

Mennonite Historical Society of BC NEWSLETTER

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

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UPCOMING EVENTS:

OCTOBER 16, 1999 - 9AM - 4 PM

GENEALOGY WORKSHOP

Come and enjoy a day of introduction to resources and methods of research. Perfect opportunity for beginners to get started on researching their family trees. We have limited space so please register by calling the office at 853-6177. Cost: \$40.00 includes light lunch.

OCTOBER 30, 1999 - 6 PM

ANNUAL FUND RAISING BANQUET

- ❖ MHS banquet at the Garden Park Tower. Dr. Walter Unger, Columbia Bible College President, will be speaking on **"Mennonite Millennial Madness: A Case Study."** Music by Ingrid Suderman. Tickets are \$15.00 and are available from the MHS office or from Board Members.

BOARD MEMBERS

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- ◆ Lillian Toews - Vancouver

NOVEMBER 12, 1999 - 7:30 PM

THREE TENORS CONCERT

- ❖ MHS Benefit Concert at South Abbotsford MB Church. Wilmer Neufeld, Ray Harris, and John Thiessen will perform a variety of hymns, gospel songs, German Kernlieder, oratorio and operatic music. Tickets will be available after October 15 for \$15.00 (\$12.00 for students and seniors) from MHS office or at the door.

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.

From the President

Earlier this year, Irmie and I joined a tour, which took us to Paraguay and Brazil specifically to visit the Mennonite settlements there. In preparing for this trip, we read about the beginnings of these colonies and thought we had some insight as to life in that part of the world. I would like to share with you our impressions and observations which are based on this brief visit.

While some things were as we had envisaged them, others were not. Paraguay is one of very few countries where the Mennonites have been able to replicate colony life as it was in Russia. They were able to negotiate a "privilegium", very much like our people received from Catherine the Great in the late 1700's. They were able to control land titles on the colony, run the schools, hospitals and other charitable institutions and thus maintain a closed community. This was possible because of the colonies' isolation - some 400 km from the nearest city, connected by a poor road that was nearly impassable when it rained.

Isolation, while comfortable from a social point of view, resulted in severely limited economic development. Eventually, the 400 km Trans Chaco Highway was completed and later paved, which allowed agricultural products to flow to urban markets. Many heavy trucks owned by the Co-ops now run daily to Asuncion and other markets so that dairy products bought anywhere in Paraguay are likely to be Mennonite brands. The national telephone company has replaced the colonies' home-made telephone system and the colonies are now connected to the national power system, which is more economical and, in theory at least, more reliable. Also, many young people are taking post-secondary education, some in the colonies but more often in Asuncion. Some return to the colonies as teachers and doctors but many are becoming urbanized, preferring city life to that controlled by the colony administration, the co-op and the church. The result of all this is that colony life as it has existed is starting to break down.

We attended a Sunday service in the local Mennonite church in the Fernheim colony which was founded by Russian Mennonites in 1930. The service was in High German with not a word of Spanish.

Although Spanish is taught as a second language in school, the working language in the community is Plattdeutsch - like it was in Russia. Even Indians who work in the large dairy operation in the Menno colony and live in rented housing in the colony or beyond its borders, speak Plattdeutsch. We could best characterize community life there today by comparing it to life in Mennonite-dominated communities in Canada during the 1950's.

Paraguay is now a democracy and the "privileges" of the the Mennonites are being questioned. It is only a matter of time, some say, before human rights legislation will take away the colony administration's absolute power to control land transfer, education etc. Some are even asking, "How did the Mennonites get the best land in the country?" now that the Chaco has been tamed.

While living in relative isolation from the Paraguayan population, the Mennonites have developed a number of charitable agencies that offer economic development assistance to local Indian tribes, in- and out-patient services to lepers, a day-care service to working mothers and shelter to street children in Asuncion. These are services financed by the progressive Mennonite colonies and staffed by paid workers and by volunteers from Paraguay and abroad.

