



The MHSA Chronicle

Official Publication of the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta

Volume XXVIII Number 1

March 2025

Mayfair Bethel (Hoffnungsfelder) Mennonite Church: a history and memoir

By Dave Toews

Before I begin, I would like to make two points.

First, as I grew up, the name of the church was and still is commonly referred to as Mayfair Mennonite Church. But it is more complicated than that, as you can see from the title of this piece. In 1933, the Mayfair group decided to build a church and organized inde-



Mayfair Mennonite Church with new shingles and siding, 2018

(See *Mayfair* on page 8)

An Anabaptist Anglican Journey

By Tim Chesterton

On December 31, 2023, I retired after forty-five years of full-time ministry as an Anglican minister. The following Sunday, my wife Marci and I began attending Lendrum Mennonite Church. This was no surprise to most of our Anglican friends, who had long been aware of our interest in Anabaptist Christianity, but



St. Barnabas' Church, Leicester, England, where Tim was baptised as a baby Dec. 28, 1958.

I've noticed that many of our new friends at Lendrum seem to find it fascinating! Dave Toews has asked me to write a few words about our journey for the Chronicle of the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta, and I'm happy to accept his invitation

I was born in Leicester, an industrial city in the centre of England, and was baptised at the age of six weeks in St. Barnabas church, where my parents attended services every week. When I was a child, my dad worked as a commercial artist, but when I was about five years old, he went off to theological college, and a couple of years later, he was ordained as a deacon and then a priest in the Church of England. At that time, I became a 'P.K.'—a preacher's kid!



Tim Chesterton

(See *Journey* on page 4)

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MENNONITE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF ALBERTA

invites you to their Spring Conference & AGM:

Where the Cottonwoods Grow

Fri May 9, Cardel Theatre, Calgary

Celebrating 500 of Anabaptism

Sat May 10, Trinity MC, De Winton, AB

See back page for more details

2025 Virtual AGM

April 15, 2025 - more details to follow by email

Editorial Reflections

By Dave Toews

Always a conundrum, what to write about in the editorial?

There are a lot of things I could write about. There is much happening. Or I could just ramble on.

As an editor, I look for editorial material to write about, I tear out pages from various publications on various topics to put in my file that might trigger some great inspirational writing. All to no avail.

What do I have in my file right now? *My Opinion on Opinions*: The author talks about people who have opinions, naturally. If we have six opinions, we are kind of normal. If we have eight opinions, we are "opinionated." And if we keep pushing our opinions on people, we can become arrogant and obnox-



Dave Toews

ious. *Life doesn't start when we are prepared for it, it's always going on.* **Life Happens even before we are ready.** This one sentence prevented me from procrastinating. Ha! Is this true in my life? I tend to write about events of my childhood, now our sons are grown, and our grandchildren are finishing high school and entering university. Oh, my goodness, how time flies! I tried not to use any of the well-worn common cliches, but this one just popped out. There is more material in my file, but I will leave that alone for now.

In the real MHSA world, we are busy preparing for the Annual General Meeting, reports to write and collate. The Spring Conference to put together: the showing of *Where the Cottonwoods Grow* and the celebration of *Anabaptism 500*. More details elsewhere in this publication.

In this issue you can read about Katie Harder and Dave Neufeldt's attendance at the MHSC conference, Tim Chesterton's Anabaptist Anglican Journey, Abe Janzen's work with the Canadian Foodgrains Bank and how Frank Martens' relatives chose to stay behind in Russia.

As always, I would like to thank all the authors and contributors to

this issue. Your articles are always appreciated. It is a pleasure to work with you. The MHSA welcomes your feedback, emails, letters to the editor, and articles. Contact Dave Toews at dmttoews@gmail.com or 780-218-7411 cell with any questions, suggestions or comments. ❖

Chairman's Corner

By Katie Harder

Sentiments on MHSC 2025 Board Sessions

"True evangelical faith cannot lie sleeping, for it clothes the naked, it comforts the sorrowful, it gives to the hungry food, and it shelters the destitute. It cares for the blind and the lame, the widow and orphan child, that's true evangelical faith. It binds up the wounded man and offers a gentle hand. It must become everything to all men. Abundantly we have received and gratefully we will respond with true evangelical faith. So overcome evil with good and return someone's hatred with love." This is an anthem by composer Larry Nickel based on the quote by Menno Simons. (1496-1561)

Menno Simons, a former Catholic priest from the Netherlands, converted to Anabaptism around 1536. His leadership and writings helped to organize and unify scattered Anabaptist groups, which came to be known as Mennonites. Among other things, Menno Simons taught the Mennonites to value simplicity, avoid pride, and practice a believer's baptism and a belief

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Katie Harder

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in pacifism. The region in which the Anabaptist movement started was one where church and state were firmly linked; everyone was expected to give primary allegiance to the government. The Anabaptist interpretation of scripture put them at odds with the official state church and local government control, and as a result, they were heavily persecuted.

This past January, board member David Neufeldt and I, Katie Harder, were privileged to travel to Kitchener/Waterloo, ON, to participate in the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada 2025 Annual Board Meetings/AGM. The meetings were held at Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, ON. During our time at Waterloo, we not only attended meetings but also attended a 500th Anabaptist Anniversary Commemoration Service at the Waterloo-Kitchener United Mennonite Church, a bus tour of the “Ontario Mennonites Then and Now”, attended a lecture by Karl Koop, professor at Canadian Mennonite University, entitled “Anabaptist Beginnings and the

Stories We Tell”, visited the Brubacher House Museum on the grounds of the University of Waterloo, plus spent a very informative morning at the Mennonite Archives of Ontario. Participating in the board and committee reports was informative and interesting, but visiting the various other venues in the area added another dimension to the meetings. I felt grateful and honoured that I could participate in this event; thank you for giving me this opportunity.

The Mennonite Historical Society of Canada comprises the six provinces where today’s Mennonites reside: BC, AB, SK, MB, ON, and Que. It also consists of nine various committees, which also send representatives to this gathering. Regarding involvement in the committees, MHSA participates in the Archives Committee, with David Neufeldt as the AB representative, and on occasion, we send articles to GAMEO (Global Anabaptist Mennonite

Encyclopedia

Online) regarding histories of Anabaptist-related congregations, conferences, significant individuals, as well as historical and theological topics.

This organization falls under the umbrella of the Mennonite World Conference. Our MHSA office also contributes to the

MAID program (Mennonite Archival Image Database). This is a repository of photographs and archival records that illustrate global Mennonites at life-work, play, marriage, and congregational worship.

The highlight of the Board and AGM was the reports from the provincial societies. I noted that while Alberta is the smallest organization in numbers, our annual spring and fall conferences are a valued component of our organization, which generated a lot of interest and drew attention from the MHSC vice-chair, who is also the archivist-Librarian at the Mennonite Archives of ON and the Conrad Grebel University, which I found very rewarding. AB and SK are the only two societies outside of Quebec that are without paid staff.

Many meaningful conversations and discussions were held outside of the meetings, and this mostly happened during mealtimes in the dining room. Another enjoyable and meaningful event was the ethnic supper hosted at the First Hmong Mennonite Church in Kitchener. Their pastor shared their history. Many Hmong refugees immigrated to Canada in 1979 and were sponsored by Mennonite churches in ON. This past connection of sponsorship by the Mennonites, together with the peace principle, encouraged them to

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MHSC meeting participants: Seated, the executive Lauren Harder-Gissing, Jeremy Wiebe, Linda Klassen, Conrad Stoesz. Standing: Dave Neufeldt 5th from left, Katie Harder 7th from left.



Froschauer German Bible, published in 1531, in Zurich, Switzerland. Property of the Mennonite Archives of Ontario, at Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, ON

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join the Mennonites. It was refreshing to hear about their excitement about having a church facility they can call their own and how thrilled they are about being part of the larger Mennonite Church. In an era when church attendance at many of our established Mennonite congregations is shrinking, the Hmong Church is growing in numbers, and people are very thankful to God for their experience in the Mennonite faith and church. They very much value the theological traditions of the Anabaptist faith.

Sad to say, but our Mennonite cultural distinctiveness is slowly disappearing. Will future generations value their heritage? For generations, a large percentage of those born into Mennonite families stayed in the fold. This has all changed as Mennonites have assimilated. The boundaries separating Mennonites from the outside have become indistinguishable. Due to smaller families and young people leaving the church not to return, the overall number of church members is shrinking, and those who remain tend to be older. Is there a future for the Mennonite tradition? Will future generations value the archives? Your donation to MHSA helps to preserve our Mennonite stories and heritage for future generations. ❖

(Journey from page 1)

My brother and I were taken to church every week. As we got older, we went to Sunday School and sang in the choir, and at home, we had bedtime prayers and readings from Bible storybooks. I never rebelled against church or religion, but in those early days, I also never felt very strongly about it. I had an *institutional* relationship with the organised church, but I had no sense of the *personal* presence of God in my life.

In the 1960s and 1970s the charismatic movement was beginning to make itself felt in the Church of England. My dad, who had been raised and nurtured in the low-church evangelical tradition in Anglicanism, had a transformational experience of the Holy Spirit at a Pentecostal prayer group in the early 1970s.

Sometime later, with the help of a couple of books he lent me and a prompt from him to ‘give my life to Christ,’ I had my own quiet conversion experience, and for the first time in my life, faith became personal for me. My early years of Christian nurture were in the context of the charismatic movement, which, I later

realised, had many things in common with Anabaptism—an emphasis on every-member ministry, a love for the simple life, an informal approach to hierarchy, an awareness of the importance of discipleship—and also, the popularity of *The More with Less Cookbook*, *Living More with Less*, and (a little later) the writings of Ron Sider! All these things were very formative for me.

