisters all died in Russia. I missed them badly and many times was very homesick for my extended family. When Peter, my dearly loved husband, went home to the Lord, my children and grandchildren were my comfort in my great sorrow but now I look forward to one more reunion in our everlasting home."

JAKE SAWATSKY (1930-1999)

Jake Sawatsky's favorite saying was: *Glueklich ist wer vergisst, was nich mehr zu aendern ist.* (Fortunate is he who can forget that which cannot be changed.) His life was evidence of living in the present without regret of the past.

Jake was a Vancouver contractor who built many homes and some apartments. He could see if a wall was crooked with a naked eye. His priority in work was to ensure his family was well provided for, yet he was able to balance his life with family, friends and church.

Jake was born in Nieder Chortitza, Ukraine on January 12, 1930, the fourth child of Johann and Justina Sawatzky. When Jake was a year old the family became disenfranchised in the aftermath of the Russian revolution. However, through a miracle he received work in a factory in Zaparozhe, a short distance from Nieder Chortitza.

In fall 1933 Jake's father was kidnapped by the NKVD (secret police) on his way home from work and for six weeks the family had no idea where he was. Since their father had the bread ration cards in his pocket the family had no bread in this time. Jake became malnourished and swollen with hunger. At Christmas 1933 Jake's father was released and began work at a collective farm. For a few years life became better. But on February 2, 1938 Jake's father was arrested again and this time disappeared forever. That summer Jake's mother became very ill with typhus, but thanks be to God, she recovered and was able to stay with the children.

Jake attended school in Nieder Chortitza. In 1943 the Sawatzky family along with thousands of others, fled from Ukraine and became refugees. Jake had been raising singing pigeons and couldn't bear to leave his birds behind, so he took them along on the trek to Germany. At the German border he was told he could not take the pigeons with him. He sold them and was proud to be the first in their group to have German money.

After a short time in Germany they moved to Yugoslavia and in 1944 to Austria. Jake often said he had an international education; he studied in five countries. In 1947, in Kapfenberg, Austria, Jake was baptized by pastor Peter Thiessen.

The dream of the family was to emigrate to Canada. In 1948 the Sawatzky family came to Port Rowan, Ontario where they were sponsored by the Lodie family. They soon moved to Leamington where they had relatives. Here Jake joined the Leamington Mennonite church. He worked as a farm laborer and as a carpenter.

In 1955 Jake, his mother, and brother John, moved to BC where two sisters already lived. He married Anne Epp in 1956 and they made their home in Vancouver and joined First Mennonite Church. Later they joined the Sherbrook Mennonite Church where Jake served on the building committee, finance committee and church council. He was instrumental in buying land where Peace Mennonite Church is situated. Jake was an active member of the Mennonite Senior Citizens Society Board and was involved in a number of projects including Menno Court, Pine Grove and Cherrywood.

Jake's experience as a starving child and as a refugee gave him an immense interest in the work of the Mennonite Central committee. He served on the MCCBC executive for 18 years. He was a generous and strong supporter of MCC.

Jake taught his children by example; he was loving, faithful, fair, patient, and a good steward. During his marriage of nearly forty years he showed Anne devotion and respect. She was the love of his life and they were truly partners. He was known for being straight forward and to the point in his communication and he worked to keep peace in every situation.

Though he often mentioned his lack of education, he had unquestionable integrity and a common sense uncommon in most people. His children along with many others would look to him for advice and guidance. His advice was to live a balanced life and to love God; his whole life was an example of this.

Jake Sawatsky is survived by his wife Anne, son Robert(Tracy), son Mark (Thaleia), daughter Teresa(Tom) and daughter Christina(Allan) and six grandchildren. A service of celebration for the life and memory of Jake Sawatsky was held at Peace Mennonite Church on April 30, 1999. His life was evidence of living in the present without regret of the past. §

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DONORS TO MHS IN 1998

We are grateful for the support received and in acknowledgment of the generosity of the following donors who contributed financially to the MHS in 1998:

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MENNONITE HISTORICAL 7

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THE DIARIES OF DAVID EPP (1837-1843)

by Henry Neufeld

Some church members used violence to deal with other people, some youth were drinking and partying, adultery was a problem, there were serious marriage problems, and infant mortality was high.

These issues faced the closed Mennonite community of Chortitza, Russia, where David Epp was one of the ministers. Epp kept a diary (1837-1843) and recorded in some detail his daily events. Historian John B. Toews discussed some of his diary entries in a recent lecture at Vancouver's Menno Simons Centre.

Toews noted that Epp's diary is likely the only one to survive from that era. Epp, not a successful farmer in an already poor village, was more interested in spiritual matters. He also helped get the village school started in 1840.

Epp had no theological education. He was a man of prayer who studied Scripture, prayed and preached frequently. His writings reflect a life of love and nurturing relationships with fellow ministers and parishioners.

Toews noted the importance of the lengthy training period for baptismal candidates in that era. The confession of faith was read to the congregation three times during the pre-baptismal period.

"Epp lived in an all Mennonite world," said Toews, "where matters of faith and life are all bound up; what do you do with sin?" The church leaders of Epp's day dealt with all community issues: alcoholism, deviant sexuality, false rumors, theft, estate divisions, and gossip.

The principle for resolving issues was that disputants must settle the matter or be excommunicated. This robbed the person of civil and religious rights since the two were closely intertwined.

Toews, after working through difficult to decipher handwritten diaries was impressed with Epp's

spirituality. "He preaches about 52 sermons a year including weddings and funerals and does not repeat a text except for funerals. He preaches on repentance, the importance of the Christian faith and of the Christ who sustains, he agonizes over the shortcomings of the life of the congregation."

Some Epp Diary Entries

May 3

On Tuesday my father-in-law Heinrich Thiessen died quietly at 12 noon following nine weeks of illness. He reached the age of eighty-two years, seven months and two days. His illness was a difficulty one. He suffered from a urinary disorder and a severe cough. He fought a difficult yet brave battle and his end was peaceable. He will receive joy for his sorrow and the oil of gladness for his troubled spirit. He so wished to die and be with Christ. Christ in His grace will fulfill his wish and prayer.

He was a widower for five years and three months. He was married for forty-eight years and twenty-eight days. He sired ten children, eight of whom died. He was a grandfather to thirty children, eight of who, died. Rest in peace you noble spirit until the end of time. A farewell to you, yet never will we be parted.

August 18.

Thursday. D. Koslowsky senior and Cornelius Vogt appeared before the Lehrdienst because of a quarrel about some chickens. The parties were reconciled. Similarly Gerhard Rempel and Johann Hubert appeared because of a quarrel about some sheep and lambs. They too were reconciled and left in peace.

December 15.

Thursday. Three youths from? and three youths from Osterwick were ordered to appear before the Lehrdienst on complaint of Peter Dyck of Kronsthal. When Dyck held services at his house they engaged in all sorts of mischief. Dyck's warnings were of no avail and they began to call him names, even on the street. Following a discussion they promised to behave and were reconciled with Dyck. Let's hope they keep their promise.

MENNONITE HISTORICAL 8

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