There are a number of very conservative colonies in Eastern Paraguay that have been established as a refuge from the evils of modern life in Canada and Mexico. These Mennonites do not share in supporting the charitable works with the more progressive Mennonite groups in Eastern Paraguay and the Chaco as they regard the latter as 'abgefallen' or worldly.

We also visited Curitiba, a large city in Brazil, where the Mennonites are virtually all urbanized. They settled on the outskirts of the city in the 1930's and as the city expanded they became part of that society.

We attended an MB church on a Sunday and the whole two and a half hour church service was in Portuguese. It was a service, which ended a church conference in that province of which some 40 churches were Portuguese in terms of language and ethnicity. This was the result of aggressive outreach efforts over the years.

Unlike Paraguay, the Mennonites in Brazil have not pursued isolation from nationals as a way of life.

We visited Witmarsum, a smaller colony and Mennonite centre, not far from Curitiba. Again, this was a progressive community with model farms and agri-businesses.

To us this trip was a continuing discovery of who we are. We could relate to what we saw partly because we understand the historical context of these settlements, but more importantly, because the story of our South American people is not that different from ours. ☺

YARROW MB CHURCH - 70TH ANNIVERSARY

This is a summary of a presentation by David Giesbrecht at the celebration services on June 19, 1999. We thank David for making it available to our readers.

The Vision is born: 1927-1931

In 1927 John Bargan of Nobleford, Alberta, noticed an advertisement in the *Mennonitische Rundschau* that Mr. Chauncey Eckert was looking for settlers in the beautiful Fraser Valley. John and Mary Bargan arrived in Agassiz on November 11, 1927, and were soon joined by Isaac Sawatzky. In February 1928 eight families (50 people) arrived in Yarrow via BC Rail and with no resettlement committee to welcome them, they all lived in one house.

Bargan's overly enthusiastic report to the *Rundschau* resulted in new Mennonite settlers arriving almost weekly. J. C. Krause's memoirs report(s) a frustrated border guard at Sumas being asked by the driver of a Ford filled with a large Mennonite family for directions.

"You'll have no problem", the guard responded, "as soon as you leave here, take any road leading east. You can't miss them. At least a million are already there."

Worship services began as the first contingent of settlers arrived in February 1928 with General Conference and Mennonite Brethren worshipping together in the first few months.

On February 3, 1929, ninety-six members met to organize the Yarrow MB church with Rev. Peter Dyck as the first leader.

By 1930 the first church had been built. The first wedding, (George Hooze and Mary Dahl) on June 16, 1929, took place in the public school that had just been built. In 1929 the young people formed a literary society with debates, orchestral music and ensembles. Waldo Bahnman was the first president of this society.

In the fall of 1930 this fledgling church organized a Bible school with P.D. Loewen as the only teacher that first year. On June 21, 1931 the first BC MB conference was held in Yarrow with delegates from Agassiz and Sardis. Rev. J.A. Harder was elected the first moderator.

The Vision Takes Root: 1930's

While the spiritual life of this small community coalesced quickly, making a livelihood was another challenge. It was during the Great Depression that this community established itself economically. The courage and ingenuity of the early settlers was enhanced by the benevolent efforts of Mr. Eckert who became a patron of the Mennonites. Eckert sold land in ten or twenty acre parcels at \$150.00 an acre with generous credit terms. He also helped secure building materials and other necessities of life.

Other business people were also helpful. Jacob Krause was at Spencer's Hardware to buy his first set of appliances when the manager looked him over and said "Looks like you have an honest face, take whatever you want (on credit, of course). George Baerg noted that because people worked so cooperatively "in a little while their homes came up like mushrooms."

Krause commented on the strength of the women in that settlement. "We have to praise our practical and enduring housewives who managed to look after the youngsters, prepare meals, mend the clothes, and besides that assist in the hoeing of sugar beets, beans, spinach, cabbage, and later rhubarb and berries." These pioneers had no idea what crops to grow and experimented with a variety of crops and became involved in curing tobacco and picking hops. However once they hit upon strawberries and raspberries their fortunes began to change.

