



Roots and Branches

PERIODICAL OF THE MENNONITE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF BC

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

Psalm 78

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Photograph by Jane Grunau

Friendship Tree in the Parke de Amistad, Neuland Colony, Chaco

Quito Mennonite Church, Ecuador, 2009

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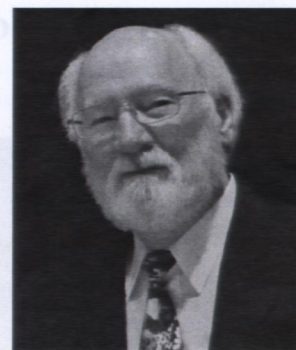
Hours: 9am-4pm Monday-Friday

Editorial

Roots and Branches continues to receive strong support from the community, and we thank you for your kind words and suggestions. We welcome your thoughts, letters and articles, in either English or German.

Recently, Anne Andres and Heather Pauls Murray have joined board members Wilf Penner and Connie Braun as members of our editorial committee, while Robert Martens has taken on the position of associate editor. These additions and changes will enable us to distribute the work of writing and editing our "periodical" among more people.

As this issue goes to press, we are saddened by the death of our colleague, MHSBC board member Ben Braun, who died unexpectedly on December 22. Ben was a committed volunteer who logged many hours at the archive office. His hard work, gentle spirit and quiet sense of humour will be greatly missed. A tribute will follow in our spring periodical. (LBP)



Ben Braun, 1942-2009

Events

February 6 at 7P.M. Lecture: *Mennonites and Collectivization under Stalin*. Garden Park Tower. See page 9 for details.

May 8 at 7 P.M. Lecture with Marlene Epp. *Mennonite Women In Canada*. Level Ground Mennonite Church (formerly West Abbotsford) 31216 King Road, Abbotsford.

June 5 at 3 P.M. **Annual General Meeting** of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC. A Low-German video about Mennonites in Siberia will follow the AGM. All are welcome. Garden Park Tower, Dogwood Room.

October 23 at 6 P.M. Annual Fundraising banquet and lecture. Emmanuel Mennonite Church. Speaker: J.B.Toews.

Topic: **The Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia: The Hundred Years War.**

Global Connections at the Mennonite World Conference, Asunción, Paraguay

by Gerry Grunau, photography by Jane Grunau



Speaker at Mennonite World Assembly

The overwhelming impact of the Assembly was the expansiveness and diversity of the worldwide Mennonite community. The Mennonite Church has successfully expanded its horizons beyond the cultural boundaries of European connections, and the evidence of this expansion was clearly visible in Asunción.

Imagine sitting in Assembly worship sessions where Spanish is the working language and where English and a host of other languages are translated. At the first session, there was the hope that a prayerful spirit might overcome the limited knowledge of Spanish of many attendees. These thoughts rapidly evaporated, and were accompanied by a sense of vulnerability associated with not being able to participate without a snazzy translation headset to sit on your head. The challenge of a common language other than English became a daily reality.

(Cont'd next page)

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Directors: Ben Braun, Connie Braun, David Giesbrecht, John Konrad, Robert Martens, Peter Neudorf, Helen Rose Pauls, Wilf Penner, Louise Bergen Price, Richard Thiessen & John B. Toews. **Editor:** Louise Bergen Price. **Associate editor:** Robert Martens. Editorial Committee: Connie Braun, Wilf Penner, Anne Andres and Heather Murray. **Staff:** Mary Ann Quiring & Elisabeth Klassen **Copy editing:** Hugo and Jean Friesen

Or imagine participating in workshops where the diversity of participants and their languages is both a gift and a challenge, as North American Mennonites were graciously surrounded, and significantly outnumbered, by brothers and sisters from Colombia, Vietnam, Burkina Faso and elsewhere.



Aboriginal church service in the Chaco, 2009

groups shared their stories through singing or through words we didn't understand, with occasional moments of recognizable Spanish. A geographic roll call was announced, and to our amazement our Chaco Christian community included persons from Switzerland, the USA, Brazil and Argentina, as well as a number from Canada. A short sermon was delivered – but prior to starting, a significant amount of activity resulted in the arrival of a personal translator to ensure our participation in the service. The building was basic and the local worshippers were not wealthy, but the enthusiasm was infectious and the spiritual energy was immense. Our Mennonite world had again expanded a few notches.

The conclusion of our trip two weeks after the Assembly took us to Quito, Ecuador. We had never met Darwin and Daniella before the Assembly. In our global Assembly conversations, however, they shared about their Mennonite church in Quito, and when they discovered we were travelling to Quito, they invited us to join them in their Sunday morning worship service, as well as a tour around the city in the afternoon and evening.

We accepted – their hospitality was also infectious. On a Sunday morning two weeks later at 10:00 AM, we were in Darwin's minivan with his daughter, Naomi, heading for Quito Mennonite Fellowship. The congregation was small – about 50 persons in attendance sitting on chairs in a large room within a residential complex. Singing was accompanied by a guitar and the sermon was accentuated by the handing out of bread. Once again we were provided with a personal translator, even though we would have loved to participate with them in Spanish. We exchanged greetings – and were asked to convey greetings to our home congregation, Langley Mennonite Fellowship. After the service, we were engaged in their time of coffee and conversation and given a tour of their church facility. Their outreach endeavors include providing shelter and support for refugees fleeing from Colombia. We met a young woman and her baby currently in immigration status, seeking a future in some country which will accept them.



Quito Mennonite Church, Ecuador, 2009

After church we headed for the Equator Monument, followed by the local canyon lookout, an ice cream break, and a downtown excursion. We couldn't have spent the last day of our trip in a more meaningful way. Our Mennonite world had expanded once again.

The way we were

A Trip through Mennonite settlements in British Columbia in 1940.

Translated by Louise Bergen Price from "Eine Wanderung durch die mennonitschen Siedlungen in Britisch Columbia," in *Warte Jahrbuch*, 1944. Arnold Dyck, editor. Steinbach: Steinbach Post, 1940. Photos courtesy of MHSBC archives.

If we wish to take a trip through the Mennonite settlements in BC, beginning in Vancouver, we are advised to travel by BC Electric Railway, which passes through all the areas of interest to us. Approximately 13 miles east of Vancouver, in New Westminster, we arrive at the first of these settlements, which comprises about 50 families and a small church. Most of the settlers earn their living by taking jobs outside of the home. Several raise chickens on the side, and a few have small dairy operations.

After we cross the grandiose iron bridge over the Fraser River, our train winds up towards Strawberry Hill. The name denotes the occupation of those who live here, although we do not see any large strawberry or raspberry fields from our train windows. Most likely, they lie hidden behind the bush. About forty Mennonite families have settled in this area, occupied with the chicken and dairy business. Some have taken over farms left by Japanese farmers.

Our train moves on, through the lovely valley, Cloverdale, where other Mennonites have settled. At the Warhoop Station, we leave the train and wander one and a half miles by foot to the Coglan settlement. Here, most of the homesteads were cut out of dense, almost impenetrable bush, involving gruelling pioneer work.



Willms family and others

Trees and huge stumps had to be cleared and thick brush rooted out before the land could be ready for cultivation. That demanded a great deal of energy, perseverance and trust in God. When one recalls that many of these settlers had to take on outside work while building homes and clearing land, one gets a glimpse of this giant undertaking. Certainly the land prices were cheap, but according to many, the land is not very productive. Yet that this settlement has boomed is evident by neat homes surrounded by orchards and strawberry and raspberry fields. Although the soil is too poor to sustain dairy operations, berry crops are abundant, and of top quality, and settlers have been able to establish themselves by means of the strawberry and chicken farms.

From Coglan, we travel to the pretty town of Abbotsford, nestled into a romantic valley, and then take a side trip to the nearby Mennonite settlement. Those who visited this area ten to twelve years ago would hardly believe their eyes now. Before, it was a wilderness. At dusk, the huge, bare stumps that rose above the scrub on the forest floor gave a sinister feeling, as if one were in a cemetery. Now, miserable huts emerging from the bush have been replaced by pretty, cheerful homes which would not look out of place

in the city. Most are surrounded by charming gardens. Large chicken barns proclaim the main income of these settlers.

In order to understand the beginnings and the economic development of this area, let us hear from settler H. Willms, Abbotsford pioneer and owner of a stucco home here:

Early in 1931, several Mennonite families came to Abbotsford and settled on stump land, two miles west of the village, 20 to 40 acres per family. North of the highway, on either side of Clearbrook Road, local sawmill owner, Preacher P. H. Neufeld (of Yarrow) had put a section of land for sale for settlement purposes, at ten dollars per acre. Four families and two single individuals bought parcels and settled there, building provisional homes in which to shelter. To earn a livelihood, they would have to find outside work.

At the same time, several families took up similar parcels of land four miles south, and only a mile from the American border. The following year, two sections of recently logged land were cut into 65 twenty-acre parcels and put up for auction. The land was wild bush with dry underbrush and huge stumps, no paths or roads leading through. Of these parcels, only 7 were sold, five going to Mennonites at \$10 per acres. Later, over half the parcels were sold to Mennonites at private sales.

More and more settlers arrived, until currently an area of 10 x 4 miles is settled mostly by Mennonites. We don't have access to statistics, but estimate the number of Mennonite families to be over three hundred.

Existence in the first few years was primitive. Male members of these households, including fathers, found work in the dairy barns of established farms on Sumas Prairie. Daughters found work as domestics in Vancouver. The intention of the settlers was to become self-sufficient farmers as soon as possible. Therefore, they lived as sparingly as they could.

For several years, a significant number of settlers were in need of government support, and availed themselves of a program whereby the municipality hired workers for road building and maintenance from those who applied for relief. By 1936/37, most Mennonites no longer needed this assistance.

Currently, our farmers demonstrate mastery of their profession. Neat farm houses surrounded by attractive gardens or green lawns stand where recently one saw only massive stumps amongst the almost impenetrable underbrush. Most of the settlers are now debt free.

The M.B. Church was organized on May 1, 1932 with 31 members. By the winter of 35/36 they built their first church, which was dedicated March 1, 1936 [now South Abbotsford MB]. At the time of building, the community split into the South and North Abbotsford M.B. churches of Abbotsford.

