

Mennonite Historian



Volume IV, Number 4
December, 1978



The Mennonite Heritage Centre has a photo collection of over 5000 items. This one pictures several Mennonite families from the Rosenbach area north of Winkler, Manitoba, taken around 1919.

Old Letters Tell Our Story

Personal correspondence can mirror living relationships, and the documents of such interaction form a vital type of research materials. Unfortunately very often letters are destroyed so that relatively few, especially older ones seem to survive.

Two archival collections recently acquired by the Mennonite Heritage Centre illustrate how preservation, usually unplanned, does occur. One comes from the southern Russian Mennonite villages of Manitoba, and the other from the Swiss Mennonite communities of Pennsylvania and Ontario, with Manitoba contacts mixed in. Helen Buhr Regier, now of Newton, Kansas, editor of **Jacob Buhr Family 1805-1977** described the provenance of the Manitoba collection as "a little wooden box which my brother Herman Buhr gave to me". Helen then translated the major portion of the contents, and used much of it as basic information in her family research.

The Swiss Mennonite correspondence came to light as described in a footnote to a typed edition of nearly 160 items. "In the winter of 1976 a chimney fire caused Ervin W. Shantz and one of his sons to crawl into the garret of the old doddy house of the Ervin W. Shantz farm (the original Peter G. Martin homestead) to make sure the fire was out. With the beam of a flashlight they noticed an old hat box in one corner. Upon investigating, the old letters were found, written to Peter G. Martin after he was retired and living in the doddy house." A portion of the collection, letters from P.G. Martin to Christian Zimmerman, came from a sale in Pennsylvania where they were purchased in 1972, and integrated with the rest.¹

In the latter exchange are included five letters from Peter and Maria Penner, variously mailed from Duluth (May 25, 1876), Rosengart (June 24, Dec. 26, 1876

and March 4, 1877), and Bourwald (June 20, 1978). The first ones in the group are addressed to "parents", and then "parents Peter G. Martin", whose letters appearing elsewhere in the collection, were mailed from St. Jacobs, Ontario.

Apparently written while enroute to Manitoba, the Duluth document recounts the dangers of Great Lakes navigation, including an ice jam which meant an eleven hour walk for eighteen passengers anxious to reach land. "We lived on five potatoes and a quarter pound of bread", they wrote, having reached the harbour of Duluth on the 24th of May after a ten-day trip. A month later they were settling at Rosengart, on the East Reserve, and in three more letters described various aspects of settling down, weather conditions, crop yields, farm developments, etc. "My brother in law, Heinrich Dueck, at whose home we are staying has sowed five acres of wheat, one and a half acres of barley, half an acre of peas and six bushels of potatoes and hopes if all goes well, to have enough food for his family of five".²

Then, in December - another letter to the parents. "Two year-old oxen are 40 to fifty dollars. . . three-year old cows, twenty to twenty six dollars. . . I still have a few dollars, but if I could borrow 15 more with interest for two years, then I will repay at that time. . . . Dear parents, we think of you often, since we cannot see each other, but we can enjoy writing, and so visit each other until we pass on. . . ."

In the last one of this series, written from Bourwald (Burwalde) to another relative somewhat southeast of Rosengart, Penner mentioned having begun to plough the land on April 15, and that many "are moving away". These may have been families moving to the West Reserve, since such a migration was getting underway about this time. Penner described that area as having good land, but no wood, and foresaw a good harvest at Bourwald.

The first clearly-dated letter of the Buhr collection originated in Nieder-Chortitza, south Russia, dated March 20, 1875, and was written to children who had moved to Canada the year before. Signed "Johann and Maria Simens", the missive mentioned other children coming home, copying the letters from Canada, and reading them "with tears

(cont. on p. 2)

in their eyes". The Siemens closed with a blessing. "We send you our greetings, and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen."

