



# Newsletter

Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta

Volume XXI Number 3

March 2018

## Along the Road to Freedom

Dec 2, 2018

by Donita Wiebe-Neufeld

"You know how you hear about great ideas starting as notes written on restaurant napkins?"

Keynote speaker, Tim Wiebe-Neufeld held up an A & W napkin. "Dave Toews, I still have it!"

On December 2, over 100 people gathered at Edmonton's King's University for the opening of the "Along the Road to Freedom" art exhibit. Featuring paintings by Winnipeg artist, Ray Dirks, the exhibit

(Continued on page 6)



Donita  
Wiebe-Neufeld

## MHSA Fall Conference Report

by Marie Moyer

On a windy, grey afternoon November 25, 2017 a unique gathering of around 200 people took place at the Southern Alberta Ethnic Association Centre in Lethbridge, AB. The assembly included members of the local Japanese and Mennonite communities, Mennonite history enthusiasts from across Alberta, and lovers of Canadian literature. What brought this diverse group together was the fall conference of the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta (MHSA), co-hosted with the Nikkei Cultural Society (NCS), and featuring acclaimed authors Joy Kogawa and Rudy Wiebe, both of whom have roots in the Coaldale area. They had been invited to address the topic, "Tapestry of Uprooted Cultures: Japanese and Mennonites of Southern Alberta."

While most in attendance were attracted by the guest speakers, the diversity of the assembly itself proved to illustrate the theme before the first address was even made. As one attendee later observed, the Coaldale area



Marie Moyer



Joy Kogawa and Rudy Wiebe

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## Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta

### Annual General Meeting and

### Along the Road to Freedom Opening and Reception

Date: Saturday, April 28, 2018

Place: Gem of the West Museum, Coaldale, Ab.

Time: 10:30 AM - Annual General Meeting

1:30 PM - Along the Road to Freedom Opening and Reception

**Featuring: Artist Ray Dirks, with stories by Henry Janzen, Herta Janzen and Henry Heidebrecht**

**See the poster on the back page for more details.**

## Editorial Reflections:

by  
Dave Toews

The fact that this newsletter is later than it should be is entirely my responsibility. My wife Marion and I decided to take a six-week driving vacation to the US after I retired on Feb 16. Freedom 72!! We drove to the Grand Canyon, Tucson, Phoenix, Yuma, Indio, Palm Springs, Los Angeles, Mazatlan, MX (flew), Los Angeles and Las Vegas. 8,600 kilometres and six weeks later we are home. We visited snow-birding family and friends, attended baseball spring training in Phoenix and hockey games in Phoenix and Los Vegas, and did a good deal of sightseeing. Now I



**Dave Toews**

have to try to develop the schedule of a retired person. It is still feeling very strange.

The Along the Road to Freedom art exhibit is currently touring Alberta, the work of many people for the past two and a half years. See Tim Wiebe-Neufeld's letter to the editor on a following page. As I write this, the exhibit crates are on a truck on the way to Coaldale from Calgary. The exhibit opens in Coaldale on April 28th.

In her article entitled Along the Road to Freedom ... and Recognition, Lynette Toews-Neufeldt offers a unique perspective of the women honoured in this exhibit. As a young person growing up in the Coaldale MB Church she saw these women as old fashioned and stuck in the 1950s. She now realizes that her judgment was premature and that these incredibly strong women are justifiably celebrated in this art exhibition.

Thank you to all the authors and contributors to this issue. Your articles are always appreciated. It is a pleasure to work with you.

The MHSA welcomes your feedback, emails, letters to the edi-

tor, and articles. Contact Dave Toews at [dmttoews@gmail.com](mailto:dmttoews@gmail.com). Be sure to enter the Rename the Newsletter Contest. The deadline for submissions to the next newsletter is June 1, 2018. See you all on Apr 28 in Coaldale at the Gem of the West Museum for the Annual General Meeting and the opening of the Along the Road to Freedom art exhibition. ♦

## Chairman's Corner

by  
Dave Neufeldt

As I reflect on the past year of the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta I realize what a particularly busy year we had. It was a year in which



**Dave Neufeldt**

some long-anticipated projects came to fruition. It was also a year of loss. The loss was the sudden passing of Dan Jack in July. Dan was vice-chair of MHSA and also the co-editor of our newsletter. He was a valued member of our society. He had an insightful and inquisitive mind and a curiosity about Mennonite history. In addition to his roles with MHSA he was also moderator of Mennonite Church Alberta at the time of his passing. He will be missed.

As usual, we held two conferences this year. The first, in conjunction with our AGM at Bergthal Mennonite Church near Didsbury, focused on the history of songfest or sängerfest. Wesley Berg gave a presentation on the history of cho-

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[www.mennonitehistory.org](http://www.mennonitehistory.org)

### MHSA Executive

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Alice Unrau, Calgary

### MAID Representative:

Alice Unrau, Calgary

(Continued from page 2)

ral singing in the Mennonite church, and Laura Dyck told the history of songfests in Alberta. An ad hoc choir led by Jake and Elsie Wiebe was convened for the event. They performed German and English songs from songfests past.

For our fall conference we were very fortunate to have two well-known authors as our guest speakers. Joy Kogawa and Rudy Wiebe shared their insights under the title Tapestry of Uprooted Cultures – Japanese and Mennonites of Southern Alberta. Both of the authors had lived in Coaldale for part of their lives. This conference, held in Lethbridge, was co-sponsored by MHSA and the Nikkei Cultural Society. The Mennonites and Japanese in southern Alberta shared many common experiences in being uprooted and need-

ing to establish themselves in a new place. This was one of our best-attended conferences with close to 200 people. We received a lot of positive feedback on the event and encouragement to explore joint conferences again with other cultural or historic groups.

