



Roots and branches

Newsletter of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC

**"What we have heard and seen
we will tell the next generation."
Psalm 78**

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**MHS OF BC ANNUAL FUNDRAISING BANQUET: OCTOBER 16
GUEST SPEAKER: DR. HARRY LOEWEN, WITH SPECIAL GUESTS
DRS. ART AND MARLYCE FRIESEN
@ COLUMBIA BIBLE COLLEGE GYMNASIUM
SEE PAGE 2 FOR DETAILS**

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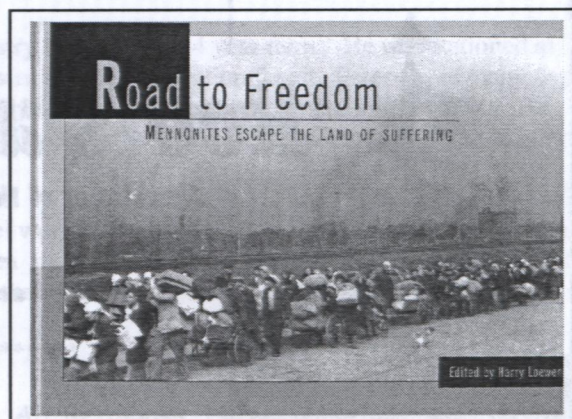
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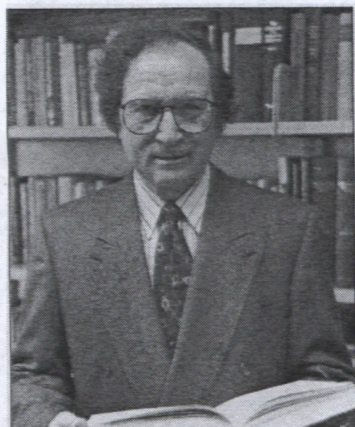
Annual Fundraising Banquet

We are privileged in having Dr. Harry Loewen as our keynote speaker at our annual banquet. Dr. Loewen will be familiar to many as the author of *"Road to Freedom: Mennonites escape the land of suffering."* Among his other publications are *No Permanent City: Stories from Mennonite History and Life*; *Through Fire and Water: An Overview of Mennonite History*; and *Shepherds, Servants and Prophets: Leadership among the Russian Mennonites (1880-1960)*. He is also the founding editor of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* (1983).

Dr. Loewen was born in the former Soviet Union, lost his father to Stalinist repressions, fled with his family to Poland in 1943, and emigrated to Canada as a 17-year-old in 1948. He holds degrees from the University of Western Ontario (B.A.), the University of Manitoba (M.A.), and the University of Waterloo (Ph.D.). From 1978 until his retirement in 1995, he held the Chair in Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg.



Last year, Loewen and his wife Gertrude Penner (also from Ukraine) celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary. The Loewens have three adult sons and two grandchildren. On August 22, 2003, their house, including Loewen's well-stocked working library, was destroyed in the Okanagan Mountain Park fire.



Dr. Harry Loewen

MHSBC Annual Fundraising Banquet

Dr. Harry Loewen: "Shepherds, servants and false prophets: saints and sinners among Russian Mennonite leaders"

*special guests Drs. Art and Marlyce Friesen to report on Molotschna 2004 celebrations

Saturday, October 16, 6:00 p.m
Columbia Bible College Gymnasium
(Clearbrook)

Tickets \$15 available at the MHS of BC office or Board Members

Revealing God's beauty: Mennonites and Art

from a lecture by Ray Dirks at the Mennonite Historical Society of BC, May 8, 2004, by Henry Neufeld

As curator at the Mennonite Heritage Centre Gallery in Winnipeg, Ray Dirks feels God has pointed him to help art and artists find a place of relevance in the Mennonite church community. In our churches, we "...need to simply start exposing ourselves to more art, to start letting art – not just art on banners, which seem to have garnered wide

acceptance – into our sanctuaries," said Dirks. Artistic images can help bring people to worship in new and quiet but powerful ways.

Popular North American culture demands noise and activity: all designed for a shortening attention span.

"There is nothing wrong with active, positive worship but sometimes I feel

we are missing something in not being quiet and contemplative."

Perhaps our understanding of beauty is messed up. Maybe beauty isn't in designer clothes, giant houses and new cars. It is in God's creation—including people—which artists can interpret, explore and offer new insights into that we in (our) church tradition...have missed."

Dirks acknowledges the fear that holding visual art important in the church could lead to worship of art. *I agree we should not worship art. However... we have misunderstood other churches, like the Catholic church, and their approach to art. My Catholic Christian artist friends are appalled when someone suggests their art is being worshipped. They say it points people beyond the subjects represented in their work to God, to worshipping the almighty God not the art.*

In addition to his concern about art in churches, Dirks senses a broader call to work with people and artists from typically stereotyped places in the world; Cuba, Ethiopia, India, and Africa. The people he encounters, often the poor, "...inspire me as an artist, as an artist of faith, as a Christian identified as a Mennonite... inspiration may come from people, or from nature, or from ideas expressed in abstract form, or from elsewhere."

In a world of poverty, despair, war, crime, separated families, famine and sorrow, Dirks finds beauty in every human created in the image of God. He sees despair and beauty in a

starving child hanging limp in his mother's arms. *"A friend of mine in Zimbabwe, an 11 year old, orphan girl with AIDS is the epitome of God's beauty, as far as I am concerned"* says Dirks.

"The beauty of Cuba is in seeing people now worshipping openly and joyously in churches throughout the country. As an artist I am inspired. Where are the truths and contradictions of Cuba? How will I interpret the beauty and stay true to Christ and to His creations, to my many Cuban friends?"

"Art is... a witness in places where no pastor would be allowed to preach, where no Christian songs are sung, the Bible is not read, yet, exhibitions celebrating faith can take place, can be there, sometimes for months at a time, being a constant, steady witness."

A Winnipeg high school with refugee students, many from Muslim countries, asked Dirks to set up an art and culture based program to help these kids integrate into Canadian society. He asked if they cared that he represented a Christian institution in a

public school. They didn't care and knew of nobody else doing the cross-cultural work Dirks does.

Art can be an entrée for meaningful witness. Artists remind us of tradition, mystery and awe; whether times are good or bad - that we often miss in our rush to make sure everybody is sufficiently uplifted

Dirks has been called a visual theologian; one who creates images to help bring people to worship in new, quiet and powerful ways. *"...we should celebrate the past, present and future and explain that we are following confessions of faith, not only ethnicity, and the Mennonite confessions of faith are where the meaning of Anabaptism and Mennonite are to be found."* Dirks is puzzled by many of our churches that hide the Mennonite name. The stories of our past - stories of faith, humility, courage, forgiveness, perseverance - are something to be proud of. We should hold up those stories. That heritage includes much that honours God, much we can learn from.