On December 2 (1874?) Maria Buhr (Mrs. Peter) Friesen wrote to her brother Jacob from Fargo where her family settled for a time. "We cannot thank God enough for he let us find such a nice land and home", she wrote. She mentioned her husband working for \$2.00 a day at first, with wages dropping after that. For five weeks the Friesens lived with the Flaming family, and then acquired 160 acres of their own. Twenty three Mennonite families made up the settlement at the time.³

The inner feelings of persons, the dialogue of daily life, the "routine" events of individual experiences constitute a significant dimension of a people's story. Documenting this dimension with the scattered information found in letters or diaries, and even casual notes is a part of preserving this story. Don't throw those letters away. Keep the tattered, age-brittle notes. They may form a meaningful piece of an archival collection, and an important group record, some day.

- Lawrence Klippenstein

Notes

1. A typed mimeographed copy of the letters, bound in paper, was provided for the archives by Dennis Stoesz of Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario.
2. Locations are deducted from internal evidence. There were villages by the same name on the West Reserve also.
3. Helen Buhr Regier. **Jacob Buhr Family 1805-1977** (Newton, Kansas, 1977), pp.11, 19-20 has the complete text of these letters.

Recent Publications

- ✓ Klippenstein, Ben D., comp. **Genealogy of Heinrich Klippenstein 1849-1977**. (97 Hart, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1977) \$10.00. paper
- ✓ Peters, Katie, comp. **Genealogy of Gerhard Peters. 1772-1978. 2nd. ed.** (145 McPhail, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1978)
- ✓ Peters, Katie and E. J. Klassen, comp. **Genealogy of Heinrich Heese 1787-1977**. (145 McPhail, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1978)
- ✓ Petkau, Irene Friesen, ed. **Genealogy of Wiens**. (Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1978)

I will trade religious books for an antique old-fashioned coffee grinder. Write to: C.S. Friesen, 338 Mandeville, Winnipeg, Man., R3J 2G9, or call 1-204-837-4734.



The Heinrich Klippenstein family, featured in a new family study edited by a grandson, Mr. Bernhard D. Klippenstein of Winnipeg. On the photo are: (back standing, l-r) Bernhard, Heinrich, Peter; (seated, l-r) Mrs Sarah Klippenstein, Abraham, Mr. Heinrich Klippenstein, John, with Margaret (left), and Sarah (right) in front. Taken around 1894. Courtesy of Mrs. Sarah Klippenstein Braun, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Genealogy: The Study of Families

Visit any archives today, and you will find genealogists heading the list of researchers in the files. Genealogical societies are among the most active, and growing bodies in historical work. They are "lay" people, usually, although not a few scholars will delve in as a hobby, and sometimes find it encroaching on their other work!

Mennonites are no exception. Hundreds of persons today can be found doing "family trees". Some publish their work, with creditable results. Many continue to roam, looking for a "missing link", sometimes stalled for a time, but not ready to give up.

Mennonite Genealogy, Inc. has had the largest genealogical holdings of Mennonites in Canada to date. Beginning with the personal files of the late A.A. Vogt of Steinbach, Manitoba the collection has grown to about 140,000 name entry items. Dozens of published studies and hundreds of family photos have been collected as well.

With its roots at Steinbach, Mennonite Genealogy Inc. continued for a number of years to offer its services at that location. As the demand for help increased, it became more and more difficult to provide the needed space and personnel to service research requests.

The opening of the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg created the possibility of moving to new premises. The board of MGI agreed after some discussion that this would be a practical way to continue the work envisioned by Mr. Vogt and others who hoped to see family studies continue. In November, the move was undertaken, and with a few exceptions the materials of Mennonite Genealogy, Inc. are now housed at the Centre.

For information write to: Genealogy, Mennonite Heritage Centre, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3P 0M4.

Aeltester Johann Funk Family Book

Soon to be published is a family study of the Bergthaler bishop, Johann Funk from Altberghthal near Altona, Manitoba. It includes the genealogy and a brief biography, with some documents and photos related to the life and work of Aeltester Funk. The editor is Mary Dueck Jefferey of Winnipeg, Man. Interested persons may write to Genealogy, Mennonite Heritage Centre, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, Man.

