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## The Spiritual Pilgrimages of Peter Penner (1829-1883) and Peter A. Penner (1852-1926) Translated and Edited by John Beno Toews

The personal spiritual narratives penned by a father and son are possibly unique in the nineteenth century Russian Mennonite story. While two surviving ministerial diaries (David Epp<sup>1</sup>, 1837-1843 and Jacob Epp, 1851-1802) provide crucial insights into the overall practice of Mennonite piety, they do not, with a few exceptions in Jacob Epp's case, document a private faith journey. Their focus is on community piety and the practice of corporate religion. The Penner accounts, though reflecting varied life circumstances, are permeated with a desire for intimacy with God. Both longed for a God-connectedness - the father found it within the context of the Mennonite church; the son by joining the Mennonite Brethren.

Their stories in part challenge the supposed disconnect between the two groups and the early irreconcilable distinctives each assumed existed between them. These God-journeys, so heartfelt in narration, were not dependent upon the prevailing piety of a given community. The father's pathway is deeply personal and charismatic while his community seems peripheral. His son's spiritual quest appears more pragmatic and is more community centered. For the purposes of this study the recollections of Peter A. Penner are translated to the mid-1870s, when he decides to immigrate to North America.

### Life Patterns

Both Penner life narratives contain some sobering statistics. Peter Penner's (1829-1883) marriage to Susana Hildebrand (1830-1863) produced nine children, five of whom died in infancy or childhood. His second marriage to Justina Braun (1841-1888) generated eight children, four of whom died in infancy or childhood. The marriage of his son, Peter A. Penner (1852-1926), to Aganetha Block (1854-1916) resulted in ten children, four of whom died in infancy or childhood.

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## The Editor's Perspective

*Ruth Marlene Friesen*



This issue has been more work, but it puts some feathers in our MHSS cap. If you are a member, it is okay for you to square back your shoulders and to walk a little taller.

Do not hesitate to show off your copy of this issue, and urge your friends and relatives to take out a membership in MHSS as well. This is the way to support the work of this organization; then the subscription to the Historian is a special benefit.

We received a grant from the Anabaptist Foundation for the publication of the Penner Journals from the 1800s, translated by John B. Toews. This is our cover feature in this issue.

Another feather is the giant gift of all the old copies of the Saskatchewan Valley News, including thousands of photos and negatives! These have been brought into our Archives. You will read much more about this in the next issue.

A steady stream of articles came in for this first Historian of 2017. It kept me busy on my MHSS night of the week all through January, February and March. We might have said it was enough at the end of February, but we had agreed to wait until after the Annual General Meeting, March 4, so I could include a report for those who were not able to be there.

Normally, I try to avoid having to split an article so you must turn to some other part of the issue to continue reading. However, the space I'd left for the AGM report was not quite long enough, and rather than rearrange the whole issue, which would mean doing a lot of the layout work over again, I have had to jump to page 27 to finish it.

Page numbers are moved to the top of the page; because my Scribus program updated and now puts a dark blue border in the margins. To keep the page number at the bottom, meant I would sacrifice the bottom line space at the end of each column. Then I saw a gap beside the page header. Ah-ha! Where there is a will there is a way!

## MHSS President's Corner

by Dick Braun

This year marks some real milestones for some people. Looking ahead as we did at our last board meeting we could see that there are some possibilities for celebrations, the bigger one being the 500 years since the start of the Reformation. The Russian Revolution is another, as it is 100 years from when it began. This revolution affected a large number of our Mennonite people.

On a more local level it is 100 years ago since Mennonite Trust became a formal company.

We are looking forward to a book launch. This will have more publicity as time goes on.

Once again we want to acknowledge all the people that have supported us with their donations. All donations of money are helpful whether they are large or small. We want to say thanks to the MB Church of Canada and its Heritage Commission for a \$2000.00 grant for our archives. We also want to say thanks to the Anabaptist Foundation of BC for a \$350.00 grant to publish the Peter Penner diaries.

This organization needs money to operate and it needs volunteers. The volunteers that come week after week and do such a good job of organizing help so much, and we as a board are very grateful to them.

The AGM is over and we want to thank Dr. Wesley Berg from Edmonton for his presentations about Old Colony singing. Singing is a large part of Mennonite history and it is always good to hear more of that history.

It was very interesting to hear that we as Old Colony Mennonite people are not the only group in the world that sing in a strange and different way. When I listened to the sample of the Scottish people singing, I thought I was in an Old Colony Church in Shipyard, Belize.

Thanks to all who came to our AGM. It was a very good weekend.

*DB*

## 2017 Events of Interest to MHSS Readers

Jan. 19, 20, 21 - **MHSC Annual Meeting** - Winnipeg, MB

March 3 & 4 - 9:30 a.m. - **MHSS Annual Meeting** @ Bethany Manor, Saskatoon

March 10 - 4:30-7:30 - **Canadian Food Grains Bank Fund Raiser Supper** - Brian King Centre, Warman

March 10 & 11 - **MC Sask Annual Delegate Assembly** @ Nutana Park Mennonite Church, Saskatoon

### Events Yet to Happen:

June 9 & 10 - **MCC Relief Sale**, Prairieland Park, Saskatoon

June 17 - **Canadian Food Grains Bank Auction Sale** @ Gruenthal

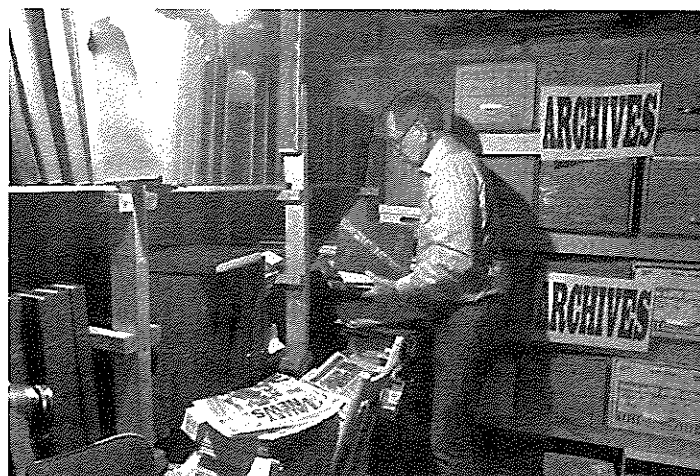
July 23 - **Swift Current Watermelon Day** @ Museum

August 12 - **MCC Spruce River Folk Fest**

August - **Hague Museum Heritage Day**

September - **Hague Threshing Day**

November 4 - **MCCS Encounter and AGM**



### Announcement!

After 110 years, the Valley News has ceased publication. The MHSS, and owner, Terry Jenson, have agreed that all existing photographs, negatives and bound copies dating back to 1930, be moved to the archives at Bethany Manor. A complete story will appear in the next edition of the Historian.

(continued from page 1: **Spiritual Pilgrimages**)

Records preserved in both the David Epp Diaries (1837-1843) as well as the Jacob Epp<sup>2</sup> Diaries (1851-1880) tend to confirm both Penner family sizes and child mortality rates as typical of nineteenth century Russian Mennonites.

1 David Epp. *The Diaries of David Epp: 1837-1843*. Translated by John Beno Toews. Vancouver, B. C., Regent College publication. 2000, 202pp.

2 Epp, Jacob. *Mennonite in Russia: the diaries of Jacob D. Epp, 1851-1880*, translated by Harvey L. Dyck, Toronto, Ontario, University of Toronto Press, 1991, 456pp.

## Schools

The elder Penner's reference to village schools and teaching in the mid-nineteenth century needs some clarification. In the surviving documentation related to the village school teacher it is not always clear what or how he taught nor what qualified one to become a teacher. During the early part of the century the village of Orloff in the Molotschna settlement organized the so-called *Christlicher Schulverein* (Christian School Society) in an attempt to standardize community educational standards. The Society and not the village apparently controlled the appointment or dismissal of teachers.

By mid-century control increasingly reverted to the village or even district civil officials. With only the local community in charge there was no appeal beyond the village. The senior Penner does not specify the reasons for his frequent moves from school to school nor what initially prepared him to be a teacher. Perhaps his move to farming in the Yazykovo colony was also one of frustration. In most instances if the village and the teacher were compatible it frequently meant that he met village expectations and that he refused to challenge the status quo. Continuity and calm in a school often meant that mediocrity was the order of the day.

## The Religious Setting

It can be argued that conventional Christianity often functions within historic time sanctioned patterns that assume all is well. No new definitions

of piety are needed and as a consequence religious documentation is rather sparse for many decades. By contrast renewal in the Christian story, while usually a minority affair, is often dramatic, assertive and projects a movement that is possibly larger than life. It frequently generates abundant literature not only fixing time and place but also the inner spiritual story of the revival. The soul life of 17th and 18th century German pietism is massively documented as is that of the Wesleyan revival in England.

The 1860 emergence of the Mennonite Brethren in Russia does not really fit that kind of paradigm. While later surviving documents cite the importance of an emotionally experienced conversion and its application in daily life, the initial secession document decried the spiritual lethargy and ethical laxity within the existing church. Furthermore constructive religious dialogue was virtually impossible in a setting where church and state had been intertwined for decades. The generous terms of settlement in Russia produced an almost independent Mennonite kingdom in which the church elder was under the jurisdiction of the village mayor and the mayor in turn belonged to the elder's church. It was a delicate equilibrium built up over many decades that was easily threatened by any new form of religious expression. Not surprisingly the 1860 secession instantly became combative and generated documents more concerned with legality rather than piety. One side deplored the sins of the larger community, the other the rashness of the would-be reformers. As a result the early documents offer little information on the spiritual content of the renewal.

In the case of the Mennonite Brethren such soul journey material only emerged over two decades later when Brethren adherents were asked to submit their conversion accounts to their denominational publication in the United States, the *Zions-Bote*. Some 150 first person accounts have survived in this fashion including three from the original secession signatories. They not only provide information on the nature of conversion but also on the structural piety associated with church life. In most instances conversion involved a lengthy

penitential agony and search for inner peace that culminated in a moment of truth characterized by joy and happiness.

While the Brethren might be credited with the rediscovery of a decisive conversion theology, they also faced the temptation to prolong the emotional ecstasy of the moment and for some years struggled with the excesses of the so-called exuberance movement. A stress on the need for personal renewal gradually brought with it a temptation to define the pattern of individual conversions. Reports of religious experiences in the 1890s are amazingly uniform and suggest a somewhat singular definition of conversion.

There was possibly a parallel development when it came to delineating what it meant to be the church. An insistence on baptism by immersion and rebaptism if the person had belonged to the established church limited entry into the new group. As a result Russian Brethren congregations were relatively small, in a good many instances the equivalent of a house church. Such a group was caring, welcoming and intimate yet also had the potential of excessive group conformity. Late 19th century congregational reports from both Russia and North America regularly use the German term *Gemeinde* (the congregation). Surviving Brethren minutes of North American congregations of the 1880s and 1890s suggest that the *Gemeinde* rather strictly defined standards of ethical behaviour and ensured conformity by exercising church discipline. Standards of Christian behaviour were well known in the community and the demand for strict adherence was at times tinged with self-satisfaction and legalism.

Two paradigms co-existed. On the Brethren side was the notion of a known conversion and salvation assurance. The established church thought more in terms of a life-time conversion fraught with some uncertainty. It was a salvation worked out "with fear and trembling." [Phil. 2:12]. Interpretations of what it meant to be the church were also different. The Brethren viewed the Christian church as restricted and defined, their co-religionists as embracing a larger community.

Within the later nineteenth century Russian

Mennonite setting such differences were not as incompatible as they may appear on the surface. In most instances both Christian outlooks lived side by side within the context of same village. Day to day farming contacts, the local school with its catechism instruction, village self-government - such interactions were not as strictly defined as those related to Sunday worship. In the end individual spiritual pathways, if sincerely pursued, may not have been that different from one another. The one progressed in a somewhat diffusive religious context, the other in a more circumscribed one.

There was a pathway of piety that existed apart from the established churches. Nineteenth century Russian Mennonite records occasionally mention the writings of several advocates of German pietism. Broadly defined this sometimes diverse movement sought to revitalize the German Lutheran Church by stressing a subjective, inward-looking religion of the heart. Extremely influential in Germany, it was inevitable that pietistic publications eventually reached German speaking settlements in Russia. We know for example that the Prussian Mennonite Tobias Voth (1791-?) who came to teach in the Molotschna settlement during the 1820s was deeply impacted by the writings of the pietist Johann Jung-Stilling.<sup>1</sup> Peter Penner mentions reading Johann Arndt<sup>2</sup> and Johann Friedrich Starck.<sup>3</sup> The sermons of Ludwig Hofacker<sup>6</sup> were occasionally read in both Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren church services and used for private devotions in some Mennonite homes. Such material was essentially subversive, nurturing individual souls. These usually made no attempt to publicize their insights or initiate broader reform.

### Terminology

The younger Penner's use of the term "*Gesellschaft*" or "*boese Gesellschaft*" should probably be understood not so much in terms of a social group of mature adults but rather as the clique or party crowd of village young people. Penner does not specify what activities characterized such gatherings.

Surviving conversion accounts from the 1870s and 1880s specify some of the not so flattering activities of the *Gesellschaft*. These included

carousing and cursing, alcohol and nicotine addiction, card playing, dancing and the singing of "worldly" songs. Conversion, protracted as in Penner's case, meant withdrawing from *Gesellschaft* and its activities. It was not easy to do so in the narrow confines of the village.

