

Mennonite Historian



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Photo Courtesy of Ernest Wiebe, Winnipeg, Man.

Many readers will have noted the recent passing of several well-known Mennonite church leaders of our Conference. This photo recalls a southern Manitoba ministers' and deacons' meeting where some of them were present. It has been dated as "the early 1940's" with the Bergthaler Mennonite Church in Morden, Manitoba, specified as the place.

We would appreciate very much knowing more about this gathering, i.e. more evidence for the exact date and place of the meeting, the names of all the participants, including churches which they served, and what the conference was all about.

Seated in the front row are (l-r): Isaac I. Friesen, Bethel Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, Man.; Johann J. Enns, Elim Mennonite Church, Grunthal, Man.; William H. Falk, Rudnerweide Mennonite Church of Manitoba; David Schultz, Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Manitoba; Jacob J. Nickel, Zoar Mennonite Church, Langham, Sask.; Johann Bueckert, Blumenorter Mennonite Church near Gretna, Man.; Johann G. Rempel, Rosenorter Mennonite Church of Saskatchewan; Benjamin Ewert, Bethel Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, Man.; David Abrams, Schoenfelder Mennonite Church, Headingly, Man.; George G. Neufeld, Whitewater Mennonite Church of Manitoba, now resident at Boissevain, Man.; and Wilhelm H. Enns, Springstein Mennonite Church, Springstein, Man. All of these men had received ordination as **Aeltesters** (bishops or elders) in their respective groups.

Peter Regier

Part III

At the turn of the century Aeltester Peter Regier stood astride two new developments in the Western Canadian Mennonite community. One was the formation of the **Konferenz der Mennoniten in Mittlern Kanada** (Conference of Mennonites in Central Canada), and the other, the opening of the German-English Academy (later Rosthern Junior College) at Rosthern, Saskatchewan.

When two ministers, Benjamin Ewert and Johann M. Friesen, of the Bergthaler Mennonite Church in Manitoba visited the Rosthern area in July, 1902, Regier welcomed them at his own home. Here they met with other local Rosenorter leaders to discuss how Mennonites of the prairies might establish closer relationships and organize their work together.

A decision to meet again the following

year resulted from these deliberations. Thus were convened the first sessions of the **Konferenz der Mennoniten in Mittlern Kanada**, held at the Hochstadt Bergthaler Church near Altona, Manitoba, on July 20-21, 1903. Fifteen or more representatives from the Bergthaler and Rosenorter churches shared the study of several major papers (**Referate**) as well as a brief business period which concluded the meetings.

Regier himself was apparently not present. The minutes do not mention his name, and one notes also that reports from the Rosenorter **Gemeinde** were brought by J. E. Sprunger and Gerhard Epp. The Aeltester was, however, appointed to a five-man constitution committee, and preached the conference sermon at the second sessions held at Eigenheim, Saskatchewan, in 1904.

Two years later, in 1906, Conference representatives appointed Regier and two other persons to a Home Missions (earlier called **Reiseprediger**) committee. For seven years he held this office, withdrawing only when illness made it difficult to continue. **Der Mitarbeiter**, a Conference periodical also begun in 1906, regularly carried his committee treasurer's reports. In its early issues, the paper also carried a short historical sketch of the Rosenorter Mennonite Church written by Regier himself.

During this same period Regier began discussing with other leaders the need for better education. Four out of the five men invited to a special meeting on this topic joined him at the William Abrams home in Rosthern on

January 24, 1903. Mennonite educational standards, all agreed, badly needed raising, and they decided to call for a public **beratende Versammlung** (exploratory meeting) regarding the establishment of a German-English teacher training centre in the area.

Support for this idea was strong at the March 7 meeting which followed. The outcome ultimately was the official opening of the German-English Academy at Rosthern on Nov. 14, 1905. Regier's interest in its progress no doubt continued, but from here on David Toews and others stood in the forefront of the enterprise as such.

