



Mennonite Brethren
Historical Society
Newsletter

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A PRAIRIE VISION

By Wesley Prieb

A strange structure appeared on the Kansas prairie in 1908: a three-storey red brick school, terribly alone, surrounded by buffalo grass. The sod buster had already turned much of the surrounding prairie into productive fields of wheat, oats, barley and corn. Small family farms checkerboarded the countryside. The village of Hillsboro, located along a spur of the Sante Fe Railroad, had reached a population of 600, mostly German speaking people from Europe and South Russia.

The new Tabor College campus, located in a meadow on the south edge of the village, was near the center of Marion County, which had just seen a massive influx of foreign immigrants. The county population had grown from 768 people in 1870 to nearly 22,000 in 1908. Hillsboro had become the hub of the German speaking and "Twee bak" eating Mennonites.

The Mennonites were not, however, the first to occupy this land. The Twenty-acre campus site was formerly part of the hunting grounds of the Quivera/Wichita Indian nation from about 950 to 1650 A.D. These peaceful Native Americans lived along the Cottonwood River in dwellings built of cottonwood and willow poles covered with bundles of long prairie grass. They cultivated corn, beans, pumpkins, squash and gourds. Their society was matriarchal. The dog was the only domesticated animal.

During the seventeenth century, as the white man moved westward and as eastern Indians were pushed west of the Mississippi into the vast western Indian territory, new tribes came to Kansas. A period of tribal wars began and the Quivera Indians were replaced by Cheyenne, Osage, and Kansa Indians in Marion County. These more aggressive Indians came with horses, firearms, and alcohol. They preferred hunting to agriculture. A number of historic Indian trails crossed the county.

Years later the eastern Indians of Marion County were slowly replaced by the white man. After the explorers came the hunters, traders, land agents, homesteaders, railroads, and then the settlers. Most of the Indians of Marion County were forced to move south to reservations in Oklahoma.

Many adventurous pioneers crossed Marion County on the old wagon trail, the Sante Fe Trail, which served as a trade route linking St. Louis, Missouri and Sante Fe, New Mexico, between 1821 and 1870. The trail, which curved around Hillsboro a few miles northwest, carried 4,472 wagons and 13,056 tons of freight across Marion County in 1865. The railroad, which reached Kansas in 1870, replaced the wagon trail.

Another trail crossing the county was the Chisholm cattle trail. In 1871 about 5000 cowboys and 700,000 head of cattle passed over the trail to Abilene, Kansas. Texas Longhorn could have pastured on these acres now designated for educational purposes.

The Homestead Laws of 1862 encouraged settlers to come to Kansas. Many veterans of the Civil War claimed land in Marion County. The land census of 1870 lists mainly British names. John Hill, founder of Hillsboro, was a Scotchman.

In 1863 the U.S. Congress granted land to railroads to aid the construction of railroads across the plains. In 1870 the Santa Fe Railroad received 211,138 acres of land in Marion County. The railroads, eager to have settlers located along their lines, hired agents to persuade interested persons to come to Kansas from eastern states and Europe. Cheap productive land and the presence of railroads made Kansas attractive to land-hungry immigrants.

Meanwhile in 1870 the Russian government revoked the Letter of Privileges which had originally been granted to the Mennonites and other German speaking people for "eternal time". This meant the loss of special rights. Similar restrictions were placed on Mennonites and other religious bodies in Europe. Thus, many freedom loving people responded to the attractive offers of the land agents.

The Santa Fe Railroad reached Peabody, Kansas in 1871. A spur was built to Hillsboro in 1879. The silent years of the prairie came to an end. Waves of immigrants came to Marion County. They came from Germany, Prussia, Poland, Russia, France, England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Bohemia, Scandinavian countries, Mexico and Canada. They came from the eastern states as well. In 1895 Marion County recorded the highest concentration of foreign born persons in the state of Kansas. The need for an education center was apparent.

Between the years 1873 and 1880 about 10,000 Mennonites came to the United States. About 6,000 settled in Kansas and 2000 came to Marion County where they quickly clustered in thirteen villages. Hillsboro soon became the major Mennonite center of the county and eventually the center of activities for the Mennonite Brethren Church in North America.

Among the Mennonites who built their communities near Hillsboro and who helped build the new college were three Mennonite groups originating from different parts of Russia and Europe.

The first group to arrive, the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren (K.M.B.), came from the Crimea, South Russia, where their church was formed in September 21, 1869. Under the leadership of Elder Jacob A. Wiebe the entire congregation of thirty families came to Marion County in 1874. They developed the village Gnadenu (Grace Valley) just two miles southeast of the present college campus.

