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MENNONITE BRETHREN HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF CANADA

NEWSLETTER

THE COALDALE MB CHURCH:

A BRIEF HISTORY

The first Mennonite pioneer in Coaldale was Brother Klaas Enns who came to the largely Anglo-Saxon 20-year old town in 1925. He came initially to clean sugar beets for a local farmer, Mr. Lathrop. But when he looked around and saw the good fertile soil, the irrigation ditches, the plentiful sugar beet harvest, and the readily available CPR land, he envisioned Coaldale as a prime spot for a great Mennonite settlement, much along the lines of those in the Molotschna. Mr. Lathrop, a land agent for the CPR, got so excited about the prospects of settlers coming that he offered Enns his farm, his inventory of cattle and his machinery for \$53,000—with no written contract or even a down payment.

News of the favorable conditions in Coaldale spread quickly, and almost overnight Coaldale became the destination of many Russian Mennonites who had just arrived in Canada. Some of them heard rumors that Coaldale was the land where milk and honey flowed. J.P. Dick in May 1951 reminisced:

Es war 1925 vor Weinachter, als im Boten ein artikel von Br. Klaas Enns erschien. Br. Enns berichtete von den Verdienstmoeglichkeiten in den Ruebenfeldern Sued-Alberta's. Es sei besonders fuer kinderreiche Familien der Ort, das Leben zu machen. Er lud nun ein, diese Gelegenheit auszunuetzen. Mancher der Neueingewanderten liess sich das nicht zweimal sagen "Auf Nach Coaldale!" so erscholl es durchs ganze Land.

There were few buildings on the settler's land in Coaldale. Some of the newcomers had to live in graineries, bunkcars, even in hen houses until their farmhouses were built. Life revolved around the Lathrop farm for it had the largest buildings. Bible studies

were first held in the workers' house, then in the main farmhouse. When that got crowded they looked for the largest room they could find—it happened to be the hayloft in the barn!

On May 23, 1926, twenty-one people gathered in the hayloft to organize the Mennonite Brethren Church of Coaldale. From these humble beginnings this church was to become the first and the largest MB church in Alberta. Other churches sprang up in places like Gem, Vauxhaul and Rosemary, but Coaldale remained for many years what people called "the heart of Alberta Mennonitism".

The Coaldale congregation experienced growth until 1955 when it had over 600 members. The people had moved from the crowded hayloft, to a school in Coaldale, then to their own church building in 1929. After building an addition once, then twice, in 1939 they decided to build a church that would have room for everybody. This "gross-artige" church situated a symbolic half a mile out of town, could seat 1000 people. Only days after it was completed the congregation hosted the 30th Canadian MB Conference. Previously the conferences were held in a large tent, but in the new Coaldale church there was indeed room for everybody.

In the early years on Sunday mornings the parking lot would be filled with horse-drawn wagons, buggies, Democrats, grain tanks, school vans, and even Bennett buggies. Inside the church, what most people noticed, is how everyone had their place. Small wooden signs on the benches directed the children to the front rows. Directly behind them on the right half of the church sat the men, first the elderly men, then the younger family men. The women sat quietly on the left side of the church; the older ones sometimes wrapped in black shawls. Mothers with babies sat at the back or in the balcony or nursery.

When people think about Coaldale they are usually reminded of the great number of leaders that either grew up or went to school there. Many went on to become teachers, writers, principals of Bible Schools, or pastors. Coaldale is one thing that J.A. Toews, Abe Dueck, David Ewert, Werner Schmidt, and H.R. Baerg had in common. The list goes on to include Rudy Wiebe, Bill Baerg, J.B. Toews, P.R. Toews, David Pankratz, Allen Guenther, Harry Heidebrecht and many others. No wonder some people say, "All good things come from Coaldale!"

Coaldale was a unique community. John B. Toews in his book, With Courage to Spare, notes that the people of Coaldale came from many parts of Russia: the Ukraine, Siberia, Crimea, Orenberg, and the Molotschna. Because of the vast distances between them they had developed distinct social, cultural and religious practices. Their views differed on church practices, preaching styles, the role of education, the function of ministers and elders, and even on the modes of celebrating weddings and funerals. For 20 years B.B. Janz, the great Verband leader who helped the Mennonites out of Russia in the 1920's, undertook the difficult task of leading the Coaldale congregation and trying to integrate them and resolve their differences.

