Newsletter

Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta

Volume XVII Number 2 June 2014

MHSA Spring Conference Session One, Coaldale Mennonite Church, April 26, 2014

by Doreen Neufeld

Doreen Neufeld

"Too many Russian Mennonites don't know who they are," remarked Ruth Derksen Siemens, the keynote speaker at the annual meeting of the Mennonite Historical Society on April 26, 2014. Despite the mist and falling snow, two dozen committed historians gathered in

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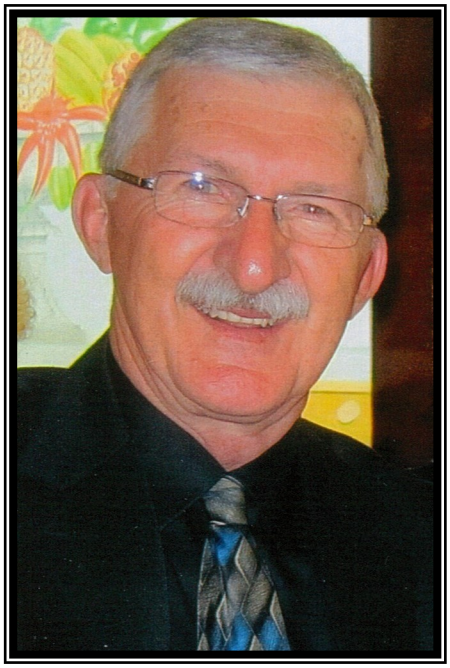
First Mennonite Settlers in Alberta

[first published in *Preservings* 33 (2013)]

by Leonard Doell



Leonard Doell

For a number of years I have gathered information on the Mennonite settlement at Gleichen, Alberta and how settlers from there moved to Saskatchewan in 1891 to become the first Mennonites in that province. In Alberta, the understanding has been that the Swiss Mennonites were the first Mennonites to settle in Alberta. Recently, I stumbled across material that challenges the belief that either of these groups were the first Mennonites to have lived in Alberta. In this article, I want to share the information I found that shows that there were actually three settlements in Alberta at the same time. The following is a description of who the settlers were, how the settlements began and what happened to each group. It has been a fascinating search and I have learned a lot in the process.

Treaties and Trains: Opening the Land for Settlers

The signing of Treaty 7 in September 1877 at Blackfoot Crossing near Gleichen created the opportunity for white settlers to have access to the land for settlement, an area that encompassed 35,000 square miles. It was here that Lieutenant Governor Laird as representative of the Queen, met with about five thousand Indians including the Blackfoot, Bloods, Piegans, Sarcees and Stonies to create a sacred covenant of how Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people would live together and share the land. As Richard Price notes:

> [the]…. prospect of increased settlement in their territory gave some importance to a Treaty from the Government's point of view. The Blackfoot too, no doubt saw their own position differently than they had prior to 1870. In that year their numbers were greatly reduced by smallpox. Whiskey, which had been a major item in the American buffalo robe trade, had further weakened them. The Mounted Police had stopped the trade in whiskey but their arrival, followed by that of the first settlers must have aroused concern for their future position. The

(Continued on page 4)

In this Issue

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Editorial Reflections:

by Dave Toews

Dave Toews

It is May 6, my day off work and it's too cold to golf, a good time to sit down and write my editorial.

What's on your Mennonite history reading list? I purchase a good deal of Mennonite history books for reference and not necessarily to read in their entirety. Three come to mind that I bought then couldn't put down, so much to learn that I wasn't aware of, in our people's history.

Red Quarter Moon: A Search for Family in the Shadow of Stalin by Anne Konrad. In spite of the fact that I had two uncles with their Kroeger and Toews families stay in Russia by choice in the 1920s, there are many details of the Soviet period revealed here that were not familiar to me. Especially interesting to me is how Gerhard Konrad was able move from job to job and place to place to avoid arrest, prison and possible execution the minute he detected trouble in his then current situation. As a technical person I am fascinated by the incident on page 65 where the cement plant drive belt and shaft caught fire. Gerhard's injury and the far reaching consequences of this event.

The Fehrs: Four Centuries of Mennonite Migration by Arlette Kouwenhoven. I have a personal interest here, according to GRANDMA Gysbert Jansz De Veer (De Fehr, Fehr) and Debora Claesdochter Harnasveger are my 22nd great grandparents. Since the Kroegers and Toews lived further down on the Werder (Vistula Delta) at Reimerswalde and Tiegenhagen respectively I was unaware of the scope of the Mennonite craftsmen and artisans in the Danzig area.

Mennonites in Ukraine, Amid Civil War and Anarchy (1917 - 1921) A Documentary Collection translated and edited by John B. Toews. This book is largely eyewitness accounts of the Mennonite *Selbstschutz* (self-dense/militia) during this period. Since my brother Ernie told me that our father Peter Johann Toews said he was in the Osterwick *Selbstschutz*, I'm reading this with great interest to determine if there are any details of our father's involvement in this, in the book.

The MHSA Spring Events on April 26 and 27 went well and are admirably documented by others in this issue. Thank you to all contributors who have written for this month's publication. Special thanks to Leonard Doell for allowing us to reprint his article "The First Mennonite Settlers in Alberta," it first appeared in *Preservings* 2013, a journal of the D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation Inc. published in Winnipeg.

We welcome your feedback, letters to the editor and articles. The deadline for submissions for the next issue is Sept.1, 2014. Have a great summer.❖

Chairman's Corner

by Dave Neufeldt

Dave Neufeldt

I'm writing this article after returning from a most interesting dinner. A small group of us had the opportunity to meet with Bob Holmes, a Catholic priest and worker with Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT). CPT was founded in 1986 by Mennonites and Brethren in Christ to use nonviolence to bring about change in situations of

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Lil Bartel in front of a Genealogy Display at the MHSA AGM

conflict and injustice. Bob shared stories about how CPT works in areas of violence and the challenges they face. He also shared some of the experiences of the victims of such violence and injustice.

Some of the people at the dinner had also attended the MHSA AGM in April and heard the stories that Ruth Derksen Siemens told of the experience of Mennonites in Stalin's Gulag. What I found interesting was the connections that people were drawing between the two sets of stories. The atrocities committed by Stalin in the 1930s and 40s are not very different from what is being experienced today by people in many parts of the world. In response to the present atrocities, Mennonites and others have chosen to join CPT as a way of living out Christ's call to be peacemakers. I left the dinner inspired by the stories Bob Holmes shared, but also humbled when hearing the depth of commitment others have made to active peacemaking.

In reflecting on the connections made between the CPT stories and the Mennonite experiences under Stalin, the importance of history was reaffirmed for me. When we remember our own stories of injustice, it helps us to see other injustice in the world and respond to it. Mennonite Central Committee started as a response to Mennonites in need but it has shifted to addressing the needs of people regardless of religious affiliation. Both MCC and CPT have made us less insular. We can make the future better when we know our past and learn from it. This is what we try to facilitate at MHSA by preserving and sharing our stories.

One of the ways we do that is through the AGM. We bring in guest speakers and we move our meetings around the province to allow more people to hear the stories. This year in addition to the stories from Ruth Derksen Siemens, we also heard the story of how Mennonites settled in the Coaldale area. The business part of the meeting told more recent stories – what we as a society have been up to in the last year.

Lil Bartel reported on the continued success of the genealogy project we sponsor at Menno Simons School, Dave Toews reported on the newsletter, Ted Regehr reported on the work at the archives, and I reported on the meetings of the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada. With the help of Jim Bowman we have processed much of the backlog of material in the archives, but continue to seek volunteers to assist in the work in the office. In particular we can use someone with library expertise.

On the financial side, we had a surplus of $6,272 for 2013. We passed a budget for 2014 of $27,000, which is an 11% increase over 2013. One of the reasons for the increase was a decision to support the archives and genealogy projects of the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada. We also had an increase in rent.

I am very grateful for all the financial support and volunteer hours people give to our society. If you are interested in helping, please contact our office.❖

Letters to the Editor

Hi Dave, Loved your Newsletter of March. I not only renewed my membership but gave a small donation so that your department would send a separate issue to my older sister living in Calgary.

This was caused by Ralph Dahl's most interesting story. Much of what he wrote also portrays my families history of their early sojourn in Alberta.

Katie Harder's article brought me back to the two years I spent at AMHS in Coaldale. There were a couple of Klassens attending that school in 1952 and 1953. I wonder if they belonged to her family: Herb Klassen and Alfred "Rip" Klassen.

Cheers, Frank Martens,

Summerland, BC ❖

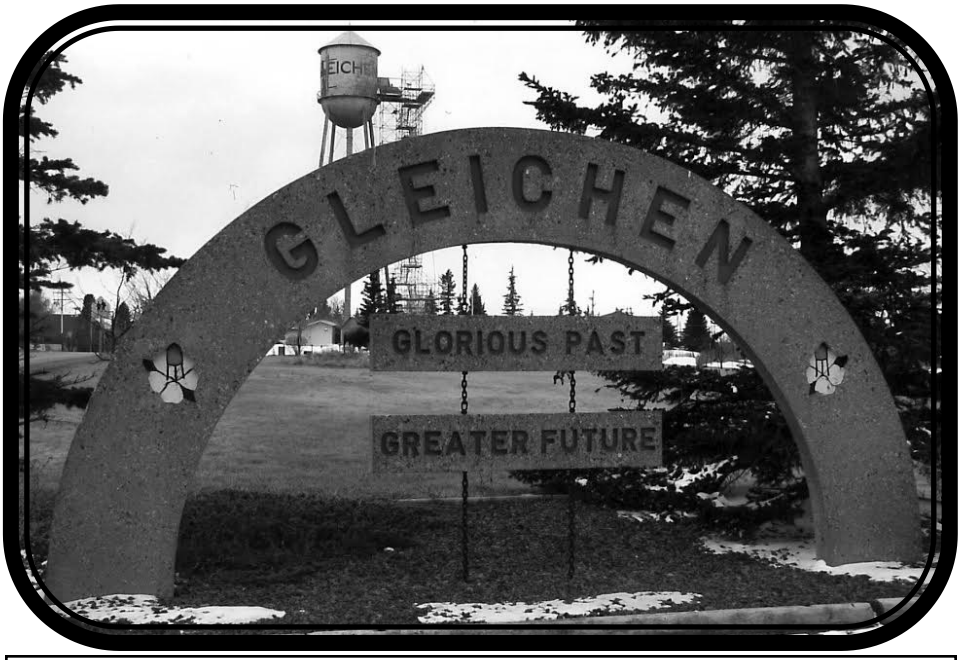
(Continued from page 1)

danger that the buffalo would disappear was becoming more evident each year. Late in 1876, their food supply was further threatened by the arrival on the edge of their territory of five thousand Sioux, refugees from the USA. All of these factors were likely to have disposed the Blackfoot to making a Treaty, whether or not they were actively proposing one.[1]

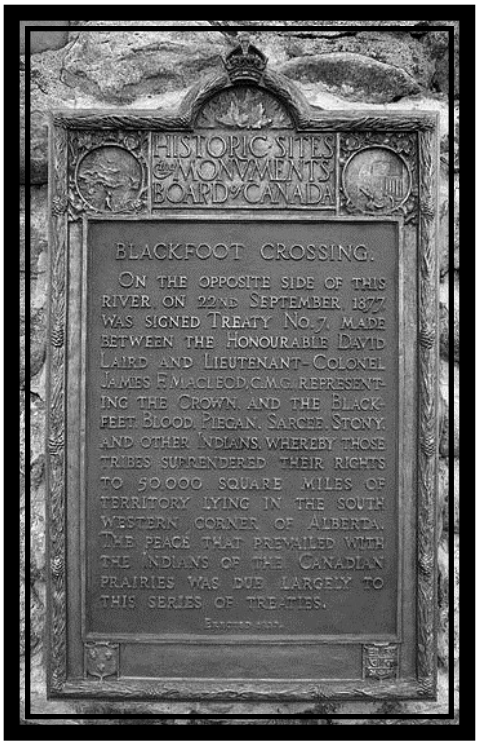
Chief Crowfoot was the leader of the Blackfoot who helped negotiate the Treaty. He was a great orator, a brave warrior and a hunter with considerable skill and courage. It was through his leadership and diplomacy that a Treaty was made. A biography notes:

Crowfoot was also a man of peace. In 1843, for instance, he adopted the Cree leader Poundmaker, thereby helping end decades of hostilities between two tribes. He resisted the Sioux Chief Sitting Bull's call to war against the Canadian and American governments in the late 1870s. And most notably he refused to join Louis Riel's Metis Rebellion of 1885. All the while he was suffering unimaginable personal tragedy. Between 1885 and 1886, for instance he lost at least 8 children to tuberculosis. His adopted son Poundmaker, was jailed for his alleged role in the 1885 rebellion...and died of a hemorrhage just four months after his release from prison. Crowfoot would die on 25 April 1890. As Edgar Dewdney, the Lieutenant Governor of the Northwest Territories during Crowfoot's time once said, Crowfoot died beloved by his people, feared by his foes and esteemed by all.[2]

The transition to reserve life following the Treaty was very difficult and Crowfoot's people faced starvation and often felt betrayed by the Queen's representatives and the police who promised to help them. With the Aboriginal peoples adapting to a settled life on reservations, the building of the railroad proved to be a further source of upheaval for them. In 1883, the main line of the CPR passed along the northern boundary of the Reserve and stations were built at Cluny and Gleichen. When railway surveyors began encroaching on reserve land, the Blackfoot objected because the railway cut across small portions of the reserve. Once Father Lacombe intervened, and with Edgar Dewdney's backing, Crowfoot agreed to accept other lands south of the Bow River and eventually the Blackfoot reserve boundaries were changed, so that between Crowfoot station and Gleichen the railway forms the northern boundary of the reserve.

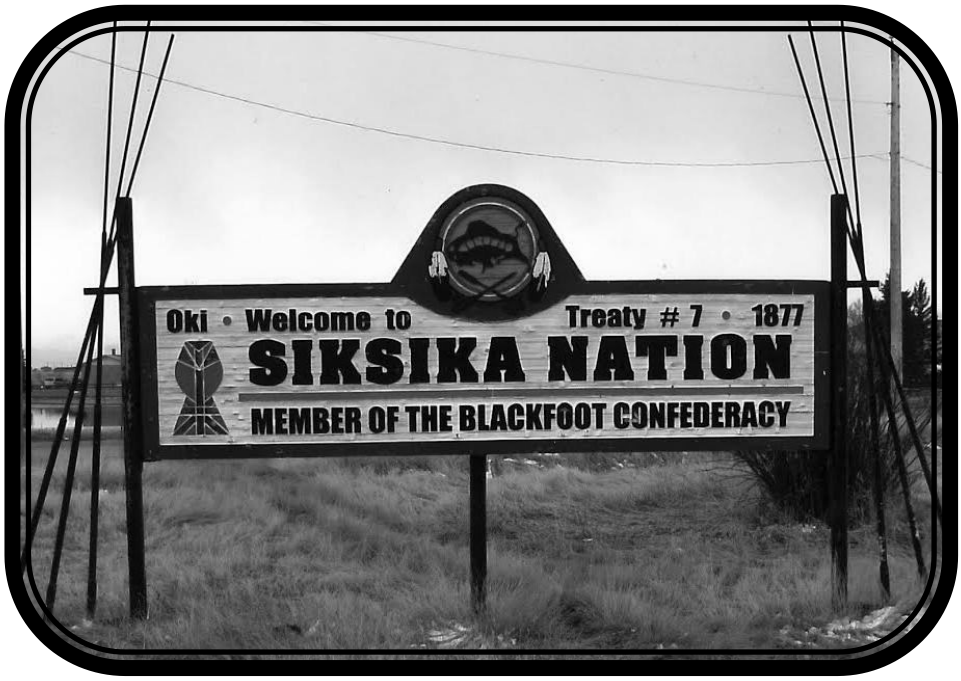


Gleichen (est. 1883) is located on the CPR line from Medicine Hat and was named after the German Count Albert Edward Wilfred Gleichen, who was a financial backer of the CPR. Photo Credit: Leonard Doell.



Blackfoot Crossing on the Bow River is where Treaty #7 was signed in 1877.Photo Credit: Grapher78, Wikipedia Commons

Chief Crowfoot (1830-90) was born into the Blood Tribe, but was raised as a Blackfoot after the death of his father and the marriage of his mother to a Blackfoot man. He was Chief of the Confederacy and signed Treaty #7 at Blackfoot Crossing. Source: Provincial Archives of Alberta, Image: Wikipedia Commons.



The Siksika Nation Reserve #146 is located adjacent to the Town of Gleichen. The name "Siksika" comes from the Blackfoot words "sik" (black) and "ika" (foot). Photo Credit: Leonard Doell

After the surveyors had marked the path for the railroad, there came swarms of rough, exploitive men who camped near the Reserve. Drinking, gambling, and prostitution accompanied the construction and of course affected the Indian people.[3] As Hugh Dempsey notes: "Although the Blackfoot had been told that the railway would be of great help to them in bringing food to the Reserve, it was also a source of concern. Trains belched clouds of sparks from their potbellied smokestacks, setting fire to thousands of acres of the prairie grass. In addition, Indian horses wandered onto the right of way and were killed by passing trains."[4] In 1889, a peasant farming policy was implemented by the government based on the premise that Indians had to experience subsistence farming before they could progress to a more advanced stage of production. They were not allowed to purchase labour saving devices and had to make their own tools. A permit system introduced in the 1890s, prohibited Indian farmers and ranchers from buying or selling produce or stock without a permit from the Indian agent. Chief Crowfoot died in the spring of 1890.

Settlers began to flock into the southern Alberta ranching country and into the farming country to the north and the east. During the summer of 1884, some 2,000 settlers took up homesteads in Alberta.[5] Settlers faced many challenges including prairie fires, drought, severe winters, conflicts between settlers and ranchers, as well as tensions with their indigenous neighbours. It is in this context that Mennonites arrived to make this place their home.

Mennonite Landseekers Begin to Explore the West: The Swiss Mennonites

In the late 1880s, there were various groups of Mennonite delegates that came to Alberta to search for land. One of these groups were Swiss Mennonites from the Kitchener- Waterloo area in Ontario. In a 1980 article Dr. Alexander Malycky attempted to identify the first Mennonite settlers who came to southern Alberta and he described the challenges he faced in doing so. He acknowledged the various sources of information that he found that raise doubts about whether Elias W. Bricker (an Old Mennonite from Ontario) was the first Mennonite settler in Alberta.

Malycky also discusses the role of Emil Griesbach (1855- 1954) in settling the Gleichen area. Griesbach played a prominent role in the Gleichen locality, as its early overseer and later mayor, businessman and civic leader. Griesbach arrived in Winnipeg from Germany in December 1883 and soon

joined a CPR construction crew. As a railroad worker he came to Alberta the following spring, first working and later settling in Gleichen. Malycky quotes an autobiographical article that appeared in 1908, where Griesbach asserts: "*Im Jahre 1888, brachte Ich durch empfehlung die ersten Mennoniten nach Gleichen*."[6] Malycky found additional information concerning Griesbach's role in bringing Mennonites to Alberta in a 1912 article where we learn that:

> [already]... in 1886-87…, he corresponded with German newspapers and the articles published abroad from his pen proved the starting point of the Mennonite migration to Alberta. During the year 1888, he assisted in locating 1,443 homesteads for these people and incidental to that service he covered the ground on foot practically all the way from Gleichen to Edmonton. During the very dry season of 1888-89, he located most of these people at Didsbury.[7]

A reference to travelling to Edmonton also appears in his autobiographical article:"*Im begleitung von Herrn Schantz von Waterloo Ontario, bin Ich im Jahre 1887 von Calgary zu fusz nach Edmonton gelaufen*". Malycky assumes that the reference to Shantz refers to Jacob Y. Shantz, the respected businessman from Ontario.[8]

There were other Swiss Mennonite delegations that scouted the land in Alberta. In 1899 the *Calgary Weekly Herald* reported that:

> ….a party of excursionists whom we mentioned as having arrived from Waterloo, Ontario last Sunday morning having made an examination of a part of the country around Calgary, have gone up to Banff to see the wonders of the mountain country at the National Park before returning to the level lands of their own country. What interests the people of Calgary district most in connection with their visit is what they thought of the capability of the country, as a farming and dairying country. Having been courteously treated and no effort spared on the part of the excursionists receptionist committee to facilitate their obtaining information, they felt it due to the community to make public their views about the place and property. Consequently they came to the Herald office and asked to make public their ideas about what they had seen and heard around Calgary. The group was thankful for the hospitality extended to them by John Ingram, proprietor of the Palace Hotel. They visited a number of farms and saw the varieties of crops grown. At the conclusion of their stay they said that they would recommend the area for their Ontario farmer friends who were coming west. They also suggested that the Herald publish their ideas and share the paper with Toronto area papers, so that people could become more knowledgeable about the west. They signed as : 'Joseph Y. Shantz, Haysville, Ont; George Proudfoot, Berlin, Ont; J.S. Hallman, New Dundee, Ont; Henry Hillgartner,New Dundee, Ont; Moses Bechtel, Kussouth, Ont; Sammuel Ponan, New Dundee, Ont.'.[9]

A High River local history suggests: "We know that in 1889, Elias W. Bricker came with a CPR sponsored home seekers excursion to Calgary and from there he went south into the vicinity of High River and took up a homestead situated about half a mile north of the future Aldersyde, a locality which he named and where he was the first postmaster."[10] That same year the *Calgary Herald* reported that Mr. E.W. Bricker of Elora Ontario, with his wife and family of eight children arrived on Friday to settle in Alberta. The *Herald* noted, "Mr. Bricker has rented J.J. O'Neil's place on the junction of Sheep Creek and High River and has already commenced ploughing. Mr Bricker brings with him a span of heavy mares, 3 good milk cows, sheep, pigs, poultry, etc. He is a good specimen of Ontario farmer and well to do."[11]

A 2012 article written by Jim Bowman, provides some helpful information about Elias Bricker and the beginning of the Swiss Mennonite settlement near Aldersyde and the Mountain View Mennonite Church. According to Bowman:

> Elias Bricker (1853-1939) was a part of the group of Mennonites from Waterloo Ontario, who were invited by the CPR to consider settlement along the route of its subsidiary, the C&E (Calgary to Edmonton) Railway. Elias was the only one of the group to file for land along the branch line which was proposed to run from Calgary to Fort Macleod. His choice was either very astute or very lucky. Elias sold his farm in Elmira Ontario and in 1891 settled on NE 7-20-28 w of 4M, a quarter section traversed by the nearly completed C&E Railway, with a corner of the land touching the Highwood River and just north of the Townsite of Aldersyde. The Brickers were industrious and enterprising and eventually the farm expanded to four quarter sections strategically located west of Aldersyde. The village, though never as big as Okotoks or High River, became an important junction point in 1910 for a new railway line that extended to Lethbridge via Vulcan. Besides farming, the Brickers established a small

brickworks using clay from the banks of the Highwood River. They also operated a cream separator patronized by local farmers.