In late 1975, our family moved from England to western Canada, and a few months later, I found myself in Toronto at the training college of the Church Army in Canada—a lay evangelistic association within the Anglican Church, somewhat similar to the Salvation Army, but not identical. It was strongly evangelical, and many of its members had also been influenced by the charismatic movement, so I felt right at home. The training program lasted two years, after which I expected to be posted to one of the parachurch ministries run by the Church Army. Instead, to my surprise, I found myself working as a full-time lay minister in a parish situation (in those days, this was not uncommon, as we Church Army officers were cheaper than ordained clergy, and bishops who were short of money didn’t mind taking advantage of the fact!). I served for a year in a rural Ontario parish, where I met Marci, and a week or two after our wedding, we moved to rural Saskatchewan, where we spent the first five years of our married life.

It was in Saskatchewan that we first encountered Mennonites. The little community of Arborfield, where we lived, was a few miles south of Carrot River, where there were at least two different Mennonite churches (General Conference and Mennonite Brethren),

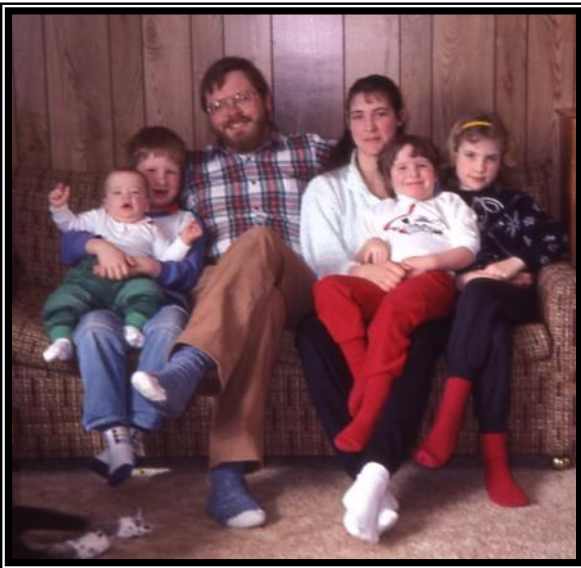
(See Journey on page 5)



Church Army classes 1978-79, Toronto, ON, May 1978. Tim is #4 in the back row.

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along with some more traditional Mennonite communities further to the northeast. One of my responsibilities as assistant minister in my new parish was to run summer Vacation Bible Clubs in First Nations communities nearby (our parish included two First Nations reserves), and the tradition had been to enlist the help of student volunteers from Rosthern Junior College. So, contact was made, and conversations took place. Also, it was while we were in Arborfield that I first ran across the novels of Rudy Wiebe, which made a strong impression on me.



Chesterton family in Ulukhaktok, Northwest Territories, 1989.

Two of our children were born in Saskatchewan, and then at the end of August 1984, we were off to the Diocese of the Arctic, where we spent the next seven years: four of them in Aklavik in the Mackenzie Delta, and then three years in what was then called Holman (now Ulukhaktok) in the central Arctic. In Arborfield, I had been working alongside an ordained priest; in Aklavik and Holman, I was a lay

minister in charge of the parishes, which meant in our Anglican tradition that we had to bring in a priest sometimes to do sacramental ministry (baptisms and Holy Communion services). This aspect of Anglicanism was something I never really bought into personally—I was obedient to it, but I never fully believed in the priesthood as most of my colleagues did. In Ulukhaktok, we had the good fortune to become friends with Gordon Peters and Geraldine Balzer, who were members of Nutana Park Mennonite Church in Saska-



Tim & Marci Chesterton with the Rev. Ken Burningham, on Tim's beginning work in the parish of Arborfield, Red Earth, and Shoal Lake, SK, Oct 1979.

toon; at the time, Geraldine was teaching at the school, and Gordon was managing the local Co-op. I actually officiated at a Mennonite baby dedication for their oldest daughter (Geraldine's mom came up from Saskatoon to make sure I did it right!)—again, an unusual experience for an Anglican minister! And by coincidence, Geraldine Balzer and Dave Toews grew up attending the same small country church at Mayfair, Saskatchewan.

Our seven years in the Arctic, following on from five years in Saskatchewan, added up to twelve years working amongst Indigenous people, for the last seven of which we were residents in their communities. This was a privilege and also a huge learning experience. There were, of course, enormous social problems—many of them the legacy of colonialism and the residential school disaster—but we also encountered a warmth and a sense of belonging and a very different way of looking at the world. In Ulukhaktok, I was able to learn some of the Inuinnaqtun language, which I had to use in leading services and preaching, as well as daily conversation with elders whose English was very limited. Also, while we were in the north, we had two more children, and with that, our family was complete.

In my final year in Ulukhaktok, I was ordained, so my years in the Church Army (which in those days was an exclusively lay organisation) came to an end, and the following summer, we moved down to northern Alberta to the Peace River country, where I became the rector of the three Anglican churches in Valleyview, Fox Creek, and Goodwin. Sundays were busy (two and sometimes three services), and my weeks involved a lot of driving on lonely roads between farms and communities.

We lived in Valleyview for eight and a half years. During that time, I gradually realised that I had some gifts in the area of evangelism and outreach that I could offer the church as a whole. I spent the last three and a half years working one-quarter time as a mission and growth resource person for our Diocese of Athabasca, so I got to travel and lead workshops in

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almost every Anglican church in the northern part of Alberta. One of those workshops was the excellent Stephen Ministries 'Caring Evangelism' course, which became very popular and influential in the Athabasca diocese.

By the end of our time in Valleyview we realised our children needed to be closer to post-secondary education, so we prayed and started exploring alternatives, and at the end of January 2000, we moved to Edmonton where I became the rector of St. Margaret's Anglican Church on Ellerslie Road. Little did I know that this would be my last parish appointment and that I would end up staying for nearly twenty-four years! At the time, we had assumed that we would be in the city until the kids were done with post-secondary education, at which point I would move back into rural ministry. However, to our surprise, we settled down permanently in Edmonton, I made some deep friendships in the folk music community, our kids put down roots, our grandchildren were born, and we're still here twenty-five years later!

It was sometime in 2005 or 2006 that I accidentally discovered the website of the Anabaptist Network in the UK. I have no recollection of what I was actually looking for on the Internet that day, but I ended up spending several hours browsing through their resource material about historic and contemporary Anabaptism (in Europe, North America, and England). The Anabaptist Network was largely the result of the ministries of Alan and Eleanor Kreider, who are known to many in Alberta, and it had spread across the UK and Ireland. As I read about Anabaptist convictions and practices, I had a curious sense of homecoming, and I suddenly realised it was reminding me strongly of those early days in the 1970s in the charismatic movement in the Church of England. In more recent years we had all been focussing more strongly on discipleship, but our understanding of that word had been somewhat nebulous. Now, in Anabaptism, I was discovering a more concrete focus centred on the actual teaching of Jesus in the gospels, and especially the Sermon on the Mount. I found this enormously attractive.



Tim on a return visit to Ulukhaktok, Northwest Territories, summer 1992, with lay readers Sam Oliktoak and Esau Elgayak.

I began to reach out to Mennonites in Edmonton, mainly in Mennonite Church Alberta congregations. MCA conference minister Jim Shantz, pastors Tim and Donita Wiebe-Neufeld, along with Tim's parents Hugo and Doreen Neufeld in Calgary, were especially helpful to Marci and me. Jim invited us to several MCA events, and he and Tim gave me some excellent book recommendations. A year or two later, for the first and only time in my ministry, I was able to go on a three-month sabbatical leave, which I spent in the UK connecting with the Anabaptist Network. It might seem strange that I should choose to connect with a network in England rather than with Mennonite congregations and educational institutions in Canada, but at the time, I was interested to find out if there was a generic form of Anabaptism that wasn't specifically tied to Mennonite history and ethnicity (tentative answer: maybe, but you can't divorce conviction from history and community!).

For a while, I toyed with the idea of leaving the Anglican church and becoming a Mennonite pastor, but for various reasons, this did not work out. Perhaps the strong-



Sunday morning congregation St. Margaret's Anglican Church, Edmonton, 2018.

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est factor in this was the deep love we felt for the congregation of St. Margaret's, the people who had become our spiritual family. I was also aware of a growing sense of opportunity for ministry outside the boundaries of the church in the folk music community in Edmonton. Additionally, I was asked by the bishop to set up a lay evangelism training program for the Diocese of Edmonton, and I continued to run that program up to and after my retirement.

Ah, yes—the R-word! My rather unusual beginnings in the Church Army had meant a very young start for me in ministry, and I actually completed forty years as a member of the Anglican Church of Canada pension plan in November 2018. However, I was only sixty at the time, so I decided to keep working until my sixty-fifth birthday in November 2023. Little did I know when I made that decision that Covid-19 was on the horizon. Of course, the years 2020-2023 were fraught with difficulty as we went through shutdowns, learned to run the online church, and tried to care for people going through unprecedented stress, fear, and desperation. In addition to my parish responsibilities, I continued to train lay evangelists (on Zoom!) and was also a regional dean, which meant I had pastoral responsibilities for fellow clergy in eleven other parishes.

Gradually, COVID-19 began to recede, and we were able to resume in-person ministries. St. Margaret's was changing; a new African population in that part of the city was making its presence felt, and I knew it was time to step back and let someone younger and more energetic (and less exhausted!) take

the church forward in the next stage of its spiritual journey. So, at the beginning of 2023, I officially announced to the congregation that this would be my final year. My sixty-fifth birthday was in November, but I agreed to stay to the end of the year so I could have one final Christmas as rector of the parish (my love of Christmas was well-known in the St. Margaret's community!).