The result was what appeared to be a staunch, strictly ordered, and quite black and white world as decisions were democratically made and acceptable behavior was well defined. Though the people still had their differences, they were unified in their fight against worldliness and in their concern for their children. They saw children as a gift from God to be treasured and protected. They often asked themselves, "Was wird aus unsfern Kindern werden?" Their ability to teach their families was threatened by the children's rapid mastery of the English language. Some people thought that if the German language was lost, so would be the children. So as early as 1927, the children were sent to German schools on Saturday mornings. Some people thought that the farm would keep the gaps from growing between the generations, and they spoke fondly of how

marvellous it was for father and son to be working in the field together. However, B.B. Janz recognized that if the church was to keep its youth, it would have to provide educational institutions to embody and teach the Mennonite faith.

So began the Coaldale Bible School, organized in 1929. In the first year twelve students were taught by Reverend Abraham Shierling. As the attendance grew, a three year course in Bible and teacher training was offered. The school was built beside the church, and in 1949 there was a peak enrollment of 101 students. From the time it opened until the time it closed in 1965 the school influenced over 1000 students.

Many young people chose to attend Bible School rather than high school. Bible School was inexpensive—in difficult times students could even pay their tuition with produce. The curriculum stressed Bible content, missions, and the importance of church involvement and leadership—giving plenty of opportunities to serve.

After World War II individuals in the church recognized the need to provide Christian education for the younger teenagers as well. An Educational Society was formed to organize the Alberta Mennonite High School in Coaldale, which opened its doors to students of grades 9 to 12 in 1946. In 1951, grades 7 and 8 were added. The enrollment ranged between 50 and 100 students. Again leadership was encouraged. Separation from the world and even from the surrounding churches and community was stressed; perpetuating an intensive social control and oneness of vision. The young people had a strong role model to aspire to—that of the preacher, teacher, musician, and church leader. Life revolved around the church. Young people's social lives consisted of choir practices, young peoples meetings, missions nights, and "Saengerfeste".

Some of the youth continued their education beyond Coaldale. Perhaps because Coaldale was reluctant to accept people back after this higher, and perhaps secular, training the students were forced to spread out to serve in other towns and cities.

The early Coaldale pioneers did not have the experience necessary to prepare their youth for the world so they had tried nobly to protect them from it. But the Coaldale enclave was not safe from threats of urbanization and professionalism. Nor was it safe from the internal pressures caused by the inability of many people to distinguish between faith and culture.

Changes were in store for this church. The schools in the late '60's suffered meagre enrollment. The restricted budget and insufficient staff was often a burden. Finally both schools closed. A church formed in Lethbridge greatly reducing the Coaldale congregation. Finally, in 1971, the great white church building itself closed its doors, and the people began to meet where they do now under the leadership of Rev. Rudy Heidebrecht, in the new and smaller sanctuary in the town.

A new generation of people have taken over the Coaldale MB Church. While many facets of their lifestyles have changed, some things remain the same: the children go to church clubs, the young people are still encouraged to go to Bible Schools, the older women still get together to sew quilts for the MCC, and the missionaries still come home to show their slides.

Over the years a host of good things have come from Coaldale including a model of Christian leadership, teaching, and an incredible faith in God.

This brief history was written by Frieda Esau, a history student at MBBC and the University of Winnipeg. It was first presented at the "Symposium" of the Center for M.B. Studies in November 1980. Frieda is a member of the M.B. Church in Coaldale.

SYMPOSIUM REPORT

"Influences Upon Mennonite Brethren Theology": Impressions and Reflections

The recent symposium on "Influences upon Mennonite Brethren theology" (November 21-22, 1980) must be considered a major event in the history of the M.B. Church. Perhaps for the first time, a group of Mennonite Brethren looked critically at some of the influences which have shaped their 120 year-old history. This critical reflection may be a sign that M.B.'s have come of age, for only a mature group is prepared to examine itself without fear that such self-examination might threaten its identity of existence.

In five formal papers (Henry Krahn, J.B. Toews, Herbert Giesbrecht, John Redekop, Abe Dueck), four responses to the papers (Harry Loewen, John Friesen, Art DeFehr, Victor Doerksen), several congregational histories, and lively discussions, the participants of the symposium not only reflected on the past but also on the future and what course the M.B. Church might take to ensure its survival as a Mennonite brotherhood. It also became increasingly evident that there was no agreement on whether the non-Mennonite influences (particularly those coming from evangelicalism) upon Mennonite Brethren faith and life were wholesome or detrimental to the M.B. Church.

Some voices (J.B. Toews, Abe Dueck) expressed concern with regard to the inroads that evangelicalism has made into Mennonite Brethren theology. The influences of pietism, Baptists, Darbyism, and non-denominationalism were cited as being dangerous to such M.B. principles as church building and discipleship, non-involvement in politics, and Christian pacifism.