Administrative and pastoral duties continued to occupy a major portion of Aeltester Regier's daily schedule. Travelling increased as the circuit of preaching points within the Rosenorter church community kept on expanding. Regier had led a new church building dedication at Eigenheim in 1902, and additional meeting houses were being planned as well.

In April, 1903, Regier travelled to West Prussia to visit family members, hoping also to bring back with him his beloved parents-in-law, the Johann Ennses. A General Conference minister, Rev. J. E. Sprunger, had agreed to serve the Rosenorter people during their regular leader's absence.

Sprunger took over enthusiastically. He showed special interest in the idea, current for some time, that a church building was needed at Rosthern. The project began and progressed rapidly, so that he was able to escort the Aeltester into a completed structure when he returned in early July.

Reporting the event Regier wrote, "Tears of joy came to my eyes. Deeply moved, I folded my hands, and inwardly thanked God Who has accomplished great things." He added in his comments, "Perhaps the outstanding debt of \$50.00 can still be met this fall!" The church building was dedicated in August. At Hochstadt, Manitoba, the 1903 Conference participants had also agreed to recommend offerings in their congregations to assist the Rosthern building program with funds.

Regier's historical sketch of 1906 concludes with these words: "We meet every Sunday for worship at Eigenheim and Rosthern, as well as gathering every three weeks in Hague, Waldheim, Tiefengrund and Bergthal. Attendance at the services is generally good. Our tasks as ministers are heavy, but we carry them out with joy. God gives us strength and our reward is in heaven." (*to be concluded*). Lawrence Klippenstein

Note: Space restrictions require a further section, Part IV, to complete this article. It is planned for the June issue.

New Studies Centre Plans

Winnipeg, Manitoba — During the recent meetings of the Council of Boards of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, a vision which has flickered among us for many years came a step closer to reality.

Peter W. Enns of Winkler, Manitoba, brought to the boards a proposal that looks forward to the establishment of an archives-library center for the benefit of the entire Mennonite community. The P. W. Enns Family Foundation proposes to fund such a center on the Canadian Mennonite Bible College campus to be operated by the Conference of Mennonites in Canada for the benefit of all Mennonites. It is understood that such a center should become a repository for the archival material of any Mennonite groups or organizations who choose to do so.

The boards responded positively and enthusiastically to the proposal and took steps to appoint a committee to work with the P. W. Enns Family Foundation to prepare a plan for presentation to the conference in July.

Mr. Enns, in his letter to the Conference states the intention as follows: "This complex would be for the use of all Mennonites. The prime intent of such a center would be an expression of gratitude for God's guidance and our Canadian heritage; allowing future generations the opportunity to study and understand the Mennonite people as servants of God."





A gathering of early Reesor settlers in front of the "Immigrantenhaus". This was the summer of 1926. In front (l-r) Wilhelm Rempel, Heinrich Enns, and Cornelius Penner. Thomas Reesor, a visitor, is seen on the front right.

Reesor — An Extinct Community

J. Winfield Fretz,

In the long history of the Mennonite church there are literally thousands of extinct Mennonite communities. Of these many have left barely a historical trace other than name. The dates of establishment and of extinction, the names and numbers and length of residence of members of the community and all records of the sociological factors and forces accounting for either their establishment or extinction are totally missing.

The Reesor, Ontario community located between Kapuskasing and Hearst, Ontario, northwest of Timmins would likely be one more such community were it not for the diligent and conscientious efforts of the last remaining member, John H. Enns who spent practically his entire lifetime in this community. Enns was a colony school teacher from 1936-1966 except for the few war years. He collected an amazing amount of valuable historical and sociological material about the families, their hardships and pioneering experiences of the institutions that were developed, a description of their means of livelihood and a detailed account of the socio-economic factors and forces that caused the final breakup of the settlement. In addition to the 84-page single-spaced historical account he also has a 76-page album of photographs. These consist of families; their early log and later frame houses as well as an amazing assortment of pictures of everyday life, of church and community activities.

