Saskatchewan Mennonite Historian

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Exodus of Mennonites to Mexico in the 1920s

Reinland Old Colony Mennonite School. Circa 1908. Photo source: Kathy Braun.

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About the cover photograph: The village of Reinland was founded by mostly Old Colony Mennonites, but also several Bergthaler families, in 1898, in the Hague-Osler Reserve. School classes began in the same year in a private home but soon a straw-thatched schoolhouse was built. It is possible that a professional photographer from Rosthern took the picture in circa 1908. The teacher and pupils are dressed in their *Sunday best* clothing. All 16 girls have their braids done over the top of their heads. The older girls are wearing boleros or mini sweaters. A number of the 17 boys are wearing 3-piece suits. The teacher, Heinrich Janzen, who taught from 1906 to 1913, is wearing a Bowler hat and a 3-piece suit. Names of the teacher and pupils are*: Back row:* Heinrich Janzen (teacher), Susanna Klassen, Helena Schmidt, Helena Driedger, Anna Klassen, Helena Martens, Heinrich Neudorf, Peter Schmidt, Heinrich Klassen, Johann Martens, Johann Driedger. *Middle row*: Anna Schmidt, Katharina Guenther, Anna Schmidt, Maria Klassen, Anna Neudorf, Peter Martens, Martin Klassen, Jakob Neudorf, Jakob Schmidt, Jakob Doell, Peter Doell. *Front row*: Peter Janzen, Maria Guenther, Helena Guenther, Maria Janzen, Maria Martens, Maria Janzen, Katharina Schmidt, Abram Peters, Abram Neudorf, Abram Martens, Jakob Martens, Peter Janzen, Johann Schmidt.

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President's Corner

John Reddekopp

It seems that I have heard the number 100 come up very frequently in the past three years. During the Pandemic there was much talk about the so-called Spanish flu and comparisons were made with our current Covid-19 virus. It is 100 years since the first groups of Mennonites left Saskatchewan for Mexico. This is being recognized with an exhibit at the Mennonite Heritage Museum in Steinbach. We expect that this same exhibit will be in our area next spring.

A year from now it will be 100 years since the coming of the Russian Mennonites to Canada. There will be a train that will leave from Quebec City and make its way to British Columbia. In each province there will be activities taking place as well. As I write this there are many events that have already been finalized.

On October 19, 2002 the grand opening of the MHSS archives took place at Bethany Manor. I know I am no longer on the*100th year* theme but it is important at this time nevertheless. At that time a 20-year lease was signed. This October it will be 20 years since that signing took place. We are confident that we will be able to sign a new agreement and much of our efforts recently have focused on that. The issue is that the Bethany Manor administration would like to cut back on the amount of space that we currently use in order for them to expand their storage space for maintenance supplies. At the same time, we are receiving more materials related to the stories of Mennonite individuals and groups and this is putting pressure on the space which we have now.

Leonard Doell was the president of MHSS when the grand opening took place. He expressed gratitude to Bethany for inviting us to locate to their building and for the partnership that had been developed over the years Leonard further reports that:

MHSS promised to continue to host stimulating events and create opportunities for Bethany residents to have meaningful involvement and engagements that would draw on the residents' wisdom and life experience plus a place to volunteer and share gifts in their home building. In turn, Peter Schroeder expressed gratitude to MHSS for their presence that enhanced the quality of life for Bethany residents… At the Dedication ceremony in 2002 we ended with the following prayer: We thank you for this archive facility, which we pray and believe will be of valuable service in collecting and making available stories of the past. Today we dedicate this facility to you and to the cause of preserving our rich heritage of faith history. Bless all who come here and may these archives be a blessing and inspiration to all who come here to read and research the wealth of heritage materials contained here. We pray this with thanksgiving and anticipation of your blessing upon this place for many years to come. Amen.

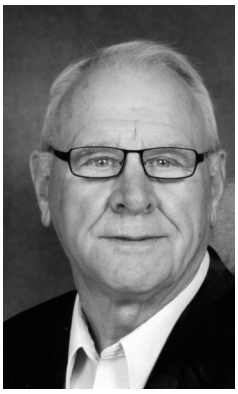
(Leonard Doell report to MHSS Executive: January, 2002)

Blessings and peace to all MHSS members!

FEATURES AND ARTICLES

The Editor's Perspective

Jake Buhler



In this issue our writers mainly write about the exodus of Mennonites from Saskatchewan to Mexico.

Henry A. Friesen writes about the more than 1,500 Mennonites who migrated from the Swift Current Mennonite Reserve to Chihuahua between 1922 and 1927. This lesser-known story is especially important to readers since it is a hundred years since the first trainloads left Swift Current for Mexico. Friesen sensitively describes the reasons why Mennonites left and what they encountered in their new homes. Friesen's extensive research makes this an important article.

Abe Janzen does not write about an out-flow of Mennonites from Canada, but instead adds new literature on who the Low German speaking Mennonites of Alberta are. He describes the Old Colony Mennonite churches, the Sommerfelder churches, and the Bergthaler churches – 32 in all – that are scattered throughout the province. In this complementary article, he provides a background on how they found homes in Alberta. Some are returned Mennonites from Mexico, and some are early migrants from Saskatchewan. Janzen adds other important information about the 139 Mennonite churches that belong to 12 distinct Mennonite conferences in Alberta.

Bill Janzen's narrative article about long interviews he had with his father Abram many decades ago, resulted in a story about the Janzen family that did not move to Mexico, but that kept in close touch with many that did. Abram Janzen is the story teller and he describes the pain and grief of those that left, and sometimes also those who stayed behind. The storyteller is sometimes conflicted in his telling. Janzen also describes what life was like in the 1920s and the decades following. Abram Janzen was the non-confrontative church leader who sought over several decades to create harmony amongst conservative Mennonites and others who wished to attend public schools.

Dick Braun is the local historian who delights in making connections with Old Colony Mennonites in Mexico and Bolivia where he has worked. He describes how he engages Mennonites that have moved from Saskatchewan to Bolivia and Mexico, and how genealogy helps him to make friends with total strangers. His photographic memory and genuine behavior aids him to make many connections.

Leonard Doell's article deals with the Bergthaler Mennonites who moved from Saskatchewan and Manitoba to Mexico and Paraguay in 1922-23 and 1926. Doell grew up in a Bergthaler family and in one way it, is a story of his own people. Doell also recounts how many returned to Canada after their hardships in Chihuahua. Because of his extensive interviews, he has documented the suffering of immigrants to especially Mexico. There were deaths caused by disease. There were crop failures. Thieves stole property, and there was loneliness. The human elements of migration are well described.

Bill Janzen's lead article focuses on the Old Colony Mennonites that emigrated from the Hague-Osler Reserve to Mexico in the 1920s. He begins his article with research done on the communication between leaders of the Church such as Aeltester Johann Wall and Premiers Martin and Scott about the right to have German language schools. Provincial authorities in their intransigence led to delegations to scout land buying opportunities in South America and Mexico. The latter was finally selected. Janzen also describes the interesting exchange between Russlaender who were arriving in Saskatchewan at the very time that Old Colonists were leaving and sometimes bought their land.

I want to thank Diana Buhler and Kathy Braun for laying out the articles and photographs. Thanks to George Epp for reading the articles. Appreciation to Dick Braun and Leonard Doell

for their exhaustive search for photographs. And of course, gratitude to our writers, namely Leonard Doell, Henry Friesen, Bill Janzen, Abe Janzen and Dick Braun. And thanks to our president, John Reddekopp, for his support.

Ken Bechtel will begin as editor in the next edition of the *Saskatchewan Historian*. We wish him well. I have enjoyed my time as the interim editor. jb

The 1920s Exodus to Mexico of Old Colony Mennonites from the Hague-Osler Area of Saskatchewan

by Bill Janzen

I will never forget the time, back in the 1970s when, while doing research in the Saskatchewan government archives, I came upon official documents about the fines paid in the early 1920s by Old Colony families for not sending their children to the newly built public schools. Among them were documents about the villages of Neuanlage and Blumenheim where my parents were small children at that time. My parents had told me about how their parents had paid fines for them, and what a huge issue the public schools had been, and how many families had moved to Mexico. Seeing these documents made it real in a new way.

The Old Colony church, whose official name was, *Die Reinlaender Mennoniten Gemeinde*, was organized from among those who migrated from Russia to Manitoba in the mid-1870s, alongside the *Bergthaler* and *Kleine Gemeinde* groups.[1] Prior to coming, the Mennonites had received a letter, dated July 23, 1873, signed by John Lowe who was responsible for immigration in the federal government. The letter stated, among other things: *The fullest privilege of exercising their religious principles is by law afforded to the Mennonites without any kind of molestation or restriction whatever, and the same privilege extends to the education of their children in schools.*[2] For these Mennonites this promise was vital. Without it they would not have moved. Once in Manitoba, they built their traditional elementary-level schools; the curriculum included reading, writing and arithmetic, as well as a number of religious subjects, all in German. The teachers did not have formal training, but were seen by the community as suitable. The Aeltesters provided oversight.

Neuanlage Old Colony Mennonite Church, 1953. Credit: Leo Driedger

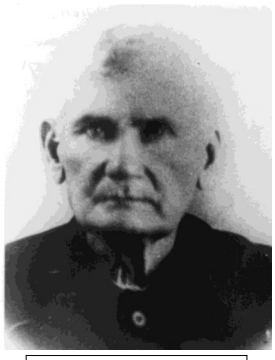
Before long the Manitoba government began to encourage the Mennonites, and other settlers, to include more subjects in their curriculum and to enroll their teachers in government sponsored training courses, in return for which the government would provide some financial support for their schools. Many Mennonites were open to such arrangements. Measures to encourage the acceptance of public schools would appear also in Saskatchewan, where the Hague-Osler Old Colony settlement was founded in 1895. Here the government would allow people in any community to organize themselves as a district, hold a vote, and if supported by a majority, then to request the government to build a public school and to provide ongoing support. As in Manitoba, many non-Old Colony Mennonites were satisfied with this option. In 1905 they started the German-English Academy in Rosthern, the forerunner of Rosthern Junior College, partly to train their own people to serve as teachers in these public schools.

These steps did not directly affect the Old Colony Mennonites since attendance in public schools was not compulsory; they simply continued with their own village schools. But with ever more settlers from various backgrounds flooding into Saskatchewan, a number of leaders in society called for stronger steps to promote the public school in order to integrate the people and to forge a Canadian identity. In 1915, E. H. Oliver, principal of the

Presbyterian Theological College in Saskatoon and Vice President of the Saskatchewan Public Education League, submitted a report in which he was quite critical of the Old Colony village schools, saying that children there learned *nothing of our literature, our history, our language*.[3] However, Premier Walter Scott, who was also the Minister of Education, was cautious. While agreeing with Oliver's analysis, he was not convinced that *coercive methods* would solve *the Mennonite problem.*[4]

Increased Government Pressure

The pressure on the Old Colony Mennonites increased when William Martin became Premier and Minister of Education in 1916, and because of Canada's fervent involvement in WWI. Canada was part of the British Empire and most of Canada's newspapers, churches, political parties, and other social institutions supported it strongly; and they saw the public schools as key to building Canadian citizens who would be loyal to the empire. Thus, in 1917, the Legislature passed the School Attendance Act, which made it compulsory for all children from age 7 to 14 to attend an English public school if they lived within a certain distance from such a school. The Act also gave the government the power to expropriate land, build schools, hire teachers, and impose fines on parents who refused to send their children.[5]

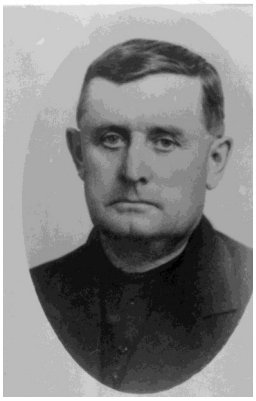


Aeltester Jacob Wiens

Before using all these powers, Premier Martin, a devout Presbyterian, made a personal visit to the Old Colony Aeltester, Jacob Wiens, in Neuanlage. (It is likely that Rev. John P Wall, an Old Colony minister who had learned English in Russia before coming to Canada around 1890, was in that meeting too.) Then, on April 23, 1918, Premier Martin wrote to Rev. Wiens saying:

> You will remember that last summer I … had an extended conversation with you. After seeing the schools that were being conducted in the Mennonite colonies, I came to the conclusion that it was high time that some improvement should take place; and I now desire to advise you that it is the intention of the Department of Education to enforce the provisions of the School Attendance Act…[6]

Seeing their fears borne out the Old Colonists now sent a delegation to Ottawa to ask the federal government to intervene on the basis of that 1873 letter. Their appeal was denied. On May 14, 1918 the federal Solicitor General, Arthur Meighen, wrote to Rev. John P. Wall, that the federal government felt that the Saskatchewan government was merely trying to ensure that the schools fulfilled the purposes that schools should fulfill, and that as such its policies were not inconsistent with the promises in the 1873 letter.[7] Meighen did not elaborate on what he saw as the purpose of schools, but to these Old Colony Mennonites, schools were to prepare their children for the separate and more communal way of life to which they had committed themselves upon their arrival in Manitoba.[8]



Rev. John P. Wall

The Saskatchewan government proceeded with its new policies. For people within existing districts who did not send their children to the public schools, it now imposed fines, even prison sentences in a few cases. This prompted Rev. John P. Wall to send a long and moving letter to Meighen. On September 7, 1918, Wall explained that they saw it as their Christian duty to obey governments in all matters that did not violate their faith, that they prayed for the government in every worship service, and that they were hard-working, self-reliant and peaceful, merely trying to follow their faith; further, that they were deeply grieved that the government would simply break the solemn promise of 1873 without which they would not have moved to Canada. He feared they might have to look for a new homeland. Meighen now discussed the issue with Prime Minister Borden, but the federal government's position did not change.[9]

In December of 1918 the Saskatchewan government began to take steps to unilaterally create school districts in the Mennonite areas. When people there did not want to elect a school board, the government appointed an official trustee who then found sites for schools, arranged for their construction, and hired teachers. When children did not attend – in some instances not one child attended – the government started to impose fines. Sadly, these Mennonites would now look for a new country.[10]

The Search for a New Country

The decision to look for a new country was made at a July 1919 meeting in Manitoba with Old Colonists from all three settlements (Hague-Osler, Swift Current, and Manitoba).[11] They would try to find a block of land large enough for all of them to live together. Of course, they also needed firm governmental assurances of broad freedoms. That search would not be easy.

By early August 1919 a delegation was on its way to South America. They visited Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay, but came back empty-handed. (In Brazil, Rev. Johann J. Wall, a delegate from Neuanlage, got sick and died. He was buried in Curitiba.)[12] Soon land agents from the US, having heard about the possibility of a large land deal, came up with proposals about possibly settling in Alabama and Mississippi. Some Old Colonists travelled down to see things, but there were uncertainties about religious freedom and other problems. One group travelled to northern Quebec and others asked about northern Manitoba, but in neither case were the authorities sufficiently accommodating.[13] People were getting discouraged.

Rev. Johann J. Wall

Then in September 1920, individuals from the Hague-Osler group, working with John D. F. Wiebe, a Mennonite Brethren businessman from Herbert, Saskatchewan, who had connections with the family of Mexico's president, sent a delegation there.[14] They came back with promising reports. Now people's hopes were raised. At the time Manitoba's representatives did not have their passports in order, but early in 1921, a joint delegation went out. On February 17, they were granted a meeting with Mexico's President, Alvaro Obregon. He was keen on getting a sizeable group of enterprising farmers to settle in northern Mexico, which had been decimated and depopulated in the recent decade long civil war. He was concerned about their desire to conduct their own schools only in the German language, but on February 25 he approved a five- point letter which promised them all the desired freedoms. In response, according to one report, Rev. Johann Loeppky from the Hague-Osler group, "extended a heartfelt handshake to the President and with tears in his eyes, thanked him…"fully confident that Mexico was their promised land.[15]

Aeltester Johan Loeppky and wife. Credit: Leonard Doell

One man who helped the Mennonites in these meetings with the President was his brother-in-law, Arturo Braniff. Since he was also involved in land sales, he took the delegates to see certain properties in the state of Durango. For various reasons, however, they were drawn to a larger block in the state of Chihuahua, some 800 KM north. As discussions about a purchase there got more detailed, a most unfortunate rupture developed. The delegates from the Manitoba and Swift Current settlements felt that the Hague-Osler group, being somewhat poorer financially, might not be able to meet its obligations, thus leaving them with a heavier load, and perhaps even placing the whole purchase at risk.[16] As a result, the Hague-Osler group, despite having led the way to Mexico, would now be on its own, even as the Manitoba and Swift Current groups proceeded to purchase large adjacent blocks - 150,000 and 75,000 acres respectively. This rupture was a serious blow to the Hague-Osler group. What to do? They considered

Paraguay. But then, in 1924, they turned to Mr. Braniff and purchased a small block in Durango that he had shown them earlier.[17] With later additions, the size of their colony reached 35,000 acres.