Others (Henry Krahn, Herbert Giesbrecht) felt less threatened by evangelicalism, believing that M.B.'s throughout their history had learned much from such groups as the Baptists, Pietists, and the free church movement about how to express the Christian faith in modern society.

Most participants agreed, however, that Mennonite Brethren should work more consciously and with greater determination at a distinct M.B. theology which would counteract the forces (militant evangelicalism, nationalism, economic prosperity, non-Mennonite education) which threaten to undermine and erode Mennonite Brethren faith and tradition.

On how this educational process is to be conducted, the symposium gave no clear answers. Some suggested that M.B. theologians should show the way. While the point is well taken, one might ask who or where are the M.B. theologians who could lead in this regard. Are the M.B. pastors and teachers in M.B. churches and institutions trained, equipped, and inclined to strengthen and promote Mennonite theology? Perhaps it is premature to expect M.B. leaders to lead in this direction. We might have to wait till more M.B. leaders have received thorough Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren training and until more of our churches and institutions are prepared to teach Mennonite Brethren faith and practice.

With regard to prophetic leadership in the M.B. churches, Art DeFehr suggested that persons in responsible positions did not have the courage to speak out on issues of concern to the brotherhood because they were part of institutions (schools, colleges, papers, conferences) which effectively controlled them. This is no doubt a real problem. The prophetic voice may thus be silenced and the leaders who should boldly lead become mere mouthpieces of interest groups.

The symposium was attended by a fairly representative cross section of Mennonite Brethren society, including some M.B. ministers. It was disappointing, however, that not more pastors availed themselves of the opportunity to become involved in an important dialogue on crucial issues. Only two or three of the Winnipeg M.B. pastors were present. Speaking of influences, it is the pastor who exerts the greatest influence on his church members, and unless the pastors can be encouraged to advocate, preach and teach Mennonite Brethren values in their churches, the erosion of these values will continue.

The Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, which under the direction of Ken Reddig organized the symposium, deserves our thanks not only for a work well done but also for the wisdom and courage to focus on an issue and problems with which M.B.s will have to come to terms. It might be suggested that in future symposia more time for discussion be provided. For example, because of lack of time John Redekop's excellent survey of the economic life of Mennonite Brethren was not discussed.

Harry Loewen
Professor of Mennonite Studies
University of Winnipeg

PUBLICATION OF SYMPOSIUM PAPERS

Condensed versions of the five major papers presented at the Symposium "Influences upon Mennonite Brethren Theology" (November 21-22, 1980) will comprise the major content of the July 1981 issue of Direction Journal. Direction is a quarterly publication of Mennonite Brethren Schools in Canada and the United States. Single copies of this issue will be available from the Center for M.B. Studies for \$2.50/copy.

The paper presented by Dr. John Redekop, "The Interaction of Economics and Religion," due to its many pages of survey results, will appear only in a resume form in the Direction issue. The paper was based upon the results of a 66 question survey Dr. Redekop conducted among some 283 Mennonite Brethren across Canada.

Since pastors, church leaders and students may desire copies of this paper, containing all the results of each question, the Center will make available, at a cost of \$2.00/copy, the full-length version of this paper.

Send your order to: Center for M.B. Studies in Canada
77 Henderson Highway
Winnipeg, Manitoba
R2L 1L1

HISTORICAL SOCIETY SPONSORS PARAGUAYAN FILM

An English version of German film "Heimat Fuer Heimatlose" is being sponsored by the Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of Canada. This documentary film tells the story of the initial settlement and subsequent growth of the Fernheim Mennonite colony in Paraguay. The film was written and produced by Mennonites from Fernheim under the direction of Dave Dueck of Dueck Film Productions, Winnipeg.

Among those who initially viewed the film the question was repeatedly asked whether it would be possible to produce an English version for the younger generation.

The Historical Society is pleased to announce that it is assisting Dueck Film Production in producing an English version which can be used in classroom and church settings.

The Historical Society invites your assistance in this production. If you would like to help by defraying some of the high cost of this venture please send your contribution (which will be receipted for tax purposes) to the following address:

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

A review of this film was recently written by Dora Dueck, who has married a son of that 1930 immigration to Paraguay. Her review (which follows below) first appeared January 16, 1981 in the M.B. Herald, and is used by permission.

HEIMAT FUER HEIMATLOSE

- A Review -

Watching Heimat fuer Heimatlose was an intensely personal experience; this review therefore is also subjective. I was born and raised in Canada, and I'm not sure I had even heard of the Mennonite colonies in the Paraguayan Chaco before I met my husband-to-be nearly seven years ago. If I did, it left no particular impression. Now, in the opening minutes of the film, as the credits roll and the aerial camera's eye focuses on that community forged in the vast green expanse of bush, I feel a tightening in my throat. The theme music is beautiful, and moving; it and the scenes already moving before our eyes evoke those complex and tender emotions we associate with a place or places called home.