The Mennonite Brethren Church was born in 1860 in South Russia. The early M.B. churches were located in the Molotschna and Chortiza Colonies. About 200 M.B. families came to the U.S. between 1875 and 1880. The first M.B. families came to Marion County in 1874. They settled east and south of the Gnadenu village. Their church, the Ebenfeld (level field) Church, claims to be the first organized M.B. church in North America. This church reached a membership of 253 by 1888. The total M.B. membership in North America was 1,266 in 1888. That year the Mennonite Brethren came together in Henderson, Nebraska to organize the M.B. Conference of Churches in North America. Three districts were established: Southern, Central, and Northern. Later, the Western District was added. The Ebenfeld Church, a leading church in the conference in the early years, became the mother church of Tabor College.

Between 1874 and 1880 a third group of 200 families from three Mennonite churches near Warsaw came to the French Creek district north of Hillsboro. Under the leadership of Johann Harms, a teacher in the French Creek School, a revival led to the establishment of the Johannestal M.B. Church. This church joined the M.B. Conference in 1881. In 1882 this fellowship moved to Hillsboro into the "Little Red School House" and was thereafter called the Hillsboro Mennonite Brethren Church.

The thirty-four charter members of the Hillsboro M.B. Church could not have anticipated that their little church would develop into the leading M.B. Church in the United States and Canada for many years. With the coming of a train depot and a post office to Hillsboro in 1879 and the incorporation of the town June 25, 1884, Hillsboro soon became the national and international hub for Mennonite Brethren. The town church soon became a melting pot as Mennonites from the country churches moved to town. Some German Baptists and Lutherans joined. A rich mix of different ethnic groups gave this church its early vitality, excitement and strength. Soon the major conference ministries located in Hillsboro: a publishing house was moved to Hillsboro in 1909; the college was born in 1908; a missionary program was developed. More and more conference leaders moved to Hillsboro. A rich ethnic mix and abundance of leadership provided the rich cultural diversity and leadership gifts which made possible the beginning of a college community.

Before Tabor College was born three attempts were made to establish a training center for M.B. and K.M.B. young people. An early pioneer in M.B. education was John F. Harms, editor of the Zionsbote for many years and an M.B. publisher. With the support of a School Association organized in the M.B. Church of Goessel, Kansas, he conducted a Bible school in the Kansas villages of Canada and Lehigh. Harms, however, did not feel that he was qualified as a teacher. This effort was aborted in 1894, but Harms continued to promote education.

A second M.B. educator was J.F. Duerksen, a gifted school master who came from Russia in 1877. With the support of another School Association, involving several Mennonite bodies, the Buhler German Bible School was established. Instruction consisted mostly of religious instruction in the German language. Duerksen had remarkable success from 1882-1899. The school closed in 1902 as it became apparent that young people seeking career training needed more than religious instruction. Many early M.B. leaders were inspired by this remarkable teacher.

The third training center was initiated when J.F. Harms chanced to meet President Scharp of McPherson College on a train running between Marion and Hillsboro, Kansas. Scharp invited Harms to take over the German Department of McPherson College. After consulting with several conference leaders, including Elder Abraham Schellenberg, a School Association appointed J.F. Duerksen to fill the post. In effect the M.B. and K.M.B. conferences controlled the German Department and thereby created a training center in cooperation with McPherson College. This arrangement lasted from 1899 to 1906.

During these six years over 100 M.B. and K.M.B. students attended McPherson College, many of the future M.B. leaders were trained here: H.W. Lohrenz, P.C. Hiebert, Harder, H.F. Toews, etc. P.C. Hiebert was the first M.B. to graduate with the B.A. degree. It was at McPherson College where the two young visionaries H.W. Lohrenz and P.C. Hiebert pledged themselves, with a handshake, to help start an M.B. college.

Wesley Prieb continues to teach in the English Department and has been an administrator at Tabor College for many years. Presently he serves as the Director of the Center for M.B. Studies at Tabor College.

(Further Note: One of the more remarkable archaeological finds, in recent years, has been in Marion, Kansas, some 9 miles east of Hillsboro. While building a levee for flood control around the small town several Indian Villages were discovered. The Department of Anthropology at Wichita State University has been sifting through the artifacts, and very shortly the results will be published. The artifacts provide valuable information indicating that Marion County was a well-established centre for the Quivera/Wichita Indians, and that the county has been inhabited for over 1,000 years.)

CENTENNIAL BOOK BEING PLANNED

In 1988 the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches will be celebrating one hundred years of fruitful worship and ministry in Canada. The annual conference, in 1988, will be hosted by the Winkler M.B. Church, for many years the leading M.B. Church in Canada, near which the first M.B. Church (Burwalde) was established.

In commemoration of this event the Conference Archivist, Ken Reddig, is compiling a book of Mennonite Brethren leadership over the past 100 years. Suggestions are invited as to which significant conference leaders from Canada, should be included. Please send your suggestion to the Centre for M.B. Studies, 77 Henderson Highway, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R2L 1L1.

REV. AND MRS. A.H. UNRUH EVENING

The Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of Canada is planning another in their series of commemorative evenings, this time remembering the contributions of Rev. and Mrs. A.H. Unruh. It is perhaps long overdue that such an evening is planned. Dr. Unruh was widely known for his teaching and preaching and he left an enduring mark upon the growth and development of the Mennonite Brethren Churches in North America.