READ

MENNONITE LIFE

*an illustrated quarterly published at
Bethel College, North Newton, Kan-
sas, U.S.A.*



New subscribers in 1979 will receive a free copy of the December 1978 issue, and the booklet *Swath and Sheaf*, fictionalized essays about a Mennonite community in Saskatchewan, written by Dr. V.A. Dirks.

Each December issue (Canadian content) is prepared by the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada. The regular editors are Dr. Robert Kreider and Dr. James Juhnke. The Canadian editor is Lawrence Klippenstein.

Subscription rates:

One year \$5.00
Two years \$8.00
Please enclose payment

Order from:

**Mennonite Heritage Centre
600 Shaftesbury Blvd.
Winnipeg, Manitoba R3P 0M4**

The material on this page was prepared for publication by the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada.

Mennonite Historical Society of Canada

Winnipeg, Manitoba — The annual board meeting of the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada was held at the Mennonite Heritage Centre on Saturday, December 2, 1978. Three member societies of the provinces were represented, with observers from a fourth present also.

The Ontario Historical Society, with a membership of seventy, sponsored two field trips in 1978: Black Creek and Markham. A visit to the Leamington area is planned for 1979. Alberta - Saskatchewan members continue to focus on the Rosthern Museum as a project for their society. Presently a survey of heritage resources in the Saskatchewan Valley area is underway. A congregational historians' seminar met at Clearbrook in February, 1978, and the BCMHS is also interested in establishing a Mennonite museum in the province. Observers from Manitoba reported an active year at the Mennonite Village Museum, and a review of the society's organizational structure planned for 1979.

Volume II of *Mennonites in Canada*, authored by Frank H. Epp is scheduled for

completion in 1979. Its scope is envisioned as the period from 1920-1950. Lyle Friesen continues as full-time assistant to the author. The Readers' Committee gave a brief report on its first meeting held the day before.

In the area of publications the board received copies of a new brochure "Mennonites in Canada", and supported the continuing distribution of the December number of *Mennonite Life* which is prepared as a Canadian issue. Material for it has gone to press. Members of the provincial societies are to receive copies, as well as invitations to subscribe to the periodical. The board also favored the publication of a guide for writing congregational history written by Frank Epp. Hopefully it will be circulated outside of Canada also.

Planning for next year the board accepted a budget of \$19,950.00, and also a proposal to evaluate possible further publication work on the Anna Baerg diary, perhaps in an English translation. The executive for 1979 includes Ted Regehr of Saskatoon as chairman, George Groening, Chilliwack, B.C. vice chairman, Sam Steiner, Waterloo, Ont. treasurer, Ted Friesen, Altona, Man. secretary, and Herb Giesbrecht, Winnipeg, Man. as member at large.

MMHS

Cultural Committee

The Cultural Committee of the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society set up heritage book sale booths at five summer festivals this past year. Included were: Pioneer Days at the Mennonite Village Museum; the Sunflower Festival, Altona; Old Time Value Days at Winkler; the Corn and Apple Festival, Morden; and the Manitoba Stampede at Morris, Manitoba. Don Stoesz of Winnipeg headed the project, with committee members Bill Schroeder and Les Zacharias assisting.

The Committee hopes to try the book project again in 1979. It is planning also to sponsor a "Mennonite artists evening", and to assist in setting up a memorial to pioneer Mennonite women at the Museum grounds.

Ongoing activities related to the work of the Committee include the "Plautdietscha Ohvent" by the Landmark Low German drama club (they plan on doing a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta in Low German), the weekly Low German lectures by Gerhard Ens, heard Mondays at 9:30 p.m. on Radio Southern Manitoba stations, the rental of a film, *Prairie Pioneers, Mennonites of Manitoba*, publication of local histories (in progress: Altona, Horndean, Niverville, Burwalde S.D., Blumenort (R.M. of Hanover), and Altbergthal S.D.) and the extensive program of the Mennonite Village Museum, now under the management of Gerald Barkman.