Bowman goes on to say that as far as he knew, the Bricker family was "Alberta's earliest Mennonite family." This is only partly true. They were the first Swiss Mennonite family to settle in Alberta but more research in this article will show that there were Russian Mennonite families from Manitoba that settled in Alberta before them.[12]

There are other hints of early Swiss Mennonite settlers. In April 1891, David Gascho, an Amish farmer from Musselburg, Ontario, wrote a letter to the Department of Agriculture asking for information about the availability of land in the Northwest:

> So please dear gentlemen, be so kind as to let me know about the Government land up there, prices and all. Could you perhaps let me have a map of the whole Northwest showing the places where land is to be had, yet cheap, in a place where it is not too cold? Is land to be had yet near Edmonton? I have some acquaintances there and they seem to do well up there. If we should get a start there once, it might be the case that a great number would follow. But we wish to settle near a railway if possible or in a place perhaps where a railway will soon be built. Is there a chance to settle or homestead? Please let me know all about it.[13]

The letter raises the question of who his acquaintances were, fellow Amish or Mennonites? If so, when did they move to Alberta and where?

The community of Didsbury was settled somewhat later but under the leadership of Jacob Y. Shantz. The *Mennonitische Rundschau* reported in 1892 that:

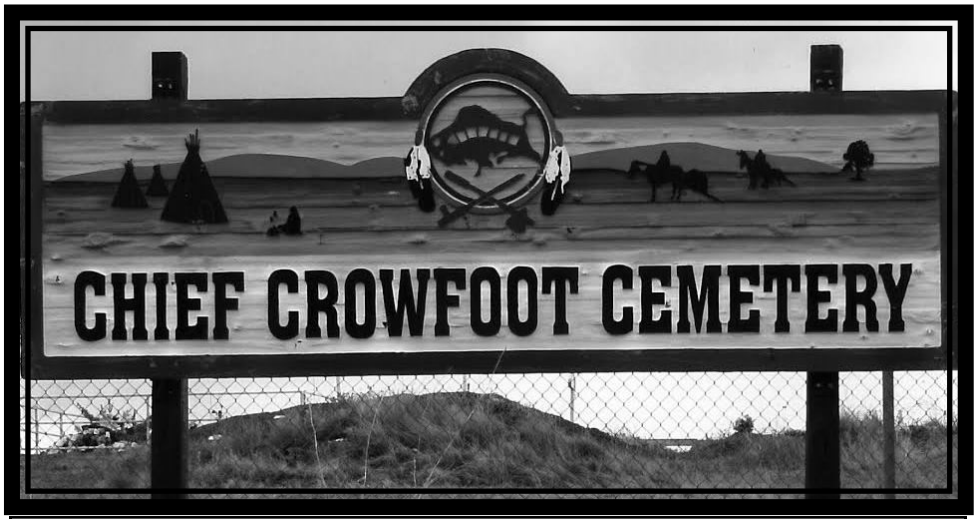
> ….on his return trip from Alberta NWT, Mr. Jacob Y. Shantz arrived on Friday 7 October 1892 in Winnipeg and then in the evening continued his journey home. He led a deputation from Ontario to an area 46 miles north of Calgary, near the station of Didsbury to search for land and to look at it with the intention of creating a colony there in spring. With this in mind, Mr. Shantz built an Immigration House, 100 by 20 foot in size and then dug a well which hit good water at the 12 foot mark. Wood to build homes is in place so that the newcomers can begin building when they arrive. In addition, they have set up provisional lodging in the Immigration House at the Station. Mr. Shantz is planning on bringing immigrants from Pennsylvania and Indiana to help settle this colony….[14]

Malycky notes that "following his exploratory trip in 1892, [Schantz] brought in 1894 a substantial party of Mennonite Brethren in Christ from the area around Waterloo Ontario to the site of future Didsbury."[15]

The Russian Mennonites: Searching for Land in the Northwest

According to E.K. Frances, the "cry for more land, that is for more land suitable for their type of farm economy and social organization, came at the opportune moment when the Dominion Government began to open up the North West Territories for large scale immigration and colonization."[16] Gerhard J. Ens' history of the R.M. of Rhineland notes that only the richer farmers and businessmen could buy land, and that inability of ordinary families to establish their children on farms meant moving to the northwest became steadily more attractive. Henry Jacobsen, an agent sent to Manitoba by the Dominion Government claimed that young farmers:

> ….were on the move or were going to move sooner or later but if the young people go, it may not be so easy to keep the farmers back as these people dread and are averse to separation from their kindred.[17]



Chief Crowfoot died of tuberculosis in 1890 and is buried on the Siksika Reserve at Blackfoot Crossing. Photo Credit: Leonard Doell

Photo (ca. 1920) of the first Swiss Mennonites Catherine and Elias Bricker, who settled at Aldersyde in 1891. Image Credit: High River Museum

Although many of what was only a trickle of families that had moved to the United States as early as 1888 returned, Ens notes that "the move to Northwest Canada beginning in the 1890s, had more serious repercussions. The settlement of Indian and Metis troubles after 1885, plus the opening of new railways in the west, Regina to Prince Albert and Calgary to Edmonton; opened vast new areas to settlement."[18]

Jacobsen, the Dominion Government Intelligence officer, visited the Mennonite colonies in September of 1889 when it was learned that "some Mennonites of these reserves were contemplating moving to the United States." He visited with the principal and most influential men to see if this was true. He also tried to persuade them to remain in Canada rather than to choose the USA. At the end of his report to the Commissioner of Dominion Lands he writes that "I have thought out a plan by which the thousands of acres of good vacant Government land in Southern Assiniboia and southern Alberta might be looked over by a deputation of influential and able Mennonites from the Eastern Reserve with the assistance of the CPR Company, the carrying out of which of course, entirely rests with you."[19]

Not all Government officials shared the same views as Jacobsen and his colleague J.H. Metcalfe about keeping Mennonites in Canada. In October 1889, Metcalfe sent a telegraph to the Deputy Minister of Agriculture, saying that he was exerting every effort to retain Mennonites in Canada, who desire to remove from Southern Manitoba owing to lack of land. "Eighteen representatives from different villages held a meeting in the Intelligence office today and are going west to select land tomorrow. CPR gives free transportation. Will your department pay expenses of guide and horses at the three points between here and Calgary, very important that this be done, will arrange if you authorize." The acting secretary for Lowe responded the following day to say that there are no funds at the disposal of the department from which these expenses could be paid.[20]

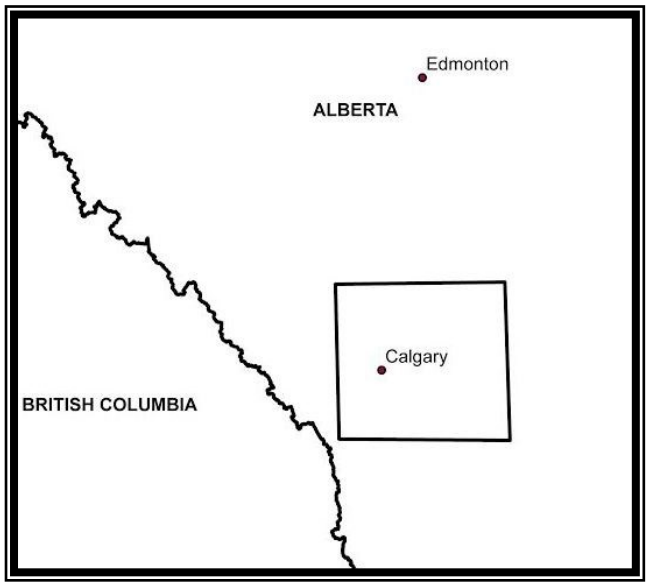
There were many delegations that went looking for land in the Northwest. There were individuals, there were groups sponsored by the CPR and accompanied by colonization agents, and there were delegations sent by their churches.

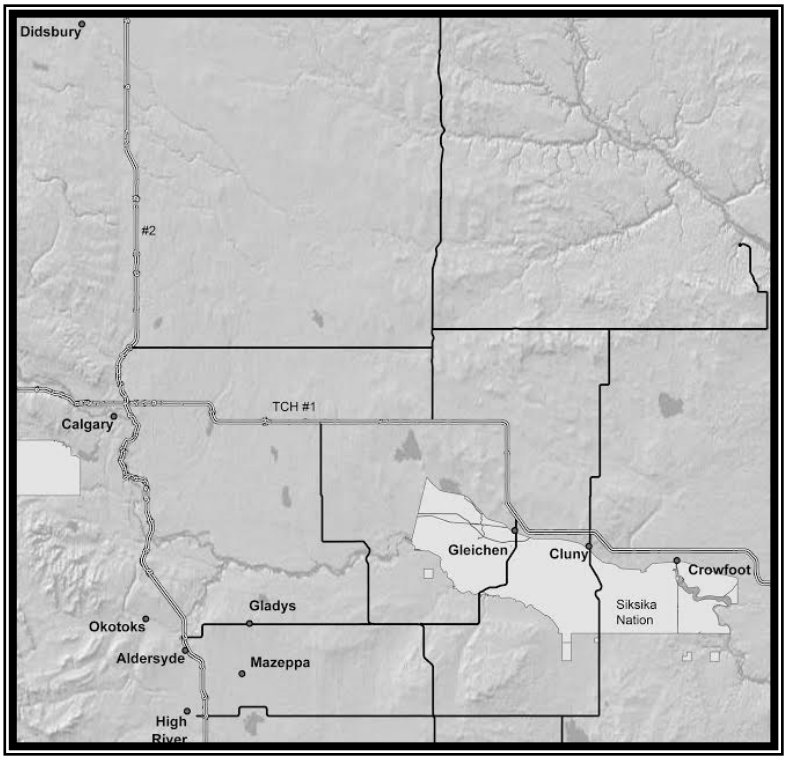
In the spring of 1889 a letter to the *Mennonitische Rundschau* reported that, "David Loewen and Jacob Regehr from Hochstadt Manitoba describe the trip that they took by train to Alberta, leaving home on April 1 and arriving back on April 19th. They visited the area around Medicine Hat and Dunmore, as well as an area southwest of Lethbridge." Two weeks later, the *Rundschau* correspondent from Hochstadt wrote that "two more landseekers left in May for Alberta, namely David Unger and Johan Esau. They were able to travel for free. It was reported that Unger brought back some gooseberries with him that he had picked himself near Medicine Hat. Unger said he would like to move there if he could sell his place in Manitoba."[21]

The same year Jacob Wiens and Klaas Peters raised funds in the community to make a trip to the Northwest (Alberta) and Oregon to explore farming possibilities. They returned home on June 21st by way of San Francisco, Nevada, Utah, Idaho, Montana and the Dakotas.[22]

While Wiens and Peters were returning home, the *Calgary Herald* reported the arrival of more land seekers:

> ….four representatives, men from Morris and Gretna Mennonite settlements in southern Manitoba, whose names are





Above and right:
Mennonite settlement areas in Alberta (ca. 1890s).

