



Newsletter

Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta

Volume XVII Number 1

March 2014

Reflections on My Father

Jacob J. Klassen

By Katie
Harder

I am going to share a few thoughts regarding my father, Jacob J. Klassen, and how he came to be involved



Katie Harder

with various

Mennonite organizations including the *Vertreterversammlung* (Practising Mennonite Mutual Aid prior to the Inception of MCC Canada in 1963 as determined by attendees at Delegate Assemblies).

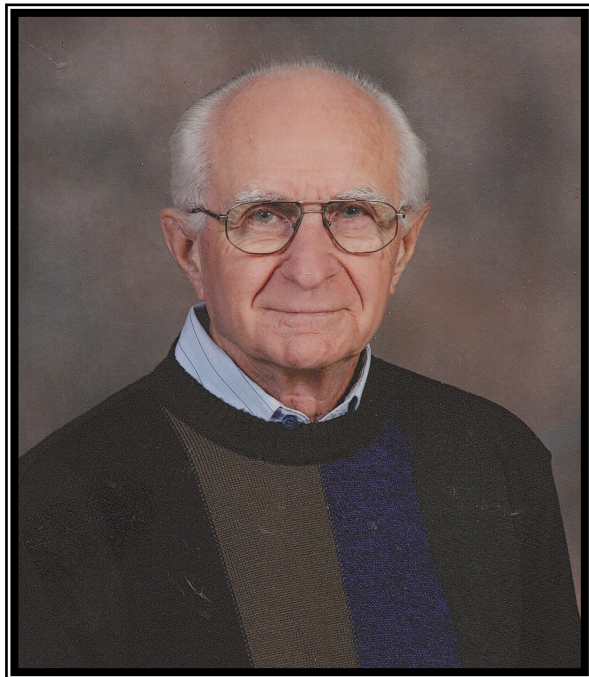
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Telling our Stories

By Ralph Dahl

It is often said that everybody has a story to tell but I never thought that that applied to me because I am not a story teller.

About two years ago, I went to George Wiebe's funeral in Didsbury, Alberta. The Wiebes were our closest neighbors when we were children. George was a few months older than I was so we went to school together and spent a lot of time together when we were young, roaming the banks of the Lone Pine Creek, drowning gophers, trapping weasels and doing what kids did before TV, computers, internet, cell phones, twitter and Facebook. But in the last 65 years, I had seen George, briefly, only twice – at family funerals. After high school George went to Calgary, got a job with Royal Trust and over the years worked his way up in the financial world. George lived all his adult life in Montreal, became an international banker and travelled all over the world. His wife and family were in Montreal. Before he died, he had made it known that he wanted to be buried in the Burns Ranch cemetery. There must be a story in that.



Ralph Dahl

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MHSA AGM & SPRING CONFERENCE Sat. Apr 26, 2014

The Annual General Meeting/Spring Conference of the MHSA will be held at the
Coaldale Mennonite Church, 2317 - 17th St., Coaldale AB on April 26, 2014.

The Annual General Meeting will start at 1:00 p.m., followed at 3:00 p.m. by a presentation by **Ruth Derksen Siemens** on "Letters from Stalin's Russia" and including a display of some artifacts and a little-known collection of letters received by the Langeman family in Coaldale from their relatives in the Soviet Union during the Stalinist era. Ruth provides fascinating insights into the way those in very difficult circumstances communicated with their relatives. A light lunch will follow the presentation.

Please pre-register by April 10 with Ken Matis: kenmatis@gmail.com (ph. 403-345-3570) or leave a message at the MHSA office (403-250-1121).

Admission: \$15.00. per person. Everyone is welcome.

Editorial Reflections:

by Lorne Buhr

Our Church's Christmas Eve pageant took a new turn in December, 2013. It was based on a readers theatre entitled "Jesus the Refugee" and was written by two women for MCC BC (Mennonite Central Committee British Columbia). I was especially moved by the role of 10-year-old Cornelius Epp. His true story gave us a view of moving from Russia to North America. A tale as seen by not an adult, or even a teenager, but a child.

Generally speaking, our Mennonite history is written by adults and often in the past by men. It was refreshing to hear a child's version of tumult and danger. The tale is not fiction.

As an aside it might be helpful to bring into this conversation an excellent novel, *The Russlaender*, written by Sandra Birdsell. It will give the reader the adult version of



Lorne Buhr

what Katya Vogt experienced as a child in Russia. Katya is the chief character of Birdsell's fictionalized account. Ten-year old Cornelius Epp in the readers theatre is age specific, a different approach.

If we could look forty years ahead what would the state of 'Mennonite history' in Canada look like? Would our younger folk be finding stories which would move them to appreciate their roots? Which would breathe life into their day to day experience? Recently, I heard the comment that those with a Mennonite heritage are very fortunate in that it is an historical tale with truths going back four or more centuries. The commentator noted that that history is sometimes unique and makes for a good grounding in faith and life. This is somewhat out of the ordinary when one makes comparison with other religious communities.

What should MHSA be about in the light of such observations? A year ago, Lil Bartel, a member of the MHSA board of directors organized a genealogical contest at Menno Simons School in Calgary. Students were to investigate their family history and create a visual account. Prizes were awarded and the process turned up some wonderful stories. Are we looking to the future and what our

'Mennonite' population will be like?

Maybe the plans and actions leadership takes now can ensure that Mennonite values will thrive for decades to come? ❖

Chairman's Corner

By Dave Neufeldt

There are many activities we undertake as an historical society. One of our primary responsibilities is to preserve historical records, but I think an equally important part of our mandate, is the sharing of information. There are many ways we do this, both provincially and nationally.

Here in Alberta, one of the ways we do this is through this newsletter. Another is through the conferences we hold twice a year. On October 26, 2013, we held our Fall Conference at the Gem of the West Museum in Coaldale. It was a successful event with about 80 people in attendance. We were fortunate to have Dr. John B. Toews share about his latest book, **"Mennonites in Ukraine Amid Civil War and Anarchy (1917-1920)."** Plans are coming together for the spring conference where Ruth Derksen-Siemens will be our guest speaker.



Dave Neufeldt

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- Coaldale Hospital Memoirs (\$25)
- Among the Ashes (\$25)
- Seeking Place of Peace (\$15)
- Nuggets of Gold (\$15)

There are also many activities happening across Canada. In January, I had the privilege of attending the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada annual meeting in Winnipeg. While Winnipeg is not my first choice for a January destination, the local planning committee warmly welcomed us. I have attended the MHSC meetings a few times in the past and I always come away inspired by all the things that other societies are doing.

There are two projects that are being undertaken by MHSC and various Mennonite archives across Canada that will have a significant impact on the research of Mennonite history. Both of these projects involve the creation of online databases. The first one is a genealogical database of original sources. This would include such things as church records, Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization records, passenger ship lists, and census records. The database would have a scan of the original document, a transliteration of that document, and a searchable index of the contents of those documents.

The second project is a photo database. There are tens of thousands of photographs stored in Canadian Mennonite archives. The objective is to scan and index the photos and place them in a central database accessible through the internet. The database would be searchable in a variety of ways such as by person, organization or location. Users would be able to download low resolution scans, or, for a fee, to obtain a higher resolution scan. All participating archives would be able to add their photo-

graphs to the database.

I find both of these projects exciting in the way they will make material readily accessible to researchers. Although MHSA is not yet a formal partner in these projects, this is something on which I would like input at the Annual General Meeting (AGM) on April 26, 2014.

One of the events at the MHSC meeting was a celebration of sixteen books published in the last year by authors from the Mennonite community. Included in this list is Esther Epp-Tiessen's history of Mennonite Central Committee Canada, which was co-sponsored by MHSC.

Some of the activities of the other provincial societies include the Quebec society's co-sponsoring of a conference on the proposed Quebec Charter. This conference provided a perspective on religious liberty from Anabaptist history. The Saskatchewan society has participated in dialog with First Nations people. Several of the provincial societies either have recently moved into larger facilities or will be doing so in the near future.

Coming back to our Alberta society, I am very pleased with what we have been able to accomplish here despite being one of the smallest of the provincial societies. This is due to dedicated volunteers we have here. There is the core group of people who come out to the archives every week to do the regular tasks involved in processing the records, paying bills, and keeping the office functioning. There

are those who create this newsletter three times a year. There are those that organize our conferences. There are those that may not be able to participate in these activities but who contribute financially. I am grateful to all of you. ❖

MHSA 2013 Fall Conference Report

By Dave Toews

"Was an historical institutionalized pacifism capable of addressing the crisis of Mennonites caught in civil



Dave Toews

war and anarchy?" The anticipated lecture by Dr. John B. Toews would seek to address this question.

The October 26, 2013, fall conference of the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta (MHSA) was held at the Gem of the West Museum in Coaldale. Chair, Dave Neufeldt, warmly welcomed the large gathering of members, interested observers and the Coaldale Choir to the activities of the afternoon. Dave explained the objectives of the MHSA; continued development of the archives, helping individuals with genealogical research and maintaining weekly office hours. Dave mentioned the organizations affiliated with the MHSA, Genealogical Registry

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When I looked around at the people at that funeral, I realized that there were very few of the original Burns Ranch people left. When I considered each of those people individually, I wondered who would write our story. It became clear to me that none of those present would – or could. So that left me! That's when I started to gather information about our past. At that point, I very quickly learned that the best time to have written a history would have been 30 years ago.

My sources are several. There are written records and there are stories. In the Glenbow archives in Calgary, Alberta, there are documents in the Pat Burns files relating to the land east of Didsbury that was sold to the Mennonites. There are church records and minutes of church meetings. I have records that my father kept and I still have his income tax returns. There are also local histories that contain information.