Leaving for Mexico at Hague train station, 1925.

The Hague-Osler Movement to Durango

This two-year delay for the Hague-Osler group complicated an already difficult situation. One issue was that a number of families moved to Swift Current and Manitoba and joined the large 1922 exodus movements from there. A second issue related to land sales. Each of the three groups had hoped to sell their land as blocks, so as to raise sufficient money to buy blocks of land elsewhere, and to keep their people united. Thus, in 1921, many Hague-Osler Old Colonists, including both of my grandfathers, signed over their land titles to four church leaders, thereby authorizing them to sell it. The leaders then entered into negotiations with a land-buyer, but the deal fell through. That also happened in Manitoba and Swift Current; what was different for the Hague-Osler group is that with the uncertainty about moving there was no immediate reason for the owners to try to sell their land privately either. Then, by 1924, when they did acquire the land in Durango, a downturn in the Canadian economy had caused land prices to fall. This left people with less money to start anew in Mexico.

An even more serious issue was the Saskatchewan government's relentless imposition of fines. The historian, Frank Epp, has described it as "a virtual epidemic of prosecutions."[18] Old Colony leaders now wrote pleading letters to the provincial government. They no longer asked the government to honour the promise of 1873. They had given up on that. They asked only that the government ease up on the fines so as to allow people to wrap up their affairs and move away. Johann F Peters, a leader from Neuanlage, wrote to the Premier on April 13, 1920, stating:

> We cannot send our children to public schools because it is contrary to our religious belief. It is against the laws of God according to our faith. We would have to trespass the promise given to our God and Redeemer at the time of baptism... Is the Premier's intention to force us to disobey God's commandments ... in that case our Redeemer would say: If you are trespassing my commandments and not remain true unto them, you will become unworthy of me...If you knew how hard it is to be a true Mennonite... If you had been here and seen the conditions you would not have had the heart to exact money from these poor people. I beg you, Honourable Sir, to be good enough to grant us two years' time to leave this country if you consider us a bad class of people. We believe that we are worthy of such a privilege at least.[19]

Rev. Johann P. Wall, also from Neuanlage, wrote to the Minister of Education, on February 12, 1923, stating:

> ... I feel myself compelled to come to you with my request… As you will know well enough, our church…has for a long time been under the pressure of the Saskatchewan School Attendance Act, which requires of us to send our children to the Public Schools, to which we cannot consent on account of our conscience. ... But since these exemptions [given by the Dominion government in 1873] have been taken away from us by the Provincial Government...we felt ourselves compelled to look around whether we could find a place anywhere in this world where we could find and enjoy those privileges lost here. And thanks be to God...we have succeeded in finding these in another country. ... And therefore, we have deemed it our sacred duty to leave our beloved country and to submit ourselves and our children

> to the great inconvenience and material loss unavoidably created thereby - as our forefathers did when they left Russia - and try to get there where we have been offered that which we have lost here... But such is not a matter which can be accomplished in a short time, particularly under the present financial depression that rests on nearly the whole world [and] the poor crops of the last few years.... there are many who are weakened so much in financial respect through the many, many prosecutions that it is a very great loss to the country, especially to the District, since they have been unable to do their farming according to the usual good methods. Yes, many of them could not support themselves anymore and would be in need and misery if they had not been supported by others. But the credit is exhausted and paying the school fines will eventually cease. And when the farmers are deprived of their working stock they cannot do their farming, as much as they want to do it. Therefore, we direct our most submissive petition to you and through yourself to the Hon. Gentlemen of the Provincial Government: Have mercy with our poor people. God will reward you for it. If you cannot keep the exemption that was granted to our people, please give us a few years in which to settle our affairs we pray.[20]

In addition to these letters from Old Colony leaders, a number of prominent individuals pleaded for moderation. In November of 1921, A. J. E. Summer, a real estate agent in Saskatoon, appealed to the Premier stating:

> This movement, if allowed to take place will be a serious economic loss to the West, and to a lesser degree to the Dominion as a whole... An extensive trip of inspection ... has prompted me to ask whether it is necessary that thousands of the best farmers Canada possesses should be allowed to leave in this manner. Twenty -five years in the history of the nation are nothing but that time would suffice to prove that the present matters of contention would solve themselves. I suggest that even at this late date an effort be made to avert this migration...[21]

Another call for compromise came from Saskatchewan's Deputy Minister of Education, A. W. Ball. In the fall of 1923, he prepared a memorandum for the Minister saying that since in the six years that the School Attendance Act had been in force there had been no appreciable headway in getting Old Colony children into public schools, the government would now be amply justified in attempting to work out a compromise. No government, he said, has been successful in applying methods of compulsion and punishment in the case of conscientious objectors.[22] Reportedly, one official trustee in the Hague area did show a certain leniency at one point.[23] But more often the fines continued. Late in 1925, after four chartered trains, with people and their belongings, had left, a fifth group was finalizing plans to leave within a few months. They then asked for a brief suspension of the fines. The government's response was a firm no.[24]

Peter Berg family, Mexico.

The first chartered train left Hague on June 4, 1924 with approximately 140 people. In addition to three passenger cars, it had 18 for freight. People brought household furniture, farm equipment, even some farm animals together with the necessary feed. Over the next two and one-half years six chartered trains followed. Smaller groups left later, the last one in 1934. Understandably, there were painful family separations.[25] The total number of people who moved from Hague-Osler is believed to be between 800 and 950, around one quarter of the Old Colony people in the area. The estimates for the Swift Current area are between 1200 and 1500, a higher percentage of the total; and for Manitoba, where the majority of Old Colony people moved, the number is believed to be around 3200.[26] Why was the

percentage from the Hague-Osler area lower? Some people, like my paternal grandparents, had changed their minds; others, like my maternal grandparents, had ongoing medical issues in the family; still others had simply become too poor to contemplate a new beginning.

Three Other Noteworthy Aspects

One aspect of this tragic encounter is the criticism of ex-Old Colonists. Soon after coming to the area in 1895, some members of the church started general stores and other businesses. For this they moved to nearby towns, many of which had public schools early on. These business people would then send their children to those schools. Since this violated the policy of the church, to which the members had committed themselves at their baptism, the church *disciplined* them by excommunicating them, the stated purpose being to win them back.[27] Once under such discipline, other members of the church were to avoid them and not make purchases at their stores. Obviously, this hurt their businesses so they appealed to the government. Jacob J. Friesen wrote in 1908:

> I lived in Warman until last spring and my business connections were principally with members of the so-called Old Colony Church; as I had two boys of school-age I was sending them to the public school… As soon as the leaders of the Old Colony Church got notice of my steps, they excommunicated me and forbade all the members to have any more dealings with me. The consequence was that I had to give up my home, my business, and everything for the sake of giving my children a better education…the existing conditions are an insult to our liberal constitution...[28]

There were a number of such complaints. The provincial government then decided to conduct an official inquiry. It was held in Warman in late December 1908. Here the Old Colony Aeltester, Rev. Jacob Wiens, was called on to explain the church's stance, which he did by referring to numerous Bible passages and to decisions taken by their members. The inquiry also heard from about a dozen of the critics. Premier Scott then raised the idea of depriving Old Colony leaders of the right to solemnize marriages, but no such action was taken.[29] The principle of individual freedom to which these business people appealed cannot be dismissed. But the claim of Old Colony leaders that the church, as a collectivity, had a right to take certain steps with regard to the behaviour of its members, cannot be dismissed either.

Jacob P. Braun family, first to settle in Schlorrendarp.
Back row: Isaac, Peter, Jacob. Middle row: Sara (Kasdorf) Braun, Sarah, Jacob P. Braun. Front row: William (on Sara's lap), John, George.

A second aspect is that, alongside the hardships, there were beneficiaries; land once owned by families who left became available to others. My paternal grandfather acquired several quarters which he later distributed among his children, including my parents. Without that land my immediate family's life would have been different. More significant is that Russlaender Mennonite families who came from the Soviet Union in the 1920s were able to acquire some of that land. No exact figures are available but it appears that over fifty Russlaender families acquired land and farms in the Hague-Osler area vacated by those who moved to Mexico. (In most cases, the land was first bought by outside business people. Russlaender families, who were helped with loans, then bought it from them.)[30] In Neuanlage, where my father grew up, at least half a dozen Russlaender families moved onto vacated farms; another half dozen acquired farms nearby.

Relations between the Russlaender and the Old

Colonists were not always ideal, but they developed. Before long, the Russlaender had their own church services, as well as monthly *Jugendverein* programs. In Neuanlage, Old Colony young people from my father's generation were attracted to these because they could play musical instruments there. One generation later, my father was keen to take his own children to those evening services, even as he served the Old Colony church as a Sunday School teacher and in other ways. We did not have to disown our Old Colony background in order to be welcomed by these Russlaender, but their orientation and mindset influenced us in substantial ways. People from Osler, Hague and Aberdeen will have similar stories. Also, to be noted is that with their pro-education mindset, a number of Russlaender soon became certified teachers; then they took jobs in the public schools in Old Colony villages, thus making those schools more acceptable to Old Colonists than they would have been with non-Mennonite teachers.

A third aspect relates to the Old Colonists who did not move to Mexico: how did they fare in the years that followed? For one thing, the Old Colony church in the Hague-Osler area kept going. (In the Swift Current area, it ceased altogether and in Manitoba it stopped, but then a new Old Colony church was started there in 1936.) A key reason why the church in the Hague-Osler area kept going is that Rev. Johann Loeppky, who had been among the first to explore the Mexico option, decided, in the end, not to move. Under his leadership, the church soon elected new ministers and things continued more or less as before, at least at one level. But the basic context had changed. The Old Colony idea of a separate and more communal way of life could no longer be pursued as before. Accordingly, the church would no longer use the practice of excommunication as it had earlier. Families now had to send their children to public schools though, for quite a while, many did that only to the extent that the law required. Also, while the Old Colony-day-schools, which had been key to the Christian formation of their children, were gone, it would be a long time before Sunday Schools and youth programs were accepted. Then, in the 1930's, there was serious and widespread poverty. For some, this lingered well into later decades. Perhaps it is not surprising that, according to a social worker in the 1950s, the area had an above average number of social problems.[31]

As time went on, people began to go in more diverse directions. Different churches and new religious ideas attracted quite a few. Some pursued higher education and entered the professions; others moved to outlying areas in Saskatchewan and northern parts of Alberta and BC, in part to try again to follow the earlier way of life more closely. (In 1948, a small group, including my widowed maternal grandmother and several uncles and aunts and their families, moved to Mexico.) Many remained in the Hague-Osler area, but with the changing economics of farming, many left the land and took jobs in Saskatoon. Interest in education increased. As a result, the number of people drawn to the Old Colony church, with its German language, declined significantly, despite the devoted service of some of their leaders. Nevertheless, it is still going.

Wilhelm and Gertrude (Bueckert) Wiebe, Blumenheim. Grandparents to Bill Janzen.

Those of us who trace our heritage to the Hague-Osler area have followed many different paths, in terms of where we live and how we earn our living, as well as in our faith and ways of thinking. Our opinions about our background will vary. Certainly, our ancestors had both strengths and weaknesses. But one cannot be unmoved by their devotion and commitment, and their willingness to make sacrifices for their faith.

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Footnotes:

1. The *Reinlaender* church was organized upon their arrival in Manitoba under the leadership of Rev. Johan Wiebe. A large portion of the people came from his *Fuerstenland* colony in Russia

which was a daughter colony of *Chortitza*, the first colony in Russia and therefore known as the 'Old Colony.' Wiebe, a very devout man, sought to "recover the New Testament vision of the church," against changes adopted by many other Mennonites in Russia. In his view this called for a humble, somewhat communal way of life, all under the embrace of the church. See Peter D. Zacharias, *Reinland: An Experience in Community*, published by the Reinland Centennial Committee, Reinland, Manitoba, 1976, p. 28-29; also his, "ReinlaenderAeltester, Johann Wiebe, 1837-1906," Parts I, II, and III, in *Heritage Posting: Newsletter of the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society*, December 1999 and March 2000.

2. Quoted in Frank H Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1786 – 1920: The History of a Separate People*, Toronto, MacMillan of Canada, 1974, p. 338. This John Lowe letter is quoted in a number of books that deal with Mennonite history.
3. Quoted in, William Janzen, *Limits on Liberty: The Experience of Mennonite, Hutterite and Doukhobor Communities in Canada,* Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1990, p. 104
4. Quoted in Ibid; these letters are accessible also at the Saskatchewan Archives Board, hereinafter the SAB
5. There are questions about the legality of the provincial government's actions. For many years it was thought that since Canada's constitution gives the provinces authority over education, the federal government had exceeded its authority when, in the letter of July 23, 1873, it promised broad educational freedom to the Mennonites. In fact, just five days after that letter, on July 28, 1873, the federal government adopted an Order in Council in which it changed the wording so as to restrict the promise to what the constitution allowed. The Mennonites did not learn of this Order in Council until around 1919. Recently, however, Winnipeg lawyer Blake Hamm, has argued that the promise in that 1873 letter did have legal standing under international law and that therefore the federal government had a legal obligation to ensure that it was honoured. See Hamm's, "Revisiting the Canadian Privilegium: The Lowe Letter, Good Faith and International Law" in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, July 2020.
6. Partially quoted in William Janzen, op. cit p. 105. The full text is also accessible at the SAB.
7. Ibid, p. 106
8. See footnote 1 for more about Aeltester Jo hann Wiebe who led the new arrivals to make that commitment.
9. Letter, Rev. J. P. Wall to Hon. Arthur Meighen, September 7, 1918, and letter, Arthur Meighen to Sir Robert Borden, Prime Minister, September 18, 1918. Both letters are in the author's personal collec tion, but can also be found in the Public Archives of Canada.
10. Harry Leonard Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1971, p. 27
11. Ibid
12. In 2019 there was a memorial in Curitiba to mark the centenary of Rev. Wall's death. Dick Braun from Saskatchewan attended.
13. Adolf Ens, *Subjects Or Citizens?: The Mennonite Experience in Canada, 1870-1925*, Ottawa, Ontario, University of Ottawa Press, 1994. This book is an excellent source on the delegations and on other issues in this paper.
14. Sawatzky, op. cit., p. 36
15. Leonard Doell, et al, "Hague-Osler Mennonite Reserve, 1895-1995" published by the Hague-Osler Reserve Book Committee, 1995, p. 374.
16. Sawatzky, op. cit., p. 43
17. Ibid, p. 49
18. Frank H Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival,* Toronto, MacMillan of Canada, 1982, p. 102
19. Quoted in, William Janzen, op. cit., p. 108
20. Quoted in part in, Ibid p. 110; the full text of the letter is in the author's personal collection and at the SAB.
21. Quoted in, Ibid p. 109
22. Quoted in, Ibid p. 111
23. See the letter dated August 31, 1923 from A, B. Wiebe to the Hon S. J. Latta, Minister of Education for Saskatchewan. This letter is in the author's personal collection and at the SAB.
24. Letters, W. T. Badger, British Dominions Land Settlement Corporation Ltd, to Chas A Dunning, Premier of Saskatchewan, December 28, 1925, and the response to Badger by the Minister of Education on December 31, 1925. Both are in the author's personal collection and at the SAB.
25. The Hague-Osler Mennonite Reserve book, op. cit., p. 386

26. David Quiring, *The Mennonite Old Colony Vision: Under Seige in Mexico and the Canadian Connection*, Winnipeg, Manitoba, The Delbert Plett Research Foundation, 2009, p. 24
27. The practise of excommunication, though now rarely used in most Mennonite churches, was used more widely in earlier times. It relates to understandings about church purity. See Ephesians 5:27 in the New Testament.
28. Quoted in William Janzen, op. cit., 100
29. For information on the Inquiry see Ibid, 101ff
30. Frank H Epp, *Mennonite Exodus: The Rescue and Resettlement of the Russian Mennonites Since the Communist Revolution,* Altona, Manitoba, D.W. Friesen & Sons Ltd, 1962, p. 186ff
31. As reported by Jake Buhler and Leonard Doell, in conversations with the author early in 2022.