So, where would we go to church in retirement? Obviously, I needed to leave St. Margaret's to make room for the next rector and give him or her space to lead the church in different directions. The usual thing would be for a retired priest to choose a different Anglican church in the city, settle down there, and be licensed by the bishop as an 'honorary assistant,' able to help out with sacramental and other ministries and also do supply duty in other churches as needed.

But I didn't feel a pull toward this sort of retirement. I was very tired after forty-five years of full-time ministry, and especially the years of Covid-19. Also, Marci and I rarely had the opportunity to sit together in church (Anglican clergy are expected to be robed and up front leading the service every week!). And I was also keenly aware that retirement gave me the opportunity to do Christianity in a different way. Why would I retire and just keep right on doing what I was already doing? And what about that interest in Anabaptism, which had never gone away?

Full disclosure: We had attended Lendrum on and off for about ten years, probably about once a year. Our contact with the church was through Dave Hubert, whom I had met when we were both members of the Edmonton Ecumenical Peace Network. Dave and I got on very well with each other, so we tried Lendrum, decided we liked it, and made it an annual 'holiday' destination when we were doing 'stay-cations' in Edmonton.

We thought about it, talked about it, and prayed about it—but not for too long, as we both felt something drawing us to Lendrum. I had a coffee and conversation with Pastor Sherri, and she readily understood that at first, we just wanted to be ordinary folks sitting in the pews. Ministry opportunities might come later, but at the beginning, I just needed a rest! So, we began at Lendrum in January 2024, and it has quickly become 'home' to us.

I am still licensed as a priest of the Anglican Diocese of Edmonton; I am still helping train lay evangelists, I do some clergy mentoring, and this year I am offering weekend 'Christian Basics' workshops in parishes throughout the diocese. But on a weekly basis, Marci and I are happy to be worshipping and serving as part of this Anabaptist congregation, where the understanding of discipleship and mission is very, very close to our own. I have always believed in every-member ministry, and it does my heart good to see so many people stepping up week by week to lead services, lead singing and play music, preach and lead children's times, and minister in so many other ways. Marci has joined the Missions and Services commission (which is something she's always had an interest in), we've helped to start a daytime midweek



Tim Chesterton preaching at Lendrum Mennonite Church, Edmonton, Dec 29, 2024.

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Bible Study group, I've preached and led services a couple of times and joined one of the music teams. It's so much fun being able to play guitar regularly in church!

As I write this article, we have just passed the five-hundredth birthday of the worldwide Anabaptist movement. It felt very right to us to be joining in the celebrations at Lendrum (with the addition of our neighbours from First Mennonite Church) on January 19, and even though we were not born into the Anabaptist family, we feel very much that the Anabaptist family has adopted us! We thank God for this rather unusual spiritual journey we've been in, and we look forward to the new surprises God will undoubtedly send our way in the days to come. ❖

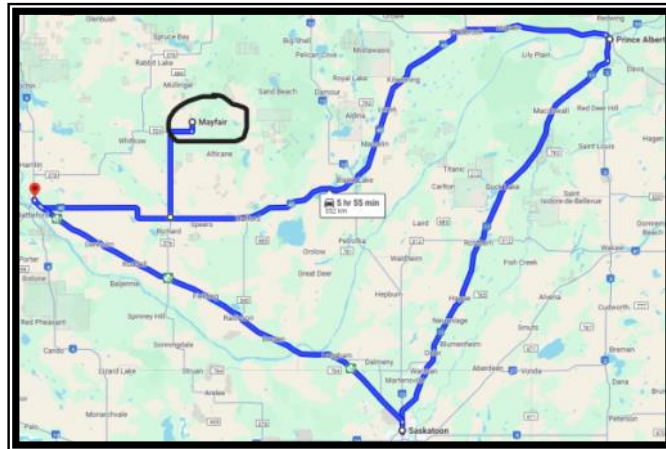
Tim Chesterton was an Anglican minister from 1978-2023, serving in Ontario, Saskatchewan, the Northwest Territories, northern Alberta, and Edmonton. Since his retirement, he and his wife Marci have been worshipping with the congregation of Lendrum Mennonite Church in Edmonton. Tim and Marci enjoy hiking, birding, music and books, and spending time with their children, their grandchildren, and their friends.

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pendently, as the Mayfair Bethel Mennonite Church. In 1935, the name of the cluster of the three churches, Mayfair, Rabbit Lake and Glenbush, was changed from Rabbit Lake Mennonite Church to *Hoffnungsfelder Gemeinde* (Fields of Hope Congregation). Mayfair rejoined this group in June 1940.

Second, where is Mayfair? When I tell people I am from Mayfair, Saskatchewan, I am always met with a quizzical look and query, "Where is Mayfair?" The enclosed map shows that Mayfair is at the top end of the up-right stem anchored on the upside-down triangle of North Battleford, Prince Albert, and Saskatoon. The other two communities, Rabbit Lake and Glenbush, referred to in this article, are north and somewhat west of Mayfair.

My father, Peter J Toews, arrived at Mayfair from Osterwick, Russia via Osler, Saskatchewan, in May 1927 with his mother, Maria (Braun) Toews, and siblings Jacob, Kate, and Henry. They joined his brother John J Toews on the land John had earlier acquired for the family. Father Peter married my mother, Helen Kroeger, in November 1942, and the farming operation was later split between the two brothers' families.



Location of Mayfair

Beginning, Growth and Programs

In June 1928, the first brotherhood meeting was held at Rabbit Lake to organize the people from Glenbush (10), Rabbit Lake (36), Mullingar (11) and Mayfair (19) as the Rabbit Lake Mennonite Church Congregation. Name changes would come later. Even before the Mayfair church was built, the local congregation started Sunday school and worship services in people's homes. Peter Durksen held German School every Saturday. 1929 also saw the first wedding in the newly formed congregation, and the community was proud, for the first marriage was the promise of inward expansion. The group held regular *Jugendverein* (youth activities). With this, they hoped to establish a closer communion with God, the people and especially the youth. That year also marked the first baptism in the congregation, and the membership grew.

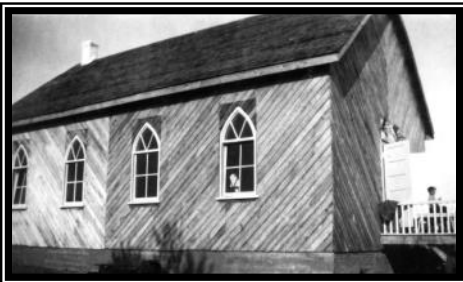
Building a Church

The congregation met in private homes, and since they had no minister, sermons were read, and a layman offered a prayer. In 1931, a women's mission society was organized, and its first sale netted \$40. This was the beginning of the building fund, of which \$35 was used to buy two acres from the Canadian Pacific Railway a half mile west of Mayfair. The settlers contributed their possessions to public auctions to replenish and increase the funds. Nickolai Friesen and Peter Durksen donated heifers, Isaac Voth a pig, John Toews a pail of dried fruit and Peter Stobbe an overcoat. The auction netted \$60, and the decision was made to erect a 26 x 40 build-

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ing with 12 ft walls. Construction began in March 1934; poplar lumber was available for \$8 per 1000 board feet, and shingles were purchased on credit from the lumber yard. Henry Rempel was the lead carpenter, and Peter Balzer was responsible for buying the material. Cabinet maker Henry Hiebert completed the finishing work around the windows, and a man was hired to build a chimney. The church was constructed sturdily, and without the aid of engineers, they created a building with acoustics that only a few auditoriums could match. Financing the building was a problem but was "built on faith and hope." The membership increased from 29 to 45 in the year after construction began. In 1946, a basement was constructed under the church, and an organ was purchased to accommodate weddings, funerals and mission fests better.



Mayfair MC with original board siding, 1938

Dedication

By dedication day, August 19, 1934, \$425 had been spent, of which \$50 was a loan from the General Conference Home Mission Board. Bishop David Toews of Rosthern dedicated the Mayfair Bethel Mennonite Church to the service of the Lord. Many songs of praise were sung, and messages of

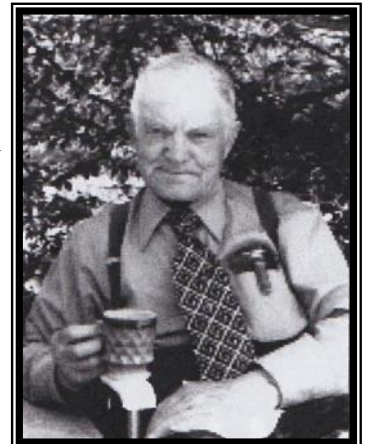
congratulations were brought from other congregations. Some of the families who lived at Mayfair and have participated in the church throughout the years are Friesen, Toews, Rempel, Balzer, Voth, Neuman, Tessman, Hiebert, Pauls, Durksen, Heide, Holmes, Enns, Reimer, Van Nortwick, Giesbrecht, Stobbe, Loewen, Zacharias, Froese, Funk, Kessler, Porter, Soiseth, and Johnson. I am not aware of any existing membership lists.



Mayfair MC dedication Aug 19, 1934

Pastors and Lay Readers

Employing and keeping a pastor, unpaid or paid, was a problem for the Mayfair group almost right from the beginning. Mayfair wanted only one pastor, but Nickolai Friesen and John Toews each received nine votes. They were both elected as unpaid pastors and later ordained by Elder Johannes Regier on June 23, 1929. John Toews resigned in 1937, and the Friesen family moved to BC in 1939; that was the last time Mayfair had a full-time resident pastor. The congregation offered a salary of \$120 a year and a residence, pasture, and garden plot with no success. After that, the church was served intermittently by visiting Pastors Abram Martens, Julius Klassen, John Janzen and others from Rabbit Lake and Glenbush. When no pastor was available, lay readers Jacob Pauls 1938-40, Peter Durksen 1941, Peter Neuman Sr 1941-44 and my father Peter Toews 1945-63 led the service and read the sermon. After the Mullingar MB Church closed, Ben Derksen served part-time from the late 1940s until 1957. Frank Enns 1950s-62, Jacob Reimer 1963-75, David Neufeld 1973-85, Earl Van Nortwick 1975-80, all pastored part-time. Don Unger 1982-2011, Naomi Unger 1998-2011 (Don and Naomi served intermittently between mission work in Nigeria and Tanzania), and both retired in 2011.



