

Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan (MHSS)

2019 Report

Jake Buhler and Victor Wiebe

Our Purpose: The Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan (MHSS) goals are to conserve, educate and celebrate Mennonite history, culture and religion in Saskatchewan, Canada and around the world. To make those stories come alive, MHSS endeavors to tell those stories to a wider audience. Archived stories and records are available to the public. MHSS has a periodical, *The Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian*, that is published three times a year. A quality website is another way in which we communicate with members and inquirers. The Mennonite peoples of Saskatchewan are a hard-to-describe mix of faith, language, and culture. From their 16th Century non-creedal and martyrial beginnings, with little outside world contact, their liturgies and theologies have changed.

MHSS Board Members: Our board representation comes from 2 conferences: Mennonite Brethren and Mennonite Church Saskatchewan. The members are John Reddekopp (chair), Susan Braun (treasurer), Jake Buhler (secretary), Leonard Doell (vice chair), Elizabeth Guenther, Harold Loewen and Kathy Boldt (archives committee, chairperson, Dick Braun and Elmer Regier. The board met 8 times this year.

Annual General Meeting: In March Ted Regehr presented a key address on Commemorating Anniversaries. He argued that true anniversaries look both backwards and forwards. Victor Wiebe presented a major paper on the Braun Friesen Trials of 1925 to 1929. Harris Ford spoke about his research/interview project.

Website: The MHSS website '<http://mhss.sk.ca>' is one of four fundamental avenues of communicating and assisting members and other interested seekers. The other three avenues are the archives themselves, our publication *Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian* and the email bulletin *E-Updates*. The MHSS website is currently receiving over 300 visitors daily with Ruth Friesen managing our website.

The website is being used to mount a large amount of basic Saskatchewan Mennonite information for those doing historical and genealogical research. This includes archival finding aids, photos of Saskatchewan church buildings, some full text documents, books for sale including used books, press releases, cemeteries, back issues of our *Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian*. Most materials are in English but some materials are in German. The server we are currently using is very near maximum of its storage capacity and the Board is investigating moving to a larger capacity dedicated server.

The *E-Updates* bulletin is widely distributed even to non-members and gives notice of upcoming events, programs and activities, along with other information useful to everyone interested in Saskatchewan Mennonite history, culture or religion.

Archives: Our Archives located at Bethany Manor in Saskatoon continues to be the heart of MHSS. It is the meeting place, the library, the work and research space and of course the location of our precious document collection. Volunteers provide access in person two afternoons and one evening each week. On average one guest visits each time we are open and between four to five emails and phone calls are answered weekly. Most of the enquiries and research are for family and genealogical histories but other topics like sports and native issues have also occupied the volunteers.

Our collection keeps growing with a number of donations of large personal collections and several congregational ones as well. This year we received a very large collection of newspaper related files when the weekly newspaper *Saskatchewan Valley News* ended its 114 year run. Though not a Mennonite publication it was owned for about 80 years by Mennonites and it chronicled the goings-on of the many Mennonites communities in the Saskatchewan River Valley. For much of its lifetime *Der Bote* and this weekly newspaper shared ownership, office space, staff and printing facilities. We have contributed about 2,700 photographs to MAID, and have also begun some document digitization activities.

In January 2019 we in Saskatoon suffered a loss when the Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan closed its Saskatoon office and moved its entire collection to Regina. The Provincial Archives has in addition to holding government records has always actively collected private records that are important for the history

and culture of Saskatchewan. A number of these related to Mennonites. We hope that in future digitization and website mounting of their archival holdings will overcome this loss of convenient access. In the meantime researchers will have to expend more on travel time.

Induction of Honorary Member: Jack Driedger became an Honorary member of the MHSS in a short ceremony in November.

Collaboratorium: The MHSS in 2018 entered into a new venture termed a *Collaboratorium* with the Department of History, University of Saskatchewan. This venture was originally under the guidance of Prof. Dr. Keith Carlson of the History Department and Dick Braun of MHSS with an upper level History student, Harris Ford, doing the research. In 2018 the University and MHSS each contributed \$2500. In 2019 the project continued but MHSS was the sole funder putting in \$5000.

Harris Ford worked in two areas. One was to digitize several of our important documents, for example the oldest issues of our publication *Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian*, and help preserve them as digital copies and also to mount them on databases and thus make them very widely accessible. The second work area was in oral history. Over two years he interviewed 25 Mennonites whose recollections and observations are important in establishing a historic record. These audio and visual documents are also preserved in databases in a variety of formats.

For the History Department this Collaboratorium gave a student valuable practical experience in the discipline of history. The Department also is constructing its own databases at the University involving both University and Provincial Archives and now Mennonite resources. Cooperation between the two organizations and perhaps others should enable better databases to be constructed, tested and accessed for preservation and historical research.

Archives Committee: It consists of five persons who are Helen Fast, Elizabeth Guenther, Hilda Voth, and Kathy Boldt. Much communication is done by phone and email but mostly by working together at the archives. MHSS acquired the entire *Valley News* collection more than three years ago. Processing this is underway. Hours of service are Mondays and Wednesdays from 1:30-4:00 p.m. and on Wednesday evening from 7:00-9:00 p.m.

Volunteers: Some work areas include *The Historian* and day to day work at the archives. Tasks include receiving and processing donated collections, clipping obituaries, checking the Grandma genealogy program at home and putting book titles online. There are a dozen volunteers.

Peace Event: On November 11, Mae Popoff, elder of the Saskatoon Doukhobor, presented the story of her people, focussing especially on the Burning of the Guns, in Russia in the 19th Century. Mae also described the Doukhobor tradition of singing.

Walking the Path: MHSS cooperates with MCC and Mennonite Church Sask to participate in on-going dialogue between Mennonites and First Nations. This group met 7 times in 2018 and organized several activities. Jake Buhler is the MHSS representative to the committee.

Year-end Appreciation Dinner for Board and Volunteers: In November archive volunteers and their partners were invited to the annual appreciation dinner. Forty-three people attended including board members and their partners. Organized by Susan Braun, it was an evening of singing, Mennonite quizzing and speeches.

Mennonite Studies Conference at University of Winnipeg: Jake Buhler and Nettie Wiebe presented a paper on “Mennonite Farmers and their struggle with Eldorado Nuclear from 1975-1980 at Warman”.

The Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian: Ruth Friesen is the editor and has finished six years in her position. Three fine issues were published this year. All 240 members of MHSS receive the publication. Susan Braun is responsible for distribution of the *Historian*.

Cemeteries: Please visit our Cemeteries Project website at: <https://mhss.sk.ca/cemeteries/> . The database has been successfully put up on our website. It has several indexes, one of which is alphabetical. Helen Fast is a resource person and can be contacted as well for information and assistance.