A few years later, the North Abbotsford M.B. group also built their church, which now has 185 members while South Abbotsford M.B. has 325. No information is currently available on the number of General Conference members or churches. Abbotsford has two Bible schools, each with two teachers; one, belonging to the General Conference, has a dormitory and enrolls about 30 students. The other belongs to the MB Conference and has 40 students.

Thus far the report of our Abbotsford pioneer, and this must suffice. [Next issue. Our traveller visits Sardis, Greendale and Yarrow.]

Mennonites and Rulers: Herbert Hoover and Maxim Gorky

by Robert Martens

Seemingly unconnected, random circumstances sometimes connect to alter our lives in profound and unforeseen ways. Mennonite history is no exception.

Herbert Hoover, the thirty-first president of the United States, was born in 1874 to Quaker parents in West Branch, Iowa. At the age of ten he was orphaned, and Herbert went to live with his uncle in Oregon, where he attended Friends Pacific Academy. Hoover was one of the very first students at Stanford University. There he graduated with a geology degree, and also met his future wife, Lou Henry. For nearly twenty years after graduation, Hoover pursued a brilliant career as mining engineer, consultant and writer, working initially in Australia and then worldwide.

Then World War I broke out and his life was permanently changed. "I did not realize it at the moment," he said, "but on August 3, 1914 my career was over forever. I was on the slippery road of public life." For two years, Hoover confronted the European wartime food crisis by working 14-hour days as head of the Committee for Relief in Belgium, an organization with an \$11 million a month budget based on voluntary donations and



South Abbotsford MB Church, 1938

government grants. Then, after the United States entered the war in 1917, President Woodrow Wilson appointed Hoover as chief of the American Food Administration, which promoted food conservation on home soil.

Foreseeing that the Democratic Party had little chance of winning the next election, in 1920 Hoover placed his name as a Republican on the ballot of the California primary, but lost the contest. He endorsed Warren Harding, who subsequently won the presidency and offered Hoover the post of Secretary of Commerce. Over the next two terms Hoover transformed the previously insignificant Department of Commerce into a powerhouse. He strongly supported the Efficiency Movement, focusing on the elimination of waste and the increase of productivity in a growing association of government with business.

In 1928 Herbert Hoover won a landslide presidential victory over Democratic challenger, Al Smith, who was widely mistrusted as a Catholic. Then in 1929 the Great Depression struck. Although Hoover acted vigorously with government aid, and especially with relief measures based on volunteerism, his political career was doomed. He lost in a landslide in 1932 to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who loathed Hoover, accusing him, quite falsely, of "doing nothing." Hoover left Washington with deep bitterness, and henceforth his involvement with politics was limited. He died in New York City in 1964.



Herbert Hoover

On the other side of the globe, in 1868, Aleksey Maksimovich Peshkov was born. Interestingly, he also was orphaned at the age of ten, and two years later ran away from home to live with his grandmother. Her subsequent death disturbed him so deeply that he attempted suicide. Over the following years he travelled across Russia, eventually finding his calling as journalist and writer. It was then that he took the pen name of Maxim Gorky, the latter meaning "bitter." Literature, he felt, should be an ethical and political vocation on behalf of the

dispossessed. Gorky achieved international fame as a writer in 1898 with his *Essays and Stories*. Meanwhile, he was associating with activists and revolutionaries, and was arrested numerous times. The ruthless suppression of a workers' demonstration on Bloody Sunday of 1905 impelled him into the Bolshevik camp, but his relationship with Communists was to be a contradictory and strained one.

Between 1906 and 1913, Gorky lived abroad, in the United States, where he wrote his famous novel, *Mother*, and for a time in Capri, Italy, hoping for relief from his tuberculosis. He developed a concept called "God-building," a system of religious atheism in which the deity is replaced by a people striving for transcendent justice and eventual deliverance from evil. A Romanov amnesty allowed Gorky to return to Russia, where he subsequently supported the Bolshevik revolution, but he soon fell out with their leaders. "Lenin and Trotsky don't have any idea about freedom or human rights," he wrote. "They are already corrupted by the dirty poison of power."

Between 1921 and 1929 Gorky was again living outside of Russia. Rather oddly, Stalin convinced him to return permanently to the USSR, where Gorky was given a dacha and was bestowed the Order of Lenin. His home town was named after him, and he pursued a precarious career as a propaganda writer for

Stalin. In 1935, however, his son died suddenly, and Gorky himself perished under mysterious circumstances one year later. It is possible that both were poisoned by the secret service NKVD. But what connection could these two men have, Hoover and Gorky, diametrical opposites in so many ways? And what possible role do Mennonites play in this story?

The answer lies in the Russian famine of 1921-22, which claimed approximately five million lives. The famine was a result of disruption of agriculture during World War I, of the ensuing revolutionary chaos, and of incompetent and malicious administration. When the Bolshevik government confiscated food from Russian peasants, the peasants reacted by drastically reducing production; Lenin denounced this as "sabotage." Drought aggravated the situation.

Meanwhile, Hoover's Quaker-influenced social conscience was emerging, as he spearheaded relief efforts as head of the American Relief Administration (ARA). The ARA had finished relief work in western Europe, and now Hoover was offering aid to Russia, under the condition that food be handed out impartially to all. Lenin, suspicious of American intervention, refused.

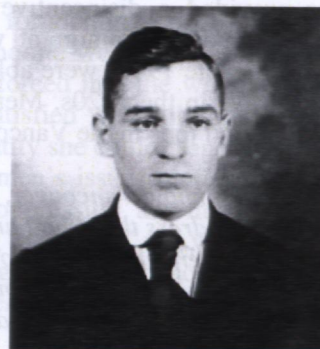
But as the famine worsened and rebellions broke out, Lenin eventually succumbed, both to general public pressure, and specifically to the pleadings of Maxim Gorky upon behalf of the starving. Gorky was permitted to



Gorky with Leo Tolstoy at Yasnaya Polyana. (Wikipedia)

make an appeal to Herbert Hoover, who responded immediately. When criticized for helping Bolsheviks, Hoover replied, "Twenty million people are starving. Whatever their politics, they shall be fed."

An agreement was reached in Riga in 1921, and the ARA opened relief operations in Russia, at its peak employing 300 Americans as well as 120,000 Russians; many of the latter were themselves among the malnourished. Ten million people were fed daily. The medical division provided treatment, especially to victims of the concurrent typhus epidemic. Despite the mistrust, perhaps paranoia, of some Communist officials, the operation was a huge success, lasting until 1923, when it was discovered that the Bolsheviks were receiving aid at home while selling grain abroad.



MCC relief worker, Clayton Kratz (Wikipedia)

And it was under these conditions that the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) was born. In September 1920 various Mennonite aid organizations met in Elkhart, Indiana to discuss helping fellow Mennonites in Russia. Once established, MCC moved quickly to alleviate the intense suffering caused by the Russian famine, working amicably with the ARA and feeding 25,000 people daily, mostly in South Russia. AJ Miller was director of American Mennonite Relief, operating under the auspices of MCC. It was a perilous enterprise, both physically, with some relief workers perishing of typhus, and politically: MCC representative Clayton Kratz was murdered by thugs. But many lives were saved, and Mennonite Central Committee continues its work to this day, in part due, originally, to the odd relationship between two starkly different individuals, Maxim Gorky and Herbert Hoover.

References: Wikipedia, www.answers.com, www.mcusa-archives.org,
Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online - Photographs: Wikipedia

Riga Agreement between the American Relief Administration and the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic

WHEREAS a famine condition exists in part of Russia, and
WHEREAS Mr. Maxim Gorky, with the knowledge of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, has appealed through Mr. Hoover to the American people for assistance to the starving and sick people, more particularly the children, of the famine stricken parts of Russia, and

WHEREAS Mr. Hoover and the American people have read with great sympathy this appeal on the part of the Russian people in their distress and are desirous, solely for humanitarian reasons, of coming to their assistance, and

WHEREAS Mr. Hoover, in his reply to Mr. Gorky, has suggested that supplementary relief might be brought by the American Relief Administration to up to a million children in Russia ...

THEREFORE It is agreed ... [t]hat the ARA will extend such assistance to the Russian people as is within its power....

H.H. Fisher, *The Famine in Soviet Russia, 1919-23: The Operations of the American Relief Administration*.

Macmillan, 1927. www.questia.com/PM.qst

Research Project

Mennonite Women, Work and the City

by Sandra Borger

It is a remarkable event when ordinary individuals reveal the stories of their lives, and instead of the monochromatic assortment of brown, tan and beige threads one would expect to find, their colours shine brilliantly with emerald greens, glow softly with sunset yellows and reds, and at times are hazy with shadowy greys. I intend on submerging myself with such ordinary, yet extraordinary, women for the next year of my life.

Even though they were the most unlikely of candidates, young, unmarried Mennonite women were able to help provide for the economic survival of their families in the 1940s and 1950s. After escaping persecution during the Second World War, Mennonite families incurred large debts travelling to and settling in Canada. A priority for these self-reliant immigrants was to quickly repay their debts to sponsors, including the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization. Hoping to create a new life in Canada, large numbers of people settled in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia, the fertile land and already established Mennonite communities a definite lure. Though berry farming was a viable means of making money, it was often not enough. Many families had no choice but to send the young women of their homes into the city of Vancouver to work as domestics, either as live-ins or day workers.

"I recognize that there was no other choice and we all wanted to work and learn English. I knew I needed to do something... there was nothing else for me or us." - Interview quote

Wages for domestics had decreased during the Great Depression in Canada, enabling an increasing number of Canadian families to hire domestic help. Lower wages and growing job opportunities for women throughout the war provided a disincentive for Anglo-Canadian and British immigrant women to enter into service. Employers turned to immigrant women from eastern and central Europe to fill the void. Mennonite women arriving in the late 1940s were able to join the marketplace alongside their peers that had come during the earlier migration wave in the 1920s. Mennonite women, known for their conservative lifestyle and reliable work ethic, were able to find jobs in the Vancouver labour market quickly and without any difficulty.