It is a remarkable documented record of a Mennonite community that once was home for more than 300 people. The dates of the Reesor community can be considered 1926-1947, the latter being the year when the Reesor Mennonite Church was formerly disbanded.

Pioneer Beginnings

The Reesor settlers were Mennonites who had come to Canada from Russia in the middle 1920's. At that time it was extremely difficult to find employment and because of the impoverished condition of the new immigrants they were not able to purchase farms. Those of their co-religionists who attempted to do this in the prairie provinces found the burden extremely heavy and many of them gave up their farms altogether.

The reason for the settlement at Reesor was the availability of government timber land that was being opened to new settlers. The livelihood was intended to be derived from cutting pulpwood for the paper mills in Ontario. Thomas Reesor, a Mennonite leader in the Markham community north of Toronto, directed the Mennonite immigrants to this location and gave them a great deal of guidance and support in their settlement efforts. It is after this man that the community was named.

Mrs. Peter Dyck of Leamington, Ontario, then Erna Toews, a fourteen year old girl with her father and her brother, Cornelius, fifteen years old, describes the arrival of the first nine group of settlers:

Thus at 11 p.m. on a pitch-dark night, in a heavy rain, greeted by scurrying rabbits and swarms of hungry mosquitoes, the group of nine settlers got off the express which had been stopped just for them in the midst of nowhere, to begin their self-appointed task of hewing a new home from the primeval forest. Mr. Toews, in his memoirs, admits that a dreadful uneasiness descended upon them and that, if an opportunity had presented itself, they would probably have beaten a quick retreat.

Culture Transplanted

One of the fascinating aspects of the Reesor community is the way it demonstrates the transplanting of culture from one country to another. The Reesor settlers were poor in material things but rich in that they had experienced a better way of life and had ideas and hopes of what could with God's help be done in the future.

The first thing they did upon arrival was provide temporary shelter. Almost before their own houses were completed they decided to establish a school so that their children would not be deprived of an education even for a single year. The Reesor settlers were able to secure the services of David Heidebrecht who had completed a crash course at the Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Manitoba. When he arrived on the scene in Reesor, Heidebrecht found that a schoolhouse had not yet been built. A vacated log house two miles from the railroad station was improvised for both his residence and the first schoolroom.

Some of the hefty tree trunks were sawed into bench-high and desk-high lengths. Poplar lumber was used to make necessary desks. In spite of the fact that the first settlers arrived in June and some in late summer the first school was already underway by the middle of September. Shortly thereafter a new building was erected to serve the double purpose of a schoolroom and a church meeting place. In the later years a second school was erected so that children would not have more than two miles to walk. *(to be concluded)*

News and Notes

The spring meeting of the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario will be held on June 11 at the Rainham Mennonite Church in Holdimand County. Sessions will begin at 10:00 a.m. and close at 4:00 p.m. The group will also tour historic sites of extinct Mennonite churches.

The book *Anna's Art* written by E. Reginald Good, and published in 1976 by Pochauna Publications of Kitchener, Ontario, is an important contribution to the study of Pennsylvania German *Fraktur*. It can be purchased at Mennonite bookstores for \$10.95.

A reader draws attention to the fact the Aeltester David Toews, of Rosthern, Saskatchewan, came to Kansas from Russia (not West Prussia as suggested in the December issue of *MH*). This is correct, of course, although Toews' forebears did come from West Prussia earlier. The background of his life story can be studied in a recent book by Fred R. Belk entitled *The Great Trek of the Russian Mennonites to Central Asia, 1880-1884* (Herald Press, Scottdale, Pa., and Kitchener, Ont., 1976).

The material for this page was contributed by the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario. Photo credit goes to the archives at Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo, Ont.

Recent Publications

This concludes our update listing of historical publications by and about Mennonites in Canada. Several other related items were added as well. Information about materials omitted will be appreciated.

Devlin, T.P. "Homesteading in Northern British Columbia," **Mennonite Life** XXXI, December, 1976, 16-20.