The term "gross werden" (growing up or maturing) implied baptism and acceptance into the church. It signified a coming of age or a rite of passage. Considered a collective process, it was nevertheless nurtured by a memorization of the catechism and certainly spawned many genuine conversions. Unfortunately for some it may have been little more than folk custom.

<sup>3</sup> Johann Jung-Stilling (1740-1817) was an economist and medical doctor who had contact with German and Swiss Mennonites. He was probably best known for his novel *Heimweh*, which apparently impacted the Mennonite dissident Claaz Epp who led a group of his followers to Central Asia in anticipation of Christ's return.

<sup>4</sup> Johann Arndt (1555-1621) was a German Lutheran theologian whose stress on inward-looking, experiential Christianity found expression in his massive collection of prayers and meditations commonly known as *Wahres Christentum* (True Christianity). Well known to Mennonite families in Germany, copies of the book also found their ways to Mennonite settlements in Russia.

<sup>5</sup> Johann Friedrich Stark (1680-1756) was a German Lutheran theologian, preacher and a prolific writer of pietistic devotional books and hymns. His works were popular and very widely read containing short biblical reflections, guides and encouragements for daily living and helps for people in hardships and with afflictions.

<sup>6</sup> Ludwig Hofacker (1798-1828) was a German Evangelical preacher whose sermons stressed personal conversion that was characterized by a deep consciousness of sin climaxed by an assurance of salvation and divine indwelling. In his diaries (1869-1876) the teacher and minister Dietrich Gaeddert noted that when the guest speaker failed to arrive in Rueckenau, Molotschna, on August 21, 1860, he read one of Hofacker's sermons. Similarly the Mennonite minister Jacob Epp, whose diaries cover the years 1851-1880, cherished the writings of Hofacker as well as those of Johann Arndt (entry of July 5, 1870). He also read John Bunyan (February 11, 1868).

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**A Brief Life Description  
from my Grandfather Peter Penner  
(1829-1883)**

(manuscript in possession of the Mennonite  
Historical Society of B.C.)

I was born on December 17, 1829 in [the village off] Schoenhorst, Chortitza district, South Russia. My father, likewise named Peter Penner, was an overseer of the poor (deacon) in the Chortitza congregation. He was a God-fearing inspirational leader of his family who died in the Lord in December, 1835, when I was a six year old lad. Before his departure from this world he expressed the wish to his brother, the respected church minister (teacher) Heinrich Penner, that he would take me [into his home] and raise me. The uncle agreed to do so.

In the winter of 1836 I came to my uncle in Chortitza who accepted me as his stepson. As I grew up I was a very lively lad. No doubt my stepfather had his difficulties with me. Whenever possible he sent me to the village school for six years. I had three teachers - Peter Sawatzky, Jacob Dyck and Johann Wieler. I did not make much progress since there was little to inspire me, yet I had to attend all the classes.

In 1842 a new school system was introduced which was not easy to implement. Authorities founded a *Zentralschule* (an advanced school) that was to upgrade the level of the village school.

In order to inaugurate the program six students were selected to attend this institution for six years at community expense. They were to receive instruction in the German and Russian languages. I was also included among the six students who were to receive six years of instruction. I regularly attended instruction in both languages. I spent five years with the teacher Heinrich Heese and one year with the teacher Franz.

My mother, the widow Sara Penner nee Friesen, lived with her four children. One had already married, the other lived in Schoenhorst as a "cottager" (*Anwohner*) and not a farmer.

I attended school for twelve years. Now, according to the prevailing standards, I possessed the required knowledge and expertise to enter the teaching profession. Yet since I was only eighteen years of age and no position was available I temporarily served as village secretary for four years at a low salary. Then for one year I worked for a certain Jacob Isaac in Rosental. Throughout most of 1848 I suffered from the "three day fever." From here I moved to a certain Dietrich Rempel in Schoenhorst

and served as village secretary for two full years.

I had become a young adult. God's Spirit spoke: "My child if the evil lads tempt you don't follow them." If I had listened carefully I would have followed [the Spirit's admonition]. Yet I joined the world (*ging mit der Welt*) even though my dear mother in her great love warned me not to do so. When I, contrary to my conscience, spent Sunday night with the [village] gang (*Gesellschaft*) and returned home my conscience already plagued me. When I got ready for bed and spoke my evening prayers I told myself I would not do this in the future. When Sunday came I went again but with an uneasy conscience. "Oh God what will happen to me." I sighed, "You [God] will lose patience and become exasperated with me. I make promises again and again but do not keep them." O calamity and distress! To whom shall I flee? Again and again I had to appear before God but I hardly knew how. Not to do so was out of the question. So I ruminated for some three years. How difficult and saddening it must be for God our Heavenly Father when a child is so disobedient.

During 1850 I felt constrained to become a member of the Lord's congregation so that my life style might better harmonize with scriptural guidelines. I was in earnest. I knew this was the good work of the Spirit. I often prayed apart from my evening and morning prayers and on bended knee implored the Lord that he prepare me [inwardly], that he enlighten my mind and make me a true object of his love. Memorizing the catechism became my meditation.

I partially withdrew from my society (*Gesellschaft*). I stopped dancing and singing worldly songs. But that was just a pretense so that the world (my friends) would not despise me. Was this conversion adequate and was it the right kind? I did not think so.

I certainly had acquired some understanding of the truth through the many explanations given in school. Yet saving faith, faith that no one [person] can give to another, was lacking. That is God's work. So in time I became a member of the church. I received holy baptism and later Holy

Communion. I had now come of age. Observing others I came to the conclusion that I could rejoin my former friends [society]. I did so gradually. After all I was now grown up and acted accordingly.

Around New Years 1851 I went to Neuendorf to [work for] the mayor, Jacob Loewen. Separated from my friends a different attitude, already evident in 1850, took hold of me.

The Lord said it is not good for man to be alone. I thought of looking for a helpmate though I really did not have to search for one. I had known that for a long time but I was concerned whether this was God's will. I did not want to marry any daughters from Canaan<sup>7</sup>, but one from my friendship circle. I often brought this to the Lord in prayer. I marvel that the Lord had so much patience with my problem.

On May 1, 1851 I entered into matrimony with Susana Hildebrand. We were married by my stepfather, the reverend Heinrich Penner from Chortitza. The following winter we lived with the parents-in-law, the Isaac Hildebrands, where I made myself useful in house and yard and was finally free, extricated from my bad (evil) companions (*boese Gesellschaft*).

I was free like a sparrow yet not entirely. Now I had to become the bread earner [*Kreuztraeger*]<sup>8</sup> in our marriage. In 1852 I was hired to teach the German language to school age children on the Island of Chortitza.

I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that if I was to be saved I would have to change my lifestyle. I knew that my parents had been pious and I wanted to be like them. I diligently began to read God's Word in the New Testament. Johann Arndt and Friedrich Starke were my daily companions. On one occasion I and my wife went to visit Mr. & Mrs. Johann Wiebe. We loved to visit with these friends. Our conversations were not always designed to gather up pearls [of wisdom]. Putting God's Word into practice unfortunately was not in vogue with us though it certainly should have been. Friend Johann Wiebe told me that a certain Jacob Janzen from Schoenwiese, a former teacher [minister] in that congregation, had said that one must persist in supplication and prayer and not give up. According to God's promise and his Word, the Lord must and will answer. This was an encouragement for me.

When I came home I prayed to God without ceasing, though I did so in great weakness. I was child-like and penitent in my endeavor, yes even childish. He would not have heard me for his mind and thoughts are not ours, yet he looks at the heart and that gives us hope. He says, "Before they call I will answer" [Isaiah 65:24]. He also did that for me. He granted me the Spirit of reverence and prayer. Undisturbed I could spend a long time in song and prayer.

I reveled in it. Was that not a gift from the Father to his son? Was this not a foretaste of the life to come?

One day we were going to see our parents. I walked over the field into the valley to get a horse. I fervently prayed to God the Heavenly Father from the depths of my heart and experienced such peace that I almost forgot I was on earth. Yet that kind of thing cannot be continuous or permanent. We are imperfect people. Without a doubt I could have become proud. The Lord let me feel a joyous comfort and gave me the realization that in the final analysis [such peace] must be achieved [through prayer]. The Lord always led me in this way - once by clear and at other times by gloomy weather. Sometimes Jesus seemed asleep amid the angry waves of this world and sometimes [I experienced] shipwreck.

In 1855 the leaders of our community [congregation] held a consultation. Our villages [colonies] needed to have better teachers. The leaders decided that I should move to Schoenhorst on the Island of Chortitza.

They did not seem to consider the fact that the [local] community also had a say [in the matter]. Our district mayor did not have the spirit of Jesus Christ that seeks to build and possess the kingdom with gentleness. Naturally this could not bear good fruit. The commendable community on the Island of Chortitza allowed me to leave so as not to oppose [civil] authority, which is placed there by God. The same was not the case in Schoenhorst. In 1856 my family consisting of four persons moved to Schoenhorst and lived there for two years. Here the church elected me as their song leader. Now the Lord spoke to me in an authoritative manner. "Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon

Him while He is near [Isaiah 55:6].

I gave some attention to his command and found him. He allowed me to experience such joy in the Spirit that I sometimes jumped and sang lustily for delight. Whether at church or at my work I was filled with joy and really did not know what was happening to me.

Sometimes when, with tears in my eyes, I observed [life in] this world, I called on the Lord to let me depart and be with Christ. I felt such a longing to be over there that I shed tears of joy and in my spirit seemed to be with Christ.

During Christmas time in 1857 I was in the barn on my knees before God my Heavenly Father when, in my spirit, I saw the dear Saviour standing beside me in the form of a child. It gave me no small comfort and mightily strengthened my faith. I determined to call on the Lord three times a day, yes even every hour. I'm certain the angels rejoiced [with me]. It was God's grace.

Yet my old, worldly nature remained even though I had received the Spirit of sonship [Romans 8:15]. I lived according to the insights I received but seemed to be enveloped by fog. Saving faith was lacking and I had not overcome fear and doubt.

When I read the Holy Scripture it seemed clear and understandable but not illuminating. Faith was lacking and that was God's gift.

In great weakness I sought the Lord and gradually received greater understanding of the truth. It is not in vain that the Lord says "seek and you will find, knock and the door will be open" [Matthew 7:8]. Over many days my seeking and knocking was sometimes frequent, sometimes infrequent. This after all is the breath of the soul, yet for me it was not and still is not sufficient. It was not enough but one must consider our weakness and imperfection. Perhaps the Lord wants to strengthen the dynamic of prayer in this fashion.

As already mentioned since I was appointed as school teacher against the wishes of the Schoenhorst community I remained there for only two years. A new district mayor took power and the district exercised its rights in this respect and dismissed me. Since I was certified for this position the authorities were helpful and in the spring

of 1858 I moved to Neuhorst to take over a smaller school of less than 70 children. In Schoenhorst there were some 120 children. Naturally my salary was much less [in Neuhorst]. The atmosphere of Neuhorst was very similar to that of Schoenhorst and I only stayed there one year. When the village of Neuendorf contacted me of its own free will and offered me a higher wage in silver [rubles] than I had received on paper [rubles] I soon made my choice.

In the spring of 1859 I moved to Neuendorf. The school I took over was larger than the one in Schoenhorst. Because I switched several positions in a few years time I made a bad impression.

Instead of being praised I came into disrepute. I consoled myself with the thought that the Lord never calls persons that are lauded by the entire world. All is in God's hand [and if I] only wanted what God wants, then things can't go wrong. Amid all this I did not forget the Lord and he did not forget me in his abundant grace. He was always with me. He consistently approached me. Often I did not open when he knocked, even though I was aware of him. Oh the Lord is very gracious. I searched for him and continued searching and became more enlightened and things became clearer. Yes one unknowingly increases in wisdom and understanding, maturity and strength.

When I lived in Schoenhorst I purchased Friedrich Staerk's Treasury of Verses [*Schatzkaestlein*] and a New Testament in Neuendorf. These are my study books that I use every day together with daily prayer. Reading God's Word without praying can lead to indifference.

Many people read God's Word year after year and don't improve because they don't pray. When one knows the Scripture since childhood it can instruct us towards salvation. But we must ask God that his Holy Spirit enlighten our minds. I also began to read a book which my dear departed mother gave me entitled Treasury for Believers [*Schatzkammer der Glaebigen*]. It spoke a great deal about righteousness through faith that we have in Christ Jesus. While reading this book and especially once during Holy Communion in 1862 the Lord Jesus granted me such a saving faith that

I can only describe as a great golden light, as a brightly shining light. I felt that every person in church must feel such joy and that I was at peace with everyone.

Then too God appeared to me in Neuendorf one evening when I was out in the yard. When I heard that gracious, blessed voice I had no doubt that He was speaking ...

He allowed me to feel his grace in other ways as well and I felt unworthy. Yet in Jesus Christ I am righteous and have received grace. I am no stranger to the verse: "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" [Romans 8:16]. I have hopefully achieved the status of being a child [of God] through Jesus Christ even if fear and doubt assails me. I look back on my sullied [Christian] walk and find it so necessary to daily cleanse my feet. Thank God that the Lord accepts our prayers through Jesus Christ...

On October 7, 1862, my wife was bedridden with an unknown illness for at least one quarter of a year. Even before she became ill she fought a difficult battle insofar that Satan attacked her by tempting her to end her life. But the Lord, the author and perfecter of our faith, stood by and helped her to overcome. In her long illness the dearly departed was not entirely free from the temptation. It is stated that after Satan had tempted Jesus he withdrew from him for a time.

