



# 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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*Holy Hush, Volendam, Paraguay.*  
Photo: Julia Toews



# Editorial – by Robert Martens

Some years ago I drove with a friend down from El Paso to the Mexican city of Cuauhtémoc, which is straddled by traditionalist Mennonite colonies. It was just before the bad years of drought, marijuana smuggling, and drug cartels, but even then, signs of disintegration were evident. Land was running short.

Bored adolescents, including girls, were getting drunk in the streets. Traditionalist leaders seemed unable, or unwilling, to cope. We watched, for example, as a shunned man was elbowed aside at his own son's funeral. Sermons were rote, read again and again, and offered little solace to the Mennonites jammed into benches, dressed in black, and separated by gender in their tiny meeting house. Education was at a minimum. A form of Canadianized Low German was spoken in the Mennonite enclave. While a new General Conference church had opened its doors, welcoming Mennonites now dressed fashionably and even dared to smile on church grounds, traditionalists stubbornly hung on, it seemed, to a system in jeopardy. And the Latin population of the nearby city somehow didn't seem to count.

When I attended the most recent Mennonite World Conference in Asunción, Paraguay, I encountered a quite different mentality in the colonies there. The economy was prospering; thriving cooperatives brought people together. The young were learning German, Spanish and English even before



*Three Mexican Mennonite Siblings* Photo: Robert Martens

they moved on to university education, with a good prospect of many of them returning home afterwards. Furthermore, the Latin and Indigenous Mennonite churches were growing rapidly. Paraguayan Mennonites were dealing with enormous problems, but compared to the Mexican experience, the future seemed bright.

And yet my friend and I felt a strange sense of homecoming in the Mexican colonies. So many memories are warm ones, treasured still after all this time. The squeaky clean cheese factories. The gravel traffic bumps on the wide colony streets. The gentlemanly – and gentle – farmer who proudly led us on a High German tour of his property, ending in the kitchen with its floor strewn with sunflower seeds. The young woman in the colony store contentedly humming hymns to herself in the silence. The little girl who proudly posed with her siblings after I requested a photograph. The rapturously starry sky over a land with little electricity. Even the nervous welcome, the clearing of space on the benches, at the funeral of the son of the shunned

man. There was a hospitality here that I'd grown up with and now greatly missed. There was that traditionalist Mennonite sense of independence coupled with the profound realization that the community must hang together. There was a hunger for conversation. And always kindness.

My friend and I drove back north, past the pistol packing American border guards, and into a Texan opulence that seemed nearly incredible after only a few days away. The simplicity of the traditionalist way of life now seemed like an alien world. And today, in light of our rampant and thoughtless consumerism, it seems to me that traditionalist Mennonites may be harbouring a truth we have lost.

## Letter to the editor

Re: the letter by Edgar G Reimer  
(September 2012 issue.)

To claim that the Mennonite settlers in the Ukraine brought the terrible events during the time of the revolution upon themselves, and that they actually deserved to be slaughtered as happened in Eichenfeld, is to belittle the martyrdom of those killed so horrendously. Machno and his band were nothing more than a bunch of criminals who took advantage of the fact that there was no law and order in Russia at that time. To ascribe some higher motives to their robbing and murdering is ludicrous.

When Mennonites came to the Ukraine they lived in mud huts the first winter. Only by hard work did they achieve their beautiful colonies. Those Russians that worked for Mennonite farmers were not forced to do so; they were happy to get some work and thereby earn a living.

Ed Pankratz, Abbotsford, BC

**Letters to the editor are welcome, subject to editing for length and appropriateness.**

# Banquet Report

by Wilf Penner

The annual fall fundraising banquet of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC was held on Saturday, October 13, 2012, at Emmanuel Mennonite Church, Abbotsford, BC. Judging by the animated conversations around the dining tables in the banquet hall and the standing ovation from a crowd of nearly 400 after the guest lecture in the sanctuary, the event was an unqualified success.

Renowned Canadian author Rudy Wiebe held the assembly spellbound as he recounted, without rancour, the events that followed the release of his first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, events that impacted him personally and also, collaterally, the members of the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Conference of Churches. Wiebe's lecture was bookended with a poised and thoughtful introduction by director Maryann Jantzen and an equally thoughtful response by director Robert Martens. Significantly, October 13, 1962, was the exact day of the novel's release.

When Richard Thiessen, chair of MHS's board of directors, became aware that 2012 marked the 50th anniversary of the publication of *Peace Shall Destroy Many* and suggested that we invite Wiebe to be our feature speaker for the Fall 2012 fundraiser, the board of directors were completely supportive and after the banquet were equally well pleased with the outcome.

### MHSBC's Annual General Meeting

will take place at 1:30pm on 11 April 2013  
at the ABC Restaurant,  
32080 Marshall Road,  
Abbotsford, B.C.

Time of the meeting 1:30 pm

# Justapaz — by Robert Martens

Justapaz is a service of the Christian Mennonite Church of Colombia which, through following Jesus Christ from an Anabaptist perspective, works with churches and organizations in the promotion and development of knowledge and skills aimed at transformative action emanating from the living experience of justice, nonviolence, and peace; and leading to a life of dignity reconciled with all creation. (Justapaz mission statement, from Justapaz website; trans. by author)

Some years ago, I sat with a small group in Vancouver, listening to a community activist from Colombia. He spoke in Spanish. He had been invited to tour parts of Canada to relate the message of his struggles in his native land, but more than that: because he and his family were under constant threat from death squads, the visit was also intended as a break from the extreme stress of his life. After his talk, the question was asked: how much support do you get from the church? His reply made clear that he understood "the church" as Catholic; the Church, he said, does very little for us, but the Mennonites are special, they are on our side. Previously I had known only of Latin Catholic priests who advocated for the poor; what he said surprised me.

Colombia's civil strife has lingered for nearly a century, killed 250,000 people, and displaced millions. As early as 1920, peasants fought over coffee growing lands, and when liberals and conservatives took sides, the conflict intensified. The most brutal times of the internal conflict stem, however, from 1948, when the assassination of a popular leader led to a riot in Bogotá that left 4000 citizens dead. The next ten years are remembered as *La Violencia*, The Violence, a period in which Liberal Party and Con-

servative Party supporters battled for supremacy in rural areas, resulting in more than 200,000 deaths. In 1958 the Liberals and Conservatives negotiated a system of shared power between themselves called the National Front. But some Liberal militias refused to disarm; the largest group formed a guerrilla force that remains operational to the present day: FARC, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

In the 1960s, the United States intervened, pressing the National Front to attack peasant villages that the Americans suspected of harbouring Communists. The consequence was a dramatic escalation of violence and the birth of a new urban-based guerrilla group, ELN, the National Liberation Army. The 1980s, however, saw a lessening of the war, and the National Front permitted FARC to organize as a legal political party, the Patriotic Union (UP). This situation ended in disaster when the UP's presidential candidate was assassinated and thousands of the party's supporters were murdered by death squads. The formal ceasefire collapsed. Violence increased through the 1990s, along with kidnappings and drug related crimes; cocaine was to become an important source of revenue for all

sides in the conflict. In 1997 the death squads organized as the United Self Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC); the AUC was responsible for countless massacres of both rebels and civilian villagers until they were finally placed on the US State Department's list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations and subsequently disbanded. In recent years, there has been a reduction in violence and an increase in tourism. Rural areas remain dangerous, however, and human rights violations continue on all sides.

Into this maelstrom of violence came Mennonite missionaries from North America. Both Mennonite Brethren and General Conference mission workers arrived in 1945, and have carried on



their work into the present day. The GC wing of the Colombian Mennonite churches became known as the *Iglesia Evangélica Menonita de Colombia*, the Evangelical Mennonite Church of Colombia. Four of their missionaries founded a boarding school in Cachipay for children whose leprous parents had been forcibly removed and isolated. It was a time when Protestants supported the Liberals, and Catholics, the Conservatives. When the Conservatives took power in Bogotá, a persecution of Protestants was the result, and the tiny school at Cachipay also became a haven for Protestant children.

Eventually, a young boy named Ricardo Esquivia, the son of an indigenous mother and Afro-Colombian father, arrived at the school. Mennonites took him in when they found Ricardo roaming the streets on the Caribbean coast after his father had been institutionalized for leprosy. At Cachipay, the Mennonite church became his new family, and he soon developed an intense passion for peace and nonviolence. Ricardo Esquivia went on to study law and to then use his skills as a lawyer to organize the poor. With the proliferation of death squads, this was a dangerous vocation. After founding a Mennonite church in Bogotá, he was forced to flee with his wife and four children to Cartagena when he was accused of supporting the guerrilla movement. In 1989, however, Esquivia was able to return to Bogotá, where he helped create Justapaz and then served as its director for the next 13 years.

The politics of violence was part and parcel of everyday Colombian life, and yet Mennonite churches had preferred to maintain their distance from social issues. For many years, writes Esquivia in his brief history of Justapaz, North American missionaries and leaders developed excellent schools and health services but were politically unprepared: their "theological, cultural and political development did not orient them ... to address the social causes and forces that fuelled their situation" (Esquivia 123). In other words, there was a split between theology and politics, and it was driv-

ing the young, Esquivia says, from the church. Subsequently, Colombian Mennonites turned to Anabaptism: "It was a way of life that affirmed a community process, rather than an individualistic one, and a way in which nonviolence was both a means and an end" (Esquivia 126). And they found support



Esquivia in centre.

in a new generation of North American missionaries and church leaders who had learned the skills and significance of political action back home in the 1970s. Change was slow: MENCOLDES, the Colombian Mennonite Foundation for Development, was founded during that time as a non-political economic aid organization. In

time, however, MENCOLDES, which had been created as a separate legal entity, became politicized, and a rift developed between it and the church that had developed it.

