



Roots & Branches

Periodical of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC

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

Vol. 30 No. 4
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Christmas Celebration • Painting by Dianne Dyck.

Her description of this painting: "Adults spent the days leading up to Christmas preparing special food, including peppernuts, and decorating the parlour which was kept locked till Christmas Eve when the children got their first glimpse of the magical tree. With much excitement each child set out a bowl to hold treats from Santa Claus. To gain entry on Christmas morning the children had to recite a special Christmas wish or poem they had memorized, carefully handwritten, and placed in a beautifully decorated folder which was presented to their parents. Only then was the parlour door unlocked so the children could once again enjoy the candlelit tree with unwrapped gifts and treats lying beneath."

See page 2 for artist biography. (Image used by permission).

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Roots & Branches

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Editorial

■ By Julia Born Toews

Once again, we are pleased to bring you a Christmas issue of *Roots & Branches*. In this edition we have included stories of celebrating the season in years past, of enjoying family togetherness in the present, remembering hard times in Ukraine, and finding creative ways to celebrate in Brazil, with the hope that they will help you, our readers, to enjoy this special season. And, as the poet Howard Thurman writes, we must find ways “to make music in the heart.”

Thank you for your continued support throughout the year. We are a community-funded organization and depend on your support to help us preserve our Mennonite stories and heritage for future generations.



The Polish Mennonite Housebarn and Church.

Artist: Dianne Dyck

ABOUT THE ARTIST: Dianne Dyck grew up in Saskatchewan and began her artistic training at the University of Saskatchewan. She now resides in Saskatoon with her husband of 58 years. As an artist, Dianne takes great delight in preserving her Mennonite roots. “The historical significance of ‘The Mennonite Story,’” notes Dianne, “has a fascinating legacy.” She did extensive research in preparation for this series of paintings. Dianne works mainly in acrylics and considers her painting style as *traditional realism*. During her career as an artist, Dianne has participated in many art competitions, exhibitions, and sales. She has paintings hanging in private collections across Canada and abroad.



Dianne Dyck at the opening of her art show *The Mennonite Story: Moments in Time*.
Photo credit: Julia M. Toews.

The Mennonite Story: Moments in Time

20 August – 4 November, 2024

■ By Robert Martens

Dianne Dyck’s exhibit, *The Mennonite Story*, has turned out to be one of the most popular ever at the Mennonite Heritage Museum. No postmodern abstraction here; rather, a clear and accessible depiction of Mennonite housebarns, churches, schools, historical events.

The fourteen-painting exhibit begins with the Netherlands, then moves through the Russian experience and ends with a depiction of the Red Gate. Dyck, who grew up in Saskatchewan, is a descendant of the “Kanadier,” the 1870s Mennonite immigrants to Canada.

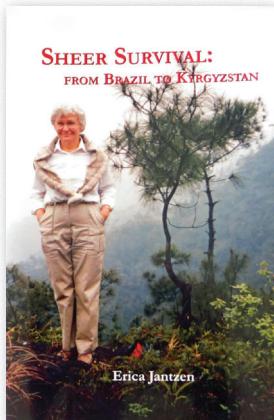
“I am proud, as an artist,” she says, “to have some small part in preserving this period in history for future generations.”

A sense of calm pervades these works. Dyck is not particularly interested in conveying the tribulations of Anabaptist/Mennonites. The Mennonite Golden Age in Russia seems truly idyllic; the farms and stylishly magnificent Mennonite schools nearly emerge from a dream. Even her portrayal of an immigrant ship is tranquil, beautiful. As Dyck says, she has created “an atmosphere that is soft and peaceful, which are two aspects of her faith journey that she cherishes.”

Christmas in Brazil

Two Christmas stories by Erica Jantzen from the book *Sheer Survival: From Brazil to Kyrgyzstan*. Self-published, Pandora Press: Kitchener, ON, 2007, pp. 19-21. (Printed by permission of author)

In this book, the author writes about her childhood in Brazil, her move to Germany and then to Canada. Besides everyday life experiences, she writes about remarkable people and places she encountered while teaching in Canada and other countries, among them England, Somalia, Malaysia and China. Fascinated with her Mennonite parents' homeland, Kyrgyzstan, she describes their experiences, as well her time teaching in that country.