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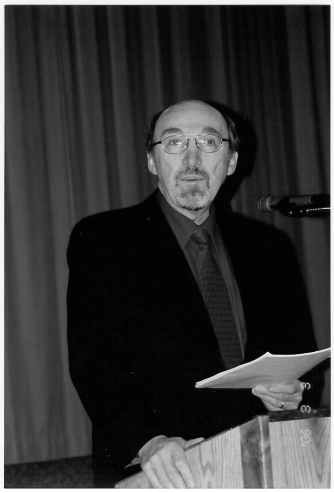


Bill Janzen
Credit: Jake Buhler

The writer, Bill Janzen, was born in Blumenheim, Saskatchewan. In his working life he has been a lay minister, an author, and always an advocate for those needing justice. He worked in the Ottawa MCC office for 33 years working on peace and justice issues. He studied at CMBC, U of Ottawa, and at Carleton University where he obtained a Ph.D. in Political Science. He lives in Ottawa with Marlene; they have two adult children.

The Bergthaler Mennonite Emigration to Mexico and Paraguay

by Leonard Doell

Introduction

My father's family, the Doells, were members of the Bergthaler Mennonite Church in Saskatchewan. Throughout my youth, my grandfather Peter Doell, told me many stories about the history of our family and our connection to the church. My great grandfather Johan Doell was a song leader in the church, and together with his wife Helena, donated land for the Schoenwiese Bergthaler church to be built. Their lives and the lives of their children and the wider community were profoundly impacted by the *public-school* question. The decisions that they made at that point in history have impacted future generations including myself. Families and communities were divided on this controversial issue. Even though they were all seeking to be faithful to God in their response, the majority remained in Canada. There were however two groups that decided to emigrate: the first to Mexico in 1922-23, and; the second to the Chaco in Paraguay in 1926. This article will tell the story of those two movements.

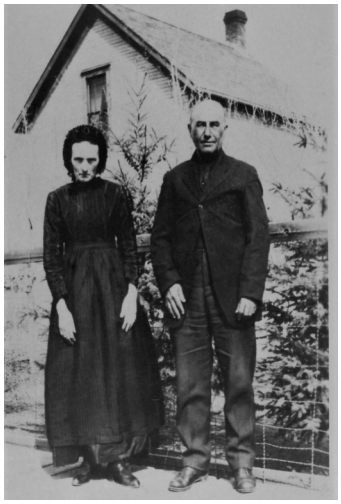
The Bergthaler Mennonites of the Hague Osler area, like their Old Colony Mennonite neighbors, came to Canada trusting that the Canadian federal Government would honor its agreement with them. That agreement was the *Privilegium* of 1873*,* that promised among other things, the freedom for Mennonites to conduct their own private schooling. By 1917, the enforcement of the *Saskatchewan School Attendance Act* convinced them otherwise. Since the majority of the Bergthalers did not live in villages but on their own homesteads, they had a more difficult time challenging the provincial authorities on sending their children to English public schools. Many chose to pay the fines for a short period of time. Some sent their children to the Old Colony German schools in the nearby villages but most chose to send their children to the public schools and tried to negotiate for more German teachers and more German instruction in the classroom. Being spread apart on the fringe of the Hague-Osler Reserve, they did not have the same power to influence government policy like their Old Colony neighbors or maintaining the unity of their own people to resist the schools.

The Move to Mexico

There was a small group under the leadership of Rev. Cornelius Epp that held fast to their resistance to the English public schools and

eventually moved to Mexico. Rev. Epp had come from Russia in 1891 and homesteaded near the Town of Rosthern. He was ordained as a minister in 1893 by Aeltester David Stoesz of Manitoba. In 1902, Aeltester Abram Doerksen came to Saskatchewan to ordain Epp as the new Aeltester of the Saskatchewan Bergthaler Church. The Bergthaler church went through a church split in 1908, causing Rev. Epp and a small group to form their own church. This group then continued to meet first at Rosthern, and from there to Aberdeen and Lost River before emigrating to Mexico. Rev Aron Zacharias who became the Bergthaler Aeltester following Epp, would eventually lead a larger group to Paraguay in 1926.

After negotiations with the government failed to bring any favorable results, delegates from the Saskatchewan Bergthaler and Manitoba Sommerfelder were sent in 1921 to Mexico and South America to search for a new home. These delegates returned home with favorable news from both Mexico and Paraguay. As a result of this, members of both the Bergthaler and Sommerfelder chose to immigrate to both countries. The two Saskatchewan delegates that were chosen to search for land were Rev. Jacob W. Neufeld and Rev. Johan Friesen. They left Saskatchewan in February, 1921 and returned home in July. The Manitoba delegates that travelled with them, then went to Mexico to explore land possibilities there.



Jacob W. and Helena (Neudorf) Neufeld

Johan and Helena (Neufeld) Friesen

Aeltester Abram Doerksen of Manitoba was the church leader who helped to establish and initially support both the Bergthaler and Sommerfelder churches in Saskatchewan. In 1891, he led a group that had separated from the Manitoba Bergthalers and had become known as the Sommerfelder Church. At the same time while this was happening, a group of his supporters moved to Saskatchewan and retained the name Bergthaler. For the next three decades, Rev. Doerksen would continue to be connected to his flock at Rosthern, Carrot River and at Herbert Saskatchewan, in a variety of ways. Up until 1913, he made frequent trips to these new settlements to provide pastoral care and help with the election and ordination of church leaders, as well as to conduct baptisms and communions.

In 1902, Rev. Doerksen conducted the ordination of Rev. Cornelius Epp as Aeltester. For the next six years Epp sought to unify the Bergthaler Church in the Saskatchewan Valley, that represented a wide variety of backgrounds and theological perspectives. In 1908, he lost the support of the majority of his members and even the efforts of Rev. Doerksen to help resolve the issues, were unsuccessful. Rev. Epp then left the Bergthaler Church and formed his own group, that eventually moved to Mexico.

In southern Saskatchewan there were two Sommerfelder settlements, one at Herbert and the other at Dunelm. Rev. Doerksen provided significant leadership and support there until local leadership was established. In 1907, he assisted in the ordination of two ministers, namely Rev. Johan Zacharias and his brother Rev. David Doerksen. In 1911, Rev. David Doerksen was ordained as Aeltester, making his trips to Saskatchewan less frequent.

Rev. Johan and Elizabeth (Rempel) Zacharias

Aeltester Abram Doerksen chose to move to the Santa Clara settlement located in Chihuahua Mexico.

Early in 1922, David A. Russek, a member of a banking family of Chihuahua and one of the heirs to the Hacienda Santa Clara, came to Manitoba to offer Santa Clara to the Sommerfelder. Because of this visit Aeltester Doerksen became a booster for the emigration to Mexico for a few reasons: First, if they settled in Santa Clara they would be relatively close to the existing Mennonite colonies founded by the Altkolonier (Old Colony). Second, emigration to Mexico entailed a relatively short journey overland, which could consume a much smaller portion of capital then would the likely journey to South America. Furthermore, and it is not to be denied that the thought was entertained by many, it was a step much less irrevocable than migration to South America. (1)

In the summer of 1922, a Manitoba Sommerfelder delegation,

purchased a tract of land of 12,000 acres of Hacienda Santa Clara, some 75 miles north of San Antonio (now Cd Cuahtemoc) and took over options on a further 50,000 acres. This became the site of the main Sommerfelder settlement. Jacob Sawatzky and Johan Fehr purchased land, over 3,000 acres privately closer to San Antonio (35 miles). They were joined by a number of other families to form the villages of Bergthal and Halbstadt. Eighteen families from Herbert, Saskatchewan founded the villages of Eichenfeld and Sommerfeld near Cusi, some 15 miles south of San Antonio.(2)

Further,

Like the Altkolonier (Old Colony), they chartered trains to transport themselves and their effects to Mexico. Three trains left southern Manitoba between October 16 and 11 November 1922. Their rail destination was Agua Nueva about 100 kms north of the city of Chihuahua on the Mexican National Railroad. From there a wagon road led some 40 miles up a canyon penetrating the Sierra del Nido, a range of the Sierra Madre Occidental, to their lands on Santa Clara. The group which chose to settle with Jacob Sawatzky and Johan Fehr on the 3,125 acres which those two had bought nearer San Antonio de los Arenales, chartered a separate train which carried them to San Antonio. The few remaining Sommerfelder from Saskatchewan chartered individual railroad cars which were coupled onto Altkolonier trains. Single families and small groups who followed later also attached their cars to Altkolonier trains. (3)

It is estimated that about 550 Sommerfelder people (about 80 % of the group) were from the Altona area and perhaps 50 from the Herbert-Gouldtown area in Saskatchewan.(4)

There was disagreement between two brothers:

In the fall of 1922, Aeltester Abram Doerksen visited the Saskatchewan communities under his care one last time before moving to Mexico, hoping to possibly recruit more to come and to say farewell to others. But he could not convince his own brother Aeltester David Doerksen of Herbert to move with him. David had wanted to move but after studying the papers he decided that there was something seriously wrong with the land deal they were proposing. He called it a "kromma Haundel." According to his son John, David landed up being right. When the Sommerfelder arrived in Mexico onto land they thought was theirs, they were greeted with men with revolvers and then told to get off their land.(5)

Epp family spouses.

The Mennonites who moved to Mexico settled in three different areas. Rev. Cornelius Epp joined together with the Herbert Sommerfelder under the leadership of Rev. Johan Zacharias, to move to the area near Cuahtemoc, Mexico. Epp settled on the

Sawatzky-Fehr land in the village of Bergthal and operated his church separate from the Santa Clara group. Rev. Zacharias moved to the Milpillas-Cusi settlement. The Friesen and Martens families from Aberdeen, Saskatchewan settled with the Sommerfelder at Santa Clara.

Three church leaders from the Herbert area landed up moving to Mexico. They were Rev. Johan Zacharias, Rev. Abram W. Goertzen and Deacon Aron Wall.

They all settled at Milpillas but the nearest post office and government offices were located at nearby Cusi. Milpillas was the site of the settlement but the location of the civil registry office for which they had to record the births, deaths and the municipal jurisdiction was at Cusi. (6)

The Mennonites at Cusi (Cusihuiriachic) faced a couple of significant challenges in settling there.

The continual influx of Altkolonier during 1923-24 steadily pushed back the limits of the land occupied by the Mennonites. This led to angry confrontation between them and the agraristas, with the latter disputing the Mennonites right to dispose them. Free ranging Mexican cattle repeatedly destroyed Mennonite crops. When the Altkolonier built a stout fence along the western boundary of the colony to keep these animals out, it was cut time and again. The actions of the Mexican country people must be regarded from dislike not so much of the Mennonites per se as of foreigners generally. They had been peons under the Spanish hacendados (hacienda owners) and more recently the mineros in the foreign owned mines such as that at Cusi, near the southern limit of the Mennonite Colony.(7)

The second challenge was that of growing crops.

The results of the Mennonites first cropping attempts were not encouraging. A series of reports during 1923 from Milpillas, near Cusi, a little south of the Manitoba Colony where the 18 Sommerfelder families from Saskatchewan had formed the villages of Eichenfeld and Sommerfeld late in 1922, gives a good indication of this problem. In April, they observed the agraristas planting corn, the Mennonites went to plant corn and potatoes. The seed either failed to germinate at all or if it did, the plants died long before the summer rains. (8)

So, they had much to learn about growing and marketing their crops.

The Saskatchewan Bergthaler maintained an ongoing relationship with their brothers and sisters at Santa Clara. After the death of Aeltester Abram Doerksen in 1929, Aeltester Cornelius Hamm from Hague was invited to come to Mexico to conduct the ordination of the new Aeltester Jacob Abrams, on the 17th of January, 1930.

The Return to Canada from Mexico

The emigrants faced many challenges in adjusting to life in Mexico. The climate, soil conditions, types of crops grown, access to markets, plus plain poverty and the challenge of having left the security of home were just too much. For most it was just too difficult and some decided to return to Canada. One can only imagine the feelings of sadness, frustration, failure, disappointment and anger, that must have accompanied them on their way back home.

The migration to Mexico had created a great deal of division in the church between those who moved and those who stayed. A Mr. Unger talked to Aeltester David Doerksen and was unhappy that Rev. Doerksen was not moving and said that he would never step over the threshold into the church again. But after a few years in Mexico, Mr. Unger did return to Canada and was one of the first to return to the Church. Rev. Abram Goertzen from Herbert also returned but there were those who were not in favor of having him serve again as a minister. A brotherhood meeting was held to discuss this issue. At this meeting, George Rycke, a Dutch-born public- school teacher who had married a Mennonite girl, spoke a very challenging message to the group, pleading with them to accept Goertzen back as a minister. His powerful message convinced them.(9)

Rev. Johan Zacharias returned to Canada in 1929, after seven years in Mexico. According to his son, he had very little opportunity to preach in Mexico. In 1930, they moved to the Meadow Lake area in

northern Saskatchewan. Here he died in 1954. There was no Sommerfelder church in the area.

Peter Dyck was a 21-year-old man that was part of the Saskatchewan move from Herbert to Mexico in 1922. Peter was interviewed by his grandson about the experiences he had in Mexico.

Peter's family settled near the dusty town of Cusi… he recalls that there were dogs and cats all running around, was the first impression of the place…with all of the mountains it was kind of strange country for us. It certainly was far removed from the frozen Saskatchewan prairie that they had left behind only weeks earlier. When the houses and barns were built, there was other work. Virgin prairie had to be broken and turned into fields ready for sowing. But then the disaster struck. The new immigrants believed their real estate agents had paid the upcoming mortgage installments from the sale of their Canadian land but soon they discovered that this had not happened and the payment was due. The grinding slide to poverty began and they were unable to escape it. Peter blames a lot of the problems on bad planning. "I think it wasn't figured out good enough", he said. We were too poor. So poor in fact that he can remember eating beans three times a day, sometimes trading chickens for beans with the local people. The problem was not with the land, although he thinks it would have been better if they had tried to grow crops that made more sense in Mexico, instead of wheat like they were accustomed to in the Ukraine and Canada. The real problem was their finances. They simply did not have enough money to make a go of it. It also didn't help that they couldn't find local jobs. …and then after a scorching July, torrential rains arrived and with them came what Peter calls the change of climate, a devastating sickness that mowed down Mennonites like wheat in harvest. The water table rose so high, it was difficult to keep the graves bailed out long enough to perform the ceremonies and get the caskets in the ground…. Finally, Peter had enough. "I couldn't see how we could make a living there he said. I really don't think it was a country for me. (10)

In the fall of 1922, the Friesen and Martens families moved from Aberdeen to Santa Clara Mexico with 8 train cars of house effects, machinery and livestock. Peter Hamm was 10 years old at the time and moved there with his mother Maria (Boese Hamm) and step-father Johan Friesen. Peter's father had drowned when he was a small child and his extended Friesen family decided to emigrate. His Mother told him, *Wie hearen too dee Derkses Jemeend enn wie trakjen no Mexico* (we belong to the Doerksen Church and we are moving to Mexico). They lived in the village of Silberfeld in the Santa Clara Colony for nearly four years, where they experienced extreme poverty; their tents were stolen and their cattle died of starvation. They returned to Canada in 1926. When they left Canada, they had sold their land on a verbal agreement but never got paid for it. They were very fortunate, though, because his birth father, Jacob Hamm, had a homestead south of Aberdeen and his uncle had paid the taxes on this land and looked after it while they were gone. So, they had a piece of land when they returned. Peter was very grateful for the people that extended compassion to those in need. But tragedy followed them back to Canada, when 5 years later his step-father Johan Friesen was accidently killed when the traincar he was riding on to Carrot River to look for homestead land, overturned. Peter lived a full and rich life, dying in Manitoba at the age of 103.

Peter J. and Margaret (Funk) Friesen

The Emigration to Paraguay

Four years after the emigration to Mexico, another group of Bergthaler made the move south to the Chaco in Paraguay. In the period of time following the move to Mexico, the Provincial Government had continued to put a lot of pressure on Mennonites to attend the public schools by imposing heavier fines and jail sentences, and seizing assets. Aeltester Aron Zacharias and the other Bergthaler church leaders were very concerned about the school situation and how that would impact the

future of their young people.

As a young man, Heinrich A. Dyck served as a translator or interpreter between the Saskatchewan Government Department of Education officials and the leadership of the Bergthaler Church. The government people came to see if the Mennonites would teach English in their schools at least a half hour per day. The ministers under Aeltester Zacharias refused, because he said "if you give one finger, they would take the whole hand". The ministers did not trust the promises of the government leaders. They felt that if they would learn English, they would be lost to the world and adopt the values of the people about them and in particular would want to fight in wars like the rest and that pretty soon a half day would not be enough to satisfy these government people. The government leaders told the ministers through their translator Dyck, that there was a lot of pressure from veterans who came back from the war, that Mennonites should also have to learn English. So, if Mennonites would even have just a half hour per day that this would be satisfied. The church leaders said no, so the government leaders said that the next time the demand would be even more stringent. And it was, for the next time they demanded one day a week be taught in English. Then the order came that all public schools would be shut down and parents were forced to send their children to public schools. (11)

Rev. Aron and Margaretha (Bergen) Zacharias

The delegates that were sent from the church had explored Paraguay and preferred it because of its more stable political climate as opposed to Mexico. Rev. Johan Friesen and Rev. Jacob W. Neufeld had been chosen to 'spy out the land' and were given a good reception by the Paraguayan Government and their requests were basically met. The land was to their liking and suitable for agriculture. The government would also allow them to have their own schools with their own curriculum and would not require Mennonites to do military service. The delegates brought back positive news and so the people began preparing for the move.