Rev Abram A Martens,
Rabbit Lake



Don and Naomi Unger, 2024

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John Janzen, Bernie Retzlaff, Christina Dyck, Jake Loewen, Cornie and Walter Martens, Wilber Epp, Jake and Laverne Isaac all ministered part-time between 1982 and 2002 at Mayfair. Chad Doell 2013-16 and Celeste Wright 2017-19. As of this writing, Jan 2025, Don and Naomi Unger are still working on a per-call basis. Don officiated at two funerals, which we attended, Jan 2024, Robert Holmes, and Dec 2024, Robert's mother, Helen (Toews) Holmes, at Mayfair.

Sunday School Teachers, Song Leaders and Music

My sources say little about Sunday School Teachers and Song Leaders. Sunday School started as early as 1929, though there was no mention of who taught it. My father, Peter, taught adult Sunday School from 1945 until my parents moved to Rosthern in 1964 with some intermittent help from Johnny Balzer and Art Froese. In later years, Bernie Toews and Earl Van



John and Helen Toews, 1954

Nortwick taught Sunday School. There was only one class for children's Sunday School for all ages. It was taught in turn by Helena (Peter) Balzer, my Aunt Helen (John) Toews and later by Margaret Tessman. Aunt Helen also organized the Christmas Eve program and significantly influenced my Christian faith during my years at Mayfair; I am very much indebted to her.

The women were often critical of how the men decorated the Christmas tree; throwing the silver tinsel by the handful to the top and placing the wax candles at various angles could have been a serious fire hazard. In 1937, Mayfair had an eight-member orchestra. John Balzer was an enthusiastic children's songleader during the 1940s. In later years, musical numbers were performed by various combinations of Marion Toews on accordion, Irma Funk on mandolin, Teresa Toews on piano, Johnny Toews on guitar and Jake Heide on violin.

The Durksen Wedel Cairn

In front of the church, against the trees on the right side looking out, stands the Durksen Wedel Cairn. The inscription reads: **Erected by the descendants of Peter and Maria (Wedel) Durksen. July 14, 1996. In memory of the founding families of the Hoffnungsfelder Mennonite Church, Mayfair, Saskatchewan. This church was established in 1928 by a group of Mennonite immigrants from Russia who arrived in Canada seeking freedom of religion and freedom from political persecution. Peter and Maria (Wedel) Durksen are the parents of Helena (Durksen) [Peter] Balzer, grandparents of Johnny (Alina) Balzer and great-grandparents of Geraldine Balzer (Gordon Peters).**



The Durksen Wedel Cairn

Peter and Helen Toews



Helen and Peter Toews, 1942

My parents, Peter and Helen Toews, total commitment and involvement with the Mayfair Mennonite Church was unparalleled. Mother would bake the communion breadlets, bring the bread, wine, and glasses to church, and then wash the glasses afterward. The wine was stored on our basement's top storage shelf; I may have been guilty of crawling up there and taking a sip or two throughout the years. I never got caught, though, and no one suspected me, I think! Mother was part of the Ladies Aid group that gathered once a month, quilted, sewed, raised money for missions and had great conversations around the *Faspa* (lunch) table. It was good for the ladies to get together, work, talk, and laugh; perhaps many important Bruderschaft (Brotherhood) decisions were influenced there. Mother always hosted the visiting pastors and unexpected company dutifully for lunch or bed and breakfast. Our whole family cleaned the church building regularly in our weekly rotation and, in winter, went extra early to start the fire so the building would warm for church time. Father brought the firewood and did the building's maintenance and repair work as required together with the other men. My father's family and farm income and expense ledgers from 1943 until 1963

(See Mayfair on page 11)

(Mayfair from page 10)

show they donated regularly to the church, missions and many other worthy causes. In 1943, the average monthly farm income was \$148.30, and expenses were \$113.79; slim margins, it was “live within your means” budgeting! In addition to all of this, Father led the service, taught Sunday School, and read the sermon for 18 years, from 1945 until 1963, when there was no visiting pastor. Father was a quiet leader. He never talked much about it, but I have a copy of the minutes of a brotherhood meeting from March 4, 1937, where he signed as the secretary. Some Sundays, on the way home from church, Mother would chastise Father, “You started that song on too high a note again!” My father would prepare the Sunday School lesson and pre-read the sermon several evenings a week. And if we were too noisy, his temperature would go up; his face would get red and redder, and when he’d had enough, he would tell us to be quiet in no uncertain terms!



Mayfair MC 1962 with asphalt brick siding, unused horse barn still standing, electricity arrived 1955

Cemetery

Every cemetery has its sad, silent, tragic stories to tell, especially pioneer cemeteries. In July 2009, I realized the Mayfair Mennonite Church cemetery was not recorded in provincial or Mennonite Histori-

cal Society of Saskatchewan (MHSS) records. I set to work; I took pictures of all the graves, got all the available records from my cousins at Mayfair, completed the forms and submitted the information to the Province of Saskatchewan and the MHSS. There were 22 burials in 2009; I am aware of nine more since. Eight babies are listed, most unnamed, in unmarked graves: three Loewen babies, one of each

Thiessen, Voth, Giesbrecht, Bergen and a Peter Tessman. My Uncle Jacob Toews, 27, botched appendix surgery; George Kessler, 22, fell off a horse and was dragged to death through a dense bush; Cousin Johnny Toews, 57, cancer, all died too young. And there was our family tragedy: my brother Rudy Gerhard Toews, 21 months old, drowned in the farm stock watering trough. (See Preservings 2015 p74 <https://www.plettfoundation.org/preservings/archive/35/>.)



Mayfair MC Cemetery, 2009



John Toews' funeral, Mar 1972

Church Memories

My earliest memory of church is seared into my soul and burnt into my heart and memory: the funeral of Brother Rudy; I was five years old. I also have this mixed bag of memories. Excitement during Christmas programs organized by Aunt Helen, we would all get the treat bag of peanuts, candy and one mandarin orange at the end. Boredom when my father read sermons that would go on endlessly, it seemed. Funerals could be disturbing events for me and cause me sleepless nights. During an open casket funeral for a handicapped youth, I could only see his nose above the casket from my vantage point, this would haunt me for weeks. It was also said that his father had given him a haircut after he died and that his hair had continued to grow even after he was in the coffin. I was happy when an ordained pastor like Rev Abram Martens came and preached animatedly, without notes; I

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got the message! Nostalgia sweeps over me and takes me back to that little prairie church whenever we sing *Holy God we Praise Thy Name* (Grosser Gott, Wir Loben Dich) on a Sunday morning. Fun times were playing, such as when children and youth came from Rabbit Lake and Glenbush for Thanksgiving and Mission Fest. Hijinx, trepidation and discipline; every Sunday, us boys would sit in the front row on the men's (right) side: George Balzer, Art Tessman, Ernie Voth,



David at Rudy's grave, the day after the funeral, June 24, 1950

Arnold, Ernie and David Toews. Inevitably, as time dragged on, we would get restless; the giggling and whispering would elevate. One of the fathers would get up abruptly, sit on the bench behind us, flick his son's ear, or wrap him sharply on the shoulder to quiet us down. Of course, our father was behind the pulpit, so our lecture and or punishment was meted out after we got home. Don Unger: *"The Mayfair church building was unique; it had a floor that sloped toward the stage. Our young son would take several Matchbox cars to church; occasionally, they would get away from him and roll to the front. As a pastor, one is never quite sure what people think if their kids get too noisy. But after the service, "grandma" (Helen) Toews, practically blind by then, would comment, it is so nice to hear there are still children in church. I can't see them, but it's good to hear them"*. It always made us feel better. Don's comment that the church floor sloped by one foot back to front reminded me that this would cause me to nearly slide off the smooth bench if I were sitting in a slouched position.

Growth, Conflict, Decline and Suspension of Services

In 1938, the Mayfair church reached its peak; membership had soared, the church was active with Sunday School, Youth Group, and Bible Study, and the future looked bright. Mayfair had finished paying for their church and barn. In the 1930s came the depression, drought, and WWII, and by 1939, people started to leave for BC and Ont for better economic opportunities. Despite faith and brotherly love, conflict, grievances and walls of strife are often mentioned in my source material. Of Bishop Daniel Loewen of the Hoffnungsfelder Congregations, it was said, "the spiritual fences between these groups and individuals gave him many dark nights"! And on occasion, Loewen was criticized (behind his back, of course) that one couldn't have a spiritual discussion with him. On the other hand, those who knew him well knew that every talk with him always ended on a spiritual theme. Among these controversies, my Uncle John Toews had resigned as pastor in 1937. Many youths left to work, attend Rosthern Junior College or other educational institutions. By the

time I can remember, there were only seven or eight families that participated regularly, about 30 to 40 people. The size of the congregation depended on how many adult children were home from school or work at any given time. The church continued to function with lay readers and visiting pastors from 1945 until 1963. In 1963, Jake Reimer came to minister part-time in English, and the church experienced considerable growth. Helen Toews started teaching Sunday School in English despite some opposition from several parents. The transition from German to English was relatively seamless compared to many other Mennonite churches. The advent of the English language opened the church to people of different backgrounds, and Mayfair Mennonite became an ecumenical and the only Protestant church in a 30-km radius. After the Reimers left in 1975, the church turned again to visiting pastors from Rabbit Lake and Glenbush and local lay pastor Earl Van Nortwick. During this time, Anne Van Nortwick, Mary Heide, Lucille Porter and Helen Giesbrecht did much of the event planning and worship leading. After more people had moved away and the passing of hardworking



Don Unger speaking at Bernie and Florence Toews' 50th Wedding Anniversary, Mayfair

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leaders Bernie and Florence Toews in 2013, services in the church were suspended in 2017. For a period, services were held in the homes of either Earl Van Nortwick or Teresa Toews. In Aug 2021, a fundraiser was organized by Laura, Teresa, Martin Toews and Dorothy (Toews) Reinbolt, grandchildren of John and Helen Toews. The church building is in serious need of new windows, doors and much more. Today, Jan 2025, the church sits largely unused except for the odd family reunion or other special occasions. Every year, Mayfair still held a Mennonite Catholic Christmas Program in the Community Hall and, in 2024, in the Catholic Church, which has also experienced low attendance.