In 1989, the return from North America of Peter Stucky, who had been born in Colombia, and the arrival of Robert Suderman from Bolivia, turned things around. Both had a keen awareness of social and political issues, and together with Ricardo Esquivia, they now brought conscientious objection into the mix. Stucky began initiating contacts with other individuals and groups, both Catholic and Protestant, with the object of creating some kind of peace council. A preliminary peace and justice commission began holding workshops in nonviolent action. Finally, Stucky and Esquivia proposed the *Centro Cristiano para la Justicia, Paz y Acción Noviolenta: Justapaz* (The Christian Centre for Justice, Peace and Nonviolent Action). The Centre began with four employees and Esquivia as its director. Because of the difficult former situation with MENCOLDES, Justapaz would be part and parcel of the Mennonite Church. This meant that prolonged consultation would slow progress, but also that a rift would not develop between community and institution.

Justapaz soon learned to consult thoroughly with local churches and to avoid imposing actions on them. Its values were Anabaptist; liberation theology was not utilized; it was felt a holistic approach

was needed. At the time, Justapaz had four major strategies. First, conscientious objection was considered a primary issue and was taught in workshops. A case of an objector was taken on by the fledgling organization. Second, Justapaz worked for constitutional reform in alliance with other groups, in order to secure conscientious objection as a legal right. Third, the Mennonite Biblical Seminary of Colombia was established in Bogotá to teach peacemaking within a well-rounded educational curriculum. Finally, educational efforts were undertaken to teach nonviolence and the meaning of human rights.

"I grew up in an environment of denial of rights," says Esquivia, "which led me to think that neither I nor my ethnic group had rights. ... As an attorney, I learned that often there is no relation between justice and the law" (Esquivia 133). It was perilous work. At one point a North American Urgent Action letter writing campaign was held on his behalf after his life had been threatened. In 2007 the Justapaz office in Bogotá was broken into, and two computers containing databases on human rights abuses were stolen. But Justapaz persisted, and this small organization was eventually networking with other denominations and organizations in more than sixty countries. Esquivia left Justapaz in 2004 to form another organization, *Sembrandopaz* (Sowing Peace), on the Caribbean coast where he had once lived as a street child. Jenny Neme succeeded him as director.

Justapaz has struggled and endured, and has been recognized with peace awards for its work. Each year a report, "A Prophetic Call," is published both on paper and online, detailing human rights violations in Colombia. Among numerous programs and projects, a school of peace has been established, and days of prayer and action proclaimed. In a country where violence has waned but is still extreme, Justapaz continues its dangerous work of uncovering the brutal secrets of guerrillas, death squads, and government. It has been said of Ricardo Esquivia that his character is "simplicity, profound patience, listening, and trying to understand people in all their dimensions" (Sampson 261). His position, and that of Justapaz, is standing in the middle, tak-

ing no sides, resolving violence through the risky business of nonviolence. It is a Christianity that faces life and death on a daily basis.

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## Having Roots

by Luis Correa, Colombia, 1990

I remember a few years ago that several other members and I decided to leave the church because of some arguments in the local congregation. ...

I was gone from the church for two years, during which time I visited several churches and congregations trying to find a place where I felt comfortable and that would meet my needs. I had spent twenty years in the Mennonite church, first in Cachipay and later in Bogotá, two years at the seminary in Montevideo, later as pastor in a small congregation in Cachipay, and eight months in the new church in Bogotá. ...

Why did I not join another church? Well, it could be that I was born into and grew up in the Mennonite church, but actually it was more than that. For me history is very important: it is said that a people without history is a people without a future. The Mennonite church is a historical church. Having a history, having roots, having been part of the process, has a lot of value. The Mennonite church is not the result of disputes or misunder-

standings among people; it represented instead a new concept of the Christian faith, a more authentic and real vision of the word of God, of a life more in touch with that word. ...

In all the Latin American countries, we live in a very difficult period; unjust political structures, external debts that extremely limit the minimal services to which the citizens are entitled, violence on all sides, propagation of religious sects through false messages that distract people from their reality and oppression. It is important that the Mennonite church recover the biblical message of peace and justice and preach God's plan for humanity, which is no other than life itself and, more specifically, abundant life. My worry is that the Mennonite church would quit participating in the building up of the kingdom; that it would quit being the church of the rural people, of the artisans, of the homemakers; that it would quit preaching and living the gospel within the reality of a liberating gospel.

It is very hard to leave or abandon a Mennonite congregation. I appreciate the Mennonite theology and, as I said before, the history. I appreciate the General Conference's vision of the world and their progressive ideas. I really like the friendship and fraternal ties between foreigners and nationals. I believe this last aspect has determined the success of the work. I hardly remember any serious conflicts between Colombian workers and foreign missionaries. Even when the missionaries have returned to their countries, we remember them here with much love. I like that family warmth in the Mennonite church.

*Luis Correa was among the founders of MENCOLDES, the Colombian Foundation for Development, which was among the first institutions to engage in micro-finance: that is, lending a hand to the start-up of small businesses in the developing world.*

Source

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# Central Menno: the MCC in Bolivia

by Kathy and Dick Braun

From 2003 to 2006, my husband Dick Braun and I took part in a Mennonite Central Committee Bolivia relationship-building program for the Low German Mennonite colonists. Our team consisted of 6 to 8 people. One day a week, each couple tried to visit one of the approximately 45 Mennonite colonies in the surrounding area. The rest of the week was spent at Central Menno, the drop-in centre located at the MCC complex in the middle of Santa Cruz. Here there was a library with some 3,000 English and German books, as well as a few in Spanish and Low German; a store which sold religious books, school materials, and some health care products; and a place where colonists could pick up *Die Mennonitische Post*, *Das Blatt* or *Menno Bote*, our own monthly publication. Guests could use the clean public bathrooms or simply hang out during the heat of the day. My job was to work the front desk, manage the store and help package the various papers for mailing, while Dick did documentation work and lots of “listening.”

Our day trips to the colonies were always an adventure. The closest colony was at least 90 minutes away by car, but mostly we could count on a one way travel time of 3 hours, especially going north. We needed to cross the Rio Grande on a two - kilometre train bridge shared with one-way traffic (that is a story in itself!). Sometimes our trips were in response to an invitation, but mostly they were “cold calls”. We’d begin with a stop at a village store where Dick would engage someone in conversation, hoping that would lead to an invitation to visit further. This stop was also a convenient place to purchase some lunch – maybe a piece of “*honsfleesch met jreens*” (chicken bologna with greens), some bread or crackers, a drink and perhaps some cookies.

When we stopped in a yard, we were always invited to get out of our vehicle to sit in the shade or possibly in the living room. The next question was, “*habe jie meddach ut*” (have you had lunch?). In response, we often told a little lie. The colonists typically eat breakfast at dawn and have their main meal by 10:30am. This meal is cooked from scratch, and there are seldom leftovers after the large family has eaten. In order to feed us, the woman of the household would need to start cooking all over again. Knowing how much work is needed to keep a household going, we did not like to take advantage of our host family’s generous hospitality.

After taking a seat, we’d be offered drinks. Although we would have preferred water, we were usually offered bottled pop. After all, we were guests! Always, Dick found it easier than I did to make conversation, since there were always farming issues or questions about documents, but I soon learned to talk about family or food. Of course, the colonists could never understand why we only had 4 children and why our two unmarried daughters did not live at home. And they would shake their heads sadly when they found we had only two grandchildren. My most common response to many of these questions was, “that’s the way they do it in Canada.” Somehow, this was understood. After all, Low German Mennonites grow up with the theme of “that’s the way we’ve always done it.”

We put many smiles on children’s faces by giving out copies of *Das Blatt* or *Der Menno Bote*, while the adults really enjoyed getting free copies of *Die Post*. After we’d made half a dozen stops it was time to leave for home. We always tried to be on the road early so we could travel the long, dusty, bumpy colony roads by daylight before hitting the blacktop and the same unpredictable and lengthy bridge crossing.

Central Menno was a natural first stop for many out-of-country visitors, be it fellow Mennonites from North America, German tourists whose *Reise Buch* told them that we were the “cultural centre for Mennonite Colonists,” or Bolivians who were looking for a certain Menno – surely we would know which Pedro Friesen they were look-

ing for – never mind that any one colony would have dozens of men with the same name.

Although some colonies do not “speak” to each other, we MCC workers were always welcome, as it was understood that we were not for or against anyone. Central Menno/MCC seemed to be perceived as a common ground. Of course, this situation put us into contact with many different religious groups looking to work among the colonies. We tried to stay neutral and remember that there is “work for all in God’s Kingdom.”

After a day’s work using the Low German language, we’d head off to a market to purchase supplies for our supper, which required speaking Spanish. A walk downtown usually took us onto “6th of August Street,” where the Mennos do most of their business. Here owners cater to the needs of the colonists, from the stockings the women wear, to the food they need to buy for their family, and the machinery needed by men on the farm. Many places also provide cheap quarters to spend the night.

One night a week all the MCC workers and many friends of MCC gathered at the MCC grounds for potluck and what we called English Bible Study. While there was always some sharing, mostly we took this opportunity to fellowship and then ended the evening with singing. And did we sing – you have never heard the likes of singing “606” (Praise God from whom all Blessings Flow) until you’ve heard it sung under a thatched roof during a hot, humid Bolivian night. “Ring those Bells” did not require the Christmas season to be enjoyed, and became a favourite, especially when all the right harmony voices were present!