By the early 1940's a village structure was organized which became the Yarrow waterworks Board; but concerned with much more than the provision of water.

A health society was organized with a special concern for the poor. In 1935 Yarrow berry farmers organized what became the Yarrow growers Cooperative Association. By 1944 this association operated a general store, a feed and grain buying business, and a packing plant.

For many local citizens the Mennonites were an unwelcome intrusion into the community. At one point a commission of inquiry from Victoria studied the Mennonite situation and commended them on their courageous beginnings. The media could be cruel. A Vancouver Sun article (March 20, 1934) quotes Gordon Towers of the Fraser Valley Board of Trade, "If it took a Pearl Harbour to get the Japanese out of the coast areas, it will take a similar disaster to influence Ottawa to remove Mennonites."

The Golden Years: 1940's

Despite difficulties, the pioneers' vision for community building was consolidated; the economic base was strong and the attention was paid to the social and spiritual growth. In 1948 the Yarrow MB church reached an all time high of 970 members. Music flourished under George Reimer and H.P. Neufeldt conducted a youth choir and orchestra. In 1944 Susie Brucks was commissioned as the church's first missionary. In 1945 MCC BC was organized in Yarrow with A.A. Wiens and George Baerg pouring their lives into this ministry.

Elim Bible School reached a high enrollment of 152 in 1941-42. In 1944 a new building was added to Elim. In September 1945 Sharon Mennonite Collegiate opened its doors with six teachers and 150 students.

The Vision is Tested Late 1940's...

The dreams of the pioneers were soon tested. In spring of 1948 the Fraser River flooded most of Greendale and Matsqui, then the bottom fell out of the raspberry market. The Yarrow Cooperative could only pay 28 cents on the dollar to shareholders, resulting in its sudden closure. The churches were unable to sustain the cost of operating a high school and the building was sold to the Chilliwack School District.

The Bible school closed in 1955. With these losses and young people seeking employment elsewhere, Yarrow lost its status as the premier Mennonite community of BC.

Their desire to operate their own high school was strong and in 1952 the Sharon Mennonite Collegiate reopened and by 1955 a new school facility was built. The financial and student base was too limited to support this venture and in 1969 Sharon Collegiate closed again.

The 1950's and 60's saw the church debate language transition from German to English. By 1957 worship services became bilingual and in 1959 women received full congregational voting rights. In 1961 three church leaders (Peter Neufeldt, Herb Martens, and Walter Sawatsky), enroute to the Canadian MB conference were killed in an automobile accident in Idaho.

The Vision Reborn: 1980's and 90's

By 1980 the church membership had dropped to 297 and declined for another decade. The founding generation of this community would rightfully be concerned that the Scriptures remain central in our churches and that the worship of our Saviour continue to be uncompromised by lesser gods. May God help us and succeeding generations to discharge that trust faithfully. *Ø*

Canadian and USA Mennonites

by Henry Neufeld

"We do recognize... that the core of the gospel is always translated in differing cultural settings. Canadians ought to work in a style that is different than Americans... for the gospel to be the gospel it must be incarnated, it must take on human and cultural forms.... Indian Christianity will look different from African Christianity and so Canadian and American forms of Mennonite Christianity will also look different," said Paul Toews at a spring lecture of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC.

Toews, who teaches history at Fresno Pacific University in California, pointed out differing realities of Mennonites in Canada and the US. Canadian Mennonites are more visible than in the US.

About one in every 288 Canadians is a Mennonite while about one of every 1150 Americans is a Mennonite.

Canadian Mennonites are more concentrated geographically than US Mennonites. The latter are spread from coast to coast while Canadian Mennonites are concentrated along their border. The US has no concentration of Mennonites like southern Manitoba. Pennsylvania's Lancaster County, which has the largest concentration of US Mennonites, has about 60% of the numbers of southern Manitoba.

Canadian Mennonites are more concentrated in urban centres than American Mennonites. In the US Mennonites remain a rural people while in Canada they are an urban people.

"Canadian Mennonites occupy a more visible niche in the economic and political life of Canada than do Mennonites south of the 49th parallel," said Toews.

