

MENNONITE BRETHREN HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF CANADA

N E S L E T T E R

The Executive Committee of the Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of Canada recently resolved to keep in touch with its membership via an informative newsletter. With this modest first edition the executive is attempting to accomplish this resolve.

The hopes and aspirations of the executive are that this newsletter will become a medium of dialogue for all persons interested in the history of the Mennonite Brethren and its earlier Anabaptist heritage. To achieve this goal will take much work, but even more, it will depend upon the contributions of all members of the Historical Society.

It is a well known fact that all across our country individuals and groups are taking an active interest in discovering their heritage. This process of discovery often results in a renewed identity for the persons or groups involved. When this interest focuses on discovery of a spiritual heritage, it can result in a renewed vision for the church and a new commitment by the discoverer to that vision.

In keeping with the hopes and aspirations stated above a number of informative articles are included in this newsletter. It is the hope of the executive that, as you read these articles, you will become better informed of some of the happenings within the scope of Mennonite Brethren History.

The executive encourages you, the reader, to take the initiative to contribute articles or information regarding historical research in which you are presently engaged. An invitation is also extended that you give the editor your critical reaction to this newsletter. Please respond by informing the editor of how the Newsletter should be improved. Your help will enable us to better inform you of the research activities of Mennonite Brethren in Canada.

- Ken Reddig

THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL HISTORIES

During the last few years the Mennonite Brethren historical organizations have been trying to encourage our churches to write their local congregational histories. A few churches and at least one provincial conference have responded to this request.

About ten years ago I realized the importance of similar histories which had been written under unusual circumstances more than a century ago. I had been looking for original source material about the Mennonite colonies in Russia for several years without any significant results when I came across the "Gemeinde Berichte", a complete set of village histories written in 1848.

The story behind these histories was this. On January 8, 1848, Eugen von Hahn (1807-1874) chairman of the Advisory Committee, a committee appointed by the Department of the Interior to supervise the German colonies in south Russia, wrote a letter to all the village mayors (Schultze) under his jurisdiction. In the letter he stated that for the benefit of future generations it would be good that the history of each village community be on record. He instructed the mayors to form an ad hoc historical committee (consisting of the mayor, his two advisors, and the village teacher) to write their local history according to a prescribed outline. The outline was as follows: Where did the original settlers come from? Why did they leave their former homeland? What material possessions did they have? Who were their leaders? Where did they locate their village? How was the village name chosen? What was the quality of the soil? What agricultural products were grown? Had they experienced natural calamities such as earth quakes or hurricanes?--- In conclusion, he commanded the mayor to send the finished reports to Odessa within a period of four months.

Von Hahn's instructions were carried out meticulously. Every Mennonite village mayor sent in his report. A few years later these reports were published in the Unterhaltungs blatt and Odessa Zeitung. Shortly after World War I the German historian, G. Leibbrandt and his assistant M. Woltner published the Gemeindeberichte along with many valuable footnotes in bookform (limited editions).

For the benefit of those who want to know more about their "roots" a copy of these village histories has been placed in our conference archives at MBBC in Winnipeg.

I hope our descendents a hundred years from now will be able to benefit from histories written today as we can benefit from those written in 1848.

- Bill Schroeder

NEW ARCHIVES AND STUDY CENTER COMPLETED

The new home of the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Archives and the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies is completed. All that remains is for the occupancy permit to be granted so that the move from the top floor of the A.H. Unruh Building to the basement of the new college addition can be begun.

The new addition provides spacious and pleasant surroundings for the housing of documents and for research. It is approximately four times the size of the present archival space. It provides ample stack space with a large main storage room in which the majority of the archival documents will be housed.

In addition there is an office for the archivist, as well as two research offices, available for scholars spending extended periods of time in research at the center. The entire archives area is complete with humidity control which will insure preservation of the documents for the longest possible time. With these improved facilities the archives is assured of adequate space for continued growth over the next two to three decades.

During the past few years the archives has had to make do with cramped and crowded conditions as it has seen its holdings expand. It will be a benefit to students, scholars and the constituency to have a new facility which will encourage and aid in the study of Mennonite Brethren History.

A PAGE FROM THE ARCHIVIST'S NOTEBOOK ...

Every archivist worth his salt possesses an insatiable desire to collect pertinent materials of one kind or another. This archivist--it may be freely confessed--nurtures a desire to collect "pages" which, in one way or another, disclose aspects of that experience which, if it could be viewed in its entirety, would constitute the "book" of Mennonite Brethren life and thought.