Back row:
Karen Esau, David Klassen,
Ray Dirks, Hildegard Lemke, Helmut Lemke,
Ed Wiebe, Chris Rollins.

Front:
Hannah Simms, Hilda Goertzen, Nancy Doell,
Ruth Sawatsky, Erna Ewert
Rosella Schmidt,
Betty Horch,
Susanne Wiebe.

Missing from picture:
Lora Sawatsky
Frieda Epp

Local artists joined Ray Dirks on the afternoon of May 8 in showcasing their art for an appreciative audience. The works ranged from realism to impressionism to fantastic imagery. The event culminated in an evening lecture by Ray Dirks with guest harpist, Heather Pauls.

Celebration of Bicentennial of Molotschna Colony by John Konrad

The Molotschna Colony: a history

This colony was established in 1804 with the arrival from Prussia of 162 families. More families arrived in succeeding years until 1810, by which time there were over 400 families in total. Further immigrants arrived until 1836 after which all new villages were established to accommodate internal growth. By 1863, there were 56 villages. This colony operated under the supervision of the Interior Ministry with its Volost or area office in Halbstadt. Later a second such office was established in Gnadenfeld. See map [page 34 Mennonite Atlas 2nd ed.]

Mennonite colonies enjoyed self-government, akin to municipal governments in Canada. The colony looked after administration, roads, schools and churches and through its own institutions, fire insurance, child welfare and community facilities like orphanages and hospitals.

Johann Cornies emerged in the 1830s and 40s as a reformer with Czarist support to improve education curricula and teachers' training and agricultural practices, primarily in the Molotschna colony. The Czars considered this colony a crown jewel among settlements and visited the colony occasionally.

By the 1860s and 70s, there was a growing shortage of land for the growing Mennonite population and the threat of social unrest emerged. Young couples were housed on small lots without agricultural land. In the 70s about one third of the population emigrated to Canada and the US, which relieved the situation considerably.

Mennonites from Ukraine, Canada, United States, Germany, and Paraguay gathered in Ukraine in early June to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the founding of the Molotschna colony. Elsewhere in this newsletter, you will see a report by Dr. Paul Toews outlining the major activities. My wife Irmie and I attended most of these functions and will give you our impressions and reflections.

As a context to the material that follows, I have provided a brief description of the country today and some historical notes on the Molotschna colony. For the sake of brevity, I have made some generalizations and omitted many details.

Ukraine Today

Ukrainians have yearned for independence for over a thousand years and in 1989, the people woke one morning to find that they had achieved this goal without a revolution or war. This new country took on the name Ukraine, and with a population of 50 million, it had become an economic power house in Soviet times. It had a very strong industrial economy.

With the collapse of central planning from Moscow and an uncontrolled move to a market system, the economy in 1999, had contracted to 40 percent of its pre-1990 level. By this time after 10 years of independence, there was little evidence of industrial activity in the major cities and many people lived off their gardens. Many factories were closed as there was little demand from traditional markets and local consumers were looking for western products. These products were imported from Turkey and other Asian countries by new entrepreneurs who sold them in stalls or public markets. Because of large-scale unemployment and the difficulty in collecting taxes

from the grey market, government revenues fell so that funding of government programs, institutions and pensions became very difficult. Government services declined and physical infrastructure deteriorated.

The country has continued to be governed by the same people, in the same bureaucratic way, but in the name of democracy. Reform has been very slow and there is evidence of corruption at the highest level. The government has moved to make Ukrainian the official language and has gradually introduced text books to support this policy. Thirty percent of the population is Russian, and Russian is still the language shared by the whole population.

In 2004, five years after our last visit to Ukraine, the situation is improving. Many factories are back in production and there is evidence of economic growth. For example, the auto plant in Zaporoshia, which produced a small car for the whole USSR market, closed for lack of demand. Today, this plant has been retooled and assembles four makes of cars, a locally-designed, modern small car, German Opels, Korean Dawoos and German Mercedes. This year car sales are running at four times the level of five years ago. In the shops, western goods are available everywhere even if much of it is sourced from Asia.

In the 1920s there was a small city, Alexandrovka on the Dnieper River near which the Chortitza colony was established. In the early 1930s, a large power plant was completed on the Dnieper at this location and the city renamed Zaporozhye. It has grown to become one of the largest cities in Ukraine with a population of one million and has absorbed the village Schönwiese, which housed Wallman and Lepp machinery factory of our parents' day. This plant was turned into an auto factory in the 1930s.

As a post note, Mennonites who received their civil liberties under Khrushchev in 1956, were not permitted to return to their home villages, thus there are virtually no Mennonites living in the former Mennonite villages now. There are very few original Mennonite houses left in these villages as most were destroyed in the war. Village structures were used as defensive positions by the Russians and later by the Germans. Many buildings were torched by the retreating German army.

Most of the villages have survived, some have grown, others have merged, all with Russian names. The villages for the most part still exist as residences for collective farm workers.

Several collective farms have absorbed the colony lands. Clusters of large structures, often barns or machinery shelters, many now seemingly abandoned, can be seen in or around some villages. There are several silo-type grain elevators in the area. Collective farms have not prospered, seeming because of bad management, central decisions over what was to be produced locally, neglected machinery and local corruption.

Collective farms have now been converted to corporations where the former workers are shareholders. Individual families may sever their interest and operate their piece as a family farm but those opting for this action usually get the poorest land and have poor access to capital to fund acquisition of machinery, seed and fertilizer. They must lease the land with great uncertainty as to what future rental costs will be. A central tenet of Communist theory was that landowners inevitably exploit workers, and so privatization of land is still a political issue. The government has recently stated that it will move to privatization of public land over a period of time.

Bicentennial Celebrations

We arrived in time to take in one and one half days of the academic conference in Zaporozhye. Like most bilingual conferences, the pace was tedious especially during discussions, even though they were ably translated. What impressed us was the large number of scholars that participated - thirty-seven from seven countries, mostly Ukrainian and Russian. Who would have thought that Mennonite life in that country, some seventy five years after it was deliberately and ruthlessly snuffed out, would be more than a foot note in Russian history?

On June 5th, some 300 people gathered at the Svetlodolinskoe, formerly Lichtenau railway station to remember the significance of this place from which tens of thousands left for freedom abroad in the 1920s, and for the Gulag or resettlement less than twenty years later. Two granite benches were unveiled on the platform between the tracks and the station; one to commemorate the station itself and the others an important rail link in the colony. Descendants of the Wall family, some living in Canada and others in Russia participated in the unveiling. The Wall family constructed this link early in the 1900s. A small visitors' group sang some of the very songs our parents sang as they left behind family members at this station never to see them again. The crowd comprised some 90 foreign visitors like us and many local people from the village and neighbourhood.

