



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

From Jan Martens:

"Creativity has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. I was encouraged at a very early age by my very creative artistic mother to try many different things, and whatever she was doing I wanted to try it too. Most of my adult life I was a floral designer but when I retired, I gave it up and looked for a new creative outlet. The last two years during the COVID epidemic gave me time to search this out, so I gave watercolour and acrylic painting a try. I immediately took to it and explored this new hidden God-given talent, feeling great satisfaction and enjoyment in the process. Painting has been my saving grace during these past couple of years and will hopefully take me through the years to come."

The Canada Coat, a novel for readers from young teens to adults, is being published by the Mennonite Heritage Museum. See the MHM website for ordering information.



Cover image of book *The Canada Coat* by Louise Bergen Price. Watercolour by Jan Martens.

I Used To Know How Angel Voices Sounded

Just like the carolers
Who sang at my parents' window
Between midnight and dawn
Awakening me from pleasant dreams
With their hymns of great joy:
"Nun ist sie Erschienen."
There was no doubt about it then.
Though it was really Walter and Harold
And Ruby and Alma, and Jake and Marie,
And I knew it, they were really angels,
Had to be to sing so convincingly
Of Christ's birth in the cold night air.

It has been a long time
Since carolers have sung
At my window.

By Elmer F. Suderman.
From his book of poems *What Can We Do Here?*
St. Peter, Minnesota: Daguerreotype Publishers, 1974.



Angel by Heinz Klassen. Drawing of one of the angel sculptures on the Ponte Sant'Angelo in Rome, 2016.

The Backstory to the Christmas Drawings of Heinz Klassen

By Lois Klassen

Heinz started making these Christmas drawings many years ago; the first one was a simple nativity scene featuring a grouping of the holy family with animals on a white background. The next year he designed another card and then kept designing cards for seventeen years! By that time his list of recipients had grown to over one hundred households. It became a yearly ritual of planning, drawing, working with a commercial printer to get the colour printing as close to the original as possible, and then a dining table work bee with him addressing envelopes while I signed the cards. Many people told us that they looked forward to receiving them; after a non-Christian friend told Heinz that it was his most-anticipated annual Christmas gift, Heinz began to refer to them as his "non-PC holiday cards." We noticed when we visited the homes of friends that some of them saved the cards and brought them out every year to display them all together. A few friends even went as far as framing them and storing them from Christmas to Christmas to hang in their homes in December.

In the autumn of 2016 we went to Italy. Heinz had announced to me that he would not be making a card that year because he had done what he had set out to do – tell the Christmas story through drawing. I saw that he had a gorgeous illustration of an angel in the small sketchbook that accompanied us on our trip. It was a depiction of one of the sculptures on "the bridge of angels," in Rome, a short walk from the Vatican. I suggested he do just one more Christmas card with that image. He spent some time colouring it to his satisfaction and when it came to the printing, he chose a smaller format than all his other cards (perhaps to signal that the series was over?). The following year, he died one week before Christmas.



Heinz Klassen 2015
Photo credit: Julia M. Toews

Heinz Klassen studied at the BC Institute of Technology and completed a Diploma in Fine Arts at Vancouver Community College (Langara) and a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the Alberta College of Art and Design. He was a studio assistant at the Vancouver School of Art (now Emily Carr). His work was exhibited at the Vancouver Art Gallery, the UBC gallery, the Reach in Abbotsford, the O'Connor Gallery in Chilliwack, and most recently in the Mennonite Heritage Museum. He made his home in Yarrow.

Editorial

By Julia Born Toews

With this Christmas edition of *Roots and Branches*, the editorial team and staff are sending their best Christmas wishes to all our members and readers. As the stories and pictures in this issue show, this holiday can be celebrated in many ways and situations. Wherever you find yourself during this season, may the stories and images in these pages encourage you as you reflect on the message of peace and hope.

We'd also like to remind you that now is a good time to order a gift membership to the Mennonite Historical Society of BC (which includes a subscription to *Roots and Branches*) for those on your Christmas list. If you are donating to MHSBC, please remember that membership subscriptions and donations are separate items.

Weihnachts- and Neujahrswünsche

By Glenn H. Penner (gpenner@uoguelph.ca)

Weihnachtswünsche (Christmas wishes) and *Neujahrswünsche* (New Year's wishes) have been mentioned in past Special Christmas Editions of *Roots and Branches*. For example, an 1884 *Weihnachtswunsch* from Heinrich Pauls of Rosenthal, Chortitza colony, appeared in the 2019 issue. These wishes were meticulously copied by schoolchildren in their best handwriting and then recited and presented to their parents on Christmas and New Year's Day.