Sundays, we were all encouraged to find a local congregation to attend, and we soon felt at home in the Sinai Mennonite Church. Of course services were conducted in Spanish, which meant that we didn’t understand nearly all the words, but we found that to be unimportant – worshipping can still happen. This small congregation had a great heart and worked hard to minister to their community – they had a large group of children in their Sunday school and mid-week clubs. The service began with lively singing that would continue until it



was deemed that most everyone was there – time has a completely different meaning in a Latin American country.

We also attended an English church a few times, but somehow it didn't feel right for us. Since Dick and I both have cousins living in the colonies, and we often spent weekends with them, we attended services there as well. On occasion, we also took part in services at the "Paraguayan" colony church.

We have been forever changed by our term with MCC in Bolivia and found that our extended family, especially those who visited us, were also profoundly impacted. Not only did our experiences change our world views on issues like politics, economics and religion, but it also reformed our ideas about what is important in life. We learnt that we don't have to agree with people's lifestyle choices to have many, many things in common. Core basic needs, wants and wishes remain the same. Mothers want what is best for their families and fathers want to work and provide for their families. Living "outside of the world" does not insulate anyone from troubles and the colonists know this.

Our good experiences were naturally intermingled with negative ones: the frustrations of differences in language, weather, and culture, and of the politics within the MCC system; the sadness of missing family and their activities; the sorrow of personality clashes within our team; and the disappointments of events unfolding badly among some of the colonies: circumstances not much different than life right in our home community.

Since returning back to our home in Saskatchewan, not a week goes by without several

phone calls from new Low German arrivals to Saskatchewan, mostly from colonies in Mexico. The last few years of drought have been especially hard on already marginalized colonists who come to Canada, a few couples at a time, to take on work as farm labourers. Often they need help with their docu-



*A Bolivian family on their farm. Photo: Dick and Kathy Braun*

ments or in communicating with their "English" employers. More affluent Mexican Mennonites colonists come as groups of families and buy land here because they feel uneasy about the increasing drug wars; they seek help working with real estate agents and understanding Canadian laws.

Sometimes we're asked whether the Mennonite colonists from Latin America have "faith." For us this is a touchy subject and it's often kept us from talking about our time among the colony people with those who don't understand.

My response to this question would be as follows: when was the last time you put yourself out on the road to a destination some three hours from home, believing that someone will give you a ride and that when you finish with your business of the day, there will be a way home? Without cell phones, a car of your own and very little cash. To me that is FAITH—the same faith the colonists have in God and a life in the hereafter. While others need "assurance," they are at peace with "faith."

# Reflections on the Mennonite Colonies in Chihuahua, Mexico (March 2009)

by Helmut and  
Eve Isaak

In 2005 we began working with Low German speaking Mennonites in Alberta, Canada, who had migrated to Alberta from Mexico. Here we helped them integrate into Canadian society by providing information about Canadian medical and legal institutions and individual, family and marriage counselling.

In September 2007 we were invited to Cuauhtémoc, Mexico, to work in *Luz en mi Camino* (Light on My Way) as spiritual directors. *Luz en mi Camino* is a drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre. We were also involved in preaching in a number of different churches in the State of Chihuahua (in Low German, High German and Spanish). In addition, we held Bible studies and marriage seminars. Eve facilitated women's support groups, and Helmut taught Christian Ethics in the Blumenau High School and Mennonite History at the Steinreich Bible School. After the kidnappings of 3 members of the Blumenau *Mennonitengemeinde* (where we were members while in Mexico), we were directly involved in the debriefing and follow-up counselling of the kidnapped men, their families and also the mediators.

On December 7, 2008 we left Mexico due to the heightened criminal activities which included

kidnappings, extortion, violent home invasions, shootings on streets, and armed robberies in our neighborhood.

## Economy

Low German speaking Mennonites have become a very important factor in the economic development of the State of Chihuahua, Mexico. They belong to the top producers of corn, beans, cotton, chilies, peanuts, watermelons, oats, alfalfa and apples, employing Mennonite as well as Mexican labourers. The production of apples in the State of Chihuahua was begun by Mennonites in the 1960s and has now become a major source of cash for the Mennonites as well as for other Mexicans. Dairy products produced by the Mennonites, such as cheese, milk, cottage cheese and different creams, are known all over Mexico.

Since land is available only for people with capital, more than half of Mennonite families have



Photo: Robert Martens

become landless. They depend on seasonal labour as farmhands or work in factories and other businesses. Many travel to Canada for the summer season, working wherever they can find jobs, saving Canadian dollars for a down payment on a piece of land or for the building of their dream home. Well-to-do Mennonite entrepreneurs are now buying land throughout Mexico, drilling for water, and then subdividing properties into 50 to 100 hectare parcels which they sell to Mennonite settlers.

Many Mennonites are very technically gifted, building shops and factories that create labour jobs for hundreds of their landless brothers. Another source of income is the importing of used vehicles, farm machinery and heavy equipment, which are bought secondhand in Canada and the USA, repaired in Cuauhtémoc, and then sold to customers in Mexico. The 35 kilometre highway between Cuauhtémoc and Rubio is known throughout Mexico as an area for the purchase of secondhand machinery. This highway is also lined with Mennonite-owned restaurants, motels, grocery stores, hardware stores, building supply stores and a newly opened ice arena.

### Education

The little school started by General Conference Mennonite Church teachers in Quinta Lupita has developed into a school for kindergarten through grade twelve. The first students graduated from Blumenau in 2007. Many of these graduates continue to study in universities in Mexico and abroad. This school, now in Blumenau, has Mexican government recognition to supervise schools in surrounding colonies; the total amount of Mennonite students in these colonies is approximately 1000.

Although the Blumenau school is open to all Mennonites in Mexico, the more conservative churches do not consider secondary education a priority and thus their children remain in the traditional Old Colony schools from ages 6-13. The academic level of these conservative schools has dropped dramatically over the

last decades. The consequence is that much of the current conservative Mennonite adult population is illiterate.

### Social Life

The Mennonite people of Mexico are in transition. The progressive population has adopted a fully modern lifestyle with all its implications. The conservatives try desperately to keep their traditional lifestyle in the midst of an integrated, highly sophisticated economy. Yet even as they maintain their traditional dress codes and other church regulations, cell phones, computers and internet access are the norm for conservatives just as they are for progressive Mennonites. Integration into Mexican culture happens through intermarriage, through learning the Spanish language and through participation in cultural events and political life.

Due to the traditionalism of the Old Colony Church, there are no social events and programs for the youth of this conservative population, and therefore young people lack direction, education, and preparatory skills for adult life and marriage. In place of social events, young people often spend Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoons and evenings in groups on the streets where alcohol and other drugs are introduced to very young people. Even though the more progressive churches do have events and programs for their youth, their young



*Old Colony Mennonite Farmers in Campeche, Mexico*  
Photo: Víctor Medina (Creative Commons)



people often join the conservative youth on the streets on Sunday afternoons. For the adult conservative population, socializing takes place during wedding receptions and Sunday afternoon visits.

### Religious Life

Religious life for the Old Colony Mennonites is subject to strict rules and traditions. It begins with memorization of the Catechism in elementary school and continues with baptism preceding church membership and marriage. Every member is expected to attend Sunday morning services, funerals and weddings. The church elders are the ultimate authority over all areas of spiritual, social and economic life. Known disobedience to the moral code or rebellion is still punished by excommunication and shunning. Male dominance is the norm and is based on interpretations of Old Testament teachings. Personal knowledge of Scripture is discouraged by the conservative leadership of the church.

Since nearly all homes have computers and thus the capability to watch DVDs, the Church often feels it has lost control over the spiritual orientation of its members. Due to their limited and sometimes complete lack of education, many Mennonites in Mexico are vulnerable to influence by extreme evangelical, Pentecostal or cultic teachings they may encounter.

### Crime

Most of the Mennonites of the State of Chihuahua live in constant fear. By 2008, the violence had escalated to the point where many Mennonites received phone calls or letters advising them that if they paid sums of money each month (up to \$5,000 US a month), they would be protected from extortion and Mafia style kidnapping. Many families would like to leave but when asked why they do not, their response is, "We have invested too heavily in business and we are too heavily in debt." Much of the crime is drug related. Since the economic, legal and political system of Mexico is corrupt, Mennonites who want to prosper in Mexico feel forced to become part of this system.

Alcoholism and drug addiction is rampant in the Mennonite communities, as most have been brought up by parents with limited or no education, communication or parenting skills. Most have never had counselling for traumatic childhood experiences such as physical, emotional or sexual abuse. Their only means of coping with trauma is to self-medicate with alcohol or other drugs. Often their addictions lead them into criminal activities.

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## Addiction Treatment Centre in Mexico: a Place of New Beginning

(From MCC Canada webpage: posted 10/20/2011. Used by permission.)

by Gladys Terichow

Manitoba, Colony, Mexico

Tears, laughter and hugs mark Grace's (not her real name) last group session at a residential treatment centre here for drug and alcohol addictions. Grace said she came to the rehabilitation centre – *Centro de Rehabilitación, Luz en mi Camino* (Rehabilitation Centre: Light on my way) – the day her first grandchild was born because she wanted to reduce usage of prescription drugs and learn new ways to deal with problems. "I could hardly sleep last night—I am so excited that I am graduating today and that I'm going home where I want to be a good example to my family," she said. Her strong determination to continue the healing journey she started in the centre was affirmed by staff and other clients who encouraged her with Bible verses and personal reflections.