"... in a way "Fernheim" in the distant Chaco has become a home "afar" for me. My husband spent the first nineteen years of his life there and his entire family but for one brother lives there. He is one of those who left to find another home and he is now a Canadian citizen. But there is still much of him that is there, or is it that he has brought the land with him in his heart? I'm not sure which way it is. Inevitably, though, his original homeland in a small way now belongs to me too. We visited his family in Fernheim after we were married, and we hope to return for a lengthier visit next year. We want our children to know their heritage on their father's side.

This is why viewing Heimat fuer Heimatlose is a moving experience for me. It gives face and order to the bits of the Mennonites' historical experience there that I have imbibed. As the snake slithers out from the blanket I recall my mother-in-law's account of their first nights in the "Green Hell" and the horror she felt when morning revealed a poisonous snake warming itself beneath their tarp. We see snatches of old film—there is my father-in-law, now deceased, plowing the stubborn earth, (the jerky photography of the past very appropriate!) with his young son, now the father of eight, beside him. I see my sister-in-law on some footage of the schools; I realize again her large love for children. Her pleasure in them lights her eyes.

I am impressed by the attention given in the film to the peoples the Mennonites live with. A unique community has resulted; one may wonder at the German and Paraguayan flags flying side by side, but there it is. The Spanish culture has changed the Mennonites, the Mennonites have changed the Chaco. Problems and challenges for the future are hinted at, yet I think again as I watch, as I have thought many times before, how God orders events of human history for his glory. These people came to "unknown" Paraguay from Russia,

and God has accomplished through them increases in his kingdom that they couldn't have imagined initially. I am grateful that the spiritual community there (to whom I am related by faith, all ties of family aside) has been faithful in proclaiming the gospel to the people around them.

The film is very well done, I feel, though I leave a thorough critical evaluation to others. My husband and I value it, for ourselves, and for what it will be for our children. Probably all who have ever lived there or who have emotional ties to Fernheim as I have, will enjoy this film, each for his own personal reasons. Our recommendation is hardly objective; nevertheless, it is weighty. In myriads of glimpses and sounds, we have touched home.

Dora Dueck

(Please Note) Showings of the German version of this film are scheduled in the following areas: February 13, 1981 Winnipeg Centennial Concert Hall (Manitoba)
February 14, 1981 Steinbach Regional Secondary School (Manitoba)
February 15, 1981 Winkler Bible Institute (Manitoba)
February 28, 1981 Eden Christian College (Ontario)
March 1, 1981 Eden Christian College (Ontario)

THE NEW MEI ARCHIVES

The following report was written by Hugo Friesen, Archivist, describing the contents and the nature of the new archival facility at the Mennonite Educational Institute, Clearbrook, B.C.

As we anticipated the move from our old M.E.I. facilities to an entirely new location and building, some concern arose about the preservation of materials that represented the history of our school. The faculty suggested that the M.E.I. School Board consider establishing archives, which they did in due course, and this led to the designation of a sum of money for this project.

The materials were gathered, classified and recorded during the summer of 1980 and were transported to a room for this purpose in the new school. Although it is a rather small collection it does contain over 1500 items. It is set up in such a way that things can be easily added as they become available. Included are periodical publications such as Board meeting minutes, which have been preserved since the school's beginning in 1944-45, annual reports, financial statements and the minutes of staff meetings. The M.E.I. Evergreen, our yearbook, The Student's Call, our student newspaper, and The Recall, our alumni newsletter, are all in the collection. In addition, there are Teachers Handbooks, Students Handbooks, copies of opening programs, Christmas programs, dramas, choral concerts, graduation programs and sports tournaments, as well as, many additional items such as report cards, forms, etc. We have also included a good collection of old textbooks, outdated science equipment and sports uniforms.

We do not have a complete collection because some items were not retained, such as back issues of The Student's Call, but we are hoping the school alumni will check through their files and send us items that we still need.

BOOK REVIEWS

Anna Epp Ens. THE HOUSE OF HEINRICH: THE STORY OF HEINRICH EPP 1811-1863. Steinbach, M.B.: Derksen Printers, 1980. 333 pp.

In 1972 the Peace Gardens near Boissevain Manitoba was the site of a family reunion for the descendants of Bernhard H. Epp (Lichtenau, Molotschna). This occasion resulted in a second reunion to be held at the same site in 1975 and included the descendants of Bernhard's nine brothers and one sister. The response was enthusiastic (approximately 270 attended) and the air was full of stories both of the past and present. The reunion prompted a request to publish the family's history and hopefully have it completed by 1980 for a third reunion.