Sunday, June 6 we participated in a church service in the former Halbstadt (now Moloschansk) which had been one of the largest and best known villages in the Molotschna colony. It now includes neighbouring villages of Neu-Halbstadt and Muntau, home of one of the few hospitals in the colony. The service was held in the former Halbstadt Central Schule, which has

About this time, reserve land in the colony was released creating more farm land, and by the 80s, daughter colonies were established as far away as Siberia.

The golden age of Mennonite life was from the late 1800s until the outbreak of World War I. Farming was prosperous, schools and institutions were highly developed, church life was improving and a number of large industrial enterprises had emerged. World War I brought prosperity to a halt. The revolution, the ensuing civil war, the Machno attacks and the near-starvation that followed, shattered all dreams for the future.

Emigration seemed the answer for some and in the years 1924 to 27 many were able to leave. All emigration ceased by 1930. The remaining population had to adjust to persecution, arbitrary arrests, and forced collectivization. When Germany attacked Russia in June 1941, Mennonites and all German speaking people were considered enemies of the state and were banished to Asiatic Russia, where many perished. Some were left behind German lines and continued to live in their home villages under protection of the occupying troops.

When the German forces were driven back, Mennonites from these villages were permitted to move westward, eventually to Germany where they thought they had reached freedom. But alas, two thirds of those who started on this trek to Germany were captured and sent back to Russia to suffer the same fate as those banished at the outbreak of the war. Thus ended Mennonite life in this colony.

been used as a club or community centre since 1943. It was a moving experience to worship in this place with 260 others—foreigners, local Mennonites and other invited guests. The last church service held in this facility was in 1943 just before the German army was driven out.

As we emerged from the doors of the hall, we faced an awesome sight - at least 3000 people crowding the courtyard in front of a building facing a platform erected for the dedication ceremonies. The most impressive and touching part of the service was a professional choir accompanied by the university orchestra from the Militopol Pedagogical University singing in German, Mennonite songs cherished by our people.

Part of this crowd was a tour group from Paraguay, mainly people or their descendants who fled Russia in 1943. Another tour group was from Manitoba, mostly descendants of Kleine Gemeinde immigrants from the 1870s. Other foreign visitors were people like us from several countries who came to be part of the celebrations. It seemed the whole town of Molochansk was out. Streets were dressed up with freshly painted lane markers, many pot holes were filled for the first time in years, manholes were covered and local police cars assigned to block off streets for pedestrians. Many invited guests and officials were in attendance. The Mennonite Centre is in this town and the Mennonite presence is clearly recognized. (For more information on the Mennonite Centre, see www.mennonitecentre.com.)

After numerous speeches by officials including the Canadian ambassador, a Settler's Monument was unveiled in the same courtyard. It was designed by Paul Epp of Toronto and shaped in granite to resemble a large threshing stone with the names of all 56 village on the six faces.



Settler's Monument

June 8 was an exiting day for the Warkentin/Dirks and Neufeld families. The hospital in Vladovka, (formerly Waldheim and Hierschau) had been founded in the early 1900's by members of the Warkentin/Dirks family. This facility, in poor repair and lacking modern equipment and supplies, continues to serve a number of villages in the area. When we arrived, some 150 people awaited us on the hospital grounds— medical staff, town officials and local people. A hospital staff choir sang in Ukrainian as did a small visitors group in German. There were speeches by the medical director, and John Dirks representing the Warkentin Dirks family. A granite plaque was unveiled drawing attention to the origin and history of the hospital. To mark the occasion, the family contributed funds to repair the roof of the building.

The second project in Waldheim was undertaken by descendants of the Johann I. Neufeld family. Neufeld was the founder of a large farm machinery factory, one of the largest industrial enterprises in the colony. A modern school stands on the grounds of the former factory. We were greeted by some 300 people – students, staff, town officials and local people. A school choir in traditional costumes sang in Ukrainian and again the small

visitors' choir in German. Speeches by the school Director and by Irmie Neufeld Konrad representing the family followed. A large plaque was unveiled drawing attention the site of the Mennonite business.

Also unveiled on that day were two restored gravestones in the Waldheim cemetery and a memorial in the village of Bogdanovka (Gnadenfeld).

Irmie and I were glad we could take in these bicentennial celebrations as it reminded us again our rich heritage. We appreciate particularly that our parents expressed no bitterness or hatred towards those who wiped out their hopes, dreams, material possessions. We sensed sympathy and understanding from the current residents of Molotschna colony whose families also suffered privations and extreme cruelty under the same evil system.

On our last day, we worshipped in a Ukrainian Baptist Church (one of some 2000 new churches) We were impressed with the unity of God's people across country, ethnic and language barriers and were reassured that the Holy spirit is at work today.



Irmie Neufeld Konrad at Neufeld factory, with translator (in white), and mayor of Vladovka on her left.

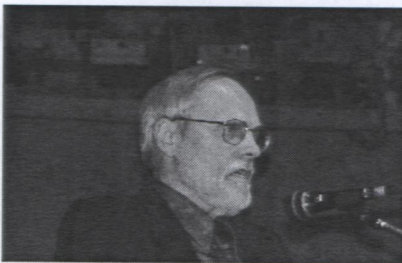
Recapturing the Russian Mennonite Story: New academic papers and unveiling of historical markers in Ukraine

by Paul Toews and Wally Unger

In order to celebrate the bicentennial of the founding of Molochna, the largest Mennonite settlement in Tsarist and Soviet Russia, a major academic conference, "Molochna and its Neighbours" was held in several southern Ukrainian centers, notably Zaporozhye and Melitopol, in early June, 2004.

There are over half a million Russian Mennonite descendants in North America. Many have been returning as scholars and tourists in the last decade. A renovated former historic girls school now serves as a Mennonite regional relief centre, specializing in medical and educational projects. MCC and other Mennonite agencies are also actively at work in Ukraine.

Thirty seven research papers were presented at the June conference, most by Ukrainian and Russian scholars. Ceremonial events were held at three Molochna village sites as well as in the city of Dnipropetrovsk. The major event was the unveiling of the Settler's Monument in Halbstadt/Molochansk with Canadian Ambassador Andrew Robinson participating. Canadian novelist Rudy Wiebe presented a major address to Ukrainian university students at the historic Potemkin Palace in Dnipropetrovsk.



Rudy Wiebe at Potemkin Palace

The events received wide coverage in

regional Ukrainian newspapers and television.

Conference organizer, University of Toronto historian Harvey Dyck, was not able to attend due to illness. His colleagues and friends successfully rallied to mount the conference and its surrounding events. The conference co-chairs were Canadian historian John Staples, and Ukrainian geographer, Nikolai Krylov.