...Long before her end came, the Lord steadied her ship of faith in that the Saviour showed her the glories of heaven and through [that experience] promised that after her long illness she no longer needed to doubt his grace. The Lord released her, brought an end to her suffering and took her soul to himself into the eternal dwelling He prepared for us at Golgotha. Her suffering ended on January 8, 1863. Shortly before she died she bore me twins - two sons whom the Lord graciously allowed her to safely deliver. She has joined the saints and now serves God before his throne... The two sons, Abram and Heinrich, preceded her into eternity.

My wife had barely fallen asleep when I began to miss a helper who would be with me [*die um mich sein sollte*]. A godly widow, Mrs. Peter Wiebe faithfully and carefully looked after me for a time.

Though I enjoyed her company she was not my wife.

I was now concerned with finding a helper. Childlike I daily prayed to the Lord about this matter. He should find me a God fearing helpmate from my group of acquaintances. I wanted a wife as described in the Scriptures. Not one who would hang about my neck like a drag-chain but one with whom I could walk the heavenly pathway in love and fellowship. The loving Heavenly Father soon let me know who he had chosen for me. She was Justina Braun, the single daughter of Jacob Braun of Neuendorf. I married her on April 14, 1863.

Meanwhile I was still a schoolteacher in Neuendorf and was also elected as a song leader in our congregation. God's ways are unfathomable, his reign is incomprehensible. It was not sufficient that the chief shepherd Jesus Christ had pastured his lambs [the students?] for 13 years. On October 14, 1865, he ordered me to feed his sheep. God willed that one Thursday the congregation elected me as a minister with 51 votes. I can't really describe how I felt. To admonish the congregation, to be the salt and light of the world, to tell them to imitate me as I imitate Christ - that is a formidable task. But there was no choice. Fleeing from the face of the Lord like Jonah never came to mind. On the one hand I felt incapable and unfit for the task, on the other the Lord had promised to give strength to the weak and that was me. Then too "if anyone lacks wisdom let him ask God" [James 1:5] - that's what the dear elder, Gerhard Dyck, said as well. So I had to trust God and accept the position. Yet I cannot neglect to say and confess that for a considerable time I did not feel free in my innermost.

I often and regularly went to worship in God's house. When Sunday, the Lord's Day, drew near I was full of joy. This was especially true when I awoke Sunday morning to go to the house of the Lord. I can hardly describe it. I sometimes thought "you are like little children who awake on Christmas morning and are full of joy for the present they receive." Then amid a wonderful service to hear a lovely sermon. The thought crossed my mind "if you were standing behind the pulpit and preaching, would you make things plain and intelligible to your listeners, so that they would be compelled to turn [or be converted] to the Lord." Then I thought, "Who are you, which will never

happen." Often when I was alone I imagined I stood before the pulpit and said to myself - if you put this down on paper it would be a good sermon. I did not know why this was happening to me. After all I would never be given such a position. But the time came when it happened.

On September 3, 1867 I walked with my brother Abram Penner on the aristocratic estate land near Heinrich Wiebe to visit our sister. In the evening we walked to our fellow teacher/ minister Johann Wiebe. We discussed God's Word. How and in what way had the dear Lord already revealed himself to us poor sinners and to what degree had our souls reflected his glory. I recalled that where two or three were gathered together [God was present]. In my spirit the loving and grace bestowing Father and Saviour showed me a door that appeared to open into heaven and from which streamed the fullness of God's grace. Grace upon grace would come upon us from his abundance [of grace]. As we conversed I saw the door of grace open. Oh blessed hours that seldom occur and soon vanish. I have to say I am an unworthy vessel to contain or preserve such grace. It [the vision] vanished all too soon. It was as if a fog arose and I could no longer see the sun as clearly as I wished. But man pro-poses and God disposes. God led me in such a way that I experienced nothing but joy and peace in the Holy Spirit, while others experienced privation, sorrow and persecution.

How wonderful and unsearchable are the ways the Lord leads us. I made the decision to give myself and my house entirely to the Lord. His will be done and may he do with us what pleases him. I am his in life and death.

In 1869 we moved to lands purchased by the Chortitza colony [Yazykovo]. I purchased 50 dessatines at 30 rubles per dessatine payable in sixteen years. I felt obliged to stop teaching [full time] though I still taught the children during the winter months. But I could not free myself from my ministerial position. Since we had moved so far from the [Chortitza] colony, spiritual and congregational matters were now my concern. It soon became necessary to have an assistant. My cousin Johann Friesen and later Isaac Klassen and Anton Loewen [were appointed].

In God's providence a large emigration took place and so my cousin and [fellow] minister Johann Friesen left in the spring of 1876. A new election

was held in the summer of that same year and brother Martin Dyck was elected as teacher and Heinrich Rempel as deacon. With regard to my own person, I became more incapable insofar that I grew weaker and more unhealthy during the past eight years. It is a gradual decline and I longingly wait for my certain end.

Since 1867 I have written nothing of my soul's journey with the Lord. The experiences of comfort and grace have been so manifold that I can't name them all. I am far too insignificant and unworthy. I live in grace like the fish in water and my soul breathes grace like the mouth breathes air. The Lord steadily affirms that my sins are forgiven. He, the Son of God kisses me with the kiss of his mouth, Song of Songs 1:2. This has become such an overwhelming comfort that I no longer have any doubt that I am God's child and am blessed in Christ Jesus.

On October 4, 1872 the Lord was so near and granted me the kiss of His love and peace that, with the centurion of Capernaum, I must confess amid joy and tears "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof." [Matthew 8:8] Lord you are so merciful and in your love reveal yourself to a sinner.

During the winter after New Year in 1875 I felt the Lord's presence in a mighty way, especially when I came before Him in prayer. I sensed and felt that the Redeemer was standing somewhat aside and to the back of me. What worship in prayer, how strong in faith and how blessed I felt in his grace - and that for weeks on end. My mind almost became confused. I thought that perhaps the Lord might soon take me out of this world. What a glorious foretaste to be in the presence of the Lord and to dwell in Him....

In the summer of 1876 as I lay down for my afternoon nap I thought of the certainty of my salvation. Nothing could be more certain than that, for nothing in this world is as certain as Christ. I could not sleep, got up and thought of the grace in Christ Jesus. I recalled the verse in Hebrews 11:1 "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certainty of what we do not see." That verse strengthened my faith and I was full of joy and praise to God....

Since my consumption disease is progressing

things are becoming more difficult. This fall I have particular difficulty breathing. Several times it was so critical that I did not know what to do. I submitted to the will of the Heavenly Father [praying] that the Lord's yoke may be easy and the burden be light. I was refreshed in my inner person.

In 1881 I had such difficulty breathing during a coughing spell that I thought the Lord would take away the little breath I had left. I felt the Lord had brought me to the edge of eternity. I only needed to take a small step. It seemed I stood at a small fence on this side of time, eternity was on the other side. How easily the Lord could have asked me to step over into an eternity filled with joy. I thought - will the Lord let me step over? But no, I had to stay, my time had not run out.....

Not long after I was sitting on my bed one evening and was terribly short of breath yet I was filled with such joy that my face beamed and my heart rejoiced in my God and Saviour. Suddenly a face appeared that looked like the head of a horse or sheep. For a moment I thought it was my Saviour but it turned out to be the father of lies, who told me I could also be happy in my own strength. It suggested that maybe I was simply imagining my joy. Perhaps this joy was not from God. Might a person in great suffering and near death not rejoice at the prospect [of dying]?

During this temptation I was entirely without fear. I threatened the evil one with my finger and ordered it to return to its dragon's lair in the name of Jesus. In an audible voice or with words I warned him not to tempt any more persons. My wife who thought I was asleep asked: "What are you doing?" I answered I was driving Satan away who was tempting me.

### End of the Autobiography

Note by his son Peter A. Penner: My father passed into eternity on December 3, 1883, believing in his Redeemer.

<sup>7</sup> A reference to Genesis 28:1 where Isaac commands Jacob not to marry a Canaanite woman.

<sup>8</sup> An old Germanic expression, sometimes used ironically,

depicting one who is literally or figuratively in tribulation or in suffering. It may depict someone who carries a significant burden.

### **The Life Story of Peter A. Penner (1852-1926)**

I was born on the Island of Chortitza, South Russia on June 4, 1852 (new style dating). My father was a school teacher there. My earliest memory of childhood is that of bliss, happiness and innocence. My parents were pious and God-fearing. I was filled with joy when my mother prayed with me in the evening.

In 1856 they moved to Schoenhorst where my father was the school teacher for two years. In 1858 we moved on to Neuhorst. I think it was then that I lost my childhood innocence and became unhappy, probably instigated by my disobedience. I was also misled and provoked by the school children. Sin was clinging to me. In 1859 my parents moved to Neuendorf. I recall that I became increasingly unhappy and knew I was sinning. Even praying with my mother, which she still insisted upon, did not alleviate my unhappiness. I experienced bad dreams at night and was filled with fear when I could not sleep. I cried when I was told to go to bed in the evening. Satan had beguiled my heart. How well I recall that first unhappiness.

As I grew up I had to attend school in Neuendorf where my father taught for ten years. As I matured so did sin. In a group of 125 school children there are many different temperaments. In such a setting a child learns evil more effectively than good. If I had enjoyed the freedom that most children did I would probably have become the greatest good-for-nothing imaginable. My desire was to enjoy the world. Yet my dear father, who was a child of God, did not give me free reign but kept me strictly in line and admonished me in the Lord. I could never leave the yard without his permission.

My dear mother died on January 8, 1863. I got a stepmother and my life changed. I became increasingly naughtier and sometimes it was even too much for me. My father did not spare the rod. Often when he wanted to punish me I had to kneel

down with him. In a loud voice he prayed to God telling Him that I had again been disobedient and that he would have to punish me with the rod. Would that God might give me a new heart. That prayer did my heart more good than the thrashing did to my flesh. So I grew up spending my days in school and later helping my father with the children. Three times a week I had to listen to Bible stories. Nothing seemed to do much good. I went from one sin to the next. I did want to improve but how? At that time conversion was an unknown concept.

In 1869 my parents moved to Yazykovo where the Chortitza district administration had bought land for the landless [persons in the colony]. My father, who gave up teaching for health reasons, purchased 50 *dessatines* in this settlement [on a time-payment plan].

Meanwhile I became [increasingly] anxious about my sinful condition. What would happen if I continued to live like this? How could I continue with my sin-laden heart? On top of that there was the manifold and difficult work associated with a new settlement which I, as a school teacher's son, had not experienced. I was in deep despair. Satan, who had led me into sin and saw how anguished I was about [my sins], [whispered] "Now you have gone too far, make an end to your life." I actually agreed with him and might have done so. But God, who does not want the death of a sinner but that he convert and live, did not let it happen. I gained more courage to live and continued as before, for there was little or no talk of conversion. One had to become better and I wanted to do so, but on my own initiative. One year led to the next and in 1872 after New Year I heard that my colleagues wanted to join the church or *gross werden* [grow up or perhaps come of age]. I also decided to do that and began to read God's Word. I knew that I had to change [my ways]. I was not at home during that winter but doing an apprenticeship as a wheelwright. I came home for seeding time. I was driving to a windmill some five verst distant with my father. I gathered up my courage and told my father, who was also a minister, of my plans. My father's eyes opened wide. He looked at me and said: "Peter you must be converted otherwise things won't work

out." Amid tears I told my father that I wanted to do so. I felt relieved that I had promised my father to convert.

Now I diligently began to read God's Word. Often when I was with my friend Gerhard Giesbrecht we conversed [about the Bible]. But I certainly would not open my heart to anyone. I had no difficulty reciting the catechism in church since I had spent 18 years in school and listened to the students recite it in several classes every Friday. So I was ready? As we drove to the church in Neuendorf to receive baptism I recalled that father had often spoken to me of the blessedness in Jesus Christ. Enroute he spoke to me of the importance of baptism.

We were in the church and some one hundred souls were on their knees awaiting baptism. When my turn came I was overwhelmed. Tearfully I prayed to the Lord that he might give me a sign so that I knew for certain that I was his child and that he had accepted me. When the elder finally got to me and baptized or sprinkled me I felt something happening and had a blessed experience. For me sin was an abomination and found the youthful society (*Gesellschaft*) I associated with repugnant. I read God's Word a lot and prayed often. I lived in communion with God and for a year stayed away from my old gang. After all I promised God I would serve him.

Next winter I again continued my apprenticeship, this time with a different master, a Gerhard Sawatzky in Eichenfeld. In the home where I stayed the young people gathered every Saturday. Initially I felt no attraction to them, but they enticed and entreated me to join. During the course of the winter I began to enjoy the company of my youthful friends. True, I avoided the dancing and drinking, yet I began to regress which naturally happens when one compromises. Being heaven-bound means travail. Again and again there were times when the Lord drew near and asked: "Where are you?" Then I perceived that my behaviour was wrong and I prayed to the Lord that he would not let go of me and that I might not be lost.

I was over 21 years of age and felt that it was time to get married. I had learned to know a

young woman and fell in love with her. Yet I could not marry her because she had not yet joined the church. The following spring she joined the church and as the saying went "grew up" [*wurde sie gross*]. I frequently prayed that the Lord would make her worthy for such a commitment.

Our God must hear a lot of foolish prayers. Finally in fall, October 26, 1873, I married Aganetha Block of Eichenfeld. During this time I often prayed that God should grant us a happy marriage. Deep inside I felt a voice telling me "tell your wife who you really are." But again and again I refused to do so.