Cornelius Striemert, Peter Gerbrandt, Fried Wall and Gerhard Rempel, arrived in Calgary this morning with the object of looking up a district where they can locate 200 families. This would require all the Government land in at least six townships. Mr. Bouchier of Calgary Government Land Office, knows these gentlemen well and says they are well off and trusted men of these settlements and undoubtedly mean business. They have procured rigs and driven out in the direction of the Little Bow River, where the required amount of land can be had without any settlers on it.[23]

The *Herald* updated the story a week later suggesting:

….there will be a large influx of Mennonites into this district this fall and next spring. The four gentlemen who came up here from Manitoba whose names we published at the time as representatives of 200 families that want to move here from Manitoba, have made a selection of several townships of land on Arrow Creek. They have gone to Winnipeg to see if they can make satisfactory agreements with the Government land Commissioner to get the land enblock. If they do, a move will be made at once towards coming out here.[24]

In his annual report for 1889, the Dominion Immigration agent for Calgary L.Z.C. Miquelon reported that:

….the CPR having run three different excursions for the benefit of eastern farmers, a large number from Ontario and the Eastern Provinces availed themselves of the opportunity and about one quarter of these visitors made homestead entries before returning on the excursions and are expected back with their families next spring. The same company moreover granted a great reduction in the passage money to 40 Mennonites of Manitoba and Dakota, they have during the past fall visited the portion of Alberta lying to the southeast of Calgary. Twenty of them made homestead entries before returning and from their answers to my questions as to the probable numbers of Mennonites who are likely to settle next summer, I have been able to estimate that there will be about 100 heads of families or about 350 souls.[25]

The *Rundschau* reported on additional Mennonite land delegations to Alberta during the summer of 1889:

On Monday, July 15, a deputation of land seekers who had been in the west arrived back in Winnipeg. They were E. Hiebert, a farmer from Gretna; David Friesen from Sommerfeld; Abram Loeppky from Eigenhoff; Jacob Toews; and, Jacob Loewen from Altona. They left for Calgary July 8th and travelled extensively in that area. They travelled from Calgary in a northwest direction and then southwest to an area where nine townships of land around the station Cheadle was reserved for Mennonite settlement. This land interested them very much. It is fruitful and there is a good water supply to be found there, they just

need more trees everywhere. The best location they found was between Cheadle and Langdon, 810 miles west of Winnipeg on the CPR. They have selected eight Townships of land in this area. The land is prairie with few trees but good grazing and pasture land. Some people are hoping to take up land there this fall.[26]

The increased volume of visitors and delegations created some unique problems for land agents. On June 25, 1889 the Mayor of Calgary sent H.H. Smith, the Dominion Land Commissioner in Winnipeg, a telegram asking him to open for Settlement Township 20 Range 27 west of the 4th Meridian. It was understood that this is one of the Townships that the Mennonite agents from Manitoba had asked the Government to reserve for them, but several farmers from around Guelph had already made a choice of land in that Township. All that is necessary for the government to do, writes the Mayor, is to set apart another township instead of 20 for the Mennonites.[27]

There was a lot of pressure on land agents and land-seeking delegations to get to the land first and then have it set aside for them before someone else got it. Mennonites complicated this by insisting on having blocks of land reserved for them. For Russian Mennonites negotiating block land settlements was very important to their choice of land. Their farming practices, their social and religious structures were based on a semi-communal way of life and living in villages (or homesteads near one another) on blocks of land near one another was a key part of who they were.

There were many who wanted the west to be settled but did not want the block settlements reserved for newcomers. At the height of the land search in the summer of 1889, the editor of the *Saskatchewan Herald* shared his strong feelings on the question:

> About two hundred Mennonites have resolved to leave Manitoba and move further west and having selected the Calgary district as the place of their choice, they have asked the Government to reserve for them ten townships for five years. We hope the Government will do nothing of the kind. Reserves have been a serious draw back to the country and ought not to be perpetrated and colonies of foreigners are not much better. There is no reason why foreign immigrants should be accorded privileges that are refused to Canadians.[28]

In November 1890, Jacob Y. Shantz of Berlin, Ontario returned from Northern Alberta with the Mennonite delegates who were much impressed with the country near Lone Pine, beside the C&E Railway (now known as Olds, Alberta). The *Calgary Herald* reported - "we hear that if land can be secured here from the Government and the Railway, a large body of the younger generation of Mennonites will come on at once from Southern Manitoba."[29] This is confirmed by the report of the Dominion Government Immigration Agent L.Z.C. Miquelon, who made a trip to this area to check it out. "The first 20 miles are without wood and is called Lone Pine. On these last twenty miles, four townships have just been chosen by a Colony of Mennonites of Dakota. They will arrive in spring. From Lone Pine there is enough wood for settlers. The soil is good and the railway is already built beyond Lone Pine."[30]

There was another delegation that came in 1891 under the leadership of Klaas Peters. According to June 15th edition of the *Calgary Herald:*

> Peters, a Mennonite, who resides at Gretna in Southern Manitoba and who spent last winter in Southern Russia in the Immigration interests of the Dominion, is in town today with a Mennonite delegation consisting of Heinrich Wiebe, David Waldner, John Hofer, Gerhard Klassen, David Friesen, Wilhelm Peters, Franz Bergen, Abram Buhr, Michael Buhler and 1 or 2 others. Misters Waldner and Hofer come from Freeman, Hutchinson County, South Dakota; Mr. Buhler is from Southern Russia and the others from Southern Manitoba. They are all Mennonites with the exception of Mr. Buhler and 2 others who are Lutherans. They will go to Red Deer on tomorrow's train accompanied by Mr. Bouchier. Mr. Peters will stay with them as long as they are in this part of the country. The delegates have already seen the country around Duck Lake and Prince Albert and think well of it.[31]

A few days later the newspaper picked up on the travels of this group again:

> Mr. Bouchier's last trip north extended through the country from the 4th Siding of the C&E (Calgary to Edmonton), 39 miles out (2½ miles from Chamberlains at Stoney Creek), through the lands on the Eastern side of the Railway up to and including Poplar Grove. He accompanied the Mennonite delegation, which by the way included a Bishop and 2 clergymen. The country traversed is townships 32, 33, 34 in Ranges 27 and 28 W of 4 M, which has been reserved by the Government for the Mennonites, they found within the districts an abundance of water and good

> land but the Mennonites preferred the country immediately alongside the Railway and they will ask for a transfer of the Reserve to the latter locality of which they are well satisfied. Mr. Bouchier finds it almost impossible to locate settlers land while on the spot, owing to there being so few townships surveyed in sections of the district and where they are surveyed there is great difficulty in locating the section marks. It is right to note the fact that Mr. Bouchier found sufficient rain in that part of the country. He has been up there in the Dog Pound country every week for the past three weeks. The first week it rained on him for three days , the second two days and the third week part of one day (Monday last). Mr. Bouchier is receiving nothing to meet his expenses in showing settlers through the country. He trusts to be able to sell the C&E lands by and by, receiving his commission for his service but in the meantime he is at considerable expense in showing settlers to the free grants, a fact which the Government should take into consideration. He is laboring without compensation to have the Government lands near Calgary settled, while the Dominion agent at Calgary is giving all of his time to settle land in the Edmonton district.[32]

The search for Alberta homestead land continued into the turn of the century. "In 1900, Jacob Y. Shantz accompanied a small group of Manitoba farmers who had not been able to acquire land. His selected destination was again the Didsbury area. Numerous homestead applications were registered, albeit twelve miles further east, apparently implying that homesteading by others had continued in his absence. These family names were typically Braun, Dyck, Friesen, Hamm, Hiebert, Janzen, Neufeld and Reimer."[33]

Perhaps one of the most interesting and unusual (peculiar) requests for land in Alberta came from Jacob Friesen of Winkler, Manitoba. He, along with a delegation of Mennonites from there, had visited in Saskatchewan and then proceeded to look at land in Alberta. In a letter to W.F. McCreary, the Immigration Commissioner from Winnipeg, dated 11 June 1900, he shares some observations and requests for land:

> I may say that they were all more pleased with the Alberta district north of Innisfail to Edmonton and northeast of that, they would like to try and reserve several townships East of Beaver Lake in Ranges 15, 16, 17 in Townships 49-53 inclusive, if there would be any chance of the railway coming from Prince Albert to Edmonton in the near future, it now means a 65 mile drive to reach the nearest point of it from Edmonton and the roads almost impassable at that and they did not think that they could get their people out there that far from a railway with bad roads in the spring and really no assurance when the roads would go through there, they would have picked right up and taken land if they could get the three Indian Reservations at Hobbema, the Ermine Skin, Samson and Bob Tail, the best piece of land we have struck in our journey. Do you think there is a chance of it going open for settlement sometime in the near future? And if so, can it be got for a Mennonite Reservation? If it can, it would be settled in no time. Kindly let me hear from you in regard to this as my delegation was much more pleased with that district than they were with Saskatchewan, although it is good there, they liked it better in Alberta.[34]

The response from McCreary's office was received on June 21, 1900 and was very clear that there was no intention whatever of opening these Indian Reserves for settlement. "Of course if they picked out certain lands we would readily reserve them for 30 days to enable their friends to make entry but as you are aware, we are not making reservations for anyone."[35]

The Mennonite Settlements at Gladys Ridge and Mazeppa

Judging by the interest in the land in various parts of Alberta, one would assume that Alberta should be one of the most heavily populated provinces of Mennonites in Canada. All of the visits by individuals and groups of land seekers did not result in the emigration to Alberta that many had hoped for or anticipated. It is very difficult to determine how many Mennonites actually applied for homesteads since, unlike those in Saskatchewan, the Alberta Provincial Archives do not contain this kind of information. Saskatchewan homestead records also have helpful information about homestead cancellations, providing a trail of the movement of people and why they moved. In addition, the CPR Land Grant records in the Glenbow Archives also do not provide the researcher with details of settlement, only the ownership of a particular parcel of land. The first movement of people from Manitoba appears to be have been very fluid; some came out of a sense of adventure and curiosity, others moved with the intention of homesteading and starting a new life, some stayed, but the majority left disappointed. So it is some-

what like a puzzle, where you try and piece a picture together from a variety of sources in order to find the truth.

I could not find any references to Mennonites actually living in Alberta prior to 1890, even though Dr. Malycky suggests that through the efforts of Emil Griesbach this may have happened. The first Mennonites to actually settle in Alberta came in the spring of 1890 near the communities of Mazeppa and Gladys Ridge, south of Calgary. The Gladys Ridge local history, *Through the Years,* is very vague about these first settlers:

> It is believed that at about this time (1889), there were some settlers on the prairie land back from the river because of evidence of plowed ground and dug wells. But who these people were, remains a mystery. There is no record of them in the Land Titles office in Calgary. Some old timers say they were a small company of Mennonites. Nobody knows.[36]

The Mazeppa history book, *Leaves from the Medicine Tree* has a similar story. It says, "a Colony of Mennonites settled at Mazeppa. They left the area in 1896 because of drought and frost. Not even potatoes would grow at that time."[37]

Letters to the German weekly newspaper, *Die Mennonitische Rundschau*, provide a helpful link between those who came to Alberta from Southern Manitoba and shared their experiences with their families and friends back home. There are two letters that give some insight into the beginnings of their life in Alberta, one written by "IR" and the other by Isaac Rempel, presumably the same person. Rempel writes that on the 20 May 1890, he arrived from Manitoba and everything was green and had been green for three to four weeks:

> The land here is to our liking, there is also good land for settlement that opened up. As far as I can tell the water is good, the grain and grass are also good. So far we have had enough rain and as of yet mainly pleasant weather, so that those of us who are building are able to remain doing so. We have needed to haul building material from Calgary, which is 35 miles distant from us. Our home is presently finished enough so that we can live in it, it is 31 feet long and 16 feet wide. About 10 miles from here they have started to set up a sawmill, where we will be able to purchase all kinds of building material. They have also started surveying the railroad line and construction is to start this summer. When the railroad is finished we expect many people will begin settling here.[38]

In September, he wrote:

> ….it has frozen a little bit each month but not that much that it had damaged our grain. I think that the grain here in Alberta can be closely compared to Southern Manitoba. The land in Manitoba that Julius Siemens talks about, may also be good land but Mr. Siemens has not seen the land here south of Calgary and the land at Gleichen. It is 30-35 miles northeast of here and at one time he thought that this would be very good land for a Mennonite settlement and yet now he spreads negative news. This is wrong. I believe that here in Alberta we can make a good living.[39]

There were many Mennonites who came to Alberta but left shortly afterwards. There were, however, two families and their descendants who persevered over a number of years: the Rempels and Walls.