But parting comments at her last group session also reflected the apprehension that people face when they leave the supportive environment of the centre to return to homes and communities where their addictive behaviours had developed. "If you offered me today that I could go home, I wouldn't go home," said one of the women at the centre. "A lot of roots have been pulled out (of my



Staff at the addiction treatment centre: From left, MCC worker, Eleanor Hildebrand Guderian (whose MCC term has since ended), Susana Peters, and Wilma Unger working on a blanket project with women participating in the treatment program.

MCC photo: Gladys Terichow

life) and new seeds have been planted, but I know that I'm not ready to go home. I want to stay here until new roots start to grow."

*Luz en mi Camino* is a cooperative venture of the Mennonite colonies in the state of Chihuahua. The centre opened on Manitoba Colony near the city of Cuauhtémoc in 2004 to provide services in the Low German language for men and expanded in 2009 to provide services for women. More than 100 women and more than 750 men have participated in the programs, said director David Penner, who was among the first graduates in 2004. Up to 15 per cent of clients come from outside Mexico, including Canada, United States and other Latin American countries. Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Canada has been supporting the centre since its early beginnings through service workers and other supports.

Penner describes addiction as a life-shattering illness that destroys lives and families. He said people come to the centre because they are eager to stop addictive behaviour, resolve the issues that contribute to this behavior and regain the trust of

family, friends and church communities. To receive a graduation certificate, clients complete a three to six month program that integrates a 12-step healing program and biblical teachings, group activities, intense counselling and plans to deal with relapse. Marriage and family counselling are also provided.

Throughout their stay, people are encouraged to embrace an identity that is based on their relationship with God and not on their past history. Penner said people who have completed the program often look to friends and places of worship to help them continue the changes in thinking and behaviours started in the treatment centre. However, many church congregations

do not understand addictions and how to support people in their recovery from addictions.

"The problem is that many of our clients don't have a support system when they leave the centre—they are alone," said Penner. "People expect them to prove that they have changed, instead of believing them that they have changed. We need to support people with friendship and say, 'Welcome back' when they have completed the program." Maintaining freedom from addictions, he said, is a lifelong challenge. To reduce the potential for relapse, the centre now encourages couples to participate in the programs at the same time, even if only one spouse has addictive behaviours.

While Grace was in the centre completing a six-month program, her husband recognized that he too would have to make changes and was part of the program for almost two months. "I'm always happy when I see young couples come here," said Grace. "If we had done this sooner, we would have been more loving parents."

# The Life of a Mennonite Woman in the Brazilian Jungle

Excerpts from: *Wie Gott führt (How God Leads)* by Susanna Riediger Hamm, summarized and translated by Louise Bergen Price

Susie Hamm, her husband and family escaped from Russia in 192-, through Moscow. Her memoir is a moving account of building a new life in the Brazilian jungle, interspersed with letters from family who had remained in Germany and others who had emigrated to Canada. In this excerpt, she describes the life of a typical Mennonite wife and mother.

When the immigrants arrived in Brazil, they were housed in barracks, each family assigned several bunk beds partitioned with blankets. Each day, men, women and young people left the barracks to clear patches in the jungle that would become homesteads, while grandmothers and older siblings took care of young children. It was a desperate situation, yet for some women at least, there were compensations.

Susanna Hamm writes that it is the mother with young children who exhibits the greatest courage:

*Where the husband has to do the work himself, the jungle so dense, and the trees so broad, and he all by himself—no, that cannot be! Quickly she feeds the youngest children, and then gives them to the care of older siblings or grandmother. Bread is already prepared—she baked it last night by lantern light. The beans are cooked, too. Quickly, she fills a basket with food, ties a hat or kerchief around her head, pulls on her boots, and, with the machete on her shoulder, she hurries to meet her husband. Her eyes shine with joy. One thought only is on her mind, “I will and must help him!”*

Two hours later, she finally arrives at the clearing where her husband is at work with his axe. He is astounded. How is it possible that she can help? But she is determined, and with practice, the swing of her machete becomes more confident. Before long, working together, they have cleared a large area. She writes,

*“You know, Mariechen,” he says as he gives her a hug, “now that you’re working with me so courageously, I am overcome with such joy, that I think I can work twice as hard!”*

*[Here, in the jungle,] the wife becomes more than his wife; she is his true comrade. Shoulders together they fight for their existence... Her head whirls with plans: hand in hand, she and her dear husband will build a warm nest, and secure home for themselves and their children. And she is filled with such warmth, as if she were sitting with him at home in the good old days near the brick oven.*

Evening is at hand and they hurry home. As they arrive at the barracks, their children rush to meet them with joy—a whole day without their parents has seemed very long. Quickly the mother prepares the evening meal, and calls to her husband, who looks at her with new eyes, as if he has just now come to know her: *You, my good friend and comrade.*

After they finish cutting trees and clearing the land, they burn the debris, and soon find the ideal place to build their home. It is framed with logs, roof and sides are filled in with woven palm leaves. There’s a small opening for a window, a door frame with a makeshift curtain for a door; the floor is smeared with clay. It is home.

Three years later, the clearing is larger, and so is the family. The mother often takes the new baby with her when she works alongside her husband. She puts the child in a basket, and tends it whenever she can. Their small home now has curtained glass windows, and even a verandah. There are real beds, and a night table and cupboard made of crates.

On Saturday evening, the table in the living room is covered with a white cloth; there are roses in a vase on the table. Here, over a meal, the family shares ...continued on page 15.



# What I Learned in School Today

by Judith Klassen

I arrived in Mexico in 2006 with mixed feelings about what my work and presence in the colonies might mean. I was a graduate student in ethnomusicology, interested in the musical and cultural happenings among Mennonites in northern Mexico. But I was also a Mennonite from the prairies, raised on *plume moos* and CFAM radio, and well versed in the four-part harmony of *The Mennonite Hymnal*. While my great-grandfather was a bishop in Manitoba's Old Colony church, he and his family opted not to leave Canada when the group migrated to Mexico in the 1920s. In fact, before beginning my fieldwork, my only experiential knowledge of Mennonites in Mexico had come from shared classrooms with children whose parents had migrated to southern Manitoba in search of work and livelihood, and a Mexican Mennonite co-worker who told me that hot peppers made her break out and (she believed) generally contributed to acne among her peers.

Needless to say, I had some homework to do before starting fieldwork in Mexico. And so I read. About non-conformist Mennonites who left Canada when the government began to interfere in their schools and communities; about farmers who left prairie earth and sold everything to start over in a desert; and about poverty, drug smuggling, and low levels of education resulting in altogether too many sad stories, and, as it turns out, too many stereotypes. It is no surprise that poverty and land shortages among conserving agrarian communities could lead to genuine struggle, but many accounts failed to recognize the creative resilience of conserving Mennonites in the face of such struggles.



Photo: Judith Klassen

During the four months I spent in northern Mexico, Old Colony Mennonite stereotypes common in Canada (i.e., of authoritarian communities with “low” education and no room for creative expression) were frequently contested. Time spent with Old Colony, *Kleine Gemeinde*, and evangelical Mennonites willing to share their homes, stories, and music with me suggested that – while Mexico's Old Colony church is intentionally non-conformist and not all Old Colony Mennonites smile for journalist cameras – generosity, honesty, and resourceful engagement are important parts of colony life. Take Abram Loewen, for example:

## Journal entry from February 9, 2006

But about today. It would seem that Abram Loewen is not only an Old Colony teacher and *Vorsänger* (song leader, literally “front singer”), but also a kind and generous man. I was a bit nervous as

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*...continued from Mennonite Woman in a Brazilian Jungle.*

joys and sorrows, and reads letters from family in faraway lands. Then, before everyone goes to bed, it's time for evening prayers.

In spite of the hard work, Susanna finds great joy in the new relationship with her husband: *It is precisely in the difficult years in one's married life that each becomes dependent on the other, sharing the other's burdens. Times like these can bind two humans so closely together that they find joy and*

*happiness even in the hardest work and most difficult circumstances.*

A copy is available in MHSBC's reference section.

In 1930 about 200 Mennonite families moved to Brazil. The two main areas where they are now located are Colonia Nova near Bagé and Witmarsum in Parana State. The largest concentration of Mennonites is in three suburbs of Curitiba. (<http://www.thirdway.com/menno/glossary>)

Simon and I pulled up to the schoolyard, since day-time meetings are often a little more intimidating than evening post-class chatter (the likes of which we had enjoyed on Tuesday last). Mr. Loewen greeted us on the yard, led us into the two-room school, and told us to sit wherever we liked until the *Pause* (recess) was over. He then headed out of doors to watch the children. Or so he said – in truth I feared that he was avoiding Simon and my linguistically choppy, slow-to-communicate-but-loud-in-attempting-selves (if only it were possible to keep to one volume when excited about something and speaking in a second language). But Mr. Loewen kept his word. After a short time he returned to the schoolhouse and listened patiently as I waded through questions about the books he used to sing with his students, and what was to happen in the classroom that afternoon.