Another event that had been planned for a number of years was the bringing of the Along the Road to Freedom exhibit to Alberta. Dave Toews spearheaded the coordination of this undertaking. It is being co-sponsored by MHSA, Mennonite Central Committee, and Mennonite Mutual Insurance. Over 100 people attended the opening at Kings University in Edmonton in December and heard Tim Wiebe-Neufeld share the powerful story of his great grandmother Maria Friesen Neufeld. The exhibit will be shown at three different venues over the next few months. In Feb-

ruary it will move to Ambrose University in Calgary and then in April to the Gem of the West Museum in Coaldale.

We have continued to sponsor a genealogy project for grade nine students at Menno Simons School in Calgary. We are hopeful that this is instilling an interest in history for these students.

In addition to the above projects, we still continued the regular work of the society. A core group of about five dedicated volunteers came out every week to manage the operation of the office and archives. Additional volunteers work diligently to put out the three newsletters we publish each year.

It has a busy year but extremely rewarding. Thanks to everyone who helped plan, participated in, or attended our events. ♦

## Letters to the Editor

Hi Dave,

Feb 27, 2018

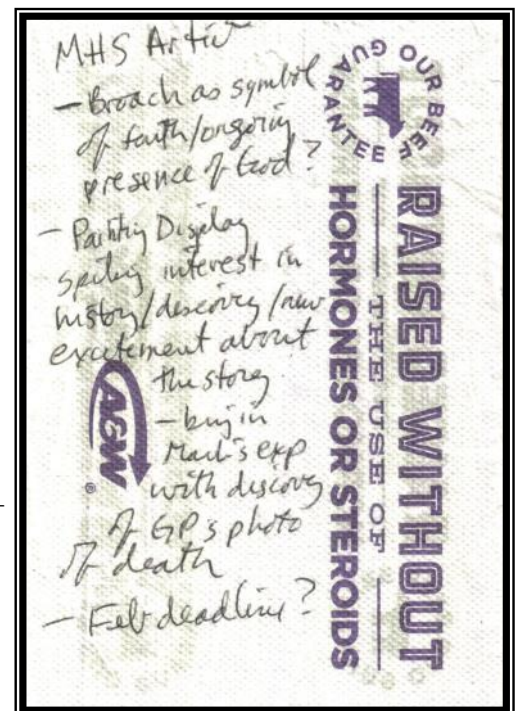
Just wanted to thank you once again for all the work you did to bring the Along the Road to Freedom display to Alberta. I enjoyed the Calgary opening quite a bit—partly because I didn't have to do anything myself except listen :- ) but also because each time I see the paintings and hear the stories I see something different emerge. Hearing Ray talk about the process of entering the story as he was developing each painting was powerful.

Thanks again for all the effort. I know many added to it, but it was your spearheading and organizational work that made it happen. Much appreciated!

Tim

P.S. I've attached a scan of the napkin notes from one of our conversations about the Along the Road to Freedom possibilities, article thoughts, etc. Thought you might find it interesting!

Tim Wiebe-Neufeld,  
Executive Minister  
Mennonite Church Alberta





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was unique among many rural Mennonite centers in that it was far from homogenous. Rudy Wiebe estimated that when he and Joy were school-mates in Coaldale in the early 1950s, one third of the students were Mennonite, another third Japanese, and the remaining third 'English' and Mormons. Rather than creating segregation and division in the community, this diversity resulted in relationships of mutual respect, admiration and friendship. The excited chatter of old school friends reuniting as people entered



Gathered participants in the  
Southern Alberta Ethnic Assoc Multicultural Centre

the hall bore witness to this.

Indeed themes of common experience, distinct but parallel threads in the common tapestry, were alluded to throughout the afternoon. David Tanaka, president of the NCS, welcomed the assembly and gave a brief history of Japanese migration to the area. Like the Mennonites, the Japanese arrived in distinct waves. The first group, working primarily in coalmines and for area farmers, arrived in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The second and best-known group were the interns – Japanese who had been living on the West Coast and were forcibly relocated to the prairies at the start of WWII. Two thousand five hundred settled in Southern Alberta, including Joy

Kogawa's family. A final group of primarily university students arrived in the mid to late 1960s when Canada opened immigration to Japan and Asia.

Following Mr. Tanaka's welcome, MHSA board member Katie Harder assumed MC responsibilities for the remainder of the afternoon. In her introduction of Kogawa and Wiebe she noted that the imagined living of history can sometimes be "more truthful" than formal histories which include only that which can be footnoted. She was especially pleased to introduce Ms. Nakayama (Kogawa) who had been her own beloved second grade teacher. Ms. Harder facilitated the main event of the afternoon, a wide-ranging conversation with Kogawa and Wiebe on the topic of the challenges and joys of writing about transplanted communities.

Although Kogawa's and Wiebe's families arrived in Southern Alberta under very different circumstances – one due to forced exile and the other as a voluntary escape – both identified the resulting internal struggle with self-identity as the central focus of their early writing. For Kogawa, being from the fundamentally different mindset of an Eastern culture living in the Western world, as well as being visibly distinguishable as Asian, gave rise to a deep crisis of self-identity and a desperate desire to be anything but Japanese Canadian. This was reinforced when her first and best known novel, *Obasan*, a veiled telling of her own family's story of internment, was initially refused publication. Publishers did not expect anyone would want to read it. Writing, however, remained therapeutic

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David Tanaka and Dave Neufeldt  
opening remarks

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for her, and with her later novel, *The Rain Ascends*, she was finally able to shed her feelings of alienation.

For Wiebe, the difficulties faced by Mennonites during WWII were due to their beliefs and refusal to fight rather than due to their racial identification. In this context, his first book, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* was an exploration of identity problems internal to the Mennonite community – how to respond to war – rather than the challenges of fitting into the larger community. While he had no trouble getting it published, he faced the threat of expulsion from his own community for having exposed these struggles.

Looking beyond these earlier novels, both Wiebe and Kogawa discussed how they as writers also confront the ills and needs of society at large. “Writing helps to awaken consciousness,” said Wiebe, “We need to know our stories, to understand them.” As a writer he has been committed to telling the whole story, “both the beautiful and the lurid.” Kogawa also spoke of her commitment to truth-telling through her writing.