In addition to the academic conference these days of bicentennial markings included the unveiling of several memorial monuments. The Mennonite International Memorialization Committee for the Former Soviet Union supervised the placement of a Settlers' Monument in Molochansk (formerly Halbstadt). Two benches at the railway station of Svetlodolinskoe (formerly Lichtenau) recall the voluntary migration of Mennonites to freedom in the West and involuntary deportation to the eastern Gulag. The station is on the railway line built by the Wall brothers and other investors. Two plaques placed in Vladovka (formerly Waldheim) recognize the role played by Agnes and Cornelius Warkentin in the establishment of a still existing hospital. The second plaque is placed at the local school which occupies the site of the former Isaac Neufeld factory. In Bogdanovka (formerly Gnadenfeld) a monument was placed at the site of the former Mennonite cemetery.

Also unveiled in the Yavarnitzky Museum in Dnipropetrovsk (formerly Ekaterinoslav) was the recently discovered tombstone of Samuel Contenius, Head of the Board of Guardians which regulated the affairs of foreign settlers in the region and a friend of Mennonites.

An extensive photo exhibit consisting of 139 historic Molochna images was opened at the Melitopol Museum of Regional Studies. It will later go on display in the Zaporozhye Museum of Regional studies.



Pastor Jakob Tiesen

An historic Sunday worship service was conducted in the famous former Zentralschule (regional High School) in Halbstadt, the first such service since 1943. The opening hymn, sung in Russian and English, was "Great is Thy Faithfulness."

Pastor Jakob Tiesen of the nearby Kutuzovka Church conducted the service. The sermon by conference participant Johannes Dyck, formerly of Kazakhstan, currently living in Germany, celebrated the "love and hope of our Christian faith" In attendance were members of the Zaporozhye and Kutuzovka Mennonite congregations plus representatives of diaspora communities in Paraguay, Germany, Canada and the USA. Most of the packed hall however was made up of local non-Mennonite Ukrainians.

Local and regional officials and many villagers attending each event expressed sincere appreciation for the multiple contributions which Mennonites made to the history of the region.



One local leader said explicitly that "we wish to build on the past which you so richly gave us."

Ukrainians speak of this spring as unusually beautiful. The landscape is green, spring rains have watered the steppe, the wild flowers are brilliant in their colour. After the winter the renewal of the spring is a metaphor for what is happening to the Mennonite story and to Mennonite-Ukrainian relationships. The Mennonite story, long suppressed, is being rediscovered as a vital part of the

history of south Ukraine. The values that shaped the Mennonite story are being embraced as necessary for the renewal of Ukrainian society. The admiration for Mennonites as a people of memory, for having a sense of tradition that anchors them in changing times was repeatedly invoked.

Both Ukrainian and the returning Mennonites from Paraguay, United States, Canada and Germany were moved by the mutual embrace and the kinship that such historic celebrations rekindle.

Noted Dutch historian, Piet Visser of Amsterdam, summarized the early June events in this manner:

"The conference was well organized and featured papers from different angles and disciplines. The level of scholarship was good. What struck me most dramatically was the substantial amount of work contributed by Ukrainian and Russian scholars. This is very promising for the future of Mennonite studies. I think it is vitally important that non-Mennonite scholars in eastern Europe bring new research to the story, allowing for new insights and perspectives. During my time at the conference I also enjoyed moments of great psychological or spiritual impact. In particular I recall a long discussion with a Ukrainian teacher associated with the Mennonite Centre in Ukraine at Halbstadt, whom I admire so much for her courage in difficult personal circumstances, itself surely a paradigm for present day Ukraine, plus my unexpected visit with other Mennonites to the massacre site at Eichenfeld and its evocative memorial erected in 2001. It is such moments and golden silences that will remain with me."

(Digital images courtesy Johannes Dyck, Bielefeld, Germany)

Dr Paul Toews, is Historian at Fresno Pacific University & Fulbright exchange scholar to Ukraine 2003/2004 & Walter Unger, Toronto, Chairman, Mennonite Centre in Ukraine

From the archives by Hugo Friesen

1. During the past months our archival centre has received 33 Family Histories & Genealogies from various sources. Please check our website (www.mhsbc.com) for the listing of our Family History books where the new entries are shown with a "bullet".
2. Our EWZ Microfilms number 199 at this time and the information continues to be extracted for entry in our database. Jonathan Neufeld is doing some of this work this summer on a HRDC Summer Career Placement grant. If you wish to donate some funds for the purchase of additional microfilms at a cost of \$60.00 each please let us know and/or send it to our office.
3. Molotschna Atlas – This atlas, produced by Helmut T. Huebert is now available to be viewed or purchased at our Centre. "This atlas is produced to commemorate the bicentenary of the founding of the Molotschna Colony in South Russia in 1804" It includes colony and village maps as well as village histories.

The way we were: Black Creek

Part 2: The Establishment and Development of Mennonite Churches by Ben Stobbe

In a previous "The Way We Were" article I described early Mennonite settlement activity in Black Creek, British Columbia. In this article I want to elaborate on the establishment and development of the two Mennonite churches in Black Creek, from their beginnings in the 1930s to the 1960s.

There are two corrections from my previous article. The original Mennonite family that moved to the Black Creek area was the Henry Schulz (not Schultz) family. The Schulz family owned a general store. The Co-op store opened later.

Black Creek has two Mennonite churches, the United Mennonite Church and the Black Creek Mennonite Brethren Church. Even though the first Mennonite settlers fellowshiped together in homes, they soon divided along the established conference lines when numbers increased.



Black Creek MB

There was no single local issue that encouraged the establishment of two churches—rather it was the acceptance of a commonly understood pattern among many western Canadian Mennonites that you were either "GC" or "MB." Even in Black Creek these church differences were sometimes reinforced in homes with children of

one group being discouraged from bringing children of the other group into their homes. And yet, even in these times the two groups provided support to each other. For example, at the first wedding in the United Mennonite Church the minister from the MB Church, Isaak Goertzen, was asked to perform the ceremony because he was the only Mennonite minister licensed to perform weddings.

In spite of some organizational and faith practicing differences, both churches have remarkably similar stories. The MB Church formally organized on Jan. 6, 1935. (This date was deliberately chosen, as this was the 75th anniversary of the founding of the MB Church in Russia.) The United Mennonite Church was founded two years later. Both churches elected local lay leadership to assist in getting started. Franz Friesen was the first leader of the MB Church, initially known as the Merville MB Church, named after the nearest post office at Merville, BC. Jacob Brucks is credited with being the founding leader of the United Mennonite Church.