Dick, LaVerna, **Who are the Mennonites?**, a brochure published in 1976 by the Heritage Committee of the General Conference Mennonite Church. Write to Box 347, Newton, Kansas 67114.

Dyck, C. J. comp. **Mennonite History Book Suggestions**. Prepared by the Heritage Committee of the GCMC. Write to Faith and Life Press, Box 347, Newton, Kansas, 67114. For church librarians.

Epp, George K. "Das Deutschtum in Kanada im Rahmen des kulturellen Mosaiks," **Mennonitisches Jahrbuch** 1977, 57-60.

Friesen, Orly, and Irma Neudorf, eds. **The history of the Friedensfeld school district**. Winnipeg, Man., 1976. 123 pp. Paperback. \$5.00. Order from Orly Friesen, 26 Watercress, Winnipeg, Man. Deals with a Mennonite area of settlement near Rosthern, Sask.

Froese, Isaac, ed. **Burwalde Album**. Newsletter No. 2, January, 1977. For copies write to I. Froese, 243 Morley Ave., Winnipeg, Manitoba R3L 0Y2. Includes historical notes on the Burwalde S.D. in southern Manitoba. The first issue is still available.

Goertzen, Peter. **Goertzen**, Edmonton, Alberta, 1976. 176 pp. Hardcover. \$14.50. A family study of the Gerhard and Helena Goertzen family. Order from the author, 12253-101 St., Edmonton, Alta.

Isaac, Frank. **Descendants of Franz Kornelius Isaak and Maria Braun, nee Ens**. Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1976. Paperback, 97 pp. \$10.00. Order from the author at 1063 Brazier, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Klassen, Agatha. **Yarrow - A Portrait in Mosaic**. Yarrow, B.C., 1977. Hardcover. More than 200 photographs. 120 pp. \$10.95. Order from Agatha Klassen, Box 49, Yarrow, B.C.

Klaassen, Walter, "The Modern Relevance of Anabaptism", **Umstrittenes Taufertum 1525-1975. Neue Forschungen**, ed. by Hans-Juergen Goertz, Goettingen, 1975, 290-304.

Klippenstein, Lawrence, "Western Local Mennonite Teachers' Conference - An Early Minute Book," **Manitoba Pageant** XXII, Winter, 1977, 8-11.

Kroeker, Nettie, **Far Above Rubies. The Story of Helena Wiens**. Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1976, 368 pp. Cloth. \$10.00. Order from Fellowship Bookcentre, 302 Kennedy, Winnipeg, Man.

Neufeld, Arnie, "The Origin and Early Growth of the MB Church in Southern Manitoba," unpublished MA thesis, MB Biblical Seminary, Fresno, Calif., 1976.

Patterson, Nancy-Lou, "Anna Weber hat das gemacht", **Mennonite Life** XXX, December, 1975, 15-19. Anna Weber (1814-1888) was a Fraktur painter in Waterloo County, Ontario.

... "Im Zeichen der Zwillinge," **Waterloo Historical Society** LXIII, 1975, 52-62.

Penner, Peter, "Mennonites in the Atlantic Provinces," **Mennonite Life** XXXI, December, 1976, 16-20.

Penner, William. **My Experiences in Camp Life**. Ste. Anne, Man. n.d. 15 pp. Paperback. 50¢. W.W. II CO camp experiences.

Peters, Elizabeth, trans. "Two Letters" by Arnold Dyck in **Journal of Canadian Fiction**, 1976 issue, 17-32.

Peters, Katie, ed. **Genealogy of Johann Janzen 1752-1977**. Winnipeg, Canada, 1977, 408 pp. Paperback. \$10.00. Order from E. J. Klassen, 467 Park, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Regehr, Ted, ed. "Mennonite Beginnings in Rosthern," **Mennonite Life** XXXI, December, 1976, 4-15. The author of this memoir is thought to be Peter Klassen, a pioneer resident and teacher of the Rosthern area.