Written records don't change over time and they don't "forget" and fade like memories do. We think these records are reliable but we know that what goes into the records is dependent on the perceptions, biases, interests and limitations and the information that is available to those creating the record. We also know that the words written many years ago may not mean the same to us as they did to the writer.

There are stories and the memories of those of us who are the survivors. We think we remember things accurately but we all know what an unreliable instrument memory can be. When two people talk about the same incident, their stories are often quite different, depending on their interests, their background, their biases and how the incident affected them.

Given these qualifications, we think a story is true, not fiction. It is the story about real people, at a real place, in a real time. It's a story that deals with history, but it's not really a "HISTORY" like a real historian would put it together; therefore it's a story.

It has been loosely said that the Mennonites bought "the Burns ranch." Sources tell us that, at one time, Pat Burns owned 700,000 acres of land in southwestern Alberta and that he could get on his horse in Cochrane and ride all the way to the U.S. border and never leave his own land. That land is not what the Mennonites bought. Today, when one speaks about the Burns Ranch, we speak about just the 5³/₄ section parcel of land the Mennonites bought east of Didsbury.

For the most part, I will focus on the years around 1926 with some information leading up to and including World Wars I and II. To put this into a context, we need to have some understanding of what Alberta was like in the early twentieth century.

I will conclude the story with a description of Pat Burns from whom the Mennonites bought the land.

STORIES FROM "THE BURNS RANCH"

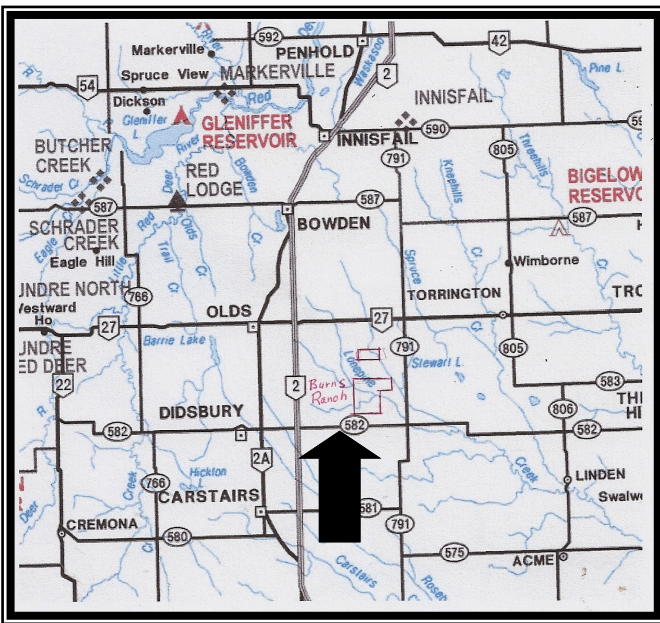
by Ralph Dahl

In May of 1926, twelve Mennonite families signed a contract to buy 5 ³/₄ sections of land from P. Burns Holdings Ltd. This land was situated east of the Calgary-Edmonton highway between Didsbury and Olds, Alberta. The

signatures on that contract were those of: D. Peters, H. Rempel, G. Dahl, G. Peters, John Wiebe, P. Esau, J. Warkentine, Abe Dick, Anna Wiens, P. Warkentine, W. Peters and G. Wiens.

They were not the first settlers or the first Mennonites in the area. In the 1890s and again in 1900, Mennonites arrived in the Didsbury area but none of those groups seem to have been connected with the Burns Ranch people. In 1900, the Neufeld brothers came west from Manitoba looking for land and they each filed on homesteads east and south of Didsbury. The next year they brought their families west and they were joined by others from Manitoba. This group eventually organized to form the Bergthal Church and would later provide pastoral services to the Burns Ranch Church. In time, the two churches would merge.

The twelve families who bought the land from Burns were all immigrants from southern Russia who had arrived in Canada at different times between 1923 and 1926. They had lived through Russia's involvement in World War I and they had survived the Russian revolution which effectively ended Russia's involvement in the war. They had survived the civil war that followed the revolution and they had survived the anarchy of Nestor Makhno and his gangs although many of their contemporaries and family members did not. They had survived the typhus epidemic, tuberculosis, typhoid and other diseases that accompanied the chaos. They had witnessed murder, rape, death and mass starvation in their homeland and they had lost their homes and all their possessions. They had received help in Russia from the newly or-



Locations of Mennonite Settlements

ganized Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), without which some of them said they would have starved to death. With this kind of background, readers shouldn't be surprised to find examples of post traumatic stress disorder and some classic symptoms among these immigrants.

They came to Canada through the efforts of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization. Money for their fare to Canada was

to be thankful. In a report to the Burns Company, its agent reported that, "...for the first year some of the settlers survived on porridge and a coffee substitute made from burnt barley."

They were also aware that some of their contemporaries who had remained in Russia, if they survived, were now in a Siberian gulag; they knew what that meant and they realized how fortunate they were by comparison.

How these particular families got together to buy this land, we don't know but the purchase must have been through the work of the Board of Colonization. Although there were some family groups, the different groups did not know each other before they met at the ranch. They faced a difficult beginning but it can be argued that they had some advantages that not all displaced persons had. They had grown up in a stable culture with firm values and a work ethic. They came with literacy and education, admitted-

ly in a foreign language and from a foreign culture, and they had work skills. They came in groups so they could support each other. Mennonites already in Canada were very helpful, not only in bringing them here, but once here, in taking them into their homes and helping them to become established. Land companies and the Canadian government were looking for settlers and for the most part, Canadians accepted newcomers. Somebody had enough faith in them to extend them credit, first to pay for their trip, and then, to make it possible to buy the land and the livestock. Later, when that financial support was not enough, the settlers must have borrowed from the Burns Company to build houses and drill wells. When they couldn't make their payments during the depression, the Company reduced their obligations to make it possible for them to remain on the land.

30 in. Red Soil north of
in. Arroyo 1/2.

32 #	31 #	22 #	70 #	G. Dahl.
H. Mark.	Am. Weiss	Ma. Dahl	W. Dahl	35 # 35 #
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S. Egan	H. Bumpel	S. Peters	D. Peters	
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S. Weiss	W. Peters
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Location of Mennonite lots at Burns Ranch

I try to imagine what the first summer at the

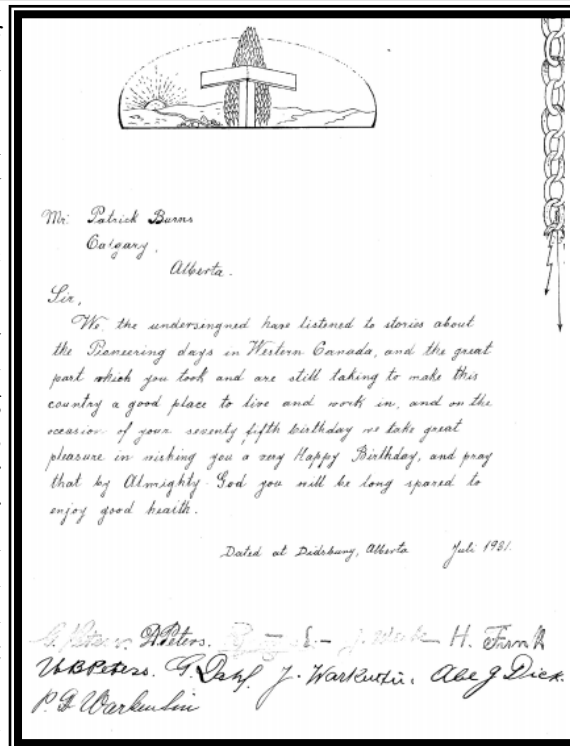
ranch was like. The members of the group arrived in Didsbury by train in April, 1926. From there, it is said, they, and all their belongings, were taken by hay rack to the ranch headquarters. There the families made their homes in whatever buildings existed, often several to a building. They must have had a common kitchen and dining room. From here, I imagine, each family would go to their own half section to do whatever they needed to do to be able, in time, to live there. They had signed a contract to buy land but there was nothing on that land that looked like a home. They had bought cows and horses and pigs but there were no barns or fences or shelters

for them. This was open rangeland. They had drawn lots for the various buildings at the ranch which they would "fix up" to become their homes. These needed to be moved to their respective holdings. Buildings were moved by large teams of horses. They needed to help each other to accomplish these moves. My older sister was born in October, 1926, which means that my mother was pregnant during this first summer. To put all this into context we need to look at what this part of the country was like at that time.

ALBERTA IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

The Alberta that these Mennonites came to in 1926 was not the boom and bust oil economy we have come to accept for the last 60 years. Alberta had been a province for only 21 years. In 1900, when the Neufeld brothers came to Didsbury, the population of the future province was just over 73,000 which is less than the population of Red Deer today! Between 1901 and 1911, the population grew to 375,000, a five-fold increase in ten years. By 1926, Alberta's population was about 650,000. So, in 15 years, the population had doubled again. Women could not vote provincially until 1916. It was not until 1929 that women were recognized as "persons" as defined in the *British North America Act*. When Anna Wiens signed the contract with the Burns company, she couldn't be sure she was actually a "person."

A severe drought had hit Alberta in 1917 and in the area of southeastern Alberta, the number of dryland farms decreased from 2400 in 1918 to just under 500 in 1926. Four out of five farms were abandoned. By 1926, drought conditions began to ease and for a few years there was enough rain to bring forth crops in 1927 to 1929. But, by 1930, severe drought returned and the wind blew and picked up the dust from the dry fields, filled the ditches, piled up along the fence lines and sifted through leaky windows.