Conclusion

The Mayfair Bethel (Hoffnungsfelder) Mennonite Church looms large in my heart and memory. As I write this, I am proud of my church and the heritage it has given me despite its many ups and downs. As with most small country churches, the future has always been uncertain, as is life itself. This church, very plain and simple, standing on the open land, holds a place very dear in the hearts of many. In spite of the humble beginnings, many of the children and grandchildren of Mayfair Mennonite Church members have gone on to successful careers in nursing, teaching, trades, professors, farming, engineering, business, and church leadership. Many are active participants in churches and volunteer work around the world. Laura Toews: *“The Mayfair Mennonite Church has always been a place of fellowship, promise and peace. We may not fellowship there*

anymore, but the promise and the peace remain”. June 2028 will be the 100th anniversary of organizing the Mayfair Mennonite church.

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Dave Toews is retired from a career at General Electric and Amre Supply; he lives with his wife Marion in St Albert, Alberta. He serves on the board of the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta as vice chair and as editor of the MHSA Chronicle. Dave also volunteers at and sits on the MCC Thrift Shop Council and church Facilities Commission. He enjoys reading, writing, volunteer work, travelling, grandparenting, golf, and history. Dave and Marion worship at Lendrum Mennonite Church, Edmonton. ❖

Harvests to End Hunger

By Abe Janzen

At an inter-Mennonite Gathering in Hillsboro, Kansas, 1977, North American Mennonites decided to respond to hunger in places like Ethiopia. That vision and that decision became part of the motivation that incentivized what became the MCC Foodgrains Bank, which became, in 1983, the Canadian Foodgrains Bank (CFGB) with the current 15 members.

I grew up on a farm in Saskatchewan, driving tractors and milking cows, I would not be able to operate most or any of the equipment on Alberta fields these days. But when the farmers make a plan to share a harvest to ‘end hunger’ ... their capacity to just make things happen, to show up and ‘get it done’ is something! Before the event, they text, they phone, they talk, and then they hope for a good day. At the event, some basic protocols of safety are reviewed, where to begin and who’s doing what ... and then, they just seem to have an eye and an ear out for each other and off they go. Two or three hours later, 150 acres are at the elevator.

These harvests are something. Sometimes as many as 15 or 18 giant combines all going at once. Sometimes only a few. In Bear Lake, just north of Grande Prairie and close to Clairmont, four vintage machines, the oldest a 1953 Massey Harris, operated by ‘vintage’ farmers who manage to keep 70-year-old Masseys, Gleaners and John Deeres running pretty smoothly. Later in October there was a threshing day at Carstairs with two threshing machines, hay wagons, stooks and horses ... on the Lyle and Betty Brown farm. So, whether giant 40- or 50-ft headers or a 10-ft Massey Harris, or an even older thresher, harvest becomes an event, not just because of the

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1920s vintage threshing machines, hay wagons and horses, Lyle and Betty Brown's farm, Oct 5, 2024, Carstairs, AB

beauty of machinery at work, but because of people volunteering their time, their equipment, their amazing knowledge of farming, and their land. The event almost always includes a hot dog, sandwich or pizza line-up out on the field, and lots of visiting on a warm, sunny and dusty late summer day. Harvest dust. It's harvest time.

I was in Linden last Fall, at an annual Foodgrains Bank Supper, and briefly met Harvey Toews, one of the farmers, who, back in the 70s, helped to give birth to what is today the Canadian Foodgrains Bank. Initially, it was prairie farmers like Harvey, shipping bags of grain. The Wheat Board got involved and by the late 70s it became the MCC Foodgrains Bank in response to major food shortages in Bangladesh and East Africa. By 1983, after a review by CIDA, it had become an inclusive, 15-member organization, supported by the Wheat Board and CIDA with matching grants and by farmers and others across Canada.

My brother Bill was with MCC in the Ottawa Office in those early days. With others in Winnipeg, they had prepared a proposal for the Wheat Board that would involve resources, shipping and distribution. On his way back to Ottawa from Winnipeg, he noticed Otto Lang on the same flight. Otto Lang was then the Minister in charge of the Wheat Board, so Bill asked if they



The Alberta Foodgrains Bank Committee with a 1953 Massey Harris combine, Aug 31, 2024 Bear Lake/Clairmont, AB

could talk. Mr. Lang became interested in the proposal (he was from Saskatchewan and well familiar with prairie farming). And the rest, as is sometimes said, is history. There is a lot more to the story, but sometimes you have to agree that the Holy Spirit helps things along a little by arranging meetings and connections that may otherwise have been missed. The Canadian Foodgrains Bank, last year, assisted almost one million people in 35 countries, through the 15 members and their local partner organizations. Today the need becomes even more urgent as the U.S. Government drastically cuts funding for USAID, the agency



Fourteen combines with four grain carts take off 160 acres in 2 hours in the first harvest of 2024, Aug 14, Vauxhall, AB.

that has provided support for major health and food security needs for many years in many countries.

Today, in 2025, there are many supporters across Canada who are not farmers. They are in all walks of life. But the Foodgrains Bank is still anchored in rural agriculture. We are about food and suffering, the one very important part of Jesus' ministry that we can all agree on.

It's nearly Spring again, but Fall seems barely past us, and for me, that may be because Fall was intense. Not intense in any way except as an experience of full-on

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harvest. In Alberta, there were 30 harvests supporting the Foodgrains Bank last Fall, all called Growing Projects. That meant that, as the Alberta Rep for the CFGF, I was able to attend as many harvests as I could get to. In the end, of the 30, I think I got to 22, beginning mid-August and ending at mid October, when it was already cool, and in a few cases, almost too wet.

The farm I grew up on was a mixed dairy farm. We were a large family in a village where we bumped into each other and into our neighbours ... a lot. Things either worked or they didn't, and there wasn't much time or space for any of us to not rely on the others. I could drive a tractor pretty well, but my brother could fix them when they were broken. I'm not somehow claiming that things were wonderfully 'tight knit' as people sometimes say these days. They weren't. But to fix anything ... a broken bike or baler or even offended feelings ... there was often a need to cross into each others' *jurisdictions*. We boys, for example, shared a bedroom ... 3 or 4 of us. So, unilateralism and jurisdictionalism just didn't ever get much traction. And that reminds me of farming and Growing Projects in Alberta.

A harvest event I attended in Southern Alberta began with a BBQ lunch hosted by the local bank, with a couple of hundred people lining up to grab a burger and some salad even as the combines started rolling and the dust got into the food. What's not to like! I was in line for a while, behind two gentlemen, so we visited a little. Like many others there, they were farmers and community people, participating in a harvest

event, the intent of which is to do our part to help people who need assistance.

As we got closer to the burgers, a young woman from the 'burger' tent approached my friends and it was clear, they were not strangers. There, in the food line, she stepped out of her hosting job

for a second to engage a couple of farmers. She was *the bank*, serving us burgers, but what struck me was that she stepped into this little moment ... into what looked like a little relational work. More than just an opportune moment, it seemed like a banker going just a little out of her way to personalize business in a way that likely suited the farmers (it's their most busy season) more than it suited her own banking protocols. Does a bank do business in a burger line up? Not likely. But can it? I think so.

Our dad sold grain at the Pioneer Grain elevator in Hague. When he did, he often came back with some conversation he had had with Mr. Knipple, the elevator agent. It was business, but it always seemed a little personal as well. If he needed a loan or had other business at the Credit Union, he seemed to have some connection that was more than it just being a banking transaction. Those people had names.

Hutterite colonies, Mennonite colonies, farming groups, any church group, or for that matter, any business or mission ... develops their own culture of how things are done. Modern institutions do this and then they develop policies and procedures, often legally scripted, to minimize risk for the business they are in. Important and helpful as those policies and procedures are meant to be, the more effective work cultures are the ones that also enable their members, their employees and managers to step outside those protocols, away from them, into the culture of the other, and into the circumstance of the moment. It helps to get things done, and it helps to build up the broader community as well.

We do need the rules and the protocols ... they provide important guidance to how we live with each other ... but they also tend to compartmentalize life, so we won't step out of line too easily. And sometimes, despite our best intentions, the compartmentalization leads to us invoking a rule or a policy when dealing with a situation, rather than *meeting the person who is involved*, wherever they are at, even in a



A quick lunch from sponsor's tents and the combines will roll again, Aug 20, 2024, Coaldale, AB



Barley dust and combines in the distance, Aug 27, 2024, Taber, AB

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burger line-up on harvest day. Protocols can keep us from meeting each other ... and from stepping into the reality of any particular moment in time. Solutions and arrangements become prescribed and policy-based, which is safer, maybe, but it also can lead to alienation and distrust. Simply following the rules may be safe and for the best, but can also become harmful. It's not for nothing Jesus kept poking at the religious leaders' obsession with protocol.

