

Mennonite Historian



Volume X, Number 3

Sept., 1984



The Blumenhof village private school was recently dedicated and opened to the public in its restored condition at its new location at the Mennonite Village Museum, Steinbach, Manitoba. Here John C. Reimer, the first curator of the museum, and Abram P. Driedger of Gretna, who donated the school building, cut the ribbon at the service, held on Sunday, August 26, 1984. (Photo credit: Eugene Derksen)

The Role and Significance of the Mennonite Private Schools in Manitoba

by John Friesen

When Mennonites in the 1870's moved from the Ukraine in Russia to Southern Manitoba, they brought with them the private school. As soon as villages were laid out on the east reserve - Steinbach to Niverville, or on the West Reserve - Gretna to Winkler, schools were established in every village.

What was the origin of this Mennonite private school? Mennonites began private schools while they were still living in Poland before they moved to the Ukraine in 1788. While still resident in Danzig or in the Polish province of Prussia they had schools for their boys and girls. They wanted to prepare their young people to take up responsible roles in the church and in the local society, so it was necessary that the children be taught to read and write. Probably the greatest incentive to develop the school system was the Mennonite practice of electing ministers, bishops and deacons from among the membership. Every young person could potentially be a leader

some day, and thus all children needed to have the basic skills of reading and writing to fulfill their duties if elected.

The architecture and layout of the private school which was brought to Manitoba was developed in the Ukraine in the 19th century. Johann Cornies introduced a new pattern for schools, according to which the schools had to be well lit and have a separate classroom where learning could go on without disruption. Earlier Russian Mennonite schools had frequently been led by a carpenter or some other tradesman who taught while he was working. The new schools provided a much better setting for learning to occur.

The new schools also provided living quarters for a teacher and his family. This arrangement implied that a teacher should teach full-time and not merely as a side-line to another vocation. The status of the teacher was raised and given dignity as an important role in the community. The new schools at first met with opposition, however, before

they were accepted and even became a symbol of traditional Mennonite values.

The curriculum of the private school was also developed in the Ukraine. The curriculum consisted of four levels: 1) the Fibel - an introduction to the alphabet and basic grammar, 2) the Catechism - a synopsis of what the church believed, 3) readings from the New Testament, 4) and readings from the whole Bible. These levels were not grades since a student usually spent more than one year at a level. The curriculum was designed to pass on the religious values of the community: knowledge of the Bible, love for God and neighbor, pacifism and rejection of war, and a willingness to share economically with fellow villagers. The school was designed to teach the basic skills and values which would be needed to take on responsibilities in the church and in the village.

With these schools Mennonites were expressing that: education is important, education ought to be equal for both boys and girls, and education is the responsibility of the Church and the parents. To a very large extent the move to Manitoba was to protect these convictions.

The Mennonite private schools were also Manitoba schools. In 1874, in Manitoba, there were two sections to the department of Education - a Roman Catholic section and a Protestant section. Many Mennonite schools were initially organized under the Protestant section. However, when the department attempted to impose requirements, many schools withdrew their registration and became private again.

In 1874 Manitoba did not have universal, compulsory education. Whether a community had a school at all depended primarily on the initiative, effort and dedication of the local people. Mennonites made the effort to provide universal education to all Mennonite children practically from the first year onward. In this regard the Mennonite private school contributed to the development of education in Manitoba.

Furthermore, the Mennonite private schools contributed to bilingualism. When Mennonites settled in Manitoba they used High German in church and Low German. Many of the early teachers had received their training in the high schools in Chortitza and Molotschna in the Ukraine. Thus the schools

(cont'd on p. 2)

(Cont'd from p. 1)

helped to maintain a knowledge of German.

At the same time, the Mennonite schools also introduced English, at first as a second language, and then also as the language of instruction for a number of subjects. By the early 20th century practically all Mennonite private schools had incorporated English to some degree into the curriculum. Some schools had more English, some less, but even the private schools in areas which were most resistant to acculturation had incorporated some English. Mennonite schools were bilingual and promoted bilingualism about a hundred years before program was introduced by federal and provincial governments. These private schools did a remarkable job of introducing their students to both the English and German cultures and languages.