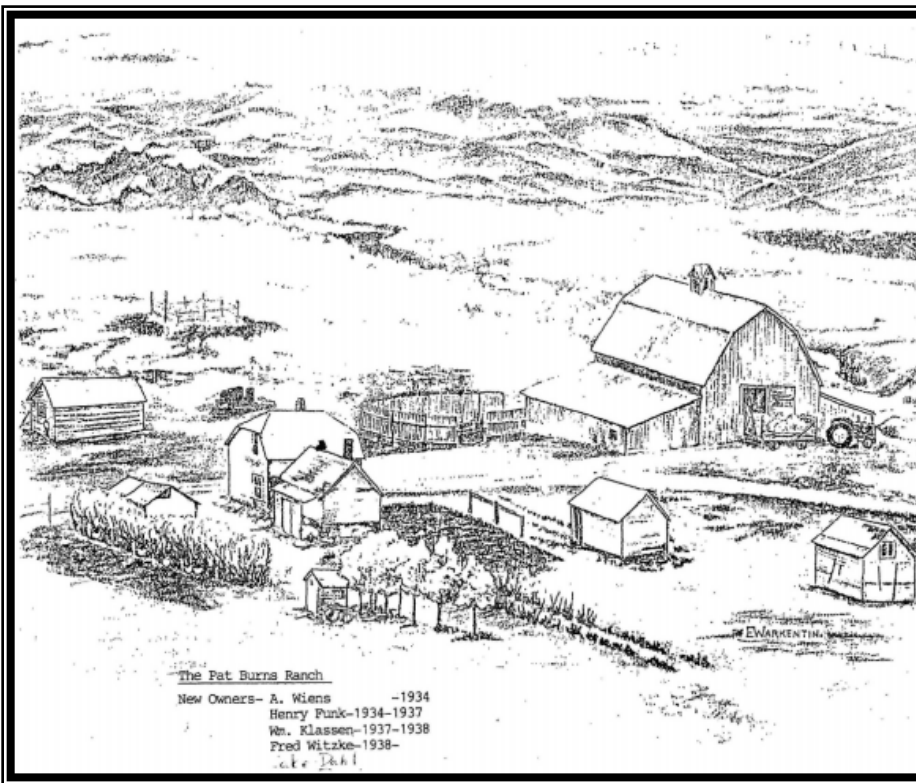


Letter to Pat Burns (1931)

Everything in the house was covered with a layer of dust and the term "dirty thirties" was born. The stock market crash in 1929 marked the onset of a worldwide economic downturn which, together with the drought, made the 1930s on the prairies something still talked about. By 1931, the unemployed in the cities were going door to door offering to work for food and school districts talked about providing milk and food to undernourished children. In 1933, the grasshoppers arrived!

The worst of the drought was in the southeast part of the province. In the Didsbury area, it was very dry but there was always enough growth to provide forage for the cattle. But, at our farm, ditches filled with drift soil and fences were buried in sand up to the tops of the fence posts. The provincial and federal governments tried to help but, for the most part, they were overwhelmed by the extent of the disaster that nature and the economy presented. The farm situation was made worse by the farming methods in use at the time: deep plowing, burning of stubble, frequent cultivating to control weeds and harrowing. Such methods left the soil pulverized and ready to be blown away. This was before the days of herbicides.

In 1935, the Bennett government in Ottawa proclaimed the *Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act* which was an effort to reclaim the drought-ravaged lands of the southern prairies. With new farming techniques, this proved to be so successful that the program became permanent and, over time, did succeed in restoring much of the land in what was known as the Palliser Triangle. One of the methods used was to establish windbreaks by planting trees and rows



Pencil Drawing of the Headquarters at the Pat Burns Ranch

of hedges. I have read that some of these hedges consisted of hemp or marijuana bushes! In 1929, Alberta had a good crop and wheat sold for \$1.02 a bushel; consequently, the province ran a small surplus. In 1930, wheat sold for 45 cents a bushel and a quarter of working-age Albertans were unemployed. The market price for wheat went down to about 35 cents a bushel of which the farmer actually often received a good deal less. By 1935, the province was bankrupt, the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) government was defeated and Social Credit assumed power under the leadership of William Aberhart. He tried to deal with this situation by firing civil servants, reducing government expenditures, raising taxes, imposing a 2% sales tax and defaulting on several bond issues, the only province in Canada ever to do so. Aberhart passed the "Accurate News and Information Act" which effectively gave his government control of Alberta's

drilled number 113 near Leduc; this one was not dry! Thus, Alberta entered into the oil economy. This, in turn, was the beginning of the end of coal mining in the Drumheller Valley.

THE CONTRACT

The contract the group signed with P. Burns and Company Limited was dated May 15, 1926. The group, as a whole bought 3677.73 acres of land (5 $\frac{3}{4}$ sections) for \$116,951.81 (averaging \$31.80 per acre). There is a record of how much each family paid for their half section. They also bought all the household effects at the ranch, some feed oats, cows, pigs, chickens and horses for a total of \$122,240.86. All the smaller items were listed in great detail (all the way from one writing desk to one dozen small spoons). Cows and chickens were simply recorded as to how many there were, but horses were described individually by color, age, and brand. I think this indicated how important horses were to the economy of the day when they provided the energy for the plow, the wagon and the buggy.

There were 12 pages of conditions that applied to this sale. "The purchasers will name a representative to speak for the group to the Company." They agreed that 1/3 of the proceeds from the sale of produce from the land would be delivered in the name of the Company and this amount would be applied against the cost of the land. They were required to brand all livestock with the Company brand. They were to summerfallow $\frac{1}{4}$ of the land annually in a "good and husband-manlike" manner. They were to kill all noxious weeds. The conditions also stated that the Burns Company would not be involved in partitioning the land among the purchasers or be involved in pricing the individual lots.

The conditions went on to say that if the purchasers defaulted on their

newspapers, because, as Aberhart said, "newspapers are the mouthpiece of financiers." This probably tells us all we need to know about Aberhart's relationship with the banks and financial institutions.

Meanwhile, Premier Aberhart's health was failing and he died a bitter man in 1943. He was succeeded by Ernest Manning. "The Great Depression" ended in Alberta with the onset of World War II. In the spring of 1939, 61,000 Albertans were on relief and by the spring of 1941, that number was under 4000. There was food and gasoline rationing because of the war. In 1942, large numbers of American troops arrived in Edmonton to begin construction of the Alaska Highway. This enterprise boosted the Alberta economy. After the war, Imperial Oil started drilling for oil south of Edmonton. After drilling 112 dry holes, they

payments or left the land before it is totally paid for, they would lose whatever equity they had invested in the land, with improvements, would revert back to the Company. (This happened in quite a few instances.) The people decided among themselves which family got which parcel of land by drawing lots. In the same way they divided the ranch buildings which would become their homes for the first winter.

I expect the financial obligations set out in the contract were fairly standard. What's interesting to me is that the contract also set out how the land was to be farmed such as making summerfallow, destroying weeds and harvesting at the proper time. In his biography of Pat Burns, Grant MacEwan says something to the effect that Pat Burns was a conservationist and environmentalist long before those words became a part of the common language.

The Company hired a man named Fischer Williams to be the Company representative to the settlers and to oversee the settlement project. His job description seemed to be to make sure the settlers made payments as stipulated in the contract and to prevent or report on any cheating on their obligations, but, he also seemed to serve as a mentor or consultant to them even though they didn't always appreciate that "assistance." With his job description, Fischer Williams was often not liked by the immigrants and some of them went to some lengths to try to outwit him. Eventually, new contracts were drawn up in 1931.

THE FAMILIES

Because I know very little about some of the families in this group, I decided to look at three as a representative sample. The Wiebe family was our closest neighbor half a mile away. They came to Canada in 1925 with six children. One of their daughters had trachoma when they left Russia and was detained for treatment and came to Canada by herself several months later than the rest of the family. For the first winter, the family was taken in by D.D. Reimer in the Carstairs area. His first wife had died and he lived alone in a small house. Into this situation, came a family of eight. How that worked one can only imagine. The following spring, the Wiebes moved to the ranch to meet the rest of the group. The building they drew by lot and bought from the Company was a large barn-like building which had provided storage for grain and hay. Before this building could be moved to their property, winter had set in. Consequently, for the first winter, they lived in a straw covered shed they built on their land. With their six children, they lived in a wooden building with a straw roof, a wood burning stove for heat and kerosene lamps for light! A firefighter's dream! The following June, their building was moved to their site and the ground floor became their living quarters while the large open loft was used in the summer months by the group as the place in which to hold their church services.

Gerhard and Susanna Peters came to Canada in 1924. They had no children. Their first months in Canada were spent in Manitoba. In the summer of 1925, they moved to the Namaka Farm where they joined their relatives, the Rempels and the Dahls. During the winter of 1925-6 they lived in Calgary where Gerhard worked for the CPR as a section hand. In the spring of 1926 they joined the other families at the ranch.

Both Gerhard and Susanna kept diaries during parts of those early years;



parts of those diaries still exist and are a wonderful source of information. From even routine, mundane, insignificant entries, it is possible to learn a good deal about the life of the day. I will now detour and follow those diaries one of which records that, on March 12, 1927, less than a year after the Peters arrived at the ranch, work was started on the David Peters house; on March 14, 1927, they laid the ground work for the Gerhard Peters house and on March 24 they raised the frame on the Rempel's house. All these houses were exactly the same in size and design. Because David Peters was a builder/carpenter who had been a foreman on a large estate in Russia, he seemed to be in charge and the families helped each other with the construction. The Gerhard Peters moved into their house in June of that year. Construction would have been, in some ways, a bit simpler in those days because there was no need to wait for the concrete trucks, the plumbers, the electricians, the furnace people or the drywallers. There was no electricity, no bathroom, no running water, no



Old barn at Burns Ranch

concrete basement and heating came from a wood or coal burning stove.