During the first winter we lived with my parents-in-law, the Jacob Blocks in Eichenfeld. During the winter I looked after the cattle and built an under-carriage [for a wagon]. After Christmas God's Spirit again touched my soul and I became inwardly anxious. "You have betrayed your dearest and not told her all that is in your heart." I frequently prayed for God's forgiveness. One evening I again implored God for mercy and as was my custom when alone, I prayed out loud. I had heard my father do this. My mother-in-law who happened to be outside heard me. She came to my young wife and said that they should both go to the storage shed and take Peter inside for he was irrational and might become delirious. Both of them came, mother carrying the lamp in her hand. Through the open door they saw me on my knees and my dearest came to me with the words "Peter do come in." I said I would and she took my by the hand. Mother went ahead with the lamp. While we were still in the barn I held her hand more tightly and said "Let's stay here awhile." Mother disappeared with the lamp. I hugged my wife and cried. "Peter what is wrong with you?" she asked me. I told her I was a very evil person. She tried to comfort me saying it couldn't be that bad. "Yes it is," I replied. "I have betrayed you and not told you who I am." I continued to cry. She pressed me to tell her what was wrong. I begged her to forgive me. "Yes please tell me, I can't stand your crying." I told her everything that was on my heart and she generously forgave me. I said "if you can forgive and God has forgiven let's kneel down together and thank God that I'm free of my burden that only God and I knew about."

For the first time I knelt down in prayer with my dearest one and thanked my God audibly so that she could understand every word. My heart was filled with joy and I felt wonderful. Nothing like this had ever happened to me in my life.

Meanwhile life continued. I had no fellowship with believers. At that time such contact was completely unknown. That was something for ministers but not for young people. Our everyday life continued in a normal fashion. I was free from my burden of guilt but my feelings of spiritual bliss gradually diminished. As was my childhood custom, I went to church regularly so people thought all must be in order.

In early June, 1874 we became independent and moved into the summer room at the Jacob Andersen's. We were happy and lived as was customary for young folk. Then in March, 1875, we moved to Gerhardstal [an estate leased by the Chortitz colony in 1860], where we rented a farm of 40 *dessiatines*. Every farmer rented 40 *dessiatines* at one ruble, 50 *kopecks* per *dessiatine*. We could not pay our rent because of crop failure so I was hired as a schoolteacher by the village. I received 30 rubles for four months, so I was able to pay some of the rent. It was a difficult beginning.

Since the village consisted almost entirely of young persons things were often quite lively. It was not too long before I participated in all their activities. After all as a neighbour I wanted to be respected. But the Lord did not let that happen. He intervened most drastically. On June 4 of the same year, my birthday, he took our ten month old son. I was once again driven to prayer. Yet the human heart is a perverse and despondent thing. I soon forgot what happened and went back to my former ways. I went to church regularly and was even elected as song leader. Now that I was a stalwart church pillar all was well and good and life went its way.

In 1876 there was a revival in Nicolaifeld [Yazykovo settlement], my home village. As I recall it was the very first one. I had never heard of anything like this, especially since people were confessing their sins. It caused me to reflect. I too had to change. I had once been converted and if there were others in my home village [who had been converted], I belonged to them. I read God's

Word more and had morning and evening devotions in my own home. I also began to pray out loud. We found three other couples in our village and held weekly Bible studies. We edified each other as best we could and began to pray out loud. That was something entirely new in our village. We were completely open in our fellowship circle and felt happy. At one Bible study I became aware that I was very selfish, especially after one sister pointed this out to me. I now found I could not really trust myself.

One day I drove to Franzfeld in Yazykovo to my aunt, Mrs. Anton Loewen. I had spent two winters here, learning to be a wheelwright. Uncle Anton Loewen was also a minister in the [local?] congregation. We soon began to talk about the revival and the fact that we in Gerhardstal had also experienced it and were gathering together. The uncle thought this was a very good thing. He said he had heard that we had begun to pray out loud and that I had encouraged others to do so. I answered that it was true. I asked him if that was wrong. He felt if I did this alone it was not wrong, but to do this publically with others was probably indicative of spiritual pride. He admonished me not to do so since spiritual pride was a dangerous thing. I could go astray. [His words] caused me to think about the issue but I remained firm in my conviction that what I had initiated was not wrong. I was convinced this was the way to go.

I also came to the realization that my first conversion when I "grew up" [*gross werden*] was not genuine. God cannot make a covenant with someone who is not pure of heart. After all baptism is the pledge of a good conscience toward God [1 Peter 3:21]. It became clear to me that if I wanted to follow God's Word, I had to be baptized according to [the instruction] of God's Word. In God's Word we find no mention of baptism by sprinkling or pouring, rather baptism in water. I was not sure how to get clarity in the matter. I drove to my parents in Nicolaifeld [Yazykovo] on the same day. My father had also heard that we gathered together and prayed in Gerhardstal. It seems that when poor sinners pray to *Gott*, thank Him and begin to speak in other tongues or freely confess Jesus, all the world talks about it. No, not only all the world but the angels in heaven rejoice. My father was happy

about all this but he too questioned if praying aloud might constitute spiritual pride. Praying aloud in fellowship with others was simply unheard of. My father felt that I, Peter, was not going to be rebaptised before him. After all he had been a believer for a long time and until now had felt no need to be baptized again. Spiritual pride was very dangerous. I should carefully think about the matter and perhaps not be too confident. In the end [he] could be right and I said no, I would not be rebaptised before he was.

The next time we came together for Bible study in our house I could not pray aloud. When the brothers and sisters asked why I did not want to pray freely [*frei beten*] I explained that the ministers considered it to be spiritual pride and had seriously warned against it. Now I had quenched this freedom [*freie bewegung*]. Subsequently we gathered together, studied God's Word but each person prayed silently. In my home I still wanted to pray with my wife but silently, each person for themselves. I would only say Amen out loud. She wanted to know to what she said Amen. After all she had heard nothing, and so could not say Amen. I thought it over and felt quite foolish. That is what happens when a half-hearted person pays more attention to human beings than to God. So we prayed silently each person to themselves, yet with zealous dedication. I certainly believe God hears silent prayers but praying aloud edifies and a father should always do so, especially in his family.

Now and then we were visited by the Brethren, who were known as "those who left" [*Ausgetretene*]. I loved the Brethren.

Though God's Spirit prompted me I resisted and gradually I began to backslide. In my life I found that if one resists the promptings of the Holy Spirit things go backward, for "rebellion is a sin of divination and arrogance like the evil of idolatry." (1 Samuel 15:23). God's Spirit convinced me that I could not go on like this. I should renounce all, follow Jesus, be baptized and join the Mennonite Brethren Church. That was not possible except through baptism by immersion. Yet I had felt so blessed when I was baptized in the [Mennonite] Church. Inwardly I was then reminded that they confessed their sins and were baptized [a ref-

erence to Matthew 3:6?]. The Holy Spirit does not dwell in a person burdened by sin. Yet I resisted until I lost all that I thought I had possessed. I realized that if I did not start anew I would be lost. This went on for six years.

I finally stopped praying because I knew it didn't help me. Unless I broke with sin and renounced all God would not hear me.

Periodically I became anxious about my life and in my crisis cried to God, yet remained a slave to my old life.

Suddenly God intervened and our only cow died, though we still had some young livestock. Now we were without milk. Just before the harvest three horses died in one week. I knew the Lord was speaking to me. Such judgments were happening because I was not following the Lord. These events, the poor harvest as well as other circumstances plunged us into debt. Meanwhile I told myself that I could not convert while living among such [unbelieving] village folk. I decided to sell my rental land and move back to my home village of Nicolaifeld, [Yazykovo] where more of the [Mennonite] Brethren lived. Among them I would find it easier to convert. I also resolved to again have morning and evening devotions.

In the spring of 1884 we returned to Nicolaifeld. Yet nothing seemed to work and all my resolutions came to naught. I remained who I was. We moved into a building adjacent to the Peter Schroeders. It was seeding time and I had to work together with another lad since I only had two horses. When I finished seeding our small acreage I wanted to build our own home. I had purchased a house from Ab. D. Woelk that I wanted to erect on a lot assigned to me by the village council. Feed was very scarce so I requested that the village council allow my horses to graze with other animals [on the village common lands]. They did so. I put the horses in their pen on Saturday evening. When I went to check on them on Sunday morning they were gone. I spent the day searching for them but found nothing. I rode to our former place of residence and borrowed a horse from my step-mother. On my way home for night I traversed a valley.

Throughout the day I felt the Spirit of God

nudging me. When I reached the valley I dismounted from my horse, knelt down and cried to God for forgiveness. I also called on the name of the Lord to help me find my horses. I promised that if I found them I would serve Him and do all He would ask of me and all of what He wanted to teach me - as if God was dependent on my services! I was not far from a Russian village and I asked a group [of Russians] whether they had seen two horses. One man replied that he had seen two horses going in a southerly direction. I rode in that direction and when I came to Reinfeld I found them among a herd [of horses]. What joy! When I had caught them and was on my way home God's Spirit reminded me of my promise.

I knew that I now faced scorn and ridicule and all that was associated with conversion. It seemed I could not decide and wanted to postpone the matter again. Then what? God's Spirit mightily confronted me and reminded me that the Lord only approaches a soul in this manner two or three times, then it is eternally too late. I can't describe the conflict that ensued. Satan confronted me at every turn, but God's Spirit triumphed. I joined the Lord's side and began to pray and read God's Word anew. It seemed I had lost everything. The assurance of sins forgiven had vanished. I went to a trusted brother and confessed what was happening to me ... I again could accept renewed forgiveness of my sins but it was much more difficult than the first time. Satan had mightily deceived me and was much stronger than formerly but God gave the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now I visited the services of the children of God - that was in early July, 1884. In October of the same year we registered our desire to be baptized. My dear wife had also received forgiveness of her sins. Because I had resisted [God] for so long and was not deeply grounded in the Scriptures the congregation decided not to baptize me and asked me to wait for a while. That was a severe disappointment. I went into the garden alone, deeply saddened. I thought about everything [that had happened] but did not know what to do. When I [finally] came to my senses and was willing to accept my lot the words of Jeremiah 2:19 came to

mind. "Your wickedness will punish you; your backsliding will rebuke you" etc. If that was the case these words should be a comfort to me. I deserved what had happened to me. But the enemy also had something to say: "If the Brethren act this way, go back to the [Mennonite] Church." My wife came outside and I told her what the congregation had done. She suggested we visit her parents who lived two *verst* distant. I refused. I said we had been there in the morning and told them what we intended to do. Her father had said a good beating [pruegel] was in order [for us] and now we were to seek comfort there? Never!

I suggested we drive to the baptismal site. A sister was being baptized. On our way home there was much to discuss but my wife and I could find no solution. That night there was an evening service in Franzfeld, one *verst* away. If we stayed home it meant the status quo or even [spiritual] regression. I went even though it was in opposition to my old nature. It was dark. I left the pathway somewhat, knelt down and asked God for grace to overcome so that I could continue to follow him. The Lord gave grace and strength and I went to the service which was held in a private house. It seemed no person noticed me. I was surrounded by praise but my innermost was crying. I again went outside and knelt by a straw stack and prayed for inner peace. I went back in and sat down near the door. Then a dear brother from our village named Johann Loewen came and sat down beside me. He was happy to see me here and showed compassion. That gave me comfort and fresh courage. I saw the hand of God in this and became joyful. I became more grounded in faith and regularly attended the services of God's children. Throughout the winter we lived joyfully in the Lord, though there were often struggles. Where there is no struggle there is no victory. The Lord gave grace and on April 28, 1885, we were baptized with a number of other souls in the Dnieper river, near a Russian village. We were accepted into the Mennonite Brethren Church. Since then I have grown steadily stronger in faith on the merits of Jesus Christ and his blood. Though there have been many battles with Satan and its wiles as well as with one's own fleshly

desires, I find repeated forgiveness at all times in the blood of Jesus Christ. I have had many blessed hours of communion with my Saviour and in the fellowship of the children of my brothers and sisters. The congregation also elected me to lead the choir. The Lord gave grace so that during the choir practices we could pray for the forgiveness of sin for some of the singers. Though they were children of congregational members, they were not all converted. As far as I know they are now all converted - glory to God.

We were very poor at the time and rather heavily in debt. Most of the time I drove wagons for others. I also became a tin smith in my effort to make ends meet and farmed on the side. Seven verst away I rented 25 *dessatines* at seven rubles per *dessatine*. The good Lord blessed my farming efforts and also improved my credit rating in the village. I had none when I moved there. An example: I wanted to borrow 20 pounds of rye flour from the miller, Franz Friesen. He refused. On another occasion I wanted to borrow five rubles from a minister of the congregation in order to buy wood so I could build my house. No credit was extended.

The Lord gave grace even in these matters. God can direct human hearts like a stream of water. After I had lived there some four or five years my situation had improved substantially. I ventured to borrow 100 rubles from a wealthy farmer for a few months. He lent me the money. There is a saying: credit is better than money. God prospered the work of my hands; it was a blessing from the Lord. Under his blessing and in the fellowship of God's children we lived in Nicolaifeld for nine years. The gathering place was across the street from us and so we could attend all the services.

Yet land rental became more difficult. The parcel I was renting was sold so things became very difficult for us. When I asked the farmers for land they wanted 10 rubles per *dessatine* and usually the land was full of weeds.