MHSO Microfilming

In June, July and August the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario co-sponsored the microfilming of heritage materials in Mennonite congregations of the province. With funding from the Multicultural History Society of Ontario, Dr. Rodney Sawatzky of Conrad Grebel College contracted Richard Neff and Richard Willms to carry out the project.

Fifty two congregations of the United Mennonite Conference of Ontario, the Ontario Mennonite Conference and the Eastern Ontario Mennonite Conference provided materials which produced nearly thirty rolls of completed film. Records copied included church council minutes, annual business meeting minutes, legal documents, women's auxiliary records, young people's records, Sunday school records, correspondence, marriage registers, membership records, church bulletins, and other items related to the life and work of congregations.

It is hoped that similar work can follow with other Mennonite groups not involved so far. Taping of oral histories of Mennonite immigrants, and conscientious objectors had been begun earlier, and more needs to be done in this area. The Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario is interested in continuing to sponsor projects of this kind.

Book Reviews

Alan F.J. Artibise, **Western Canada Since 1870. A Select Bibliography and Guide.** Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1978. \$17.50 cloth, \$6.95 paper; xvi + 294 pp. Reviewed by Adolf Ens, Winnipeg, Man.

Earlier this year the *Historian* (IV: 1, March 1978) announced two bibliographies that contained specifically Mennonite materials. In comparison with them, Artibise's **Select Bibliography** is of only marginal usefulness to Mennonite researchers.

The author has compiled some 3800 titles of books, pamphlets, articles and unpublished materials relating to the history of the four western provinces from 1870 through about 1977. These are arranged topically and grouped by province, with separate sections for the region as a whole, the Northwest Territories to 1905, and the Riel Rebellions. It thus becomes a very helpful guide in locating quickly background materials relating to government and politics, agricultural and rural development, economic development and labour, and a number of other topics for any of the regions in the west.

An appendix to the bibliography lists the main periodicals, archives and libraries, organizations and societies, and specialized series of publications dealing with western Canadian studies. There is a full author index, but the subject index is quite selective. Its section on ethnic groups will find much use among researchers who follow the currently popular trend toward multiculturalism. Unfortunately, the thirty-odd items listed under "Mennonite" are not adequately representative of the available material (although the selection is a better one than that included in Bruce B. Peel's **Bibliography of the Prairie Provinces to 1953**). F.H. Epp's **Mennonite Exodus**, H.J. Gerbrandt's **Adventure in Faith**, and John Bergen's writings on Mennonite education in Manitoba, for example, are not included in Artibise's **Bibliography**.

Although I have "discovered" only two or three items on Mennonites in this book that I had not been aware of earlier, I nevertheless find it a useful addition to my research tools. Writers on Mennonite themes, myself included, need to pay more attention to the larger Canadian context in which "our" story takes place. To help us in that task, Professor Artibise and the University of British Columbia Press have made a valuable contribution.

Rolf Wilh. Brednich, **Mennonite Folklife and Folklore. A Preliminary Report.** National Museums of Canada, Ottawa, Canada. 1977. paper. vi + 116 pp. Reviewed by

Lawrence Klippenstein, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

The study summarizes the result of a two-month investigation initiated by the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies. Its aim: to contribute to German-Canadian studies and to advance the study of Mennonite folklife and culture in Canada.

Focusing on the Saskatchewan Valley area around Hague-Osler and Rosthern, Brednich planned a penetrating on-the-spot contact designed to provide a first-hand glimpse of Mennonite ways in every day work and living together. It may be confidently stated that, as an "outsider" becoming a part of the group, and providing an over-all view of the topic, it is one of the most wide-ranging and observant results produced thus far.

The topics of study included: material culture, with special interest in wall mottos; foods and dishes; social customs; hymns and folksong traditions; storytelling — and some jokes for the appendix. Appropriately considerable attention was given to Mennonite history and thought, on the basis of which the author drew some conclusions, and also set out future tasks.