Writing for her is both an art and a cure for humanity. In addressing our woundedness in society, she spoke of the need for mercy, not only justice: “We no longer have time to deal with justice first. We are desperate for reconciliation. Mercy will lead us there.”

The conversation throughout the afternoon returned again and again to the gift that the community of Coaldale had been. To nods from other former Coaldale students in the audience, Wiebe recalled a particularly influential teacher, Mr. Robinson, who modelled inclusion and under whose influence bullying disappeared. He noted that his years in Coaldale were crucial in allowing him to continue the education that set him on his life’s path. Kogawa credited her passion for truth-telling and honesty to her Mennonite friends and neighbours who modelled these values faithfully under challenging circumstances. Her family noticed a marked difference between this community-minded approach and their previous experience of big city life



Japanese Nikkei Cultural Society Minyo Dancers

in Vancouver.

The afternoon was rounded out by a rich tapestry of cultural contributions from both communities: musical performances by the NCS Taiko Drummers, a Coaldale Mennonite Church a Capella group, the singing duo Mountain Sapphire, and the NCS Minyo Dancers, and the recounting of some area family histories by Dave Neufeldt, Rochelle Sato, and Katie Harder.



Coaldale Mennonite Church A Capella Singers

A final period of visiting over a luncheon of traditional Japanese and Mennonite foods was followed by an invitation to everyone to see a preview of the Winter Lights Festival at the Nikkei Yuko Japanese Gardens. ❖



Mennonite and Japanese Ethnic Food



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celebrates the stories of Mennonite women of courage and faith.

Two years earlier, at a men's breakfast outing, Wiebe-Neufeld and Toews found themselves sharing a table and brainstorming about the possibility of bringing the exhibit to Alberta. Toews, a member of the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta, ran with their ideas and began the diligent and detailed work needed to bring the exhibit to Alberta.

The 26 paintings are intricate water colour collages depicting snippets of the lives of women who brought their children out of the Soviet Union to lives of peace and freedom in Canada and Paraguay. Relying on oral family history and his great-great grandfather's diaries from the early 1900s, Wiebe-Neufeld told the story of his great grandmother, Maria Friesen Neufeld,



The King's University Atrium

member of the original Along the Road to Freedom committee from Winnipeg, who shared briefly about how the project began as well as her mother's story of emigration. A small choir, led by Harold Wiens, shared 4 German songs, including So nimm den meine Hande and Nun danket alle Gott! which were sung at the Lichentau train station and after



Dave Toews meets his Kroeger cousin Adrienne Jansen for the first time in front of the Katherine Kroeger Neufeld Painting



Tim Wiebe-Neufeld with the Painting of Maria Friesen Neufeld  
Photo Credit: Donita Wiebe-Neufeld

clearing the gate that led to Latvia as the people fled the Soviet Union.

The exhibit is sponsored by the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta, Mennonite Mutual Insurance Co. (Alberta), and the Mennonite Central Committee of Alberta. It will remain open for viewing at King's University until Jan. 30. It opens at Ambrose University in Calgary on Feb. 25 and at the Gem of the West Museum in Coaldale on Apr. 28. ❖

who brought her 4 children to Canada alone, scant weeks after losing her husband to a bandit's bullet. The program also featured Nettie Dueck, a

## Along the Road to Freedom ... and Recognition

by Lynette Toews-Neufeldt

When I was growing up, a significant portion of the Coal-dale Mennonite Brethren Church's congregation consisted of row upon row of elderly women who sat



Lynette  
Toews-Neufeldt

in a phalanx on the left side of the church. They all drew their hair into tight, unflattering buns and wore sturdy polyester dresses that appeared to be sewn from the same pattern. When younger women began to engage in "subversive" behaviour like wearing pants to church, piercing their ears, and working outside the home after they had children, these stalwart women continued to go about their lives as though it were 1950, impervious to the societal change taking place around them. As a young person, I was rather dismissive of these women. They seemed to have an unhealthy obsession with the baking of *Zwieback* [so much so that their physiques resembled the shape of this quintessentially Mennonite food], and many -- including my own grandmother -- couldn't speak English well enough to communicate meaningfully with their grandchildren, even though most of them had lived in Canada for several decades. To my mind, these women suffered from an inability to move with the times and

adapt to change. Their contribution to church life and modern life in general seemed minimal.

I now realize that my judgment of these women was premature and ill-informed: these incredibly strong women witnessed unprecedented change during the course of their lives and were forced to adapt, adjust, and sacrifice on a scale that most of us will thankfully never have to experience. It is women like these who are celebrated in the travelling art exhibition entitled *Along the Road to Freedom: Mennonite Women of Courage and Faith* recently on display at King's University Edmonton.

In her book *Women without Men: Refugees of the Second World War*, historian Marlene Epp explores the unique challenges faced by Mennonite women who were forced to take sole responsibility for their families when war deprived them of their husbands, fathers or sons. However, there's nothing like a good picture to bring such stories to life. *Along the Road to Freedom*, sponsored by the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta, consists of 26 watercolour paintings of such women by Ray Dirks, Curator of the Mennonite Heritage Centre Gallery in Winnipeg. Dirks is an accomplished painter who was inspired by photos and other details provided by family members to create these unique works of art. Images depicting the life of each woman are combined with a short biography hand stamped in capital letters. Each of the women featured in the paintings left or attempted to leave Imperial Russia or the Soviet Union with family members in tow, often after being widowed. Many were thrust into the role of sole breadwinner and decision maker for their family, and all showed incredible courage, strength, and faith in the face of the trials they were called upon to endure.