Brazil: Christmas Celebrations, 1937

My siblings have never let me forget that I once caused them great embarrassment. When I was just a little kid, a kind lady at church asked me what I had received for Christmas. According to my sisters, I said in loud tones for all to hear, "*Ein Strohsack*" (a sack of straw). People smiled and raised their eyebrows. *We know they are poor, Aren't we all? But who would give their child a sack of straw?*

You see, my father, an expert carpenter, had made a fine wooden cradle for my rag doll. My mother sewed the bedding, as well as new clothes for my doll. I liked everything, but most of all I liked the straw bedding, probably because it was just like the bedding we slept on. I loved to bury my face in it. It smelled of sunshine and held the fragrance of all the flowers in the garden.

I also loved the *Strohsack* because the cover was made from the colourful cloth of an old print dress that our mother used to wear. It had always been my favourite. How often I had sat beside her, while she nursed our little brother! With my finger, I traced the patterns on her dress. How lucky I was to have a piece of my mother's dress, made into a *Strohsack* for my doll's cradle! I loved to stroke it and hear the rustling sound it made. My mother promised to put in new straw, should the sack become flat and worn down.

I knew my doll was not as big and beautiful as those

of my older sisters, but mine had new clothes, and best of all, had a sack of straw that crackled when you shook it and whispered to you, when you held it to your ear.

Another story

I remember another Christmas in Brazil. In the southern hemisphere Christmas falls into the hottest season. There are no coniferous trees in the jungle, but there had to be a tree for the Christmas celebrations.

While the children slept at midday, our mother called Spitz, the dog, from his noonday rest. With the dog at her side, she felt less afraid of snakes. She fetched an axe and went into the thicket behind the house to look for a Christmas tree. When she found a leafy bush that resembled one, she chopped it down and carried it home. She stuck the bush into the pail she had filled with sand and placed it on top of the living room table. Even before she reached the house, the leaves turned limp, but she added water to the pail of sand.

We children could hardly wait till Christmas Eve, but first, our parents had to finish milking the cows, place the cans of milk in cold water drawn from the well, and wash the pails. Then we ate supper of fried *Bataten* (sweet potatoes), with a bit of smoked pork and a rice pudding for dessert. After that, our parents went into the living room and closed the doors. We had to wait outside while they decorated the Christmas tree. When all the candles, brought from Germany, had been inserted into the holders and fastened to the branches, they lit them and opened the doors.



Candle and swan.

Photo credit: Julia M. Toews.

We stood awestruck, admiring the lightened tree in the dark room. Next, we craned our necks for the plate of sweets and the promised toy. But we dared not move. First we had to sing *Oh Christmas Tree* and *Silent Night*. Trudi recited the Christmas story, as recorded in the second chapter of Luke. With our mother's guidance, she had memorized the passage many days before Christmas. At last, our parents led us to our plates, standing near the tree.

My plate held many delicious candies and my favourite cookies. Behind it, underneath a tree branch, sat my present. It was the most beautiful, white celluloid swan I had ever seen. I was about to reach for it, but drew back my hand as a candle doubled over from the tropical heat, and as it bent down, caressed the tail of the beautiful swan. The candle light went out, but an iridescent glow exploded in the body of the swan, travelled up the long neck and raised the head. Then, all of a sudden, the light was gone and so was my swan. I was left breathless. The swan had come to life and, just as



Christmas greeting card from Brazil, 1961.

Source: Henry & Esther Born family files.

quickly, had disappeared. My parents rushed over and told me I would get another present, after their next trip to the city. I didn't feel deprived. Hadn't I seen the most beautiful swan?

That year, also, I had a hard time explaining what I got for Christmas.

Twin Cousins?

■ By Linda Klassen

Linda Klassen has been a volunteer in the MHSBC Archives since 2016 and sits on the Board of Directors. She lives in Abbotsford.

I've never liked the question, "What was your best Christmas ever?" because I don't have an answer for it. Nothing ever stood out, until Christmas 2023. This was a year when both of our sons and daughters-in-law could join us and our daughter for Christmas which, due to distance, only happens every other year.

We had almost finished our gift opening when our sons handed my husband and me each an envelope containing a clue to a scavenger hunt. Several clues later we both had a gift bag. Inside mine was a framed pregnancy ultrasound photo! It took a minute to register what was happening and as I looked up to see to whom it belonged, I saw that my husband had one, too, but his was different! Reality dawned that both of our couples were becoming parents! We were also presented with a beautifully carved wooden plaque created for us by our son.

The babies' due dates were only eighteen days apart, and over the next months we joked about them being born on the same day. We knew that it could happen



but the chances were so slim that it wasn't worth considering, so we just had fun with it.