In 1890 the original system of 2 denominational school boards was abolished in favour of one Board which was intended to be secular and non-denominational. This meant loss of control by the French of their schools. But this loss by the French also had implications for other groups and their schools. There was pressure on Mennonite schools to become public schools and to accept public funds, standards and curriculum. There was pressure on Mennonite schools to fly the Union Jack, a symbol of patriotism for the British Empire.

Mennonites viewed these developments as a threat to their values, and to their schools which were to pass on their values.

In 1916 this conflict over the type of schools Manitoba should have reached its culmination in laws which created English only schools in Manitoba, and made attendance in public schools compulsory. A government leader in a burst of patriotism in the midst of the 1st W.W. was reported in the Free Press to have said that Manitoba needed unilingual English schools to train Manitoba young people to fight under one God, one flag, and one empire.

For Mennonites in Manitoba, the private school became the symbol of opposition to this nationalistic crusade. They saw the school as the key institution for transmitting their values. The Canadian government in 1873 had promised them the right to have their own schools, and to this promise they clung.

The government of Manitoba in 1916 was however of a different mind. It was set on creating a uni-lingual English society. Despite many protestations, the Manitoba government could not be dissuaded from its goal, and the Mennonite bi-lingual private schools were eliminated. By the 1920's Mennonites either accommodated themselves to the changed situation and accepted public schools, or

they emigrated to either Mexico or Paraguay. Thousands decided to emigrate and transplanted the private school into new settings.

The Mennonite private school had made its mark in Manitoba. The public schools in Mennonite communities were closely patterned upon the former private schools; as closely as Provincial government regulations would allow. They tried to preserve the values of peace, community and bi-culturalism. An era had however passed with the extinction of the private school.

The opening of the private school at the Mennonite Village Museum is both ironic and a sign of hope. It is ironic, because the governments, both Federal and Provincial, have spent many times more money to restore this building than they ever spent to support the Mennonite private schools when they were in use.

The opening is also a sign of hope. Governments have changed since the 1920's. Today people of Canada and their governments recognize the value of strengthening traditional cultures, values and heritages. We now see that instead of weakening a country this emphasis enriches it, and can make its people more tolerant of differing views, cultures and ideas. We also see that a student's education is richer if he or she can read, write and speak in more than one language. Even in the area of nationalism, our country now recognizes that the narrow nationalism of the First World War eventually only produces more wars, and that in a nuclear age such narrow patriotism will destroy us all. The peace message of these private schools, we could say, has finally been recognized as the only way we humans can continue to live with one another. (John Friesen is a professor at the Canadian Mennonite Bible College)

CORRECTION

The review of *Blumenort* was done by Peter A. Petkau, not by Irene Petkau, as stated in the March 1984 *Mennonite Historian*, p. 8. Sorry about the error.

Directory of Mennonite Archives and Historical Libraries. Editor, Lawrence Klippenstein. Winnipeg, Manitoba. Mennonite Heritage Centre, 1984, 28 pp.

The directory lists a total of 42 places in Canada, United States, Australia, Brazil, France, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Netherlands, Paraguay and Switzerland.

Price: \$5.00. Order from Mennonite Heritage Centre, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3P 0M4.

BOOK REVIEWS

Our regular Book Review column will not be featured in this issue.

Two books recently written by Mrs. Andrew Friesen are *The Martin Family* (\$2.95)--a children's story of a Christian family, and *Three Years Later* (\$5.50)--a sequel to the first book. Books may be ordered or purchased from Gospel Publishers, Box 18E, Ste. Anne, Manitoba. R0A 1R0. Please add 39¢ or 50¢ for both, for the postage.

Activities

The Conference of Mennonites in Canada has received an \$800 grant from the Manitoba Government to help pay for sending their archivist, Dennis Stoesz, to Ottawa to take an Archives Course at the Public Archives of Canada in September 1984. The grant came from the Minister of Culture, Heritage, and Recreation, Eugene Kostyra.

Dennis Stoesz was hired as interim archivist for two years, starting June 18, 1984, while Lawrence Klippenstein and family are on a sabbatical in Europe.

Other staff changes at the Mennonite Heritage Centre include hiring Mark Froese as archivist for three weeks. He has worked previously at the Centre for one and a half years. Bev Suderman has been hired as the new secretary-receptionist-archivist assistant, to replace June Wallman who will be attending school fulltime.

Laura Brubaker is volunteering some of her time, while studying at the Canadian Mennonite Bible College, to sort and file material like bulletins which are regularly sent to the archives by the churches.



