



*Mennonite Brethren
Historical Society
Newsletter*

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THE HERBERT BIBLE SCHOOL

The Herbert Bible School was the first conference school of the Mennonite Brethren in Canada. It had its beginning on July 11, 1911, when the Northern District Conference, held at Brotherfield, Saskatchewan, selected a committee of 9 brethren to establish a Bible school for the training of young people. In the fall of 1912 a general meeting regarding the school was called in Herbert. The outcome of this meeting was that 30 acres of land, at the west end of the town of Herbert, were bought for \$50.00 an acre. The initial plan was that part of this land was to become the campus of the proposed school and the remainder to be divided into lots and sold for \$100.00 each. This latter proposition never materialized.

In the summer of 1913 a large basement was constructed and the frame building of the Herbert public school (which had been replaced by a larger brick building) was purchased and moved onto the basement. Since the harvest was poor in 1913 no further building projects could be undertaken that year. However, at a meeting in August it was decided to open the school in fall.

The driving force in this undertaking was Rev. John F. Harms, teacher, former editor of the Mennonitische Rundschau, and minister. He had come to Canada from Kansas with his family in 1906. He had already been involved in establishing the Gnadenu M.B. Church, some 30 miles southeast of Herbert, in 1908. He now was asked to be the founder and first teacher of the Herbert Bible School.

It is generally known that financial struggles are not foreign to private schools, and the Herbert Bible School was no exception. The policy was to keep tuition and board fees as low as possible and to accept farm produce as part payment. Brother Harms was given a free hand to solicit interest and support in all districts of the Conference. To strengthen the support it was decided

to seek the cooperation of other Mennonite denominations and operate the institution as a Bible School Association. This was completed and reported on by Brother Harms at the Northern District Conference in June, 1918. He noted that all responsibility for the Herbert Bible School was lifted from the Conference.

In 1918, due to failing health, Brother Harms had to close the school six weeks earlier than planned. Teaching was again resumed the following winter when Jacob F. Redekop of Main Centre accepted the position as teacher. However in 1919 the school ceased to operate as a result of financial failure. In order to permit the school to operate twenty brethren banded together to pay the incurred debt, and so became nominally the owners of the property.

In 1913 William J. Bestvater had, together with his wife, taken on the City Mission work in Winnipeg under the auspices of the Northern District Conference. Prior to coming to Winnipeg Bestvater had served as traveling evangelist and Bible Conference speaker for the Central District Conference (U.S.). He was especially interested in the teaching ministry and during the winter of 1919-1920 was conducting Bible courses in Winnipeg. A number of students came to Winnipeg from Saskatchewan to take his courses. Since he was also well known because of his Conference work a call was sent to Brother Bestvater to come to Herbert and re-open the Bible school. This resulted in the family moving to Herbert in the summer of 1921. In October classes resumed in the Herbert Bible School with 41 students in attendance. These came not only from the northern and southern districts of Saskatchewan but also from North Dakota, Montana and as far away as Oregon.

A 2 year course program was outlined with 40 hours of instruction offered per week. Most of the courses taught were in the German language and since there were no suitable textbooks available, Bestvater wrote and had his own textbooks published. These included, "Textbuechlein in Glaubenslehre" and "Textbuechlein in Bibel-Kunde".

Besides Bible courses classes also included Church History, Missions, English and German grammar, orthography, English Bible and note reading. Music always stood high on the list of priorities in our Bible schools. The choirs and smaller singing groups (Herbert Bible School never lacked a good male quartet) enjoyed a good measure of popularity. The good attendance from all areas of the constituency when programs were presented by the Bible School were proof of this.

In the early years, final oral examinations were conducted (according to European fashion). These did not replace written exams but proved to be very interesting.

For social life the teachers and students were sometimes invited out to homes for an evening. These were really appreciated and enjoyed by all.