The David Peters house was still standing until 2013, although it had been abandoned since about the 1950s. I went to look at it. It measured 20 by 14 feet. The stairway to the second floor was 27 inches wide and steep. When space is at a premium, one doesn't build a grand circular staircase. The house was on timbers which were set on large stones and, though the shingles were mostly gone and the windows were out, the roof line was as straight as the day it was built. There was no basement as we think of basements but there was a depression under the floor, partially caved in, which had been a cellar where potatoes, vegetables and canned goods were stored. In this house, the David Peters raised five children, some of whom were in their teens when they came to Canada. Later, an annex was added to the house, but, even with that, the total square footage of living space was less than 1000 square feet.

Back to the diaries. The Gerhard Peters diary states that, in

February, 1928, eleven rail cars were loaded with hay which was the portion owed to the Company. Initially, this was a hay economy. In April, 1929, the community voted on and passed a motion to build a new school which was to be called Mona School. This was a community decision and not confined to the Mennonites. The school was opened in 1930. It is my understanding that, at that time, each community was responsible for the building and maintenance of its own schools. The community also hired the teachers and paid them if they had the money to do so. When I started school at Mona, we had, in one room, 39 students in nine grades and one teacher for whom this was her first job, fresh out of teacher training.

In 1930, Gerhard and Susanna adopted an infant son who was named Edward. They had

no other children. This is the Ed Peters that many readers know. He was married to Kathy who has done a great deal of work translating the diaries and typing them to make them much easier to read. Ed is the only one of the first generation children of the original purchasers of this land who has lived all his life on the land his parents bought in 1926. Ed has been most helpful in gathering information for this story. He extracted a lot of information from his parents' diaries, and later, when writing became more difficult for him, he allowed me to use some of those diaries to fill in information that I would not have been able to obtain elsewhere. Not only that, Ed has an incredible memory for events of the past and when memory faded, he was always ready to help me. (1)

According to the diary, in 1930, Gerhard Peters and his brother-in-law, Abe Dick, bought a 15-30 International tractor and a plough for \$800.00. In 1932, they bought a threshing machine for \$700.00 which was paid off in 1933. In 1935, they built a new barn. In 1941 they traded in their Model A Ford for a 1937 Ford; we don't know when they bought the Model A. In 1942, they got their first radio and which had a huge impact on their lives by opening up the world to them. These were battery powered radios. There was no electric power on the farm yet so they didn't have the radio on all day because it would drain the battery. On January 15, 1943, a severe snow storm closed all the roads and the snow plough didn't come through until March 3. In those days, the wisdom of the experts told us that the earth was going into another ice age; no one worried about global warming! In December, 1944, there was a service of thanksgiving because the "Reiseschuld" (travel debt) had been paid off for our district. In 1944, the Peters finished paying for their land and for the first time, in 1946, the diary says they were working on their income tax.

When I read these diary entries, I began to revise my perception of what the "Early Years" were like. Because I was born in 1931, the depression didn't really affect me much as a child. My parents worried but I was unaware of their concern. Still, it had always been my impression that, from the time the group bought the ranch until the beginning of the war, it was a

desperate struggle to survive; there was no money to do anything other than survive. Then, I read in the diaries about building houses in 1927 and drilling wells. The Burns Ranch Mennonites must have borrowed money from the Company to do these things; but in any case, they were working. In 1927, wheat sold for 75 cents a bushel. The Rempels threshed 1758 bushels. In 1930, the community built a school and people bought tractors and machinery and the Burns Ranch Church was built. In 1935, the Dahl's started construction of a new house which still stands and is still occupied. In 1936, the community built a cheese factory and a few years later added a general store and a service station.

These are just a few of the things for which we have records, but other things were happening, too. There wasn't much money but people were working and doing things. It seems all of these things were done without government assistance. We remember that, by 1935, the Alberta government was bankrupt and the federal government was not much better off. Even though all these things were happening, that's not to suggest that life was easy. At the ranch, no one was unemployed and because they had chickens, cows and wheat, there was no fear of starvation even though a gourmet diet was still far in the future. People in the cities who lost their jobs in the depression were destitute and stood in line at the soup kitchen to feed their children but on the farm they were working and nourished.

The other family that I know something about is mine. By the time my parents came to Canada in 1923, they had experienced the turmoil and insecurity of the war and revolution in Russia like everyone else. Because their home village had been burned to the ground in 1919, they had no permanent residence. During the war, Dad served as an orderly on the troop trains bringing wounded soldiers back from the fighting front. Later he taught school. My parents were on the first train allowed to leave Russia going through the "Red Gate" into Latvia. They came with one "suitcase" which contained all of their worldly possessions and they had a nine month

old daughter. When they came to Canada, they were taken in by the A.W. Klassen family near Swallow, Alberta. The Klassens had a large family of their own (we think they had nine children) but they still took in my parents and their child. Mr. Klassen, besides being a farmer, was a business man and he was also somehow involved with the Colonization Board. Through him, Dad got a job with the Colonization Board. Dad knew German and Low German and had taught Russian and Ukrainian in Russia and had been to a few English classes that first year in Canada. Accordingly, his job was to be a translator for other new immigrants to help them get established. To get to these new immigrants, he was given a CPR pass and a Colonization Board expense account which paid him \$4.00 a day, a big wage for that time. A hotel room would cost \$1.50 per night, breakfast was 25 cents and lunch and supper were 40 cents each.

According to Dad's records, the family travel debt in January, 1924 was \$339.05. In the summer of 1925,, my parents were moved to the Namaka Farm where they lived with other Mennonite immigrants. Their "apartment" consisted of one of the stalls in what had been the horse barn of the George Lane ranch.

During the winter of 1925/26, the Dahl family lived in Calgary in the Chinatown area while Dad worked for the Colonization Board. In the spring of 1926, they moved, with the rest of the purchasers, to the ranch. Where they were housed for that first summer at the ranch I don't know. The building they drew by lot was half the bunkhouse. The cowboys' residence was sawn in half and two families got half each. Our half was



An old house at the Burns Ranch



The Dahl house at the Burns Ranch

moved to our farm sometime during that first summer and my parents and their two children moved in, even though the house had only three walls. For the first while, they hung blankets or sheets across the open end to keep the rain and the wind out as much as they could; but this didn't keep out the gophers that seemed to be curious to see who it was that had invaded their territory. During that first summer, the missing wall was filled in so they could live there during the winter. As well as fixing their house, they built a rudimentary barn with a pole roof covered with straw and they had to build fences to keep in their livestock. They were also required by contract to start breaking the sod to get ready for the crop the following year. The breaking plough was pulled by horses but first these horses needed to be convinced that this was something that they should do. They were not the gentle beasts we see at the Calgary Stampede parade. These were wild, untamed horses raised on the open range with no acquaintance with halter or harness and they were not about to submit to this kind of treatment without serious protest.

As already mentioned, in October, 1926, my older sister was born and then my parents had three children under five years old. That is such a simple and ordinary statement: "My older sister was born." It wasn't quite so simple. By October, the half of the bunk house had been moved to my parents' farm and they were living in it. It seems that the two children had been sent to Mom's sister's place where the grandparents were also staying. Mom and Dad were home alone when mom went into labour. When this started, Dad got on the horse and hurried to town to get the doctor, a distance of 15 miles. Before long Mom realized she couldn't wait for the doctor so she spread a sheet on the floor (she couldn't mess up the bed) and long before Dad or the doctor got there, she had her baby.

Our farm was not far from the Lone Pine Creek so there was water there for the livestock and for washing. There was a well at the ranch and I imagine they would haul water from there for cooking but every drop of water used was carried in by bucket and to get warm water it would be heated on the stove. Water conservation was a natural. I don't know exactly when my parents dug a well by hand, hauling every shovelful of dirt up by rope and bucket. This well was about five feet in diameter and 35 feet deep. Digging this well must have been a huge undertaking and an act of faith because there was absolutely no guarantee that they would eventually get water. They did find enough water for the house but not enough for the livestock. The house that had been part of the cowboys' bunkhouse was about 18 feet by 20 feet with an upstairs. For several months during the first winter at the farm, my Dad's sister, her husband and their three children lived in the house with my parents and their three children. Try to imagine what that was like with one room upstairs and one room downstairs, two families, each with three children, no plumbing, one cook stove for heat and kerosene lamps for light. There were obviously no



The Dahl homestead at the Burns Ranch



Remnants of a barn foundation at the Burns Ranch

street lights so when they blew out the lamp at night, it was DARK!

During the first two years at the farm Dad worked part time for the Colonization Board which meant that he would be gone for days at a time on those road trips. During those times, Mom would be alone on the farm, responsible for the milking, looking after the livestock and carrying in the firewood to keep the house warm, carrying in water for washing and feeding and looking after three small girls. No cell phone, no radio and no TV! No dishwasher, no fridge and laundry done on the rubbing board. No neighbours within a mile. One couldn't turn on music to dispel the deafening quiet but one might hear the chorus of the coyotes, especially on a clear winter night. When Dad came home from his trips, he would come to Didsbury on the train and, from there, he would walk to the farm, a distance of 15 miles.

THE CHURCH

Apparently, the first social activity of this group related to church. This is what one would expect from a group of Mennonites living together and somewhat isolated by language and culture from the greater society around them. We have the minutes of church meetings from 1928 to 1941. We have a copy of the church constitution the group created in 1929. There were several other Mennonite families in the vicinity who had bought land, but not from Burns, who were also part of the church community. This group did not include any ordained ministers, and not, it seems, anyone who wished to be a minister. The first minutes were dated December, 1928, at which time the group agreed that they should organize as a congregation and that its name should be "*Friedenshort*." I had never heard that name until I saw these minutes. We were always known as "The Burns Ranch Church." At the next meeting, about six weeks later, the agenda included discussion on the proposed constitution. Twenty-one people were in attendance. Before they got to talk about the constitution, a member asked whether they shouldn't first talk about the unity or the lack of unity and the many disagreements among the members of the group. This seemed to lead

to a long discussion at the end of which the following resolution was passed: "*Because in this situation there is no way to force compliance, we solemnly promise to work at overcoming all those things that have been and are dividing us, and that we learn to forget those things.*"

I think their solution to their problem reflects their situation. In Calgary today, if we don't like the music in the church, or the pastor, or some of the other people, it is quite easy to go to another church. This was not an option for them. They were not going anywhere. They were stuck with each other and they needed to try to make the most of the situation as it was. They needed to learn forgiveness. The Constitution document was not finalized until 1934. Its contents were not too different from similar documents today. All members had voting rights and the women took part in the discussions and decision making.