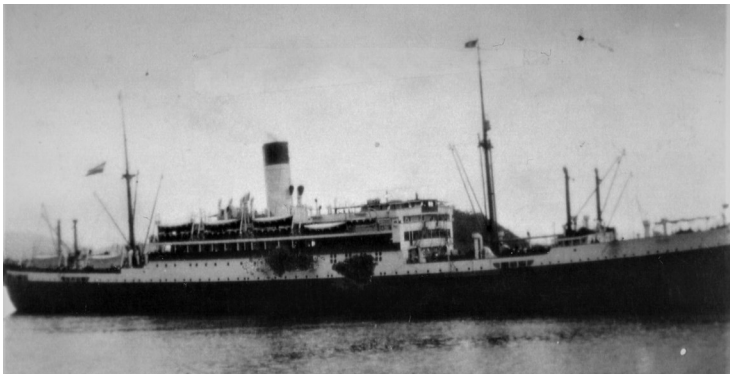
Mr. Peter I. Dyck writes about this move to South America as being

...a very exciting and emotional episode of my life. Never will I forget these days, weeks and months of endless trips and many meetings by day and by night. On top of that the enormous expenses and responsibilities incurred, not to mention the ridicule and mockery we had to put up with, flung upon us by our own brethren in Christ. They could not and would not comprehend the motive behind this venture. Very disheartening. And on-the-other-hand, the support and uplift we received from other brethren was a very heartening boost in this undertaking. (12)

Peter I. Dyck family

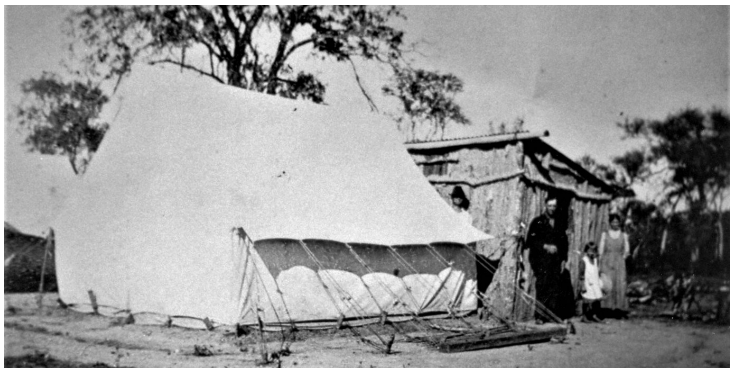
On December 14, 1926, the train in Osler was boarded for Paraguay. It was a bitterly cold day accompanied by a sharp northwest wind. The group was led by Aeltester Aron Zacharias, Rev Abram Bergen and Deacon Heinrich Dyck. Painful goodbyes were said to friends and relatives for no one knew if they would see one another again. The party left Osler for Winnipeg where three more cars were added to the train by Manitoba Mennonites. From there the trip proceeded in several stages: by train to New York, from New

York to Buenos Aires, from Buenos Aires by smaller boat to Asuncion and from Asuncion by boat to Puerto Casado, which they finally reached on 16 January 1927, after over four weeks of travel. The sea journey went pretty well in spite of the fact that some people became very seasick. There were two deaths at sea. The Bergthaler group comprised a total of 31 families (195 persons) and was the second group to reach Paraguay. Four families from the East Reserve in Manitoba also travelled with this second group.(13)



SS Western World ship from New York to Paraguay

When the families arrived in Puerto Casado they were in for a long wait. The land had been bought and paid for but they could not move onto it. The railroad going inland was not completed and as a result they had no way of moving to their land. The men and several families moved out to the land but



Rev. Cornelius A. Neufeld home in Porto Casado.

the majority of the people remained in their tent settlement outside of Puerto Casado. The men who went out measured the fields and village plots in preparation for the move. This time of waiting created dissatisfaction and disharmony among the various groups. The people had no income and no way of earning any either. Most people held auctions before they left Canada but this money had paid for their trip to Paraguay and left them barely enough to get started on their farms. It was not, however, enough to support them for a long period of time. The ticket to Paraguay, including the ship passage and the train fare, cost in excess of two hundred dollars per person. Meals had been provided on the ship but not on the train.

After eight months in their tent settlement at Puerto Casado, many had become bitter and disillusioned and the group became quite divided. Some prepared to move back to Canada. The dream of settling in a new land had faded. Those who wanted to return home had to borrow money to do so; substantial sums of money were sent from Saskatchewan to help the settlers at Puerto Casado but it was not enough. Many also could not stand the heat; the change was just too great. Most of the settlers would have stayed if they could have moved to their land right away. Mr. Peter I. Dyck writes:

A thought came to me - how is it humanly possible after putting so much energy, time and effort into such a gigantic project and then to sacrifice everything and turn our backs on it? Here we anticipated we had followed the leading of God in this venture. (14)

During this period of waiting from 1927 to May 1928, an epidemic broke out which resulted in a total of 18 deaths. One hundred and twenty persons died at Puerto Casado while the other forty-seven died on the way to or at the settlements in the following places: Pozo Azul, Hoffnungsfeld, Palo Planco and Loma Plata. Aeltester Aron Zacharias who led the Saskatchewan group died in Paraguay in October of 1927.

Jacob K. Peters and his wife Sarah moved from the village of Schoenwiese (northwest of Osler) to Paraguay in 1926. Mr. Peters was 70 years old at the time and one of his neighbors asked him why such an old man would want to move to Paraguay, to which he replied, *they are taking me along to scare away the wild apes!* He was the local chiropractor and blacksmith and had a wonderful sense of humor. Both he and his wife never made it to their new home but died in Puerto Casado.

The Franz Ens family also moved from Schoenwiese to Paraguay. Franz was married to Katharina Peters, (the sister to Jacob K), who died in Saskatchewan on January 9, 1926. They had thirteen children of which 9 grew to be adults. Franz then remarried to widow Anna Niessen in July, 1926, who had a family of eleven children. The wedding took place on the Ens farm in Schoenwiese where they continued to live until December 1926, when they moved to South America. On August 1, 1926, Justina Ens, the daughter of Franz, was married to Johan Hildebrandt in a wedding planned prior to her father's wedding. The next morning after the wedding, Johan was kicked by a horse and died 2 days later. His funeral took place one week following his wedding to Justina. Only one of Franz Ens's children made the move to Paraguay with him and this was his daughter Katharina, who was married to Jacob Goertzen. Katharina died on February 7, 1927, of a sun stroke less than a month after arrival in Paraguay. Her husband Jacob and his 5 children stayed in Paraguay where they farmed and operated a brick making business. Franz Ens Sr. died on May 26, 1928 in Puerto Casado and was also buried in the Catholic cemetery in Puerto Casado with his daughter Katharina.(15)

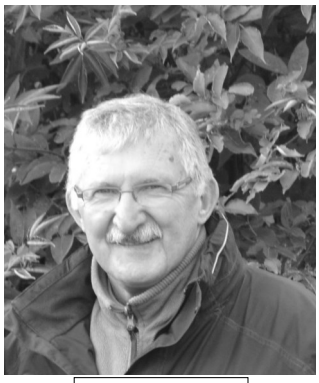
Johan and Sarah (Peters) Wall

Approximately 375 people who returned to Canada found life to be very difficult as well because they had disposed of all their property before leaving for Paraguay. Some stayed with relatives or on abandoned farms until enough money could be raised to begin anew. Very few returnees had enough money to purchase a farm near their former homes. Shortly after their arrival back in Saskatchewan, news came from the Meadow Lake area saying that inexpensive farmland could be purchased there. By the early 1930s, others moved with friends and neighbors to land near Mullingar and Carrot River. One door had closed and now another one had opened, offering renewed hope.

About 1,200 of the 1,763 Mennonites who emigrated from Canada to Paraguay eventually made it to the land. The new settlement was called Menno Colony and the first village to be set up by the Saskatchewan Mennonites was named Bergthal. The start was slow and required a lot of hard work and patience. Despite all the setbacks, adjustments were made over time and Paraguay became their new home.

Footnotes/Endnotes

1. Leonard Sawatzky. *They Sought a Country,* University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles Published 1971, p. 51
2. Adolf Ens.article, "Sommerfeld Mennonites at Santa Clara, Mexico,"in *Church, Family and Village*, MMHS Vol#3, 2001, p. 183
3. Sawatzky, opcit p. 59
4. Jacob E. Peters, article, "Aeltester Abram Doerksen (1852-1929)",in *Church, Family and Village, MMHS Vol#3, 2001, p. 121*
5. Rev. John Doerksen interview by Leonard Doell, on 19 September, 2013
6. Bruce Wiebe, email correspondence with Leonard Doell, 2022-04-01
7. Sawatzky, opcit p. 69
8. Sawatzky, ibid, p. 117
9. John Doerksen, opcit,
10. Bruce Dyck, article "New Life in Mexico", *Western People Magazine, 3 July 1997, p. 7*
11. Heinrich A. Dyck, Interview with Leonard Doell, 31 January 1983
12. Peter I. Dyck, *My Life's Inventory,* a diary finished 9 January 1949
13. Leonard Doell. *The Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Saskatchewan*, CMBC Publishers, Winnipeg, Manitoba 1987, p. 30
14. Peter I. Dyck, opcit
15. Jack Friesen. *Ens Family History*, self-published.



Leonard Doell

About the writer: Leonard Doell was raised in Warman, Saskatchewan where he received his schooling. He attended Swift Current Bible Institute, and Canadian Mennonite Bible College. He worked for Mennonite Central Committee (Sask) for 25 years working especially on First Nations issues. Leonard has written several books and many articles on Mennonite history. He is married to Tina Janzen Fehr. They have several children and grandchildren. They currently live on a farm near Aberdeen.

Mennonites from the Swift Current Mennonite Reserve Migrate to Mexico

by Henry A. Friesen

The sun rose bright and clear that spring morning on Wilhelm and Katharina Rempel's farm in Rosenhof. Today they would be seeing off many families who were moving to Mexico. Katharina got up early, milked the cows before making breakfast and waking her five-year-old son Wilhelm so that he could eat and get ready for the trip into town. She had dreaded this day for months–ever since it became clear that her Mom, Dad, and all of her siblings, except Bernhard, had decided to move to Mexico. The questions filled her mind even as she worked in the kitchen. Why did they have to go? Wasn't life getting better here in Rosenhof where she lived and seven miles away in Rhineland (the original spelling was Reinland but it changed decades later) where they lived? What would she ever do without her Mom and Dad close by? She knew she would miss her brothers and sisters very much.

Suddenly one-year-old Helena started to fuss, so she went to pick her up and came back to have breakfast with her husband who had been getting the horses and buggy ready to go. Neither one said much as both were busy with their own thoughts. She packed a lunch, making sure she had diapers and blankets for Helena and some extra blankets for themselves as the air was chilly this morning–who knew if they would need to spend the night somewhere on their way back.

The drive into town was uneventful but as soon as they got near the train station Katharina felt herself tremble and tears welled up. They spotted some members of her family busily loading their suitcases, boxes, and furniture onto the train. When she saw her parents, she started to cry. It was so hard to see them leave. For the rest of the afternoon, she and her husband helped where they could while various nieces came to take care of the baby and young Wilhelm ran around with his cousins.

Finally, everyone had to board the train. Aeltester Abram Wiebe gathered everyone and, encouraging them to have faith in God, led them in a prayer. The crowd of Mennonites, those who were staying and those who were going, all began to sing: "Nun danket alle Gott" (Now Thank We All Our God). It was too much–Katharina burst into tears once more and then hugged her mother, father, and sisters fiercely. Auf Wiedersehen (until we see you again) they said to each other even though Katharina had the sinking feeling that this would not happen. In her heart she felt as if this was a final good-bye... (excerpt from *Open Wide Your Heart* by the author).

When *Aeltester* (Bishop) Johann Wiebe (1837-1905) and *Obervorsteher* (Chief Administrator) Franz Froese Sr. (1845-1913) led the efforts of the Reinlaender Mennonite Association (RMA) to establish a new reserve southeast of Swift Current, Saskatchewan in 1904, did they envision that less than twenty years later they might witness a poignant scene such as the one portrayed above? Did they think that this new reserve would be fractured by a dispute with the government about schooling? I think probably not; their vision was to obtain land for their growing population and to secure exclusive homesteading rights to it in order to develop a spiritual community, separate from the world as they were convinced the Bible taught.

Unfortunately, just like the Hague-Osler Reserve near Saskatoon and the West Reserve in Manitoba, the Swift Current Mennonite Reserve (hereafter the SCMR or Reserve) would face the issue of schooling: their own German-language schools vs the public, English schools mandated by the government of the day. The practical

outcome of that conflict would result in fully one-third of the Reserve's families migrating to Mexico from 1922 to 1927. (The reader will find a fuller description of this story in the author's book: *The Swift Current Mennonite Reserve 1904-1927.*)

Immediately on finalizing the negotiations for the new reserve (1904), the RMA was flooded with applications for homesteads. Typical of the hundreds of Mennonites who took the settlers' trains from Manitoba to the SCMR a year or two later (1905-6) were Bernhard (b. 1860) and Helena Rempel, members of the Reinlaender Gemeinde in Manitoba since their arrival from South Russia in 1879. It was an opportunity not only for them to acquire a homestead but for their five oldest children to do the same; Peter, Bernhard (b. 1885), Helena (married to Franz Peters), Gerhard, and Franz all settled in the new village of Rhineland. (Katharina, from the story above, was among the younger group in the family; she was twelve or thirteen when her family left Manitoba.)

Rhineland was only one of the villages where homesteading activity took place in those first years: similar work was going on in Schoenfeld, Blumenhof, Blumenort, Schoenwiese, and Chortitz. All of these became what Richard J. Friesen calls organized villages in that they adopted a strict pattern of development in which equal sized acreages complete with typical house-barns stood on either side of a common central road. Together with ten other *unorganized*but vibrant villages, three large churches established in Schoenfeld (1906), Reinfeld (1909?) and Rhineland (1912) and a German school in each of the villages, the future looked bright for the SCMR.

The Aeltester of the Reserve, Johann Wiebe, until his death in 1905 were followed by his sons Peter and then Abram (the first to actually live on the Reserve), together with the supporting ministers, provided the spiritual oversight for the new community. They were convinced that the spiritual life of the community was paramount and that through the churches and the German schools both adults and children on the Reserve would learn all the things necessary to live a life that conformed to the community's vision; these institutions were vitally important to the identity of the Reserve. They also felt that having control of their own schooling – taught in German and using their own curriculum – was guaranteed by the *Privilegium* (agreement conferring special exemption) signed with the Government of Canada in 1873.

Helped by the general oversight of Franz Froese Sr. (who lived in Manitoba) and the local Vorsteher (Local Administrator) from each of the villages, the SCMR by 1920 boasted sixteen stable villages and 4, four-cornered communities. When the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) built two branch lines – in 1912 the Vanguard line running N-S and in 1924, the Shamrock line running E-W – shipping grain and other farm products from the SCMR to the larger commercial centres such as Swift Current became much easier. Except for the usual vagaries of grain farming on the prairies, the SCMR grew well and experienced harmony. It was from this position of strength and well-being that they encountered the question of public schooling which challenged the very essence of their vision. To this subject we must now turn.

A few years after its formation as a province in 1905, the Government of Saskatchewan sought to establish a uniform, province-wide, English-taught, public school system. When by 1915 it became clear that the Mennonites on the SCMR were unwilling to participate in this process, the Department of Education took direct action and over the objections of the leaders of the Mennonites, created nine school districts on SCMR lands between August 1918 and March 1919: Flora, Amphion, Clemenceau, Flowerville, Balfour, Maharg, Falkland, Iris, and Versailles.

The story of Gustave Schlamp who lived in the Flora School District north of the village of Rhineland colourfully illustrates the resistance to the government's efforts exercised by members of the Mennonite community. Schlamp attended a meeting called by Inspector W.S. Kram for the express purpose of forming a local school board in the newly formed school district. It was 1920 and Schlamp's child was the only one who had attended the public school that had been built near his farm the previous year. When Schlamp was asked if he would agree to be on the board he replied

(through an interpreter), *they would pull the hair out of my head if I would.* (Caswell, 2006)!