Considering that the *Weihnachts-* and *Neujahrswünsche* were a tradition in Low-German Mennonite families for hundreds of years, it is surprising that I have been able to find very little written about this topic. They are only mentioned in passing in the GAMEO article on *Fraktur*.¹ The book *Frakturmalen und Schönschreiben*² contains an excellent collection of about a dozen *Weihnachts-* and *Neujahrswünsche*, but tells us very little about them. There are many questions a proper study could answer. For example: 1) Is this a uniquely Mennonite tradition? 2) When did this tradition start? 3) What are the earliest examples of *Weihnachts-* and *Neujahrswünsche*? 4) When did the tradition die out in Canada, or other locations? 5) Is it still taking place in any Mennonite communities? 6) Where do these poems come from? and 7) How common or universal are these poems?

In 2019, I came across a book with the title *Weihnachts- and Neujahrswünsche*. This collection of wishes was compiled in 2003 by Dorothea Fröse and Sieghard Schartner of the Centro Menno in Bolivia.³ This book contains one hundred eighty *Weihnachtswünsche* and seventy-one *Neujahrswünsche*.

I can give a partial answer to question 3 in that the earliest two examples I have been able to find are *Neujahrswünsche* from Catharina Thun of Brunau (1783)⁴ and Hermann Claassen of Gross Lichtenauerfeld (1786).⁵ Both of these are from West Prussia before the first emigration of Mennonites to Russia.

Question 7 can also be partially answered by com-

paring various *Weihnachts-* and *Neujahrswünsche* to those found in the published book. I have scanned the book and used optical character recognition software⁶ to make the text searchable. The *Weihnachtswunsch* found in the 2019 *Roots and Branches* issue is not in the book; however, the *Weihnachtswunsch* of Heinrich Wiebe (1913/14), found in the December 2020 Christmas edition, is #99. I also have two *Weihnachtswünsche* from my grandfather, for the years 1907 and 1908. These are numbers 125 and 49 in the Fröse and Schartner book.

If you would like to know if a *Weihnachts-* or *Neujahrswunsch* in your possession is in this book, just send me a good quality scan or a transcription. Note that you must include the name of the person (a GRANDMA database number, if possible), year, and location.



Cover of a notebook containing handwritten Christmas wishes, from the Irene Rempel fonds, donated to MHSBC in 2019

1. See: [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Fraktur_\(Illuminated_Drawing\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Fraktur_(Illuminated_Drawing))

2. Abrahams, Ethel Ewert. *Frakturmalen und Schönschreiben: The Fraktur art and penmanship of the Dutch-German Mennonites while in Europe, 1700-1900*. North Newton, KS: Mennonite Press, 1980.

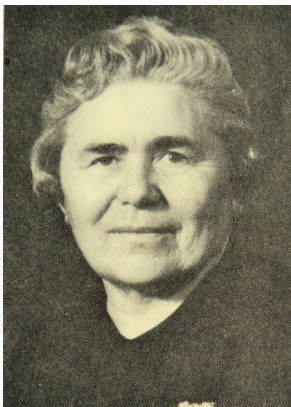
3. Fröse, Dorothea and Schartner, Sieghard. *Weihnachts- and Neujahrswünsche*. Centro Menno, Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, 2003.

4. She is #1202200 in the GRANDMA database. I would like to thank Dolores Harder for providing me with a copy of this document. Unfortunately, the current location of the document is unknown. Any help in tracking down the location of this document would be greatly appreciated.

5. His identity is unknown. The only available copy of this document is of such low quality that the text of the poem is unreadable. It is of a photo from the collection of Ethel Ewert Abrahamson (Kansas). The locations of the photo collection or of the original are also unknown.

6. This can be done with a full version of the Adobe Acrobat software.

Christmas in Siberia



Excerpted from *Exiled to Siberia* by Anita Priess

Anita Priess was born in 1909 in Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine, to Jacob and Helene Enns and enjoyed a happy childhood. She came to Germany with her mother and sister in 1943. Then, in 1946, she was arrested as a political prisoner by Stalin's police and returned to the Soviet Union, where she was sentenced to ten years in a penal camp. Eventually, she was deported to Siberia where she remained until the death of Stalin in 1953. In 1967, she was able to leave the USSR to join her mother and sister in Canada, where in 1972 she wrote her memoir Exiled to Siberia. The following excerpt is from her book, pp. 53-54. Printed with permission of Derksen Printers Limited, Steinbach, Manitoba.