"You didn't know Vancouver, and I was terrifyingly shy, I was very very timid. I would get on the bus with this address that I had and I said could he [the bus driver] call out such and such a number, like the street avenue. I didn't know anything about the streets, but the bus drivers were very kind. He had the bus jammed full, and I could see him in the mirror, and you would get worried, would he remember me? He would call out so and so street, and then he'd look at me in the mirror and I'd get out." - Interview quote

These girls, some as young as thirteen years old, were able to utilize one of the many religiously-based girls' homes that were located throughout Canada, established in order to ease their transition into the paid work force. In Vancouver, the local *Maedchenheims* were the Bethel Girls Home (MB) and the Mary Martha Home (GCM). These homes, run by female Mennonite matrons, provided advice for finding work, mediation between employers and the young women, a network of social support, and, ultimately, a place of refuge for women who suffered various forms of abuse in the workplace. The homes also created a sense of community in an unfamiliar setting; they were havens that the girls could turn to when loneliness or fear set in.

"Wherever we worked across Vancouver, that was our day [Thursdays] when we were made free. And then we would come to the 'heim and there would always be a program and visiting with each other and some snacking around 4/5 o'clock or something like that. At the Mädchenheim we felt that we were with our own people – there we could speak German with each other. In truth, none of us really spoke English. You were in a foreign atmosphere. Then you came there – the Mädchenheim. There you were like at home." - Interview quote

My research will push forward the existing historical literature by complicating identity with specific experiences of ethno-religious community and a rural-to-urban shift. I will examine the construction of gender within this group of women, and see how their transition into the paid workforce in an urban area affected their ideas of what it meant to be a Mennonite woman. Likewise, I will examine the dynamics of the girls' homes and try to understand both their significance to the girls themselves and the greater Mennonite community in British Columbia.

As a woman's historian, my research is focused on the everyday experiences of Mennonite women. While political and economic history have their place in the academic world, it is important to understand what was going on "behind the scenes" so to speak. Often, women's experiences are given very little space in the historical record, if they are mentioned at all. Each tear, each bout of laughter, each struggle and each victory – all the memories matter.

Oral interviews are an excellent way to do women's history. In the case of my own research, the process is completely informal, more of a conversation over tea than an interview. The questions are open-ended and participants have the opportunity to ask questions of the interviewer as they please.

While the historical theory and context is researched by the historian, oral interviews are important because they provide Mennonite women with the opportunity to tell their own stories. Women are experts in their own lives; the researcher has not seen, heard or felt the experiences of the participants.

"We didn't have to make an effort even [to get along in the girls home]. This was good after what we went through before [with the war]. There was a positive in everything, even the house cleaning" - Said with laughter in an interview.

For more information on this topic, or to participate in an interview or donate photographs and other related items, feel free to contact Sandra Borger by phone at 604-944-2068, or by email at smb11@sfu.ca.

Book Review:

Katie Funk Wiebe, *You Never Gave Me A Name: One Mennonite Woman's Story*

Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2009. Reviewed by Helen Grace Lescheid.

You Never Gave Me A Name is a fascinating memoir of one woman's search for identity. For several decades Katie Funk Wiebe struggled hard to fulfill the role of a silent, submissive Mennonite woman who accepted her destined life as wife and mother. After her husband's death, she was suddenly forced into the work world. She faced a jungle of confusion about gender roles in a conservative church. Not satisfied with filling stereotypical roles, she began to ask herself, "What does God want of me?" She wanted an identity she could respect.

As a regular columnist for *The Christian Leader*, she began to address women's issues more openly. "The responsibility of both men and women in an age of suffering, hunger, loneliness, oppression, and much corruption is to choose according to strength, gifts, and grace given us by God—not according to gender," she writes.

In 1966 she began teaching at Tabor College in Hillsboro, Kansas. "Tabor gave me a chance to start a new life after being forced into the work world and, especially, an opportunity for personal and intellectual growth," she writes.

When she resigned twenty-four years later, she had finished two university degrees and was head of the English department and chair of the Faculty Personnel Committee. She had also published several books.

In this "life review" Katie Funk Wiebe reaches out not only to "the men and women waiting in the shadows for opportunity to use all their gifts in service to the church," but also to anyone who is growing older. "You don't grow old, you become old when you quit growing," she writes. She reminds us that "aging is a time to forgive and let go in all areas, including family conflicts."

"The greatest thing we can do for the younger generation is to reveal to them that life never loses meaning," she writes. "We need to keep telling them that life is precious at all stages. The greatest tragedy is not death but never to have lived."

As I was reading this harvest of her life, I found myself saying "Yes!" again and again. With honesty and pathos Katie Funk Wiebe has described a journey that many of us are on. I highly recommend this book.

You Never Gave Me a Name is available at the MHSBC archive office.

Helen Grace Lescheid is the author of Lead Kindly Light, now available in an expanded and revised edition. Available at the archives or from the author at www.helenlescheid.com. A review will follow.

Upcoming Lecture: Mennonites and Collectivization under Stalin

Speaker: Dr. Colin Neufeldt

February 6, 2010 at 7 P.M.

Garden Park Tower

Colin Neufeldt writes: "Collectivization in Ukraine began in 1928 and continued until 1934. The period from late 1929 to late 1930 marked a critical stage in the collectivization process, with an intensified attack against the *kulaks* (better-off peasants) in a process known as "dekulakization." My lecture will focus on the dekulakization process in Ukraine in 1929-30 and will be divided into two parts.

Part 1 will examine the Mennonite dekulakization experience both as victims of dekulakization and as agents of the government campaign. Part 2 will look at the establishment and operation of the *zborniyis* – kulak settlements located in the Ukrainian countryside that served as transit settlements for Mennonites enroute to forced labour camps in the north."



"Comrade, come and join the kolkhoz!" (Wikipedia)

Colin Neufeldt has received numerous degrees, culminating in a LLB and PhD from the University of Alberta. His particular fields of interest include Soviet Mennonite history, and 20th-century Polish Mennonite history. Neufeldt has opened up his own law practice and also works as an Assistant Professor of History at Concordia University College of Alberta. He and his family attend First Mennonite Church in Edmonton.

Our Aboriginal Neighbours:

H.R. Voth, Missionary to the Hopi - by Robert Martens

During the current inquiry into the devastating effects of residential schools in Canada, Mennonites might well examine their own historical relationships with First Nations peoples. The story is not guiltless, as Mennonite colonists, themselves seeking a homeland, displaced aboriginals both in Russia and the Canadian prairies. H.R. Voth, American General Conference missionary, historian and ethnographer, sought to assimilate native Americans to the prevailing mainstream culture, much as Canadian residential schools later would attempt to do by "taking the Indian out of the Indian." On the other hand, Voth's profound fascination with native American life impelled him to an extensive study of its stories and rituals.

Heinrich Richert Voth was born April 15, 1855 in Alexanderwohl, South Russia, and emigrated along with his family's congregation to a colony near Newton, Kansas in 1874. He studied at the Ohio Wadsworth School, one of the first North American Mennonite initiatives in higher education, as well as at the Theological Seminary of the Evangelical Synod in Missouri. Voth also attended the St. Louis Medical College in preparation for his intended mission work.

In 1880, S.S. Haury had become the first Mennonite missionary and teacher at the Darlington, Oklahoma Mission to the Cheyenne and Arapaho. The US government had built its first native schools here, and was favourably disposed to the Mennonite project, granting the station forty acres of good land and use of a sawmill. Catastrophe ensued when the mission building burned down, killing three native children and the Haurys' only son. H.R. Voth arrived as a replacement

in 1882. Although he had a great talent for learning new languages, Voth required his Indian students to speak English, and believed that "heathenish culture" had to be stripped away in order to convert them to Christianity. At the same time he was becoming an avid ethnographer, studying native customs and publishing his results in journals. In 1884 he married Barbara Baer, but she died in 1889. Voth seems to have been deeply affected by her death, and in 1892 he left Darlington and toured the Russian lands of his birth. No congregation ever developed at the Darlington Mission.

In 1893, Voth and his second wife, Martha Moser, were assigned to a new mission to the Hopi in Oraibi, Arizona. It is said that Voth would enter uninvited into Hopi sacred rituals and preach the Christian faith in the Hopi tongue. His insensitivity, however, was again counterbalanced, perhaps contradicted, by his extraordinary interest in traditional religion and belief. Voth was meticulous in his study of native life, collecting numerous artifacts and photographing Hopi ceremonies.

After Martha died in 1901, Voth retired, heartbroken and perhaps weary and somewhat disillusioned, from native mission work. The outreach to the Hopi was no more successful than the one at Darlington had been. There were only a handful of converts, and in 1912 lightning struck the church Voth had built. Some Hopi maintained that the building was cursed.

After leaving Arizona, Voth moved on to church building for the General Conference, serving at congregations in Goltry and Gotebo, Oklahoma. He married his third wife, Katie Herschler, in 1906. Meanwhile his passion for native culture never waned. Voth



H. R. Voth and Barbara Baer Voth, 1884

donated artifacts to what would later become the Henry R. Voth Indian Collection at Grand Canyon, and collected material for the Field Museum in Chicago, even recreating a Hopi altar there. He also published extensively on his Hopi studies and experiences.

Voth maintained a vital passion for Mennonite history as well. In 1911, the Mennonite Historical Association of North America was founded in Bluffton, Ohio, and by 1914 Voth was serving as its chair, a position he held until 1930. The Association printed its first report in 1917. Its constitution was in German and English, and dues were \$1 for five years, or \$10 lifetime. The massive job of filing and cataloguing historical materials continued "during the late hours of the night" at Voth's home (GAMEO). Space for the collection was urgently needed and plans were made to establish a museum on the grounds of Bethel College Campus. Voth's contributions were so vital to the Association that, when he died in 1930, these plans virtually ground to a halt. Eventually most of the material was put on display at the Bethel College Historical Library, which also incorporates the H.R.

Voth Collection containing Arapaho and Hopi studies and artifacts. H.R. Voth bore the contradictions and ambivalences of his time. He both feared and loved native American customs, simultaneously intending their destruction and preservation. Today Voth is respected, however, as an important pioneer anthropologist and collector of aboriginal material. In the light of European devastation of First Nations cultures in North America, Voth's contributions, however controversial, must be seen as invaluable.

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Missionary Martha Moser Voth - by Louise Bergen Price

They were, and are, often called "missionary wives," and, as such, their work is not valued in the same way as "regular" missionaries. Martha Moser Voth, a missionary in her own right, was such a woman.

Martha was born in Dalton, Ohio, in 1862 to German speaking Mennonite parents. When she was in her twenties, and heard about the General Conference Mennonite Church mission work among the Indians in Darlington, Oklahoma, Martha Moser joined the team of teachers and missionaries at the newly established residential school for Indian children, arriving there in 1888.