Bev Suderman started her job at the Centre as receptionist-secretary-archivist assistant on September 15. She graduated from the Canadian Mennonite Bible College in 1981, and from the University of Manitoba this fall. She originates from Winkler.

Church Records discussed at Workshop

by Dennis Stoesz

The theme of the workshop put on by the Mennonite Heritage Centre at the 1984 Canadian Conference in Three Hills, Alberta, was Church Records. It was held on July 9, 1984.

The twenty-six people who attended the hour and a half seminar brought with them a variety of questions about their congregational records. How does one deal with confidentiality of and access to records? How does one organize and preserve the materials? What does one throw away and what does one keep? And what does one do with the older books and records of the church?

Other questions from participants included: What is the role of the congregational historian in the church, and what is her relationship to the Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives? How often does one send in the bulletins, annual reports, etc. to the Archives? The Mennonite Heritage Centre is the official repository for the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. How long does it take to microfilm the records of one congregation at the Archives?

Five key questions

The participants were also asked five key questions by the workshop leader, Dennis Stoesz. Who creates the congregational records? It was agreed that several people wrote minutes, letters, reports, and other articles related to the work of the church: the Pastor, the elected church secretary, the office secretary, secretaries of the various committees, the treasurer, the church historian, youth leader, Sunday School Superintendent, and others.

Secondly, who is responsible for these records? No agreement could be made on any one person who took total responsibility for minutes, reports, correspondence, etc. of the congregation. It could include the pastor, his secretary, or the elected church secretary. Usually these persons, or an appointed individual also kept the Church Registers up to date. Some churches used bound registers, while others have been switching to loose leaf binders or 4x8 cards.

Thirdly, where are the records kept? The records themselves were kept in a variety of places: pastor's office, secretary's office, fireproof safe, in the basement of a church, or at home(s). The group did not come up with the best place to keep them; however, they did raise several suggestions where not to keep them, such as in damp places, in possession of private individuals, etc.

A fourth question focussed on how the records are organized. Usually the current records were organized by year, as in the case of minutes, reports and correspondence.

Some remarked that their older records were stored in boxes, and were dismally organized.

Who all uses the records? The question included the concern of confidentiality of records. It also raised the concern that the church sometimes does not see its "old" records as valuable as its current ones because they are not used as much.

The workshop was a good forum to hear each other. Though it stimulated more questions than answers, it was a start at reviewing the records kept in the some 150 congregations in the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. If anyone wants the question sheet used at the workshop, write to Mennonite Heritage Centre, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, Manitoba R3P 0M4. I must thank Esther Patkau who lent me her minutes of the workshop, which I have used extensively for this report.

Participants in the workshop were:

British Columbia

Nick Janzen, Cedar Hills (Surrey)
Leona Dyck, First Mennonite (Burns Lake)
Henry H. Epp, First Mennonite (Kelowna)
Jacob Brucks, Clearbrook
P. G. Wiens, Peace (Richmond)

Alberta

Joyce Baergen, Faith (Edmonton)
Irene Klassen, First Mennonite (Calgary)
Herman Walde, Trinity (Calgary)
Norman Bergen, Coaldale
Ruth Friesen, Coaldale
Abe Janzen, Coaldale

Saskatchewan

Laura Kroeger, Dundurn
John Friesen, Zoar (Langham)
Gordon Laskowski, North Star (Drake)
Doreen Klippenstein, Zion (Swift Current)
Esther Patkau, First Mennonite (Saskatoon)

Art Klaassen, Rosthern
Cornie A. Guenther, Osler

Manitoba

Edd Funk, Northdale (Winnipeg)
Henry H. Patkau, Grace (Brandon)
D. G. Friesen, Altona Berghaler
Abe Loewen, Gretna Berghaler
Elsie Epp, Homewood

Ontario

Eleonore Willms, Bethany (Virgil)
Jacob Reimer, Niagara
Victor Dick

Report on the archives of the Faith Mennonite Church, Edmonton

by Gladys Isaak

Since we are a fairly new congregation we do not as yet have a large archive. We are keeping our bulletins (Sunday by Sunday) in storage binding cases — stamping the date on the outside of each bulletin, which makes it easier to find.