Because the Mennonites were reluctant to serve as trustees, Kram himself became the sole trustee for six of these new school districts. His next step was to insist that a school be built in each of the newly formed districts. At first the Department of Education sought permission from the SCMR to build these schools in the villages but in another act of resistance most villages refused this as well. Where permission to build a school in a village was denied, the Department resorted to expropriating a few acres for schools in a location that was **near** a village. As a result, Lens East, Lens West, Flora, Iris, Balfour, and Versailles schools were built a mile or two outside the villages rather than within them.

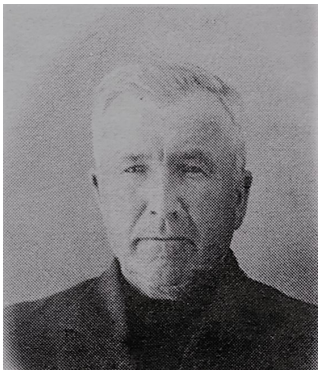
Already in 1917, the Government of Saskatchewan had passed the School Attendance Act making clear that school attendance was not optional for those who had a public school nearby – German schools did not count. To avoid prosecution, some families resorted to having their children live outside the school districts and come home on weekends, or they moved the entire family to an area that did not have a public school nearby. For most families though this was not an option and when they refused (or could not afford) to pay the fines, they were subject to jail time or having their goods and property confiscated and sold in order to make up for the unpaid fines.

Adolf Ens provides poignant details of the prosecutions that were carried out. He reports that in 1919 at least twenty-eight men from the Reserve were fined in three separate court actions, some paying their fines and others refusing to do so. In 1922 five school districts on the SCMR–Flora, Amphion, Clemenceau (Blumenhof), Versailles, and Iris - amassed 645 prosecutions and 528 convictions. Furthermore, the Mennonites on the reserve were so frustrated and angry that they even refused to accept any seed grain or other relief from the municipal officials (Ens, 1994).

The Rural Municipalities Association and the Swift Current branch of the Great War Veterans' Association were two local groups that sided fully with the government's hard-line position vis à vis the private German schools. Yet there were those public figures who spoke out in support of the Mennonites. Businessman W.W. Cooper of Swift Current, for example, communicated with Saskatchewan's Premier Martin on this matter noting that some families were in dire straits because of the fines they had to pay. Cooper suggested that there be a two-year halt to the fines to give people time to emigrate, should they choose to do so. His proposal fell on deaf ears.

At the same time as families were refusing to send their children to school, Aeltesters and ministers from the Hague-Osler Reserve and from Manitoba were petitioning their respective government officials to reconsider their right to private schooling. When these had no effect, Aeltester Abram Wiebe from the SCMR added his own petition to the provincial government on January 7, 1922. In addition to arguing that the *Privilegium* of 1873 guaranteed them the freedom to conduct their own schools, the numerous petitions by Reinlaender-Old Colony leaders argued that the responsibility for teaching their own children was *a matter of conscience* and *the state* had no right to interfere in this matter. The Government of course disagreed, arguing that the children would be full citizens one day and therefore the state must prepare them for that. The two visions were incompatible.

When no concessions were forthcoming, all three Reserves (the SCMR, the Hague-Osler of Saskatchewan and the West Reserve of Manitoba) chose delegates and gave them the task of exploring land options for the purpose of resettling their community. From August of 1919 until August of 1921, they participated in eight land-seeking trips. Although not all trips involved the same personnel, these delegates travelled to Quebec (the only option they explored within Canada), to Argentina, Brazil, Mississippi (USA), and, to Mexico. Meanwhile Aeltester Wiebe continued to encourage the people on the SCMR, that moving would demonstrate their faithfulness to



David Rempel was a delegate sent to search for land in Mexico in 1921.

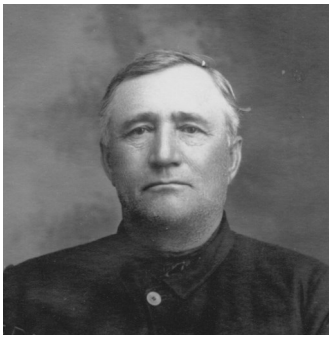
God and to their baptismal vows. His view was similar to that of the Aeltester in Manitoba, Johann Friesen, who *challenged the people to accept anew the tribulations required of all people […] Suffering was necessary for the testing and refining of the church* (Epp, 1982). The search for a new area or country however was fraught with disappointments until finally Mexico offered them the land and the assurances they sought.

When it became clear that Mexico would be their destination, those from the SCMR who wanted to migrate were faced with the challenge of selling their land. Recognizing that having all of their land for sale at the same time would decrease its value the leaders of the Reserve were pleased when the opportunity came to sell all their holdings to an American company for five million dollars. Unfortunately, the land-holding company was unable to come up with the money to consummate the deal which then pushed the RMA to take legal action on behalf of the SCMR to recover the deposit money they had given to the real estate company. Both Epp and Ens record that the SCMR loss was huge - a forfeiture of 10,200 acres of land in lieu of a settlement of $222,000 and court costs. With the joint sale for all the farms now impossible, every family had to sell their own land. The whole process left the would-be immigrants deeply disappointed and with very little money from the sale of their land in Saskatchewan to help pay for the land and the farming start-up costs in Mexico.

Despite these challenges, one third of the Mennonites from the SCMR chose to migrate doing so over a period of five years from 1922 to 1927. Franz Peters of Rhineland noted that 13 trains left Swift Current carrying a total of 1,892 people bound for Mexico (Rempel, 2017). The eight-day trip ended at the cattle station in San Antonio de los Arenales (now called Cuauhtémoc) in the Mexican province of Chihuahua.

The emigration of this contingent of families from the SCMR deeply affected those members of the Reserve who stayed. One effect was that the land vacated by those who migrated to Mexico became available at a low price because the migrating farmers were in no position to demand a high price. This benefitted both the well-off residents on the Reserve and the incoming *Russlaender* (Mennonites who fled Russia in the 1920s) who wanted to begin farming. In addition, the land-holding company that was awarded land by the Court chose to rent some of it to farmers in the area. In one case though the company first had to fight for that land; Bernhard Rempel (b. 1885), whose younger sister we met in the opening story, hired a lawyer to retain ownership of his farm buildings and land, but the legal decision went against him.

As well as these material impacts, the exodus of Aeltester Abram Wiebe, Rev. Julius Wiebe (Rhineland), Rev. Schmidt, and the Vorsteher had a destabilizing spiritual and social impact. Moreover, the Altester took with him the church records–a tangible and powerful symbol that their Gemeinde was no longer on the Swift Current Reserve in Saskatchewan. However, during the years in which trainloads of Mennonites from the Reserve migrated to Mexico, church leaders from the Swift Current Colony in Mexico came up once or twice a year to the SCMR to conduct baptismal classes and serve communion. These services were helpful but were not an adequate substitute for the weekly services and steady encouragement of leaders *in their midst.* After 1927 the people on the SCMR were very much on their own and had to live with the message that had been communicated to them by those same leaders: *you are being influenced by the world and are not maintaining a true faith.*



Rev. Julius Wiebe was an Old Colony minister and served as a delegate to Mexico in 1921.

In *Patchwork of Memories* (1985) a few of the village and family histories lament the loss of their Reinlaender-Old Colony Church. Jacob and Susanna Knelsen of Chortitz recall how there were no church services for a number of years. Members of the village therefore asked Rev. Peter Dyck and Rev. Abraham Peters from the Sommerfeld Church in Dunelm, to come and serve them.

Perhaps the most troubling consequence of the

Mexican migration (but also the most difficult to quantify) was the personal pain and loss experienced by those who stayed on the SCMR. Often siblings were divided over the issue of emigration as were adult children and their parents. As noted in the opening scene of this article my maternal grandmother, Katharina Rempel, was deeply affected. In her family it was only her older brother Bernhard Rempel (b. 1885) and his wife Maria (Teichroeb) who chose to stay in Canada. Her parents (Bernhard (b. 1860) and Helena) and all the rest of her siblings – many of whom had lived in nearby Rhineland, Saskatchewan – moved to Mexico in April of 1923.

In 1929, six years after they had moved to Mexico, her father wrote the following to Katharina's husband Wilhelm:

We greatly pity you, and your children are receiving a great loss through the worldly schools. The scriptures say that when the prophecy is completed, the nation becomes wild and desolate. You write in your letter, that if Paul should travel through the congregations, he would have to say to you, as he once wrote to the Galatians: 'You have begun in the Spirit, do you want to finish in the flesh?'

Yes, there are people here who write to you, if they had not already moved here; they would not do so now. When we began the emigration, we all thought unanimously, that we could no longer stay there because of the worldly schools, but now it seems that the worldly schools are no longer a hindrance; but it is written in the scriptures, that if one knows the scriptures from childhood, it can lead to salvation. But when children instead of the scriptures learn the worldly caricatures in worldly schools, it cannot lead to salvation, and when they have completed learning, they are no longer valuable to Mennonitism. They are wild children, and who is to blame for that? The door has been opened for us to flee.

It is not hard to imagine that there were some pointed discussions within the Rempel families long before this letter was written when all of them were living within ten miles of each other.

The migration to Mexico was a difficult chapter in the life of the Swift Current Mennonite Reserve. The conflict over schooling was painful for all of them, both those who moved and those who chose to stay; it brought tensions and clashes in families and individuals alike. The subsequent upheaval brought on by the search for new land, the fiasco of the failed land deal, and the departure of key leaders was deeply distressing. It would be years before either those who stayed or those who migrated reached a level of comfort and well-being.

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Henry A. Friesen of Regina has written two family histories: *Johann Friesen of Poland and His Descendants* and *Open Wide Your Heart* and, more recently, a short history book entitled *The Swift Current Mennonite Reserve 1904-1927.* He can be contacted at hefriesen@accesscomm.ca.

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Henry A. Friesen

Henry A. Friesen was born in Swift Current, SK, and until age 12 lived on a farm near the village of Rosenhof. During his working life, he was a teacher, a plumber, a church minister, and a building manager. He received his BA from the U of Regina and his MDiv from the Canadian Theological Seminary. He lives in Regina with his wife Eleanor; they have three children and four grandchildren.

Mexico Mennonite Stories

by Dick Braun

Mennonites have been moving from one place to another and from one country to another for hundreds of years. Such movements have happened many times since the middle of the 16th Century. When we look at various migrations and try to make connections between those who have left and those who have stayed behind, it is possible to make important linkages. We can call this phenomenon the *Mennonite Circle*. When we leave our Canadian home, for example, and go to a second country where there are Mennonites, we can ask several questions. We can ask where someone came from, and who their parents and grandparents are. Soon we are playing the *Mennonite Game* where we make associations between families, villages and churches. With this method we can find out if there are common relatives or places amongst. My wife Kathy and I worked in Bolivia and this was a common thing for us to do when we would meet Mennonites from any colony. My article concentrates mainly on Old Colony Mennonites over the past one hundred years.

One such encounter involves Gerhard Redekkop. I was involved in helping to establish an irrigation project in Durango Colony in Bolivia around 2005. There were several young men that came to our Centro Menno office to ask for money to buy some irrigation equipment. I said that I would need to talk to the *Vorsteher* (mayor, director) of the colony before we would go any further. The *Vorsteher* came in and we talked about various possibilities. I asked his name and he said that he was Gerhard Redekop. I asked if he came from Durango, Mexico and his answer was yes. I asked if he was familiar with Canada and where his grandparents had lived before moving to Mexico. He did not know where they had come from. I then asked what his father's name was and he replied it was Gerhard. I asked for his grandfather's name and he replied that it was also Gerhard. After another question I learned his great grandfather was David. Then I believed I had found the link that I was looking for. But I kept asking more questions. I asked if his great uncles were short sighted and had used thick glasses. He replied yes. Then I asked if they had blacksmithing skills. Again, he answered yes. I told him that his great grandparents had come from the village of Neuhorst in Saskatchewan and they had been the neighbors to my grandparents. Well, this was the beginning of a very good friendship. My father, David Braun, had often talked about the neighbors north of their place. He had been good friends with the Redekop boys. He told me many details about their growing up years: thick eye glasses, blacksmithing skills and an ability to repair almost anything. When we visited the Redekops in their home we were treated like family. Later on, after we had worked together on the project, Gerhard made the comment that working together felt like we could be brothers. Gerhard

Braun delegation

told me of how his father Gerhard Redekop was a delegate to a meeting where the decision was made to go to Paraguay to look for new land to

move to. His father had become good friends with the then President Stroessner. When the Durango group moved to Paraguay, President Stroessner came to the colony to visit and to stay with them. The President repeated this many times as he liked the food and the Mennonite hospitality.

This brings to mind another story about a Mrs. Maria (Gerhard) Enns (nee Rempel and granddaughter of Aeltester Johann Loeppky). Leonard Doell (who has recently retired from 35 years of service at MCC Sask) and I traveled to the colony of La Honda, Mexico. Our host was Abram Bergen and he knew all the people in the colony. Abram also knew some history and so we started to visit people in the colony. We saw a distant Berg relative of mine. Then Abram said I had another person to introduce him to. We arrived at the house of Mrs. Enns and she was the granddaughter to Aeltester Johan Loeppky. I got out of the vehicle and said hello and asked if she could see that I was part Loeppky. She looked at me starting from my feet up to my eyes and answered yes. Then she invited me to visit! The way she looked at me and the way she talked reminded me so much of her uncle John Loeppky and his son Jake Loeppky. It was so good to connect with the descendants of Aeltester Johann Loeppky. A few years before this, I had met this lady's sister, Mrs. Margaretha Franz Guenter in Bolivia who looked like her and was as hospitable as this lady.

The Peters - Friesen story is as interesting as many other migration stories. If we could only have a record about the many moves that our people made to different countries and those who decided to return. These stories would give us a glimpse into the lives and the decisions that were made and why these decisions were made. Johan Peters from Reinfeld, Saskatchewan (northeast of Hague) decided to join the group of Reinlaender Mennonites from the Hague area that were moving to the Durango area in Mexico. Their son Peter was 22 years old when he moved to Mexico with them in 1924. This is the story that he told to his daughter Tina in 1980.

Some years earlier, I had met David Friesen who was the grandson of Herman Friesen who had moved from Blumenheim to Mexico in the 1920s. The Friesens had left behind a very well-built house and barn and a big machine shed. There was also a well, established fruit garden and many Manitoba Maple trees on their yard. David talked about the memories that his father had of their yard and the surrounding landscape. He had talked about all the many trips that they had made down to the river which was less than a mile away. One other thing that stuck in David's mind was his father talking about picking wild strawberries. I invited David to come to Saskatchewan and told him I would host him and his wife and that we would retrace his father footsteps. The day came when David called me to say he had arrived and was ready to go on the promised tour. David and his wife and another couple in Osler joined us. We began by going north because they had an idea that the ladies would see the Hague Museum and be dropped off at a place in Schoenwiese and then we men would continue on our way to Blumenheim. I was telling them all about Johan P. Wall and the house-barn at the museum and a few other stories when all of a sudden, the ladies had a change of mind and wanted to continue on with us. So off we went to Neuanlage to see the Old Colony church and a bit of the village. We drove into Blumenheim and pulled onto the yard that David's grandparents had left behind all those many years ago. Ann Peters lives there now and she was about to leave. I talked to Ann and explained to her who was here and the purpose of our visit. She said her door was open and that all were welcome to look around. David was thrilled to be able to see the place that his father had talked about with such wonderful memories. We found the house to be almost unchanged from when the Friesens had lived there. We drove to Osler to have supper at the restaurant. I asked the group if they were into having kjielkje and farmer sausage. This turned out to be a hit. I asked David if there was anything else on his list and he said that his father had talked about picking wild strawberries. After supper we drove east out of Osler towards Blumenheim and stopped to check for berries. We were in luck as we had not walked more than 10 feet and there were the berries in the ditch. David said this was a thrill of a life time. I also had a lot of pleasure in connecting the dots and families

and the circle of life.

Leonard Doell and I had the privilege of visiting a Mennonite colony near Durango, Mexico and found many people whose forefathers had come from the Hague Osler area. One such person was Mr. Jacob Friesen who was more than 90 years old. While visiting with him we soon found out that he was fluent in English. We asked more questions and also learned that he had attended the German English Academy in Rosthern now known as Rosthern Junior College (RJC). His teacher had been none other than David Toews (1870-1947). David Toews was the founder of RJC around 1905, and later became the Aeltester of the Conference Mennonites. Today they are referred to as belonging to the Mennonite Church Canada Conference He told us that his father had also attended the College. He talked very highly of David Toews and his teaching skills. He brought out a copy of *The Mennonite* from about 1954 with a picture of David Toews on the front page where he had made a notation *The Moses of today*. The one question that has been in my mind for some time is: *how was it that such well educated people would join a group of people and move to Mexico when most of them were rebelling against the education system?*

When you are visiting a Mennonite Colony in Mexico it is a must to go to the store in the Colony. Here you will meet men from many different villages. We went to the store in Colony Durango where I met some of Johann P. Wall's great grandsons. They soon asked me if I knew this man. I replied yes and the discussion went off into historical things. They knew things about him that were new to me, and I could tell them some things that were new to them. They were very interested to learn that the house-barn that Mr. Johann P. Wall had built in the village of Hochfeldt, was now standing on the yard at the Hague, Saskatchewan Museum as a permanent structure with the clay oven in it restored. The one difference in the house-barn from 1924 to 2005 is that today it is painted whereas when Mr. Wall left, it had not been painted. They asked if it was possible to get pictures of the house-barn and I replied that it was possible. One of these Wall men was a school teacher.