At Darlington, she worked with the missionary couple, Heinrich and Barbara (Baer) Voth. In 1889, Barbara Voth died, leaving two young children, newborn daughter, Bertha Selma, and four-year-old Frieda Edna. After the death of his infant daughter Bertha in March 1891, Heinrich requested a six-month leave, and toured his Russian homeland with his father, leaving young Frieda in his mother's care.

Martha Moser, who had become matron at Darlington, also requested leave from the mission 1991 to pursue her education. In January 1992, she enrolled in Halstead Seminary.

Halstead had been founded ten years earlier by recent Mennonite immigrants to Kansas, its purpose primarily to prepare workers for the mission field and to train teachers for public and German parochial schools. During the first year, it was limited to men; later it was co-educational. Between 1883 and 1893, the school enrolled 515 students with 33 graduating. One of Martha's fellow students was a young David Toews, who, as chairman of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, would help thousands of refugees find new homes in Canada.



Martha with step-daughter Frieda Voth.
Mennonite Church USA Archives, Bethel College

Martha, like most of Halstead's students, did not graduate. On August 18, 1892, she married Heinrich Voth, and the following summer, the couple took on an assignment for a new Indian mission with the Hopi at Oraibi, Arizona. According to archeologists, Oraibi was founded some time before 1100 AD, making it one of the oldest continuously inhabited places in the United States. It would not be an easy place to promote Christianity.

The Hopi were known as one of the most "religiously intractable tribes of North America" (Brown 12); this in spite of intense pressure on them to convert from their beliefs to Christianity. The pressure came from the government as well as missionaries, for Indian agent and school superintendent in Oraibi, C.D. Burton, vigorously "opposed anything that perpetuated Hopi religious ceremonies" (Parezo, 92).

For the first two years, Martha kept a diary, written in German. It is evident that she was a strong, capable woman, learning to speak Hopi before her husband did, and establishing good relations with Hopi women. In fact, since Heinrich fell seriously ill soon after they arrived and did not recover until January, Martha had to do the lion's share of establishing their presence in the pueblo. Early on in their stay, she received a shipment of calico from women missionaries in Kansas and established a sewing circle, teaching the Hopi women and using this opportunity to preach the gospel (Trotta 133).

Beside the daily chores of cooking, washing, caring for livestock, and gathering firewood, Martha accompanied Heinrich in his travels through the pueblos in a mule-drawn wagon. Together they tended the sick and dispensed medicines. In times of famine, they brought in supplies through their contact with other missions.



Oraibi village, circa 1899 (Wikipedia)

With the birth of Martha and Heinrich's first child, Albert, in October 1895, Martha's life became even busier, especially since the baby was frail, often ill with diarrhea, earaches and fever. A daughter, Esther, was born in 1899.

All of these activities were common to "missionary wives" of that era. What was unusual in Martha Moser Voth's life was her husband's frenetic pursuit of knowledge about the Hopi religion and culture, a culture he was trying to destroy even as he recorded it. Over the eight years the Voths lived in the Oraibi community, Heinrich took over 2,000 photographs detailing not only everyday activities among the Hopi, but also secret ritual practices. Meanwhile, Martha added the work of developing the photographs to her already busy life, assisted by Heinrich's young daughter, Frieda. It is very unlikely that H. R. Voth would have been able to accomplish this mammoth task without the help of his wife and daughter (Trotta, 184).

Summers were especially busy in the Voth household, when the family was inundated by tourists and scholars who had read of Heinrich's work. For instance, on August 25, 1897, Heinrich and Martha had just hosted some visitors:

"It was so quiet after everyone left. Martha and I had just laid down to rest awhile since we were tired when someone knocked and here was another group. G.A Dorsey and E.P Allen from [the] Field Columbian Museum and their driver. They were without supplies so they simply stayed at our place....Drove with them to the mesa and interpreted for them." (Trotta 200, quoting from Heinrich's diary)

At first, the Voths' relations with the Hopi seem to have been cordial, but hostilities arose when they became aware that Heinrich was publishing descriptions and photographs of sacred ceremonies in anthropological research papers (Brown, p. 13). In spite of the couples' hard work, there were few converts.

The lack of converts and the growing controversy surrounding Heinrich's anthropological activities caused unease in the Missions board that supported them. We don't know what the future of Heinrich and Martha Voth's mission would have been, because tragedy struck the family again. On May 3, 1901, Martha, who had just given birth to the couples' third child, fell ill with puerperal eclampsia. The doctor was 35 miles away, and by the time he arrived in his buggy, it was too late. Martha Moser Voth died on May 6, 1901, and was buried the following day. Heinrich was unable to speak at her funeral, so Indian Agent Burton read scripture and committed her body to the grave.

On May 16, the *Christlicher Bundesbote* published the obituary of "Martha Voth, wife of Missionary H. R. Voth." Martha was 39 years, 2 months and 22 days. "There were seven whites and a number of Indians present" (CBB, 10).

A 1901 photograph of Martha's grave shows a desolate plain with a scattering of small shrubs. In the centre of the photograph, flat stones trace the outline of her grave. In the distance, against the low hills, a solitary house.

Perhaps a fitting epitaph for Martha Moser Voth is the following entry in her journal of 1893/94: "Although we feel the solitude here very much, it seems to us that time passes faster now. It seems that time rushes down like water down a river and we rush along with the flow. May we arrive at a proper destination where time does not eat into our life with biting teeth." (Trotta 201)

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Mennonites and Nogais

by Robert Martens

It was not a good beginning. When Mennonite pioneers first arrived in the Molochna in 1803, they settled on land where five Nogai villages had stood, now evicted by the Russian government to clear the way for these new German-speaking immigrants. Nogai raids and thefts in succeeding years motivated Mennonites to live for protection in densely designed neighbourhoods with their farm properties situated on village outskirts. In 1811 four Mennonites were murdered by Nogais. Nevertheless, over the next decades, relationships between the two groups were reasonably good, with Mennonites assigned by the Russian authorities to help develop a viable Nogai economy, make "citizens" of these seminomadic people, and lift them out of poverty. A paternalistic and condescending Mennonite attitude was frequently overshadowed by a surprising degree of respect and fairness. By 1860, however, the project to "civilize" the Nogais, in which Molochna Mennonites were so heavily involved, had clearly failed. What had gone so wrong?



Nomadic peoples in South Russia

The Nogais, excellent warriors and scattered in small groups across the steppes, had been associated with the Crimean Tatars before the Russia authorities occupied the Crimean peninsula. The state confiscated Nogai land, suppressed rebellion ruthlessly, and burned their tents to compel them to settle down. After 1790, thousands of their families were forcibly relocated to the Molochna area and awarded a land grant of about 385,000 hectares. The total population here eventually peaked at 35,149. The land given to the Nogais was considered marginal to agriculture, but for these seminomads, who cultivated some land but valued the right to wander with their herds, this was not a great hindrance. Most Nogais lived in mobile villages called *auls*, comprised usually of between two and ten families, and were led by *beys*. The beys were members of a hereditary nobility known as the *murzas*, and traced a mythical lineage both to Genghis Khan and to Ishmael of the Genesis account. Villagers often lived in *yurts*, felt-covered tents, easily dismantled and re-erected. Relative social equality was dictated by the need for mobility: a Nogai family required a minimum of livestock to survive, but too much livestock would hinder their ability to move. In the Molochna, however, it appears that the Nogais, hemmed in by farming settlements, were less nomadic than elsewhere.

In 1808, the Russian government changed its Nogai policy from one of security to that of wardship. An attempt was made, under the administration of a French-Russian nobleman named Demaison, to convert the seminomads to grain farmers. Johann Cornies, the charismatic and often domineering Mennonite leader who had known the Nogais since childhood, was effusive in his praise of Demaison: "Finding them dwelling in portable felt tents, which were highly deleterious to their health, he built them good homes, ending their nomadic way of life and arousing them to the work of agriculture with great zeal and profit. The philanthropic graf governed with fatherly patience and love, and only when all measures of indulgence proved ineffective did he turn to strong measures" (Staples 3). Demaison's efforts were not very successful, however, as Nogais clung to the prestige of livestock ownership. A Swiss missionary in fact remarked that Nogai men placed greater value on their horses than their wives.

In 1825, although never officially mandated by the state, Johann Cornies took over the role of "improving" the Nogais. Demaison had governed by force. Cornies, on the contrary, attempted to "civilize" the Nogai by introducing them to the lucrative breeding of merino sheep. He wrote, "Can not a model colony be established in the region, for poor but industrious and willing Nogais, which could serve as a model for other Nogai villages? Can not a flock of improved sheep be bought through the community treasury, to be paid for from the profits of the improved wool in the future?" (Staples 5) In ordering the building of Akkerman as a model Nogai village, Cornies was perhaps utilizing an inappropriate Mennonite model, and "improvement" of the Nogais certainly implied a moral transformation in a narrowly understood sense. On the other hand, Cornies ensured that business transactions were standard, formal, and fair. Mennonites would

supply Nogais with sheep, pay half the cost of breeding rams, and at the end of the contract would split the profits. This "share pasturing" arrangement "clearly was not exploitive" (Staples 7). Cornies even complained to Russian authorities when he saw Doukhobors and Molokans making shady deals with Nogais under the umbrella of the new arrangement. Sheep grazing had the further advantage of placing less stress on the land than cattle herding.

The first signs of problems, however, were beginning to emerge. Share pasturing contracts were generous, but at the same time contributed to a new Nogai elite with such stipulations, for example, that fodder for the first winter had to be paid for upfront: this was a condition that only wealthier Nogais could afford. While the model village of Akkerman seemed prosperous, 1838 data showed that Nogais had generally regressed economically, and that other villages were doing much more poorly: Akkerman was, perhaps, a cosmetic creation for public relations.

In 1838, the Ministry of State Domains instituted a new policy that regarded Nogais as indistinguishable from Russian peasants, and Cornies stepped aside as a leader, although many of his policies were continued. The assimilation of Nogais to the mainstream by their "improvement" soon faced even greater difficulties. The international market for wool declined, then bottomed out in 1847, and while Mennonites managed generally to make a smooth transition to grain growing, Nogais were still stuck in a rigid state policy of encouraging sheep grazing. Their poverty increased. Under these conditions, Nogais were forced to make concessions in their dealings, and Mennonites began to shift contracts their own way, sometimes buying sheep at deflated prices at Nogai expense. Nogai landowners, their backs against the wall, were now leasing land to Mennonite farmers and herders. To some extent, the leasing of land was an equitable arrangement, with Nogais making good profits, and Mennonites, especially the Molochna landless, obtaining access to grain and grazing acreage. The two ethnic groups indeed tended to deal with each other generally on terms of mutual respect. Underlying problems were being camouflaged, however, and soon many illusions would be shattered.