The Minutes of both Council and Congregational meetings are kept by the ar-

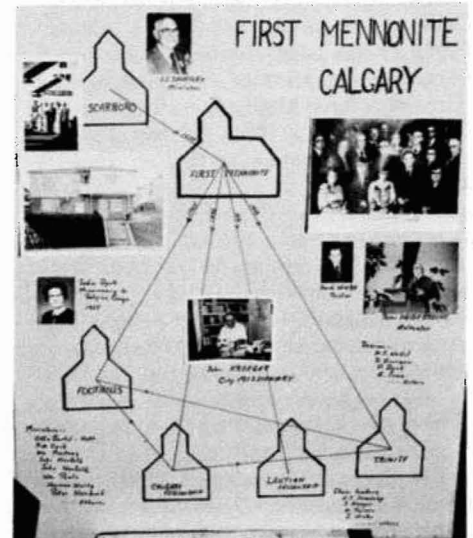
chivist, as she is the Church Secretary as well. Newspaper clippings pertaining to Faith Mennonite and other Edmonton Mennonite churches are kept in a scrap book. All other correspondence, etc. are kept in a file at the home of the archivist.

Report on the archives of the Dundurn Mennonite Church and of the Nordheimer Mennonite Gemeinde of Saskatchewan

by George Zacharias

I regret to say that our Dundurn Church records are not complete; the early years are missing. The records are kept in a fireproof safe, and have not been microfilmed. Our church secretary is responsible for the Church Register.

Perhaps I could base my report on what we have done with the Nordheimer Mennonite Churches of Saskatchewan, to which Dundurn, Hanley and Pleasant Point churches belong. The records of this Conference are complete from 1925 to 1980, as far as I know, and have been organized and kept in a fireproof safe in our church. In organizing these records, all material was classified by using serial numbers and letters. These records have been microfilmed by the Mennonite Heritage Centre.



Display at the 1984 Canadian Conference in Alberta showing a graphic history of the expansion of First Mennonite Church (1946-) in Calgary. Seven other Alberta churches also set up historical displays at the conference: **Bergthal** (1901- , Didsbury); **Coaldale** (1928-); **Faith Mennonite** (1980- , Edmonton); **First Mennonite** (1949- , Edmonton); **Foothills** (1956- , Calgary); **Hillcrest** (1957- , Grand Prairie), and **Springridge** (1928- , Pincher Creek). (Photo credit: Dennis Stoesz)

News From the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society

by Rhinehart Friesen

The board of directors of the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society held their summer meeting on June 9. The place chosen for the meeting was, very fittingly, the Mennonite Village Museum in Steinbach. At a luncheon of delicious ethnic food before the actual meeting, Peter Goertzen, Museum Manager, welcomed the Board to Steinbach.

Present were president Delbert Plett, secretary Ruth Bock, continuing board members Ed Schellenberg, Doreen Klassen and Ted Friesen, and new directors Abe Dueck, Rhinehart Friesen and John Dyck.

The Constitution and Nominating Committee presented a budget which was approved after discussion. They are looking into various sources of funds including a grant from the Department of Tourism and Culture and the possibility of establishing an endowment fund. Members of the Finance Committee are Abe Dueck, John Dyck, Delbert Plett and Victor Duerksen.

The Membership and Publicity Committee has temporarily lost the services of its former chairman, Dennis Stoesz. It now consists of Dr. Rhinehart Friesen, Ruth Bock, and Royden Loewen. At latest count the membership stands at 140 not including the three honorary members, Eugene Derksen, Gerhard J. Lohrenz, and John C. Reimer. Publicity has been assisted greatly by the friendly cooperation of numerous publications who have kindly published material supplied to them in News Releases. These include *The Carillon*, *South East Bulletin*, *Mennonitische Post*, *EMC Messenger*, *Mennonite Mirror*, *Red River Valley Echo*, *Bote*, *Familienfreund* and probably others. For some time Updates on the activities of the Society have been published in the *Mennonite Historian*. In future it is intended to replace alternate Updates with more inclusive Newsletters sent to all members. The Society also received considerable favorable publicity from the display put up by Dennis Stoesz at the Arts festival at Polo Park.