Anita Priess in 1972 at the time of writing *Exiled to Siberia*.

This year, for the first time during my stay in camp, I looked forward to Christmas. There were so many pines and firs in the forest. Shortly before Christmas we brought a small tree in and set it up. On our return from work the next day, the spot where our tree had been was empty. We asked the woman on barrack duty of its whereabouts and quietly she replied, "The overseer on duty threw it out."

Consequently, we decided to wait until Christmas Eve to set up our tree. We festooned it with all sorts of home-made decorations. Representing people from five nations – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Germany – we gathered around the little tree, each singing in her own language the beautiful Christmas carol, "Silent Night, Holy Night." All those in the barrack about us were still, even the criminals. The Estonian lady had received a Christmas parcel from home, which she shared. Although this was the fourth Christmas in camp, it was the first I had celebrated.

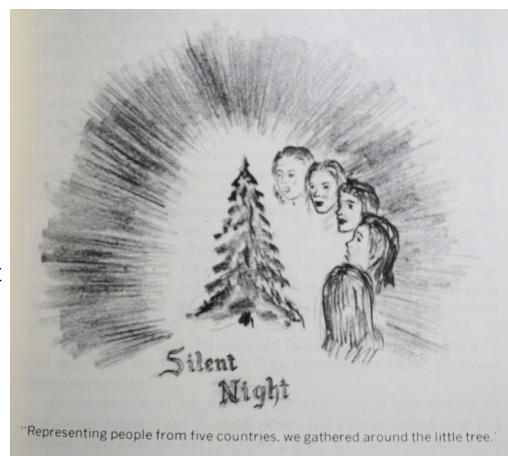


Illustration from *Exiled to Siberia*, p. 53

Pluma Moos

(Fruit Soup)

2 quarts water	½ cup sugar
1 cup seedless raisins	6 tablespoons flour
1 cup dried prunes	½ teaspoon salt
¼ cup dried peaches	1 teaspoon cinnamon
¼ cup dried apricots	1 cup sweet cream or sour cream



A bowl of *Pluma Moos*
Photo credit: Julia M. Toews

Wash fruit and add warm water. Cook until almost tender and then add sugar.

While fruit is cooking, prepare flour paste by combining flour, salt, cinnamon, and chilled cream.

When fruit is done, slowly add the flour paste, stirring constantly.

Cook until slightly thickened. Serve warm.

This dish is served traditionally as a dessert or side dish in some Mennonite communities for Easter, Pentecost, or Christmas dinners.

Recipe Source: *Mennonite Community Cookbook* by Mary Emma Showalter, Herald Press: Harrisonburg, VA, 1977 edition, pp. 321-322.

Editorial note: Sometimes I have added cloves, dried lemon or orange peel, and/or allspice. Flour can be thickened with water instead of cream. I have also made it with whatever fruit is on hand and served it cold.
JMT

Christmas Eve in Yarrow

By Robert Martens

As a boy growing up in Mennonite Yarrow, I invariably felt an inward starry glow as Christmas approached. Easter was a very poor second to the Yuletide season. I didn't particularly like the story of the crucifixion and resurrection. It all seemed a bit too real, too aligned, perhaps, with some of the refugee tales I'd been told on my grandfather's knee.

My refugee village felt loving and secure. We kids were often firmly ejected from our house with a "Now go play outside. Come back for lunch." And we roamed the streets and forests and pastures of Yarrow with glee. If we needed anything – like the time I was stung by a bee and cried my heart out – there was always an "old grandma" ready to hug, guide, and comfort. The "old grandmas," of course, may have ranged in age from thirty to eighty. (Grandpas were there, too, but they tended to the more stoic.) Nevertheless, even after the upheaval and trauma Yarrow's inhabitants had endured in Russia, they had created a village that felt, to most of us children, like a warm embrace.

And Christmas Eve was especially happy. It was also, for us kids, a time of restless anticipation. The evening service, in our cavernous Mennonite Brethren church, went on far too long from the point of view of the children, who knew that paper bags of candy would be distributed after the final "Amen."



Sitting on Santa's knees are Bob (Robert), Dolly (Rosella), and Mel (Melvin) Martens: facing the future with confidence. Photo: Robert Martens

After an hour of squirming in our seats, it was all over, and we received our bag of Christmas treats with a breathless "thank you." Sometimes we were mildly disappointed when we discovered too many peanuts, in proportion to candy, stuffed into our bags. Was candy too expensive for the church budget that year?