In both churches there was an urgent need to create a strong sense of community and fellowship. Being on an island on the West Coast brought a real sense of isolation from other larger Mennonite communities in the Fraser Valley and the Prairie provinces. This fellowship was strengthened through activities such as "Jugendverein," Saturday evening prayer meetings, Wednesday evening Bible Study, Sunday School for children and adults and "Naehverein." Church sanctuaries served as multi-purpose facilities simply by pulling the curtain dividing Sunday school classes. In 1946 the United Mennonite Church built the "Little Brown House," a separate building that served as the facility for Sunday School,

German School and for special social functions. Choirs also reinforced the sense of coming together in common fellowship. The MB church was blessed with the early choir leadership of Heinrich Haak and the 34 years of Albert Wedel being choir director. One wonders how these small groups could take on a full schedule of programs and services that occupied part of every weekday. These early churches were the centre of everyone's social, spiritual and service life.

Not only did these early churches have a committed group of lay leaders, they also benefited by bringing in experienced prairie ministers who provided long-term foundational leadership. Rev N.N. Friesen served the United Mennonite Church from 1939 to 1954. Rev. John A. Goerz served from 1942 to 1956. These men grounded these groups with strong biblical teaching; both were instrumental in developing local Bible schools. Shortly after arriving in 1939 N.N. Friesen started a winter Bible school program in the United Mennonite Church. This continued for two winters. In 1942 under the leadership of John A. Goerz the MB congregation organized and supported a Bible school. The school offered a two-year winter program. Even though the school had a small number of students (never more than 15 in any one year) it certainly prepared students for subsequent Christian ministries and drew students from both churches.

It was not always easy recruiting suitable ministers to come and serve on the Island. Consequently the churches developed strong lay leaders such as Walter Dirks, Peter Friesen, Jacob Falk and Cornelius Thiessen. These were only some of the dependable cadre that filled in behind the newly emerging leaders.

(Black Creek, cont'd)



The arrival of Mennonite Conscientious Objectors during WWII provided a great boost to the programs of both churches. Young Mennonite men came from across Canada to Vancouver Island to do Alternative Service with the BC Forest Service. Many worked in the Campbell River area planting trees after the great Sayward fire of 1938 and some took the opportunity to serve in the churches. Elsie Enns, the then-15-year-old daughter of Henry Schulz, recalls that these young men were a tremendous boost to the Sunday night youth meetings. (One is surprised that with all these young men in attendance the church leadership did not have gender-segregated youth meetings!) John Falk recalls the uplifted singing from the male ensembles. One of these young men, Abe Koop, eventually returned to Black Creek as minister in the United Mennonite Church. Visiting ministers, sent to provide spiritual support to these men, also served in the local congregations at special events such as thanksgiving services. The larger Mennonite community in Canada also benefited in having these two small Mennonite churches in the area, providing a sense of home and community for these young men.

As in all early Canadian Mennonite churches the voices of women were heard through sewing machines, knitting, crochet and quilting needles and in the quiet earnest German prayers. Their finely constructed crafts and projects funded Sunday School and mission projects and helped supply MCC needs. Their scope was far beyond Vancouver Island.

CO's at Black Creek

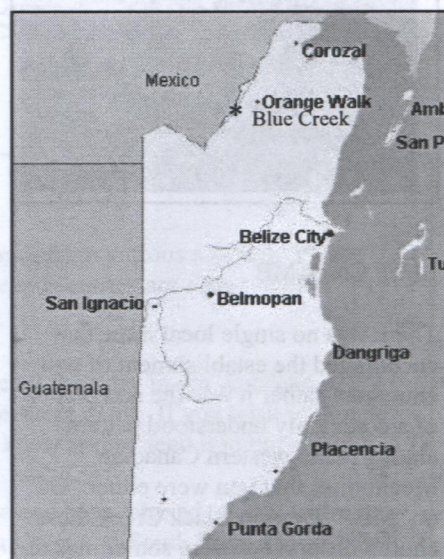
With established outreach programs such as the Sunday School mission at Oyster Bay, summer Vacation Bible School, Bible memory awards to Camp Imadene, as well as local tract missions, these churches extended their influence beyond immediate Mennonite circles. This resulted in new building programs with the MB Church dedicating a new sanctuary in 1954 and the United Mennonite Church in 1963. These congregations have given nearly 70 years of witness to God's grace and faithfulness. Indeed an impressive legacy.

Visiting Mennonite Colonies in Belize

Story and photos by Helen Rose Pauls

Three year old Roger, our host's cousin, cuddles on my lap just as he does on his Oma's lap, but he has trouble understanding my Low German. I can hardly decipher his either, until I realize that almost all the nouns are in English, the national language here. His generation will not need the nicknames of the previous ones to differentiate between all the David Rempels, Cornie Friesens, Tina Klassens and Frank Reimers. Roger's brother is called Westin, and the other children we meet have names straight out of "What to Name your Baby?" I meet Jaunita, Shayla, Kayden, Levi and Heidi.

Of the half dozen Mennonite colonies in Belize, this village, Blue Creek, is the most modern. They are very self sufficient, having built a secure, even prosperous life upon the foundation of hardship of the first pioneers to this area. Their forefathers left Russia for Canada in 1874, and left Canada for Mexico in the 1920's to escape integration. Everyone has relatives in southern Manitoba, Burns Lake, Peace River district or in Ontario, but few in the Fraser Valley. Many return to Canada for a few years at some point in their early adulthood, and are able to establish Canadian citizenship for the next generation, based on their grandparents' roots.



Little Roger's T-shirt, proudly proclaims, "If you think I'm cute, you should see my dad", underscored "Niagara Falls, Canada". Perhaps it is the tie to Canada which makes them so progressive in their country, planting and spraying their flooded rice fields with airplanes using GPS and storing the rice in huge silver silos; purchasing bulldozers and back hoes from the Ritchie Bros. auction in Houston, Texas for road building, logging, clearing the jungle and creating shrimp beds.



Rice Silos

If the Ten Commandment forbade auctions "we couldn't keep that one," says Roger's dad. They use the same parent stock for their chicken industry which feeds Belize as we do here. In the jungle, they scout for mahogany trees for furniture makers, and pine roots for cleaners manufactured in the States.

One farmer dammed the river, building a shed to house a hydro plant made from parts found in a downed airplane. He shares the electricity with half the neighborhood; the rest receives service from nearby Mexico.

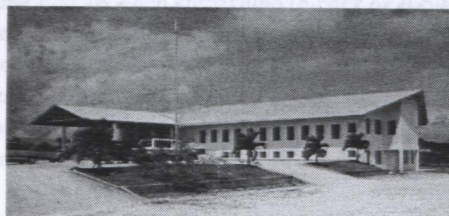
Cowboys daily lasso and round up cattle from the many beef ranches, and truck it to the local government inspected slaughterhouse so that meat can be sold all over Belize, into Guatemala, Mexico and even flown to the hotels and tourist spots on Ambergris Cay. Mexican women come over the border a mile away to cart off the cow's heads in their bicycle baskets. They will eat what can be eaten, and make tourist souvenirs from the skulls.