He told us that the *Gesangbüchlein* (small songbook or hymnal) we had seen during a previous visit was something that he put together himself so that the children wouldn't have to carry the larger and heavier *Gesangbuch* (songbook, the hymnal used in Old Colony worship) to and from school, and to keep the latter from becoming tattered before a child was even of church-going age. While the *Gesangbuch* has been around for over a century, the *Gesangbüchlein* was printed in 2000; each *Büchlein* hymn includes its own hymn number in addition to its corresponding *Gesangbuch* hymn and melody numbers. This detail may sound minor, but it is significant – *Gesangbuch* melodies are learned by rote and passed along from one generation to another. Only the texts are included in the hymnal itself (melody numbers are given, but there is no musical notation). Since Mr. Loewen is also a *Vorsänger* in the Old Colony church, I asked how many melodies are connected with the Old Colony hymnal. He estimated 60 to 70, and when we looked at the list in the final pages of the *Gesangbuch*, there were in fact over 100. "Wow!" I responded (a chorus repeated, probably a few too many times, in the course of our conversation).

Needless to say, my anxieties about this visit were unfounded. At 11:30, Mr. Loewen went outside with the school bell in hand (better than yelling, he reckoned) and the children gathered in the classroom. There were so many of them! Simon and I were sit-

ting at the front of the class, facing the students. The girls were directly in front of us, the boys to their left (on the other side of the woodstove), leaving us with a side profile of Mr. Loewen, seated at his desk. He assured us again that it was okay to record the music, and once everyone was settled the class began to sing together from the *Gesangbüchlein*. A unison the size of a tidal wave.

Mr. Loewen mostly sat through the singing, acting as leader at times, allowing students to carry the melody at others. He would page to the next song during the final verse of the present one in order to maintain continuity, and tapped his ruler on his desk every now and again to ensure good behaviour. Watching him, it became clear that he is not just an observer of his students – teaching, leading, and choosing repertoire – this man can *sing*. He sat in his chair without particular intent (or so it appeared), and yet his torso seemed to fill like a bagpipe with each breath, the air slowly released with each melismatic wonder of a word. His *Schlaubecksen* (overalls) made it easier to note the depth of his breathing. The resulting sound was incredible – a nasal timbre that resonated off the bare schoolhouse walls, somehow without drawing attention to itself but rather inviting the young student voices to join in. One cannot help but be enamoured by this all-encompassing unison.

The girls (and the boys for that matter), spent a fair bit of time watching Simon and me during the singing, mostly smiling freely. They were also careful to open and close the door loudly as they came and went from the washroom, all things that make a person love the honesty of children and to want puffed sleeves and Mary Janes, even if it means sweating in polyester.

**Judith Klassen** is the curator of Canadian music at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, QC. An ethnomusicologist and violist, she completed her PhD at Memorial University of Newfoundland in 2008, where her doctoral research explored faithful defiance in the song practices of Mennonites in northern Mexico. In 2011, she collaborated with the Mennonite Heritage Village in Steinbach, MB on the exhibit *Singing in Time: Music and Mennonites*.

# Columbia Kitchen Cabinets: A Brief History

by Hans Kruger

*In 2012, Columbia Kitchen Cabinets won a Cultural Diversity Award, sponsored by Abbotsford Community Services, in the category of Reflective Workforce. Nominees in this category "reflect the community they serve and have strategies to recruit and retain people from culturally diverse categories."*

Columbia Kitchen Cabinets Ltd had its beginnings on Columbia Road in Abbotsford, BC, in 1970. It was founded by Peter Loewen, who had recently immigrated from Paraguay. The company had a very humble beginning, operating out of a private garage. Having honed his carpentry skills under the guidance of his father in South America, Peter was naturally drawn to the same profession in his new country of residence. After a few rocky starts, Peter made a commitment to God that he would serve Him by supporting world missions through the profits generated by his company. The rest, as they say, is history.

Over the decades, Columbia has grown to become a major employer in the Fraser Valley, and today is a supplier of kitchen cabinets and countertops all over Canada and the western United States. The company, thanks to its highly committed staff, is recognized for its

high quality products and service.

At Columbia, *people* make the company what it is. We simply couldn't survive without their commitment. The diversity of our people is one of our many strengths. Our principle is to support diverse ethnic/cultural backgrounds, which we cultivate in various ways through the initiative of staff. Our support to our employees, however, is more than just financial; we believe without prejudice that all people are equal, no matter what their cultural background. Our firm has been blessed with a diverse workforce: this is the true and rooted strength of Columbia.

Over the years, it became obvious to Peter Loewen that he needed to hire qualified managers to run the business. Doing so gave him more time to become personally involved in mission projects, such as building churches in Peru in the late 1980s and early '90s, then leading teams of North American Christians on two to three week missions trips all over the world with Church Partnership Evangelism (CPE), later to become Discipleship Making International (DMI). Today, with Peter fully retired from the company that is now owned by three of his married children, he and wife Hildegard enjoy the fruits of their labour. However, he still goes on some mission trips, because that's where his heart has always been and will always be till the day the Lord calls him home.

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## Crystal Vision and Hearing - by Robert Martens

*Crystal Vision and Hearing won the 2012 Cultural Diversity Award in the category of Marketing/Outreach: "Nominees market and outreach to culturally diverse communities. There is an attempt to communicate different cultural norms, values and languages; and to participate in community activities."*

Over a decade ago, Crystal Vision was established by Leona Wiens and her sons George and Steve. Their first outlet was in Maple Ridge, and over the years the business expanded to offices in Abbotsford, Chilliwack, Langley, North Vancouver and White Rock. Personal hearing loss motivated the change from Crystal Vision to Crystal Vision and Hearing.

The firm chooses to be involved in the surrounding communities, and this ultimately led to its nomination as a contender for the Cultural Diversity Award. Crystal Vision and Hearing hosts children's tours at their laboratories and holds clinics at seniors' centres. A stated goal is to keep prices manageable for those in need. The business is also involved in outreach to First Nations communities, where diagnostic hearing tests are provided free of charge.

The award recognized these activities as a model for business involvement in the community.

Sources: [www.cvoh.ca](http://www.cvoh.ca); [firstnationshearing.com](http://firstnationshearing.com)

# The Way We Were:

## Birch Bay Community Bible Church (MB)

by Robert Martens

The Great Depression and the dust bowl of the 1930s caused an unprecedented upheaval in North America. As documented so powerfully by John Steinbeck in his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, a multitude of farmers were forced to vacate their land, especially in the Midwest, and among them were Mennonites. The news that land was available in the lush green landscape of western Washington State drew a number of Mennonites into the Whitehorn area of Birch Bay, and for them, building a church was a priority. At that same time, a retired MB conference leader and former missionary to India, N.N. Hiebert, was living in Salem, Oregon. He was asked by Whitehorn Mennonites if he would be willing to help establish a fledgling congregation in Blaine. Hiebert accepted, and travelled by train to Blaine, carrying as luggage the bicycle that would provide him with transportation for the next few years. Just south of where the church would be located, he built a shanty of shiplap, alder poles, and tar paper; he now had a home, and his wife soon joined him. It was a time of desperate poverty, but as depicted in *The Grapes of Wrath*, also a time of unimaginable courage. By 1937, great persistence had established Washington's first MB church, the Mennonite Brethren Church at Birch Bay. The original charter members numbered twenty-one.

The year 1938 saw the building of the first church edifice, made possible by a loan of \$350 from the MB Conference. By 1943, however, the building was too small to accommodate the arrival of new Mennonite settlers. A basement was dug, and until the new church was finished in 1948, that was where services were held. Poverty enforced a certain amount of creativity in the construction process, as told by an eyewitness\*: "After the west, north and south walls were up and properly braced,

it was time for the roof trusses. Because we were poor and could not afford to hire a crane to lift the roof trusses, a tall fir tree was brought into place and erected on the subfloor near the west end of the building. The pole was put on a heavy plank to distribute the load and keep it from breaking through the subfloor. The pole was stabilized by long cables attached to tractors" (Harry Fast).

The ensuing decades saw numerous changes. Renovations and additions continued until 2003. Fifteen pastors served the congregation, and the church renamed itself three times: from Whitehorn MB Church to Birch Bay MB Church, and finally (a mouthful) to Birch Bay Bible Community Church of the Mennonite Brethren. Daughter and granddaughter congregations were formed. A General Conference faction broke away in 1945, only to disband in the 1980s, when many returned to their original congregation. Struggles and tensions were not uncommon: Rick and Esther Eshbaugh comment that "during the times of corporate change (which has been most of the time!) we have found ourselves surrounded by people anxious to see God's kingdom expanded. It has been exhausting at times, but we know there will be celebrations in the future because of faithfulness today!" Another church member recounts, "My faith was stretched when we went a year without a pastor. I had expected our church to not survive, but it turned out that WE are the Church and we did survive" (Susan Gooding). Finally, in 2006, British Petroleum bought the original church property; by then the congregation had already purchased a new 10 acre lot at Blaine and Bay Roads in 2005.

Singing has been a much loved activity at Birch Bay MB. The church choir, comprised of volunteers from the ninth grade and older, lasted into

the 1990s. The congregation participated in Song Fests and Ferndale area "Singspirations". But the most vivid memories seem to be of the youth Christmas carolling groups. Judy Warkentin recalls, "I remember our long nights on Christmas Eve – We would start carolling after the program, go all night, and end up for breakfast at someone's house. When I was in Youth Group, we made the rounds to every house in the church. We went from Birch Bay to Blaine to Lynden to Bellingham and even a jaunt into Canada some years. Of course, we had to be in church on Christmas morning for the service."