Gerhard and Helena (Miller) Rempel lived in Neuhorst Manitoba before coming to the Gladys Ridge area in1890. There are no homestead files for them or their adult children, which included their son Isaac who wrote letters to the *Rundschau*. There is, however, a CPR land grant issued to Gerhard Rempel in May of 1890, for two pieces of land: the NW and NE 25-Tp 19-R28 West of 4. In 1891, they appear in the Census records for the sub-district known as High River. According to Saskatchewan Homestead Records, Gerhard Sr. (1842-1910) and five of his adult children all took up homesteads in Alberta but abandoned them, this included: Isaac (1865), Gerhard Jr. (1867-1953), Sarah (1868-1927) married to Isaac Klassen, Johan (1870-1923), Peter (1873). Isaac and Sarah Klassen had a son named Cornelius who was born while they were living here. By 1896, they were living near Rosthern, Saskatchewan and had taken up homesteads there.

The second family was Heinrich Sr and Agatha (Bueckert) Wall. He homesteaded the SW 6- TP20- R26 West of 4 in Alberta and abandoned it. Heinrich Sr (1850-1920) and his oldest son Heinrich Jr (1872) both homesteaded here. Their family also appears in the 1891 Census for High River District. In December of 1897, they entered for a homestead at Rosthern Saskatchewan. In the Alberta Provincial Homestead Records there is a Johan M. Wall who applied for a Pre-emption in 1889 for NE 4 and the SE 4 of Tp20-R26-West of 4. It is not clear how long he may have been here. This Johan

M. Wall (married to Aganetha Dyck) is the nephew to Heinrich Wall Sr.

After 6-7 years of trying their best to make a living, the Mennonites left. Since there are no diaries available from the Mennonites who settled in the Gladys Ridge area, the best explanation of the sequence of events that led to their leaving is found in the life story of John V. Thompson who also settled in the Gladys Ridge area in 1889:

> John's first crop was harvested in 1890, cradled and bound by hand, then hauled to a neighbours' for threshing. The next year he was hailed out and then a succession of dry years followed. Sloughs dried up and wells had to be dug to provide water for the increased numbers of livestock. John dug a 40 foot well and stoned it up. In 1893, he dug another, which gave a good flow at fourteen feet. 1894 was the driest yet, with not a drop of rain falling in June or July. A fire started at Mosquito Creek and the next day it reached the Bow River at Arrowhead Creek. A small hailstorm helped put it out but men fought the fire for seven days and nights as the sod was burning and every breath of wind started the fire again. Indian boys from the Dunbow Industrial School helped put it out.[40]

The Gleichen Mennonite Settlement

In 1890 the *Nordwesten*, a German weekly newspaper, reported on a group of land seekers from Manitoba who visited Alberta that spring. They were not interested in the land southeast of Calgary near Mazeppa but:

> ….spent time near Gleichen, a station on the CPR, east of Calgary. The land here interested them more (since they found both wood and coal in the area) and some left back to Calgary immediately after seeing the area in order to sign up for a homestead. About one and a half miles from Gleichen, the open prairie begins, where there are large areas of land available for homesteading. There is great anticipation that the area next to the settlement of Calgary and near to Gleichen, a large German Colony is going to break out. The first migration from Southern Manitoba to this area should begin next spring.[41]

It is quite possible that Rev. Gerhard Paetkau was a member of this delegation, because in June 1890 he purchased a CPR land grant for NE 31-Tp 22 -R22 West of 4.

In April 1891, a group of fifteen families left Southern Manitoba to settle at Gleichen. The *Calgary Herald* published a letter sent to them by Emil Griesbach where he notes that "15 families with 16 carloads of stock arrived at Gleichen on April 16 and will proceed to locate to their lands as soon as possible. One of their number, Mr. Sawatzky from Gretna has brought a steam thresher with him. The parties are all from Gretna and that vicinity."[42]

Abraham H. Friesen was one of these families that made the trek. He and his family had come from Russia in June of 1890 and spent the winter with the Jacob Ens family in the village of Rosenort, Manitoba. He did not see any possibilities for farming in Manitoba so he joined the move to the northwest. In his letters to the *Mennonitische Rundschau* and in his personal diary, we get a glimpse into the many challenges his family and community faced at this time. He was disappointed when he arrived:

> I did not like it here at all, there were no trees and no brush, almost no grass and no water, only many loose stones on top of and in the soil which is quite hilly. We dug in the hard loam 42 feet deep but there was still no water, with rocks from pea size to a foot in diameter in size. With lots of hardships I plowed about 10 acres of land, picked all the stones and even seeded part of the land.[43] In the previous year it was not as dry as it is now, you can see this in the grass, which in the spring time did not burn out. It did not snow here this past winter and the rain has stayed away up until now and the grass is drying up. The Edmonton district sounded very appealing to us because of the mild climate but when some of us wanted to go see this land it had severely frozen, then we saw that this land was low and wet and that the best land had been taken up by English farmers, other land is heavily grown over with willows and poplar and other trees that grow in this area.[44]

In his letter two weeks later on July 15, 1891, Abraham H. Friesen informed the readers of *Die Mennonitische Rundschau* that 11 of the 15 families who moved to Gleichen would be leaving:

> It is very difficult work to move twice in one summer he writes, but we all now see that we cannot stay living here. Gerhard Paetkau, Isbrand Penner, Johan Sawatzky and Abram Sawatzky are all staying here. If all goes according to plan, then we will arrive with God's help in the new area and I will then write about how things are going with us there. To-

> day there should be news arriving from Winnipeg if we will be getting a train, it is supposed to cost $70.00 for the trip from here to Duck Lake.[45]

In a history of the Peter Siemens family, life at Gleichen is described in this way:

> They continued to farm in Manitoba until 1891, when their son Peter wanted to start farming but there was very little land available for young men in this area. In the spring of 1891 they decided to move to Gleichen, NWT. They spent three miserable months with only their wagon for shelter trying to find good farm land but could not find it... They finally gave up and said that the land is only good for ranching and not suited for them. Peter had said, "How will we survive if the gophers are dying?[46]

There two different versions of who should be credited for recommending the area around Duck Lake Saskatchewan for possible settlement. In his diary, Abraham H. Friesen credits Klaas Peters, a land and immigration agent in the service of the CPR, who had been visiting Alberta with other land seekers from Manitoba as being the one that suggested to them to move to Duck Lake, "which they did right away."[47] A second version by J.J. Andres of Rosthern, credits Abram Buhr. Andres claims:

> A bachelor, Abram Buhr, had followed the above group to Gleichen. That year the railroad was built from Regina to Prince Albert and Abram Buhr had been told that south of Duck Lake there was a large area of beautiful country suitable for farming. He left to investigate and what he found he liked, especially the land in the vicinity of today's Town of Rosthern. He selected a quarter of land one mile north of the present townsite...Abram Buhr left for Prince Albert where the land titles office was situated to file his claim for this quarter. He then returned to Gleichen and told the people of the land where he had taken a homestead. The settlers immediately decided to move to Rosthern. Two men were sent to Winnipeg to petition the railway authorities for lower fares to Rosthern, which they were granted. As soon as the freight cars arrived, all chattels and goods were loaded and they were on their way to Rosthern....The group that arrived here from Gleichen were ten families who had not seen the land before. They arrived in July and immediately took a liking to the country.[48] Abraham H. Friesen writes that it was the mosquitoes that were the first ones to greet them, since there were no people in this wilderness and the conductor told us that the train cars should be empty when he got back 35 hours later from Prince Albert. At that time there were 3 trains a week with mixed cars, passenger and freight cars from Regina to Prince Albert. So early morning the poor cattle were unloaded first and then machinery and other belongings. Then the building of huts started and in no time there was a city of rough boards and canvas buildings up. The name existed already even though along this very new track there was nothing but a water tower on a creek where we got our water for our cattle. The name is Rosthern.[49]

In a later letter he writes to tell everyone that "his family, thanks to God," ...[is] healthy and the other settlers are too, except Mrs. Aaron Friesen who sprained her foot as she stepped backwards into a hole in the roof."[50]

Conclusion

According to his homestead record, Rev. Gerhard Paetkau lived on his land at Gleichen from April 1891 until April 1896, without once being away. In 1896, he left the homestead due to ill health and was away for one year. In June 1897, the Homestead Inspector wrote that a friend of Mr. Paetkau had just informed him that his house and stable had recently been destroyed by prairie fire. It is unclear whether Rev. Paetkau returned to Alberta or not. In the 1901 Census for Lisgar, Manitoba, Rev. Paetkau appears living with his wife and stepdaughter Maria in the village of Reinfeld. In 1911, the Census for Manitoba shows that Rev. Paetkau was living with his son Jacob. He died in Manitoba on 8 October 1915.

It is quite possible that the Mennonites that had settled at Gladys/Mazeppa shared church services with the group at Gleichen. Rev. Gerhard Paetkau had been elected as an Old Colony minister in Russia in 1868 and came with the group to Alberta to serve as their spiritual leader. With the departure of Rev. Paetkau in 1896 due to ill health, combined with the difficulties in farming, this may have been the catalyst for the Mazeppa people to move to Rosthern.

There was a small group of Mennonites that remained living at Gleichen up until 1902. In his homestead record for NE 32-22-22 W of 4, Isbrand Penner was seeking to leave Gleichen in March 1902 with a party of Mennonites who were leaving there later that month. 51 It has been assumed that Russian Mennonites from

Manitoba only lived in Alberta for a few months before leaving. We now know that a small group of them lived here for a considerable period of time and seriously attempted to make Alberta their home.

Notes

[1] Richard Price, *The Spirit of Alberta Indian Treaties* (Edmonton: PicaPica Press, 1987), 26.

[2] Mark Reid, "Crowfoot" in Jean Chevrier, Denis L. Daigneault and Jeanne Poulin eds., *Native Leaders of Canada* (Ottawa: New Federation House, 2008), 17.

[3] Aritha Van Herk, Mavericks, *An Incorrigable History of Alberta* (Middlesex: Penquin Books, 2001), 94.

[4] Hugh Dempsey, *Indian Tribes of Alberta* (Calgary: Glenbow Museum, 1986), 16.

[5] Sir Cecil E. Denny, *Denny's Trek* (Surrey: Heritage House, 2004), 179.

[6] Alexander Malycky, "First Mennonites in Alberta, 1888?," *Mennonite Histo-rian*, (December 1980): 1.

[7] As quoted in Malycky,1.

[8] Malycky, 1.

[9] *Calgary Herald*, 4 September 1889.

[10] As quoted in Malycky, 1.

[11] *Calgary Herald*, 22 April 1889.

[12] Jim Bowman, *Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta Newsletter,* October, 2012.

[13] David Gascho to Dept of Interior, 22 April 1891, Library and Archives Canada, RG 17 Vol 684, p.5, Docket #78337.

[14] *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 19 October 1892.

[15] Malyky, 1.

[16] E.K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia* (Altona: Friesen Printers, 1955), 146.

[17] The agent was Henry Jacobsen who is quoted in Gerhard J. Ens, *The Rural Municipality of Rhineland, 1884-1984* (R.M. of Rhineland: Altona,1984), 83

[18] Ens, 83.

[19] Henry Jacobsen, "Report on Mennonite Colonies," *Sessional Papers*, 1890, Vol. 23, #5, 146.

[20] J.H. Metcalfe to John Lowe, Deputy Minister of Department of Agriculture, Ottawa, 10 October 1889, Library and Archives Canada, RG 17, Vol. 625, Docket #70887.

[21] *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 29 May 1889 and 12 June 1889.