The date chosen for this event is April 6, 1984 at 8:00 p.m. The place is the Auditorium of the Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg.

The program for this event will be as follows:

- * Introduction
- * Slides of selected family photographs
- * "Biographies of Rev. and Mrs. A.H. Unruh"
Peggy Regehr (Granddaughter)
- * "The Teaching and Preaching Ministry of Rev. Unruh"
Dr. David Ewert
- * "The Humor of Rev. Unruh"
Dr. Harry Loewen
- * "Family Life at Home"
Rev. A.A. Unruh
- * Refreshments to follow

Anyone interested is invited to attend this event. Representative sermons of Dr. Unruh (cassette tape) will be available for purchase.

SUMMER GRANTS REQUESTED

As in previous summers the Centre for M.B. Studies has applied to several grants to aid in the research activities of the Centre.

A grant for continuation of the Rundschau indexing project has been submitted. Another grant to interview Mennonite musicians across Canada has also been requested.

While it is still too early to know whether any of these grants are forthcoming, the Centre would like the readers of this Newsletter to aid in both these projects should they materialize.

First, for the indexing project three students able to read German and one student able to operate a computer will be required. Since word is often received in late March or April as to whether funds will be available, it usually leaves very little time to locate students with the necessary qualifications.

The second project requires the names and addresses of Mennonite musicians from every province who have contributed significantly, not only to Mennonite Brethren, but in general to Mennonite Music-Making in Canada between the years of 1920-1970. Please send the names and addresses of individuals whom you think should be interviewed to the Centre. These names will be given to the researcher conducting this project.

MENNONITE HISTORICAL ATLAS

For years William Schroeder (school teacher in Winnipeg and secretary of the M.B. Historical Society) has pursued his interest of drawing maps related to Russian Mennonites and Mennonite History in general. He continued his research as he led repeated tourist trips into the Soviet Union. Now a collection of his maps is being prepared for publication.

The maps in this atlas will deal with many aspects of Anabaptist and Mennonite History, but will tend to emphasize the Russian experience. Explanatory notes and an index are being prepared by Helmut Huebert of Winnipeg. Cartographer for the atlas is Weldon Hiebert, of the University of Winnipeg Geography department. Publisher is Springfield Publishers of Winnipeg. It is hoped to have the atlas available by late 1984.

Enquiries or pre-publication orders may be direct to:

Springfield Publishers
6 Litz Place
Winnipeg, Manitoba
R2G 0V1

or to the:

Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Canada
77 Henderson Highway
Winnipeg, Manitoba
R2L 1L1

VOLUNTEERS: THE WORKFORCE OF THE ARCHIVES

A fine spirit dwells among the people of our conference. As an archives of the conference we enjoy the good will and close working relationships with churches, agencies and institutions. But on another level, we also enjoy the fine spirit of people willing to spend energy and time to make our conference agencies, in this case the archives, achieve their goals.

A demonstration of such a gift of time is in the fact that our archives benefits by having a good group of volunteers who give weekly to the ongoing operations of the archives. We, as the Historical Committee of the Canadian Conference of M.B. Churches, wish to commend the following for the many hours they have given and continue to give the archives.

Velma Mierau, wife of College Professor Eric Mierau, works for the Centre on a part-time basis. In addition she volunteers an extra 6 - 8 hours each week. Her tasks include creating registers of acquisitions, typing, maintaining the rare book and periodical collections. Velma has been a volunteer in the Centre for the past 3½ years.

Erica Voth volunteers one day each week and maintains the obituary collection (useful for genealogists) and the church bulletin collection of the Centre. In addition she is our "expert" in deciphering problematic "gothic" hand written script. From time to time she transcribes manuscripts from "gothic" to "Latin" script. Erica has volunteered her services for the past 2½ years.

Lena Ewert, wife of College President David Ewert, has volunteered her services one day each week since coming to Winnipeg in the fall of 1982. Lena does a variety of different tasks including organizing microfilm accessions, creating registers of acquisitions, sorting backfiles of periodicals and sorting manuscript collections. Her facility with "gothic" script is a great asset in attempting to sort through letters and papers of early Mennonite Brethren Conference files.

Most recently Ida Toews, long time teacher in the Winnipeg area, has volunteered to help one day each week in the translation of important documents and books. Having grown up with German, and then teaching German for many years, qualifies her for this important task. Presently she is translating Anna Thiessen's book, "Die Stadtmission in Winnipeg," for use by College students.

Over the past five years many others have volunteered their services. They include Neoma Jantz, Goldie Pankratz, Adelheid Fast, Dorothy Huebert, Karen Huebert and David Huebert. Without the excellent services all of these people have rendered we would simply be far behind in making available to researchers the resources of our Centre. Many thanks to all of you.

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: _____

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