In 1934, the group built a church. It was on two acres of land donated by the Burns Company. It was a very basic building with a cottage roof (I would guess about 25 by 30 feet in dimensions). There was no basement. The building sat on timbers set on blocks. There were large windows on three sides and above each window was a decorative arch, the only indication that the building was a church. The inside was one large plain open space with a small coat room to one side of the door for the women to hang their coats. For the men's coats, there was a row of nails on the back wall. Across the front was a slightly elevated platform on which was a table and a chair. I don't remember any pictures or decorations on the walls except a large plaque behind where the preacher stood and it said, "*Danket dem Herrn; denn er ist freun-*



The Mennonite Church at the Burns Ranch (1935)

dlich, und seine Guete waehret ewiglich." There were no pews as we think of them; we sat on planks set on wooden blocks. In winter, there was a space heater in the middle of the building. There was no electricity and no plumbing. There were outdoor toilets. On one side of the lot was a hitching rail for the horses. The cost of the building was \$551.40. This would have been for materials only. The labour was donated by members of the congregation.

The building quickly became the centre of the social and religious life of the community. By the time the church was built, pastoral care was provided by the ministers of the Bergthal Church. Services were every second Sunday and when roads were impassable because of mud or snow, one of the lay members would read a sermon from a book kept at the church. Sunday School for the children preceded the church service, with all the children from preschoolers to teens in one class. That Mrs. Rempel, with very meagre resources, managed to keep most of this motley crew more or less focused on the lesson still seems like

a miracle to me. She did this for many years. We are told that she had only three years of formal schooling but she was a talented and beloved lady. On Christmas Eve, the Sunday School always put on a program. The church would be lit by kerosene burning mantle lamps and there would be a big Christmas tree with real wax candles that would be lit after the candy bags were handed out. One advantage Mrs. Rempel had was that she didn't need to compete with the entertainment offered by TV.

The group had a choir or, maybe the group was a choir that would meet for practices. There was no piano or any other instruments so the choir was led by Gerhard Peters as "*Vorsaenger*." At some time there was a ministerial election within the group with two candidates. The record shows that the "winning" candidate preached one sermon and that seems to have been the end of his career as a preacher. During the summer, there was German school in the church where we were taught to read the Gothic script.

During the 1940s, many people from the prairies were moving to British Columbia. This exodus included some of the Burns Ranch Mennonites and church membership declined. In 1951, the remaining members formally joined the Bergthal congregation and the Burns Ranch Church was no longer used. The following year, the church building was dismantled and moved away. Today, there is no physical evidence that a church ever existed on that site. And yet, surely, some of its essence and the lessons and the values learned in that church must live on in some way in those of us for whom that was once "our church."

"PAT BURNS: The CATTLE KING"

It is probably important to say something about the man from whom the group of Mennonites bought the land. This information is taken from a biography of Pat Burns written by Grant MacEwan in 1979. Pat Burns was born in 1855 in Kirkfield, Ontario. His parents were also refugees, like the people who bought his land, fleeing from starvation caused by the potato famine in Ireland. It is estimated that, in 1847 and 1848, more than 36,000 Irish Catholics arrived in Ontario. The Burns family came in 1848. Pat was the third of ten children. The Burns family knew poverty and Pat was accustomed to hard work with little pay. He attended school in Kirkfield, but, as Grant MacEwan wrote in his biography, "...attendance was erratic at best," and he "...was not drawn to scholarship." MacEwan went on to say that, "...the most lasting reward of his attendance was making the acquaintance of Willie MacKenzie." This Willie MacKenzie later became Sir William Mackenzie who was, among other things, a railroad builder. He helped Pat

Burns' early business career by giving him a series of contracts for supplying beef to the railway workers.

Before he came to western Canada, Pat worked in the bush in Ontario, saved his money and he, with his brother, arrived in Winnipeg in 1878 by riverboat because the railway had not come that far west yet. He worked at odd jobs to earn the \$10.00 he needed to file on a homestead near Minnedosa, Manitoba. To support himself and his farming operation, he started hauling freight by ox cart and buying and selling cattle and anything else he could trade.

This humble enterprise he nurtured through incredible energy, frugality, good management, good luck and integrity to result in the largest meat packing business in the world at that time. Part of his "good luck," as already mentioned, consisted of his friendship with his old school buddy from Kirkfield, Ontario. In time, he became a good friend of R. B. Bennett, a well known Calgary lawyer at the time and future prime minister of Canada. He was one of the "Big Four" who financed the first Calgary Stampede in 1912. As his wealth grew, Pat Burns built a large sandstone mansion on 13th Avenue which was similar to, but a bit more grand, than the Lougheed House a few blocks away. The mansion was finished in 1903 and when Alberta became a province in 1905, a reception was held for Sir Wilfrid and Lady Laurier in Burns Manor. It is said that Burns always kept a dairy cow in the back yard as long as he lived there. Following Pat Burns' death in 1937, the mansion stood empty for a few years before it was eventually demolished to make way for the construction of the Colonel Belcher Hospital on that site.

We might well wonder how Pat Burns' background influenced how he thought about, and, how he dealt with, the destitute people who bought the land east of Didsbury from his company. His own family had come to Canada under similar stressful circumstances 78 years earlier. Did this heighten his empathy for these people? The fact that he kept a cow in the back yard of his elegant mansion suggests that he never did lose all of his survival instincts in spite of his great wealth. We can only wonder. Maybe the following story tells us something.

On his 75th birthday, in 1931, Pat Burns was appointed to the Canadian Senate and at that birthday celebration, the Mennonites who had purchased his land near Didsbury, presented him with a hand drawn birthday card with a chain link border with 75 links drawn by David Peters and signed by ten of the original signatories on the 1926 purchase agreement. Part of the inscription reads, "*We the undersigned have listened to stories about the Pioneering days in Western Canada, and the great part which you took and are still taking to make this country a good place to live and work in, and on the occasion of your seventy fifth birthday we take great pleasure in wishing you a very Happy Birthday, and pray that by Almighty God you will be long spared to enjoy good health.*" Dated "Juli 1931." Grant MacEwan writes that, of all the magnificent and expensive gifts given to Pat Burns on that day, the card from the Mennonites seemed to be the one he treasured the most. (2) The original of that card is preserved in the Glenbow Archives, Calgary, Alberta.

An Interesting Post Script

In 2008, the *Calgary Herald* ran a survey of its readers to see who they

thought had been the most positive influence on their province since its creation in 1905. Many names were put forward, including Wayne Gretzky, Ernest Manning, and Peter Lougheed, but, at the top of the list, by a good margin, was the name of Pat Burns.

Notes

(1) Since this article was written, Ed Peters died on April 17, 2013. With his passing, his amazing memory and the many wonderful stories he could tell died with him.

(2) MacEwan, *Pat Burns Cattle King*, 1979.

Photo Credits: Ralph Dahl ❖

(Continued from Page 3)

and Database of Mennonite Ancestry (GRANDMA) and *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (GAMEO). In addition he stressed the needs within these organizations; volunteers for the archives, library and website, also required are updates to GAMEO articles, donations to MHSA and articles for the Newsletter.

Dave Neufeldt went on to introduce the speaker Dr. John B. Toews, Professor Emeritus, Church History and Anabaptist Studies. Dr. Toews grew up in Coaldale and reminisced that the drive from Calgary to Coaldale had brought back many childhood memories; of the vast prairie landscapes, of thunderstorms and scenes from the cemetery where many family members are buried.

The conference featured a presentation and book launch by Dr. Toews. He lectured on his latest book, *Mennonites in Ukraine, Amid Civil War and Anarchy (1917 - 1921)*, *A Documentary Collection* translated and edited by John B. Toews. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the resulting Civil War had destroyed the existing social order and plunged Ukraine into chaos and anarchy. The reaction to this unbridled chaotic rape and murder of the heretofore peaceful people led to the establishment of the *Selbstschutz*, an armed Mennonite self-defense militia. This militia largely trained and armed by the German army, at one point, included thousands of Mennonites and German colonists.

The peace position of the Mennonites enshrined in the *Privilegium*, the rights and privileges negotiated with Catherine the Great, had been suspended in order to protect life and property. Many believed things would have worse without the *Selbstschutz*. Others, including B.B. Janz, saw it differently: "We must make a confession: We have sinned and not only in this particular case. However, in all the murders of those days, all the conflagrations, all the rapes resulted from the Mennonite armed resistance" (page 118 *Mennonites in Ukraine, Amid Civil War and Anarchy*).

"Dr. Toews did not comment extensively on these documents, rather, and wisely, they were allowed to speak for themselves. The depictions of what our people did when faced with the unbridled vio-



Above: Gem of the West Museum (Coaldale, AB)

Below: Dave Neufeldt and John B. Toews seated at table



lence forces us, rather than judging our forefathers, to consider our reaction in similar situations." (from the book review by Henry Neufeld, Ladner, BC)

The *Selbstschutz* had its causes, effects and explanations and perhaps it is best not to judge it too harshly. This is how Toews left the conundrum with the group, each to ponder the question in his/her own mind. It is important

to publish these documents of many sad stories so future generations can read them in English.

The choir sang three songs; the poignant and very fitting *Wehrlos und Verlassen, Each Step I Take* and *Be Strong in the Lord*.

Book sales were brisk and Dr. Toews autographed many copies as he chatted with the buyers.