[22] John Dyck, "Edenburg 1879-1947," in Adolf Ens, Jacob E. Peters and Otto Hamm eds., *Church, Family and Village* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Histori-cal Society, 2001), 278.

[23] *Calgary Herald*, 19 June 1889

[24] *Calgary Herald*, 26 June 1889.

[25] L.Z.C. Miquelon, "Annual Report of Calgary Immigration Agent," *Sessional Papers*, 1890, Vol. 23, # 5, 111.

[26] *Mennonitishe Rundschau*, 31 July 1889.

[27] *Calgary Herald*, 26 June 1889, 8.

[28] *Saskatchewan Herald*, 10 July 1889.

[29] *Calgary Herald*, 5 November 1890.

[30] L.Z.C. Miquelon, "Report of Dominion Government Immigration Agent," *Sessional Papers*, 1891, Vol. 24, #4, 134.

[31] *Calgary Herald*, 15 June 1891.

[32] *Calgary Herald*, 24 June 1891. Poplar Grove is present day Innisfail, Alberta.

[33] "Three Generations of Shantz Family Members," *Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta Newsletter*, Vol. V111, #1, March 2005.

[34] Jacob Friesen, Winkler MB, letter to W.F. McCreary Immigration Agent, Win-nipeg, MB, 11 June 1900, Library and Archives Canada, RG 15, D-11 -1, Vol:652, file#270476. Beaver Lake is present day Mundare, Alberta.

[35] Ibid, McCreary to Friesen.

[36] *Through the Years, Gladys/Denton Alberta*, Vol. 1, 1883-1964 (Altona: Friesen Printers, 1991), 9.

[37] *Leaves from the Medicine Tree* (High River, 1969), 297.

[38] *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 20 May 1890.

[39] *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 17 September 1890.

[40] *Leaves from the Medicine Tree*, "John V. Thompson," 399.

[41] *Der Nordwesten*, 2 July 2 1890

[42] *Calgary Herald*, 22 April 1891.

[43] Abraham H. Friesen diary, original in possession of James Friesen, 25.

[44] Abraham H. Friesen, Letter to *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 1 July 1891.

[45] *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 15 July 1891.

[46] Ben Fehr, *History and Roots of the Peter I. Fehr Family* (Hague, Sask., 2006), 93.

[47] Abraham H. Friesen diary, 24

[48] J.J. Andres, "Reminisces of a Rosthern Pioneer," *Saskatchewan Valley News*, 1951.

[49] Abraham H. Friesen diary, 25.

[50] Abraham H. Friesen, Letter to *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 2 September 1891. ❖

(continued from page 1)

Coaldale, Alberta, some having travelled five hours or more. Attendance doubled for the presentation on "Letters from Soviet Russia" after the break following the 2014 Annual General Meeting of the Mennonite Historical Association of Alberta.

How do we keep our heritage alive for coming generations? How do we continue to remind ourselves of the way God has led us as a Mennonite people? In her comments of welcome and opening, Lil Thompson, Pastor to Seniors at the Coaldale Mennonite Church, noted that, to enliven her family's connection with her past, she has given each of her children and grandchildren a memento from Russia, along with a section of her autobiography.

Lil Bartel's grade nine genealogy students at Menno Simons Christian School in Calgary, Alberta, have enthusiastically embraced the concept of tracing their ancestry. Several of their impressive projects showing family trees going back four or five generations, were on display at both sessions of the conference. "The kids have really gotten into it," said Lil, who plans to continue leading this special genealogy unit in social studies for a few more years to come.

Another way of connecting with our roots is through old letters. A collection of 200 family letters written from Soviet Russia dated between 1927 and 1934 is in the possession of Agnes (Langemann) Thibert. She was scheduled to have these letters on display and to reflect on some of the contents. Unfortunately, weather conditions prevented her from being present. Ted Regehr, who spoke with her by phone, summarized briefly the nature of the letters. They often expressed separation sadness, worry about hunger, crops, taxes, and onerous levies required by the communist government. Later letters were often crowded onto poor paper, sometimes undated and unsigned. Though they were not available for viewing in Coaldale, the letters will be given to MHSA to be displayed in the MHSA office Calgary.

The Box of Letters

The featured speaker, Ruth Derksen Siemens, has been actively engaged with another corpus of letters from Soviet Russia stored for more than fifty years in a Campbell's soup box in an attic in Winnipeg, MB. Peter Bargen became aware of the letters when his brother, who had cleared them from their parental home, was tired of moving the box from attic to attic. Consequently, he asked Peter to take a look at the letters before disposing of them. Because they were written in Gothic script, Peter's brother had never taken the trouble to read them. To Peter's surprise, these letters came from his uncle and aunt, Jasch and Maria Regehr, their six children and an uncle in Soviet Russia dated from the time of the ruthless Stalinist regime.

Ruth Derksen Siemens, a writer and historian, is an instructor of Rhetoric and Writing at the University of British Columbia. Because she is a relative of the Barg-

Ruth Derksen Siemens autographs her book

ens, she became aware of the letters after Peter Bargen and his wife, Anne, spent three years, painstakingly and often tearfully translating them. Ruth could not get them out of her mind. "I was not planning on doing a PhD," she told her audience, "but the letters were calling out to me." When the University of Sheffield, England, learned of the letters, there was an immediate interest in having them analyzed for their historical value and then safely stored for future reference. Ruth was the logical person to pick up the challenge. In a sense, as she put it, "The project fell into my lap."

The letters, written on scraps of paper, old newspapers, postcards, in some cases on cigarette paper, and even, ironically, on Soviet propaganda pamphlets, tell the heartbreaking story of a family of nine forceably removed from their home. The family was allowed only the belongings they could fit into a hastily built 5.0 by 1.5 by 1.5 foot wooden trunk. Along with scores of others, the family was packed into a windowless boxcar which was then locked for the nine-day journey to the Siberian north. "It was intolerable," recalls Lena Dirksen, one of the family members.

Unlike memoirs written in retrospect, these documents were, as Siemens put it, "written in the moment, not years later when time has eroded the experience. The smell of the barrack, the noise of prisoners, the taste of the watery millet soup, the itch of the bed bugs, and the beauty of the frost on the windows are described in actual time." (Cited from the back cover of the book, "*Remember Us*," by Ruth Derksen Siemens, 2007; Pandora Press). Often, there were codes to be deciphered. Sometimes there was no envelope or stamp. Lena Regehr Dirksen, now living in Cologne, Germany, was the youngest of the writers, only nine years old at the time.

CBC was quick to respond when made aware of the letters. The result was a documentary called, "*Through the Red Gate*." The red gate into Latvia symbolized freedom at last for the thousands of Mennonites and others who fled the brutality of the Soviets. Not until they were through that landmark gate could they be sure they would not be arrested and imprisoned, or, that their entire train would not be turned back. Included in this hour-long film are interviews with Peter Bargen, one of the translators of the Campbell's soup box of letters, as well as with Lena Dirksen, whose memories are still vivid. She recalls a critical point in their escape when they were rescued by a prostitute. While the family huddled in fear upstairs, their benefactor remained downstairs, entertaining the investigating soldiers

The Bargens, themselves, made it through the Red Gate, but thousands of others who had waited in line to board a train to freedom were denied. Only one in four of those who had fled to Moscow in hope of escape, Ruth told her audience, made it out of the country.

Miraculously, the 463 letters had come through rigorous censorship in a time when sending to and receiving mail from outside the Soviet Union were considered crimes punishable by imprisonment or death.

Session Two, Foothills Mennonite Church, Calgary, April 27

On Sunday afternoon a substantial audience gathered to hear about the historical implications of the *Maedchenheime* (Mennonite Girls' Home) movement in Calgary and Vancouver. The second presentation of guest speaker, Ruth Derksen Siemens, was the featured event in the MHSA Fundraiser endeavor which concluded the annual MHSA Spring Conference.

Daughters of the City

In 1945, when Andrew Sawatzky was a child, his parents were asked by Mennonite Church mission leadership to move from Carstairs, AB, to establish an outreach ministry in Calgary, a city of 85,000. Not only was the Scarboro Mennonite Church (now First Mennonite) born as a result, the Sawatzky home became a shelter for young Mennonite women seeking employment in the city. These women began arriving in 1948, soon after a postwar wave of Mennonite refugees entered Canada. In his opening comments, Andrew recalled that not only did young women find shelter, protection, and companionship at the home, but, also help in finding jobs. Though the city was considered a dangerous and frightening place, families were often in dire straits while getting established in a new land. Just as important was the urge to help their families pay the debts (*Reiseschuld*) resulting from their journey to Canada. In time, a women's choir was formed in the home, with Andrew as the conductor.

Agnes Peters, one of the young women benefitting from the home, remembers four girls sharing two double beds in the lower level of the home. They brought their own food and did their own cooking. Though men were not allowed on the premises, they were somehow drawn to the vicinity. Was it coincidental that Paul Bartel and seven other young men shared the base-

Ruth Derksen Siemens with *Maedchenheime* quilt.

Patch from the quilt.

ment of the house next door? "We were wall-to-wall, with no indoor bathroom," he said. Rita Dahl added to the story by helping him act out dating practices of the time.

Guest speaker, Ruth Derksen Siemens, has brought to life the ministry of the Mennonite Brethren and General Conference churches' *Maedchenheime* (Girls' Homes) in Vancouver in her book "*Daughters of the City*," for which she is to be awarded a book prize on June 6, 2014. In Vancouver, Ruth noted, the need for a home for young women arose as early as the 1920s. Great concern was felt by both families and church leaders around the well-being of these vulnerable women, some as young as 14. Influential church leader, Reverend J. J. Thiessen, expressed his response to the city-ward movement of Mennonites throughout western Canada in these words: "May the hour soon come when none of our people can be found in Vancouver or any other large city. Don't send your daughters to the city unless you are in dire straits." The needs as well as the dangers were real, especially for young, impressionable girls, who knew neither the English language nor the culture of the city. Mennonite girls rarely had difficulty finding employment as domestics, largely because of their stamina, high standards and hard work. Yet, advantage was taken of some girls who were even abused by their employers. To these women, the *Maedchenheime* movement was a true Godsend.

Hedy Kaslowsky Krause, for example, worked for a Jewish family, but had trouble with the appliances, which were completely unfamiliar to her. She looked after children aged 3 months, 6 years, and 10 years. She slept with the baby and then worked all day, cooking, cleaning, doing laundry and more. "I was not tired," she said later. "I was strong. We did not know about breaks."

For parents, it was a great relief to know their daughters were cared for in a God-fearing setting in the context of the "evils" of the city.

On display at the second spring conference session was a quilt fashioned from individual blocks, each with a Bible verse embroidered by one of the women in the girls' home. Some of the verses suggest certain priorities and concerns of the time. "Remember Lot's wife," surely implies a warning around becoming too attached to the city. *"Rufe mich an in der Not'* (Call to me in the day of trouble) is a comforting thought in an unfamiliar, supposedly hostile environment. Some blocks suggest the importance of relationships in the crowded quarters that were shared: *"Eine linde Antwort stillet den Zorn"* (A soft answer turns away wrath); or *"Die Liebe tut dem Naechsten nichts Boeses"* (Love does no wrong to the neighbour).