A teacher in Fairview College, up in Fort Vermilion and La Crete, years ago reminded me ... to ... 'worry more about doing the right thing', he would say, 'and less about doing things right'. Sometimes I remember that bit of counsel as I watch Alberta farmers so efficiently going out of their way, finding each other to make amazing things happen ... doing what they can to build each other up, and to end hunger. ❖



Two giant New Holland and a Case IH combine,
Sept 27, 2024 Edberg/Ferintosh, AB

letters don't fly across the border fast enough, there are admonitions to please write sooner and definitely write longer letters! There is good-natured ribbing about what must be a shortage of writing paper that may be the cause of a drought of letters arriving. And there is constant concern for their Papa's health as the severe beatings Bernhard experienced in Russia had left lasting and debilitating health consequences. The mining boys urge him to look forward to spring when circumstances will no doubt be better.

There are written reflections of the despair of the circumstances of the 1930s. The Saskatchewan farms are struggling with poor crops and little income. Schools and churches are threatening to close. In Alberta, the mining boys are happy if they actually work a couple of days in a row, and while they acknowledge that farming is poor, they indicate that the "black pit is no paradise" either. In reflecting on the rather dire circumstances they find themselves in, they still encourage each other by commenting, "One must take life as it offers itself and not make it worse than it is in reality."

Despite the poverty and hardship there is a spirit of generosity. The mining boys, in a gesture I wouldn't usually attribute to young men of that age, send their youngest sister a warm winter coat. The Saskatchewan farmer has an older brother's presence of mind to send shaving materials to his youngest brother at the German English Academy in Rosthern. And that same student is gifted with money from his mining brothers so that he won't have to take a freight train home again for Christmas when it's bitterly cold. Money is quickly dispatched to Russia after

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Stories and Snippets: Swift as an Arrow

By Joanne Wiens



Joanne Wiens

The Story: In my last column, we left the B-line Wiens family in the Willow Creek region of Alberta, where they were mourning the too-early death of their mother Elizabeth. Elizabeth's eight children ranged from school age to young adults. They were forced to quickly pick up responsibilities of caring for each other and contributing to the family income. They were also about to scatter and leave their tight-knit group. In the immediate years that followed Elizabeth's death, the family reached natural points of moving on with their lives: some married, some young men worked in the coal mines, some young women 'worked out' with

other local families, one brother pursued higher education to become a minister. Our widowed patriarch, Bernhard, took his two youngest children with him back to Herschel, Saskatchewan, to live with his oldest son and his wife, and their two toddlers. It must have been a crowded little house!

One of the delights in researching this time period was coming across correspondence drifting between Saskatchewan and Alberta. Oh the letters! They are warmly affectionate, teasing, caring, and eager for connection. If

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despairing letters are received of abject starvation. And to prevent boredom on long days when the boys aren't working in the mine, their older brother sends them a batch of books and a mandolin which is received with great thanks.

Of great interest to me was discovering the 'voice' of the author in each writing. Personalities shine through. When a Christmas gift of farmer sausage and pickles is



The sign above the door "Wiens Bros" on the house they constructed at East Coulee, Alberta, 1933. Red Deer River and the mine behind the house not readily visible..

sent from the Saskatchewan farm to the mining boys, their response is hilarious. Here's a glimpse of what happened when their package was picked up at the post office by their soon-to-be brother-in-law Henry:

There a delectable scene presented itself. Henry's eyes and his mouth popped wide open; he had to close the latter immediately, however, as it instantly began to water, and he was forced to swallow again. That was no wonder — the whole post office smelled of sausage, pure sausage! I explained it to myself as follows: the railroad travel and all the jouncing back and forth eventually struck the sausages as too silly; they abruptly rebelled, broke out of their confining can and began amusing themselves in their new surroundings. The accompanying glass jar (which must have contained

pickles, judging by the enhanced savour adhering to the sausages) became seasick from the journey and disgorged its contents (just as people in a similar condition tend to do), and the sausage wallowed happily in the brine. I'll tell you, that made a wonderful concoction, and I know of no dish that could bear comparison with it.

The writing throughout the months and years not only shows imagination and creativity, careful vocabulary choice, but even at times contains quotations from literary works. And always, the signature is preceded by tender words such as, *Swift as an arrow, the future flies to meet us. I, therefore, hasten to sleep. With love, your...*

How lovely.

The Snippet: I am no doubt romanticizing when I picture each of the writing settings of my extended family: a miner in a wooden chair by the burning coal embers in a 16 x 22 foot shack along the banks of the Red Deer river; a farmer battling the dustbowl, legs stretched out at the dining

table lit by candlelight while both young toddlers and an ailing father sleep in the next room; a student in a chilly dorm room in Rosthern, alone for the first time in his life and very much figuring it out by his bootstraps. But I don't think I am imagining the warmth that flows from each pencil. There is a longing for connection, a kindness, a genuine care that leaps from the page as sharp as the sparks sputtering from the fireplace. Our texts, emails and social media posts don't usually carry that depth, or thoughtfulness, or pulsing love. My last text to my sibling read: *I left my flash drive in your laptop.* Ugh. Using the poignant example of my past family, I need to do better so that my words - at least at times - carry some creativity, the longing of my heart, and the depth of affection I feel towards those nearest and dearest, friends and family alike. For even now, swift as the arrow our

future flies to meet us, and there will eventually be a time when only our words remain. When the next generations eagerly discover your words, what will they be? ❖

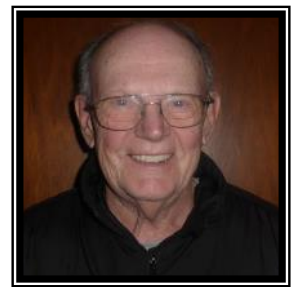
THEY CHOSE TO STAY BEHIND

By Frank Martens

My mother, Cornelia (Koop) Martens, wrote her autobiography late in life (1965) after my father, Frank John Martens, passed away while we were residing in Three Hills, AB. Her first paragraph read:

"I, Cornelia Martens, was born August 12, 1901, in Alexanderpol, South Russia, [near the town of Memrick, province of Ekaterinoslav, District of Bachmut, founded in 1888]. My parents were Jacob and Maria (Tessman) Koop. My parents moved to Barnaul, Siberia when I was still a child. They settled in the village of Reinfeld [Barnaul] in 1905, where I went to school for eight years and enjoyed some of my teenage years.

"On October 18, 1918, I joined hands in marriage with Franz Johann Martens



Frank Martens

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[born in Armavir, South Russia, on the Kuban River, not far from the Mennonite Kuban Colony]. We were married by the Elder Aron Ar. Reimer of Schoental. We bought an empty farm without a home, and then the hard work began. We made bricks of mud and straw and built a house. Brother-in-law Johann Martens did the woodwork. I made the clay and put two layers of it on the inside and on the outside. Then we moved in. But it seemed that the more we worked, the more burdened we became. They [the Communists] took the wheat, and then they took the animals. That still was not enough. They came and robbed us of our smoked ham, the lard and the butter. We could not fulfil their demands.”

When the Communists threatened to jail Cornelia’s husband for selling butter on the black market, they made the decision to migrate to Canada. Frank Martens (Sr.) begged Cornelia’s siblings and his brothers, to come with them, but they felt, for various reasons, the need to stay. Unfortunately, their decision caused the husbands of the sisters Anna, Liese and Sara’s eventual banishment to the gulags of northern Siberia. Only Anna’s husband survived and rejoined his wife and family. The wives and the children had been moved to southern Siberia and forced into hard labour either in forestry camps or farms.



Author’s mother, Mrs. Cornelia (Koop) Martens, Three Hills, AB 1955

My parents arrived in Alberta in 1925 with two daughters, the youngest just a few months old, having lost a son in Russia to diphtheria. It took several years to establish themselves on a farm of their own in Three Hills, AB, but they persevered as most Mennonites in Canada did. I was born on that farm along with a number of siblings, attended school in Three Hills, spent two years in Coaldale at Alberta Mennonite High School, joined the Navy for 5 years, met and married my Irish wife, Jane, attended UBC for five years, and taught social studies and commerce for 30 years in BC and helped raise three children in the process.

One of the best things we did was to move to Summerland, BC, where, along with my teaching and my wife’s post office career, we bought a small orchard, which kept us both working long hours in the Mennonite agronomist tradition. That didn’t keep us from having the occasional holiday. We leased out our orchard for one year and took a sabbatical in England with an exchange family and did numerous home (and car) exchanges with families from Europe, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa and even a few in the States.

My interest also grew in trying to trace my relations through Brother’s Keeper and newsletters such as *The MHSA Chronicle*, to which I’ve been a subscriber for several years. It was here that I came across the story by Eleanor and John Woollard of their trip to Uzbekistan, which brought back a lot of memories of the trip my wife Jane and I took to

the Soviet Union in 1983 and a second trip two years later with my older sister Martha.

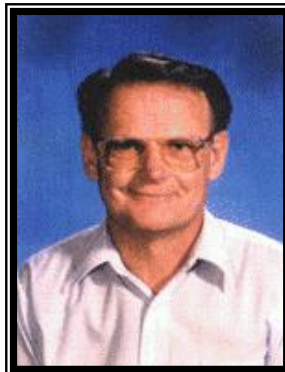
My mother, Cornelia Martens, passed away in January of 1981, and I inherited the correspondence that she had had with her two sisters, who had stayed behind when my mother and father migrated to Canada in 1925.

I wrote to the aunts about my mother’s passing and thus began a correspondence with Aunt Liese and Aunt Anna, who had been forced to eke out an existence in Kazakhstan. This culminated in our decision to visit them in the summer of 1983. The two aunts lived in the village of Shymkent, Kazakhstan, 13km from Tashkent, Uzbekistan. At that time, the easiest way to travel there was by doing a group tour of Russia, making sure that Tashkent was on the itinerary.