Revival meetings were a prime component of church life. Meetings went on for two weeks, six nights a week, and attendance was compulsory. Youth, of course, were the primary target. One member recalls, tongue in cheek, his conversion during Vacation Bible School: "One of my earliest memories is having VBS in the basement. When I got saved during VBS, Pastor Ed Heinz gave you a giant Hershey bar if you came forward and prayed with him and got saved. That wasn't why I made my decision, but it was definitely an added bonus! The next day I had sinned and I went forward because I thought if I had sinned since I was saved if I went forward I would get another candy bar. Pastor was quick to remind me that I didn't need to be saved again, and I wasn't getting a second candy bar" (Roger Eytzen).

Sometimes change was painful. Anna Thiessen remembers that "on January 30, 1949, Pete and I became the first couple to be married in our present sanctuary which was completed in 1948. I remember there were some concerns since I wanted to marry an 'outsider' (one who was not baptized by immersion by the Mennonite Brethren). After being given permission to marry anyway, Pete said 'no.' He decided he wanted to be immersed, so into the chilly waters of Birch Bay, on a Sunday in January, Pete was baptized by immersion. Then the wedding could go on" (Anna Thiessen Warkentin).

The church, however, was also a community of healing. E.D. Bryan states, "I moved to Birch Bay with the idea of fixing up a mobile home within walking distance of the beach as a healing place and

retreat for women survivors of domestic violence. Once I began attending BBBCC I realized that the 'Hiding Place' and healing place in Birch Bay was for me. ... BBBCC was and is a body of believers that had room for me and those I love, unconditionally accepting us where we were but loving us too much to let us stay there" (E.D. Bryan).

The final word goes to a member who moved away and recognized the loss of her community. "When Jay and I moved to Yakima in 1991 I felt I was losing a legacy that I so wanted to pass on to my children. ... Settling in the Yakima valley left us no choice but to search the scriptures and raise our children in the knowledge of Christ. I knew that I could not slack off and count on the church we were attending – especially when it came to Anabaptist theology. ... I was appalled when we ... found the churches lacking in music – both in organized groups and corporate congregational singing. ... Relying on the things I had learned and the rich heritage of music passed on to me thru this body of believers, I was able to pass on to my children the love for corporate worship and the desire to be involved in the music ministries within their own congregations" (Vivian Unruh Wheeler).

\*All quotations are taken from *Birch Bay Bible Community Church: 70th Anniversary: December 1-2, 2007. Our Memories.*

The Birch Bay Church has played a significant role in my life. First of all, [members of the church talk in the anniversary booklet] about the evangelistic meetings; well, it was the Birch Bay pastor at that time (1951), Rev. Schultz, who came to South Abbotsford and spoke. It was at one of his meetings that I accepted the Lord as my Saviour! It was in the German language then and obviously very meaningful to me.

Then some years later I met my wife to be. Joan's father was the pastor of the church then and had sent his daughter up here to Bible School where we connected (47 years ago). Her father's leadership followed the pastorate of H.H. Epp, who was a well-known evangelist in Canada. There has always been a strong connection between that church and this side of the 49th.

*Jim Baerg, MHS Board member and formerly part of Birch Bay Church*

## GENEOLOGY COLUMN: THE TIE THAT BINDS

# One Wednesday Afternoon

Submitted by an MHSBC volunteer

War. Chaos. Confusion. Records disappeared. People disappeared. A situation all too familiar to many of the Mennonites coming out of Europe after World War II. And so it was also for a little boy who had come to Canada. As he aged he learned his father's name and that he was a German soldier, but that was all. The only one who could have given him more information, his mother, had died.

Moving forward in time to 2011: his older sister came to us at the Historical Society in order to enter some genealogical facts into the computer record, which in turn would be forwarded to the central database in Fresno, California. While checking some of the pertinent facts with us, she happened to mention that someone had told her about some "EWZ files". At the Archives, we have those files on microfiche, purchased some time ago, and are now in the process of scanning them into our computer for easy access. The woman's comment set us off on a search through the files to see if we could glean more information about her family. EWZ stands for *Einwandererzentralstelle*,\* that is,

"Immigrant Centre" – records prepared for the German government on those of German descent wanting to enter Germany during World War II. Extensive questions were asked regarding each individual's nationality and ancestry, including parents and grandparents. These records were then stored by the German government.

The woman's family was easily found, and to our surprise and her great joy, not only was her family's record there – as far back as her great grandparents – but her younger brother's father's and grandparents' names were listed. The records included even the information on the army rank his father had held, and that he was "missing in action." It was a delight to see the expression of gratitude on her face as she held the information in her hand.


So now we come full circle back to that little boy, now a mature man, able to add more to the puzzle of who he is. Now able to approach the German authorities with information that might allow him to discover his roots.

All in a day's work for the genealogy crew at the Historical Society.

*\*Editor's note: We owe an apology to our readers, having interpreted EWZ in the past in various ways, such as Einwanderungszentrumstelle or Einwanderzeugnis. A trip to the Internet would quickly have set us straight.*

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## BOOK REVIEW

Conrad L. Kanagy, Tilal  Beyene, and Richard Showalter. *Winds of the Spirit: A Profile of Anabaptist Churches in the Global South.* **Harrisonburg, Waterloo: Herald Press, 2012. 260 pp.**

Reviewed by Robert Martens

*Christianity is a faith that was born in Africa and Asia, and which, in our own lifetimes, has decided to go home.* (Foreword, Philip Jenkins, 11)

In the 1980s, Conrad Kanagy was living among Quichua peasants in the highlands of Ecuador. Curious about their mass conversion to evangelical Christianity which had occurred in the 1960s, he questioned them about it, and what he learned surprised him. Many contemporary scholars have regarded evangelical forces as imposing Western values. On the contrary, Kanagy writes, the Quichua had abandoned the Catholic Church which only visited them on such major occasions as marriage or death, and had made a rational choice to form

their own evangelical community-oriented church. The Protestant model, more egalitarian and more concerned with economic development, better matched what the Quichua needed. Kanagy concludes, "Far from being victims of neocolonialism, they were savvy religious entrepreneurs who, in coming to Christ, had found spiritual freedom, retained their cultural identity, and strengthened their community autonomy. Far from being Marx's 'opiate of the masses,' religious conversion became for the Quichua an 'engine of hope'" (19).

*Winds of the Spirit* is a survey and study of the rapidly expanding Anabaptist\* churches of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, or what the authors call the Global South. This well researched profile is almost unique; previous studies have been based primarily on membership lists, and consequently information so far on Global South churches has been meagre. The authors speculate that Western scholars, believing that Christi-



anity would wither away and was no longer worth studying, have largely ignored the churches south of the equator. *Winds of the Spirit* has a limited scope, confining its inquiry to twelve churches (including, for comparison, one northern one, Lancaster Mennonite) that are all connected with Eastern Mennonite Mission. Even with those limitations, however, the profile that emerges is an eye opener.

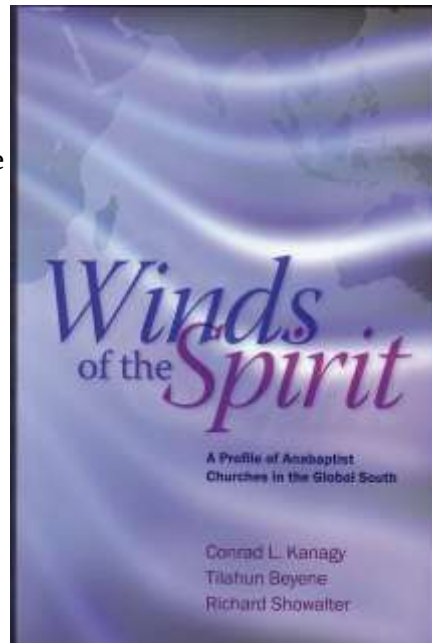
The churches of the Global North, that is, North America and Europe, are the result of several thousand years of history, and are showing signs of age. Their membership is getting older, their numbers have generally plateaued or are in decline, and they have little sense of evangelizing to encourage their own growth. Meanwhile, the churches of the Global South are expanding at an unprecedented rate, appeal to the young as well as the old, and seem bursting with a passion for their communities and the world.

The authors of *Winds of the Spirit* suggest that Global South churches benefit by not having the historical baggage of those in the north. First, they have "leapfrogged" the formalized Christendom of the West that began when the emperor Constantine incorporated Christianity into the structures of the Roman Empire. Official Christendom, led by the Vatican, then persisted for centuries. Churches in the Global South, however, never experienced Christendom, and are more like the Early Church, fluid, self-sustaining, and localized. Second, the Global South did not live through the Enlightenment period of Europe, when individual freedoms and a free economy became the norm. Consequently, they are non-individualistic, non-rational, and charismatic; religion is not "privatized". Third, the Global South churches did not experience the divisiveness of North American denominationalism, and value their local congregations far more than any denominational structure.

What, then, do Anabaptist churches of the Global South, so different from ours, look like? The authors propose that they are "contextualized," that is, adapted to local conditions, so that congregations may often differ greatly from each other. This happened, they suggest, only *after* Western missionaries left the area, and the membership was free to create its own local church structures. Global South churches, although a few are urbanized, are mostly rural, impoverished, and uneducated; the church functions as a centre of commu-

nity self-support and economic advancement. Beliefs are overwhelmingly orthodox. Typically, alcohol, tobacco, divorce, premarital sex, and homosexuality are strongly condemned. On the other hand, in Global South churches, belief and behaviour are regarded as natural partners, and service to the

community, such as work with HIV sufferers, is paramount. Quite naturally, as these churches draw their membership from the marginalized, there is an eager commitment to social justice. For this reason, the Old Testament, with its stories of liberation, is strongly prized. Global South churches affirm that accepting the Christian life should lead to prosperity and health; paradoxically, they do this in complete awareness of their current poverty. Finally, and perhaps most importantly to the authors of this study, Global South churches have embraced Pentecostalism, with charismatic services, healings, and speaking in tongues. Despite the fact that many Mennonites in the North feel uncomfortable with these elements, the



authors of *Winds of the Spirit* suggest that this Pentecostalism is in fact much closer to original Anabaptism than are North American churches today.