The name, *Swift Current,* has been around for a long time. It was near this creek and town that Mennonite people settled starting in 1905. The name has been used for a colony in Mexico and also in Bolivia. One day when we were traveling through Swift Colony, we decided to stop in at Aeltester Klassen's house for a visit. He was a person who was very interested in history. We got into the topic of the name, *Swift Current*. He was very interested to hear that the name came from Canada and from a place in Saskatchewan. The name was given to the creek by the Cree people long before any white person had seen it. A problem arose when the settlers learned that the creek and the river it flowed into had the same name, namely *Kisiskaciwan* meaning *swift flowing water*. The settlers then renamed the creek, *Swift Current*. The river was later named *Saskatchewan* which is a close version of the Cree name.

The interesting thing about Mennonites who name new villages is that they will use names of places and villages from where they came. There are names like Chortitza, Neuhorst, Reinland, and Waldheim, to name a few. I asked a Vorsteher about this and his answer was that this way people feel at home and don't long to move back to where they came from. We have also found many letters in the newspaper, *Steinbach Post*, where family members tell the left-behind members that they should consider moving. Mennonites have been on the move and one of the last countries they have moved to is Peru in South America. Will there be a day when our Low German speaking Mennonites will be farming as neighbors with our Black Mennonites in a country in Africa? The Low German speaking Mennonites are continuously looking for new frontiers to move to.

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The author, Dick Braun, has retired but continues to work causally doing repairs for a furniture manufacturing business in Osler, Sask. He has been a mechanic, a business owner, a farmer, and a tool sales representative. He and his wife Kathy have served with MCC in Bolivia. He is a local historian with strong genealogy

interests. Dick is married to Kathy Guenther. They have four children and four grandchildren.

Dick Braun visiting with grandchildren of John P. Wall.

Stories from the Life of Abram Janzen of Blumenheim

by Bill Janzen

While visiting with my father, Abram G. Janzen, some years before he died in 2015, I asked him about his personal and family history. When he began to talk, I asked him to write up what he was telling me. He did that. The result needed editing. Unfortunately, I did not find time to do that until years later. But here now are the stories he told. They are not a full life history; only the memories that he recounted at that time. I have kept them as if he is talking.

The Church's Decision to Move to Mexico in the voice of Abram Janzen

I was born on June 8, 1920, in the village of Neuanlage, near Hague, Saskatchewan, to Peter P. and Helena (nee Guenther) Janzen. (Author's note: I do not know why my father used the initial P. If he had followed the custom of the time, he would have used the initial M, because his mother's maiden name was Martens. Maybe he just liked the sound of *Peter P.)*

(Abram Janzen's story continues) At that time the big question in our community was whether parents should send their children to the new English language public schools. Back in 1873 when our forefathers were exploring the possibility of migrating from Russia to Canada, they had received a promise from the federal government that they would always be able to run their own schools in their own language. This meant the German language. Unfortunately, in World War I (1914-1918) strong public feelings developed against everything German. Then the Federal Government explained that education was a provincial jurisdictional issue so those promises of 1873 did not hold, despite lengthy pleas from the leaders of the church.

When the Government of Saskatchewan imposed fines on the Old Colony Mennonites to force parents to send their children to English schools, the church held *brotherhood* meetings where, after long and solemn discussions, it was concluded that in order to remain true to the faith they would have to look for a new country. So, the church collected money and asked delegates to look for a new suitable location; they would need a large block of land as well as broad religious freedoms. After inquiring with various governments in South and North America, they found that Mexico might be a suitable option. But to arrange a migration was a very complex and involved undertaking. Some of my earliest memories are of my parents talking about the exodus, (*dee Uetwaundrung*). My mother would hold us children close and talk about how grave the situation was and how we might have to move. I recall her saying that *if the church moves then we have to move.* I was overwhelmed by the seriousness of it all.

My father also worried about the economic prospects there, and about the land and the farm here. The church wanted to sell the land here as a block. With that in mind individual farmers were asked to sign their land titles over to two church leaders, Benjamin Goertzen (Vorsteher) and Rev. John P. Wall (minister). These leaders then entered into negotiations with real estate agents who wanted to buy the land as a block, hoping to settle the area with newcomers from Europe. But the deal with those agents fell through; also, there were complications that hampered the Hague-Osler group's

acquisition of land in Mexico. When some land was finally bought there, people here disposed of their land and belongings on a more individual or small group basis. In many cases this meant that the original owners of the land first had to regain their legal titles so that they could sell it.

To facilitate the transfer back, Mr. Goertzen and Rev. Wall signed the necessary papers and left them with a Mr. Klassen in Hague who handled such matters. Individual farmers like my father could then go to Mr. Klassen and get their titles back though they had to cover the legal costs. When my father got his titles back, he decided against moving. Signing away his land titles had left him uncomfortable. Also weighing on him was the uncertainty about how long it might take to become economically viable there, and what they might get for their land here, now that quite a lot was coming onto the market.

The Hague-Osler Group Heads for Durango

There were other factors that influenced people's decisions. When the discussions about moving to Mexico began, it was assumed that the Old Colony people in the Hague-Osler and Swift Current areas of Saskatchewan and those in Manitoba would all settle in one place in Mexico. This was attractive to the Old Colony people in Saskatchewan since they had all come from Manitoba within the preceding twenty or thirty years. (My parents had moved in 1905) They looked forward to living close to their friends again. A sufficiently large block of land appeared to be available near Cuauhtemoc in the state of Chihuahua.

But then, in one of the early joint delegations to Mexico, a break in relations developed. As a result, the smaller Hague-Osler group had to fend for itself. (That is why they eventually bought land in Durango, 500 miles south of Chihuahua.) When word of that break came back to the Hague-Osler area, people had many questions. Some were angry. Some of the better off Saskatchewanians, like a Heinrich Wiebe family near Aberdeen, then joined the Manitobans on their own. But this increased the financial burden on those in the Hague-Osler area still planning to move.

While some people were unhappy after the Durango land was finally purchased, most of the ministers and many of the better off people began to charter trains and move. Others followed over the course of several years. Those who moved sent letters back urging others to come too. The reasoning was that the church had moved; that people who did not move were less faithful. They were compared to ancient Israelites who wanted to stay back in Egypt rather than follow the call of God to a new land. This led some very poor people to try to move. One poor widow, a Mrs. Friesen from Gruenthal, wrote to the church in Durango to ask for financial help in order to move. The church replied that they already had many poor people. Eventually, they agreed to help with the travel costs but only if she would bring very few of her belongings so as to keep travel costs low. A few years later she was back here, helped by relatives. For her, things there were too difficult.

In the first years after the departure, Bishop Jacob Wiens came back to officiate at Baptism and Communion services here. He was highly respected and people here would talk to him about also moving, but soon he had to say that getting started economically in Mexico was more difficult than expected, that many who had moved were becoming poor. Despite this, the feeling that moving to Mexico was *the right thing to do* persisted. My father-in-law, Wilhelm R. Wiebe, is said to have felt somewhat that way until the end of his life. (He died in 1932 so I never met him.) But he couldn't have moved. In the preceding decades he had spent what money he had on the medical needs of his daughter Katharina.

We and Others Stayed Back

For me, as a young boy, the departure had other dimensions. One of my childhood friends was Henry Bueckert. We had often played together. His family, like others from Neuanlage, boarded the train in Hague with all their belongings. Then when the train passed by Neuanlage, just a few hundred metres from our farm, I ran to our steam engine, climbed to the top of its wide rear wheels

and waved, believing that Henry could see me. I was probably seven years old at the time. Years later, in 1950, when we were in Mexico to visit my mother-in-law in the new Los Jagueyes settlement, I drove with her to the Durango colony and I got to see Henry again. We spent a very pleasant Sunday afternoon talking about the past and how our lives had diverged some 23 years earlier. His father, Peter Bueckert, who was a brother to my mother-in-law, talked wistfully about how peaceful things had been in Canada. In Mexico thieves and bandits sometimes came to the villages.

Other things about the departure also come to mind. One is about sheep that my father bought at the auction sale of one departing family from our village. In fact, it was the family of Aeltester Jacob Wiens. We boys then herded the sheep home. It was late fall, snow was falling and the sheep went *baa, baa, baa*, long into the evening. For us children that was an interesting new thing. Another memory I have is how sombre my parents felt after seeing the first trains depart. They seemed to feel that the people who remained were like sheep without a shepherd. They wondered how the community could hold together now that the leaders were leaving. One other memory is about the empty houses and barns in our village. Perhaps eight families from Neuanlage had left. I recall running to one farm yard and getting a strange, almost scary feeling, just seeing these houses and barns with no people in them.

Well over half of the Old Colony people in the Hague-Osler area, maybe two-thirds, stayed back; many, because they did not have enough money to move. If they sold their farms, they would little money for them because there were so many farms for sale. Some people had become poor from paying fines for not sending their children to the English schools. Two of the ministers also stayed back. One was an Abram Wall from Neuhorst whose wife was said to be strongly opposed to the idea of moving. The other was Johann Loeppky. His situation was more complicated. He had been on the delegation to negotiate the religious freedom arrangements in Mexico. Indeed, his name is one of four that appear on the 1921 letter from President Obregon. The ministers who did move were sharply critical of him for backing out. Eventually they disowned him as, in a sense, they did all the people who did not move. Perhaps he felt that it would be wrong for him to abandon the people who could not move.

Resuming Life After the Departure

With only two resident ministers, the worship services in the various villages were less frequent. In Neuanlage, they might be held every third Sunday. I remember father telling us children, on a Sunday morning, to run to the church at the end of the village to see if the shutters were open. If the caretaker, who knew the schedule had opened the shutters, that meant that there would be a worship service that morning. On those Sundays when there was no service, a lot of the young fellows would sit by the side of the street and talk and the children would play. My mother, however, would not let us go out on Sunday mornings.

My mother's father, Isaac Guenther, had long been a teacher. He had loved teaching. My mother was his only daughter. He had taught her many Bible stories and she had memorized many of the Psalms and knew many of the hymns by heart. She wanted to impart this to her children. So, on Sunday morning she would lead us in our own little worship services. We'd sing hymns, read some scripture passages and she'd tell us a story and pray with us. I did not find the reading particularly easy. Already then, I had some hearing problems and some of my siblings, it seemed, were simply more gifted in reading than I was. After we had completed our little worship service, we were allowed to go out. Other families in the village did not do this but our mother, with the full support of our father, would simply say, *in our family we do it this way.*

The question of schooling remained. The government had built a school at the end of our village and named it, Pembroke. A number of families started sending their children there. My older

brothers, Jake and Isaac, who had gone to the German school earlier, were enrolled there and became excited about what they were learning. But some Old Colonists wanted to keep some German classes going so, since I was not yet of age to go to the English school, my father asked if I wanted to go to the German school. I agreed. So, I went there for one year before also going to the English school. At the English school my first teacher was Peter Harder, a very kind man. By my second year a junior room had been readied. There my teacher was a Miss Katharine Lepp, sister of Peter Paul Lepp who taught at various schools in the area for many years.

The Coming of the Russlaender

Another factor in village life at this time was the arrival of the Russlaender, these being Mennonites who had fled from the Soviet Union. About 21,000 came to Canada during the 1920s and some of them acquired the homes and farms newly vacated by those who had left for Mexico. Indeed, the farm of the Peter Bueckerts, whose son Henry was my close friend, was obtained by his cousin, Herman Bueckert, a new arrival from Russia. In our village of Neuanlage now there were Klassens, Ennses, Sawatzkys, Janzens, Rempels and other Russlaender people.

Given that the Old Colony church did not have services every Sunday at this time, these Russlaender started conducting Sunday School. At first it was held in their homes but then, for a while, they were allowed to use what had been the Old Colony German school. Our family attended quite often, even my parents went on the Sundays when there was no service in the Old Colony church. Later the Russlaender began to use the public school. Eventually, they acquired their own church building. Over the following decades, many Old Colony young people began to participate in their programs. Indeed, one reason why, in the 1940s, the Neuanlage Old Colony church started their own Sunday School was to prevent their young people from going over to the Russlaender Sunday School.

Economic Life and the *Dirty Thirties*

In 1928 the crop was very good, as were the prices, so my father bought a Model T Ford car as well as a windmill to pump water for our livestock. Until then we had to haul all our water from a well at the end of the village. Now we had a deep well on our yard. On the days when there was no wind, we would use a one-cylinder engine to operate the pump. That year we also had a bountiful Christmas. Our parents were generous. I remember getting a whole farm set with a toy Fordson tractor. Of course, it had steel wheels but we could wind it up and it would go. It had a cultivator and a wagon and other equipment.

But then in 1929 everything changed. The crop was poor and there was a financial crash in New York. And in Saskatchewan a drought set in that lasted for most of the 1930s. Feed for farm animals became scarce. In 1934, my father's siblings in Manitoba sent us a train car full of hay and in between the bales of hay were cobs of corn, but we had a number of horses and cows and other livestock. Before long, the hay was gone. Also, during this time, the government shipped in hay from distant places. I recall going to Hague on Thursdays, which was *freight train day*, and there was a long line of sleighs. Then an official from the local municipality would divide the hay that had come on the train. Usually, the most that any one farmer would get was ten bales. Farmers would then mix this hay with straw to try to make it last longer.

1936 saw a slight improvement so my parents drove to Manitoba. My father wanted to pay his siblings for the hay they had sent. I got to go along. It was an unforgettable opportunity to visit the places and the people about whom I had always heard. 1937 was worse again so now the government ordered farmers to sell off much of their cattle. On the specified day, all the farmers in the village chased their animals onto the street and we boys then drove the cattle, cowboy style, to Hague, four miles away, where they were loaded onto the train and taken to the slaughter house in Saskatoon. While herding the cows along, one of our cows darted away and we were not able to get her back so, in order to keep the rest of the herd moving, we had to let her go. That cow was blind

so she may have been totally bewildered by what was happening. Actually, my mother was happy to see that cow back because she was good for milking.

The shortage was not only for cattle; people also struggled with getting enough food for their families. Thus, the government sent car loads of dried cod fish and other food stuffs. Many things were scarce. It was a really hard time. Nevertheless, life went on; there was much visiting among people; young people got married, etc. According to my memory people were not particularly grumpy. For quite a few people, the poverty ended when World War II broke out and the government needed workers in the factories of Ontario. Quite a number of poor Mennonites from our area then headed east to Ontario. Many never returned. They gained some financial security but my impression is that many did not settle into any church there. Other people from our area went to southern Alberta for the summers; there, in the Coaldale and Taber areas, they found work because new irrigation systems made it possible to grow sugar beets and other crops.

One other thing from those years that stands in my memory is that in 1927 my father sold his steam engine and threshing machine. He had had that operation since soon after arriving in Saskatchewan in 1905; and before that he had one in Manitoba. He had done threshing work for many farmers in the area. It was a very involved kind of work. In addition to keeping the steam engine and the threshing machine in good mechanical order, it meant hiring a lot men who, with horses and hay wagons, would get the sheaves from the field to the threshing machine. It also meant collecting money from the people for whom he did the threshing and paying the workers. Dealing with people on issues of money is often quite challenging. Another reason why my father sold the outfit was that he saw that the trend was away from steam engines toward gasoline powered tractors.

The buyer of his steam engine and threshing machine was a Mr. Martens; he agreed to pay $1500 in money, and give a small tractor, called Waterloo Boy, and a cream separator, in kind. My father received these two items but not the money; things did not work out for Mr. Martens as he hoped. Sometimes, in those difficult thirties, I'd hear my parents talk about the money that Mr. Martens still owed. In those years it would have made a huge difference. Years later, in the 1950s, when my father had become a widower, I visited him one day and he was pleased to tell me that he had just received a visit from an old friend – *that Mr. Martens*. I then asked whether Martens had brought the money. *Why, no,* my father said. *We all know that he does not have any money. If I had brought up that matter, I would still not have gotten any money; I would only have lost a friend.* It was a reminder of my father's generous and forgiving spirit.