Canadian Mennonites have consistently been elected to provincial and national governments. 43 Mennonites sat in the House of Commons up to 1989 while in the US only three had held a seat in Congress up to 1980. These differences are due to the differing roles of the two nations on the world scene, and the differing roles of immigrant communities in each country.

The major reasons for these differences are their old world roots: Canadian Mennonites tend to come from the Dutch/North German/Russian stream while US Mennonites tend to flow from the Swiss/South German stream. The first Mennonites settled in the US in 1683, in Canada in 1786. Due to persecution the Swiss/South German tended to develop a doctrine of separation or a two kingdom theology where they expected marginalization and shunning by the larger social and political structures. This led to an emphasis on separation and the practice of humility and simplicity.

The Dutch/North Germans pursued separation through group autonomy from the larger society, requiring the development of community institutions and governance, particularly in Russia.

The Swiss/South German migration to the US brought the ethic of simplicity, humility, and social withdrawal from institutional forms.

"Mennonite schools evolved much later among the Swiss-related Mennonites than among the Dutch/Russian. Seminary education developed almost 180 years later. Private... schools also emerged much later and only proliferated following the Second World War."

Toews noted that the Amish receive a lot of publicity in the US and thus define, in the public mind, the identity of Mennonites "Precisely because they provide an antidote to the dominant culture they have become cultural heroes. In a culture organized around the future, they preserve the past," said Toews.

Canadian Mennonite public identity is much different. Only in Ontario do the Old Orders shape public images. In the rest of Canada the image is defined by large business enterprises, large congregations, politicians, artists, novelists and musicians.

"Although Mennonites were scattered and dispersed over different continents and host societies... there emerged what the late Frank Epp came to call a 'corporate Mennonite personality' which identified and distinguished Mennonites from other Christian communities," said Toews.

These qualities included "a wariness of the state modified by a strong sense of obedience in most matters, a refusal to swear an oath of loyalty while regularly and sincerely praying for those in authority, great familiarity with... agricultural processes, a love of family and children, and at least some degree of ethnic culture."

In attempting to deal with the modern world to cope with the encroaching larger society, the progressives felt the new society would infuse the Mennonites to new vitality; while the conservatives worried about the effects of acculturation. The result is 31 different Mennonite groups linked by inter Mennonite networks (MCC and Mennonite World Conference) which span denominations and countries.

Toews concluded: "Today we are no longer a marginal folk. We are viewed by many as a people with a word to offer the coming century. Many thoughtful persons, on both sides of the 49th parallel are looking to us to provide ways to navigate the future." 8

Book Review

Dit Un Jant Opp Plautdietsch: This and That in Low German, by Reuben Epp. The Reader's Press, Hillsboro, Kansas. First Edition, 1997. Illustrations by Mike Unger. Library of Congress Catalog No. 97-75520. ISBN 0-9638494-2-5. \$9.95 (US)

Reviewed by Eldo Neufeld, Vancouver.

This is the third work by Reuben Epp published by Reader's Press in Hillsboro, Kansas. The first one, "The story of Low German and Plautdietsch," was written in English and published in 1993. The second, entitled "The spelling of Low German and Plautdietsch," was also in English, published in 1996. Now comes this third publication, "Dit un Jant opp Plautdietsch," subtitled "This and that in Mennonite Low German."

Reuben Epp seems tireless in his pursuit of the ideal of advancing the cause of his mother-tongue. His first volume presented a scholarly history of Low German and Plautdietsch, two terms that probably require a brief clarification. When I first saw that title on a bookshelf in Kansas, I said, "Low German AND Plautdietsch?" Since my childhood I had always thought of the two as being one and the same thing. As Reuben makes clear in that book, Low German (Niederdeutsch) was an early literary language as well as the language of business in the Hanseatic League, roughly from the 12th to the 16th centuries. Plautdietsch is one of perhaps eight or more dialects that sprang from that language.