After the event, a light lunch of *Zwiebach*, ham, *borscht* and apple *plätz* with ice cream was enjoyed by the participants amid the buzz of highly animated conversation. ♦

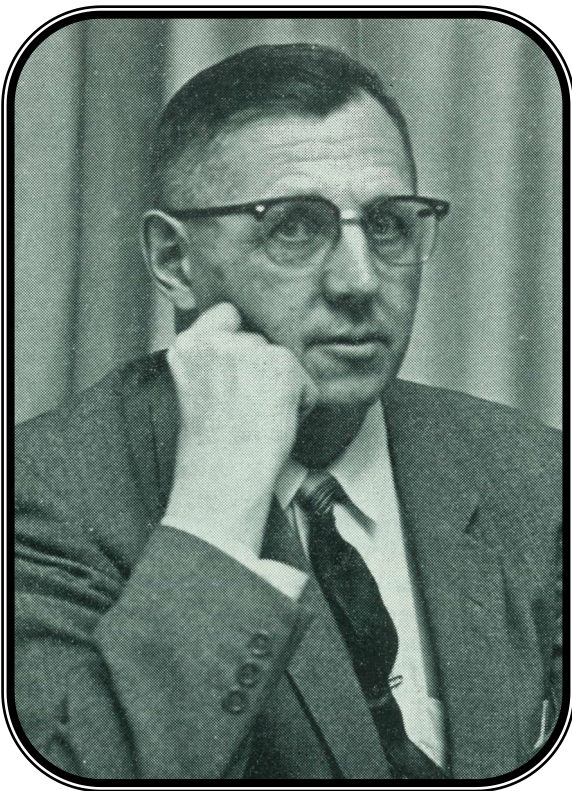
(Continued from Page 1)

My extended family immigrated to Canada via Moscow in 1926. From Moscow, they travelled to Riga, Latvia, and from there to Libau, a city on the Baltic coast. Here they boarded the ship, *Boltara*, and sailed to London, England. In Southampton, they boarded the ship, the *Empress of France*, and sailed to Canada arriving in Quebec City on October 22, 1926. From there, they took the train to Harris, Saskatchewan where my Grandmother Klassen had a brother by the name of Peter Hildebrandt. Together, with the extended family, they purchased three sections of land in Esbank, Saskatchewan. Payments for the land were not made directly to the owner, but through a second party called a vendor. With time, it came to light that the vendor had made partial payments and had pocketed some of the proceeds for himself. This, together with drought and depression, forced them to vacate the farm and, in 1931, the extended Klassen family moved to Coaldale, Alberta to raise sugar beets. In the community of Coaldale, the Klassen family flourished and grew. It was here that my father found his niche.

In Russia, my father attended the *Zentralschule* whose education stood him in good stead. He was a diligent student, had a good head on his shoulders and particularly enjoyed the subject of mathematics. His math skills, together with his organizational skills, proved invaluable to him throughout his life. Out of necessity, my father was a farmer and, for the remainder of his life, he lived on the farm that they had purchased. From 1937 onward, when he was elected to the organizational committee to start the Coaldale Cheese Factory, he enjoyed the role of being a business man. I knew we were farmers, but growing up as the youngest of eleven children, I never once saw my father in farmer garb; he was always dressed in a suit and tie. He supervised his sons and hired hands from the big family dining table as well as from his car when he inspected the fields and crops, which he did regularly. Irrigation ditches were often an obstacle but he navigated around them. Our mother was the one who kept the family and the day to day operations going.

During the 1930s, the Mennonites in the Coaldale area had a vision to start a cheese factory which would enable them to supplement their farm income with the selling of milk and cream. This venture was realized and in 1940 my father became the manager of the Cheese Factory, a position he held until 1972 when he retired and the cheese factory was sold. In the 1930s, the Mennonite community also felt the need to establish a hospital in the Coaldale area. This dream also came to pass and my father served as the first secretary-treasurer when the hospital was founded in 1934; he remained as a board member until his passing in 1974.

I, too, have memories of the *Vertreterversammlung* era. With my dad being so involved with the various Mennonite agencies, we, as a family, became quite familiar with the innumerable terms used in connection with the *Vertreterversammlung*. Over the dinner table we often heard about the Fire Insurance component, the Bethesda Home for the mentally ill in Ontario, the Funeral Aid Society (known as the *Sterbe Kasse*), the *Reiseschuld* and the *Hilfswerk*. I remember discussions about the clothing depot in Yarrow, British Columbia. If my memory serves me correctly, P.A. Neufeld from Didsbury was responsible for the collection of clothing in Alberta for several years and his family home became the gathering site. In December of 1946, my father was elected as chairman of the Mennonite Pro-



Jacob J. Klassen

vincial Relief Committee in Alberta and, as a result, he automatically became a member of the Mennonite Board of Colonization. Consequently, we, as a family, became very conversant with the names of David Toews, C. F. Klaasen, J.J. Thiessen and B. B. Janz. These men became personal friends and acquaintances of my father, and he held them in great esteem. Occasionally my dad would reminisce of his times with the Mennonite Board of Colonization and I distinctly recall his fond recollections of C. F. Klassen whose premature death was mourned by my father. C. F. Klassen was highly esteemed regarding his efforts to help the European Mennonite immigrants in refugee resettlement. My father travelled frequently to meetings: to Edmonton in regard to the Cheese

Factory; to Saskatoon and to Winnipeg for the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization; or, to the Council of Boards when he served on the Finance Committee with the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. My personal memories of the time when my father was involved with the *Vertreterversammlung* are varied and perhaps differ from those of my older siblings. Nowadays, restaurant dinner meetings are popular whereas I remember my mother hosting dinner meetings for the members of the *Hilfswerk Komitee* in our humble farm home years ago. I distinctly recall George I. Penner, H. H. Siemens and Henry Thiessen from Rosemary, Gem and Grassy Lake (all in Alberta) being at our home for meetings on numerous occasions with mother serving a light lunch or supper. Every year, when the *Vertreterversammlung* rolled around, our father was responsible for the making of the report book. This was all prior to having photocopiers and all the reports were duplicated on a gestetner machine. We children who were still at home were called into service to collate the report books. He would put the pages out on the dining room table and we would go round and assemble the pages by hand.

In the late 1950s, there was pressure from the government for the insurance aspect of the *Vertreterversammlung* to be incorporated. The act to incorporate as approved by the Alberta government was presented and approved at the annual meeting in Coaldale, Alberta in 1961. The name of the company became Mennonite Mutual Relief Insurance Company Ltd. (MMRIC). In order to be a valid company, the government required the MMRIC agency to have a licensed agent. In 1960, at the age of 60 years, my father wrote and passed the exam to become the first licensed agent for the MMRIC and also became the first manager. I was in grade seven at that time and I remember my dad being somewhat nervous and apprehensive about the qualifying exam but, apparently, he passed with flying colors. Those readers who remember my father know that he retained his German accent all his life and, even though public speaking was not his forté, with determination he spoke effectively and in a dignified manner. I recall in my high school years being called upon to do some typing for him, letters that he dictated and also completing some fire insurance forms. These letters and forms all had to be done in duplicate with a carbon copy. I just dreaded this job! He was always a very exact task master and did not appreciate typing errors. At those times, I did not fully appreciate him and all his tireless work. Occasionally, we younger children resented the numerous hours of volunteer community work and committee meetings that took our father away from home and farm but, as I reflect on that time, I can't ever recall that my mother was resentful or annoyed. She was his sounding board, his confidant, his faithful companion, and she stood by him faithfully, encouraging him along the way, even when criticism came his way as it often did.

My father was a man of integrity, modest in regards to his own accomplishments, he worked diligently and always saw a task through to completion. Most evenings after the family supper, where a lot of the table discussion centered around the day's happenings, he would rest for 15 to 30 minutes and off he was again to the cheese factory for another meeting or to complete some other business. Some evenings, he remained at home and worked in his office. Saturday was just another work day at the office in town but generally, on Saturdays, he managed to come home by 5:00 p.m. On other days, it was 6:00 p.m. or thereafter. Fortunately, we lived only three miles out of town. The rewards that his efforts brought him were not for personal or monetary gain; his service to God carried its own reward. When he took over the treasury of the *Vertreterversammlung* in 1950, he was paid \$400.00 per year; in 1952, it was increased to \$500.00 and, in later years, the amount was adjusted slightly upwards.

One significant incident that I clearly recall happened about the time I was in Grade Five. A few weeks before Christmas, we had a blizzard that resulted in large snowdrifts around the farm. Like all farmers in that day, some of our farm income came from milking cows. That particular snow storm caused the snow to drift onto the dugout which was very deep and hence fenced off. Due to the snow storm the fence surrounding the dugout was now not noticeable to the cows and, as a result, they wandered onto the dugout where the ice was partially frozen; with the weight of them, three cows were drowned. This was not a happy time. The cows were insured with the MMRIC, but my father thought my brothers had been negligent; they should have noticed the snow bank and made some provision so the cows would not have wandered onto the dugout. Because of this, he would not submit a claim. That time, I remember my mother being somewhat frustrated with him. Gerald and Henry, my brothers, did the milking, but they were both still in their teen years, and in school, and she did not feel that they had been irresponsible; She felt a storm of that nature was an act of God. Nevertheless, my father would not change his mind about submitting a claim. I remember that the Christmas gifts that year were less generous than usual. The lost income from the three drowned cows left its mark and things were a bit tight.