The first baby was twelve days overdue when I got a text in the wee hours of the morning. I grabbed my phone, eager to see the message from our younger son announcing the birth of their child, as they'd been in the hospital since the previous day. Instead, it was our older son's wife, telling us they were leaving for the hospital! In an instant, all the joking we'd done about a shared birthdate lost its humour.

Our younger son announced the birth of their son a few hours later, and eleven hours and forty-five minutes after that our granddaughter was born! We had the privilege of meeting her a short time later.

As we left the hospital late that night, my heart was full and rejoicing in God's goodness. I could barely comprehend that the babies really had arrived on the

same day! It struck me that God has a sense of humour, followed immediately by the thought that our grandson should be named Isaac, which means "laughter." We had no idea yet what the babies' names would be so I kept that thought to myself. Two days later we learned that our grandson's name is Isaac—because it means

FROM THE ARCHIVES

My most memorable Christmas?

This summer MHSBC was given some archival material from the Hildebrandt family. Included in the documents was this Christmas story by Jacob Dietrich Hildebrandt. Jacob was born in 1910 in Nikolaifeld, Yazykovo, South Russia (Ukraine). Both his parents, Dietrich and Mathilda (Lehn) Hildebrandt, had studied in Leipzig and Dresden: Dietrich as a chiropractor and physiotherapist and Mathilda as a dietitian and midwife. The family came to Canada in 1930—first to Rosthern, Saskatchewan then to Yarrow, BC, and later to Greendale, BC. Dietrich and Mathilda had four children of whom the oldest child, a daughter, had died in infancy. The eldest son, a doctor who had chosen not to leave Russia, was executed by the Soviets in 1936. Dietrich and Mathilda immigrated to Canada with their two sons, Jacob and Rudolf.

Later in life, Jacob was asked by his church to relate a story of "his most memorable Christmas" at a family-style Christmas gathering. Here is his story:

Perhaps I should say Christmas Eve; ... and they usually happen in childhood.

It was the year 1919—two years after the Bolshevik revolution. The place—a Ukrainian village some 135 miles north of the Crimean Peninsula.

The Civil War was still raging on with unabated fury.

Our family had moved to this village—some four miles distant from the Mennonite settlement.

Our dwelling place was a one-room affair in a building detached from the landlord's house—a Ukrainian farmer.

Almost all civil wars have periods and places where there exists complete freedom from behavioural restraint—no police protection—and people are at liberty to rob, molest, torture and even kill with utter impunity.

And so it was safer to live in a Ukrainian community, because German farmers were more affluent and therefore more likely to be pillaged, mishandled, even killed.

With the oncoming of winter months, typhus fever,

"laughter." Our granddaughter's name is Mary, which means "beloved." Both names are perfect.

We are delighted with this new season of grandparenting! We look forward to the twin cousins getting to know each other. And, perhaps, this new season also contains another "best Christmas ever."

that ruthless century-old killer, started to spread with alarming rapidity all over the wide expanse of southern Russia.

Even without shooting, the frequent advancing and then retreating, the opposing armies left death at their wake in the form of killer diseases. One of them was typhus.

In most homes there were sick and often dying people. Thus it was in our home village as well.

Now, Father had to come out of hiding and venture back to the settlement and administer what help he could give to sick friends and relatives.

Since Mother, too, had some formal medical training, she soon joined father in his often thankless efforts to ease lives.

Pharmaceutical medicines were almost impossible to come by, so home remedies were resorted to.

At home with us was our little cousin Johnny, some



Jacob (1855-1918) and Katharina (Kasper) Lehn (1857-1936) with their grandchildren, 1918, in southern Ukraine. Jacob Hildebrandt is sitting first in the second row, his younger brother Rudolf, is below him. Dietrich, the older brother, is in the top row second from right. Grandfather Lehn was a teacher and preacher in the Mennonite communities.

Photo source: Else Hildebrandt Arcoite.

5 or 6 months old. His parents, too, were sick and helpless.

Day after day our parents would leave now for the settlement in a one-horse sleigh, provided for this purpose by our generous landlord.

(In passing, I would like to remark here that from the usual 300 horses or so in our village, only 17, yes 17, poor critters were left.)

Often Father would not come home for the night.

Came Christmas Eve! Again, our parents were absent. We three boys—ages 7, 9, 11—somehow managed. Even with little Johnny among us.

That night, again, Mother came home alone. However, our Christmas spirit was not dampened; neither our expectations of nice things to come.

Supper over, Mother read that lovely story from Luke chapter 2, how Jesus was born in Bethlehem, how the angels proclaimed this heavenly miracle to the lonely shepherds in the hills; and then glorified God in the highest.