By the time of the publication of his second volume on the subject, Reuben had become thoroughly convinced that it was time to begin working toward the goal of a common method of spelling among writers of Plautdietsch, a method that would be easily readable and understandable among speakers of the dialect. That goal has not been universally achieved, but some progress has been made.

Now comes this third volume, a 64-page booklet written almost entirely in Plautdietsch. The spelling used in it is based on the method advocated in the volume on spelling described just above. There are obviously differences in the way that Plautdietsch speakers from different historical backgrounds and geographical areas

speak, but that should not stand in the way of being able to read and understand the materials in this book. There will be, for almost anyone who reads it, some unfamiliar words and expressions, but not so different as to make the gist obscure. Reuben's vocabulary is clearly wide-ranging, often colorful and highly descriptive.

The contents include short stories, some slightly longer ones, and a fairly large number of poems, vignettes, and anecdotes. Some appear to come out of Reuben's personal experiences, but many are transcriptions, paraphrases, and translations of writings by others.

A number of the items are serious, even sad, but in many of them Reuben's well-developed sense of humour shines through. Some of the items included were read by Reuben on a vinyl long-playing disc some years ago, including his own "Toom easchte Mol Koa foahre" ("Driving a car for the first time"). Anyone who can read that and control his/her belly-laugh clearly did not grow up on a Saskatchewan or Kansas farm!

Eight humorous free-hand drawings help illustrate the text.

An extensive table of contents, "Waut Hia Benne Steiht" ("What is included herein"), gives a short synopsis (in English) of each item, which will be a help to those who do not feel totally secure in the dialect.

Technically, a few inconsistencies in spelling are the only quibble this reviewer can muster, and those will certainly not hinder the reading and enjoyment of this highly-recommended book. For the reader seriously interested in Plautdietsch, this booklet and the two previously mentioned titles by Reuben Epp are available in any Mennonite-related bookshop. ☺

A Brief History of Mennonite Schools in BC.

By David Giesbrecht. This article appeared in the June 1999 issue of Mennonite Historian and is reprinted in abridged form with permission. David Giesbrecht is librarian at Columbia Bible College and a MHS board member.

In February 1928 fifteen families arrived in Yarrow to begin the first permanent settlement in BC.

During the next several decades the development of local congregations paralleled the establishment of Bible training centres and Christian high schools for both United Mennonites (later Conference of Mennonites or COM's) and the Mennonite Brethren (MB's). The Yarrow MB congregation was organized in February 1929 while the first COM congregation began worship services in Sardis the following year.

The energy of these young churches was such that by 1936 both denominations had organized into provincial conferences and embarked upon a growth pattern that continues to this day.

From these modest beginnings have emerged BC's fastest growing denomination in membership growth and in number of churches established (MB's), the largest local congregation (Northview Community Church) the largest independent school, (Mennonite Educational Institute) and the largest Bible College (Columbia Bible College). It is the strong congregational support base that was and is critical to the maintenance of Mennonite schools and affirms that in Mennonite thinking the local church bears a vested responsibility for the training of young people.

Although Bible schools, have to a considerable extent preoccupied BC Mennonite educational endeavours, Christian day schooling has also been a major concern. In both Yarrow and Abbotsford, the church community endorsed the need for Bible school as well as high school education, and initially in both communities, these two kinds of school operated out of the same buildings and began operations within a year of each other.

Sharon Mennonite Collegiate Institute

In Yarrow a Schulkomitee (school committee) under the chairmanship of J.A. Harder began to plan for a Christian high school in the early 1940's, no small undertaking given that the country was in the midst of a devastating war and that this Mennonite community was already operating a Bible school. Chilliwack District provisional educational authorities only reluctantly granted such approval contingent on conditions that the prescribed curriculum was to be taught,

that teachers be paid on the Chilliwack salary scale, that compulsory attendance was to be expected of students and that no public money be spent on this school. SMCI began instruction in September 1945 and closed in spring 1949. (See article on Yarrow in this issue for details.)