In 1847-48, disaster struck. An epidemic killed 46 percent of livestock in New Russia, and while this hit Mennonite farmers hard, it devastated the Nogais. Many Nogai villages were now reduced to severe poverty, with only a fringe elite continuing to prosper and cutting deals with Mennonites and others. Nogais were being forced to borrow money from their Mennonite neighbours. The official Russian policy of Nogai improvement and assimilation was openly admitted to be failing.

The Crimean War of 1853-56 brought about an end to the Nogai presence in the Molochna. The Russian government was suspicious that Crimean Tatars would align themselves with the Turkish enemy, and considered evicting them from their traditional territories. After the war, the Nogais aligned themselves with their former Tatar allies, and identified with Tatar hostility to the Russian state. And when the Russian administration ruled that Nogai leaders, the murzas, no longer would be recipients of special privileges, but would henceforth be regarded administratively as simple Russian peasants, the Nogais decided it was time to move on. In 1859 they asked for and received permission to emigrate to Turkey. Nogais travelling from the Caucasus stopped in the Molochna, where virtually all their fellow tribespeople joined them in their trek out of the Russian Empire. The government ceded Molochna Nogai land to Bulgarian colonists. At this point the hollowness of the former Mennonite-Nogai economic arrangement became starkly apparent. The Nogais in the long run had not benefited, and indeed had become impoverished. And in addition, when the Mennonites lost access to Nogai land, the suppressed problem of the Mennonite landless blew up in their faces. An economic, social, and religious crisis ensued; in the turmoil, a new church, the Mennonite Brethren, many of whose members were landless, emerged to extreme hostility from the Old Church.

Landless Mennonites—as they were compelled to in order to survive—had exploited their relationship with the Nogai. All the attempts to "civilize" the Nogais into good citizens of the Russian Empire, even though often characterized by honesty and fair business dealings, had failed. Underlying problems had simply simmered underground for decades. Perhaps the Mennonite model, as promoted by Johann Cornies, was not quite as successful as historians have assumed.

In the 1990s, 65,000 Nogais were still living, without legal recognition and therefore in danger of assimilation, in the Northern Caucasus. About 90,000 reside today in Turkey, where the Nogai language survives, but barely. Some Nogais are also citizens of Jordan, speaking Arabic but attempting to maintain cultural independence. After all these years, Nogais, like Mennonites, are scattered across international boundaries, and are faced with the challenge of preserving some kind of identity. Their years together in the Molochna have nearly been forgotten.

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When the Mennonites Came to Us - by Peter Sawatzky



“When the first Mennonites came to us, the meeting was peaceful and free of confrontation” remarked a native pastor during a ceremony marking the transfer of the land title from Mennonite hands to the native community of *Pozo Amarillo*.¹

Like *Pozo Amarillo*, each native settlement in the central Chaco has its own unique history. However, in two significant ways their history is essentially identical. Before the arrival of Mennonite settlers, the Natives had access to vast territories of the entire Chaco without legal boundaries. Today, Natives live in communities with proper land titles. Securing these land titles has only been possible through the determined effort in the last 60 years of the immigrants

and their supporters abroad. In the central Chaco, two organizations in particular, have been involved: ASCIM (*Asociación de Servicios de Cooperación Indígena Menonita*) and VAP (*Vicariato Apostolico del Pilcomayo*), a Catholic organisation, together with their respective supporting organisations. Government support, while appreciated, has been more token than substance.

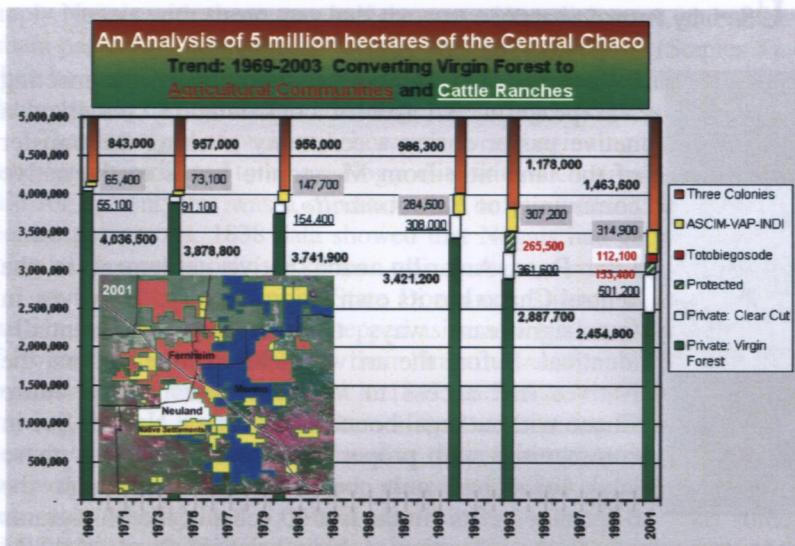
My analysis of six colony maps since 1969 bears out the Mennonite colonists’ efforts to secure their own livelihood, as well as that of the Natives who have been living amongst them. The analysis is limited to a rectangular area of about 5-million hectares in the Central Chaco.²

1. In 1969, forty years after the arrival of the first immigrants, there are three immigrant colonies and several native settlements in this region, with a combined area of about 908,400 ha. Seven percent (65,400 ha) of this area belongs to the native settlements.
2. Twenty years later (1990). Colonies have not expanded significantly, while the combined area of native settlements has been increased four-fold. This can be attributed to the rapid population growth in native communities and the growing awareness in colony circles that Natives need to have more land of their own. By this time the three colonies and several native settlements owned a total of about 1,270,800 ha. Of this area, twenty-two percent (284,500 ha) with legal title had been secured for native settlements.
3. In the ten years that followed (2001) the combined area of the 3 colonies had increased by 48% yet the combined areas of the native settlements increased barely 11%. This despite the fact that the native population was growing at a much higher rate (3.5%) than that of the colony population (1990-2000 average: 2.1% per year and declining).
4. By 2001, 1,778,500 ha (36%) had been settled by colony and native communities. Native communities, including some Latin-Paraguayan settlers, own 18% [314,900 ha] of this settled area. An additional 112,100 ha (2%) belongs to the Ayoreo-Totobiegosode – purchased by non-Mennonites and the state. Claims and negotiations for another 153,400 ha are in progress. The remaining 3,109,400 ha (62%), is in private hands – ranchers and land speculators, many amongst them are descendants of the first immigrants. The aggressive investments in the private sector are clearly recognizable by the multitude of newly cut survey lines and large scale clear cutting. 501,200 ha (16%) of private lands have already been cleared, 139,600 ha of them just in the eight years preceding 2001.

After seventy-six years, Mennonite settlers and their supporting agencies have bought and provided land for the Natives at a rate of 18 ha for every 100 ha bought for settlement purposes. This amounts to 314,900 ha, enough land for 3,149 families at 100 ha/family or 15,745 persons at 5 persons/family.

¹ Paraguayan daily “ABC Color”, October 15, 2003.

² Graphs and maps are based on data obtained from Mennonite Colony Maps [1969-2003] and satellite photos from the 1990s up to 2003. Where necessary extrapolated values have been used to bridge gaps between documented source data.

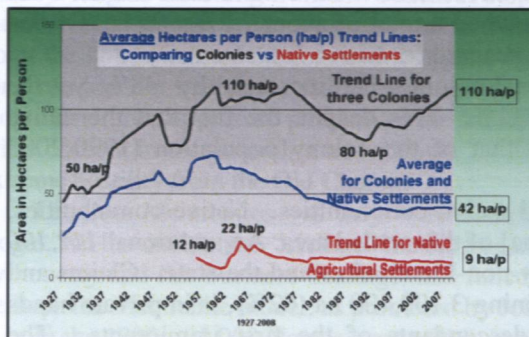


If other private estate owners in the Chaco would match the social conscience of the colonists, another 5,135 families totalling about 25,675 Natives could have a place to settle and to build homes and communities of their own. Applying the colonists' approach to the entire Chaco would provide sufficient living space for 41,420 Natives. (15,745 + 25,675).

The census of 2002 registered 42,151 Natives. Equitable sharing of the social burden across all stakeholders throughout the Chaco could provide sufficient land and livelihood for all, and could serve generations of Natives and descendants of immigrants well, even without a large contribution from the national treasury.

Precisely now, at the beginning of the 21st century, the time has come to:

1. Search for and explore bold and creative solutions to new challenges facing an ever changing multi-ethnic society.
2. Design solutions which primarily rely on the grass-roots communities and only marginally on a faltering national treasury - a "Land-Bank for future Native Communities" to address land-shortages, similar, in principle, to "The Canadian Foodgrains Bank, established in 1983" to alleviate food shortages around the world.
3. Implement such solutions before global planners and market forces have had a chance to scheme and shape the future of the disenfranchised and marginalized rural communities. There is no time to lose, now, when sustainability, decentralisation, and megaprojects are about to elbow their way into the Chaco - projects like major highway networks linking the Atlantic and Pacific, gas pipelines, and aqueducts.



The graphs show convincingly that available land resources are in steady and rapid decline. Add to that the out-of-control, upward spiralling land prices. Furthermore, since the 1990s the responsibility for providing land for Natives has increasingly been shifting away from private charity to the state – a state with a chronically depleted treasury.

While the colonies, large ranchers and multi-nationals have bought up and are still buying increasingly more properties to expand their operations, the hectares-per-person (ha/p) ratio in native agricultural communities has steadily decreased from a high of 22 ha/p in 1965 to 9 ha/p in 2009. The average across the three Mennonite colonies today is about 110 ha/p – not counting land privately owned by Mennonites outside the colony boundaries. Half of the native population (some 15,000) lives on small lots in worker communities near colony centres and towns. Their numbers are not included in the preceding calculated averages of ha/p.