I first viewed the exhibit on December 4<sup>th</sup> as Ed-



Lieutenant Governor of Alberta Lois Mitchell,  
Selma and Wesley Berg

Photo Credit: Nikolas Vanderkooi

monton First Mennonite's own Selma Berg and Joanne Moyer shared their personal family stories with Lieutenant General Lois Mitchell. I confess that after viewing the exhibit I felt as if I had encountered the equivalent of baseball trading cards, but for saints: instead of hits, runs, and batting averages, I had been inundated with statistics about the number of children born to each woman, husbands outlived, and tribulations endured. I don't mean to trivialize these women's stories, but rather to say that my viewing

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of the exhibition would have been more meaningful and enriching if I had known more of the useful background that can be found in the book *Along the Road to Freedom: Mennonite Women of Courage and Faith* by Ray Dirks and others. I encourage you to seek this book out as a companion to viewing the exhibition. It provides more detail about each of the 26

women, showing them not only as devote Christians, but also as profoundly human individuals with all the normal reactions to stressful situations. Consider the story of Margarete Bergmann Dyck, a widow with four children who emigrated from the Soviet Union to Paraguay in the aftermath of World War II. The stress of dealing with the challenges of life in South America gave her insomnia, which she coped with by crocheting her one-and-only ball of yarn until it was all used up, then unravelling it and crocheting it all again and again. These more nuanced details remind us that these were real women, not saints.

This brings me to the question of who we will be celebrating as Mennonite women of courage and faith 50 years from now. Most of today's women are not defined by having suffered and survived war, but maybe it will be their contributions to the church or society at large



The King's University President Melanie Humphreys, LG Lois Mitchell and Joanne Moyer  
Photo Credit: Nikolas Vanderkooi

that will be evidence of their courage and faith. Perhaps we'll see paintings of women who helped refugee families or worked at the thrift store. Maybe those who volunteered with Mennonite Disaster Service will be recognized for their contribution. What about the love of learning that the female teachers in our congregations have ignited in the children they've taught in the public school system? A significant number of the younger women in our congregations have entered or will enter professions that have traditionally been dominated by men. That, too, takes a certain courage. And let's not forget those who have made a contribution in the areas of music and visual arts, both in the church and in our wider society. Our congregations and the broader Mennonite church have been blessed with women who enrich our lives with their spiritual gifts and vocational talents. Let's recognize their contributions and celebrate the fact that courage and faith are not restricted to past generations of women.

First published as an editorial in *The Communicator* of First Mennonite Church, Edmonton, Jan 2018.



Aides-de-Camp Chris Culhane, LG Lois Mitchell, Herman Neufeld and Delores Jeffares, the Lieutenant Governor enjoys talking with the people  
Photo Credit: Nikolas Vanderkooi

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*Lynette Toews-Neufeldt grew up in Coaldale, Alberta and now lives in Edmonton. She is the Assistant Library Director at Concordia University of Edmonton.* ❖



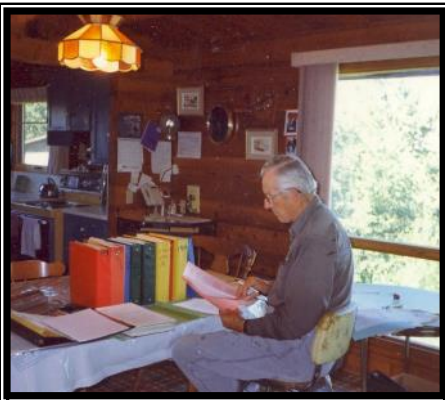
## MHSC Award of Excellence - Nomination

by Dave Neufeldt

The Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta would like to nominate Henry D. Goerzen for the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada (MHSC) Award of Excellence.

Henry Goerzen was born near Didsbury, Alberta in 1928 and has been attending the Bergthal Mennonite Church there his entire life. He has been very active within the Mennonite church and has served as chair of both his congregation and the Conference of Mennonites in Alberta.

Although Henry is not a



Henry at Work at the Kitchen Table in the Early Years

trained archivist he has worked diligently to preserve the history of Mennonites in Alberta. For over twenty-five years Henry served as archivist for the Conference of Mennonites in Alberta. One of his primary interests has been the preservation of records. As a conference historian he ensured that conference records were not destroyed. He also carefully collected materials from Mennonite churches and institutions that were closing.

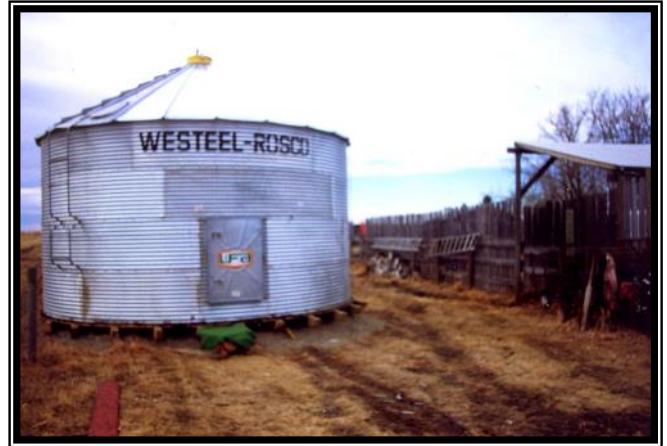
In 1986 he organized a meeting

that led to the formation of the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta. He served as chair of MHSA from 1986 to 1999, and then continued as vice chair until 2003. In the early years of MHSA there was space made available at the provincial MCC building to store the archival material of the society.

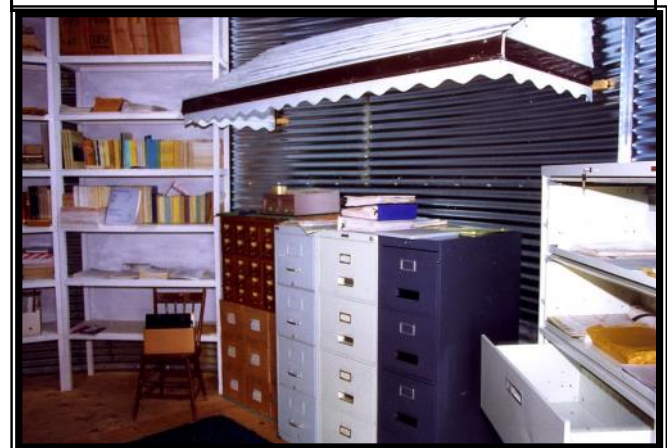
When that space was no longer available Henry set up a steel grain bin on his farm, carefully sealed it against moisture and rodents, and built shelves to house the material until a new home could be found. He maintained the materials in this grain bin until 2001 when space became available in the new MCC building in Calgary.