Sharon Mennonite Collegiate

The death of SMCI did not kill the vision for Christian education in Yarrow... by 1952 members of the congregation began a second high school, called Sharon Mennonite Collegiate. Once again this community gathered its resources and commenced building a new school together with a fine playing field and a gymnasium. This school emphasized a Christ-centered education and considered its primary mission to give its students "a practical Christian Missionary outlook on life." While the beginning seemed promising, the base of financial support as well as the source of students was much too restrictive to ensure its survival. By 1969 it had become painfully obvious that the central concerns of this faith community to pass on to their children "the thinking, the spirit, the mind and the way of our forefathers" could not be sustained. Accordingly SMC was closed and the building sold to the Christian Reformed denomination.

Mennonite Educational Institute

The vision for a Christian high school in Abbotsford must be credited to the South Abbotsford MB Church and its beloved teacher F.C. Thiessen. The question this church asked was how much the children were worth. Of great concern to the church was the spiritual nurture of young people together with the inculcation of a Mennonite heritage.

After some difficult negotiations with the provincial authorities and an agreement in which Bible school and high school would share the same building, the MEI opened for instruction in the 1944-45 school year with 43 students in grades 9 - 11. Following such an auspicious beginning several Abbotsford area Mennonite churches joined the MEI Society. It was now possible to purchase prime property near the centre of Clearbrook and commence construction of a separate high school building.

The new MEI was occupied in December 1946 amidst euphoric community support. With a succession of able principals such as I.J. Dyck, David Neuman, Bill Wiebe, Hugo Friesen, Wally Sawatsky, and Leo Regher, the school has continued to flourish.

In 1976 overcrowding and dilapidating facilities required serious attention. With generous assistance from the friends of MEI Society, some choice property was purchased in Abbotsford and a state of the art building erected. At the time of writing (1999) MEI is the largest independent school in BC with over 1100 students in elementary and high school, and it is again anticipating expansion.

MEI has earned an enviable reputation academically, as evidenced by numerous provincial scholarships students have received. Given its student population compared to some of the largest provincial high schools, MEI has notable athletic success as well. In recent years both senior and junior boys and girls basketball teams have captured provincial championships. At the same time the school has endeavoured to maintain its Christian identity. Chapels, spiritual emphasis weeks and student mission trips are a regular part of the school cycle. ¶

THREE DAYS OF THE WEEK

By Mesach Kristya, Indonesia, President of Mennonite World Conference

Reprinted from *Courier*, MWC, 1998.

After a recent riot in Indonesia, many people were afraid and anxious that the situation might repeat in the near future. They began making a lot of questionable decisions - some planned to flee the country; others decided to send their children to school in faraway places. Some who were direct victims of the riot and those who were raped covered themselves and hid from other people.

As I reflect on all the damage caused by the riot and the suffering that people are undergoing, I am sure that there are two days in every week about which we usually worry. Those two days are Yesterday and Tomorrow.

The Yesterday damage that resulted from the riot scared people, and the Tomorrow riot or Tomorrow suffering is already making people worry.

The word of God advises the opposite: namely that there are two days in every week about which we should not worry, two days which should be kept free from fear and apprehension.

One of those days is Yesterday with its mistakes and cares, its faults and blindnesses, its hurts and pains. But Yesterday has passed forever beyond our control. All the money in the world cannot bring back Yesterday. We cannot undo a single act we performed; we cannot erase a single word we said. Yesterday is gone.

The other day we should not worry about is Tomorrow, with its possible burdens, its large promise, its chance of poor performance. Tomorrow is also beyond our immediate control. Tomorrow's sun will rise either in splendour or behind a mask of clouds, but it will rise. Until it does, we have a limited stake in Tomorrow, for it is yet unborn. ¶

A Prisoner of Conscience

The wartime travail of Jacob H. Giesbrecht as told to Edward Hildebrand.

Jake Giesbrecht was born on May 21, 1925 to Henry and Sarah Giesbrecht near the city of Omsk in Siberia. In 1927 the family, including Jake's two older half-sisters, emigrated to Canada and settled on a farm near Coaldale, Alberta, where in time, six more boys and one more girl entered the family - a not untypical Mennonite family of that time.