This discussion brings us to the central thesis of this study. According to general sociological theory in the West, institutions begin with charismatic individuals, but in time lose their energy, become more and more structured, and finally end up imprisoned in bureaucracy, "an iron cage of rationality" (72). At that point, depleted of energy, they plateau, decline, and eventually die. This process, the authors say, may quite possibly happen to Global South churches as they age.

But not necessarily so. Perhaps the churches of the South possess a more durable energy than those of the North. Perhaps, as the authors write, the Anabaptist Vision as expressed by Harold Bender in 1944 emphasized social values that were acceptable to a Western-educated middle class, and inexcusably ignored the pietistic and mystical aspects of early Anabaptism, "the heart religion of renewal movements" (180). In following Bender's one-sided vision, they say, North American and European churches may have become victims of the "iron cage of rationality." Further, the authors argue that liberation theology, intended to empower the poor through Jesus' prophetic teachings, was a creation of Western rationalist elites that condescendingly assumed that the marginalized of the "Third World" were helpless on their own. The new

"Pentecostalist Vision" of the South appeals to an individual, emotional, charismatic conversion, but in the context of social commitment and of economic mobility. Members of Global South churches learn entrepreneurial skills together, with a more egalitarian standpoint than is common in the North, and this combination may have a more long lasting impact than the social and political work of liberation theology. The Anabaptist Pentecostalist Vision brims with energy and confidence; it does not believe it is helpless; and its fluidity, spontaneity, and lack of hierarchy may just spare the Global South

the doom of the "iron cage". It is a provocative thesis. As Mennonite membership stagnates in the Global North, will the Global South in fact, as the authors suggest, have the last word?

*\*The term "Anabaptist" is used far more commonly than "Mennonite" in the Global South.*

*Winds of the Spirit* can be borrowed from the MHS library, or ordered from a local bookstore or online from Herald Press.

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## BOOK REVIEW

### Emmy Barth, *No Lasting Home: A Year in the Paraguayan Wilderness*. Rifton, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2009.

Reviewed by Robert Martens

At the 2009 Mennonite World Conference in Asunción, delegates of the Bruderhof officially thanked the global Mennonite community, and Paraguayan Mennonites in particular, for their help in a time of crisis some decades ago. Their traditionalist attire, contrasting oddly with their "progressive" convictions, may have baffled some in the audience not familiar with Bruderhof history. Listeners were charmed, however, by the ease, humour, and gospel singing of the Bruderhof representatives, and in the days following, many could be seen reading a newly published book about the Bruderhof's Paraguayan story. That book is *No Lasting Home*, a poignant first-hand narrative by Emmy Barth.

In 1920 Eberhard and Emmy Arnold founded a community intended to be based on the Sermon on the Mount in Sannerz, Germany. The Sannerz Bruderhof was conceived as neither dictatorship nor democracy, but as a gathering of individuals committed to peace, non-competitiveness, and the elimination of personal possessions. The group soon outgrew the Sannerz house and moved on to a location in the Rhön Mountains. In 1930, Eberhard Arnold, having discovered the similarity between the Bruderhof and Hutterites, engaged in talks and was subsequently ordained as a Hutterite minister. The Bruderhof were thus often known in succeeding years as the Arnoldleut.

Motivated by their peace principles and the rising tide of war, members of the Bruderhof attended the 1936 Mennonite World Conference in Amsterdam but were deeply

disappointed. The European German Mennonite churches, they learned, had wandered far, over the centuries, from their original doctrine of nonresistance. In a small meeting after the Conference, however, a group of individuals met to draft a Mennonite Peace Declaration, a *Friedensbekenntnis*, to express their concerns. Two Bruderhof representatives were signatories, as well as some Dutch, Polish and German Mennonites, and all of the American delegates. The latter included the scholar Harold Bender and Orie Miller, the executive director of MCC.

These contacts would turn out to be invaluable. Hitler's National Socialist government first harassed, and then expelled all Bruderhof members from the continent. The Nazis charged that "[i]ts members reject the race laws ... and oppose the institutions of the Third Reich" (Barth 8). The Bruderhof moved in 1936 to Cotswold, England, but soon encountered hostility there to the German nationals in their group, who were threatened with internment. The Bruderhof devotion to community then prevailed. Many of the group were by now non-German in origin, and the decision was made to emigrate en masse, to choose exile once again, in order to remain together. In the prevailing war hysteria, however, and despite the help of Quakers, Mennonites, Hutterites, and even Eleanor Roosevelt, the pacifist Bruderhof group was not welcome in North America. "The powers of evil are especially active right now," wrote a Bruderhof member, "they will not suffer the arising of a Zion, of a city of peace" (9). It was then that Orie Miller stepped in, negotiating an agreement with the Paraguayan government for the Bruderhof to establish colo-

nies in Paraguay under the same privileges previously granted to Mennonites.

Just before Christmas of 1940, the first Bruderhof group set sail and arrived, after a very difficult journey, in Filadelfia, Fernheim Colony, on January 2, 1941. There followed a time of enormous strain and suffering, of disease, disillusionment, and death – but also of great courage and joy. The story of the first years in Paraguay is engagingly told in *No Lasting Home*. Numerous photos and eyewitness documents enliven the narrative. The overall history of the Bruderhof is, disappointingly, only sketchily told, but the Paraguayan story is a strong one. "You poor courageous people," was the reaction of a Bruderhof member to their welcoming Chaco Mennonite hosts, "how much you have had to endure already! Will we soon look like that too?" (Barth 37)

The Bruderhof did not stay long in the arid scrubland of the Chaco. As well as profound gratitude, they felt some discomfort with the Mennonites there, who seemed entrenched in tradition, as well as ambivalent in their commitment to nonresistance – in fact, some among them were celebrating the rise of Hitler. When the Bruderhof located a property called Primavera adjoining the Mennonite Friesland Colony in the lush lands of Eastern Paraguay, they quickly purchased it and moved on. Hardy Arnold, son of Eberhard and Emmy, delivered a farewell speech to the Chaco Mennonites, outlining four reasons for their departure: 1. The Bruderhof did not wish to live in isolation as some Mennonites had chosen to do, but preferred to witness their faith in a populated area. 2. In the adverse agricultural conditions of the Chaco, they would be forced to hire cheap Indian labour, and did not want to do so. 3. They did not want to supply the Paraguayan military for profit, as the poverty-stricken Chaco Mennonites were doing. 4. They longed for a better climate.

Nicolai Siemens, Chaco resident and editor of the *Menno-Blatt*, wrote that he regretted the loss of the open-minded Bruderhof: "Our little flock that would like to hold faithfully to the teaching of Jesus feels more and more alone" (Barth 75).

*No Lasting Home* chronicles the crushing difficulties of the first year in Primavera. Entire chapters are devoted to the

deaths of infants, testifying to the Bruderhof love of family and to their ideal of childlike joy, non-judgementalism, and innocence. The Paraguayan Bruderhof would eventually prosper, founding three settlements and building a hospital open to the public. "I love Paraguay very much," a member wrote, "its stark contrasts between hot and cold, between luxuriant beauty, almost like Paradise, and the hideous insects. Nothing here

is tepid..." (149). They would stay in Paraguay until 1961, when a rapid growth in American guests, as well as dissension in the ranks, impelled them to move once again, this time to New York, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and North Dakota.

Today the handful of Bruderhof communities in the US as well as in Germany run a variety of businesses – including Plough Publications online, from which *No Lasting Home* can be ordered or downloaded for free – but they allow no personal bank accounts. Their relatively broadminded beliefs and activities, such as participating in peace marches, fostering music and education, and encouraging children to live outside the community and make their own decisions on whether to return, have resulted in conflict with their Hutterian associates.

In 1990 they were excommunicated by the Dariusleut and Lehrerleut Hutterites.

The Bruderhof, like any other group, have not escaped controversy, and some of the dissent can be viewed on the Internet. Emmy Barth's book, however, is a deeply moving account of a people struggling to remain true to its principles. "At Christ's second coming," she writes, "will there be those who, not having bent the knee to the princes and dictators of this world, will be ready to receive him?" (155) The Bruderhof, like Mennonites, have suffered much in their wanderings, but at their best are determined to transform the pain of exile through their faith: "I think there is something in all things that cries out for redemption, not only in human beings. Therefore everything we do toward building up is holy" (148).

Barth, Emily. *No Lasting Home*.

GAMEO (Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online).

*Wikipedia*.

[www.perefound.org](http://www.perefound.org)





## BOOK REVIEW

### Ernie Harder, *Mostly Mennonite*. Elsie Neufeld, ed. Abbotsford: Abbotsford Printing, 2009.

Reviewed by Wilf Penner

Upon musing over Ernie Harder's entertaining and thoughtful *Mostly Mennonite*, here are my summary and observations:

Part One, first of all, outlines the history of Mennonites succinctly, and then details the Harder family story through the past three or four generations. I found these chapters well written but somewhat disjointed, as I tried to piece together the extended Harder ancestry. Furthermore, since I'm reasonably well informed on the Mennonite sojourn in czarist Russia, I read the historical summary as a history teacher reads a student's essay, checking to see whether Harder has his facts straight – which he does. I don't make these comments as a critique, because Harder's purpose was to inform his own extended family of their rich heritage, which he does admirably, but rather as a reaction, as an “outsider,” to what I was reading. If I were a Harder I would value all that detail, since I am a genealogist myself.