In the 1990s Henry travelled extensively throughout Alberta meeting with conscientious objectors and documented their stories. Many of these stories were included in the book *Alternative Service for Peace in Canada During World War II, 1941-1946*, edited by A.J. Klassen. Henry has also written numerous articles related to Alberta Mennonite history.

Henry is a farmer, an artist (he created the MHSA logo), and a lover of the Mennonite Church and Mennonite history. He has possibly done more than any other individual to ensure the preservation of the history of Mennonites in Alberta. ❖



The First MHSA Archives on Henry and Erna's Farm



The Archives Interior



Henry as the Guest Artist at the Cremona, Alberta Art Show

## Award of Excellence - Acceptance Speech

by Henry Goerzen

Henry rising to be awarded an Award of Excellence certificate in this specialty of preserving the stories of its Mennonite people feels somewhat awkward when noting all the added components that have grown this field of endeavour from its shoe box state to that of accredited Archives and Library. I would have found this Award of Excellence better applied to the whole crew who were involved to date. In this response to the award I will walk together with those of you who have been a part of that exercise from its inception.

No one would have guessed that the tiny seeds sown in my early life would have brought about what is now in full operation, a modest site with a qualified staff caring for historical documents and collecting complimentary books that bring in data from all the world.

There were early life steps that motivated me in that direction. I remember my mother colouring her conversation with stories from her early life. Noting that I was soon forgetting things I asked her to write things down, which she did. Now it did not matter if I forgot, or that she may pass away. The stories would always be there. Sister Kathy picked up on that and did further research in family and church in a way that I could not have done. This was exciting!

Somewhere in the later years of the former century I became the Bergthal Church historian. It is a post "until death do us part". For Bergthal's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I was asked to chair and direct this activity. Besides having committees for food and logistics, it was decided that a history of the main event of the church's century life be undertaken. Paul Dyck wrote the early church history, and I wrote the latter part. Beyond that, church members were asked to write memoirs of their own church experience. Kathy Peters was asked if she would prepare a photo album to bring a visual presence to this historic event. I would doubt there is ever a meeting of our people where this album is not viewed and enjoyed.

After a few years it was deemed to be rather unorthodox to have the growing library and archival materials in a farm granary, far removed from the crowds of people it might serve. The MCC facility on 48 Avenue was eventually sold, and the new place appeared to be very spacious. It had an upstairs mezzanine that was offered to the Society free of charge. A deci-



Erna and Henry Goerzen with  
MHSC President Richard Thiessen

sion was made to move into these new MCC facilities, and it was thought that this would be the last move forever. We would need to partition off an office and purchase shelving, which we did. I busied myself with some drywalling and erecting the shelves. These were donated to us from Dan Jack's eavestroughing business.

Being well into my ninetieth year of life, as I write this response to receiving the Award of excellence, I have observed many instances where human undertakings have hints of Darwin's evolutionary thought. So this project may have had a rather rustic beginning. I want to thank all of you that have



MHSC Award of Excellence

put your hand to work for this precious cause, doing far beyond what I'm now able to do. Above all I acknowledge that the Spirit of God undertook to use me, with limited natural talent but along with you, to create this historical Mennonite Archive. The mudding trowels that I used to finish all the cracks in the drywall of the archives are now all stored on a high shelf. For all of you who put your hand to the job in the past and to all of you presently carrying on in the duty of Excellence I want you to think

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proudly of your part in it.

*The above paragraphs are excerpts from Henry Goerzen's acceptance speech.*



## Mennonite Historical Society of Canada Meets in Calgary

by Dave Neufeldt

On January 18-20, 2018 about 30 people gathered in Calgary for the annual meetings of the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada. The society is made up of the six provincial societies (from British Columbia through Quebec) as well as some church conferences, museums, and other historical organizations. The annual meetings rotate locations giving each of the provincial societies an opportunity to host. The last time Alberta hosted was in 2007.

These meetings are a means for the various groups engaged in Mennonite history to learn what others are doing and to combine efforts on major projects.

On Thursday evening the Ar-

chives Committee met. This was an opportunity for various archives to report on their activities and discuss challenges and achievements. A major project of this committee for the last several years has been the development and implementation of the Mennonite Archival Image Database (MAID). This is a searchable on-line database of the images contained in the various archives. Most of the MAID partner organizations have already started entering information into the database. New issues raised at this meeting included suggested changes in archival practice in light of the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Archives are encouraged to revise the terminology used in referencing material. For example, references to "Indians" in subject headings should be changed to "Indigenous peoples".

The Friday sessions included a MAID training session, Genealogy Committee meeting, and an MHSC Board meeting. The Genealogy Committee has been working on a project to make original genealogical sources available on-line. This would include such things as Prussian Church records. This project has been delayed due to financial constraints, but it is anticipated that it will move into beta testing in the coming year.

Typically the MHSC meetings include some type of special event. This year it was a bus tour of the TsuuT'ina First Nation Reserve. This Treaty 7 reserve is located on the southwest edge of Calgary. Band member Hal Eagletail led the tour and shared about their people's history. He was both

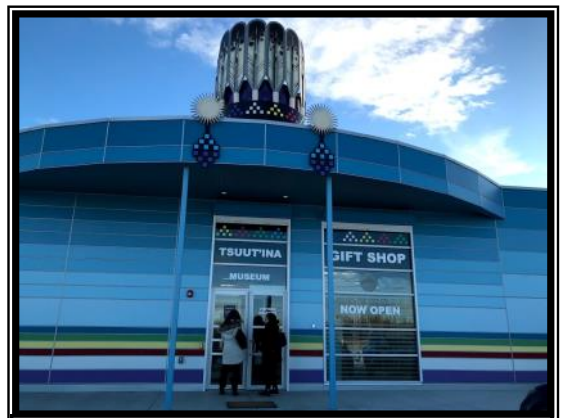


MHSC Executive and voting Members



Working Session of the MHSC

knowledgeable and entertaining. As a people they are most closely linked to the Dene and Navajo peoples and share a common language with them. This reserve is distinct from most reserves in that it has experienced greater prosperity.