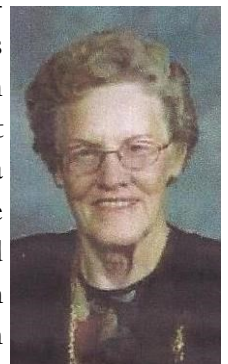
I think I may have given the reader the impression that life in the Klassen household was all work and no play. That is not true. Our Christmases were delightful. Our father was a giving man who very much enjoyed giving all in his family generous gifts. Christmas morning, with all the married siblings and grandchildren coming home to open their gifts, was an amazing time. In summer he would take us all to Waterton Lakes and go boating and hiking. He and mother travelled extensively every summer while we younger ones stayed home and were looked after by our older siblings. With such a large family, my parents had built in babysitters!

I am thankful for the opportunity to share a critical period in my life. My growing up years left a lasting impact on my life and have formulated who I am as an adult. My father, Jacob J. Klassen, modeled servanthood to his family and community as best as he knew how and for this I am truly grateful. ❖

GARDENING THROUGH THE AGES

By Laura Dyck

Where did gardening start? Was it in the Garden of Eden? Did it come to earth as a part of the curse when Adam and Eve were driven from the garden or was it a blessing for those of us who love watching things change from the tiniest seed to a tree that brings forth fruit or a carrot or a potato, or is it a part of our DNA?



Laura Dyck

For me, gardening takes me to a place of peace; it fills in me an empty spot of longing that has nothing to do with loss, but, when I get my hands into the dirt and the magical smell of earth surrounds me, then that spot is filled and I am completely at peace. Because we have a green-house, I can start planting as early as February or March. Many of our plants are kept alive all winter and so our flowerbeds get a head start in the spring.

Our parents brought a few precious seeds with them from Orenburg, Russia in the early 1920s and when I phoned some relatives who



have come out of Russia to Germany, they told me that their gardens were similar to ours since their climate is similar. Those of our relatives who stayed in Russia and managed to live through the terrible Stalinist years, managed to stave off starvation because they were able to keep some of their garden produce for themselves. Sometimes, when famine and drought threatened, they were able to find wild onions and some edible grasses which they were able to use to cook a soup (green *borscht*) and thus fill their stomachs. Then, when the rains came, they were able to grow things again and keep that part of the produce that the government allowed them to retain. Scarce as food was, they always managed to grow a few flowers, something of beauty with which to feed their souls.

When my parents and others came to Rosemary, Alberta, in the early 1930s, everyone had to rely on their own resources and gardens were a must. We always had a large vegetable garden. Mother had a yearning for beauty and one of our neighbours, about two miles

from home, said that mother could come and get bits and pieces of the flowers in her garden. Mother took the little red wagon and, with my twin brothers and me in tow (I was about five years old and the boys two years younger) we walked to the neighbor's garden where mother dug plants to bring back to plant in the flower bed that she had fashioned within the vegetable garden which was quite a distance from the house because our house was on a knoll and we couldn't get water to it. In later years, when electricity came to the farms, we were able to pump water to the flower garden that was then planted around the house. It was a beautiful spot! And so, the reader may ask, why do you garden, Laura? My answer: "Gardening was handed down to me through the ages. I believe it's in my genes."

I cannot describe the beauty that surrounds our home. I have added a few pictures and if readers want to see our garden and take a few bits and pieces with them, come by in the summertime and see. If the Lord grants health and it doesn't hail, readers are in for a treat. Peter and I, often with company, spend a lot of time in our backyard and marvel at the beauty that surrounds us. ❖

Why Do We Sing Together?

A View from the Pews

By Jonathan Dueck, Assistant Professor of Writing, The George Washington University

Why do Mennonites care so much about the way they sing together? I'll explore this question by recounting the experiences, in the early 2000s, of congregational singers in three Edmonton Mennonite congregations. As an ethnomusicologist, I study living people's music-making by observing music-making carefully



Jonathan Dueck



Choir at First Mennonite Church (Edmonton)

and by interviewing musicians, as I did in these congregations. So, this article is my snapshot of several people's experiences in the early 2000s--not an account of these congregations' music and people now!

Between the mid-1980s and early 2000s, many Canadian Mennonites were involved in a conflict over music which the evangelical press often called "the worship wars." In the early 2000s, the Edmonton congregations I studied occupied three major "positions" usually contrasted in scholarly discussions of the "wars".(1) First Mennonite Church (originally General Conference, now Mennonite Church Canada) with its choirs, string quartets, and intergenerational hymn-singing, held what Barry Liesch would call a "traditional" worship service. River West Christian Church, a Mennonite Brethren congregation tied to broader evangelicalism, worshiped with praise bands, sometimes led by professional jazz and pop singers--a "contemporary" service. Holyrood Mennonite Church (then [Old] Mennonite Church, now Mennonite Church Canada) began each service with a praise band, then sang hymns with a song leader--a "blended" service. The three congregations were linked by service work in Edmonton (such as recycling and immigrant advocacy), and, during my study, they held an annual shared Good Friday service. Each congregation was musically and socially compelling. But here, I'll focus on stories from First and River West because they illustrate my argument most compactly.

In 1999, historian, Michael S. Hamilton wrote, in *Christianity Today*, an article arguing that advocates of popular music had successfully divided churches by musical affinity and age, and that the churches with "guitars" were likely to win the "worship wars" since churches that appeal to young people were most likely to survive.(2) Similarly, a layperson at River West in this period told me: "[our church music] changed from the traditional hymn singing to the more contemporary singing sometime before we came... [these] are good changes. The singing style appeals to our young

people who are our future." For Hamilton and this layperson, musical style--patterns of instrumentation, melody and rhythm--appear to be the central issue in Christian conflicts over music, because style is a key commodity in the market of churches competing for young members.

In the same period, evangelical theologian Marva Dawn criticized the adoption of popular music in church because of its aims to attract new members by entertaining them, a means which didn't express the focus on God that characterizes serious theology of worship.(3) Dawn's arguments--that the worship wars are really about theologies of liturgy and the church--are reflected in editorials in and letters written to many church periodicals of the time, including Mennonite periodicals.(4)

But in the same year that Hamilton wrote his article and only a few years after Dawn wrote her book, a First Mennonite Church member said: "...one of the wonderful offshoots of [choirs at First Mennonite] is the number of times that we have three generations in one choir... in September when we [sang] this year, all my family members were in the choir...in fact, that time in September, there were actually three families like that... three entire households that were represented in the choir."

This singer emphasized neither musical style, nor a theology of worship, but rather the social relationships that he experiences when singing church music. Similarly, a

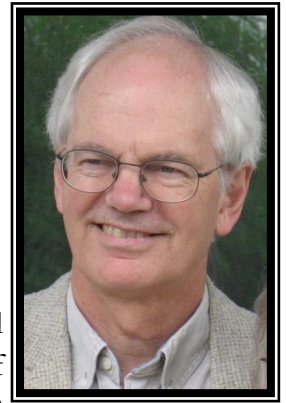
River West member told me about his young adult experiences as a bassist in popular music bands. As an adult, he visited River West when friends suggested that he should do so. But it was the invitation to play in the church's band, the experience of rehearsing and performing regularly, that made church most meaningful for him.

These people presented their experiences of church music, not in terms of the sound of their preferred musical style, nor their theologies of how the church ought to worship. Instead, the choir and the band--ensembles that are social groups--allowed these musicians to continue lifelong patterns of musical meaning which are also patterns of friendship and of community.

If we most often see conflicts over church music in terms of musical style or of theologies of worship, stories like the two I've retold, suggest a third standpoint: singing is a shared activity which presents a context for love, for relationship, for memory. It is a practice in which we relate, and not only a text that we read. Particular ways of singing together are intertwined with particular people and places in our memories. If we want to understand each others' musical values across difference, we should not ask "what is the theology of that song, and is it right?" Instead we should ask "who, what, and how do you remember and relate to when you sing that song?" We should ask these questions, too, because they can throw light on the little people whose interactions make up the bigger things we think of as "Mennonite society" and "Mennonite history."

Notes

- 1 Example: Barry Liesch, *The New Worship: Straight Talk On Music In The Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001).
- 2 Michael S. Hamilton, "The Triumph Of The Praise Songs: How Guitars Beat Out The Organ In The Worship Wars." *Christianity Today* 43:8 (1999): 28-35.
- 3 Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for This Urgent Time* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995).
- 4 Example: Henry Neufeld, "Current Worship Silences the Voice of the People." *Canadian Mennonite* 2:22 (1998): 16. ❖



GAMEO Report 2014

By Wesley
Berg

The annual
meetings of
the GAMEO
Canadian Edi-

Wesley Berg

torial Committee and the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada took place in Winnipeg, Manitoba, from January 16-18, 2014 at the Mennonite Heritage Centre on the CMU campus.

I attended the GAMEO meetings on behalf of the MHSA. While GAMEO is now under the umbrella of the Mennonite World Conference instead of MHSC, there is still a need for a committee that oversees editorial policies and matters like templates for writers wishing to write articles. A good deal of time was spent on developing templates for film, Hutterite colonies and Mennonites in various professions and vocations. My task for next year is to develop a template for musical composition. Watch for an article on the Mennonite Concerto.

A total of 634 new articles were added to GAMEO from January to December, 2013. These include: 436 new Hutterite Colony brief articles (stubs) written by Bert Friesen; 69 new Polish (formerly Prussian) village articles added by Richard Thiessen; and, 14 new Evangelical Mennonite Church articles written by Terry Smith. Bert was

MHSA Fund Raiser, Sunday, April 27, 2:30 p.m. at Foot-hills Mennonite Church, 2115 Urbana Road N.W. Calgary

Ruth Derksen Siemens will speak about impoverished Mennonite immigrant women and girls who worked as domestic servants in Vancouver, Calgary and other Canadian cities. A light lunch will follow. **Please pre-register by April 10 with Lil Bartel** at lilbartel@shaw.ca (403-288-1297) or leave a message at the MHSA office (403-250-1121).

Admission is \$15.00 per person. Everyone is welcome.

especially satisfied with the fact that one of the Hutterite articles had been written by a Hutterite.