Now came our presents, packed in little white linen bags, each with his name on it. (We usually received our gifts Christmas morning. This year it was different.)

We each got half a pencil, some cookies sweetened with homemade syrup—sugar was unavailable. Also,



A mother's Christmas gift in troubled times.

Photo credit: Julia M. Toews.

there were a few filberts, walnuts and some dried fruit, such as apples, pears, and others.

Mother now lit two candles—also homemade—and then for the longest time we joyfully sang those well-known traditional Christmas songs.

In spite of all the adversity around us, we boys were quite happy. Even little Johnny on Mother's lap, I am sure, delighted in our sing-song.

Oh yes, the fourth half of a pencil was securely locked away in Mother's sewing machine.

Mother left next morning, as usual.

It was Christmas Day!

Celebrating New Year's Eve

■ By Julia M. Toews

Some Mennonite communities had a curious way of welcoming in the New Year. Young men and boys would gather together and wander from house to house in their neighbourhood and sing well wishes to families on New Year's Eve. They would be accompanied by a musical instrument called the *Brommtopp*. This was a type of drum made from a barrel that had skin stretched over each end. A wire hung with washers was strung through the centre of the barrel. Attached to the top end of the wire was a hook to which a whip of horse hair was tied. When rubbed with wax or rosin or dampened with water and then pulled continuously, a droning, rumbling sound was produced. The other end was often placed against a wall, preferably next to shelves with dishes. This helped the *Brommtopp* (also known as *Brummtopf* or *Brummtupp*) to resonate louder and made the dishes rattle.

The singers often would be in costume. This could include a policeman, whose role was to keep order in the group that sometimes tended to become unruly in their merrymaking. He would knock on the door of a home to say that a group of people wanted to present a New Year's wish. If the group was welcomed, the troupe was ushered in. The order-keeper also was the steward of the evening's collection. Another character was a clown who brought humour to the event both hilarious and ridiculous. Then there was a married couple usually made up of a henpecked husband and a nagging wife. Other singers might wear white sheets and masks, or sometimes came in black- or white-face, or dressed as people of other nationalities. The performance usually lasted no more than ten to fifteen minutes. Money and food were given to the "singers" before they moved on to the next household.

This custom is thought to have originated in Prussia

in the 1700s. There are descriptions of performances in Ukraine and also in Manitoba.

Following are two stories reminiscent of this kind of adventure. The first one is written by an anonymous writer who hails from Burwalde, Manitoba. The second story is from John G. Rempel, who remembers participating in a *Brommtopp* event in Ukraine.

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An evening of *Brummtropping* in Burwalde, Manitoba, 1930s

Possibly some Burwalde people will best remember the *brummtupp* choristers who entertained the homes in the district on New Year's Eves for about four years during the 1930s. It appears that it all began with the suggestion of Mr. Peter P. Wiebe of Burwalde. Mr. Wiebe built the *brummtupp* in his famed workshop much as given in the accompanying illustration. Six to eight choristers practised the well wishes in song to the steady hum and buzz of the *brummtupp* which was set in vibrating motion by pulling the rosined horse tail hairs between thumb and forefinger.

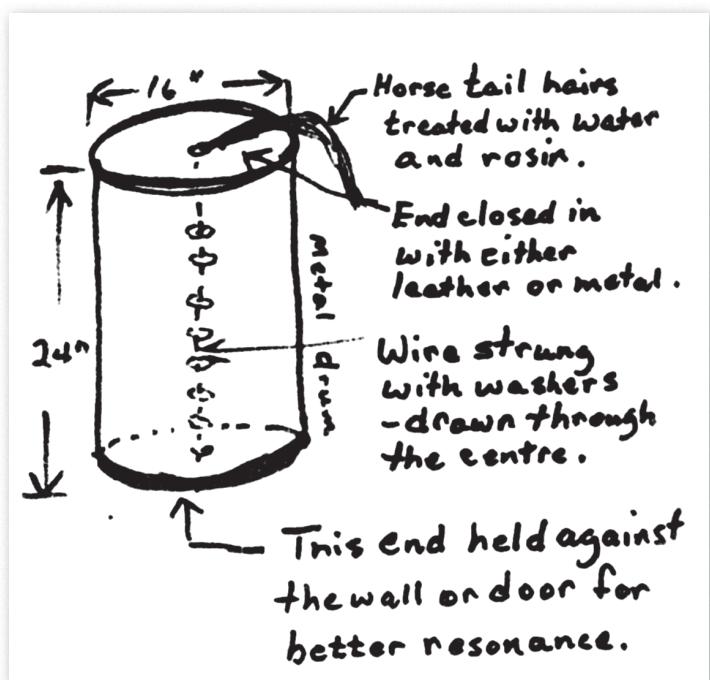
Wir kommen hier heran
Ohne Spott und ohne Schan
Einen schoenen 'Guten Abend'
Bieten wir euch an.