Still, clutching our bags as we walked home through the rain, or snow, or a night filled with stars, we could not imagine a better moment. Peanuts and candy alone did not evoke that kind of joy. It was a time of birth, of beginnings, of angels singing in our ears.

Even in a refugee village, we felt, for a time, utterly safe. Silent night, holy night...

Not All Christmases Are White

By Julia Born Toews (all photos courtesy of author)

In July of 1954 my family moved to the Mennonite Colony of Volendam in Paraguay. Leaving in the heat of a Kansas summer, we arrived at our destination in the middle of winter, for the seasons are reversed in the Southern Hemisphere. We were glad we had brought our parkas.



The Born family and Paul Esau standing in front of the house-barn that served as the MCC house for Volendam in village No. 5.

At first, we lived in spartan circumstances in a house-barn in Village No. 5 with Paul Esau, an American who was the MCC director of Experimental Agricultural Research in the area. At night, my sister Naomi and I slept on collapsible canvas

army cots. Until it was repaired, my mother cooked on a broken, earthen stove. We did have electricity, but only from 6 to 9 most evenings. We were waiting for a house to be built for us in Village No. 12. This village was a kilometre farther into the jungle and did not have electricity. Finally, after six months, it was (mostly) ready.



We moved into our new, not quite finished, brick house shortly before Christmas. Also at that time, the barrels with our belongings that had been shipped by boat finally arrived. Just in time, because some Christmas gifts and decorations had been packed in this baggage.

Since there were no fir or pine trees in the jungle, my dad decided to craft a Christmas “tree” using random leafy branches stuck in a tin pail. For this task he wore his pith helmet to ward off the fierce summer sun. My sister Naomi and I, having thick hair, needed no such protection. Our faithful dog, Ajax, also supervised the proceedings and kept the area free of snakes.

Christmas morning the tree shimmered with tinsel and a handful of ornaments – a work of art. How could Father Christmas not find us when a Santa bauble hung prominently in the centre? Our presents of new doll clothes, doll furniture, and a red wagon stood unwrapped under the drooping branches. My dad interrupted our play to take a picture of us with these gifts. The smug expression on my face and the disappointed look of my sister was the outcome of a tiff we had as to who was going to pose with the new doll carriage – a present we were meant to share.

A snack of watermelon helped restore family harmony. Then we went to our neighbour Mrs. Fast’s house for a lunch of chicken, mandioca (manioc root), and fruit moos.

Ah! A Christmas in summer!



Background information: The year my dad graduated from Tabor College in Kansas, 1954, the M.B. Board of General Welfare (later Board of Missions and Services) asked my parents, Henry and Esther Born, to go to Volendam Colony, Paraguay, to teach in the high school and assist the MB Church. The people in this colony were Mennonites, European refugees from World War II. They were not accepted as immigrants by Canada and the USA, and had been “settled” with the help of MCC in this subtropical jungle.

MHSBC presents *Pier 21: The Musical* by Allen Des Noyers

Tickets are available by calling the MHSBC at 604-853-6177. The event takes place on February 12, 2022, for two showings 3pm and 6:30pm at the Matsqui Centennial Auditorium in Abbotsford, BC. Come out and hear stories of the immigration experiences of so many, including Mennonites. See the web-site for details and to order tickets online: www.mhsbc.com.

Roots and Branches

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Editors for this special Christmas issue:

Julia Born Toews and Louise Bergen Price.
Associate editors are Maryann Tjart Jantzen and Robert Martens. Designed by Jennifer Martens.

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*The Refugees in Egypt. Drawing by Heinz Klassen 2015.
See the background story of this painting on p.2.*

**Please donate to the Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia,
and help keep our stories alive for future generations!**

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**Please donate by December 31 to receive your 2021 tax receipt,
and please also remember to renew your 2022 membership.**



Christopher Friesen – Painting *Snowy Day* 2021 18 x 24 Oil & acrylic wash on canvas

Friesen is a painter, community advocate and educator, currently living in Langley, BC. His work has been shown extensively throughout Western Canada and can be found in international private, public and corporate collections. Born in Chilliwack, BC, Friesen is an Associate Professor at the University of the Fraser Valley (UFV) in the School of Creative Arts (SoCA). More information about the artist can be found on his website christopherfriesenart.com. (Printed with permission of the artist)