The question of sufficient living land for Natives has a financial as well as a political solution. Transferring land titles to "Pozo Amarillo", and shortly after to "Nueva Vida", does not need to remain a historical rarity. On the contrary, it can serve as a model for the future for all Chaqueños (Chaco-dweller). Social responsibility must not be permitted to be thrust on just a charitable minority, while the other members of the same society are allowed to shirk all such responsibilities, yet claim the benefits.

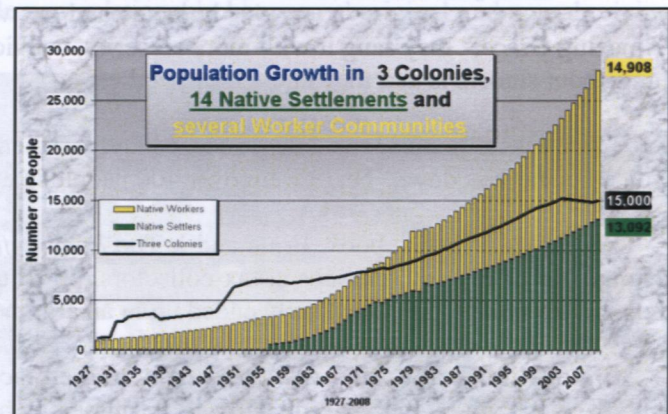
The challenge remains:

- Will the descendants of the “immigrants that came” live up to the task of social responsibility modelled by their parents and grandparents?
- Will they intentionally and proactively spread this spirit of community throughout the Chaco for the benefit of all? One for all, all for one.
- Will they apply their sizeable influence – moral, economic, social, and political – in support of Law 904/81 (Constitution of 1992, Cap. V) which guarantees Natives some basic territorial rights in the country of their ancestors and the land they now share; even if it can be done only with a local solution with or without the resources from the national treasury; a solution primarily financed from the sale of large properties and acceptable to all major stakeholders?

This would not be the first creative and home-made solution. The *Health Services Plan* for employed Natives and their dependents (AMH) is a case in point. It was designed by a *Chaqueño* (resident of the Chaco) and successfully implemented by the colonies – though only reluctantly at first. The government just recently legalized this plan after many years of proven track record. It’s the envy of all Natives who live outside the Mennonite economy.

Given the population trends, it should be worth the effort if the immigrants’ descendants would continue to be the catalyst for a change toward a community-appropriate social safety net. Descendants of the aboriginal hosts must become equal stakeholders in, and beneficiaries of, all the resources the Chaco has to offer, in particular the diminishing and increasingly expensive land resources.

It is vitally important that colonists partner with today’s Mennonites-of-faith world wide – especially with new Faith-Mennonites such as those in the Chaco; to engage all levels of governments in their respective countries to tackle the new challenges – primarily for the benefit of the new-marginalized.



Each generation has its challenges. The Mennonites stranded at the Gates of Moscow in 1927 needed a life-line out of a calamity and a country for a new home. Their brothers-and-sisters-in-faith stepped up to the plate. Despite the depression of the 30s, the 2nd WW of the 40s, and the slow global recoveries of the 50s, their generation crossed national, faith, and political boundaries to first, settle Mennonites in the Green Hell, then to advocate at all levels for the construction of the Trans-Chaco highway. They did this first and foremost for the benefit of the immigrants, ignored by the world. Similarly, today’s Mennonites are not without new challenges and opportunities to engage the powers on behalf of today’s marginalized in the global village. Our ancestors’ personal and collective resourcefulness helped them deal with adversity and poverty. Will our resourcefulness help us deal with this generation’s comfort, affluence, and apathy?

The 15th Mennonite Assembly in Asuncion this year has focused the spotlight on Mennonites of all nationalities and ethnicities, but even more so on those living in and around the Chaco colonies. Expectations from outside and within the faith have been raised several notches. Will we of the Anabaptist faith take up the challenge? Is there a better testimony than that of such a multi-ethnic Mennonite community in partnership with the global Anabaptist community, in a country where political rhetoric gives little more than lip-service to justice, peace, and equality for all?

Green Hell, Green Paradise. What will today’s generation of Anabaptists make of this, and other places like it?

Author Peter Sawatzky experienced the pioneer life in the Chaco first-hand. He moved to Canada as a young man, completing his high school at MEI, and earning a BSc and teaching certificate at Simon Fraser University and UBC. He has taught in Clearbrook (MEI) and Neuland, Paraguay. While teaching in Paraguay, he was instrumental in identifying the needs in the school system, designing a viability study which eventually led to the centralization of the village schools in Neuland. He implemented a similar study for the Chaco colonies in support of their joint Teachers Training College in Filadelfia, a study which included discerning the schooling needs of the native communities. Through projects and personal involvements, Sawatzky has kept in touch with Chaco Communities, both Mennonite and Native, and has retained some roots in the Chaco while being firmly anchored in Canada.

Eulogy: Ernie Jacobson - by Darryl Klassen



Ernie Jacobson

On Tuesday I attended the funeral of my good friend Ernie Jacobson. Some of you may remember him as one of our guides and hosts during our annual MCC summer camping trips to Vancouver Island. Others may recognize Ernie as the guitar player on *The Jacobsons: 'A Kwagu'l Family* dvd. Ernie struggled with addictions all of his life, but was winning battles at the end. He was praying with his sister on the phone when he tripped and fell down a flight of stairs. He never regained consciousness.

I first met Ernie through his dad Larry who lived with us in our home for a number of years. Sometimes Larry and I would travel together—the “Lone Ranger and Tonto” he called us! One thing about people who struggle with life and addictions I’ve learned. They often have a wonderful sense of humour, and yet when either Larry or Ernie picked up the guitar and sang “Amazing Grace,” they sang it with more sincerity, conviction and emotion than I’ve ever heard in church. The nice thing about sinners is that they know they need grace.

Ernie was a popular musician, soccer player, fisherman and artist. Many spoke of how he encouraged them even when he was down. There were over 400 people in attendance at his funeral.

We had a favourite book, Ernie and I. *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, by Brennan Manning. Jesus hung out with the ragamuffins of his day, the lepers, tax collectors, prostitutes, and probably the odd alcoholic. When Jesus went to church, (the synagogue), he usually ended up in an argument with the preachers!

Ernie’s life and passing was a testimony to the grace of a God who loves us just as we are and who can use anyone who is willing to be used. He will be missed by his family, his friends, and his community.

A Brief History of the MCCBC Aboriginal Neighbours Program - by Darryl Klassen

In 1974 Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) assisted the people from the Tsaxis (Fort Rupert) Reserve with the repair of three houses. The completion of the building effort brought a call for further assistance. After discussion with the villagers, personnel from MDS sensed that the aid needed was beyond the scope of their organization. At that point Menno Wiebe from MCC Canada was contacted to participate in the evaluation of an appropriate response. Following numerous visits by Menno Wiebe and others to the three First Nations Communities in the Port Hardy area and discussions with community members, it was decided that Gwa’sala Nakwaxda’xw was the community most in need of assistance.

The Gwa’sala Nakwaxda’xw community was formed in 1964 when the Federal Government relocated two separate villages from the mainland coast onto a small reserve right next to the village of Port Hardy. The rationale at the time was that it was both very difficult and prohibitively expensive to provide health, education and housing services to remote villages. During the next roughly 35 years MCCBC maintained a continuous presence in the community.

Prominent in the 1970s were numerous confrontations in British Columbia between aboriginal communities and resource companies regarding access to forestry and fishery resources. These conflicts had their roots in unresolved historical issues, many of which led to deep frustration in aboriginal communities, and sometimes to physical dispute and the danger of escalation. Among the most publicized of these confrontations and court challenges were the positions put forward by the Haida people of Haida Gwaii in blocking access to Lyall Island on the Queen Charlotte Islands, and the Gitksan court case asserting ownership and jurisdiction over some 50,000 square kilometres along the Skeena River.

MCCBC at this time had volunteers in a number of aboriginal communities. Some of these volunteers were close to conflict situations themselves, and were thus raising questions about how to respond appropriately. On June 10, 1987 MCC, Mennonite Church Canada (then General Conference) and the MB Conference called together a seminar for pastors, staff and interested constituents. The one day seminar included a historical overview of

relations between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people in BC, reflections on biblical justice, and visionary responses.

The outcome of this seminar was that MCCBC established what was called a "listening" stance to aboriginal people and communities. Rick Zerbe Cornelson occupied a short-term position to put feet to this stance, contacting communities, individuals, and aboriginal organizations around the province. He reported that there was generally a welcome to this stance, and frequently surprise. How was it that a "white" church organization should be approaching aboriginal people in a learning rather than teaching mode? This was something new.

The learning from this stance eventually led to a resolution from the floor at the MCCBC Annual Meeting of 1988 to establish a full time voluntary service position to continue the learning and relationship building begun by Rick. The mandate was to be threefold:

- to continue listening, and thereby build bridges of understanding and friendship between aboriginal and Mennonite people
- to explore ways of linking MCC voluntary service personnel with needs as defined by aboriginal communities
- to work with other churches both individually and through coalitions (Kairos), governments and the business community towards a just and honourable new relationship between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people.

For the next two decades MCC worked with aboriginal communities and organizations in British Columbia. Dozens of volunteers have cooperatively worked on projects that sought to bring healing, justice and friendship. Church groups and individuals have been involved in a wide variety of projects around the province. Many aboriginal and Mennonite people have become friends and have shared the beauty and pain of that meeting.

I began the assignment with MCCBC in the Aboriginal Neighbours Program in 1989. At that time there was an active Summer Gardening Program, run by MCC Canada. This program was initiated in response to a

request from a community in northern Manitoba in which fresh vegetables were either unavailable or of poor quality, and always expensive. The objective was to assist families in growing fresh vegetables and to build relationships between people through the process. Volunteers, often college students, would spend the summer being hosted in an aboriginal community; the emphasis on working "with" rather than "for" community members.

During the next decade five communities in BC hosted summer gardeners, while another half dozen or so attended workshops or participated in less structured ways. Gardening together proved to be a low risk way for aboriginal and Mennonite people to work together to develop relationships. It also encouraged the reintroduction of gardens in communities. In fact, it was soon learned that many of the elders were very knowledgeable about gardening. Gardens, up until the 1960s, were common in aboriginal communities.