We're coming here to you
Without mockery or bad intent
Just wishing a "Good Evening"
To all you gathered here

(Translation by editor JMT)

Starting at 9 pm at the Hiebert farm across from the Abram Thiessens, the group worked their way by horse team and box sleigh to Winkler and Morden by dawn. As many as thirty places were visited despite frozen hands, feet and faces.

It was very well received and provided a novel break



in the monotony of winter. One host is reported to have added his own critique to the performance by commenting “*Kohmt ehn mohl vahdah wahn yee eesht ehn mohl baytah singen koennen!*” (“Come back some time when you can sing a bit better!”)

Another story featuring *Brummtropping* is set in Ukraine, in the early 1900s.

It comes from the book *My Village Home Nieder Chortiza*, by J. G. Rempel, 1956.

Johann G. Rempel (1890–1963) was born in the village of Nieder Chortiza, Ukraine. He, together with his wife Susanna Epp and two sons, emigrated from Russia in 1923, settling in Langham, Saskatchewan, where he served the local church for twelve years. In 1935 he was called to teach

in the Bible School and the German-English Academy at Rosthern, Saskatchewan. He taught in these schools for sixteen years. He also served as secretary-treasurer of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. In his book *My Village Home Nieder Chortiza*, he describes many events from his early life in this village, including a description of how the young men ushered in the New Year.

continued on page 8

New Year's Eve was almost nicer [than Christmas celebrations]. Especially one New Year, perhaps my first year home from high school for Christmas and New Year's break, when my friend Johann Bergen asked me to sing while he played the *Brummtopf*. I was excited about this and could hardly wait for the day. The *Brummtopf* was made of a tin box into which strands of horse hair were attached. On these strands Bergen would pull while some other fellows poured water over the box. This made a terribly loud racket. We boys had practised the songs days before.

We wish you a laden table,
On all four corners a fried fish,
And in the middle a jug of wine,
So Mr. and Mrs. can be happy again.



Brommtopf singers, or sometimes called mummers, in Neuberghthal, Manitoba, during a reenactment of this New Year's activity in 1974. The choristers stand to the left, the *brommtopf* is in the centre placed against a wall, and a family being entertained sits at supper on the right.

Photo source: Mennonite Heritage Archives CA MHC 053-197. Printed by permission.

That is for the Mr. and Mrs., but certainly we have to sing for the maid and servant too. But those are our own people. So that they will understand we will sing in Low German.

Low German version

We wish the servant a shovel in his hand,

Wi wenschen dem Tjacht de Scheffel enne Haund
So he can journey all across the land,

daut he kaun foaren ewa't gaunze Laund,
We wish the maid a pair of white stockings,

We wenschen de Tjetzsche von witi Stremp,
So she can watch when a suitor comes!

Daut se kaun setten, wan de Fria tjemmt!

I always listened for the end of the sentence at a pause when Bergen would really tug at the horse hair. It was a wonderful sound!

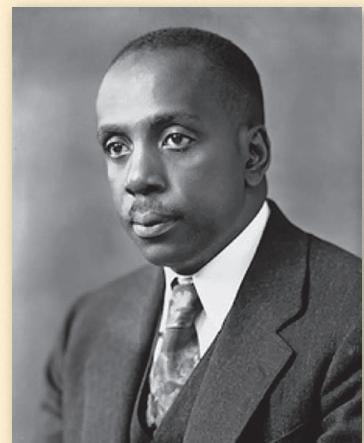
Later, the spoils had to be divided. The listeners had paid well. But still it was not quite one ruble per person, as we were a large group. The main thing, however, wasn't the money but rather that the people had been willing to listen. The art of asking, "May we play the *Brummtopf* for you?" was not everyone's talent. Only a few had the nerve to do it. I never was one of them.

The Work of Christmas

■ By Howard Thurman

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.*

Howard Thurman (1899-1981) was an American author, theologian, philosopher, educator, and civil rights leader. In 1944 he helped found the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, one of the first racially integrated churches in the USA. He played an active role in many social justice movements. As a theologian and advocate for radical nonviolence, he was a mentor to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and others in the Civil Rights Movement.



Howard Thurman.
Photo source: Wikipedia.