Getting Started on Our Own

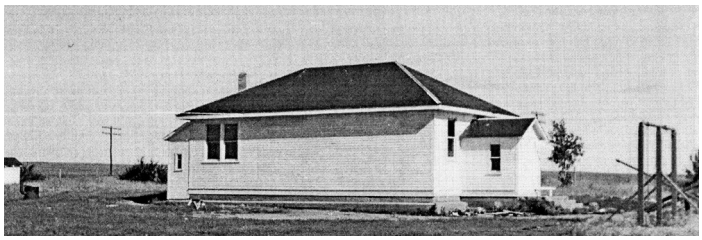
Gertrude Wiebe and I got married on October 6, 1940 in Neuanlage. My parents had an empty house and some land by the South Saskatchewan River, in an area called Rieferthal, eight miles southeast of Neuanlage. (My parents had built that when they first came from Manitoba, before moving to Neuanlage. Several of my siblings had lived there in later years.) For us it had the advantage of bringing us closer to the Wiebe family. My parents gave us a cow and a large hog which they helped us butcher a few weeks later. They also gave us ten chickens. I also had a horse and buggy. My wife received a cow and a small pig from her mother. Sometime later that pig produced a large litter of little ones.

Pigs were good farm animals to have. Feed was scarce, but in the summers the pigs would almost feed themselves as they scrounged around the river bank and dug for roots. The next year we had a lot of piglets. I then advertised them and sold a number for $3.00 per piglet. We felt pretty good about all the money coming our way. We also sold cream in five-gallon cans; they were picked up by a Mr. Abram N. Wiebe who had a model T Ford. He lived in Blumenheim and I believe he took the cream cans to Osler and loaded them on the train for Saskatoon.

At this time, we also bought a tractor. That way we were less dependent on horses which required so much feed. Together with my brother Jake, who farmed the river land with me, (though he lived in Neuanlage) we bought a Case Cross tractor for $325.00. It had lots of power once we got it started. But we were never sure that we'd get it started. The only way of starting it was with a manual crank; sometimes we'd turn that until we were exhausted. If we got it started, we would not stop it even when we'd go in for a meal.

After two years we were able to sell the Case Cross tractor. My father then sold me an International Harvester W-12 tractor. It was easier to start. The price was $450. After the harvest when I brought him the money, he kindly cut the price by $25. Sometime later my brother Isaac, who had a Farmall H tractor, was able to get a Farmall M, so he offered me the Farmall H. I then sold the W-12 for $200 more than I had paid. It is the only time that I made money that way. Like our previous tractors, the Farmall H had steel wheels but a few years after the war, when rubber became more available, I was able to buy wheels with rubber tires for a total of $150. The Farmall H then served us for many years.

The nearest school, Renfrew, was about four miles away. But the Bill Fehrs, who lived one and one-half miles away, had older children who would go to school with a horse and buggy. They were willing to take our little Gertrude along, so, in the mornings I would take her to the Fehrs with that Farmall H. (Sometimes, after school, Gertrude would walk that mile and a half home by herself.)



Renfrew School, 1953. Credit: Leo Driedger

In 1944 I was elected as the Secretary Treasurer of Renfrew School, the English school near Blumenheim. I was in that position for nine years. This meant, among other things, that I was responsible for hiring teachers. That was hard. Teaching at Renfrew was not easy. There were a lot of children in the one room school, often 50 or 60, even more some years. The teacher's residence was poor and the salary low. So good teachers who might have wanted to give themselves to this work wholeheartedly, like Corny Boldt, found it too difficult. Peter Paul Lepp, a very colourful man about whom I could write many pages, stayed two years.

In 1947 our school board worked with others in getting a new school southwest of Renfrew, between Blumenheim and Kronsthal. It would be called the East Osler School and it would relieve pressure on Renfrew and some other schools in the area. The government provided some extra funding for it, hence the designation *government aided.* The various meetings with other school boards and with government officials about starting that school were an interesting new experience for me. Of course, it meant long rides by horse drawn sleigh or buggy during which Mom was home alone with our little ones. In the 1950s, we got another school northeast of Renfrew, between Blumenheim and Blumenthal. It was called the South Venice School.

Renewed Interest in Mexico

After WWII there was a new wave of interest in moving to Mexico. The war years had been difficult and there were fears of a new war, as well as concerns about becoming assimilated. And economically, the situation in our area did not look promising. The Church asked my brother-in-law, Jacob Wiebe, to travel to Mexico to explore the possibilities. This led, in 1948, to a small new settlement at Los Jagueyes, some distance from Cuauhtemoc. In November of that year, Jacob and my mother-in-law, and four of her other adult children, boarded the train in Osler and moved. One of her sons, Herman, had moved to Mexico in the 1920s already, and another two of her children, with families of their own, would move in 1949. None of the children who remained in Canada were interested in the family farm in Blumenheim, so we moved there. Now, Renfrew School was only one and one-quarter miles away.

My wife and I also considered the idea of moving to Mexico, but a number of developments persuaded us not to. One was my father's trip to Mexico in the summer of 1949. My mother died in December of 1948 so the following summer my father went to visit his relatives who had moved to Mexico in the 1920s. (Rev. Isaac M Dyck, a key leader in Cuauhtemoc, was his cousin.) My father's reports were not very positive. Also, several families in the small new migration to Los Jagueyes were returning. And the letters we were receiving from my mother-in-law and brother-in-law also indicated that things were not easy there. (They had made me their *Power of Attorney* so that I could settle their unfinished business here). Also, to be noted, is that in the summer of 1949, two of my wife's sisters, Agatha and Anna, with their families, spent a lot of time at our place in Blumenheim. (Agatha had 12 children by this time.) They had moved to Burns Lake, BC, about a decade earlier but now they were on their way to Mexico.

Even though we were leaning away from the idea of moving to Mexico, we wanted to visit those family members who had moved. With this in mind we bought a new International half-ton truck in the fall of 1949. I then built a camper on the back. Then we loaded our five children and an older Siemens couple, and set out for Mexico. For me, getting passports and Travellers Cheques and road maps were new things. Also, in some US cities we faced traffic lights, something I had not seen before. Even more scary was when we entered Mexico at night and drove on a narrow trail in a mountainous area and had to let logging trucks pass.

We arrived at my mother-in-law's place on December 14, 1949. Almost the first thing she asked was *have you come to stay?* The whole migration was precarious. A number of people from our area who at first had indicated that they would definitely move had backed out at the last minute, and some who had moved were already returning. This was all deeply discouraging to her. Thus, it was hard to say to her that, no, we had not come to stay, though we had not yet definitely ruled out the idea of moving later.

Everyone in the family there welcomed us and since we had a truck, I was able to help them with some transportation needs. But what we saw in the community there was not encouraging; in particular the quarrelling over issues like whether to allow the driving of cars and trucks. The leader, Rev. Johann Loeppky, became disillusioned and headed back to Canada even during our two-month visit. For my mother-in-law this was heartbreaking. Before long, she and the other Old Colonists at Los Jagueyes, moved to the Durango Colony, joining people from Hague-Osler who had moved there in the 1920s. The land at Los Jagueyes was then sold to other Mennonites.

Continuing Life in Canada and Accepting Responsibilities

When we prepared to return to Canada, my wife's youngest brother, Peter, who was not yet twenty, wanted to come with us. His mother reluctantly agreed on the condition that he would return. We were happy to have him, but it made our little truck quite full, given that we also had that older Siemens couple and our own five children, but we managed. As we got closer to Canada we ran into cold weather. Indeed, a snow storm forced us to spend a night in a hotel in the town of Chamberlain, Saskatchewan. But we got back home in February, 1950. My nephew, Herman Janzen and his wife, Anna, had lived at our place in Blumenheim and had taken care of our farm while we were gone. We were very grateful for that. We had travelled many miles, some in dangerous places, but the Good Lord had mercifully protected us.

Before we went to Mexico, I had become involved teaching Sunday School in Blumenheim. Sunday School was a new thing in the Old Colony church and some leaders opposed it, but people realized that since the German schools had closed in the 1920s, children were receiving little in terms of learning about the Bible or the German language. When we left for Mexico, Jacob Reddekopp and Wilhelm Friesen took over the teaching duties. I certainly did not now want to impose myself but after the second Sunday back, they asked me to take up the teaching duties again – something I

did for about 25 years, though after a while we arranged a separate class for smaller children and other teachers came and served there.

Another development in the 1950-51 years where I was quite involved was the building of a church building. Blumenheim, being a relatively small village, had never had its own church building. Old Colony ministers had come there every two or three weeks and held services in the Old Colony school building. That school had stopped running years ago, so we now wanted to transform that building into a church, with a room for Sunday School. And we wanted it to be a joint Old Colony-Bergthaler church since by this time Bergthaler people in the community had increased to where both denominations were well represented. And they were similar: they used the same hymn book, spoke German, and their ministers circulated from church to church. Fortunately, we were able to get support from leaders of both denominations. The costs were modest since we did the physical work by ourselves. For many years thereafter, we had ministers from the two denominations on alternate Sundays. This made it a community church, rather than a denominational church. Likewise, the Sunday School. By the mid-1970s, the Old Colony numbers were down, while those of the Bergthaler were up. Before long it was simply a Bergthaler church. They now pulled the old building away and moved in a new one. I had mixed feelings about that, but we did have 25 good years.

Blumenheim Church.

Also in those years, I served on the Old Colony *Waisenamt.* Historically this office was responsible for dealing with estates and ensuring that widows and orphans were cared for. The institution had also served like a bank where people could deposit money which it could then lend out. By my time many of those needs were being addressed in other ways, but there were many old accounts in the *Waisenamt* that needed settling, and even some land that had to be sold. I was totally surprised when, in 1951, I was elected to manage that office but I worked on it for 25 years, together with John N. Klassen who was elected to be my assistant. We wrote countless letters and drove hundreds of miles in order to contact people. Of course, giving money to people who had claims was easy. Approaching people about old debts was not, but we usually cancelled the interest; also, we found that most people were genuinely relieved when they were finally able to pay what debts they owed. It gave them peace.

Working with the *Waisenamt* meant attending quite a few meetings with the Aeltester and the ministers. Some of these were difficult. My predecessor, Jacob Guenther, had strongly advised me not to let the ministers get into the details of the *Waisenamt*. That was good advice and I kept to it. There were legal dimensions of this work too. For that we dealt with the firm of Kyle, Ferguson and Hnatyshyn, both the father, John Hnatyshyn, and the son, Ray. (Ray Hnatyshyn later became Canada's Governor General.) These were good men. They dealt with all our concerns in a careful and respectful way. Also, they were friends with John Diefenbaker. A few times when I was in the office, Mr. Diefenbaker came by.

Near the end of my involvement, two Mennonite scholars from Manitoba, Lawrence Klippenstein and John Friesen, came to hear about the *Waisenamt*. I then obtained permission from our Aeltester at the time, Julius Enns, to give them several of the volumes from the *Waisenamt*. Some years later when I was in Winnipeg for other reasons, I went to the Mennonite archives for another look at these books. When I paged through them and saw the various names, I felt as if I was among old friends. I was also reminded of the words in 1 Corinthians 14:40 that *all things should be done decently and in order*. I was grateful that I had been able to tie up many complicated loose ends in that aspect of our community's life and to

close that chapter in a way that was orderly and as fair as human.

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(Author's notes): These stories deal with my father's life until the mid-1970s. It was around that time, that his work with both the Blumenheim Sunday School and the Old Colony Waisenamt, came to an end. Sometime thereafter, he and my mother joined the Neuanlage Grace Mennonite Church, the Russlaender church where he had had friends from his childhood and where we, their children, had begun to attend in our late teens. However, before joining that church Dad visited Rev Julius Enns, Bishop of the Old Colony church, to explain the decision. He wanted to ensure that he was leaving on good terms. In these later decades he was active in new ways. From 1976 onwards, he was a correspondent for *Die Mennonitische Post*, which is read in communities and colonies throughout the Americas. He also recorded stories for the Low German radio program started by Rev. John D. Friesen, and heard in those same areas. Eventually, his stories filled eight disks. Also, he often gave many talks in seniors' homes, smaller outlying churches, and other places. When he died, we found well-written notes for 400 such talks. His style was low key, not dramatic at all. One regular radio listener in Mexico once told me, *people open their hearts to him, and they receive encouragement and hope.*

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The writer, Bill Janzen, was born in Blumenheim, Saskatchewan. In his working life he has been a lay minister, an author, and always an advocate for those needing justice. He worked in the Ottawa MCC office for 33 years working on peace and justice issues. He studied at CMBC, U of Ottawa, and at Carleton University where he obtained a Ph.D. in Political Science. He lives in Ottawa with Marlene; they have two adult children.

Low German Speaking Mennonites in Alberta

By Abe Janzen

In November of 2019, I attended a two-day seminar in Taber, Alberta. About 120 professionals from all over Alberta had found their way to the Heritage Inn to attend a seminar on Low German speaking Mennonites hosted by a group of agencies called the Southern Alberta Kanadier Association (SAKA). A number of the organizers were young women from one or more of the Low German groups in Southern Alberta employed as health workers, social workers, educators, and support workers. It was a remarkable event, little known in the broader community. But professionals, including social workers, school principals,

Howard Kehler, Chrissy Enns, James Schellenberg

councillors, school superintendents, and other educators, had gathered to learn from each other's experiences and from Low German speaking resource people about the Low German speaking Mennonite populations of Alberta. Each of the participants had some experience in their part of the province with Low German Mennonite employees, parents, church leaders, neighbors, clients, and students.

What the event indicated was that the Low German Mennonites have become a significant and widely-based part of the Alberta demography. They have settled in the north, south, east and northwestern parts of the province. They continue to find opportunity for employment, innovation and places to settle. They did not come to Alberta in large groups. Most have come as single families, leaving behind the supports of colonies in

Mexico and Bolivia and Belize and the traditional village systems of Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Where they are able to purchase land, they do, though the price of land these days makes that nearly impossible for families who have limited resources upon arrival. In a recent conversation, a young woman, daughter of one of the Old Colony Aeltesters, said her husband would love to farm in Southern Alberta, but the price of a quarter section of irrigated land lately *seems to be going up about a million dollars a year*! The current price is from 2.5 to 3 million dollars a quarter. So, they work for larger corporate feedlots or in the beet, potato and other farm industries. They weld, drive trucks and they start small businesses. They are known for their hard work, their good food, their hospitality, and their capacity for innovation. They take risks that sometimes make them move or start over.

For clarification it should be noted that the term *Aeltester* is used in this article as the leader of a number of churches. An Aeltester conducts baptisms and communion services, and ordains ministers. A near translation into English is *Bishop*. The difference is that a Bishop (as in the case of Catholicism) is appointed, but an Aeltester is elected by the members.

The total population of Alberta is about 4.5 million. My estimate is that Mennonites make up about 55,000 or 60,000 of that number. They are concentrated loosely across the south, then up through Lethbridge and Calgary and northeast to Didsbury (Bergthal), north to Edmonton, east to Tofield and Two Hills, northwest to Peace River/Grande Prairie and Worsley, and north from Peace River City to La Crete and High Level. They weren't always spread out like this, and the earliest Mennonites here were not Low German speaking Kanadier.

The first Mennonites settled in the Didsbury and Tofield areas in about 1905. They were later called the General Conference Mennonites and more recently, Mennonite Church Alberta, part of Mennonite Church Canada. The Swiss Mennonites came to the Tofield area soon after this, moving up from the United States. There are Swiss Mennonites (North West Conference) in various parts of Alberta but mostly east to west across Central Alberta. The Mennonite Brethren began to come in the 1920s from Russia, and settled in the Rosemary and Coaldale areas and spread out from there, but not very far. In the later 1940s, other Mennonites came from Prussia and Germany after the War to settle in the Coaldale and Rosemary areas. Many moved to Calgary and Edmonton and became well established during the 50 years of post-war economic growth. In the 70s and 80s, refugees from Vietnam, Central American and Chile moved into Alberta and now there are a number of churches that are primarily of Asian, African, and South American backgrounds. There are also traditional Mennonite Churches that are no longer mostly of German or Swiss ethnic backgrounds.

Mountainview Mennonite Cemetery, south of Calgary

Alberta is a unique province in that it has agricultural land east to west and north to south. That is not characteristic in any other province and Mennonites are spread out, like the rest of the population, over the entire province. From Calgary, for example, it is 11 hours to La Crete, 4.5 hours to Two Hills, 10 hours to Cleardale-Worsley, 3 hours to Edmonton, and 3 or 4 hours to Taber or Pincher Creek in the south.