The music department received a real boost when Brother H.N. Wiebe from Dalmeny, Saskatchewan was engaged as a second teacher, in the fall of 1922. He took over direction of the school choir, organized a small orchestra and helped as teacher. According to a comment in his biographical sketches

Brother Bestvater records that Brother Wiebe and he "worked together in good harmony till 1927."⁵

The students were given opportunity for practical experience in Christian service. Groups would visit the nearby country schools to conduct Sunday school and other services. A quartet of young men walked to a school five miles south of Herbert to hold services on Sunday afternoons on a fairly regular basis. Very few of the students then owned or even had access to a car. The services in our churches were entirely in German so Brother Bestvater held English services in the Herbert Town Hall at which the Bible school students supplied the special music. Then a weekly class was also held for children of the town, at which the Bible school students could do their practice teaching. In reminiscing on some of these things one incident comes to mind. The teacher wanted to impress the importance of prayer to the class and so asked whether someone would relate an answer to prayer which they had experienced. One young boy volunteered and told that he and his sisters had received permission to go out to the pasture to gather flowers. They had been told not to lose their new mittens but that was just what happened to his little sister. The boy said that they were sure that if they would return home without the mitts his mother would give them a "terrible scolding". A snickering went through the audience and all eyes turned to the embarrassed mother. The story had a happy ending, for after the children had prayed and asked God to help them find the mitts the mitts were found and the "terrible scolding" avoided.

The Herbert Bible School was a boarding school and the large number of students posed a difficulty as space was so limited. Accommodation for the girls was made available on campus, in some rooms in the basement of the school, and in the home of the Bestvater family adjacent to the school. Living quarters for the young men were found with friends in town. When, in 1923, a two story addition to the school building was built, this need for dormitory space was alleviated.

House parents were employed who, together with some kitchen help and gratis work by the students, looked after the preparation and serving of meals and the general maintenance of buildings and grounds. Produce and meats were accepted as partial payment for student fees. These were not always of the highest quality, sad to say. One of the students aspiring to the ministry had in a "test-sermon" on the Prodigal Son" (Luke 15) told how the loving father had the fatted calf fed for years and years in anticipation of the son's return. When, at the noon meal, one of the teachers found the meat on his plate too tough to cut he remarked that "this meat must come from the calf the father of the prodigal son had fed for those many years."

Students were required to submit to some rules which we might regard as strict and conservative. The girls were to wear proper length skirts and no sleeveless dresses or "transparent" blouses. The use of cosmetics, such as rouge and lipstick was also frowned on. Radios in the dormitory rooms were not permitted.

Then there was the relationship of male and female students. Private visits and walks were forbidden. After all most of the students were of marriageable age and some even confessed later that one reason they wanted

to go to Bible school was to meet members of the opposite sex. There were some brothers and sisters in attendance and if a young swain had his eyes on a certain girl, and she had a brother there, it was helpful to have him as a good friend. Some outside critics even spoke of the Bible school as a "glorified marriage bureau."⁶ A statement once made by Dr. A.H. Unruh comes to mind. He said that he would be happy to see all his Bible school students intermarry but he hoped they would not get involved in serious courtship while attending school. Mrs. Bestvater is quoted as saying "I'd rather my son met his future wife in Bible school than on the dance floor." Her oldest son Arthur followed up this statement when he married Kathryn Kroeker who had come from Dallas, Oregon to attend the Herbert Bible School. When someone got the idea of making a list (under the heading of "Blessings of the Herbert Bible School") of couples who had become acquainted there, and later got married, the number was surprising.

Brother Bestvater with the help of an appointed committee carried the responsibility for conducting classes, soliciting funds and operating the school. However, in 1926 the school was reorganized as the "Herbert Bible School Association." Membership in the association was offered for donations of \$25.00 for a life membership and \$5.00 for an annual membership. This organization received a charter from the provincial government of Saskatchewan and was in operation for about 25 years, when the M.B. Churches of the Herbert District took over the responsibility for the school.

In the spring of 1928 a quartet, consisting of G.W. Peters, Bernard Sawatzky, Daniel Berg and principal Bestvater, made a tour visiting such places as Winnipeg, Minnesota, North and South Dakota, and Montana. They gave programs and presented the work of the Bible school. They were well received and the support was a real boost to the school.

During the absence of Brother Bestvater, who was doing Bible Conference work in California in the summer of 1930, the Bible school board decided that, on account of adverse conditions, the school could not be opened in the fall. This was a real blow to the teacher who later said that he "had left the greater part of his heart in the Herbert Bible School." So in October 1930 the Bestvaters and their three younger children left Herbert for California. There they pastored the M.B. Church at Shafter from 1931-1939 when Bestvater followed a call to Hillsboro, Kansas to accept a position as instructor in the Bible Department of Tabor College.