Commitment to God and the church were high values reflected in some of the quilt block choices: *"Dienet dem Herrn mit Freuden"* (Serve the Lord with gladness); *"Alles was Odem hat Lobe den Herrn"* (All that has life and breath, praise the Lord). Dependence on God was acknowledged: *"Ohne mich koennt ihe nichts tun"* (Without me you can do nothing). And then there were the assurances: *"Wie hat Gott die Leute so lieb"* (How much God loves His people); *"Ist Gott fuer uns, wer mag wider uns sein?"* (If God is for us, who can be against us?). And finally, the comforting words from Matthew 11:28, for those stretched to the limit by long hours and high

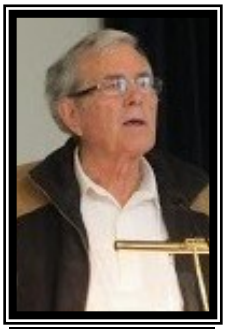
expectations: *"Kommt her zu mir all die ihr muehselig und beladen seid"* (Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden).

One cannot overestimate the importance of these places of refuge and support. As a young woman without family nearby, for instance, my own mother found great solace and friendship in the *Maedchenheim* in Winnipeg in the 1920s. That these homes emerged when finances were so limited in virtually every Mennonite community of western Canada was a significant accomplishment, surely resulting in stronger, more deeply grounded wives, mothers, and faithful church workers.

Each of the Derksen Siemens presentations was followed by a delicious *Faspa* during which good food was accompanied by lively conversation precipitated by the excellent content so ably delivered by Ruth Derksen Siemens in her presentations. ❖

Review of Sean David Patterson's "The Makhnos of Memory: Mennonite and Makhnovist Narratives of the Civil War in Ukraine, 1917 - 1921" (MA. Thesis, University of Manitoba, 2013).

Reviewed by Henry M. Dick, Edmonton



Henry Dick

This thesis examines the conflict between Nestor Makhno's gang of bandits and the Mennonite colonists in southern Ukraine during the years 1918 - 1921. The author posits that Makhno saw the colonists as a "class category," rather than as an ethnic group, and that he was an ideologue gone wrong rather than the "embodiment of evil" as the Mennonites labeled him. The Mennonites saw themselves as innocent victims of a group of lawless, irrational, murderous band of anarchists that took advantage of the loss of central rule and order in the southern Ukraine during and following the civil war and the rise of Bolshevism.

Chapter One defines the author's research methodology. "Deconstruction" is a methodological theory applied to the analysis of written text which says that meanings given to observed events are always "unstable" because the interpretation of these events is influenced by the degree to which peripheral and related events and their broader political and historical contexts are taken into consideration, as well as the bias and emotional connections that the observer may bring to the events, and even the narrative skills of the writer. Using the deconstructionist approach to analysis of selected relevant sources, the author attempts to develop a more realistic understanding of Nestor Makhno, given the political, cultural and ideological realities that lead to and drove the tragic events that befell the Mennonite colonists during the time frame under consideration.

The author travelled to the Ukraine to do some of his research. He soon discovered that the folklore and legend surrounding Nestor Makhno was larger and more complex than the person and that the literature pertaining to the events that define his legacy is characterized by two radically divergent narratives - one written by the Makhno sympathizers and another by the Mennonites. The objective of the research was to free these historic narratives from "the burden of history" so that a "new multi-perspective narrative capable of embracing both groups" might be formed.

The background to the events under review is complex. The 1917 Bolshevik revolution resulted in lawlessness in the Ukraine. Land reforms were introduced and Soviet Councils replaced Mennonite self-government. German occupation in southern Ukraine in early 1918 temporarily restored some semblance of law and order and so the Mennonite colonists welcomed them with open arms. When the Germans extended the invitation to Mennonite men to join their militia some of them did. When the occupation ended in late 1918 there was massive political and social upheaval. Lawlessness encouraged disparate groups of self-proclaimed revolutionist militias to attempt to fill the power vacuum. Nestor Makhno's militia created havoc across the region inhabited by the Mennonites.

Makhno, as a youth, had joined a local anarchist group and after participating in the murder of the local police chief was jailed. In the wake of the Bolshevik revolution he was freed from jail. Thereafter, he provided leadership in organizing the regional peasantry in an ideological thrust towards egalitarian land redistribution.

During the civil war the Makhno forces directed their attention to the anti revolutionist White army, supported by the Mennonite self defense militia (*Selbstschutz*) which had established itself after the German troops withdrew. With the eventual defeat of the White Army, the Makhno militia expanded its influence in the region dominated by the Mennonite

colonies in southern Ukraine. Because of the colonists relative wealth and their earlier support of the White army they became identified as "counter revolutionists" and "class enemies" and became targets for the Makhno revolutionists.

Chapter 2 outlines the Makhnovist narrative. To the landless peasants, Makhno represented a positive example of the use of anarchism for the liberation of the peasantry from oppression. Foreign colonists were exploiting the Russian peasantry for personal benefit. They had been given special privileges, owned many of the richest estates and had the best land. Justice demanded that the kulak estates be divided, giving landless peasants an opportunity to work independently. The socio-economic privileges of the colonists must end and their weapons removed. The Mennonites were simply the target of this broad revolutionary objective.

A pivotal turning point in Mennonite - Makhnovist relations came when the German occupation, in late 1918, cornered and attacked Makhno and his partisans. As the Mennonite colonists were seen to be in league with the occupying forces, the Makhnovist's hunted down and murdered some colonists. In reprisal, the colonists with a detachment of occupation forces, attacked a Makhnovist village, burning more than 600 homes and killing a number of peasants. Thereafter Makhno adopted an eye-for-an-eye policy. He decreed that those who had taken up arms against his militia should be hunted down and shot. The fact that this ideological pursuit of justice ended up with a slide into lawless terror was a result of the chaos caused when the counter revolutionists resisted the establishment of a new egalitarian order.

Chapter 3 examines the Mennonite narrative about Makhno. It is simplistically encapsulated in a guide written for a Mennonite Heritage Cruise in Ukraine and reads as follows: "Makhno attacked Mennonites because they had food, horses, equipment and did not resist - simple as that. Makhno was an anarchist and their philosophy was to scorch the earth and rebuild. There are myths surrounding Makhno, like the one that suggests he worked for a Mennonite family that mistreated him. They are not true. Makhno was a brutal terrorist and bandit who died a fitting death from syphilis in Paris at age 46" (page 70).

Most Mennonites in the Ukraine had limited understanding of the historical / political context of the revolution, the philosophical foundations of the peasant revolt and the factors that contributed to lawlessness and anarchy in the Ukraine during and following the civil war. The Mennonite narrative favors a pacifist perspective.

As an historical backdrop, by the very fact that the Mennonites accepted Catherine the Great's invitation to settle the Ukraine, they were seen to be complicit in Russia's pacification of the Cossacks and expansion into the Ukraine. The Mennonite colonies maintained social insularity and were primarily concerned with preserving their traditional way of life. They had large tracts of land, were granted special privileges and became very prosperous. As they prospered, separation from the world became less of a reality in their business and government contacts, but they nevertheless remained religiously and culturally distinct. Their only contact with the peasantry was in the service economy and they denigrated them by referring to them as Russians, denying them their distinct identity as Ukrainian. Peasants were referred to as dirty, ignorant, violent, thieving, spiritually backward. This was understood as blatant class prejudice and lead to bitterness and hostility among the peasants and a strong anti colonial sentiment.

Makhno's columbarium vault in the Père Lachaise Cemetery, Paris

The Mennonite self-defense brigades that became established after the German occupation departed exacerbated the anti colonist sentiment. When Makhno's militia raided and raped villages, armed defense was supported by many traditionally pacifist Mennonites who felt that it was their responsibility to protect their women from rape, even with arms. The estate owners who had so much to lose became more lax in pacifist stance and condoned and at times participated in armed protection of their properties and forced recovery of stolen properties and goods. This resulted in deep and bitter divisions in the Mennonite community, many feeling that by taking up the sword their historic identity had been compromised. Some landless Mennonite villagers actually felt that the wealthy landowners got what they deserved from Makhno.

Nevertheless, for most Mennonites the view was that Makhno embodied a satanic philosophy of unrestrained self indulgence and that they were innocent victims.

Chapter 4 examines the Eichenfeld massacre and draws inferences that address several core questions related to the Makhno - Mennonite conflict. The Makhno narrative suggests that the Mennonites were targeted as members of a class (kulaks) rather than as an ethnic group. Their relative wealth and defense of their way of life identified them with the counter revolutionists. To determine the answer to the question of who was responsible for the raids and the massacres, the many complex contributing factors need to be considered.

1. Mennonite colonists had actively participated with German occupation forces in 1918 in raids against Makhnovist and peasant villages to retrieve stolen land and property.

2. Eichenfeld had a self-defense unit that had participated in raids against the Makhnovist villagers. Also, colonists had not complied with Red army requests to give up their arms and had, on several occasions, repelled soviet actions against their village.

3. Makhno's army grew to more than 100,000 with consequent breakdown of central command, discipline and control. Many of the new recruits were prisoners released from jails, Red army personnel left behind enemy lines and local peasants; a large cadre of disparate often drunken groups.

4. Makhno considered the Mennonite self-defense units to be White army collaborators and counterrevolutionaries.

5.The historical record suggests that the local peasantry may have played a greater role than the Makhnovist forces in the Eichenfeld massacre and the looting that followed.

The author therefore concludes that:

a. the massacres and anarchist raids were not directed at Mennonites as an ethnic group, but rather as members of a larger class of anti revolutionary kulaks.

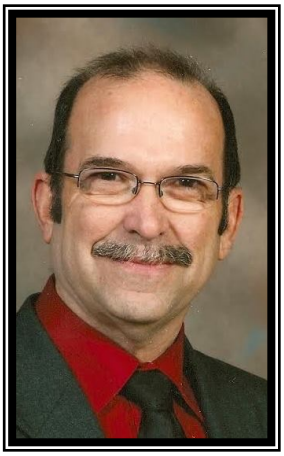
b. Makhno may not have been the primary instigator of much of his bands anarchic activity as the local peasantry often took the initiative in venting their anger by attacking the colonist kulaks and traitors. As lawlessness became entrenched in the region the raids escalated, Makhno lost control of his militia and what began as a pursuit of justice turned into a war of vengeance. Nestor Makhno himself became a victim of events and got caught in the vortex that ended in terrorism, murder and plunder. This also happened to members of the self-defense units when they took revenge on Makhnovist troops and murdered peasant villagers, burning their homes in vengeance for stealing their land and property.

c. the Mennonites and Makhnovist's saw each other as "the other." Neither narrative is objective. A reexamination of critical selected source materials exposes a more complex relationship in which each side bears responsibility for the terrorism which evolved. Both groups were motivated by a struggle for justice that ultimately gave way to vengeance. The predominant Mennonite narrative that they were innocent victims and martyrs is no more real than their image of Makhno as the embodiment of evil.

A bibliography and extensive endnotes are provided in the thesis. ❖

From Indiana to Alberta: The Wanderings of a Mennonite Pastor

by Ed Kaufman



Ed Kaufman

How does a Mennonite pastor from the US, with Amish and Amish Mennonite ancestors, end up pastoring a congregation of Russian and Prussian Mennonites in Calgary, Alberta?

It's a question I have been asked numerous times. Of course the short answer is that one goes where you feel God is calling you, but there are a lot of factors that go into that call.