Perhaps it is a phenomena of the passing years that the "family clan" takes on a new significance. The story of one's family is an important vehicle for sharing our faith with our children and grand-children. It is however a disappointment that so much of what is being written is not complete with photographs, maps and stories and is therefore predictably of poor quality. It is here that The House of Heinrich is a clear departure.

Right from the physical structure of this large 333 page hard cover book, one is struck by its sincere attempt to avoid becoming just another collection of memorabilia, instead of being a serious piece of research. No attempt is made to glorify or conceal parts of the family story. The scholarly (yet personal) work done by "cousin Anna" is exciting in itself. To see reprints of official documents that changed the course of so many lives, together with the recollections and personal observations will be a valuable resource for succeeding generations.

The first 204 pages provide a most interesting compilation of Epp history compiled from documents and family stories recalled by family members. The remaining pages are detailed genealogical charts of the family into the fifth generation.

Also included are helpful indexes for maps, personalia, diagrams, etc.

Some inaccuracies do exist and family members may have a differing view on some of the anecdotes. Nonetheless, the diversity of experiences, and the uniqueness of each family is well expressed in this book.

It is a reminder to this descendant that the oral tradition from earlier times still has its place in today's world. We need to know who our ancestors were and how they survived. We need to know that just as we make mistakes, or adversities take their toll, we are not unique, and others also have prevailed. The faithfulness of those who chose to follow the call to discipleship is an encouragement and a challenge to the next generations.

Reviewed by: Elizabeth Neufeld - DeFehr - Wall

daughter to Erna Neufeld

Wm. DeFehr

granddaughter to Wm. Neufeld

Anna Epp

great granddaughter to Bernhard Epp

Anna Wiens

Gerhard Lohrenz. STORIES FROM MENNONITE LIFE. Steinbach, MB: Derksen Printers, 1980.
132 pp.

Reviewed by Ken Reddig, Archivist of the Canadian Conference of M.B. Churches.

It is always a delight to see more writings by Gerhard Lohrenz available for those interested in their Russian-Mennonite roots. As a fine story-teller Dr. Lohrenz does not disappoint the reader in this his latest book.

Within the book are seventeen stories which describe Mennonite life in Russia during the first half of this century. The stories are presented in the form of biographies of important personages, stories of the fate of several Mennonite families and personal reminiscences.

This book is a valuable addition to the literature available on Russian Mennonites since it not only depicts the history of the period, but also captures the emotion of the time—as only a well-told story can.

An example of this is the story of "Two Brothers". Here the love of a young man for a beautiful woman is described against the stark background of the fathers conviction that the impending marriage is not permissible. We see both the young man and young woman struggle to accept the fathers wishes. Finally in stoic obedience the young man follows his fathers directive and eventually marries another woman. The tragic final scene portrays the son, years later, forgiving the dying father for his stubborn discipline which has caused him years of deep emotional pain.

One would like to think that within the peaceful village life of our forefathers in Russia such cruelties did not occur. As a peace-loving community, striving to follow Jesus' example of love, such willful, inconsiderate regard for the feelings of ones own son seems out of place. Yet within most of our families we have a story or two that closely resembles the account Gerhard Lohrenz describes.

In this sense the book is much more than history. It provides the reader with an inside view of the socio-cultural life of Mennonites in Russia. Spanning some fifty years the stories portray the First World War, the aftermath of the war, deportations, labour camps, and the subsequent forced interaction with the larger Soviet society. This systematic disintegration of the closed village community leaves its indelible mark on the attitudes, values and religious life of the Mennonites.

In writing this book Gerhard Lohrenz has done us a fine service in capturing brief vignettes of our past history and culture. The portrait is not always a rosy one. Some scenes are vivid in their disappointing portrayal of a persecuted people who did not always give evidence of their faith in God. Yet, as in biblical stories, through the deeds of the good and the bad we sense a people of God striving to remain faithful in the face of horrors and deprivations—the personal impact of which most of us cannot imagine.

The book also sets a fine example of how the older generation can convey its thoughts, dreams and disappointments of the past in an understandable form to the younger generation. They too were like we are—though in a different time and different context. The book forms a bridge of understanding between two generations; those who lived in a tempest of the past, and a sheltered generation for whom physical and emotional horror is mainly in the movies.

This NEWSLETTER of the Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of Canada is published three times a year, by the Executive of the Society, at the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Canada, Winnipeg. All correspondence regarding the Society or the NEWSLETTER should be addressed to:

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