The gardening program at its peak during the 1970s and 80s had volunteers in a dozen or more communities across Canada each summer. In many communities the program ran for numerous years. During the next decade the number of volunteers fell off considerably. Even with volunteers from Europe added to the mix, the program lost critical mass, and was eventually discontinued.

A significant outgrowth of the relationships begun through Summer Gardening was the numerous more long-term voluntary service assignments that ensued. These assignments included educational, social, forestry, economic and health care mandates. For example, MCC partnered with the Presbyterian Church to provide a forester to two interior communities that were attempting to negotiate a forest licence with the provincial government. Many assignments led to deepening relationships with the aboriginal community and to further invitations for other



2008 MCC Aboriginal Neighbours campers. Darryl Klassen back row, middle.

assignments. Over the past three decades ongoing long-term relationships have developed between MCCBC and at least a half dozen First Nations communities.

It is noteworthy that in recent times there has been a new ideology developing within MCC that questions the value of voluntary service within aboriginal communities in general. Was gardening really something that aboriginal communities wanted to do, or was it really “our thing?” Were we being paternalistic, even arrogant, in thinking that our volunteers were empowering communities? Were MCC volunteers sometimes doing jobs that would have been more appropriately done by community members? These and other questions have shifted more and more to the forefront of thinking in the aboriginal network of MCC.

Over the past half dozen years the above outlined rethinking of our mandate has been one factor that has led to a decrease in voluntary service assignments. Another factor has been that a number of our most recent assignments proved for various reasons to be very difficult, with issues of isolation playing a major role.

While MCC continues to explore creative opportunities for service assignments there are presently no volunteers in First Nations communities in BC. The current focus within MCC aboriginal programming has shifted somewhat to a more concerted effort in education and broader relational bridge building.

MCC personnel have learned a great deal in our encounters with First Nations people over the years. We have learned that sometimes what has been portrayed as Christianity has not been Good News for aboriginal people. We have learned that aboriginal people have much to share and teach, if only we will take the time to listen. We have learned that, in listening, we may see reflected back to us an image of ourselves than we might neither imagine nor cherish. We have also been blessed with friendships that are true and enriching.

To learn more about MCC's Aboriginal Neighbours program, see <http://mcc.org/stories/videos/camping-aboriginal-people>



Dave Jacobson discussing one of his carvings (2008 Aboriginal Neighbours camping trip)

Profiles: Anna Koehn - by Robert Martens



In the Yarrow farmhouse she's lived in since 1954, Anna Koehn greets me with a warm but inquisitive smile. It's clear from her erect bearing, clear voice, and immaculately organized home, that she doesn't lack confidence or a strong will, and yet she's a bit shy, wondering why I'd wish to interview her. She's playing the Mennonite game: "Who were your parents, your grandparents?" It wasn't always so. Anna grew up without any idea of the meaning of "Mennonite," or, for that matter, of "religion." After the death of her husband, Peter, in 1973, she raised six daughters on her own, sending them all to Bible school, hoping to give them a better start than she had. "For me, religion is number one," she says. "I want them to learn more than I know. I was without religion. When I came here, I was in a different place – how special these people were, so close, so loving. We had good teachers, and they tried to teach us beginners. I didn't know anything about God or religion. Somehow the Lord was leading me, I came here and got God in this place." Her family name was Lauber, of German Lutheran heritage. Anna grew up near Odessa, Ukraine, in a small settlement where most of the one thousand residents were Jewish. No Mennonites lived there at all, and she was completely unacquainted with them. Anna was born in 1926, learned to read and write Hebrew, remembers her Jewish teachers with great fondness. "They were all very nice people," she says, "We were always doing business with Jewish people, and mom helped them. I still stick up for Jewish people." It was Anna's misfortune to grow up during the great Ukrainian famine, inflicted on his own people by Stalin, who confiscated food in order to feed the urban economy. As many as seven million people may have starved to death. "There was nothing, everything went for the Red Army," says Anna, and in 1933 she and her mother nearly died. Her mother, however, was "self-sufficient," Anna remarks, and would sneak into the *kolkhoz*, the collective farm, in the dead of night, steal a few sprigs of rye, and make pancakes with them. The authorities were suspicious, wondered why Anna and her mother weren't starving to death, "always asked on what we were living. We had to steal to survive." "The old people still prayed, quietly, hidden," Anna says, but she had little or no understanding of religion, illegal under Stalin's brutal regime.

The authorities had converted a beautiful Orthodox church in her village into a granary. "Everything was demolished and forbidden, we never went to church. We were slaves to the government, and when you're of German origin, you can't even vote." And so when the German army invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, they were initially greeted with open arms. "We were so happy, now we are relieved from the Communists." Some ethnic Germans met the soldiers of the Reich with bread and salt.

"They were good at the beginning," says Anna, "but then they began killing Jews." The entire Jewish population of her village were shot. They were rounded up early one morning and brought to the local movie theatre, from which they were led, twenty by twenty, to be executed in an open brickworks. A woman who had survived the shooting, had fallen wounded into the mass grave, appeared at the door of Anna and her mother with a dead baby in her arms. "It was a nightmare," says Anna, "I still cry for those poor people." And indeed she is weeping as she tells me this story.

In 1943 the German army was in full retreat, defeated by the extreme miseries of winter and tenacious Russian resistance, and Mennonites were falling back with them, travelling by any means possible, desperate to escape the psychopathic Soviet empire. Among them was Victor Born, a young man who immediately set his eyes upon Anna Lauber and declared he would marry her. And marry they did, within five weeks, and Anna a mere seventeen years of age. With Victor and his mother, Anna fled by train on a circuitous route through eastern Europe, as it was no longer possible to travel through Poland. It was a journey that lasted from March of 1944 to the middle of May, lasting that long partly due to continuing hostilities: the tracks were intermittently bombed both by the German Luftwaffe and the Russian air force, and the journey would be delayed while repairs were made. "When it was rainy we could travel, there was no bombing."

Anna's group eventually ended up near Hanover, Germany, where they didn't live in refugee camps but were billeted with private families, assigned by the mayor. Germans were reluctant at first to provide shelter to Russian "dirty pigs. We had to convince them we were human." Eventually, as so often occurred elsewhere, close friendships with their hosts were born. Anna lived there for three years, and although her mother-in-law was "an old school Mennonite, a believer," Anna herself "didn't understand religion." And at that early age, yet another tragic loss: Victor, drafted by a panicked fascist regime determined to fight to the last man, died in action alongside "a bunch of his friends."

In 1947 Anna, sponsored by a Yarrow resident, paid \$300 fare to cross the ocean to Canada, travelling alone and frightened to a new world. She arrived in Halifax, journeyed by train to Mission, and first set foot in Yarrow at Christmas time. In the Mennonite Brethren Church of some nine hundred members, she was asked to rise and be introduced. "I was scared," she says, "Where am I?" At least, she remarks, everyone there spoke German, but on the other hand, she wasn't used to the strict moral codes that were enforced. "In that dress, they said, you're not going to church, it's too short. I kept my mouth closed. But I was very welcome here," and church members pitched in to buy her new clothes. The abundance of food overwhelmed her. "Everything was so new. Everyone was always starving in Russia." On the ocean voyage, Anna remarks, Russian refugees had continually and habitually stuffed every bun they found on tables into their pockets, a hedge against hunger. Anna was 112 pounds when she arrived in Yarrow, but her sponsors fed her well, and this was a new sensation. "That *Tante* cooked porridge every day, with cream and sugar, I gained and gained."

Anna moved to Vancouver for a few years, living at the *Mädchenheim* (young women's home for Mennonites), and working as a domestic. "There were many newcomers, we hung around with the same people," she says, "we tried to go back to our roots." In Vancouver Anna met Peter Koehn, and they married in 1950. "I tried to learn and believe what religion meant. In Yarrow they tried to make me a Christian the next day, and I didn't know what they were talking about." At one point she heard a siren, and was instantly terrified that bombing was about to resume. "Will Stalin be in heaven with you and me?" she ponders, and wonders how far forgiveness can go.

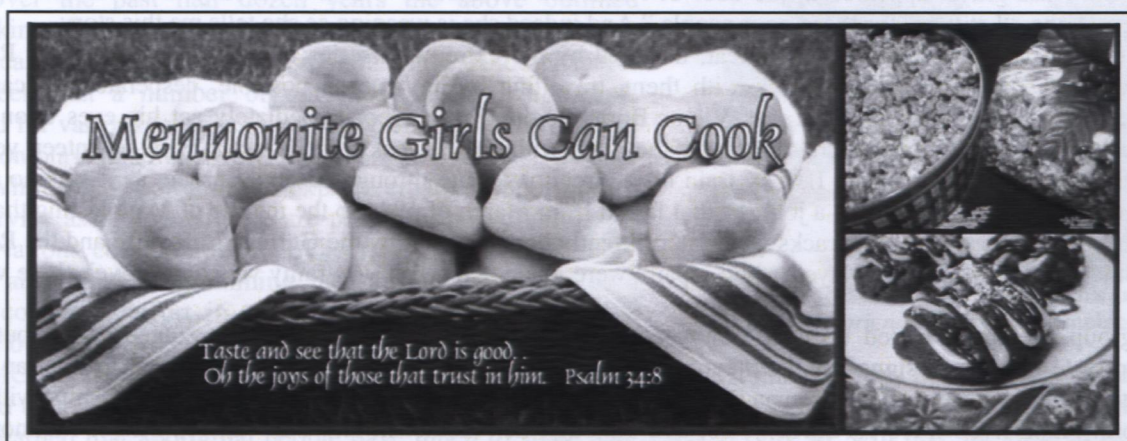
In 1954, since Peter had three uncles living there, the Koehns moved to Yarrow. They started a raspberry farm on Stewart Road, where Anna still lives. They also owned three cows and shipped milk, but it all wasn't enough to cover expenses, and the always independent-minded Anna, refusing to accept the option of welfare, worked on the belt at Berryland for fifteen years until her retirement. Peter was employed at Vancouver Steel for seventeen years, but contracted cancer and, after a 3½ month stay at Vancouver General Hospital, moved back home where Anna nursed him until his death.