I was sent to Yekaterinoslav several times by Wm. Dyck in order to obtain exit visas for those wishing to leave for America. During the years 1890-91 many Mennonites were immigrating to

America and I got somewhat caught up in the fervor. In the spring of 1891 I began to seriously think about doing the same but kept the matter to myself until fall. At that time everyone still used the threshing stone. I asked my wife what she thought of the idea. After all we could not obtain land [in Russia] and our children were growing up. What shall we do here? She looked at me and said she had thought about it a lot. Why had she not mentioned it? She replied that she had been unsure of herself. What if we moved and then she would regret it. Well if she felt like I did it must be of the Lord. Let's go inside and ask our Heavenly Father about it. After we had prayed we immediately went back to work. We told our children of our plans, the oldest of whom was 16 or 15 years of age. They were willing and happy to leave. There was a lot of preparatory work.

Saying goodbye to our brothers and sister was difficult. We had been so blessed by our human and spiritual fellowship and the love they extended to us. My wife's aged father was still alive and it was difficult to leave ... Finally we left on April 27, 1892.

(Note: The rest of the manuscript deals with settlement in North America as well as poems and sermons.)

*JBT*



### **About John B. Toews**

*Professor Emeritus, Church History and Anabaptist Studies BA (Tabor College), MA, PhD (University of Colorado)*

Since 2002, John Toews has been Professor Emeritus of Church History and Anabaptist Studies at Regent College, where he taught as Professor of Church History since 1989. Prior to coming to Regent, John Toews taught at the University of Calgary for twenty-seven years, including a term as the head of the Department of History. Dr. Toews has written many articles, book reviews, and a number of books, most of them focusing on the history of the Mennonite people. He is married to Lillian, and they have three adult children.

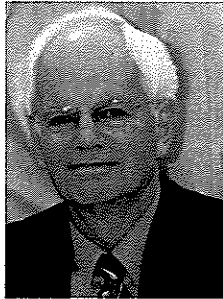
## Singing by the Numbers

### - A Report on the AGM Weekend - March 3 & 4

by Ruth Marlene Friesen

The Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan (MHSS) had its Annual General Meeting on March 3 and 4, a weekend of informative guest speakers, including a workshop for audience participation.

Wesley Berg's presentation, *Singing by the Numbers; Mennonites and the Ziffernsystem* proved his extensive research and grasp of the Ziffernsystem, known as the number system.



Some have said that the singing we have heard in our local Old Colony churches evolved from the Gregorian chants of old Catholic orders - a choral music that has soft, gentle notes floating on the air. Berg disagreed. He played samples for us as he told of the history of the Ziffernsystem. It grew over hundreds of years, being passed on from generation to generation as an oral tradition with no written notes.

Naturally then, they lost the variety they may have had at the beginning and are reduced to six or so melodies, which the Old Colony Mennonites now apply to all the hymns in their Gesangbuch.

Wesley Berg sought out Vorsänger (cantors) who would be willing to sing for him, and give him opportunity to transcribe their singing to a written form.

There are other ethnic and closed religious groups which use Ziffern as well. The Amish have an oral tradition of more than 450 years, dating back to the Ausbund of the middle 16th century.

The Hutterites (Dariusleut), like the Amish, have their oral traditional singing going back to the 16th century as well. So does a Pennsylvania German Mennonite group.

There is a primitive Baptist congregation in the southern USA that keeps to themselves, and sings by numbers. (Dolly Parton comes from this background and one may detect some influences of that style in her singing).

Other non-Mennonite German groups in Russia

have been found to have 434 melodies collected from prisoners of war. Furthermore, a Swedish colony found in a Russian village, were from a Swedish religious group that disappeared in Sweden, but whose singing style had survived in these isolated colonies abroad.

Berg heard this Ziffernsystem singing in the Scottish Hebrides, where he recorded two brothers singing Psalms in this manner.

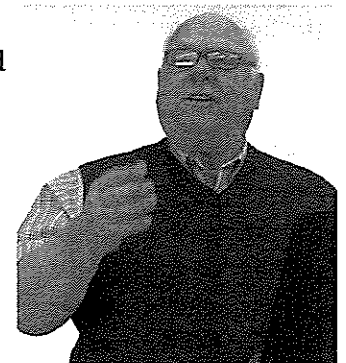
In a Copenhagen archives, he found recordings of a congregation singing by the numbers. His conclusion: the Ziffernsystem is not to be scoffed at. It is a unique way of making music, coming from isolation, and reflects a desire for isolation in these religious groups. Yet, it is valid and worth learning to sing.

A Question and Answer time followed.

Before the meeting was closed, Dick Braun called for an offering to be received, while he referred to special events that we will likely celebrate this year. These include: 500 years since the Reformation, and a book launch (perhaps with several authors).

Draws were made for 5 reference books, and then Leonard Doell made the closing remarks. He told of an instance when he was a child and came upon his recently widowed grandmother and other widows sitting together in the living room and singing in the Old Colony way to comfort one another. He saw that it meant something special to her, and thus inclined him to value their music too.

**The Annual General Business meeting** took place at 9:30 on Saturday morning. Ben Buhler shared the stages of his life in music and had us join him in some of the songs, from German hymns in his childhood, then English ones, and some rebellious teen choruses from the 1960s, then back to songs like *Joy is Like the Rain*, and, *Lord Jesus, You Shall Be My Song*.



*Ben Buhler - music*

Jake Buhler was glad to share some Happy Announcements. Since the Saskatchewan Valley News closed after 110 years of publication, the owner, Terry Jenson, has donated to our Archives the whole collection of past issues. This includes about 1000 negatives, photographs, and bound copies of the newspaper going back to the 1930s. It will take a while to catalogue them all, but then this collection will be available to anyone coming to the Archives to do research.

We received two Grants in the past year. The Mennonite Brethren Heritage Commission gave us \$2000 for improvements and Archives upkeep. The Anabaptist Foundation in BC gave us \$350 for the publication of the Penner Diaries from the 1800s. (See cover story in this issue).

Elmer Regier's financial report added that we have received \$1000 as a memorial gift upon the death of Al Mierau, who began a cemeteries database on the internet for us when websites were quite a new thing. (That is now transferred to our main domain site). Vera Falk, secretary, handles book sales that come via the book lists on the website, and has been keeping the Dundurn post office open for postage to send out the orders.

Ruth Friesen fielded some discussion on her reports on the website, the excellent STATs for visitors from around the world, the Historian, and the Cemeteries Project. Also, the E-Updates email mailing list by which we announce coming events.

Kathy Boldt, who is in charge of the Archives volunteers, gave a glimpse into the work that goes on there, often unseen and unsung. She named the faithful volunteers; Peter Adston, Lois Block, Elva and Jack Braun, Jack Driedger, Helen Fast, Verner Friesen, Deanna Krahn, Mary Loewen, Erna & Elmer Neufeld, Esther Patkau, Linda Unger, Hilda Voth and Victor Wiebe, who is always welcomed when he comes as he solves problems. Jake Buhler has also helped recently with building more shelving space.

Vera reported on book sales, commending her husband Werner for all the books he packages for mailing. There are more German book sales of late.

Susan Braun reported on our 375 members. 170 copies of the Historian are mailed out, while 105 are hand-delivered to Bethany residents, and churches to be distributed to members there. One disappointment comes when issues are returned undelivered; please notify us of your change of address!

**Board Elections.** Susan Braun's and Elizabeth Guenther's terms were up, but both were willing to accept new terms. With no further nominations from the floor, both were re-elected for three further years.

Susan presented the Constitution changes, to be ratified by the membership present. Simply stated, it was a separation of the Constitution and Bylaws so the latter can be updated as needed through the year. Second, to increase the number of days to notify members of official business meetings, so that this can be handled through announcements in the Historian, rather than by extra mailings. Her motion was passed promptly.

Elmer Regier presented the Projected Budget for the coming year, and it passed swiftly too.

This closed the official business meeting, and we went to a coffee break before the next meeting.

### **Anabaptist Interpretive Centre, Rosthern**

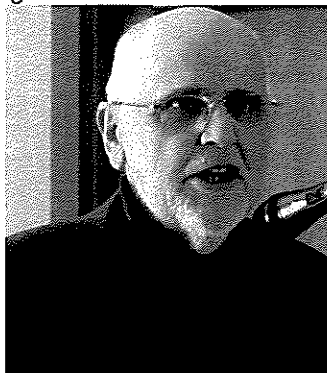
At 11 a.m. we returned to our seats to hear

George Epp tell of the Anabaptist presence in the Saskatchewan Valley needing interpretation.

They found that their museum was crowded with an excess of stuff in every display and room. Their Board felt that it would be better to put it all away and focus on arranging displays that would tell our stories in more attractive ways. They wanted to help the artifacts tell their story.

Another development was that the little white Mennonite church that had been sold years ago to the Swedenborg congregation, has now been donated to the museum. It is being retooled for a new age.

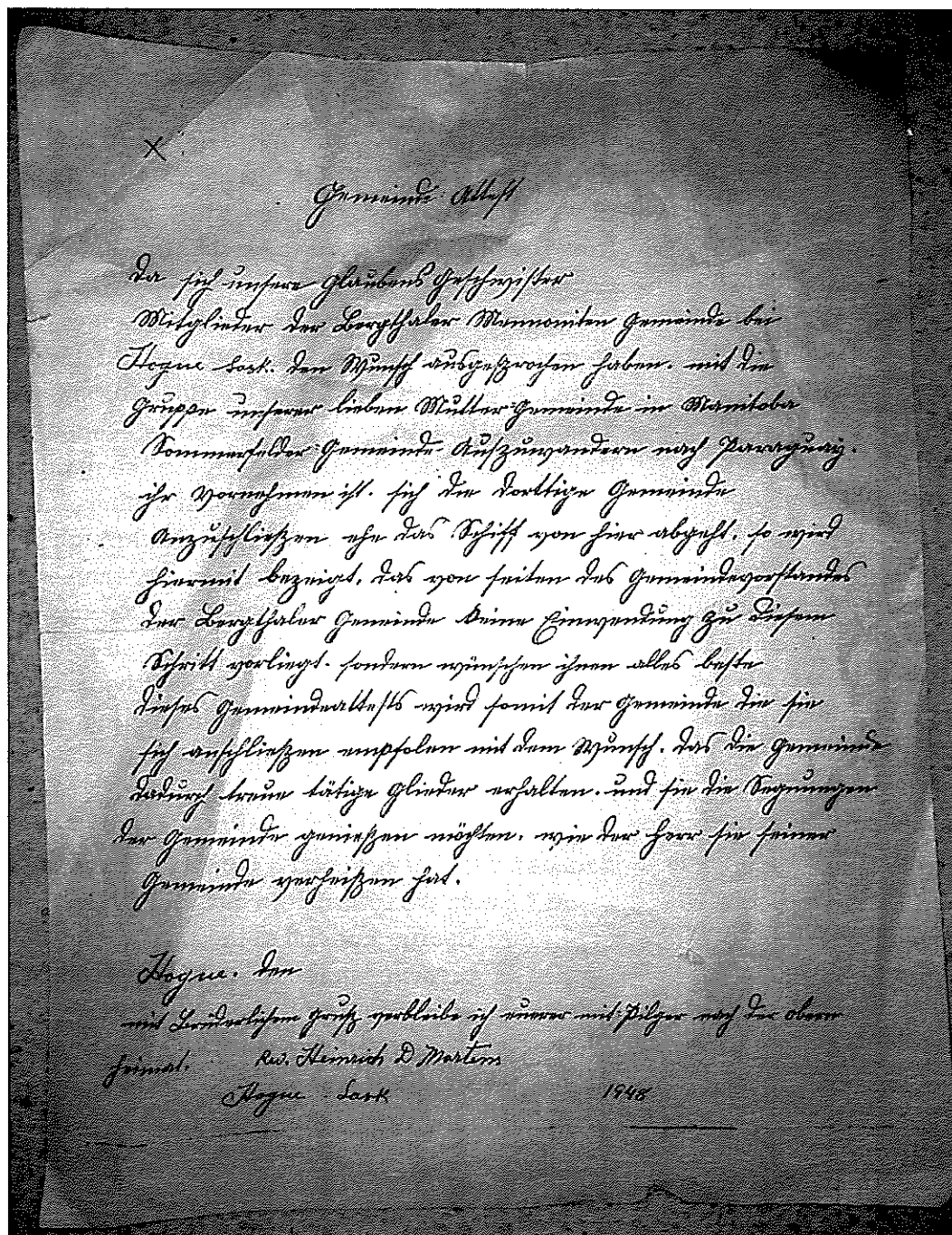
They want to start bringing (cont'd page 27)



George Epp, Roisthern

# Bergthaler Church Certificate - 1948

Found by Linsay Martens; Translated by Esther Patkau



## Church Certificate

Since the brothers and sisters in the faith, members of the Bergthaler Mennonite Church at Hague, Sask. have expressed the wish to emigrate to Paraguay together with the members of our beloved mother Church in Manitoba, the Sommerfelder Church, their intention is to join the congregation over there. This certificate indicates there is no objection from the Church leadership here and this Church certificate is a recommendation with the wish that the Church will receive faithful, active members and will benefit in the Church from the blessings from them, as the Lord has promised for His Church.

At Hague, with brotherly greetings from your fellow pilgrim to the homeland above.  
Aeltester Heinrich D. Martens, Hague, Sask. 1948.

(Letter found by Linsay Martens; translated from Gothic German to English)

If the Lord has you on hold... hold on!  
If the Lord has said "NO" to you... thank Him!  
If the Lord is moulding your heart and mind... go with His change!  
If the Lord opens doors that you have asking Him to open... Praise Him!  
Be blessed wherever you are in your life today! God has His hands on the situation!