In 1941 the family migrated to Yarrow, B.C., where two years later, at age eighteen and a half, Jake received his draft call for service in the Canadian Army. This is his story.

What were the circumstances of your call? Had you not applied for Conscientious Objector (CO) status?

Yes. I had applied for CO status through the Yarrow MB Church. However, when I received my first call, I also hired on at a coal mine in Merritt to become classified as an 'essential worker.' This had worked for some friends, Bill Teichroeb and Pete Dyck, and I thought it might work for me. However it didn't, and about a month later I received a second notice to report to the draft office in Vancouver immediately.

There I was told that my employment in a mine was just a sham to avoid the draft and was inducted the following morning into the Medical Corps of the Canadian Army as number K608330. I was now a soldier in the Home Defense Army, a so-called Zombie.

What happened to your CO application?

I never did find out. Possibly after my move to Merritt it just 'fell between the cracks' as they say.

I was now in the army and was sent to Peterborough, Ontario, for basic training and then to Camp Borden for advanced training as a medic. I didn't really mind being a soldier as long as I could be a non-combatant and not be required to carry a rifle.

After advanced training, most of the General Service (GS) enlistees were sent overseas, but as a Zombie, I was sent to Vernon, B.C. I had been scheduled for a Kiska, Alaska, posting which would have kept me out of trouble, but that was cancelled when I developed a minor case of pneumonia. I thus remained in Vernon until the summer of 1944 when the Canadian Government mandated total conscription, which meant that at least some Zombies would be drafted for overseas service.

I was one of the unlucky ones who were ordered into the Infantry and on January 10, 1945 was shipped to England.

Were you not a Medic? Many went overseas with that designation.

If I had accepted GS status as a medic immediately I might have gone overseas in that capacity - many did. But since I was a Zombie draftee, I was given no such choice. I was in the infantry. As a last resort I applied for help to the Reverend J.B. Wiens of Vancouver during my pre-embarcation leave. I had heard that he had some influence and might be able to help me regain my medic status, but to no avail. In England I was posted to an Infantry unit near Aldershot for further drill and training and there my lot was very rough. Since I would not carry a rifle they made me drill with a broomstick, making me the laughing stock of the outfit and the butt of every man's joke. Often I was tempted to chuck my principles and just go along with the flow. However, I did not. This went on for several weeks until we were to be mustered out in a final parade.

Here the commanding Brigadier noticed my broomstick and called me out for an explanation. I said, "Sir, I cannot carry a rifle because I am a Conscientious Objector."

He replied, "In the Infantry there are no CO's, so pick up your rifle, now!" When I refused, he ordered, "Put this man on charges!"

From the parade ground I was marched off by two MPs to a guardhouse at another camp about five miles away and dumped into a bare brick cell about twelve feet square with two metal bunks and iron bars on windows and doors. This was to be my home for the next several months.

Were you locked up full time? Were you abused in any way?

I was never physically abused, but I was subjected to a lot of verbal abuse and scorn by my fellow soldiers. I was called 'Yellow-belly, Chicken-hearted, Lily-livered,' and other names, always combined with appropriate modifiers. I was also given all the dirty jobs in camp. I peeled potatoes; I scoured pots and pans; then after I had gone to bed I was roused out to scour more pots. One MP Corporal even made me polish his boots, and after they shone like mirrors, he sloshed through a pile of wet ashes and made me polish them again. He probably had no right to make me do this, but at the time, who was I to argue? Through all this I also got an occasional pat on the back and encouraging word from a few. They said in effect, 'If you really believe it, keep it up. You're doing the right thing.'

I was also taken from my cell, always under guard, for meals, the bathroom, and for daily exercise. This led to an amusing incident.

My mail still went to my original camp in England. To collect this mail, an MP, the same one that made me polish his boots, marched me to my former camp and told me that on the way back we would 'double time it.' (He was always bragging about his physical prowess - 'I run eight miles per day and don't need a rifle to guard a single prisoner.') On the way back he ordered me to run, so I ran. At the time I was nineteen years old and in perfect shape and he was a good ten years older and enjoyed his beer more than he should. In no time, I had run away from him. He yelled, "Stop you (expletives omitted)." But I just kept on running and was soon out of sight on this winding country road.