Touring the TsuuT'ina First Nation Reserve

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The Saturday session was the formal Annual General Meeting of the society. Each year during the AGM the society presents an Award of Excellence to someone who has made significant contributions to Mennonite History. This year's recipient was Henry Goerzen from Didsbury. Henry was instrumental in the founding of MHSA and in preserving the records of Mennonites in Alberta.

The next annual MHSC meetings will be in Winnipeg in November 2018 and will be a celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the society. These meetings will be held in conjunction with a conference focusing on "A People of Diversity: Mennonites in Canada since 1970". ♦

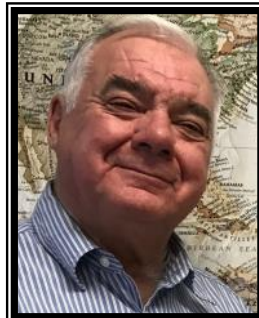
## The Berg Family Moves to Taber, Alberta

by Dick Braun

This is the story of Jacob and Marie Berg, my maternal grandparents.

A number of years ago my wife Kathy and I spent three years in Bolivia working with MCC in the Low German Mennonite program. In October 2017 I went back to Bolivia for a number of reasons; one was to check on the irrigation project in colony Durango that I helped start, and a second was to take part in meetings of the MCC Low German program. At the meetings I met Ernie Wiens from Alberta who was there as a guest. Ernie and I hit it off because we know people in common. Ernie mentioned that he was involved with the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta, and that they were hosting a conference in Lethbridge featuring the topic "Tapestry of Uprooted Cultures: Japanese and Mennonites of Southern Alberta". The Mennonites who came from Saskatchewan to that area to work the sugar beet fields were part of that story. Ernie also talked about a Mennonite *treffen* (gathering) they hosted at their house and mentioned that Kurt and Frieda Sawatzky attended that event. Right away the "Mennonite game" started (who is related to who). Frieda is my wife's cousin.

The sugar beet story interested me as my grandparents, Jacob and Marie Berg from Blumenthal Saskatchewan, were part of that move. The 1930s had taken its toll on the economy, and the forties were not much better. The people in the Hague area of Saskatchewan were looking for a place to earn money to pay off debt. The Rural Municipality of Warman brought in some people who were looking for labourers, and Mr. Philip Baker, President of the Alberta Sugar Beet Growers Association, came to to recruit labourers to work the beet fields. The enticing part was that the whole family could work in the field together, and all would earn money. In the late forties there was a meeting in the village of Neuanlage. Looking back, that was the right place for a meeting because a number of families there were growing potatoes, a process that, like growing beets, was labour intensive. Also, as these families were large, income per family would be greatly improved.



Dick Braun

Jacob and Marie Berg had thirteen children, so they decided to move to Taber, Alberta. They moved with their seven youngest children; oldest to youngest these were Susie, John, Kay (Tina), Margret, Cornelius (Neil), Abe and Dave. Their son Jake was already in Taber building irrigation ditches. Daughter Ann and husband Peter Friesen and the Peter and Margaret (Jacob Berg's sister) Braun family were also there. Jacob and Marie had a cap built on their 1937 Dodge truck box, and this is where most of the children rode. Another truck loaded with the household wares also made the journey. The trip took two days from Hague to Taber with a stop at Maple Creek for the night. Uncle Dave Berg recalls the South Saskatchewan River Landing hill and how that Dodge had a lot of problems pulling its way up there. They arrived at Barnwell just west of Taber. There was a farmer there who hired them. Grandpa Berg liked the sandy soil in the area. It was just like his land in Blumenthal, and that made hoeing the beet fields much easier.

Some, but not all, of the other families who went to Taber from the Hague/Osler area were the Heinrich Doerksens, the Isaac Doerksens, the Wilhelm Zacharias, the Cornelius Harders, the David Fehrs, and the George Friesens. Some of them came back to Saskatchewan, and others decided to stay and make Taber and area their home. Many families from the Swift Current area also went to Taber. These included the Knelsen family and the Martens family. One of the Martens sons later became my uncle.

Life soon became somewhat

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normal as church services began in the homes. The Berg's large house was one of those used for this purpose. Mr. Peter Braun, an ordained Old Colony minister from the Hague area, served as the pastor. On occasion a minister from Swift Current, Saskatchewan would serve as well. Dave was the only child that went to school in Taber, and he recalls the Japanese children in school. The neighbour family to the Bergs was a Japanese family, so the children spent a lot of time together.

There seemed to be almost year-round work for most of the people. The spring started off with thinning the beet rows as they only wanted one plant every six inches. Then the weeding started. This needed to be done twice in a summer, all hoed by hand! During the summer there were cucumbers and green corn to pick. The farmers also had to work on field improvements. Grandma Berg and the children were always out in the field working very long days. Work in the beet fields was hard and tedious, so to get their minds off that, Grandma would get the children to sing.

Some of the young people still had energy left for the weekend and could be found at a dance on Saturday night. This is how two of my aunts met their future husbands. Susie Berg married Abe Martens in Taber, stayed for a few years, and then moved to Waldeck, Saskatchewan to raise a family. Kay Berg married Henry Martens and stayed in Taber the rest of her life. Kay worked the beet fields even after they were married. She was not afraid of hard work, and she continued to do this work well into her fifties. The Martens worked for

a farmer and later purchased their own land.

As the story goes, Grandpa Berg worked with a Japanese man, and one day they were trying to start a tractor. The Japanese man was too small to crank the engine. Jacob Berg in his broken English said to the Japanese man, "I crank him and you *shook* (choke) him, but he goes". My uncles tell me that working with the Japanese people was a good experience.