It will be my modest ambition, in this small corner of the Newsletter, to share a "page" from the "notebook" of my own activity as Conference Archivist with our readers. This modest ambition is predicated, of course, on a rather large and optimistic premise: that the present Newsletter actually survives and receives the tender care which it undoubtedly will need.

The unexpected death of Dr. John A. Toews (on January 13, 1979), scholar-in-residence for our recently-established Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Canada, has created a very painful and significant loss for all of us. At present the suggestion that Dr. Toews' memory be honoured by (possibly) a special collection of (historical) books or some other suitable project is being given serious consideration. I have myself prepared, for the forthcoming (Spring, 1979) issue of DIRECTION, a (hopefully complete) bibliography of John A. Toews' published writings (books, theses, articles).

During the Fall of 1978, the exciting news filtered through to us that the Southern Baptists (Historical Commission - Nashville, TN) had discovered, in Leningrad, an extensive run of issues of the Mennonite periodical FREIDENSSTIMME, a popular family periodical edited by Jakob and Abraham Kroeker. This run of issues (of which we now possess microfilm copies) extends from 1906-1914 and therefore is not complete but photocopied issues for other years (between 1917 and 1920), already in the possession of our Mennonite Brethren archives depositories (at the Seminary in Fresno and here), render our total holdings very nearly complete.

I will be serving as member-at-large in the Executive of the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada (not to be confused with our MB Historical Society of Canada) during the 1979-80; it is to be hoped that this association will aid us in remaining more fully informed about archival/historical activities among Canadian Mennonites generally.

STUDENTS DISCOVER THEIR FAITH HERITAGE

The disparity that exists between young people and their elders often creates seemingly unbridgeable chasms. Especially when referring to matters of faith, principles and a particular theological point of view it often appears that communication somehow does not span generational differences.

Often I have heard parents and grandparents express concern over the future fidelity of their children and grandchildren, to the Mennonite Brethren Church. "They don't understand," many say "They just don't know what all we've gone through, how we've struggled to survive, to rebuild the church in a new land." "They don't realize all we've gone through to provide them (children) a secure home with a secure future."

Parents are often right. Children don't understand. They don't understand because many of them have never incorporated the stories of the past into their heritage of faith. This is not to say that stories are never recounted in the home. But, the story of faith from the time of Abraham-Jesus-New Testament Church-Reformation-Russia-Canada is not often presented to young people as their heritage of faith.

Teaching Church History and Mennonite History in a Mennonite High School in Winnipeg over the past few years has provided ample evidence that our young people are interested and, in fact, eager to learn of their more recent heritage of faith.

The approach at MBCI has been to have each student, during his grade eleven year, write a research paper which explores the "faith in conflict" experience in his/her recent family history. These papers usually are biographies of a relative who has had to struggle to survive both spiritually and physically under adverse conditions.

Most of the research undertaken is original. Students begin by interviewing parents or grandparents. They search out old diaries, newspapers and church periodicals. They also confirm their research by checking into the secondary sources available in local libraries.

What the students find usually fascinates them. While secondary sources provide a broad general sweep of the history of a particular period of time they seldom relate stories students can relate to directly, i.e. through their own family history. But a student writing the story of his own "Tante Tina", and finding that her story relates to events of a particular period of time, soon catches the point and sees himself as the inheritor of a story of faith. Once he sees himself in this stream of faith a change comes over him. Tante Tina no longer becomes the "Old Lady" in a retirement home who has to be visited once a week, but rather becomes a heroine who in her younger years struggled against seemingly insurmountable odds to preserve and transmit her faith to succeeding generations.

The joy and reward of teaching Mennonite History to high school students has been to witness students beginning to understand and appreciate their recent history of faith, as well as, seeing that faith in the context of a

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sovereign, revealing God who spans the scope of human history. It has reminded me many times of the importance not only to tell the story of faith, but to encourage others, especially our young people, to search it out for themselves. Such a search contributes to a greater understanding between the generations. It fosters a new spirit of fidelity to the Church of Jesus Christ and builds the strength of that Church for the future.

- Ken Reddig

We encourage your response to this first newsletter. Feel free to give suggestions as to how it can be improved. Send your responses to:

Menonite Brethren Historical Society
77 Henderson Highway
Winnipeg, Manitoba R2L 1L1