At the local sawmill, rubber trees show traces of having been diagonally

sliced for chicle, a reminder of British Colonial days when slaves worked in the plantations. Poisonwood lies here as well, but it is rarely used because it causes skin irritations.

The Mennonites enjoy a good deal of self government, providing a "Christian school" taught in English for the youngsters of the village up to grade ten. That seems sufficient for these enterprising people, but a few continue on at a boarding high school near Orangewalk: King's College. On a bluff above the village centre at Klassen's B&B, we hear the school bell ring accompanied by loud motorcycle noises. From every direction, children are roaring toward the parking lot on their colorful quads. I see one helmet. As long as they stay in the colony boundaries, it is legal for the children to drive on the roads, and there are no speed limits, just common courtesy.

Strategic speed bumps act like sleeping policemen in front of the village core: a garage, hardware store, grocery and the Blue Creek credit union, all under one roof. One wall depicts the brands and names of thirty-six cattlemen, all of them Mennonite. The Blue Creek phone book has only two names that are not typical Mennonite ones. A medical clinic with a full time nurse sits across the road. The store near our B&B specializes in fabric and sewing supplies, and it overlooks the airstrip.



Blue Creek Church

English church starts at 8:30, and the Low German service is at 10:00. Both have a worship team with drums and guitars. The old "Gesangbuch" is in evidence alongside a duo tang full of photo-copied chorus sheets. We are invited to faspá. Our tie here is our

Canadian neighbor's daughter, who is teaching grade three. Her Belize relatives round up a table full of family and we sit down to the traditional zwieback, pickles, cheese, cookies and cakes. It feels as if I am at my favorite aunt's. My hostess enjoys the "Tim Horton's" coffee that I was told would be the best gift. The garden has mango, banana, coconut and papaya trees, but she wishes for apples.



Mennonite House

Homes, surrounded by large porches, are built on leveled knolls in the hills above the farmland, where they can catch the breeze through their louvered windows. This home has a television, but I am told that this is just "coming in". Roger's dad is building a "Canadian" house for a family from Ontario that spends the school year here. It will have air-conditioning and closed windows and doors, a first for the village.

I am invited to accompany a new friend from Blue Creek, to the neighboring old fashioned Mennonite village, Shipyard, where she teaches a women's Bible study on Tuesdays. I don't realize how radical her work is until she tells me that the twelve women she is teaching are all from families that were recently shunned for holding Bible studies.

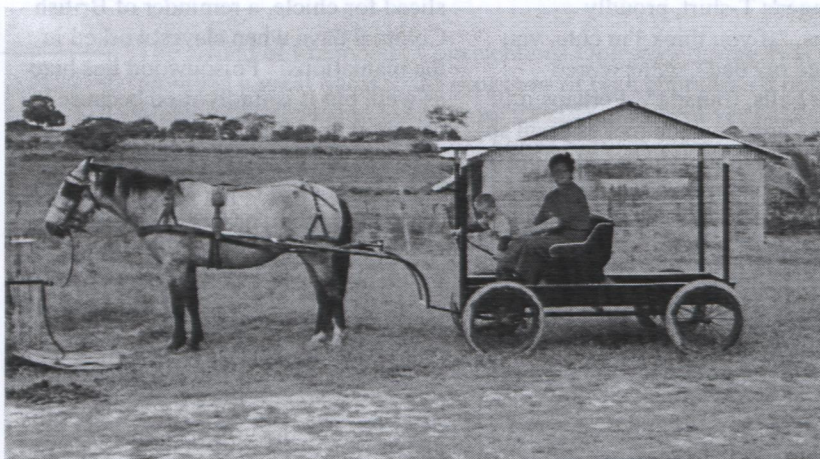
It is reminiscent of the Reformation, for these people finally have the Bible in Low German and are reading it for the first time, and asking many questions. The elders feel threatened, and root out the dissenters who want to embrace "the priesthood of all believers". "It makes the popes tip over", says my friend.

These farm families can no longer ship their chickens to the village slaughterhouse, send their children to the local school, attend the church or enjoy the help and company of extended family. With aid from the Evangelical Mennonite Missionary Church in Canada, they have erected their own church building, and Kroekers from Manitoba have recently arrived to give it leadership.

Never having attended Sunday School, the women are eager to learn about Elijah, who also suffered for his faith, and also felt alienated and misunderstood.



We enjoy fasma together with the many children who have played outdoors during our study. One of the changes this group is experiencing is the freedom to use birth control, relieving these women of bearing annual children. Several leave in their horses and buggies, but some crowd into the cabs of beat up Nissan pick-ups.



A lady from Shipyard tours her father's store with me, but few goods line the shelves. "He couldn't buy many supplies to stock the store this year, because he had high medical bills when his wife sickened and died", she says. These villagers make use of the clinic in Blue Creek and the hospital in the nearby town of Orangewalk. The rolling hills are green with Milo in straight rows, cultivated with modern tractors with modified steel wheels that will somehow keep them from the "world". We know that there are undercurrents here that we cannot see, but the cattle and crops look lush and idyllic, and porches are full of drying clothes. I count seven pair of black overalls, each one a bigger size, flapping in the wind by one house.

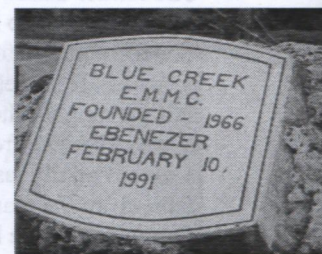
Back in Blue Creek, Rosy the schoolteacher and my former neighbor, asks me to lead weekly chapel the next day. During my presentation, two male school board members appear, and listen in. Is my speech being monitored for heresy, I wonder?

When the session is over, they tell me

that they have heard that I am a retired Canadian school teacher, and offer me a full time job for next year. Reluctantly, I decline, but teaching a class of sixteen innocent children in four tidy rows is tempting.

A barbecue at the local lake is typical Belizean fare: chicken, rice and beans, potato salad. The lake water is buoyant because of all the mineral deposits, and quite milky. It isn't until Roger's mom and I have canoed half way across it without life jackets, and with a wiggly little boy between us, that she mentions that her husband shot an alligator here last year!

Our week flies by. Only once do we make our own supper, and complete strangers become our friends very quickly. Rosy arranges for a local Rempel fellow to fly us to the resort in San Pedro, on Ambergris Cay, where we will spend another week. In Blue Creek, we have felt very much at home. The resort is anticlimactic.