The Bergs stayed in Taber for four years and then came back to Blumenthal Saskatchewan. The family had done well. They bought a 1952 Ford truck, came home with money to purchase better used farm machinery, and built a house on a new yard. They were also able to pay off their debt. The family never lost touch with Taber Alberta. In addition to the fact that the Peter and Margaret Braun family remained there, two of the Berg's daughters had married in Taber. One of them, Kay, and her husband Henry Martens stayed for life. They became members of the United Church in Taber; the Old Colony church did not gain much momentum there. Kay and Henry made many trips to Saskatchewan and always had their camera with them. When Aunt Kay passed away, I was asked to give a history of how and



L - R Jake Berg, Japanese Man, Peter Braun Jr and Peter Braun Sr Constructing Irrigation Ditches near Chin, Alberta in 1948



Jacob and Marie Berg with their 1952 Ford Truck



Berg Family Packing the Truck for the Move Back to the Village of Blumenthal, Saskatchewan

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why our family and their communities wound up in southern Alberta.

I remember my grandparents coming back to Saskatchewan, and I remember staying at their place during the summer school break. Grandpa and Grandma Berg were very kind people and fun to be with. I think some of their way of life was a result of working with another culture.

*Dick (Didrich) Braun, was born in the old colony village of Neuborst, Saskatchewan, in 1948. He lives in the town of Osler with his wife Kathy. They have four children and four grandchildren. Dick has worked as a mechanic, farmer and salesman. He is retired from maintenance at Creative Wood Interiors. Dick and Kathy continue to work in the Low German program for MCC Saskatchewan. Dick is on the board of the Mennonite Historical Society of Saskatchewan. He enjoys blacksmithing, history, writing, genealogy, family, and making new friends. Dick and Kathy are members of the Osler Mennonite Church. ❖*

## Women Without Men (2002) by Marlene Epp

Reviewed by Ernie Wiens

**Description:** This book is an in-depth look at a large group of mostly south Russian Mennonites that appended itself to the German Army when it retreated the Eastern Front. It is estimated that the refugees numbered 35,000. In Poland, they were joined by another 12,000 Polish Mennonites who were in the same predicament. Having identified as Germans when the German Army “liberated” them, they knew they would be treated as traitors by the advancing Communist soldiers.

This exodus became known as “The Great Trek”. Starting their flight in late fall of 1943, they suffered unimaginable hardships through the cold, rain, snow, mud, bombings, and chaos.

Fully 23,000 did not reach safety. Many men and older boys were conscripted into the German Army, and most of these died in battle. Other men were conscripted by the Russians when apprehended, suffering a similar fate. When arrested, women, children, and the elderly were “repatriated” forcefully, loaded into cattle cars, and sent east, mostly to Siberia. Thousands died of disease, starvation, and injury. Some simply went “missing”.

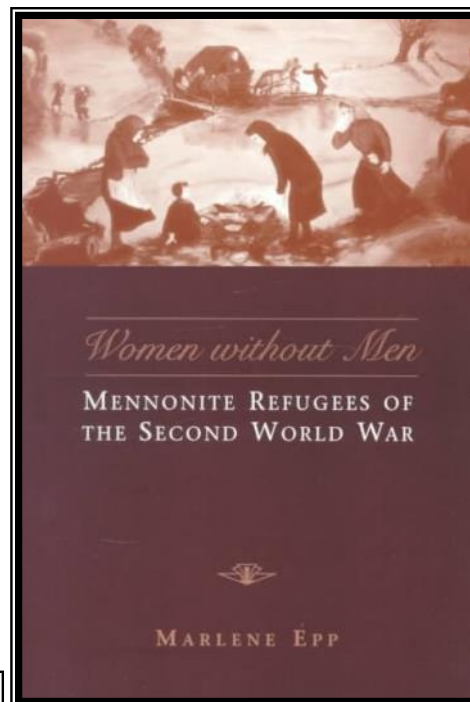
Only 12,000, mostly women separated from their men by Soviet purges, military conscription, repatriation, or death found refuge in the camps of Western Europe. Many had dependent children and dependent elderly. With over two million Displaced Persons straining Germany’s meager post-war resources, expatriation seemed the only solution.

Mostly through the auspices of the Mennonite Central Committee, in the ensuing decade 4000 of these women were resettled into South America (most in Paraguay), and 8000 were resettled in Canada.



Ernie Wiens

These 12,000, mostly women without men, are the subject of Epp’s book.



Women without Men

**Analysis:** Much of the research for this book was done for a doctrinal thesis at the University of Toronto using archival collections in Winnipeg from the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, and the Mennonite Heritage Centre. In the early 1990's, Epp personally interviewed 34 resettled individuals in Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta, and British Columbia including some who had re-immigrated to Canada from Paraguay. She also utilized interviews from earlier research by historian Cornelius Krahn in the early 1950s. The format, tone, and academic rigor reflect this origin. Her book clearly fits into the category of Women’s Studies in the field of Gender and History. In her words “... my own research has

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been informed by feminist approaches to oral history, life stories and ethnography...”

The author identifies 4 themes she wishes to explore in the lives and narrative of the Mennonite women from this cohort:

1. The intersection of gender, war, and immigration
2. The effect of Mennonite ethnicity
3. Family fragmentation and re-configuration
4. The role of memory in the presentation of historical events

Through seven chapters and some 190 pages she chronicles the reasons these women became separated from their men and the uncertainty of what happened to them. She brings out the hardships suffered and the changing gender roles that ensued. With remarkable in-

sight she covers the identity issues of adopting a new country, belonging to a religious culture unfamiliar to a new community, and experiencing nearly three decades of religious suppression.