For a pretty young woman, unused to the strangeness of an ethnic Mennonite village, Yarrow demanded some major adjustments. Women in the MB Church there weren't allowed the vote until 1954. "That makes me mad, the Bible says we're all equal," says Anna. "It was the life here, the main thing was the church, you do what they tell you, and I didn't mind, and I still don't mind – it was a good discipline." Anna still maintains a sharp eye for Mennonite ways, an eye that sees things from the perspective of someone who grew up outside that culture, but today she feels entirely at home with her town and church. "Now I stick up for Mennonites, I tell my German friends, Mennonites are close to the Bible, I love the Mennonites, they brought me to believe, the Lord was in charge of my life, and through them I found the Lord."

In 1948 Anna had been baptized into the Mennonite Church, but her religious understanding, her "conversion," was far from instantaneous. "It was a part of this village life. I had to learn what Christianity is about, but not only Christianity, Jesus has to be part of your life. I had to learn, wanted to understand, tried very hard to learn. I didn't know Bible verses, I was new. But now I understand." Her life has been a difficult one, her spiritual vision hard won. Anna Koehn, it seems, has managed to live out her tragedies and joys to the fullest, has transformed them into a radiant confidence that is special and rare.

Websites: Mennonite Girls Can Cook

<http://mennonitegirlscancook.blogspot.com/> - by Dolly Peters



Mennonite Girls Can Cook is more than just recipes. It is about HOSPITALITY versus entertaining. It is about BLESSING versus impressing. It is about taking God's Bounty, and co-creating the goodness from God's creation into something that we can bless our family and friends with, to help sustain our health and energy. From a simple and rustic recipe, to everyday ingredients made into a thing of beauty. No matter which way you look at it, wonderful things happen when given the opportunity to gather around the table: a chance to nurture and build relationships, to fellowship and encourage one another, and to create a place of refuge for those who have had a stressful day. (<http://mennonitegirlscancook.blogspot.com/>)

I spent an enlightening morning visiting with my sister-in-law Lovella Schellenberg, the administrator of Mennonite Girls Can Cook. We drank coffee and savoured the taste of "Charlotte's Maple Twists," with the occasional swat of the electric fly swatter to keep the bugs at bay.

My first memory of Lovella is her love for cooking and baking. She has the natural ability and passion to create the most sumptuous of foods. I have collected many of her recipes over the years and placed them in my personal cookbook. So what has prompted her to author a blog illustrating Mennonite foods?

One day, Lovella was trying to track down a Mennonite recipe, but realized that the only book she had on hand was the Mennonite Treasury. Her next option, searching the Internet, did not result in any new ethnic Mennonite recipes. Lovella subsequently contacted her email blogging friends, who agreed that a Mennonite food blog would be a great idea.

Lovella had previously established her own personal blog, so that setting up the new website, using Google's blogger.com page as a tool, was relatively easy for her. After a discussion on various names, a simple title was decided upon, and Mennonite Girls Can Cook was created on June 8, 2008.

The site is easy to manage and requires no technical support. There are nine other contributors: Kathy, Charlotte, Marg, Anneliese, Ellen, Julie, Bev, Betty and Judy, all Mennonite Brethren members, except for Ellen who contributes as a non Mennonite but shares a common Russian national heritage. These women have formed a Google group and communicate daily on the Internet.

The collaborators submit recipes but only one new recipe is published daily on the blog. The rules are simple: each recipe must be proof read and spell checker applied, and accompanied by a picture and a link to a recipe book if required. Originally, the recipes were posted in a row, but as time passed, so many accumulated that categories were created. Lovella, as administrator, inputs and categorizes the recipes daily.

Lovella feels passionate and proud of her Mennonite heritage. She feels that Mennonite people are generally hardworking, giving and proud. Mennonite recipes can be variable, as women cooks rarely wrote them down and the recipes were frequently lost in time. The main goal of this blog is to revive the recipes with illustrations, create an enjoyable blog (including gluten free), and make Mennonite foods available for everyone to enjoy. There is an open invitation to opinions and comments. "The blog really has taken over a life of its own. I think that for so long

the family recipes were not easily obtained because women did not measure carefully or they just were into keeping them family secrets. Now our generation realizes that ethnic foods are cool and we need to celebrate them. I'm passionate about Mennonite food. After trying to perfect platz, apricot tart and frozen chocolate pie, I gained 5 pounds in 2 weeks. Oh vey."

Lovella feels that this is an inexpensive and rewarding hobby. Six months ago, she added Google translate to the site to offer availability in languages other than English. A youth pastor has posted an endorsement of the blog on YouTube. Currently, there are 2000 hits per day, mostly within Canada and the United States.

This group's goal is to raise charitable funds through the blog and give 100% of the proceeds to a cause engaged in feeding the needy. Lovella does not want to use the option of Google advertisements, because feedback has shown that viewers enjoy the blog as it is: just recipes, clean, and no clutter. Google, on the other hand, would choose the ads, and the blog group is resisting, wishing to maintain control.

What matters most in life? If it is to make others happy, this group is going a long way in accomplishing this with their Mennonite recipe blog. After all, comfort foods are often familiar foods that soothe the psyche by reminding us of a cultural and ethnic heritage.

Story: Instant Pudding and Camay Soap - by Helen Rose Pauls

As an impressionable seven-year-old, I could hardly wait to meet the family that had moved into the berry cabin at the neighbors. "They come from far away," said my mother, "from a hot country named Paraguay, and they are very poor so they will live in Wieler's berry picker cabin until they can get a better home. You must talk German to them and always be nice." Being nice was not so easy as I was so full of questions. I began to hang out at the barbed wire fence which separated our berry patch from the Wieler's, hoping for a glimpse. Maybe they were a different color or had curly hair. Or maybe they talked funny. A dark haired boy appeared first. He told me it was so hot in Paraguay that they fried eggs on the sidewalk. "They have a sidewalk?" I wondered. Even when we went to Abbotsford sometimes on Friday nights to shop at Funk's, there was only one sidewalk, and I tried to imagine an egg sizzling on it.

I noticed that the boy was wearing my brother's pants and hat. Maybe he was stealing from us at night? Then a girl my age came to smile at me, and invited me into the shack. Two rooms with exposed two-by-fours had beds for six people, a metal crib, a table and chairs and a wash stand with an enamel bowl on it. A tap outside provided water and the girl carried some in a metal bucket and began to wash her hands, slowly, softly, a rich lather coming up between her fingers,

What a beautiful smell! Pink soap that smelled like flowers. The soap was oval and had the word "Camay" pressed into it. At home we used mother's dull lye soap that had a sharp tangy smell and I knew that she made it with old beef fat. I had seen *Palmolive* soap at Oma's and *Ivory* at Neuman's store in the village, but *Camay*?

Then she told me she would make us a snack. From a jug of milk, she poured two cups into a bowl and mixed in a box of butterscotch instant pudding, without even asking her mother. She whipped it with a spoon as if she had done this before, and gave me half, while she ate the other.

Such delights had never reached my lips. Boxes like this were on the shelf at Funk's but not in my home! I savored each smooth delicious mouthful, and ran home to tell my mother.

"You said they were poor," I cried. "They have Camay soap and the girl made me butterscotch pudding and the boy stole Daniel's clothes and they have sidewalks in Paraguay!"

Mother laughed and said, "Daniel's clothes are too small for him so I put those things on the clothes pile at the church shower. They got the Camay soap and the pudding at the church shower too, and lots of other supplies and groceries so that they can start a new life in Canada."

"Not fair, not fair," my young mind told me. I had sung "Showers of Blessing" as loud as I could and no one at church ever gave me anything.

"They are just using what they were given, my dear," said Mother patiently while I pouted. "Now you be nice and make them feel at home here."

Soon I loved going to see my new friends. After picking berries all day, we played 'Anti I Over' the cabin with a rubber ball and I taught them "Monopoly" but they usually won.

Correction: Tributes to Erica Suderman (R & B, September 2009, page 3) The first tribute was written by Laura Unger, not Lora Sawatsky. We apologize for the error.

A Common Thread: Exhibition at the Reach Gallery Museum, Abbotsford

by Heather Pauls Murray, photos by Louise Bergen Price

The textile exhibit at *The Reach* showcases blankets from South Asian communities, the Stó:lō First Nations from Chilliwack, and European Mennonites.

As you enter the exhibit, the blankets each radiate a personality of their own. They hang in the air by clear strings, seeming to levitate. You are standing among them as if in a crowd of people. It is an arresting and strange feeling.

And just like with people, you can sometimes intuit what they have seen and experienced. You can tell which quilts were made in times of peace and plenty, and which were made in time of scarcity and strife.

The “16 Piece Quilt” on display is a quilt at its very basics – a collection of scraps sewn together to make something serviceable and warm for refugees. But each piece of fabric tells a story. Was that patch Oma’s apron, an uncle’s Sunday shirt or a sister’s nightgown? Hanging there, the quilt evokes so many images in the mind’s eye: the refugees huddled beneath it for warmth, the people who wore the fabric before it was scrapped, and the women who carefully stitched it together, praying for the family who would receive it. The quilt is well-loved and well-worn.

Other quilts were made in times of wealth. You can tell that the mathematically precise “Farmer’s Daughter” and “Wedding Ring” quilts were made from brand new, good quality fabric in the latest styles. Pristine and colourful, with every swatch matching, they look like rarely used pieces of art. They are beautiful and eye-catching, but do not tell a story like the refugee quilts.

In addition to the blankets, the exhibit features an assortment of sewing-related items like old sewing boxes, needles, spools, and thimbles. It also showcases a red star quilt pulled tightly across a frame, surrounded by chairs. I could imagine smiling ladies like my grandmother in those chairs, stitching the quilt together with friends and sisters like I saw so many times as a child.

In India, stitching a “ralli” quilt was usually the work of one woman, not a group. While rallis are also made from used fabric, they look and feel very different from Mennonite quilts. The scraps look like they’re artfully painted onto a fabric background, not pieced together. Additionally, a special stitching technique gives the fabric a beautiful rippled texture.

In contrast to the Indian and Mennonite quilts are the woven blankets from the Stó:lō First Nation, whose weaving tradition was all but lost until a resurgence in the 1960s. Made from materials like cedar fibres, roots, mountain goat wool, and the fur of domesticated dogs, the blankets are often gifts symbolising wealth and prestige. Some of the weaving patterns depict personal stories and spiritual legends.

The three types of blankets look very different from each other. However, they have much in common that doesn’t meet the eye. Although their primary purpose is to provide warmth out of combined materials, all of the blankets show the hospitality, ingenuity, and stories of the people who made them.