Roots and Branches is a publication of the Mennonite Historical Society of B.C. and is mailed three times per year to those who donate \$25.00 or more per year. Your help is urgently needed if this work is to continue and donation envelopes are enclosed for this purpose. All donations will be receipted for tax purposes.

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A Stitch in Time

By Deborah G. Block

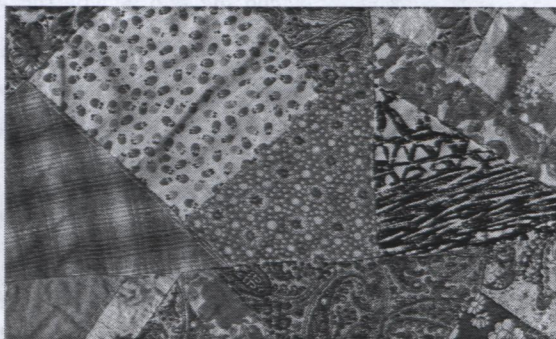
There have been many great women in the history of Canada. We read about women like Emily Murphy, Nellie McClung, Louise McKinney, Irene Parlby, and Henrietta Edwards, who challenged the governments of the day to declare that women are persons back in October 1929. There are many other achievements by great Canadian women: the first woman electrical engineer, the first woman nuclear physicist, the first female astronaut, and so on. These women's accomplishments are indeed praiseworthy and deserve our recognition and admiration.

However, there are a lot of heroic women whose stories are not so widely known or acclaimed. The women who laboured hard on the land, with or without husbands, struggling to meet the day to day needs of their families – these are the women that I have come to admire. Their perseverance, dedication, and economizing strategies should also be lifted up as examples for future generations. My grandmother Helena G. Neufeld Harder was one of these women.

This is a sample of the “crazy quilts” Helena would sew for family and charity. In it I see grandma's old apron, grandpa's plaid shirt, my cousin's blouses, pyjamas, and other scraps of garments that Helena sewed. Just like the quilt, there are many pieces in her family history. Here I capture only a stitch in time.

Helena's Great Grandmother was born in Prussia in 1791; later she married a Mr. Neufeld and together they had a number of children, including a son named Paul in 1838. When Paul was 17 years old he and his family emigrated to Schönhorst, Ukraine, Paul married Agatha Klopfenstein in 1850. By 1877 they had 13 children.

Gerhard Paul, Helena's father, was born in 1858 in Neuberghthal, Old Colony. In 1881 Gerhard married Anna Kroeker, daughter of Maria Koslovski and Claus Kroeker.



Ten years later, after they had had their first 6 children, the family packed their bags and immigrated to Canada where they had been promised land and no military service. There Gerhard was the teacher of the Mennonite village school. An additional eight children were born to the couple - their ninth child Helena G. Neufeld was born in February, 1896. I found an interesting story about Helena's childhood around the turn of the century, that she wrote in one of her journals 80 years later. It was written in German using old German lettering, as were most of her notes, and with the help of my in-laws, we have translated it into English.

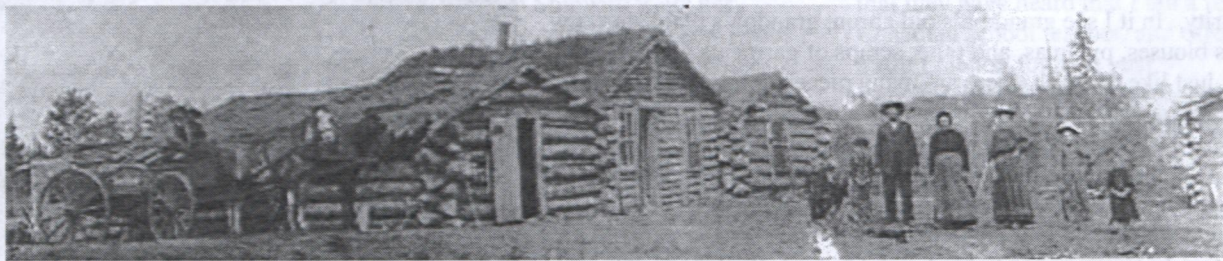
But now some more about Rosenbach first...We had a Christmas program there, the first one I can remember. Then we had a different teacher already, a Mr. Fast. He came from the U.S.A. to the village. Better said, it did not give Mennonite teachers who could teach the English language, and that is why my father had to stop teaching. They (parents) came from Russia and that is why my father could not teach English. Mr. Fast really loved singing, and when it came to Christmas, everyone had to learn something (a part or Bible verse). I did not go to school then yet. But father said everyone had to learn something, and that's how it was that I had to learn a verse too. I could sing better than I could recite. And so it was, everyone wanted to go to the Christmas program. The school was just across the street and it was bitter cold and also some new snow. We received new clothes for Christmas and now we put them on. And that made me prouder than ever. I felt really big, but when it came to walking, father had to carry me. Mother took a large kerchief around me and I was ready to go.

At the school there were a lot of people already. The children all had a place near the tree and they were proud of that. I thought I would be able to sit with the children. Mother said "there is no room. You sit with me." and that's how it had to be...The teacher was up front, too, and what I noticed he had a big beard - pitch black. After an hour the children had recited everything. Then the teacher looked at the audience and asked if there were some children who didn't go to school yet and wanted to say something, too. Then mother poked me and said "You go sing - the song that you have sung so many times." Then I sprang up but I was just small and there was not a big platform. But the teacher let me stand on his chair. But then I was supposed to sing very loud. He had already

asked me what I was going to do. And then he lifted me up and his beard rubbed my face. That was not very nice, I felt it all week. The song that I sang was "Ihr Kinderlein kommet..."

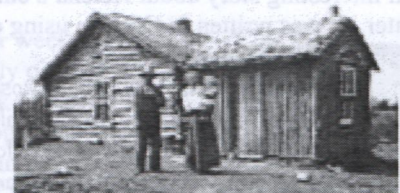
Then we went home and then came Christmas. Before we went to bed, everyone had to put out a bowl with our name on it so that the Christmas Man knew what he had to put in each bowl. Then came a long night where we had so much trouble falling asleep. We always had to listen to see if we could hear him. But our parents understood. Suddenly everything was quiet and soon it was morning and we wanted to get up early and wash and put on our Sunday clothes again. Then we had to say our verses to the parents. When that was done, father would remove the white oil tablecloth from the table and there stood our bowls, full of nuts, candy, and everyone had one small gift.

Then after Christmas we had to pack up to move. Everyone had to help...And now we had finished packing and were supposed to go. Our neighbours had helped, too. And off we went. My younger siblings and I rode on the big buggy with mother. Father was the driver. The others had to drive the cattle. We had a few cows and young stock. We were the first ones there - but the feelings that I had I cannot describe. I just know that I asked my mother how long we would stay and she said "Maybe forever."