However this was not the end of the Herbert Bible School. After two years it was reopened under the leadership of the brethren Jacob F. Redekop and Henry Regehr. It is true times were hard and it was tough going. Had it not been for the sacrificial dedication of these men, who received only minimal salaries, the school could not have carried on. However, some unique ways were found to cut down costs. For instance instead of serving tea and coffee, "Prips" became the beverage served. This was grain prepared and roasted with a very small addition of molasses. It was ground and made into a palatable beverage similar to "Postum" and besides the low cost had the added advantage of being caffeine free. One winter more than 2½ bushels of grain was thus prepared in the B.F. Redekop kitchen for the Bible school. As has already been indicated produce, especially meat, was often donated to the Bible school. To acquire some much needed cash the choicest meat that came in from farmers was cut up and sold to businessmen and salaried people in town.

In 1958 a resolution was passed to amalgamate the Herbert Bible School with the Bethany Bible Institute at Hepburn, Saskatchewan and thus create one provincial school. Throughout the years that the Herbert Bible School operated some 1,350 students had enrolled at the school. From these ranks came missionaries, pastors, evangelists, teachers, and Christian service workers who had served in our churches and conference agencies. Men like Dr. G.W. Peters, Rev. G.D. Huebert and others have testified that they received the initial impetus for the direction of their future life at the Herbert Bible School. So we join with many former students and say "Thank God for the Herbert Bible School."

Endnotes

- ¹Yearbook of the Northern District Conference (1911), p. 14.
- ²Yearbook of the Northern District Conference (1912), p. 12.
- ³Yearbook of the Northern District Conference (1914), p. 16.
- ⁴Yearbook of the Northern District Conference (1918), p. 27.
- ⁵William J. Bestvater, Autobiographical Sketches from our Diaries (unpublished), p. 15.
- ⁶Margaret Epp, Proclaim Jubilee (Hepburn, Saskatchewan: Bethany Bible Institute, 1976), p. 5.
- ⁷Ibid., p. 5.
- ⁸Bestvater, p. 17-18.
- ⁹A.J. Klassen, Fifty Years of Mennonite Brethren Bible Schools in Canada (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Canadian Conference of M.B. Churches, 1963), p. 3.

Anna R. Redekop
February, 1983

NOTICE!

A change in numbering the issues of this newsletter will begin with the next issue. Instead of numbering the first issue in June and running for twelve months, the first issue will be numbered in February and run through November, following the calendar year.

BOOK REVIEWS

Elisabeth Peters, Editor. Gnadenthal 1880-1980. Winkler, MB: Gnadenthal History Book Committee, 1982. 232 pp.

A fair number of local history books have been produced in recent years documenting the origin and development of small towns and communities in western Canada. These books, usually written to celebrate a special occasion, provide a rich variety of detail. It is an important fact that with the current realization of the importance of social history in Universities across Canada, these books begin to provide the necessary details, visual images and general background for historians to use in assessing the impact of minority religious and ethnic groups in the settlement of the prairie west.

This book, researched and written by a committee of eight, adds significantly to the story of one religious group of people, Mennonites, and their struggles and successes within a small thriving village in southern Manitoba. Particularly unusual in this village was the fact that the two major denominations, MBs and GCs, each had a congregation in the village, but still gathered together for many occasions. Over the years they cooperated in such activities as evangelistic services, Bible studies, Christmas concerts, a youth organization and in mutual concern for the needy. The relationship was unique and served to promote a positive community spirit.

Well illustrated by many photographs and several good maps, the social flavor of the community has been well told. Being one of those villages where the original inhabitants left for Mexico in 1922, they were almost entirely replaced with "Russlaender" by 1924. In essence then the book must tell the story of two villages. The committee of writers evidently worked very hard at researching the first forty-two years of village life since that section contains some significant information on the early history of the community.

Since Gnadenthal was primarily an agricultural settlement the chapter discussing the successes and failures of this industry helps enhance the broader picture of its everyday life. It is unfortunate that many local histories only highlight the major events of a community, and only rarely attempt to assess its economic activities—especially when it is mostly farming. Western Canadian history still lacks a good history of its agricultural development so therefore it is good to see that the committee of writers did not overlook this crucial aspect of the community.