By the time the author deals with war and revolution and the emigration of the Penners and Harders, the story line becomes focused and reads as an exciting adventure, with much gripping pathos, as the author weaves the Harder/Penner strands into the tapestry of Mennonite suffering in that time of war, anarchy, terror, famine, and pestilence.

In Part Two, Harder recounts his parents' struggle when they experience, first, the trauma of separation and loss on leaving all they have known, then the economic challenges of finding employment and accommodation, and finally the years of the grim “Dirty Thirties” on the Canadian prairies. The meagre existence of those years forms the dark backdrop for a robust love affair and a life marked by a remarkable resilience of spirit that keeps Jake and Mary Harder happy as they begin their family. Their story may differ little from that of many rural prairie settlers in that difficult decade, but demonstrates that those who kept faith, hope, and love alive were “bettered” by their difficult experiences, while those who didn't were embittered by them.

In Part Three, we enjoy, vicariously, the personal experiences of the author as he encounters the various stages of childhood and youth in the Mennonite village of Yarrow,

BC. His descriptions of the toilsome raspberry “industry” that was the backbone of the Yarrow economy, where every member of the family was involved, are accurate and true to life. The adventures of Ernie and brother Al bring back to my memory many of my own experiences as a 10 year old, when my family lived for seven months in the shadow of Vedder Mountain, and I attended Miss Lewis' grade five class in Yarrow Elementary and Heinrich Janzen's *Mittelstufe* German Sunday school class in the MB Church.

Through the recounting of the second half of the 19th century in Parts Four and Five, we get to know the Harder family, the love they share, and especially the parents whose extraordinary resilience helps them to graciously adapt to rapid social changes and accompanies them until their deaths.

As with any good book, this one leaves important questions to ponder. For me, the juxtaposition of the Harders' forward-looking optimism with those elements that wanted to replicate the *goode oole Tiet* (good old time) of life in the villages of Molotschna on Canadian soil gives me much food for thought.

In *Mostly Mennonite*, Ernie Harder has achieved his goal of writing a very readable history, both for his own family and for a much wider public readership.



Mennonite gate in Halbstadt, Molotschna.

Photo: Louise Bergen Price

# Blagodadne: a Journey to Remember

By Steve Theissen

Our destination was Blagodadne, the name of the estate where our grandfather, Nikolai Thiessen, had lived from 1902 to 1926. He was born September 8, 1887, in Molotchna, Ukraine, and died December 4, 1959 in Coaldale, Alberta. In early May of 2011, my sister Vi Chappell and I took a “roots” trip to Russia. Through my work with Communitas Supportive Care Society, I had had the privilege of six previous visits to Ukraine and other parts of the former Soviet Union. My trips have always been work related, but this one (with the first week still dedicated to work) was to incorporate some personal vacation time. Vi and I were committed to get to our family’s former home site adjacent to the Neu Samara Colony, near the large industrial city of Samara.

In recent years a collaborative partnership between Communitas and a family service agency, the Florence Centre, in Zaporizhzhie, Ukraine, has resulted in my having a working relationship with Dr. Lucy Romanenkova, its director. In working through the logistical details of our trip, we were greatly assisted by the staff of the Florence Centre. One of the Centre's emerging social enterprise initiatives, in support of its work, is called Welcome to Ukraine. This service is designed to make custom travel arrangements for individuals or groups by assisting with accommodation and transportation as well with related family and historical research. Since our ancestry is connected to the Molotchna colonies of Ukraine as well as to the later-established colonies of Orenburg and Neu Samara, Vi and I were eager to explore our “roots.” After much



*Walking to Blagodadne Photo: Steve Thiessen*

email interaction we were ready to begin.

With Lucy as translator and Igor as driver, we began our more than 4000 kilometre journey in the villages of Molotchna, with Moscow as our final destination. We travelled the first day from Zaporizhzhie, Ukraine, in a north-easterly direction, arriving in the evening at the home of Igor’s mother and her partner. Following a sumptuous late night dinner and an early morning breakfast, we eagerly approached the Russian border. However, after citing incomplete and improper paperwork for the car, the border officials did not grant us entry into Russia. Complex and hasty arrangements were negotiated by cell phone with Igor’s brother, arranging to have him bring up another car from Zaporizhzhie.

This time approval was granted, albeit after several anxious hours, and we resumed our trek. We found ourselves extremely thankful for our driver and interpreter. This was only one of the occasions on which Vi reminded me that my original idea of “possibly doing this ourselves” had not been a good one.

We found the expanse of the Russian steppes to be exhilarating. It was not hard to imagine how this landscape was fertile ground for the Russian soul: the vast, dramatic beauty of the steppes and the extremes of the continental climate feeding the imagination of its poets and writers. As we passed by dozens of villages, scenes from Dostoyevsky's and Tolstoy's writings came to mind. Lucy, as our personal raconteur, delighted us with her stories, entertaining and informing us with keen insight and cheerful demeanour. A true teacher, she insisted that we spend part of each day in "Russian" lessons. Benefiting from her insistence and assistance, we daily worked on our Russian "paragraph," refining and adding to it. She humoured us by engaging in her own German lessons in order to encourage us, while insisting that Igor participate in English lessons. For added value, and in harmonious voice, Lucy and Igor sang Russian folk songs, while Vi and I struggled to muster up some Canadian equivalents.

From the book, *Mennonite Estates in Russia*, by Helmut Harder, we had learned that our great grandfather Nicholai Thiessen, a man obviously eager for adventure, had left the Molotchna colony in Ukraine in 1902. It is recorded that "he packed up his whole family and property, including the animals, and left his home in Ekaterinoslav province."

He is said to have rented a whole train, travelling as far as the train could go to Sarachinsk, and then hitching up the animals to go the rest of the way. Some buildings had already been prepared before his arrival. He built a nice barn and a beautiful house and used up to 16 yoke of oxen to work the land. When the weather was poor, he got the workers together and had Bible studies with them."

We finally arrived in the vicinity and found the closest village of Kuterlay, but could not find road access to our destination. With the assurance of a local woman that "these *are* the Thiessen lands," we set off on foot, over hill and vale, to find the exact location of *Estate Blagodatne*.

After several hours, with a Google Earth map in hand, we determined that we had found the homestead, near a lovely stream. There were no buildings left, but we could tell by the remaining

basement impressions where they had been located. We saw the dammed up pond, originally stocked with fish, and we imagined the Thiessen boys skinny-dipping on a warm evening – only, of course, after the day's work had been done. As we stood there, contemplating what life was like in this idyllic setting, a sudden flurry of wind and rain reminded us of the fragility of peace. This very place, nearly a century earlier, had been the home of a prosperous and happy family – one that would soon experience the violence of robbery, forced relocation and murder.

Although we were still several days from Moscow, we felt the purpose of our trip had been accomplished. We were stopped once again on the final leg of our journey to have our papers checked. When Igor sensed the real reason might be to obtain a bribe, he remarked to the official, "I have guests from Canada with me – do you want to embarrass me by giving them this impression of how our country works?" The official, pondering the situation replied, "Of course not, please wish them, 'Blagodatne'."

Blagodatne, Lucy informed us, means God's blessing.

### Artist Bio—front and back cover

Julia Toews has been involved in the Abbotsford arts scene for over 25 years as a violin instructor at Central Valley Academy of Music and is also a member of the Fraser Valley Symphony. Born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, she lived in South America as a child. Looking through a camera lens encourages her to see the intricacies, structures, and hidden beauty of the world around her. Other interests include travelling, reading, kayaking, ethnomusicology, collecting old Mennonite hymnals, and being a grandparent



# Roots and Branches

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## Mennonites from Mexico find a Home in BC The 1950s in Retrospect

Submitted by Esther Harder, Edwin Lenzmann, and Elmer Wiens

Reports from the 1950s indicate that Mennonites in Mexico experienced a great drought from 1951-1954. For this reason several hundred of them returned to Canada. A few found new homes in the vicinity of Yarrow, BC. Although Low German was not normally the language of public discourse in Yarrow, many residents were familiar with the language. This was appreciated by the newly arrived Mennonites from Mexico and contributed to their feeling at home from the start. Then too, the raspberry patches provided immediate summer employment for the entire family and many of the men found additional year round employment on the farms of the region.

Additional information about Yarrow is available on the website [www.yarrowbc.ca](http://www.yarrowbc.ca). By clicking on *Public Schools* one can view class pictures. These pictures include the students who had arrived from Mexico. In addition, the book *Windows to a Village* deals with the history of Yarrow and makes brief mention on pages 227-8 of the Mennonites who had come from Mexico.

The photo shows the 1953-54 grade 3 class in Yarrow. In the back row, the boy at the left and the second last one at the right are from Mexico, as are the two girls to the right of the girl looking down in the third row, and the last two girls on the right in the second row. Unfortunately, we do not remember the names of these students.

Anyone knowing the names of these students or otherwise interested in corresponding with us about the Mennonites from Mexico who lived in Yarrow for a short time can contact us at [lenzmann@mts.net](mailto:lenzmann@mts.net).







**Above:**  
*Santa Cruz,*  
*Bolivia*  
 Photo:  
 Julia Toews

**Left:**  
*Guarded*  
*Friendliness,*  
*Asuncion,*  
*Paraguay*  
 Photo:  
 Julia Toews