Sawatsky, Walter, "A call for Union of Baptists and Mennonites," **Mennonite Quarterly Review** L (July, 1976), 230-239.

Schroeder, Bill, "A Visit to the Former Bergthal Colony in Russia," **The Carillon**, Steinbach, Man., Nov. 3, 1976. Sec. 3 p. 1.

Toews, John B., "Documents on Mennonite Life in Russia 1930-1940: The Great Terror," **American Historical Society of Germans from Russia Work Paper No. 19**. December, 1975, 3-12.

... "Documents on Mennonite Life in Russia 1930-1940: Cultural and Intellectual Life," **AHSGR Work Paper No. 20**. Spring, 1976, 36-43.

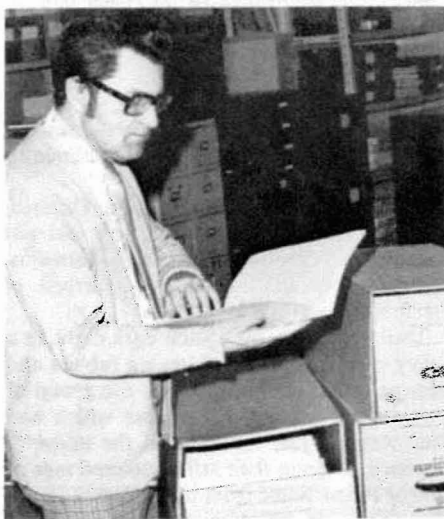


Photo: Dennis Stoesz

Historian-archivist Lawrence Klippenstein examines some of the files of the recent MCC (Canada) deposit at the CMC archives.

Toews, Julius G., "Reflections", **The Carillon**, Steinbach, Manitoba. A series of autobiographical articles beginning on March 31, 1976.

In Search of Ancestors

Edwin D. Hoepfner

Looking for ancestors is one thing and finding them is another. Yet the search is of value for its own sake partly because it constrains one to acquire some knowledge of the history of our people and of our literature. You never know in advance what you will find - that's after all the primary reason for the search.

During the past year we have had modest success in establishing the identity of the great-grandparents of my mother who was born Margaretha Reimer, the sixth of eight children. When she was not quite eight years old, the children lost their father, their mother having passed away somewhat earlier. The names and birthdates of her parents and grandparents were known to us as well as the story that her father and been brought initially to the East Reserve as a small boy by her grandparents when they emigrated to Canada.

A search of Peter Brown's copy of the "Ship Lists of Manitoba Mennonite Immigrants" failed to yield any record of the appropriate Johann Reimer with a five-year old son Dietrich. Thanks to an article on Aeltester David Stoesz in **Mennonite Life**, (April, 1976) we learned of the existence of the Bergthal Colony church records at Steinbach, Manitoba. As a result of these records we have established Mother's family record back to her great-grandfather, Derk Reimer, who was born in 1814, i.e. prior to the establishment of Bergthal in 1836. Therefore he was probably born in the Old Colony "centered" on Chortitza. Now, if we only had records of the Old Colony...

Currently I am attempting to establish the identity of the parents of Delegate Jakob Hoepfner of Bohnsack/Danzig as well as to document the entire Hoepfner family. Copies of old letters, diaries, photographs, as well as other help would be appreciated. The earliest reference I have found is to a Peter Hapner in Klein Lubin in 1632. This could well be "ein plautdietscher Hapner."

Note. The author's present address is 16 Dunelm, Winnipeg, Manitoba. Hoepfner family studies are also being pursued by other researchers including Pauline Heppner, 45135 Haig Dr., R.R. 4, Sardis, B.C.; P. M. Hoepfner, Winkler, Manitoba; and Lawrence Friesen, 2-865 LaSalle Blvd., Sudbury, Ontario.

URGENTLY NEEDED!

Back copies of "Mennonite Historian" for the first two issues: Sept., 1975, and March, 1976. Requested by university libraries. Use address given on page 2.