Our flight started in Montreal on an Aeroflot plane with passengers from our tour group, including some Americans. The initial part of the flight was interesting as the pilot flew very low along the St. Lawrence River until we reached the Atlantic. We conjectured that there was a bit of espionage involved.

We had a bit of an episode as we went through Russian customs in Moscow on arrival. I had decided to grow a beard over the summer and, on a dare, had curled my naturally straight hair. The Moscow customs officer took one look at my old passport picture and one look at me and immediately reached for his red phone, which brought down a superior officer who also looked at me and my passport picture. Soon, another officer showed up. Fortunately, there was enough similarity be-

(See Stay Behind on page 19)



Frank Martens
Summerland, BC
1990

(Stay Behind from page 18)

tween me and the passport picture to allow entrance through customs. Jane and I were a little worried, but I guess they just wanted to show their power and make me worried enough to behave for the rest of the trip.

Throughout our tour from Moscow, Bratsk (Siberia), Irkutsk, Lake Baikal and finally to Tashkent, we had an English-speaking young lady guide who kept us well informed about the geography and culture of Russia, but with very little about its politics.

One of our fellow tourists was a middle-aged Ukrainian Canadian

mostly from Muslim women. I thought it was because of my lovely legs, but that turned out not to be the case.

In Tashkent, our guide allowed us to stay for a few days, missing out on a tour of a nearby city, but it gave us the opportunity to meet my aunts. The meeting was unbelievable! Aunt Anna looked like my mother, and Aunt Liesa sounded like her. With the two of them and a



Author's wife, Jane Martens, Aunt Lisa, Aunt Anna in Tashkent, Uzbekistan 1983



Frank and Russian tour guide Irene, Moscow 1983



Jane and tour guide Irene, Moscow, Moscow 1983

who wore black clothing and had the appearance of a Russian. He, at first, kept telling us how he looked forward to seeing the Russian countryside. However, he soon changed his mind after continuously being blocked by officials whenever we went through airport customs, hotel entrances, and subway stations because they suspected him of being a Russian trying to pass himself off as a member of our group.

During most of my stay in the hot climate of southern Russia, I wore shorts and sandals. Being ignorant of Muslim customs, I drew a lot of stares and comments,

we crowded into an old Lada and drove across the border to their home. En route, we stopped for a bit of lunch that Aunt Liese had packed. Included were some ripe cherries, which she enthusiastically invited us to share. As Jane bit into one, she spit it out very quickly and showed me the white worms inside it. Both aunts were oblivious to the invertebrates.

Aunt Anna's home was an old house with a central fireplace to heat the two bedrooms, kitchen and small living area. Floors were dirt. Noisy pigs occupied the backyard along with chickens. We were treated with great hospitality, staying the night, although Jane and I were kept awake with mild stomach problems and visits to the outhouse.

In the morning, we were engulfed by all the sons and daughters of the two aunts, along with their children and a few of their neighbours as well. Aunt Liese arrived on a motorcycle with a sidecar from the WWII era, probably confiscated from the German army, which was the only mode of transportation for her son and his family. I'm not sure what I had expected, but I don't think this was it. Pictures were taken, and questions were asked and answered as best I could in my long-forgotten *Plautdietsch* Low German. But we had to leave all too quickly to meet up with our tour group in Tashkent. On the return trip, we passed a small funeral procession. A large, dilapidated truck carried the coffin and immediate family seated beside it on the back. We stopped as they passed, and I took a quick picture.

(An aside comment: My father's nephews [the Martens side] were living not too far away in another village. They had heard of our coming but had not been invited by my aunts. I only found out about them while visiting Germany much later. I can only assume there was some jealousy in keeping this information from us.)

Poverty was evident everywhere in Russia at that time. To us, Russia

(See Stay Behind on page 20)

(Stay Behind from page 19)

and the Russians looked as if they were one step away from having survived WWII. I was frequently accosted by young males asking for my “jeanskis”



Author's aunts, nieces, nephews and cousins,
Shymkent, Kazakhstan 1983

and belts. I could have given any extra clothes away on the spot. Our meals, even in the better hotels, usually consisted of a sort of black bread, liverwurst (at least that's what we thought it was), goat meat, tea and a type of bun.

We went on to visit Samarkand, which is well described in Woollard's article. Forty years

later, after our visit, from their description and what I have seen in recent pictures and videos of Russia, the changes in their economy and the people, the clothes they now wear and the cars they drive went through a radical revolution.

From Samarkand, we travelled to Bukhara, the Black Sea, Sochi, and Leningrad before going once again through Moscow customs and home. I recall landing at one of their airports, and right beside the major runway was what was left of the pieces of an Aeroflot passenger jet that had not made a successful landing.

It was one crazy trip!

I continued to correspond with my aunts, and this intrigued my older sister Martha, who suggested that she might want to visit them as well if I were to go along as a “guide.” Martha was more fluent in Plautdietsch than I was and would make a real asset on a visit.

This time, I bought one of the first Kodiak 8mm movie cameras for the trip with a special itinerary for just the two of us with the intention of staying longer with our kinfolk. So, in the summer of 1985, we took a three-week holiday. However, the Russians, still trying to maximize their tourist dollar, made us take the obligatory visits to Moscow and Leningrad before we were able to get to Tashkent. Since we weren't on a regular tour, we were ferried to hotels and airports by car, a couple of times in one of those black Russian cars reserved for diplomats and important visitors. In Tashkent, we were booked into their expensive Intourist Hotel and met later by our aunts and a cousin who was still driving his old Lada with the now much older tires. I thought it prudent to get him a new set of tires, which we did at one of the local Intourist “GUM” *Gosudarstvenny Universalny Magazin* (State Department Store). At the same time, I bought the family a few gifts, which they suggested – mostly electronics – radios, CD

players, etc. I had American dollars, but surprisingly, the store accepted my Mastercard.

During our visit, I convinced my two aunts to do an on-camera interview in which I tried to get them to relate some of their history. They were somewhat reluctant as they thought it might compromise themselves and me if the film was confiscated. Martha had an enjoyable time with the families, reminiscing about our mother and the changes our family had lived through in Canada. One notable difference was in the size of the families: Aunt Anna, who was younger than our mother, had only four children, and Aunt Liesa, the youngest, had only two. The reason, of course, was that both their husbands had been forced into slave labour in northern forests while the families were still very young. My parents, living in a free country, had eleven children, not unheard of in Canadian Mennonite families.

Later, in the '90s, during the Glasnost period, all my Russian relatives, including my elderly aunts, were able to migrate to Ger-



Author's maternal
aunt, Anna (Koop)
Reimer, Detmold,
Germany, 1994



Author's maternal
aunt, Lisa (Koop)
Engbrecht, Detmold,
Germany, 1994

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(Stay Behind from page 20)

Getting to Know Your MHSA Board Members

many, and we visited them several times before the aunts' passing. The aunts lived to a very respectable 87 and 96 years of age. Some of their younger relatives had been able to emigrate to Germany a few years earlier and kept them informed of the changes they should expect there, but it must have been overwhelming at first. Now they have better homes than a lot of us, have built some very impressive churches, enjoy a freedom that must have felt totally foreign to them in the beginning, and have been blessed with a future for their children that they could never have imagined in their lifetime.

I still keep in contact with my younger nieces and nephews on the internet. My Aunt Anna was married to a Gerhard Reimer, and a member of that dynasty, Adina Reger, put together a tome of 717 pages, "*Familienstammbuch und Geschichte der Familie Reimer, 1740 – 1995*" (Reimer Family History and Genealogy 1740-1995) which includes a short commentary by Aunt Anna about her family. Among them is a very distant cousin, Henry John Deutschen-dorf, Jr -- better known as John Denver.

Frank Martens is a retired high school teacher with three years at Golden, BC Secondary School and 25 years at Summerland, BC Secondary School. He lives with his wife Jane in Summerland, where his second "full-time" occupation has been fruit orcharding for the last 50 years. His hobbies have been participating in most sports, travelling, being a Kinsmen and K-40 Club member, piloting private planes and writing letters to editors. ❖

Darrel Heidebrecht

Darrel Heidebrecht was born in Tofield, Alberta on November 22, 1955. In 1963, his parents decided to move to Calgary, AB, where they joined what was then known as North Hill Mennonite Mission, later to become Foothills Mennonite Church. Darrel grew up in this faith community, where he and his wife continue to participate.

Darrel has a Bachelor of Theology degree and an M.A. in Peace Studies. His MA Thesis focused on Mennonite/Metis relations beginning in 1874 with the coming of Mennonites to Manitoba. Darrel attended Swift Current Bible Institute, Canadian Mennonite Bible College (now Canadian Mennonite University) in Winnipeg, University of Calgary, and Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries (now Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminaries) in Elkhart, Indiana.

Darrel worked for 35 years with MCC Alberta, providing leadership to Restorative Justice programs. He and his wife Gladys worked at Y.O.U. (Youth Orientation Units) at Warburg, AB, for 1-

½ years, after which they moved to Calgary, where Darrel began coordinating the M2/W2 prisoner visitation program. In 1999, he co-founded Calgary Community Conferencing, a restorative justice program working with youth.

Darrel and Gladys also worked with the Native Ministries program with Mennonite Church Canada in the late 70s and early 80s, living primarily in Metis villages in the Interlake region of Manitoba.

Darrel is retired and enjoys reading, walking, writing, and spending time with his grandkids. His early retirement project was the completion of a book entitled "a little more peace in the world: my experiences with restorative justice."

As a newcomer to the MHSA board, I look forward to learning more about the history of the Mennonites in this province. I believe in the power of stories to celebrate and embrace identity and take lessons for contemporary living.