Brednich found the main cultural change to be linguistic, the shift from an exclusively Low German speaking "island", to a much more Canadian English-speaking, community: It is an area, still in transition since many of the older people have not forgotten their language, and still speak it a great deal. Younger people do so much less. Because the Old Colony Mennonites have tended to retain their older ways more firmly than others, they became the object of special studies in this project. As such, of course, they would not represent the Mennonite group as a whole, and this may cause a reader now and then to suggest that certain dimensions of their folk culture are not generally "Mennonite" in Canada.

The relationship of Mennonite religious life to folk culture remains somewhat ambiguous. Brednich stated categorically that "for the Mennonites their religion is their folk culture." In the project report as a whole, one could use clearer definition of terms, and more evidence would be needed before that equivalence could appear established.

The author did not try to decide whether one culture (the German) might carry religious values better than another (say, the Canadian). That is a question which Mennonites would answer in different ways and even the Old Colony people might find a consensus hard to achieve by now.

The tapes, photos, etc. now on file may warrant further investigation, and others, like Professor Brednich, the head curator of the University of Freiburg in West Germany, may yet enrich this area of study even more.

John P. Nickel, ed. and trans. **Thy Kingdom Come. The Diary of Johann J. Nickel of Rosenhof 1918-1919.** Saskatoon, Sask., 1978. vii. + 103 pp. \$6.50 paper.

Yesterday's diaries continue to fascinate, and really, to inform many readers today. Documents on the Mennonite experience during the Revolution in Russia have an undying interest quality as well. Hence, **Thy Kingdom Come**, which combines these features undoubtedly will find its way into many hands, and be eagerly read.

The years 1918-1919 were a high-point of agitation and suffering for Russian Mennonites, and the observations of Johann Nickel (1859-1920) an (MB) minister of Rosenhof offered another account of how one lived, and survived, during those days. Many died, of course, and the entries commemorate their passing.

A special contribution of the book are the notes on a minister's work which Nickel included. One of his essays, "The Authority of a Teacher" forms an appendix for the volume, and the index of personal names provides a tool for genealogists and relatives of the Nickel family.

The book can be ordered from J.P. Nickel, 510 - 716 Melrose Ave., Saskatoon, Sask.

New Books

Dueck, Abe. **Concordia Hospital 1928-1978.** Winnipeg, Manitoba. 1978. English and German text. Pp. 42. \$3.50 paper.

Fast, Karl and C.G. Unruh, eds. **Fiftieth Anniversary of the Mennonite Settlement in North Kildonan.** Winnipeg, Manitoba. 1978. German-English text. Pp. 128. \$5.00 paper. Order from Karl Fast, 340 Cheriton Ave., Winnipeg, Man.

Goman, Jean Reimer. **Rebecca's Nancy.** St. Jacob's, Ont., Sand Hills Books, Inc. 1978. For children \$7.95

Lohrenz, Gerhard. **The Odyssey of the Bergen Family.** Winnipeg, Manitoba. 1978. Pp. 145. \$6.00 paper. Order from the author, 261 Renfrew, Winnipeg, Man., R3N 1J5

Petkau, Irene Friesen, ed. **Just When We Were. . . The Story of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada.** Winnipeg, Manitoba. 1978. Pp. 60 Graphically illustrated. \$6.00 paper. Order from CMBC Publications, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, Man. R3P 0M4.

Snyder, Peter Etril and A. K. Herrfort. **Mennonite Country.** St. Jacobs, Ont.: Sand Hill Books, Inc. Pp. 185. About Old Order Mennonite life with photos by Snyder and text by Herrfort.

Toews, John B. **With Courage to Spare. The life of B.B. Janz (1877-1964).** Hillsboro, Kansas. 1978. Pp. 185. \$6.60 paper. \$8.95 cloth. Order from Christian Press, 159 Henderson Hwy, Winnipeg, Man.