## Rev Heinrich D. Martens and the Emigration to Paraguay by Leonard Doell

The Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Saskatchewan has a long historical connection to the country of Paraguay, that goes back to 1926. It was in December of that year that a group of Mennonites from Saskatchewan and Manitoba emigrated to the Chaco, in response to the "Compulsory School Act," being enforced on them. Mennonites had been exempt from sending their children to English Public Schools by the Privilegium signed by them and the Federal Government in 1873. But in 1916, The Canadian Government changed their mind and all who did not send their children to the Public schools were fined or jailed. A group totalling 1763 persons made this move to Paraguay, of which 195 were Saskatchewan Bergthaler.

In 1948, a second group of Bergthaler Mennonites emigrated to East Paraguay, joining a large group of Sommerfelder and Chortitzer Mennonites from Manitoba. World War Two had been a very unsettling experience for many Mennonites. Already on July 2, 1946, Rev. Jacob B. Guenther and Abram Reddekopp Jr. were sent as delegates to check on settlement possibilities in Costa Rica. Nothing came of it but the time was ripe for another move.

The trend towards absorbing Mennonites, as well as the pressure on them to adapt to Canadian ways and use English in their daily lives, left many Mennonites feeling very uneasy about where all of this would lead. For about 30 years the public school system had been teaching their children that it was important to be Canadian and "British." Many people began to have doubts about the value of their own heritage and value system.

During the Second World War, it was not popular to be Mennonite because they were pacifists, plus they spoke German and the Germans were Canada's enemy at war. Because of this, numerous Mennonites stopped speaking Low German, others felt ashamed of their roots and to avoid being harassed, even changed their names. After the war, more Mennonite young people found jobs in the city, and did not return home to the farms.

Others went east to Ontario to work in factories. But there was also a group that decided to move to Paraguay. There was no concerted movement to emigrate that developed in Saskatchewan however.

The decision to move to Paraguay was made and led by the Manitoba Chortitzer and Sommerfelder. In 1948, a total of 1640 Mennonites moved to Paraguay from the Manitoba East and West Reserves and from the Hague and Swift Current areas in Saskatchewan. Fewer than 20 families migrated from Carrot River, Aberdeen and Hague areas at this time.

Just recently, Linsay Martens discovered a document signed by his great grandfather Rev. Heinrich D. Martens, that urges the Mennonite Churches in East Paraguay to recognize the Bergthaler Church members from Saskatchewan that have moved there and accept them into their fellowship.

The document is valuable because it reflects the pastoral care of the Saskatchewan church leadership for part of their flock who have now made their home elsewhere, with a concern for their welfare and expressing confidence that they too will be a blessing to those who receive them.

The other interesting thing about this document is that it is signed by one of the senior ministers in the Saskatchewan Bergthaler Church Rev. Heinrich D. Martens, but not by the Altester. It just so happened that this move to Paraguay took place in the gap between the death of Altester Cornelius Hamm on 25 January 1947 and the ordination of Altester Abram Buhler on the 22 February 1949. During the two years in between, the Church was served by Altester David Wall of the Swift Current Sommerfelder Church. It was appropriate that this document was signed by Rev. Heinrich D. Martens who was a very well respected leader in the church, being elected as a deacon in 1909 at the age of 27 and then elected as a minister in 1914. He preached for 60 years, preaching his last sermon in 1974. He died October 14, 1988, at the age of 106.

*LD*

## Peace Event Explored How Blacks & Mennonites Have Been Good Neighbours in Saskatchewan

by Ruth Marlene Friesen

Mennonites are generally known to be pacifists. To celebrate this, the Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan (MHSS) tries each November to have a Peace Event on or near Remembrance Day to hear stories of peace-building. Last year that event was held on Saturday, November 12, 2016, in the Fellowship Centre at Bethany Manor, Saskatoon, on LaRonge Road.

Dr. Timothy Epp, an Associate Professor of Sociology at Redeemer College, in Ontario, was invited to share about his research on how Blacks and Mennonites have got along as neighbours in Canada.

His work has been featured in various publications, including a recent issue of the Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian. Originally born in Rosthern, Dr. Epp plans to write a book in the near future.

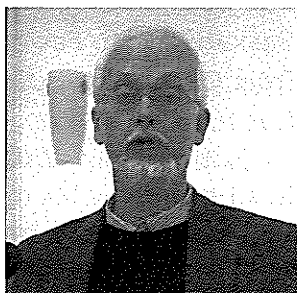
He entitled his presentation, *"Roots and Routes: Blacks and Mennonites in Canada."* He began with Mennonites and Blacks being neighbours in Germantown, PA, USA as early as 1688, and some of those Pennsylvania Mennonites had helped Blacks escape to Canada via the underground railroad in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. He was able to show that Blacks had been capable farmers among the Mennonite farmers of Upper Canada, or Ontario.

At first Dr. Epp thought this was a unique but small episode in our history, then he got some connections to people from Saskatchewan, particu-

larly Berny Wiens, who reported he had grown up with Blacks in the area around Herschel and Fiske, SK. Berny introduced Epp to his friends from the large, extended LaFayette clan. Then the contacts began

to snowball. Even before the meeting began he had met people who told him they had also grown up with Blacks in their communities at Aberdeen, Glenbush, and Blaine Lake. A good turnout of about 150 people listened intently to the stories Dr. Epp told in his presentation.

Then a panel of guests was invited to sit on the platform, passing a microphone back and forth to answer questions from the audience. The guests were Berny Wiens, two LaFayette sisters, Carol, (a psychiatric nurse), and Vera, and their cousin Ruby, a social worker. Also Murray Mayes from Elrose, though originally from Maidstone. He was a shy man who, once he got going, was happy to share that one of his 7 children, is Reuben Mayes, of football fame, and a number of his other children work in academia and government jobs. One or two of the panelists could relate an instance or two of racism, but some could honestly say they had not experienced any while growing up.



Dr. Timothy Epp



LaFayette sisters, Carol & Vera, Cousin Ruby, and Murray Mayes



Berny Wiens

Instead of just answering questions, however, this turned into an interesting story-telling session. Not only from the panel but also from people in the audience, who got the roving microphone and told their own stories of sharing food and events with Blacks in their original farming communities like Glenbush, and Aberdeen. These triggered more memories and stories from the panel members.

Tina Siemens, from Fiske, had taught seven of

the LaFayette children in school, and greeted them as good friends.

One woman from Drake held up a small photo album, which had been her mother's. It held more photos like the one she had given to Dr. Epp, from her mother's summers teaching DVBS in these communities and staying as a guest of Grandma Mayes, a well-known, and much-loved midwife in that area.

More and more, this afternoon felt like a family reunion with friendly reminiscing and storytelling.

The MHSS Board members, Dick Braun and Leonard Doell, who were the organizers in charge, let it go on longer than planned before they drew the program to a close, and invited everyone to stay for coffee and cookies and to continue their visiting informally. Many commented how much they had enjoyed this Peace Event.

Dr. Timothy Epp was extremely pleased with the excellent participation, and made a request at the end, that each one who had any memories or stories of Blacks and Mennonites as neighbours would write them down, or at least give him their contact information so that he could connect with them further and get all the details for his research and book. This invitation also applies to anyone reading this report. You may reach him here;

Timothy Epp  
Redeemer University College  
777 Garner Rd E.,  
Ancaster, Ontario, L9K 1J4  
(phone: 905-648-2139 x4247).

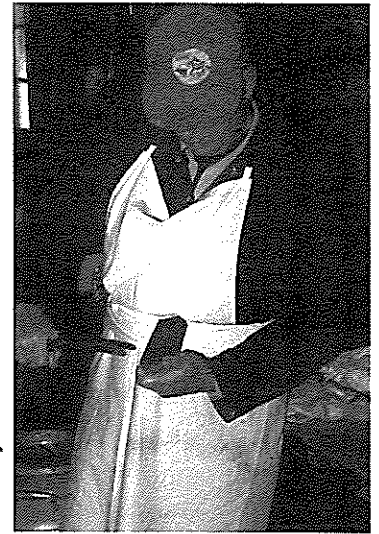
*R M T*

Note: The above article/report is on our website, <http://mhss.sk.ca/reports/> and was also published in *The Canadian Mennonite*.



## **Dee Plautdietsche Akj** **with Jake Buhler**

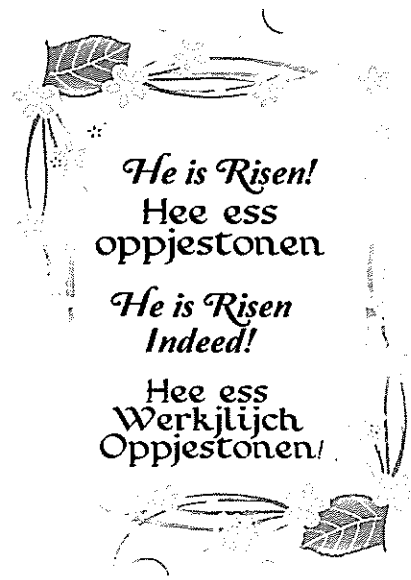
Mennonite Low German, or Mennonite Plautdietsch, is rich in its sayings and expressions. Unlike English, the Plautdietsche language has no abstract expressions. Its expressions are earthy and real. Here is a saying understood by those who in the past co-operated with neighbors to butcher pigs on farms across the prairies:



**Kjein Uetnehma  
ohnen schoapet Massa**  
(translation: you can't be  
an eviscerator without a  
sharp knife)

In the 1970s photos,  
one shows Art Friesen  
sharpening his knife; the  
other shows John S.  
Driedger eviscerating a  
pig on the John G Wiebe  
farm east of Warman  
(photos by Jake Buhler)

*JB*



## A Tribute to Alvin "Al" Mierau

compiled from several sources including the Family's Tribute

### ALVIN HENRY MIERAU -

November 4, 1938 - November 4, 2016. At MHSS, "Al" Mierau was a hidden volunteer, who began a Saskatchewan cemetery website for us in the early 1990s. He passed away suddenly, while taking a bike ride on his birthday along the Meewasin Trail alongside the Saskatchewan river, in Saskatoon.

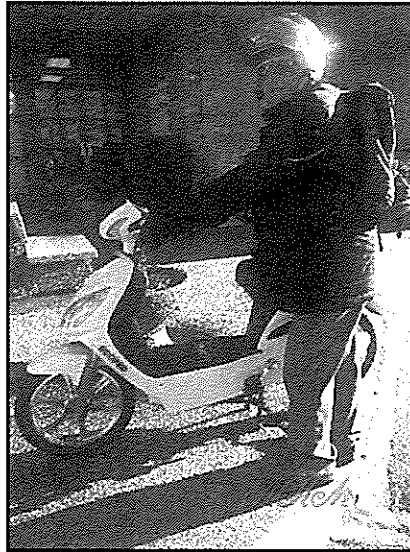
In fact, John Nickel started collecting cemetery listings for the Saskatchewan and Saskatoon genealogical Societies earlier than that. John then shared these early Mennonite cemeteries listings with Dick Epp, the chairman and editor of the Saskatchewan Mennonite Historical Society and Archives. Dick knew Al Mierau. Both were into computers and Al knew how to set up a website. Dick listed the cemeteries and Al became our webmaster, putting the cemeteries on a "Roots" site. Dick was busy so he asked Helen Fast to work with Al.

Helen was new to computers; but Al patiently taught her his spreadsheet method, and he sent her interesting bits and photos about his family and photography, new finds, as well as the annual study of the search STATS on the site.

Again, Al was probably invisible to most of our MHSS family.

Just over the last two years, Helen has turned the cemeteries over to Ruth Friesen, (our MHSS webmaster, and Historian editor), who has now moved the whole database to our main domain website; [mhss.sk.ca/cemeteries/](http://mhss.sk.ca/cemeteries/)

Al is dearly loved and remembered by his wife of 55 years, Marion, two sons and four grandchildren; Bryan Mierau (Gail) and his children Megan and Kyle (Heather); Cameron (Tammy) Mierau and children Bradley and Cristianna (Jayden) Phillips; two brothers Harold (Jeanette) Mierau and Daniel Mierau; sisters-in-law Marie Mierau and Doreen (Walter) Nickel, as well as numerous nieces,



nephews and cousins.

A memorial service was held November 10, at McClure United Church, Saskatoon. Memorial donations may be made to the Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan (900-110 LaRonge Road, Saskatoon, S7K 7H8) in his memory.

Helen Fast and some Board members attended the Memorial service and remarked on the tribute presented by the sons, Bryan and Cameron. We have received Bryan's permission to share that Tribute.

### Our Dad, Alvin

Cameron and I were asked a couple days ago, what values did our dad imprint upon us as children, and we both sat there with blank stares and silent voices. We struggled to put it into words. We both had never thought about this before, and at this awkward moment in time a process of discovery was started for us.

### Who was dad?

These past few days we have been finding items in the house that we both associate with our father and have placed them on the fireplace hearth getting ready for today's celebration. We knew something was missing, and it was then that we realized, we have a second home full of the memories we were looking for.

That second home was the Cabin at Manitou Beach. A pilgrimage was required.

Mom, Cameron and I made the journey to the lake. We were looking for that memorable "thing" that we felt represented our father. The three of us stood in the living room with the objects in our hands ready to depart for the return trip back to Saskatoon, but none of us headed to the door, something was missing.

It took a while before we all realized that the object we were seeking on this pilgrimage was not a tangible object we could return back with, it was intangible, it was the environment where we were

standing. This place, this environment was the central hub for all our adventures and excursions as a family when we were young and with our own friends when we were older.