The Program Committee, consisting of Henry K. Friesen and Delbert Plett, discussed the continuing popularity of the Society's fall programs. Tentative plans call for the one in 1984 to be held in the West Reserve, possibly in Winkler. John Dyck, Chairman of the recently formed Genealogy and Local History Committee, suggested that the theme of this year's event should be genealogy. If this was aimed at the many people interested but relatively inexperienced in this field, it might generate enough enthusiasm to warrant an advanced workshop in 1985 including a high calibre outside speaker. Genealogy is a field in which the MMHS logically should



1984 Board of the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, as taken on June 9 at the Mennonite Village Museum in Steinbach. Seated (l-r): Doreen Klassen, Delbert Plett, Ruth Bock. Standing (l-r): John Dyck, Ted Friesen, Rhinehart Friesen, Ed Schellenberg, and Abe Dueck.

become more involved.

The Arts and Interdisciplinary Committee consisting of Doreen Klassen, Ken Reddig, and Ed Schellenberg, reported that they are taking steps to rectify the false impression given by a published report which gave the Society credit for publishing Victor Davies' Mennonite Piano Concerto. The board heartily endorsed their plans for holding a Composer's Competition and approved a budget for this undertaking. All Canadian composers and would-be composers please take note that there will be prizes in two categories: (a) instrumental music based on traditional Mennonite tunes, and (b) vocal/choral music with texts based on historic Anabaptist/Mennonite ideals.

The newly formed Genealogy and Local History Committee consists of John Dyck, Margaret Kroeker, and Henry Fast. The Board commended them for becoming operational so quickly and encouraged them to proceed with their plans. These include the following: (a) preparing a list of government assistance programs for communities which are considering writing and publishing local histories (b) recording names and dates on headstones in Mennonite cemeteries in Manitoba, using the list of cemeteries compiled by the Historic Sites and Monuments Committee as a guide to their location; (c) exploring the possibility of working cooperatively with the other provincial Mennonite historical societies and Mennonite Genealogy Inc. to establish MGI as the central Canadian clearing house for genealogical data on Mennonites in the Prussian Russian stream with a view to computerizing these data; and (d) holding genealogy seminars in a number of locations.

The Historic Sites and Monuments Committee, consisting of Herman Rempel, Ernie Friesen, and Helen Janzen, after listing all the Mennonite cemeteries in Manitoba which they were able to find, are now anxious to hear from any families who have continuously owned the same farm for one hundred years or more.

The Mennonite Book Club Committee, consisting of Al Reimer, Victor Doerksen, Roy Vogt, Harry Loewen, and Bert Friesen, are proceeding with plans to set up a book club which might also make cassettes available. Mrs. Lora Sawatzky has consented

to look after the club's day to day operations.

The Research and Scholarship Committee, consisting of Bert Friesen, Harry Loewen, Elizabeth Peters, and Al Reimer, hope to publish Arnold Dyck's "Verloren auf der Steppe" in Fall of 1984. A second volume of Dyck's writings, in Plautdietsch, is being processed by computer.

It is apparent that the MMHS is not only alive and well, but active in many fields. Please watch for announcements of coming events.

(Rhinehart Friesen is on the Board of the MMH Society and is chairman of the Publicity and Membership Committee.)

Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society Committees 1984

Operating Committees:

- (1) **Publicity and Membership** - Rhinehart Friesen, Ruth Bock, Roy Loewen.
- (2) **Constitution and Nomination** - Ted Friesen, Delbert Plett, John Friesen.
- (3) **Finance Committees** - Abe Dueck, John Dyck, Delbert Plett, Victor Doerksen.
- (4) **Program Committee** - Henry K. Friesen, Delbert Plett, and hopefully more to be announced.

Standing Committees:

- (5) **Arts and Interdisciplinary** - Chairman Doreen Klassen, Ed Schellenberg, Ken Reddig.
- (6) **Historic Sites and Monuments** - Chairman Herman Rempel, Ernie Friesen, Helen Janzen.
- (7) **Research and Scholarship** - Chairman Bert Friesen, Harry Loewen, Elizabeth Peters, Al Reimer.
- (8) **Russian Mennonite Monument Committee** - Chairman Gerhard Ens, George K. Epp, H. D. Wiebe, Otto Klassen, Karl Fast, Harry Loewen.
- (9) **Mennonite Book Club** - Chairman Al Reimer, Victor Doerksen, Roy Vogt, Harry Loewen, Bert Friesen.
- (10) **Genealogy and Local History** - Chairman John Dyck, Margaret Kroeker, Henry Fast.