What is also unique is that Alberta has few pillars that identify Mennonites as a people, aside from their churches, several homes for seniors and some private schools in the local communities. Alberta does not have Seminaries, Bible Colleges, or other well-known Mennonite institutions that

identify Mennonites as *this is us!* Mennonite Mutual Insurance still has the name but now caters to a broader evangelical population. Two large Newcomer Centers established in Edmonton and Calgary in the early 80s have only a minimal connection left with the Mennonite churches who, together with MCC helped to establish them. *Mennonite Pillars* attract resources, both human and financial but they also help a people to develop a sense of identity. When such pillars are largely absent, people disconnect from each other more easily. It's often said that most Albertans come from somewhere else, and that is quite true of the Mennonites in Alberta as well, including the Low German speaking Mennonites particularly. Mennonites are not yet deeply rooted here. What Alberta does have is land and natural resources, and so there are today, 146 Mennonite churches spread over this entire province, representing 16 different Mennonite denominations. They have come here to look for opportunities. What keeps them together, in each denomination, is their ommitment to their particular group. Fractures happen and there is significant inter-church migration among some of the various Low German Mennonite denominations.

In broadest terms, the Low German speaking Mennonites, known also as the *Kanadier*, and in Southern Alberta as the *Mexican Mennonites*, have settled in four areas of Alberta: First, in La Crete, beginning in the early 1930s, coming mostly from Saskatchewan. Second, in Taber and across Southern Alberta beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, coming from Ontario and Mexico. Third, in Worsley and Cleardale, beginning in the late 1950s coming from La Crete and Saskatchewan. Fourth, Two Hills, beginning in about 2000, coming from Southern Alberta, Ontario, and Mexico. They also live in other parts of Alberta, but in smaller numbers and sometimes, for shorter times as they wait for opportunities in areas where their churches and communities are more established.

The Low German speaking Mennonites first came to Canada in 1874, settling on the East and West sides of the Red River in Manitoba. The East side were Bergthal Mennonites, originally out of Chortitza in Russia, and the Kleine Gemeinde, who were from Molotchna. The Old Colony, also from Chortitza, settled on the West side around 1876. They took the official name of Reinland Mennoniten Gemeinde, but they also kept the Old Colony name, by which, today, they are mostly known. The Bergthaler and Kleine Gemeinde were a little more willing to adapt to public education in Manitoba; those who were less willing eventually broke away under the Sommerfeld name, in 1893. The Old Colony, like the Sommerfelder, were more resistant to public education and the Manitoba Schools Act and by the early 1890s, were migrating to the Hague-Osler and Swift Current areas in Saskatchewan where government set aside what were known as Reserves. My grandparents, on both the Wiebe and Janzen sides would have been part of that early migration West. In 1921, after the Manitoba Government refused to negotiate with the remaining Old Colony on the West side, they began to migrate to Mexico where they purchased 230,000 acres in the state of Chihuahua and 35,000 in Durango. My grandmother and several uncles and aunts moved in 1948 from Saskatchewan (Hague-Osler Reserve) to the Durango settlement.

The Low German speaking Mennonites first began moving to the La Crete and Fort Vermilion area, 3 hours north of Peace River Town, from Saskatchewan in 1932. Today they number over 12,000 in the La Crete region. Worsley settlement followed and later Mexican Low German Mennonites began moving to Southern Alberta from Ontario and from Mexico. Today, the Low German Mennonites make up the large majority of Mennonites in Alberta and they are rapidly growing. My guess is that the Low German Mennonites number at least 55,000 and the other Mennonites, who have been here longer and have not moved around as much, number about 5,000 or 6,000. I base that number, in northern Alberta, on census information, and in other locations, on estimates offered by local people.

A few Old Colony families from the Hague-Osler settlement of Saskatchewan, moved up the Peace River to Carcajou in the early 1930s, but the very first family to arrive was the Peter Elias family

from Manitoba who were soon joined by three families from Saskatchewan. Four years later, with the annual risk of being flooded out by the Peace River, they moved up-river to La Crete, a small settlement thus named in 1914 by three French brothers from Quebec who were there, hiding on the banks of the Peace River, avoiding WW I Conscription. They had found their way up the Peace River to a place about 5 km from what is today, La Crete. They used the name, *La Crete Landing*, referring to an outcropping on the bank that had the appearance of a rooster's crown. Eventually, the name stuck.

The Old Colony settlement grew in numbers. Aeltester Loeppky of Osler, Saskatchewan, would travel up to visit and serve the growing community, and in 1941 he ordained Wm. P Wiebe as the first Aeltester. (see *Then and Now, a History of La Crete, Vol 1*). In 1978, Rev John Klassen was ordained as Aeltester, a leadership role he still holds. In the meantime, he has ordained Jacob Giesbrecht (2001) as Aeltester in South Eastern Alberta, based near Vauxhall. Aeltester Giesbrecht, in turn has ordained Aeltester Henry Wiebe (2012), in Two Hills, and Henry Thiessen (2018) in Bow Island. The Old Colony, in 1959 began to migrate from La Crete, south to the Worsley and Cleardale Area, northwest of Peace River City towards the BC border. In 1993, Aeltester Klassen ordained Benjamin Wolfe as Aeltester of the Old Colony in the Worsley-Cleardale area. It should be noted that beginning in 1968, many families from the Worsley and La Crete areas moved to Bolivia to establish the Santa Rosa Mennonite Colony in that country. Aeltester Wolfe himself moved to Bolivia in 1993, to help start up the new Alberta Colony there. That colony did not survive and Aeltester Wolfe returned to Worsley-Cleardale where he provides leadership to this day. The migrations to Bolivia have continued over the years, but many have also returned to northern Alberta. Today there are two Old Colony, one Kleine Gemeinde and one Reinländer Mennonite church in the Worsley-Cleardale region.

Some of the Bergthaler from the Swift Current and Hague-Osler areas had also migrated to La Crete. For a few years, beginning in 1955, Abram J. Buhler, Aeltester in Saskatchewan (Hague-Osler) travelled from Hague to La Crete to conduct baptismal and communion services. In 1957, they opened their first church building. In 1962, Aeltester Buhler installed Jacob Dyck as the first Aeltester of the La Crete Bergthaler church. In 1965, there was a split under Aeltester Jacob Dyck (*Then and Now Vol 1*) during which the existing group kept the Bergthaler name; the leaving group took the Sommerfeld name, but kept the church building. The new Sommerfeld Church was shepherded for a few years by Aeltester David F. Wall, who had moved to La Crete from the Swift Current area of Saskatchewan in 1963. Aeltester Wall was the brother to Peter Wall, who was the grandfather of Brad Wall, former Premier of Saskatchewan. David F. Wall was not well, and Jacob Kroeker was elected as the Sommerfeld Bishop in 1968. After Jacob Kroeker, Henry Kroeker became Bishop and in 2003 Nick Boehlig was ordained and is the current Aeltester of the Sommerfeld Church in Alberta. Both groups now have large churches in the La Crete area, all well attended.

Sommerfelder Mennonite Church, northeast of Vauxhall

In 1973 the Evangelical Mennonite Conference, based in Steinbach, Manitoba, sent Elmer and Lena Hamm to La Crete to explore the planting of an English-speaking Mennonite church and in 1977, the EMC opened its first church building in La Crete. Mr. Hamm was also instrumental in the beginnings of an EMC Church in High Level, in 1978. And more recently, the Kleine Gemeinde

from Southern Alberta have opened a church in La Crete, as have also, the Reinländer, from a base in Vauxhall.

Backing up a couple of decades, in the early 1970s, Low German speaking Sommerfeld Mennonites began migrating from Saskatchewan to South Eastern Alberta where they were welcomed in the sugar beet, feedlot, and potato industries, which were all clamoring for reliable workers. The Sommerfeld Bishop from Saskatchewan, David Wiebe, would come to the Taber area to conduct services, and some local ministers were eventually elected. Daniel Dyck was elected as the Aeltester of the Sommerfeld Church in Southern Alberta in 2007. But before that, in 2000, there had been a split, led by Abram Fehr who was a Sommerfeld minister. The new group, with Rev Fehr, took the name Reinländer Mennonite Church. In 2012 there was a second Sommerfeld split, this time with Daniel Dyck and those who followed him taking the name Friedensfelder. They are independent from the Friedensfelder in Manitoba, but when they had to choose a name, they listed five options and the brotherhood selected this one. The Friedensfelder kept the main church building in Chin (West of Taber) and now have a second church in Grassy Lake, East of Taber. So, the Reinländer and the Friedensfelder both come out of the Sommerfeld church which now is a small group with a church building north east of Vauxhall. The much larger Sommerfeld group in Alberta is up north in La Crete, as already noted, under leadership of Aeltester Nick Boehlig.

Reinland Mennonite Church at Taber.

Like the Sommerfeld, Old Colony Mennonites began to come to Southern Alberta from Ontario, Manitoba and Mexico in response to opportunities for work. As noted, Aeltester John Klassen from La Crete served the church in Southern Alberta, driving 14 hours from La Crete as often as once a month some years. During one 5-year period, he travelled to Southern Alberta 26 times, while also serving the church in Cecil Lake, BC, and Two Hills. Today there are 7 large Old Colony Mennonite churches in Southern Alberta.

The Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference, also based in Manitoba, and sometimes known as the Rudnerweider, began a Singstund (singing hour), a Bible study and informal fellowship among Low German speaking people, in fall the fall of 2001 in Vauxhall. Richard and Elisabeth Hamm moved to Vauxhall and were the first pastors of the group. The dedication service of their first building was on September 30, 2001 with about 90 people in attendance. The current pastor is Henry Redekopp, who is also from Manitoba, but he and his wife, Tina, come with 9 years of experience as missionaries with the EMMC in Belize. About 5 years ago, they built a new church in Vauxhall, which, today, is over full and they usually have at least 3 services on a Sunday.

Kleine Gemeinde Church near Cleardale.

The Kleine Gemeinde (direct translation is *small church*) is really not so small in Alberta. Their story goes back to 1812 with Klaus Reimer in the Molotschna settlement who, along with others, thought the Old Colony a little too worldly. They began to meet in private homes emphasizing church discipline, humility and non-conformity. Kleine Gemeinde came to North America in 1874 with two groups settling in Manitoba and one in Nebraska and a bit later also in Kansas. In 1948, the Kleine Gemeinde migrated to Mexico and

from there to Belize and Bolivia. They had considered migrating in the 1920s but it didn't happen for them. In the meantime, in 1959, the Canadian Kleine Gemeinde reorganized itself as the Evangelical Mennonite Conference. But long before that, they had also given birth to the Church of God in Christ Mennonite (Holdeman, after John Holdeman), in 1882, when almost half of the Kleine Gemeinde in Manitoba were rebaptized and joined the Holdeman group. By 1954 this ex-Kleine Gemeinde group had settlements in Manitoba and Alberta. Today there are 15 Holdeman churches in Alberta, north as far as Fort Vermilion, around Linden and other places in Central Alberta, and southeast of Taber. The Kleine Gemeinde today has churches in Grassy Lake, Bow Island, Willingdon (Two Hills), Ferintosh, and most recently, La Crete and Worsley-Cleardale.

Old Colony Mennonite Church north of Bassano

Two Hills, an hour and a half NE of Edmonton, was a dying community in the late 1990s. Much of the population was Ukrainian. Young people were moving to the larger urban centers and the public school in Two Hills town was barely surviving. Jacob Wiebe, a deacon in the Old Colony church in Southern Alberta saw an ad about affordable land. He and his wife were the first Mennonites to move up, but they were soon followed by others. Abe Martens, with business partner, Aaron Giesbrecht, moved up in 2000. Jacob Wiebe's brother, Henry, a minister, moved up in 2003 and was ordained by Jacob Giesbrecht as Aeltester in 2012. In 2008, the Reinländer Mennonite Church started to have informal evening gatherings in Two Hills and for some years, Aeltester Hiebert traveled up from Vauxhall to provide leadership. In 2020, John Klasssen was ordained as Aeltester of the Reinländer Mennonite Church in Two Hills. Today there are 3 Old Colony churches, one Reinländer, and one Kleine Gemeinde church in the Two Hills area. All are growing.

Finally, several notes: I mentioned the amount of travel Bishop John Klassen has done, during his years of service, on behalf of the Old Colony Church in Alberta. I want to add that this kind of selfless commitment seems evident among all the leaders of the Low German Speaking Mennonites of Alberta. I'm sure it's the same in other provinces. They travel. They meet. They visit. They listen. They preach. They baptize and bury and marry. They don't have office hours. All of them do other things to support their families, but their work in the church is understood as a calling and they seem unfailingly committed to that calling.

Eventually, books will be written about how this all happened, but this is very recent history. Certainly, each of the churches seems to keep detailed records of what happened when and who was involved, and without exception, the people I've contacted are happy to talk about their stories. Some of what could be included will remain unwritten, because this is a brief article, but even for this little article, I was able to talk (by phone) with Aeltester John Klassen and his wife in La Crete. Aeltester Jacob Giesbrecht (Vauxhall), his wife and three married daughters along with their young children invited me for coffee and chocolate chip cookies one morning. Aeltester John Hiebert and his friend, John Siemens gave me a tour of the Reinlaender church near Vauxhall. Abe Banman, a senior minister in the Kleine Gemeinde church of (Grassy Lake) visited by phone. Daniel Dyck, Aeltester of the Friedensfelder took time to visit, as he was preparing to go fishing with his children. Nick Boehlig, Aeltester of the Sommerfeld church and Ron Boehlig, a deacon, both visited by phone, more than once. Henry Redekopp of the EMMC connected me with their head office in Steinbach, who sent information about their beginnings in Vauxhall. Jacob Wiebe, deacon of the Old Colony in Two Hills, and his wife, hosted me for morning visit. Dave Dyck, employed by Two Hills County, had lunch with me at the local Pizza and Wings

shop and John Klassen, Aeltester of the Two Hills Reinländer Mennonite church interrupted his work at Green Hill Building Supplies to help me with some details.

The Low German Speaking Mennonites of the Western Hemisphere are under acknowledged in most Mennonite histories. They number at least 400,000 and perhaps half a million. My own experience with the Low German Speaking Mennonites in both Bolivia and Alberta is that they migrate sometimes for religious reasons and other times to look for new opportunities that usually have to do with employment and land. But they are not just opportunists. They are settlers. They look for places to build their families and their communities. That does not mean they don't drift away from each other, into other communities. They do. But as Henry Redekopp once said, they will drive a long way to be with people with whom they feel at home.

In Alberta, the Mennonite churches can be enumerated like this: Low German speaking Mennonite Churches (Old Colony) - 18; Sommerfeld - 7; Bergthal Mennonite -7; Kleine Gemeinde - 6; Reinlaender Mennonite - 10; Old Reinlaender - 1; Friedensfelder Mennonite - 2; Evangelical Mennonite -12; Evangelical Mennonite Mission -1; Church of God in Christ (Holdeman) Mennonite -15; Nationwide Fellowship - 8; Other Mennonite Churches: Mennonite Brethren - 21; Mennonite Church - 12; Northwest Mennonite - 15; Independent Mennonite - 4.

A final note: Alberta has well over 180 Hutterite colonies, of two types: the Lehrerleut and the Dariusleut. They are well established as farmers and have branched into the business and trades world. Manitoba has the Schmiedeleut. I'll note the Schmiedeleut have their own teachers training arrangement with Brandon University.

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Abe Janzen.
Credit: Kathy Janzen

Abe Janzen was born in Blumenheim, Saskatchewan. He has studied at the University of Saskatchewan and St. Francis Xavier University. Abe worked at Fairview College in La Crete-High Level for 11 years. He and Kathy spent another 10 years in Bolivia with MCC. He was director of MCC Alberta for 21 years. One of Abe's interests continues to be the story of the Old Colony Mennonites. Abe is married to Kathy Weber Janzen. They have two children and 6 grandchildren. They live in Calgary.

Youth Farm Corn Maze is celebrating the signing of the CP Rail Deal!

It has been 100 years since David Toews signed a deal with CP Rail that ended up bringing over 20,000 Mennonites from Russia. In some circles, David Toews is even known as “The Mennonite Moses”.

The Corn Maze by Rosthern is celebrating this heritage in this years design. It is quite remarkable to see from above! Many of our staff have grandparents or great grandparents that came to Rosthern area through the support of David Toews and the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization (which he chaired from 1922-1946).

David Toews saw there was a great need for Mennonites in Russia to colonize in Canada. He chose to sign an agreement with CP Rail without a lot of support and felt personally responsible to make sure the debt was paid. The transportation debt was paid off in 1946 shortly before he passed away.

When J.C. Schmidt was negotiating with the federal government to purchase the Mennonite Youth Farm Complex. He used the good rapport David Toews made with federal officials to grant the purchase of the yard and farm land. David Toews was a teacher, statesman, pastor, leader and entrepreneur. Find out more in *David Toews Was Here,* written by Helmut Harder in 2002.

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