Outdoor adventures happened here at the beach. Time canoeing, time swimming, time sailing, time motor bike riding, time target shooting, and time visiting family and friends.

Over and over again, dad gave us the most precious gift he could; *he gave us his time.*

Dad provided the learning opportunities by including us on his adventures and allowing us to participate in his hobbies. Music, electronics, camping, travelling, photography, astronomy. The list goes on and on. These activities were how dad shared his knowledge and his passion with us. We learned by doing these things with him not by doing them for him.

And as usual, our interactions with dad were met with no expectations or judgment set upon us.

There were also all of the Indoor Adventures, toys with a purpose, anything electronic, all technological building blocks that could lead us to a larger picture without us realizing that we were being taught – we were playing – he was teaching. This was how dad shared his love for us by sharing himself.

Dad was always ahead of the curve, especially on any new geek technology that could be incorporated into his hobbies. He was very proud of having one of the first personal home computers available. Playing on this computer brought us into this future as we know it today.

From then till today, he has kept us involved in his pursuit of his passions. Photography, travel, geo-caching, and continual communications keeping us all “in the loop.” That was his way of bringing you along on his latest adventure. **Ding.**

*BM*

Note: Al's blog is still up and there are some beautiful photographs Al took; you may see them here: <https://almierau.wordpress.com/>

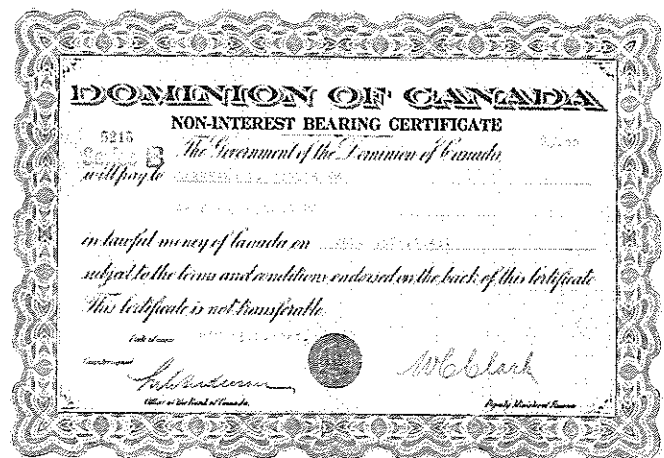
## Dominion of Canada Bonds and Certificates sold during World War 2 - by Jake Buhler

When Canada declared war on Germany in 1939, it was ill-equipped to respond. Canada needed money to build ships, airplanes, and armaments. To raise money, beginning in 1940, the Government sold War Savings Certificates that yielded \$5 over 7 years for every \$4 invested. There was a limit of \$600 per person. The sale of certificates was mildly successful. Canada then shifted to selling Victory Bonds with no purchase limits. Interest yields were between 1.5% if held onto for 6 years, and 3% if held onto for 14 years. These bonds raised enormous amounts of money: 6.25 billion dollars or \$550 from each Canadian citizen over the next 5 years.

War Bonds or Victory Bonds were a problem for many Mennonites who did not wish to be seen to profit from investments in a war. The Government realized this and offered an alternative. It sold non-interest bearing certificates, and the money raised was used to build roads and bridges in Canada.

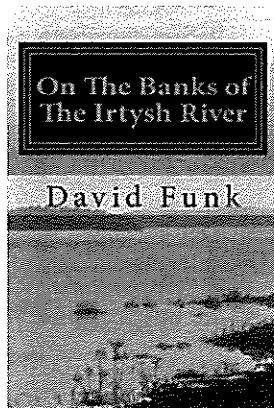
On March 15, 1941, Ben W. Buhler, who lived on a small 80 acre farm near Winkler, Manitoba, bought a 51 month non-interest bearing certificate for \$5. It expired on June 15, 1945. But Ben W. Buhler, who later in the year married Maria Pauls Driedger and moved to Osler, Saskatchewan, never cashed in this certificate. It is uncashed to this day and remains as a rather rare financial instrument. It is not known if any other uncashed certificates survive anywhere else.

*JB*



**On the Banks of the Irtysh River, (247pp) & The Last Train to Leningrad. (232 pp)** by David Funk, [Abbotsford, British Columbia], published by the author, 2015, Paper covers. \$15.00/each - **Book Reviews by Victor Wiebe**

If you think Russian Mennonites only came from the colonies of Chortitza or Molotschna or their daughter settlements, read this novel, *On the Banks of the Irtysh River*, to learn about Siberian Mennonites. David Funk tells the real story of his Siberian family, but as fiction.



Historians tell us that Mennonites first arrived in the Omsk region of Siberia in 1906, and by about 1918, there were at least 90 Mennonite villages in Siberia.

One Siberian Mennonite who I met told me that he is often asked what Siberia is like. He answered - it is just like Saskatchewan! Omsk which is on the banks of the Irtysh River is an important Russian city in western Siberia, not the far east, only about 2,200 km east of Moscow. Just to get an idea how far apart these two cities are, Winnipeg is 2,300 km east of Vancouver.

This novel is set just before the start of the First World War and tells the troubles of the Rempel family in revolution and Civil War and then its immigration to Canada in 1926.

The novel's main character, Heinrich Rempel, is a business man with a young family in a Mennonite village across the Irtysh River from Omsk. He tries to set himself up as a farm implement dealer in Omsk, Siberia. Tragically, it's August 1914, and the First World War thwarts his pursuits, then the revolution and Civil War follow and destroy his comfortable world.

From late 1917 on events in all of Russia are bewilderingly complex, with many leaders, political parties, armed groups and regional governments forming and falling. Mennonites tried to isolate themselves from these outside events and were most often victimized by each change in the power structure.

David Funk gets his history, geography and Russian language right, and one learns a great

deal about how Mennonites lived and prospered in Imperial Russia.

He also expresses quite well the ignorance, surprise, bewilderment and then suffering that Mennonites experienced when the Communist Revolution finally took hold of their local communities and the nation.

The author, Funk, uses the device of an English medical doctor, Dr. J. Benny, to narrate the opening and ending of the novel. Funk has Dr. Benny enduring the First World War as a German POW, where he learned Russian from other prisoners, and also German.

After being repatriated he served in the British Expeditionary Force which was sent to Omsk in October 1919 to help stiffen the resolve of the White Army, headquartered in Omsk.

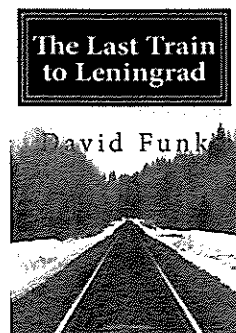
History tells us that one of the British units was the Middlesex regiment, and Funk has the good Dr. Benny serving in that regiment. He befriends the local population and tries his best to help.

Later the Doctor, now a ship's doctor, finally meets the refugee Rempel family in 1926 on the ship taking them to Canada.

Though *On the Banks of the Irtysh River* is fiction it is well written and accurate. It narrates the story of how a normal Russian Mennonite family is victimized by revolution and civil war.

## **The Last Train to Leningrad**

I generally do not read or review fiction, and I am more familiar choosing to read history. However, from my knowledge of the history of the Soviet Union reading the novel, *The Last Train to Leningrad*, gives the reader an accurate feeling of the trials and emotions endured by Russian Mennonites as refugees; the deplorable living conditions, the uncertainties and anxieties, the disappearances and deaths and finally the feeling that God had abandoned them in a way only a



novel can evoke.

David Funk's career as an elementary school teacher, and Mennonite pastor, has given him the tools to depict his characters, both adults and children as real and believable.

This is a story set in the Omsk region of Siberia beginning in the fall of 1928 at the start of Stalin's Collectivization Policy with the First Five-Year Plan. This Plan favoured workers and destroyed the agriculture of the Soviet Union leading to the great Soviet Famine of 1932-33.

*The Last Train to Leningrad* tells the history of the author's Funk family as it struggles for a year to finally escape from the Soviet Union. It is authentic and personal history told in a novel format.

The author, David Funk, has invented dialogue and plausible scenarios in the lives of his ancestors to make an interesting and readable book.

In the "Historical Notes" given on the last three pages he tells of getting information and stories from frequent conversation with older family members and he lists some of the historical works consulted.

This is David Funk's second book. In his first book, *On the Banks of the Irtysh River*, which is also set in the Siberian Omsk region, we learn of the torment of an urban Mennonite family enduring the chaos of revolution and war.

Though historically accurate and well written, *On the Banks of the Irtysh River* does not make this book a happy read. Chapter 1, titled, "May 1911" tells of the fortunate and prosperous times enjoyed by Mennonites farming in the rich soil of western Siberia, as the Funk family purchase an estate named Lyubinovka, "Village of Love." Chapter 29, the last, titled "November 27, 1929," tells the Funk family's final journey out of the Soviet Union to Germany, and then on to Canada. In between the two chapters are 27 chapters that narrate the family's unrelenting misery, deprivation and deaths inflicted on them in the thirteen months from October 1928 to their final November 1929 train and ship ride out of the Soviet Union. They flee their farm in their village of Isylkul, part of the Omsk Colony settlement and have a perilous flight to Moscow. There, along with over ten

thousand other Russian-Germans, they endure misery and fear as they go through many frustrating efforts, almost always failing, to get exit documents and finally to escape from the Soviet Union.

The book's title: *The Last Train to Leningrad* tells of the author's own family's experience as they were in fact on the final agonizing last refugee train trip from Moscow to Leningrad and on out of the Soviet Union.

VW

Both books may be ordered from MHSS's Secretary, Vera Falk, via the usual methods.

**David Funk** was a pastor in Alberta when Elmer and Agnes Regier met him. They met him again last year in BC, when he was launching these books.

=====

**Singing by the Numbers** - cont'd from page 19

in school classes for tours this year. George, himself, and Oliver Friesen, try to be available so they can be open on Thurs-days, Fridays and Saturdays - all day, plus Sunday afternoons. They can be available any other day too, if pooplo call ahead.

In a Q & A time, Leonard Doell wondered if the First Nations will be incorporated into the Mennonite story?

George replied that they have started working with Beardy's Reserve, and he had asked Oliver to prepare a timeline. Already they noticed the First Nations took up most of the width of the chart, while the Mennonites had only been here for less than one inch of comparable space.

There will be rooms for various historical themes, such as Medicine, Business, etc. They are working on one for the Ukrainians too.

Someone asked if they were still accepting donations, such as the travelling minister, David Epp's communion cup, which he used to have communion in host homes and churches?

George answered, "Yes, as long as it is not another pump organ; we have six already."

Another question asked, was whether they have gaps in donations, besides money?

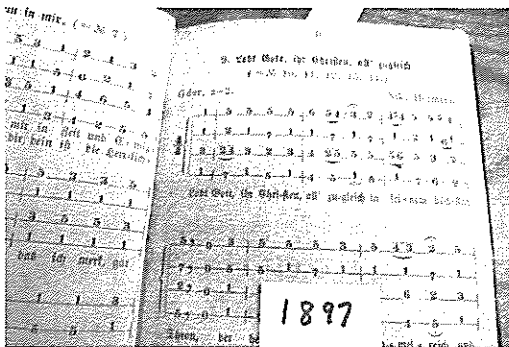
George agreed that volunteers are needed to do

much physical work. A glazier is needed to replace windows that broke when the little church was moved. Furthermore, they are looking for some of the earliest copies of the Valley News.

Leonard Doell suggested that while our MHSS Archives preserve historical papers – documents and books, our Mennonite museums preserve other objects and memorabilia; we need to develop better communications with them, so we can refer donors with their artifacts!

George Epp recommended that everyone get a passport at any one of our area museums, and get our passport stamped as we visit all the other museums. Those who visit all of them can get a prize. (He had suggested a pump organ, but was over-ruled).

After a delicious lunch, where the Summa Borscht was excellent, and much friendly visiting, we gathered again for the afternoon workshop with Wesley Berg.



Mr. Berg read a few quotes by people commenting on the sound of Old Colony Mennonites singing,

most making subtle fun of the same. Particularly of the melisma. This is the singing of a single syllable of text while moving up and down between several different notes in succession.

#### A Condensed Ziffern History:

1837 – Heinrich Franz, a Prussian trained schoolteacher, introduced Ziffern singing to his class in Gnadenfeld, Molotschna.

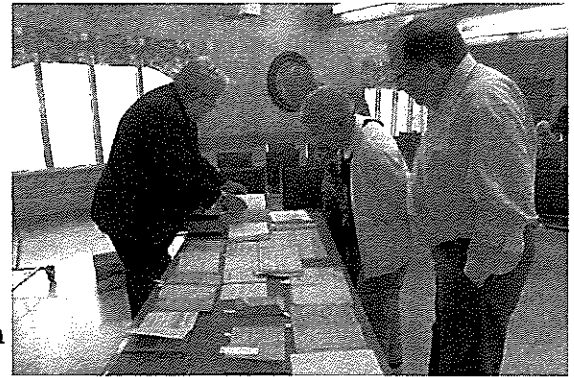
1846 – Johann Cornies made Ziffern singing part of the school reform in Molotschna.

1860 – the Choralbuch was published, and Old Colony hymns in the Gesangbuch.

1865 – a version was published with melodies only, separate from the hymns. This is still how the Old Colony, and other conservative groups, sing their hymns. These have been popular enough so that D. W. Friesen printers in Altona, MB., has run a number of reprints.

Wesley Berg explained also, about shape notes, (squares, triangles circles and ovals), introduced in 1801, and popular in American singing schools to help singers quickly find their pitches within the major and minor scales.