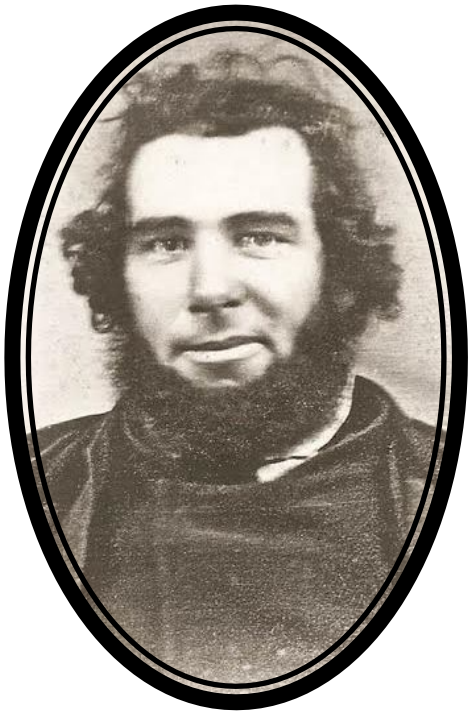
A number of years ago at the Mennonite Church Canada Assembly in Vancouver, Tom Yoder-Neufeld spoke of the Bible as the book that tells us who we are, that gives us an identity. And the Scriptures often speak of the need to continue telling our stories as a way to affirm our faith in the God who calls us, and walks with us through our history. When the children of Israel entered the promised land, they were told to set up twelve stones to remind them of their journey, and to serve as prompters for telling the story to their children. Deuteronomy 26: 4-10 instructs the Israelites to recite their sacred history as they bring their offerings.

Our story adds on to the sacred story and gives us our identity as well, so here is a bit of mine. My ancestors were Swiss Anabaptists who left Canton Berne for safer

havens in Alsace, in the region of Montbeliard. While there, they became followers of Jacob Ammon and even signed some of the letters which created the split between the Amish and Swiss Anabaptists. Eventually, Isaac Kauffman left Europe in 1737 and came to the promised land of William Penn. He and his family were among the first Amish immigrants to the New World.

From there my ancestors scattered westward, to Somerset County in Western Pennsylvania, to Ohio and Indiana. At this point I have relatives scattered in numerous countries around the globe. I discovered that my son, although he didn't know it at the time, met distant relatives at a small Beechy Amish settlement in Costa Rica when he was there with a Goshen College group.

The earliest ancestor that I have a picture of is Christian Mast who was born in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania in 1821 and died in Lagrange County, Indiana in 1874. I own a large blanket chest with his name inscribed on the back. Parts of my family moved from Amish to Amish-Mennonite to Mennonite, while others remained within the Old Order Amish. My father's parents left the Old Order when he was a young boy, while my mother's line had been Mennonite for some time.



Christian Mast (1821-74)

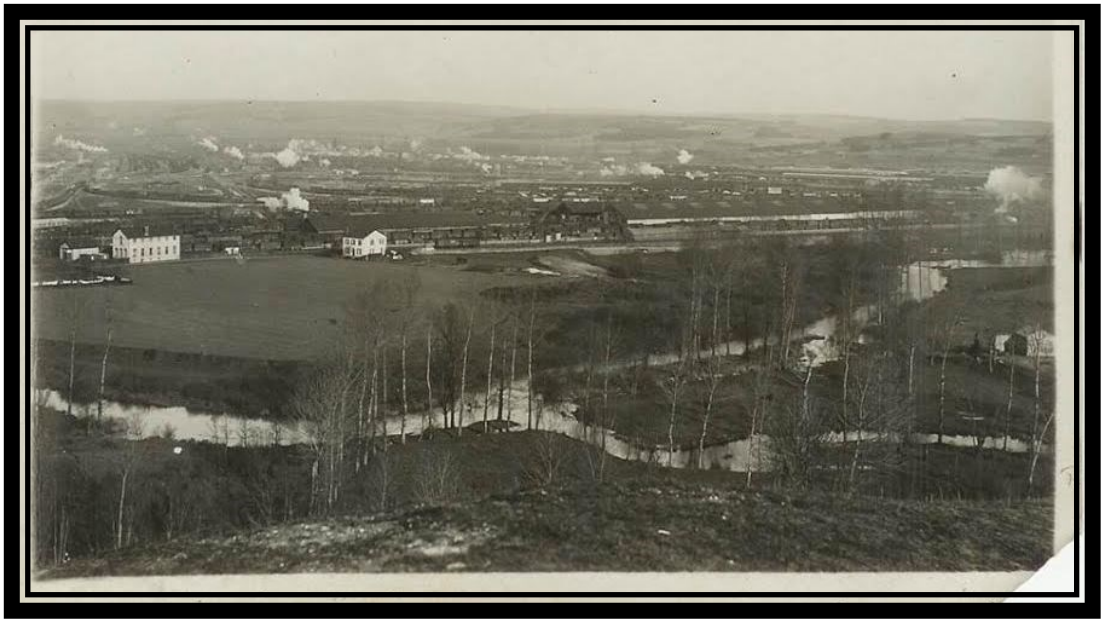
Tracking down family history always reveals some interesting stories, and the search can be interesting in and of itself. A number of years ago, while traveling in the US Southwest, I had opportunity to visit the La Junta, Colorado area where my maternal grandmother's family had homesteaded in 1907. While they lived there only three years until my great-grandfather's death, I have photographs, diaries and receipts from their time there. After several dead-ends, I was finally directed to an elderly gentleman, in his 90s, who recalled the family, was able to point out on a map where the homestead had been – no buildings remain – and tell me stories about the pictures I had.

In 2006 I was able to visit the small village of Is-sur-Tille in France where my maternal grandfather was stationed at a large supply depot as part of the Corps of Engineers during WWI. Again maps, blueprints and photos were part of the family collection I inherited when my grandparents died, and I had taken a few pieces with me. While only one large fireplace remains of the camp, the director of the Tourist Information Centre in town showed me some film footage taken of the camp by the US Army in 1917 and was generous enough to trade copies of my material for a copy of the film.

Part of my family story, which is not that unusual, is that both my

Family Homestead at La Junta, Colorado (ca 1907)

mother and father were Kauffmans. Although my mother spelled her name with only one "f," they were both descendants of immigrant Isaac and were fourth cousins. This meant we had to find others ways of distinguishing between my grandparents, since they were both Grandpa Kauffmans.



US Army Corps of Engineers Supply Depot WWI, Is-sur-Tille, France

My family has had an Alberta connection since 1967 when my older brother, Glen and his wife, Mary Ann, moved to Marlboro, AB as part of the Voluntary Service unit there. As seems to happen often, when their term of service was over, they decided to stay, although they moved to the bigger town of Edson where they currently live. My family made our first trip to visit them a year or two later, my first visit to Alberta. Then in 1972 my new bride and I made our way to Alberta to visit them on our honeymoon – in March!

In 1976 when I graduated from Goshen Biblical Seminary (now Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary), I accepted a call to the Shantz Mennonite Church in Ontario. Since I had a brother living in Canada, it didn't seem that unusual, although I soon learned that Alberta and Ontario were quite different places, especially in the 1970s. From there we returned to Goshen, Indiana for a period of time before moving to Beatrice, Nebraska where I learned to know the story of the Prussian Mennonites who came to Nebraska in the 1870s, as well as descendants of the Klaus Epp trek.

I then spent 9 years as a Conference Minister in the Central Plains Mennonite Conference where I learned to know congregations of Swiss, Low German and Hutterite background in South Dakota and Minnesota, as well as Mennonites of Cheyenne, Hmong, Lao, and Hispanic backgrounds. They taught me not to speak of "ethnic Mennonites." In my last years there I also learned to know persons new to the Mennonite family who were eager to connect with a history, particularly of a people who embraced a peace theology.

And so, after the wanderings of my ancestors and my own wanderings, it was not hard to consider a call to Alberta. And imagine my surprise to learn that the Prussian Mennonites of First Mennonite in Calgary came from the same region, and even villages, as the people in Beatrice, Nebraska!

Keeping our history alive, whether family or congregational, is important as we tell our stories. Not because our story is better than any other story, but because our stories tell us something of who we are and give us an identity, whether we consider that history to be positive or negative. I have served in congregations that try to cover over, or forget the negative stories of their history, but those are also part of our identity. The descendants of Klaus Epp are only recently discovering things about the Trek that are positive, but much of that story had been lost, or hidden, because of the shame associated with it in the past.

In Joshua 24, Joshua recalls the history of God's action among them to remind people of their story and ask them to choose whether they will continue to follow this God. We connect to our history, not to replay the past, or with a desire to return to the "Good Old Days", but rather to see God at work throughout history, and once again choose to follow. ❖

Did you know an important Alberta Mennonite leader, pastor, missionary, educator or entrepreneur? If so, then now is the time to write his or her biography and include it in GAMEO. For more information, contact Wes Berg (GAMEO rep.) at: wberg@ualberta.ca

Review of Jacob A. Neufeld's, *Path of Thorns. Soviet Mennonite Life under Communist and Nazi Rule*, Harvey L. Dyck, ed., transl., analysis and introduction, and Sarah Dyck, transl. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014. Pp. X, 444.

John B. Toews

Reviewed by John B. Toews, Professor Emeritus of European History, University of Calgary

Path of Thorns brings new life and vibrancy to Jacob A. Neufeld's largely forgotten German memoir, *Tiefenwege*, first published in 1957, as well as previously unpublished material. I know of no other surviving narrative, either in scope or depth, that better articulates the Russian Mennonite experience between 1917 and 1948. The Civil War, attempts at reconstruction, the drastic shifts under Stalin's First Five Year Plan, the terrors of the 1930s – Neufeld documents one man's survival journey. He personifies the twenty percent of Mennonite family heads who survived imprisonments, labour camps and outright executions. In addition, he joined the German and Mennonite colonists in the so-called "Great Trek" from Ukraine to Germany beginning in the fall of 1943. Co-translator, Professor Harvey Dyck, is to be congratulated for his informative and incisive introduction that so aptly "sets the stage" for a better understanding of the memoir. In doing so, he also provides the reader with a substantial bibliographic resource.

As a translation, the book very successfully transitions the agonies of a Germanic/Mennonite soul into an idiomatic English that will deeply resonate with the reader. It is a masterful translation that at times appears to elucidate the text more clearly and graphically than its original counterpart. While not distorting the German text, it frequently captures its essence and imagery more succinctly.

The reader might be struck by Neufeld's pro-German sympathies. The Great Trek, via Warthegau in Poland, eventually brought Neufeld and his co-religionists into a rapidly collapsing Germany and subsequently to Germany's post-war disasters. Readers, accustomed to western attitudes towards a defeated enemy capable of great brutality, may be taken aback by Neufeld's deep empathy for things German. From his perspective, the German Wehrmacht "rescued us from our oppressors" (p. 369) when they occupied Ukraine. Later, in Germany, people, amid great deprivation, shared their rations, offered sympathy and housed themselves. As a refugee who had found refuge, Neufeld writes "our deep sympathy for the Germans is probably understandable… yet we had never imagined that judgment [upon them] would be so pitiless" (p. 339). He was a man of two worlds. His homeland had rejected him; Germany had given him shelter and shown him kindness. Whereas many were victims of Nazi atrocities, he experienced kindness at the hands of ordinary Germans. For him there was another side to the story.

Periodically, Neufeld pauses in his memoir and struggles to make sense of his experiences. A deeply pious Mennonite Christian, he seeks to come to terms with the countless assaults on his innermost being. For him, Stalinism had battered traditional Mennonite identity in every possible way. During the Great Trek westward beginning in the fall of 1943, he observed how quickly the human being could change "under conditions of threat, affliction and severe poverty" (p. 285) yet amid all the failings there were the "matchless deeds of our women… not one of them collapsed." (p. 287). Throughout the narrative Neufeld, amid calamitous situations, maintains a "Kingdom of God" perspective. In circumstances designed to generate despair and rebellion, he clings to the notion that God is in charge (pp. 370-372). Throughout the memoir, Neufeld provides a clear personal perspective on who he is and the world view he holds. Most moving for me was the letter he addressed to his wife, Lene, in September, 1947, while still in the Gronau, Westphalia transit camp.

Path of Thorns provides a key contribution to the telling of an incredible story. In its scope, depth and presentation, no other book better articulates the bitter Mennonite experience under Stalinist rule. ❖