Well, they did not stay there forever. The family packed up once again and travelled by wagon train and oxen with another 19 Mennonite families, over prairie, across rivers, and through Indian villages complete with tepees and smoky fires drying fish, to homestead a settlement called Lost River in Saskatchewan. They were the first white settlers that far north. Here Helena's family built a sod house and eked out a bare existence.

When Helena was 17 years old, her mother passed away. Later that same year Helena married Jacob Wilhelm Harder whose family was also homesteading there. They built their own home with small logs and sod from the prairie. The gaps in the walls let in the heat in summer and the bitter cold in the harsh prairie winters. Here they had their first 5 children - Maria, Helena (died at 3 months of age), Wilhelm (Bill), Gerhard (George), and Nickolei (Nick). They struggled to survive off the land with Jacob farming and blacksmithing, and Helena and the children growing food and raising animals.



In the mid 1920's South America was welcoming Mennonite farmers and some of Jacob's brothers decided to go. Jacob had wanted to go too, but Helena had told him in no uncertain terms that he could go, but she and the children were staying in Canada. Jacob's brother Peter wrote to them later and told them not to come - conditions were far worse in South America. Peter died there before they even settled and his wife returned to Canada.

Jacob and Helena moved back to Southern Manitoba and tried farming for about 9 years. Their 6th child Johan (John) was born here in 1933. The depression prevented them from prospering and they moved to the town of Winkler where Jacob set up a blacksmith shop. He was an excellent blacksmith and very creative man, but he was not a good business man as he found it hard to charge people for his services when they had so little. In later years, Bill and George helped run the business and they were able to make a living from it.

In the meantime, Helena provided income by selling butter and cream, growing vegetables and fruit (especially crab apples) to trade with, and raising between 50 and 75 turkeys a year for the Timothy Eaton Company in Winnipeg. She spun raw wool to knit socks and sweaters, and sewed garments for her family, some out of flour and sugar sacks. Helena was not a fancy cook or housekeeper, but her children remember there always being lots of food and they do not remember feeling poor.

After her only daughter Marie married and moved to Ontario, the neighbour girls from across the street would come over and help Helena with the housework. One of these girls, Margaretha, later married George and they lived with Jacob and Helena for a year until they could afford their own house. Helena opened their home to many different people over the years, including Bible school students, people requiring nursing care, my cousin Shirley (Marie's daughter) who came to live with them after her parent's divorced, and a physically disabled man confined to a wheel bed. Helena's inventive sons later remodelled a van for this man so that he could wheel his bed into it and drive by himself. She also cared for a little blond girl named Marilyn Friesen who lived with the family for most of her preschool years. The whole family grieved over the loss of their little girl when the Welfare office came and the girl's mother took her back. Helena also spent time cleaning the church, making quilts with the Ladies Aid to send to poorer countries, making soap for the MCC, and giving food to the poor.

By 1957, all of their children and grandchildren were living in British Columbia and because Jacob was now eligible for pension, they sold the blacksmith shop and retired to B.C. They bought a large lot in Clearbrook with the \$800 that Helena had saved by collecting the dimes from the shop and from her dairy sales, and built a cozy 2 bedroom house and workshop for under \$2000. Here Helena continued to serve in the church and made soap and knitted bandages for the MCC. She also sewed many "crazy" quilts using any scrap of leftover fabric or worn out garments she could find. Jacob did woodworking as a hobby. Because they now had the first steady income of their lives, the couple was able to travel to Manitoba and Saskatchewan many times, and even made a trip to Paraguay in the 1960s to visit Jacob's brothers. When they returned they both said how glad they were that they had not moved there too.



Helena loved to write things down in many different notebooks. She noted the weather, visitors, funerals, world events and local news alike. She had one special book where she noted all the family births, marriages and deaths. The last birth noted in that book is my oldest son, Jordan, born in June 1981. She also briefly wrote about her three surgeries for breast cancer in 1963. Even back in the 1960s it was early detection that saved Helena's life - her cancer never came back and she lived another 20 healthy years.



The couple moved into the Sherwood Home and there celebrated their 67th wedding anniversary. Jacob passed away in 1981. Helena continued to care for the people around her in the home and visited with family and friends regularly. She passed away in 1982 at the age of 86 and her loving memory lives on in the photographs, notes and records she kept, as well as in the brightly coloured quilts which are scattered all over the world.

Jacob and Helena's simple Christian faith helped them endure many hardships in life, and they prayed daily for all their children and grandchildren. While they never had a fortune to leave their children, they remained deeply committed to each other for over 67 years and left a wonderful example of perseverance and faith in God to their descendants.

In closing, I would like to challenge you to take up pen and paper and tape recorder and spend some time with the elders of your families. Ask them about their childhood and what they remember about their parents and grandparents. You will be blessed by the experience. And when you are the grandmother, you can write these stories on the hearts of your grandchildren and pass that blessing on.

Genealogy workshop, Nov. 13. Please call the office for details.

From the collection held by Lydia Martens Issak

In the fall of 1903, Peter P. Martens was called into the Forstei (forestry service) for a 4 year term. He was stationed at Alt Berdianst project (Molotschna), which had once served Johann Cornies as a demonstration forest. Peter wrote many fond letters to his wife Helene in his 4 years of forestry service, and later 3 years of Red Cross service during the WWI. He often started the letters with: Meine innig geliebte Lensch (my dearly loved Lensch), 'Herzlich geliebte Lena und Kinder', or just plain 'Liebe Lena.'

Peter and Helene's letters provide a window into the life of a Forstei worker and his family at home. At the time of the following letter, Peter and Helene are both 22 years old and have been married less than a year. In the next few issues of *Roots and Branches*, we will follow the events in their lives through their letters.

Mein innig geliebtes Weibchen (My dearly loved wife)

Alt Berdiansks, 14 March, 1904



Helene Wieler Martens

Have just received your letter and have enjoyed it thoroughly. I want to answer it right away. I am, thanks be to God, in good health, and hope you are the same. We arrived here at eight on Sunday, and ate supper (Bulke and milk.) Last week, we only worked for one and a half days; the rest of the time we were inside. I supposed we'll go to work tomorrow again. The work in the forest is not too difficult. Because the rain has slowed us down, we won't have a long vacation at Easter; perhaps only 5 days. Peter Sukkau has told us he and David Penner will come and get us with two wagons—please ask my parents to remind Penners. We are counting on them. If they can't do it, perhaps they can hire Jak Hamm. Now I will close. We have had our evening devotions and I want to go to bed.

I remain
your loving Peter.

Below: At the left in the horse-drawn carriage, bridal couple Peter Martens and Helene Wieler at the home of Franz Martens, Rückenau, South Russia, 1903. Right: Peter Marten's Forstei documentation

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