Whether or not anyone is related to someone from this village should not deter from purchasing available copies of this book. It is well written and provides interesting detail for both the casual reader and anyone seriously interested in "Mennonite" or western Canadian history.

Elsa Redekopp. Wish and Wonder: A Manitoba Village Child. Winnipeg, MB: Reddell Publishing, 1982. 59 pp.

Reviewed by Bert Friesen, Winnipeg.

Elsa Redekopp's book contains a number of sketches of life in Gnadenthal, Manitoba. These sketches are presented from a child's perspective and therefore have their innocence as well as their profound insights.

The subject matter covers life in the village from summer chores and harvesting, to weddings and Christmas celebrations. Each sketch gives some detail about life as it was a half century ago.

Such detail is of great importance from an historical perspective. In such stories facts are passed on to succeeding generations about life as it was in the first half of this century and in many respects, as the author alludes, to even the past century. And with a little broader scope, it might well be a picture of life in Europe before the twentieth century.

Herein also lies one weakness in the book. Some of the sketches end a little abruptly and the reader must wonder, along with Lisa, what really happened to a man like Fleishmann or what went on in the worship service on Sunday, in years past.

A lot of delightful poetry and lyrics are presented in the German with English translations. This helps children to understand it today and still realize that a different language other than English was once the mother tongue. However, this along with allusions and intimations about babies or Russian history, mean that younger children find it difficult to follow the stories, that is children Lisa's age. For them more illustrations or more straight forward storyline would have been easier to follow.

However, for adults, this reliance on allusions gives one the opportunity to answer many children's questions and in the end makes one want to re-read and even study more about this period of Manitoba history.

All in all, it is a delightful book. It is written with personal touches and a personal perspective. This makes it a valuable resource for all readers.

ACQUISITIONS

1. Newton M.B. Church Ledger (1928-1937). Donated by Mr. A.A. Dyck.
2. Family and Membership Register of the Sperling M.B. Church, Sperling, Manitoba. Donated by Dave Hildebrand.
3. Thirty-seven volumes of classical music in Russian and German brought by Mr. and Mrs. John Henry Janz from Russia in 1924. Donated by Mrs. John J. Janz.
4. Saenger=Bote, 1914 and 1915.
5. Folder of music in ziffern. Donated by Mr. Oscar Epp.
6. Photocopy of material from the Polish State Archive, Gdansk. Acquired in the summer of 1980 by Fresno CMBS.
7. German Bible, 23 cm x 31 cm. Donated by Peter Matthies.
8. Frohe Lieder, Jubel-Klaenge, Lieder-Quelle, Neue Chorlieder, Evangeliums-Lieder, Die Palme, Die Kleine Palme, Silberklaenge, Die Perle, Jubeltoene, Sieges-Palme, Kostbare Perlen, Zionsharfe, Freude Allem Volke, Siegeschoere, Saenger=Bote, Unser Kirchenchor, Lobt der Herrn, Gesangbuch Mit Noten, Evangeliums-Saenger, Die Sieges=Palme. Donated by Anna Redekop.
9. College Companion (1956-1958). Donated by Harold Jantz.
10. Fourteen German books, mostly related to missions and church discipline, from the Johann Warkentin Collection. Donated by Esther Enns.
11. Photocopy of manuscript of the biography of C.F. Klassen written by H.F. Klassen. Donated by Catherine Klassen.
12. 39 German histories and novels. Donated by Jacob Mantler.
13. 238 crates of periodicals, personal papers and books from the collection of the late Mrs. Selma Redekopp. Donated by the H.W. Redekopp family.
14. Blumenort: A Mennonite Community in Transition. Written by Royden Loewen and published by the Blumenort Mennonite Historical Society.

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

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Executive of the Society: Helmut Huebert, Chairman; Abe Dueck, V. Chairman; William Schroeder, Secretary-Treasurer; Velma Mierau and Harry Loewen, Members-at-Large. Editor of the Newsletter, Ken Reddig.

If you know of someone who would be interested in becoming a member of the Society and receiving the Newsletter please have them fill out the following form:

Name: _____

Street Address: _____

City: _____

Province: _____

Send form together with the yearly membership fee of \$5.00 to the Society Secretary in care of the above stated address.

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