Cooperation with Anabaptistwiki continues. Primary documents like confessions of faith have been moved there and a joint web page should be appearing soon. In keeping with the global, multilingual direction of the Encyclopedia, two geography professors from a university in Curitiba, Brazil, sat in on the meetings and provided valuable and interesting insights into the nature of the Mennonite community in Brazil.

Together with Dave Neufeldt, I then attended the MHSC meetings. Apart from the minutiae of provincial reports, two large projects are under way. The genealogy committee is ready to test a beta version of its web site in the next month or so. The photo database task force reported that it is ready to move to implementation of a web site. We also heard from Esther Epp Tiessen, whose book on the Mennonite Central Committee was sponsored by the Society and launched at a conference sponsored by the Chair of Mennonite Studies in December, 2013.

The tour on Friday took us to Altona and Friesen Printers. There is a long association between the MHSC and Friesens. Ted Friesen, one of the three Friesen brothers, helped establish the Society and was its president for many years and Friesens printed the three volumes of Mennonites in Canada sponsored by the Society. Authors in the group were interested in seeing how books were assembled in this very impressive facility.

I will close by repeating my invitation to historians around the province to get in touch with me if there is someone about whom an article should be written, who would like to revise and update an article on churches, towns or other institutions in the province or who might have a subject in mind that belongs in GAMEO. My email address is: wberg@ualberta.ca ❖

Archives and Library Report and Appeal

By Ted Regehr

The Archives and Library of the MHSA has very valuable and quite extensive archival collections and an excellent library of published works focusing on the experiences of Mennonites in Alberta and of their European, Russian and North American heritage.

The New Website

The most important recent development is a major redevelopment of our website, under contract by Leon Janzen. Leon is also providing assistance for volunteers working to bring relevant material from the old to the new website. Look for further announcements when the new website is

opened for public use.

Appeal for Volunteers

It would be very helpful to have assistance by a volunteer with computer expertise in the ongoing website development and the entry of relevant new information. Our volunteers usually work on Thursdays from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. It may not, however, be necessary for a computer expert to come to the office during those hours. Anyone with computer expertise and an interest in Alberta Mennonite stories is cordially invited to contact the office on Thursdays at 403-250-1121 or, at other times, Ted Regehr at 403-249-2553 or at t.regehr@shaw.ca. Several of the volunteers now working at the Archives and Library can do most of the detailed computer work, but they sometimes need professional guidance and help.

A volunteer trained in Library Science, working with and providing professional guidance for volunteers working in the Library, is also needed. The books in the Library have been catalogued but entries on the old website need to be reviewed, modified and brought onto the new website. Again, anyone willing to help is encouraged to contact Ted Regehr or the office.

Both the Archives and Library have extensive material of great interest to persons seeking information about their ancestors and family histories. We have some volunteers who assist visitors working on their family histories, but that work could be greatly en-



hanced by one or more volunteers trained or with experience in working with various genealogical source materials.

It would advance the work of the Archives and Library very significantly if we could establish a small co-ordinating team, consisting of an archivist, a librarian, a genealogist and someone to look after routine office administration, with each member working and providing guidance for other volunteers in his or her area of interest and expertise.

We need more volunteers willing to work on various projects. We now also extend a special invitation to potential volunteers with expertise in computer website development and maintenance, library or genealogical work.

Disposal of Some Donated Items

Archives and Libraries quite properly encourage anyone who is disposing of items of possible historical value to check with or donate them to the Archives and Library. Not all donated material, however, is of historical value or falls within the mandate of the MHSA Archives and Library.

The MHSA Board has approved policies authorizing the staff to dispose of duplicate library books and periodicals and of archival material not deemed by a trained archivist to be of historical value. The Library will keep one copy of books received for use only in the MHSA offices. A second copy of books will be retained for possible future use if the MHSA decides to establish a lending library or authorizes the transfer of the duplicate collection to a Mennonite museum, archives or church in the province. Third and additional copies of books will be offered to other Mennonite archives, sold or destroyed.

The Archives and Library have also received multiple copies of numerous periodicals. Once the most complete set of a specific publication is identified, any missing issues are taken from other less complete sets. After that, duplicate copies will either be returned to the donor or destroyed.

The Library has also received numerous books and periodicals not within its mandate. These will be offered to other libraries, sold or destroyed.

Several large archival collections include routine and detailed financial material (invoices, cancelled cheques and financial working papers) which, from an archival point of view, are not of sufficient historical value to justify their preservation. A volunteer with expertise in financial matters is reviewing some of these records to determine taxation, legal or other requirements. The donor will be informed and offered return, within a reasonable time, of documents not deemed to be of continuing historical, financial or legal value. If the donor does not request the return of the records, they will be destroyed. ❖

Letter to the Editor

Dear Dave Toews, I have received my first copy of the MHSA Newsletter via e-mail and find it a very satisfactory way to receive mail. Thank you so much. Emma Gregg

Book Review: John B. Toews, John B. and Paul Toews, editors. *Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage in Ukraine (1922-1927). Mennonite and Soviet Documents.* Published by the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 2011. 515 pp. \$35.00.

Reviewed by Henry Neufeld,
Ladner, B.C.

What happens when an ethno religious group feels that their way of life is threatened? For over a century, Mennonites in Ukraine had considerable independence in managing their own villages, churches, schools and communities. Now this almost utopian way of life was threatened by a new Soviet regime.

When threatened, groups often organize themselves. They meet, plan, discuss, strategize, appoint leaders and negotiate. Following the October, 1917 revolution in Russia, Mennonites did all of that. They sought to adapt to a new system without losing their identity. And they prayed. They prayed because the world as they knew it was beginning to collapse. They needed a strategy for survival.

They discussed key issues including the future of their children's education, the threat of military conscription, the loss of farmland, the need for fire insurance, the possibility of emigration and the threat to their independence by an increasingly intrusive regime. And they organized so they could speak to the new government with one voice.

They called their new organization, "The All Russia Mennonite

Congress.” When seeking government registration, in a country that claimed to be considerate of ethnic groups, they ran into a roadblock.

Soviet officials informed the Mennonites that the new Russian regime followed the principle of separation of church and state. Since “Mennonite” signified a religion and represented counter revolutionary thinking; it was unacceptable. A compromise was quickly reached; the group would be called the “Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage in Ukraine” (*Der Buerger Holländischer Herkunft*). Often simply referred to as the “Union.” This volume traces the work of the Union in the early to mid 1920s. It is a rich compilation of documents from Ukrainian and Russian archives, as well as North American sources. Remarkably, the Union charter provided Mennonites with more power than any comparable group in Russia and was allowed to function with no Communist member on its Board.

The Soviets wanted to integrate the Union with the Soviet co-op system; this was constantly resisted by the Mennonites. The state said: “The union has not yet done any good... they represent a closed community.” (p. 259) The Union was seen, not inaccurately, as opposing Sovietization.

Initially I approached this book with some skepticism; archival material does not usually hold much interest for me. Then I began reading and was fascinated by what I found; intriguing details about those years and original documents. I gained increasing regard for the two Toews historians who edited this edition and the translator of these documents. Primary sources are fundamental to historians and these documents, enhanced by introductory essays in each section by the editors, are rich in detail and new insights.

For instance the Mennonite Congress meeting in 1918 has lengthy debates about socialism and Christianity. “B.H. Unruh explains that Christianity has no direct relationship with any economic system, either socialist or capitalist.” (p. 29) The Mennonite Congress was concerned about education; teachers should receive an adequate salary with periodic wage increases, cost of living increases, pensions and leave for further studies. There is a debate about whether arithmetic should be taught in the Russian or German language. There are clear statements about non-resistance: “Mennonites see it as a holy duty to serve the fatherland, but without the shedding of blood.” (p. 36) B.B. Janz, the leader of the group, promotes non-resistance at a Congress meeting and is questioned: “What of the brothers who hold a different conviction?” (p. 101) Janz demands that the group affirm non-resistance, or he resign. Unanimously the group affirmed the principle and Janz remained as their leader, a crucial point in Ukrainian Mennonite history.

Starvation and Emigration.

Feeding starving Mennonites and emigration became major issues. Janz saw “...the sallow pale faces, the farm boys running after a cat or a dog for a meal...” (p.115) At one meal, horse cutlets were served. Food reserves were seized or consumed, including seed grains. Emigration was seen as an option because of starvation, limits on school instruction, land restrictions, military service and the undermining of faith. Janz was persistent in seeking visas from officials in Moscow.

The barriers that Janz faced were enormous: finding a country that would accept Mennonites, getting Soviet permission to leave and the complex logistics of moving thousands of people. Janz’s pleas to North American Mennonites reflect his desperation when faced with pressure for action from the Mennonite colonies.

Janz’s efforts to get aid from North America and Europe intensified. In 1925 he wrote his American brothers: “give these destitute people a new life.” (p. 492) And in a prophetic comment: “The days will come when the consequences of your action will appear much more important than now.” (p. 492)

For five years Janz was, in effect, the Mennonite director of emigration. In constant demand from Mennonites seeking his advice, negotiating with authorities in Moscow and extensive travel that kept him away from home. “For four years she (my wife) has borne the burden and heat of day alone.” (p. 501) As the Union nears its state enforced end, Janz speculates about his future: “...everything seems dark as night. What pathway shall I walk? How shall I feed my family? What work will I have in the future?” (p. 504)

This remarkable collection of original source material is a major contribution to the study of one of the darkest periods of Mennonite history. The Mennonites of the era faced bandits, a new and hostile government, loss of farmland, famine, a demanding five-year plan and a threat to an insular way of life. The documents describe, from various perspectives, the plight and the increasingly limited options available.

This book is a valuable addition to the writings about his turbulent time in Mennonite history; it is an impressive tribute to B.B. Janz, a man of faith, vision, and persistent diplomacy and his determined efforts to save his people.❖