I ran all the way back to camp where the other guards put me back in my cell. When the MP finally arrived at camp he yelled, "That (more expletives omitted) ran away and went AWOL. Sound the alarm." The other guards went along with the joke for a while and then I walked out and showed myself saying, "Don't fuss. I'm here. I wasn't going anywhere." His response was as expected, "You (and still more expletives omitted)," but he never again escorted me without his rifle and he also never again made me to shine his boots.

How did this story finally end?

In April 1945, after about two months of potatoes and more potatoes, dirty pots and more dirty pots, and continuous verbal abuse, I was taken to Divisional Headquarters for a Field General Court Martial. Here I was arraigned before a panel of six or seven officers, with a Brigadier as Chairman, and another officer, a Lieutenant I believe, who laid out the charges against me. After these had been read, the Brigadier turned to me and asked, "Young man, what have you to say for yourself?"

I answered, "Sir, I signed on as a Medic and I told them I would go to the front as a stretcher bearer or whatever else they wanted. But I am also a Conscientious Objector and therefore would not carry a rifle."

"You are telling me that you were willing to go to the front lines un-armed," asked the Brigadier?

"Yes sir. That is what I said then and that is what I say now."

The Brigadier then turned to his panel and asked, "Who among you is prepared to go out there without a weapon?" No one answered and he turned back to me and said, "I commend this young man for his courage. Case dismissed, unless further evidence can be brought before this court."

After that things happened in a hurry. I don't know whether it was the embarrassment of the trial, orders from on high, or the fact that my dad had written to the Prime Minister, Mr. Mackenzie King, that lit a fire under the command, but I never saw the army move so fast. That same day I was taken out of that camp and sent to #22 Field Hospital in Bramshot England to work as a Nursing Orderly. Here I served until July 1946 when I was shipped backed to Canada, where in October, 1946, I received my Honorable Discharge at Little Mountain Camp in Vancouver.

Now it was over. Do you recall ever being really afraid?

No. I was harassed, humiliated, and verbally abused, none of which were pleasant, but I can honestly say I was never afraid. Maybe I was just kept too busy to have time for fear; or maybe it was simply the confidence and naivety of youth; or maybe it was just faith that I was doing right; but I never really feared for my personal safety. ☺

Bits & Pieces

Abe Pankratz of Abbotsford recently donated a German Bible to our archives. On a recent trip to Donskoye, Neu Samara the Pankratz's were looking for but could not find their own family Bible. However someone gave them a Bible containing family information about Johann and Adelgunde (Krausthal) Klassen. This Bible also had two photographs and some notes in Russian and German. If anyone is interested in examining this Bible please contact the office at 853-6177.

Thank You!

In our last newsletter we invited readers to continue their support for the work of the BC Mennonite Historical Society. Readers responded with contributions of over \$1300. This much needed money helps us continue our efforts to remember and learn from our past. Thanks to and please continue to support this work.

Rev. G. I. PETERS

It is with sadness that we report the recent death of Rev. G.I. Peters, a long time supporter and former Chairman of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC. A tribute to Mr. Peters will appear in the next Newsletter.

Archives Notes

The MHS gratefully acknowledges recent donations to our collections from Agatha Klassen, David Ewert, and Dave Klassen. Archivist Hugo Friesen reports the acquisition of the 3rd volume of the index of *Der Bote*. We continue to have an increasing number of visitors, many are engaged in genealogical research.

Memorial Wall Project

Provides an opportunity to purchase a memorial plaque in honour of someone whose legacy you wish remembered. The plaques that will be displayed publicly. Each plaque purchaser will submit a written testament to the person named on the plaque. Please consider buying a plaque (\$500.00) to honour a person or couple for their legacy to the BC Mennonite community. This is also one way to contribute to the work of the BC Mennonite Historical Society. ☺