We were reminded by Wesley, that Victor Wiebe had set up a display of books from the



Victor Wiebe explaining Ziffern books

Archives,

that had Ziffern numbers, over to the far side of the platform. It truly had a great array of books, so we could see what this music looks like, in four-part harmony as well as the single line style.

It was time for us to learn to sing by numbers. Mr. Berg introduced us to the music on the handout-sheets we had been given; *Welt Ade, ich bin dein müde* (World, Goodbye, I am Weary). We began by singing the numbers, much as we would a scale. Then we sang it with the German words.

When we were done, Jake Buhler asked if he and some other volunteers could sing this song in the way with which they had grown up. Permission was granted, and three women, including the caterer, who had made our lunch, lined up to sing for us.

Dick Braun made the closing remarks, thanking our speakers, Wesley Berg and George Epp, and reminding us of the special celebrations that are coming up this year; 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, and the 100th year of Mennonite Trust, in particular.

Those interested in seeing the Archives were invited to go downstairs for a tour.

R M F

Note: You can find a more in-depth edition of this article, with more photos on our website, at [mhss.sk.ca/reports/2017-Annual-General-Meeting-Singing-by-Numbers.shtml](http://mhss.sk.ca/reports/2017-Annual-General-Meeting-Singing-by-Numbers.shtml)

# Young Chippewayan Indian Reserve #107

by Leonard Doell, Aberdeen, Saskatchewan  
(reprinted from Preservings)

The Young Chippewayan Indian Reservation (also known as Stony Knoll) #107, is located in Treaty Six Territory, the traditional home of the Nehiyawakor Plains Cree people. There are thirty square miles of excellent farm land located near the present town of Laird, Saskatchewan that was chosen by

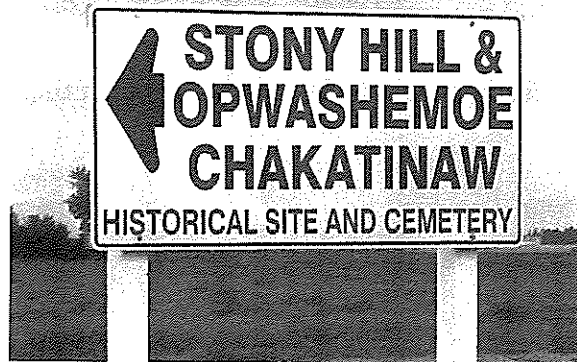
Chief Chippewayan and his people in 1876. The following year, Chief Chippewayan died and his son Young Chippewayan became the hereditary Chief.

Life following the Treaty was very difficult. With the disappearance of the buffalo, many people faced starvation.

In 1885, Louis Riel and his Metis people confronted the Government about the way they were being treated and expressed concerns about the loss of their land. The Federal Government feared that local First Nations people would join with the Metis, so their guns were taken away to eliminate the possibility of them fighting with Riel.

Young Chippewayan heard that buffalo had been sighted and headed south to Cypress Hills to find food for his starving people. The Young Chippewayan people were afraid of returning to their land at Laird for fear of retaliation from the Indian Agents and eventually many of them made their home with other Bands near North Battleford, while others died from starvation and disease.

To the Young Chippewayan people, the reserve land at Laird was chosen as their home and was occupied from time to time. The Carlton Trail, leading from Prince Albert to North Battleford, crossed this land and was bustling with activity. The site known as Stoney Knoll (Opwashemoe Chakatinawa), the highest point on the Reserve, was and still is considered a sacred piece of land and held in high regard by Young Chippewayan descendants. Oral history has confirmed the presence of sacred burial grounds on this property.



In May of 1897, this land (Reserve #107) was taken from the Young Chippewayan Band by the Federal Government and opened to Mennonite homesteaders and later German Lutheran settlers from the USA. The Young Chippewayan people were never contacted and

were not aware that their land had been relinquished, for it was done without their surrender or consent.

In 1895, the Hague-Osler Mennonite Reserve was created, when the Federal Government offered Mennonites a large tract of land north of Saskatoon up to Rosthern. As this land filled up with homesteaders, Mennonites petitioned the Federal Government for more land and in October 1898, this land at Laird was added to it. So the former Young Chippewayan Indian Reserve now became part of a Reserve for Mennonite farmers. With the influx of settlers looking for a chance to homestead, the Government felt a need to open every inch of available land, since agricultural settlement was more in keeping with the Government's idea of proper land use at the time. The Federal Government regarded the Mennonites as ideal colonists. Mennonites became the beneficiaries of this land transaction but were unaware at the time of the history of the Young Chippewayan people and their loss.

In August 1976, a group of descendants of the Young Chippewayan Band visited the Laird area after the 100th Anniversary gathering of Treaty Six at Fort Carlton. They were frustrated by the litany of broken promises and fundamental rights promised by the Federal Government under Treaty Six that had never been honored. So they travelled to Laird, to visit the land that many had never seen before in an attempt to talk with farmers about their connection to this land. This created a lot of fear and anxiety in the settler community and the Young Chippewayan folks who came to this land

hoping to build some understanding and empathy for their situation, left frustrated by the experience.

This became the catalyst though for Mennonites to learn about the injustice that had occurred that had removed the Young Chippewayan from this land and allowed Mennonites to settle here. These courageous but awkward first steps for change became the impetus for us to learn more about the land where we lived and a first step on a journey of three peoples eventually working toward justice.

In the spring of 2006, Chief Ben Weenie approached MCC Saskatchewan about the possibility of the Young Chippewayan commemorating the

130th Anniversary of the signing of Treaty Six at Stoney Knoll together with the Mennonite and Lutheran settlers who now resided on this land. Chief Weenie and Gary Laplante (a Young Chippewayan Descendent), had been travelling together, when Chief Weenie shared his vision of working with settlers to seek justice for the land they had taken from them. By taking this risk and extending the olive branch, Chief Weenie began a journey of reconciliation, hoping that there would be receptive people from the Mennonite and Lutheran communities to walk alongside on uncharted ground.

In 2006, 2011 and 2016, Young Chippewayans, Mennonites and Lutherans have gathered at Stoney Knoll to commemorate the 130th, 135th and 140th Anniversaries of the signing of Treaty Six and to continue the journey of building friendship and understanding. On each of these occasions, they decided to meet at Stoney Knoll (Opwas-hemoe Chakatinaw), the highest place on the Reserve and considered to be a sacred place by the Young Chippewayan people. In 1910, the

Lutherans built a Church and Cemetery on this site. The church was moved into Laird in the 1950's, so they too have a strong spiritual connection to this land.

In 2006, a Memorandum of Understanding was drafted by all three groups: giving thanks to the Creator, indicating respect for Covenants including

Treaties and calling for a committing to peace, justice and sufficiency for all communities. We agreed that we did not want to fight amongst each other but to hold the Federal Government responsible for the injustice that they had created.

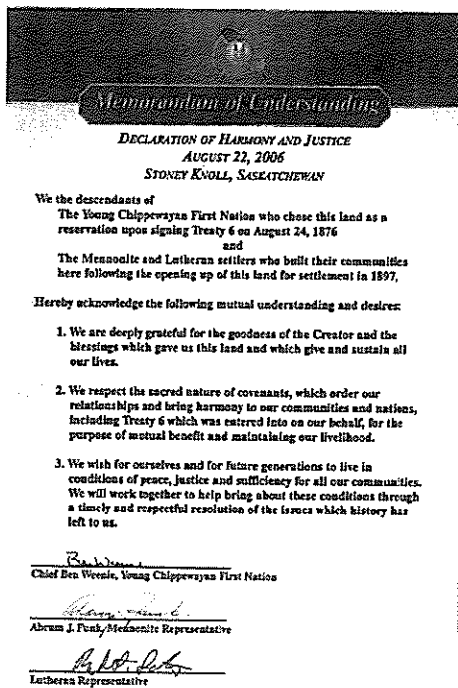
Chief Weenie has emphasized that these gatherings were not a time of confrontation but as a time of healing between our

peoples. The emphasis has been to be a spiritual one of healing, where perhaps, said Chief Weenie, we could set an example to the rest of the country of how our peoples could live in peace and harmony with each other. Chief Weenie has made it clear that the Young Chippewayan respected the current ownership of the land by the settlers and in turn Mennonite and Lutheran communities pledged support for the Young Chippewayan band's ongoing struggle to obtain compensation for the land owed to them under Treaty Six after all these years. These gatherings brought renewed hope to all those that were gathered there.

The Young Chippewayan Band has never been compensated for the land they had taken from them. Most of the descendents of this Band reside in the North Battleford area and others near Prince Albert but are considered to be squatters in the communities in which they reside. The Band is working to seek redress for their Specific Land Claim by meeting the requirements of the Indian Claims Commission (ICC). In 1995, the ICC concluded in its report



*2006, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was drafted by all three groups, Young Chippewayans, Mennonites, and Lutherans, at Stoney Knoll, SK.*



on the Young Chippewyan Claim that the Department of the Interior had illegally taken from the Band without their consent but that genealogical research was needed to prove that there is an "identifiable community" or Band, so that their Treaty promises could

## Mennonite photographic database shortlisted for national award

(reprinted from The Canadian Mennonite)

The Mennonite Archival Image Database (MAID) website, which showcases 80,000 photographs of Mennonite life, was recently shortlisted for the Governor General's History Award for Excellence in Community Programming. MAID is a partnership of eight Mennonite archives. The award celebrates "small volunteer-led community organizations in the creation of innovative programming that commemorates unique aspects of [Canadian] heritage."

The judges identified MAID as "a very special project since it, in many ways, is helping to bring together a diasporic community" by sharing "heritage across vast distances, but also through the cooperation of archival professionals invested in the community."

"We feel honoured to be considered for an award of excellence in community programming," says site administrator Laureen Harder-Gissing, "since MAID is all about sharing our archival treasures with communities worldwide."

MAID originated as a project of the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada. With the software development provided by Peaceworks Technology Solutions of Waterloo, Ont., the site went live at archives.mhsc.ca in 2015, and acquired its first cross-border partner in 2016. As MAID's reach grows, site visitors reach back to contribute facts and stories, order photographs online and express their thanks. "The photo you sent me shows real people from the past with real struggles," wrote a visitor in Tasmania. "MAID is a truly wonderful project."

- Mennonite Archival Image Database



Consider bringing your old photos into this database. Enquire at Your Archives.

be honored.

A historical researcher has been hired, who is familiar with Plains Cree history, culture and kinship structures to complete this band membership list. All three communities have offered prayer, moral and financial support for this cause and are working together towards a timely and respectful solution to this issue.

Treaty Commissioner Judge David Arnot has said "Our lives and our futures are bound together."

The Young Chippewyan, Mennonites and Lutherans continue to work at our mutual commitment to honor the covenant between our peoples, to strive for justice and to create healthy space for us to live together in peace and harmony. May the Creator grant us strength, courage and wisdom as we continue on our journey of reconciliation together.

### Endnotes

Revised and updated from Leonard Doell, "Young Chippewyan Indian Reserve No. 107 and Mennonite Farmers in Saskatchewan," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 10 (2001): 165-167.

## Honour List

This list recognizes individuals who have made significant contributions toward preserving Mennonite history, heritage, or faith within our province. To submit a name for the Honour List, nominate that person in writing, and forward to the MHSS Board.

The date in brackets is the year of death. The profiles of some of the honourees are on our website. <http://mhss.sk.ca/tributes/> (If you can provide the ones that are missing, the editor would be glad to hear from you).

**Helen Bahnmann**  
**Abram J. Buhler** († 1982)  
**Helen Dyck** († 2007)  
**Dick H. Epp** († 2009)  
**Jacob H. Epp** († 1993)  
**Margaret Epp** († 2008)  
**Peter K. Epp** († 1985)  
**George K. Fehr** († 2000)  
**Jake Fehr**  
**Jacob E. Friesen** († 2007)  
**John D. Friesen** († 2004)  
**Jacob G. Guenter** († 2013)  
**Gerhard J. Hiebert** († 1959)

**Katharine Hooge** († 2001)  
**Abraham G. Janzen** († 2015)  
**John J. Janzen** († 2004)  
**George Krahn** († 1999)  
**Ingrid Janzen-Lamp**  
**Abram M. Neudorf** († 1988)  
**J. J. Neudorf** († 1988)  
**J. C. Neufeld** († 1994)  
**John P. Nickel**  
**David Paetkau** († 1972)  
**Esther Patkau**  
**John D. Reddekopp** († 2011)  
**Ted Regehr**

**John G. Rempel** († 1963)  
**Ed Roth** († 2008)  
**Wilmer Roth** († 1982)  
**Arnold Schroeder** († 2000)  
**Jacob Schroeder** († 1993)  
**Katherine Thiessen** († 1984)  
**J. J. Thiessen** († 1977)  
**David Toews** († 1947)  
**Toby Unruh** († 1997)  
**Albert Wiens** († 2002)  
**George Zacharias** († 2000)

### Websites

MHSS: [mhss.sk.ca](http://mhss.sk.ca)

**Cemeteries:** [mhss.sk.ca/cemeteries/](http://mhss.sk.ca/cemeteries/)

**Mennonite Encyclopedia Online:** (GAMEO)  
[gameo.org/news/mennonite-encyclopedia-online](http://gameo.org/news/mennonite-encyclopedia-online)

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### Send in Feedback & Stories

You are cordially invited to send in feedback, news items, stories, articles, photographs, church histories, etc., to be considered for publication. The editor is willing to help polish it up so it looks professional. See contact info to the right >

### MHSS Office and Archives, & SMH Editor

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