In her conclusion the author focuses on the gender-specific effects of war experiences:

1. Becoming the target of sexual violence
2. Destruction or loss of home
3. Family loss and fragmentation

She then adds a totally unexpected philosophical observation: “Yet war also breaks down some social boundaries and frees women to behave in response to a situation, rather than in accordance with gender limitations.” (page 194)

**Evaluation:** History is sometimes a retelling of someone else’s stories or a composite of multiple sources. Although this book is not autobiographical, it is clear that Epp has “lived” this history. Included in this book are 47 pages of annotated notes and another 14 pages of selected biography. Although the book was first printed in 2000, it is obviously the end result of decades-long interest if not obsession. It appears obvious that the author knows her stuff. If at times her inferences, judgments, critiques, and conclusions suggest a personal bias, these seem reasoned and credible. She knows her subject that well. This book describes with grace, compassion and empathy a time when Mennonite women were compelled by unimaginable circumstances perhaps even happenstance, to live their lives differently from the accepted norm: as “Women Without Men.” ❖

## Contest

### Rename the Newsletter of the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta

In discussion with the MHSA board of directors it has been decided that it is time to have a contest to rename the newsletter. The name, The Newsletter is so mundane and far too common. We have decided to enlist your help.

**Rules** - Names that contain the words: historical, historian, heritage, roots and branches and preservings are very common and do not qualify. We would like something more unique.

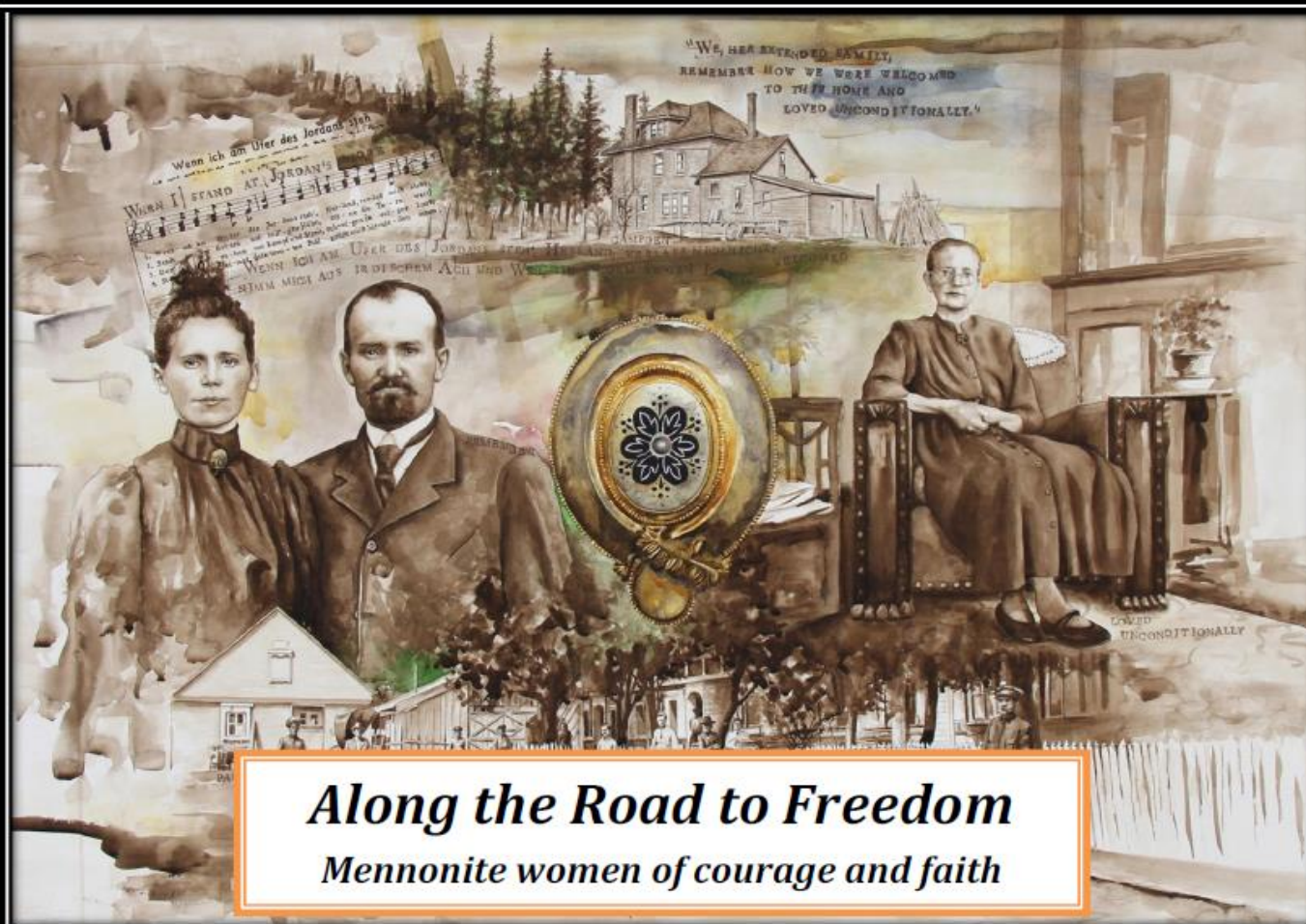
**Who can enter?** The contest is open to everyone: MHSA members, non members, the board as well as the newsletter volunteer staff.

**How to enter?** Email your entry to the editor at - [dmtoews@gmail.com](mailto:dmtoews@gmail.com).

**Deadline** for entries, June 15, 2018, the board will make the final decision on the new name.



**The winner** (unless it is a board member) will receive a one year subscription of the newsletter free of charge.



## ***Along the Road to Freedom***

### ***Mennonite women of courage and faith***

**26 Paintings by Winnipeg artist Ray Dirks  
honouring women who brought their children out of the Soviet Union  
to lives of peace and freedom in Canada and Paraguay**

**Gem of the West Museum  
1306 20<sup>th</sup> St, Coaldale, AB  
Saturday April 28, 2018**

**10:30 AM Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta AGM**

**1:30 PM Exhibit Opening Program and Reception**

**Artist Ray Dirks presents the Along the Road to Freedom story  
Local stories shared by Henry Janzen, Herta Janzen, and Henry Heidebrecht**

**Donations accepted**

**Sponsored by:** ***Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta***  
***Mennonite Mutual Insurance Co***  
***Mennonite Central Committee of Alberta***