Darrel Heidebrecht

Eugene Janzen

Eugene Janzen was born May 26, 1946, in Rosthern, Saskatchewan. He spent his preschool years on a farm 1 mile east of the Eigenheim Mennonite Church. He attended the public school in Rosthern until he completed grade 8 and then finished high school at Rosthern Junior College. Eugene attended the University of Saskatchewan, completing a Bachelor of Arts. He received his Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (D.V.M.) in 1972 from the Western College of Veterinary Medicine, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Dr. Janzen spent three years practicing in



Eugene Janzen

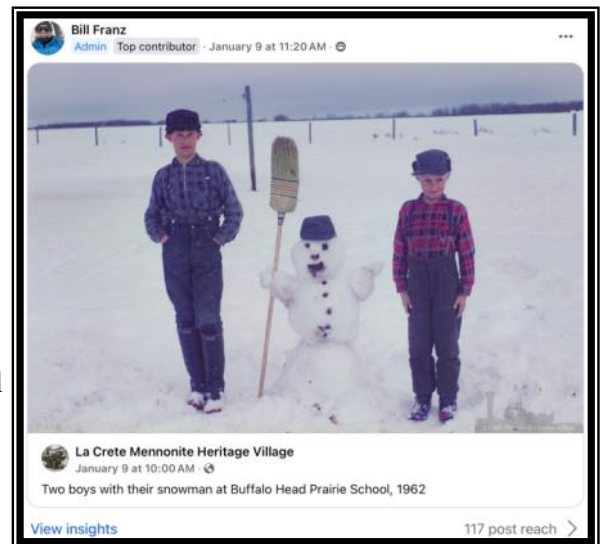
(See Board Members on page 22)

(Board Members from page 21)

northeastern Alberta before returning to the Western College of Veterinary Medicine on an Alberta-sponsored fellowship to complete a post-graduate degree. He received an M.V.S. degree from the University of Melbourne, Australia, in 1977.

That year, he accepted a position with the Ambulatory Clinic at the Western College of Veterinary Medicine, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. As a Field Service Practice clinician, he spent a lot of time working with a general interest in cattle medicine, currently referred to as Buiatrics, amongst the Mennonite dairy producers north of Saskatoon. He left the WCVM and became associated with an Alberta Feedlot practice in 2002. In 2005, he began working with Canada's newest veterinary medicine program, with the University of Calgary Faculty of Veterinary Medicine (UCVM), which accepted its first class of students in September 2008. He recently transitioned from an administrative position at the UCVM and now continues as a Professor Emeritus.

Eugene has two sons, Mark and Jeremy and two granddaughters. Grandmother Janzen stimulated his interest in Mennonite history in his very junior years. He currently lives in High River and attends the Trinity Mennonite Church in De Winton, Alberta. In addition, his partner, Ms. Carole Grier, also has a special interest in Mennonite history and volunteers at the C.M.U. Archives. He looks forward to more formally participating in further exploration of our Mennonite history in Canada. ❖



La Crete Mennonite Heritage Village post: Two boys with their snowman, 1962.



La Crete Mennonite Heritage Village post: Horses tied up outside, 1961.

The MHSA Facebook Group

By Bill Franz

Are you on Facebook? If so, consider checking out the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta. It's been about five years since we set up this private group and we now have over 1100 members. Dave Toews and I are the administrators.



Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta Facebook header

There are usually several posts a week. We are grateful to follow the **La Crete Mennonite Heritage Village** and share their historical photos from days gone by. Of particular interest are the photos of school children at play and community members at work.

We also follow **Jack Van Rijn - Mayor - Town of Coaldale** as he

posts #Throwback Thursday, with historical photos. He often refers to how Mennonites have contributed to the life of the community. A recent post states, "When Mennonite families began arriving in the mid-1920s, fleeing persecution, they embraced their new home with determination and resilience. They contributed significantly to the community, building a future with quiet strength and self-sacrifice."

From further afield, we share the posts of the **Mennonite Cen-**
(See Facebook on page 23)

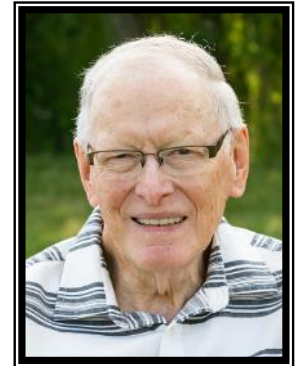
(Facebook from page 22)

mind several guidelines: What is the connection to Mennonites in Alberta? Is this historical? Finally, as Mennonites are both a faith tradition and an ethnic group with different cultures and beliefs, the MHSA Facebook group is not a forum for preaching. So check us out if you're on Facebook! ❖

Tribute to David Jeffares

By Bill Franz

David Jeffares was born in 1935 to James and Sheila (Bampfield) Jeffares on a farm near Huxley, Alberta and passed away on November 23, 2024. Remembering David are his wife, Dolores (Fast), two children, and four grandchildren. Also mourning his loss are his sister-in-law, nieces, and nephews.



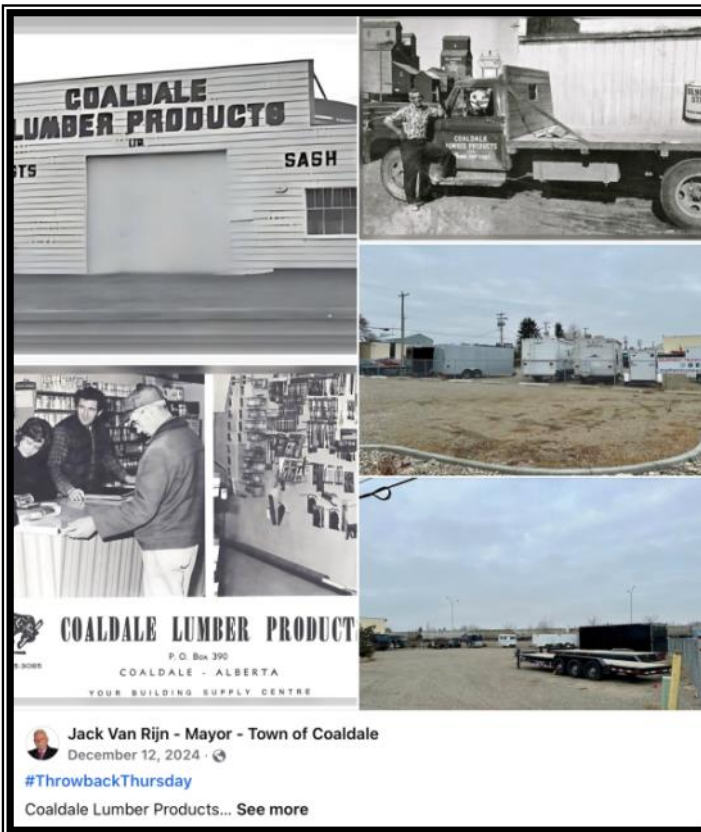
David had a distinguished career as an educator, as a teacher and a principal, in Canada and France. He then assumed the role of director of Early Childhood Services with Alberta Education. He was subsequently invited to Australia to develop early childhood programs at the University of Armidale in New South Wales. David also taught in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta.

David was a creative person. He loved to decorate the house and yard, especially at Christmas time. He decorated the storefront window for Ten Thousand Villages for seven years while it was located on Whyte Avenue in Edmonton. He enjoyed entertaining, family dinners, camping, and he and Dolores travelled extensively, including a cross-Canada antique car journey.

David was an avid volunteer, assisting with Sunday morning services at the Glenrose Hospital for twenty years. He served in various capacities with the MHSA, as a director, on the editorial team of our newsletter, The MHSA Chronicle, and as secretary. His contributions were much appreciated.

David suffered a severe stroke three and a half years ago, which affected his quality of life and independence. He still appreciated visits from family and friends and enjoyed celebrating family milestones. He and Dolores were able to celebrate their 55th wedding anniversary this past July. David's Celebration of Life was held at First Mennonite Church in Edmonton on December 7, 2024.

The MHSA invites its members to make donations in David's memory to the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta, 210-2946 32 Street NE, Calgary, AB T1Y 6J7. ❖



Jack Van Rijn - Mayor - Town of Coaldale post: Coaldale Lumber Products



Mennonite Centre Ukraine Facebook header

tre Ukraine, as they seek to provide humanitarian aid and outreach to needy people of Ukraine without discrimination.

We also receive submissions for approval from various sources, including other Mennonite historical societies and from individuals. We welcome submissions from individuals, but please keep in



MHSA 2025 Spring Conference

Friday, May 9th & Saturday 10th 2025

Calgary, Alberta

WHERE THE COTTONWOODS GROW (feature film)

Cardel Theatre

180 Quarry Park Blvd SE

Calgary, Alberta

Fri. May 9th, 2025, 7 PM

Tickets: \$20 at the door

Pre-registration is NOT required



CELEBRATING 500 YEARS OF ANABAPTISM

Trinity Mennonite Church

32023 – 232 Ave W

De Winton, Alberta (10 min from south end of Calgary)

Sat. May 10th, 2025, 2 PM - MC Katie Harder

Entry: By Donation

Pre-registration IS required



Conrad Stoesz

Speaker: Conrad Stoesz

Archivist, Mennonite Heritage Archives, Wpg, MB

"Touring Anabaptist sites, commemorating Anabaptism at 500"

Come on, an Anabaptist heritage tour with me, where I will introduce you to people, places, and events that have meaning to the Anabaptist story. Sites in Switzerland, Germany, and Holland will be featured.

Question & Answer Period, Light lunch and Visiting to Follow

Email Dave Toews to register for May 10th

dmtoews@gmail.com

Deadline for registration: May 1st

CELEBRATING 500 YEARS OF ANABAPTIST MENNONITE HISTORY



Trinity Mennonite Church