
Mennonite Historian

A PUBLICATION OF THE MENNONITE HERITAGE CENTRE and THE CENTRE FOR MB STUDIES IN CANADA

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Burns Lake, British Columbia (May 9, 1940). Mennonite settlers passing Tsinket Lake enroute to Cheslatta via horse and wagon. Photo: Courtesy of Mennonite Heritage Centre (1286-720 p 5a). See story on p. 2.



BC Mennonites: Changing Perceptions of Pilgrims in Lotus Land, 1938–2014

(Part 2)

by David Giesbrecht

Robert Burkinshaw's *Pilgrims in Lotus Land* explores the remarkable growth of Conservative Protestantism in the intensely secular province of British Columbia, 1917–1981,¹ a story that includes the growth of BC Mennonites. Over the past 75 years BC Mennonites have left a deep imprint on the communities in which they have lived and in that process, found themselves changing as well.

With the end of WWII in 1945, the public perception of Mennonites in British Columbia improved noticeably from the earlier anti-German sentiment, at least as reflected in media stories.² The scurrilous headlines of 1943 regarding the “Mennonite menace”³ slowly yielded to begrudging acceptance, even affirmation for these German-speaking immigrants. Such was the positive tone heralded by *The Victoria Daily Times* when it informed readers in 1946 that “Mennonites are Good Citizens.”⁴ The writer seemed to draw much comfort from an observation that “Mennonites [were] gradually assimilating into Canadian culture.”

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By 1950, Les Rimes in the *Vancouver Province* opined that Yarrow residents were diligent citizens, who in their own small way, “carry Christianity beyond Sunday worship to everyday living.”⁵ Going forward, positive stories proliferated, including coverage of the relief work done by Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Disaster Service, the success of students in Mennonite schools, and the stardom of opera singer, Ben Heppner, “the Mennonite farm boy.”⁶

On occasion, media stories about Mennonites verged on adulation, as for instance when David Virtue took notice of industrious Mennonites in 1977, telling readers that “if God were a capitalist, Mennonites would be his favourite people.”⁷ Similarly, admiring stories of Mennonite successes have been widely acknowledged. In Volume 2 of *The Canadian Establishment*, Peter Neuman zones in on the once mighty Block Brothers real estate empire.⁸ In 1994, the *Globe and Mail* took note of Peter Wall, who like his Redekopp business partners, arrived in Canada in 1948. The “five diamond” Wall Centre has become a Vancouver landmark. Nor was it lost on journalistic curiosity that Peter Wall’s donation of \$15 million to the University of British Columbia in 1991, was until then the single largest donation the university had received.⁹

Reasons for the dramatic change in perception of Mennonites are varied. Gradually, it dawned on the public consciousness that Mennonites had contributed significantly to the Canadian war effort. In addition to those choosing alternative service of national interest in forestry, medical services, and road construction, in Yarrow alone, 52 Mennonite men and one woman enlisted for military service.¹⁰

After the war, the social and linguistic obstacles for entry to public life rapidly dissipated for those Mennonites choosing cultural integration. In 1946, Abraham Isaak became the first Mennonite appointed to a public teaching position.¹¹ Thereafter, young Mennonites seamlessly found their way into a wide diversity of careers and professions, many serving with distinction, as for instance Ron Wiebe who combined a stellar career in correctional services with deep commitment to church and community.¹²

Mennonite?

With the rapid integration of many Mennonites into Canadian culture, the historic demarcation of Mennonite as an ethno-religious grouping began to fade. So, what does it mean to be a Mennonite today? Too many exceptions exist to consider Mennonites as exclusively Protestant Christians. Nor is it correct to say that Mennonites are only those of Dutch-German-Russian descent. Over time, the name has become more of an accumulation of identities than an easily definable term. As Harry Loewen notes, “there is no one clear discernable Mennonite identity.”¹³ Some of those who consider themselves to be Mennonite, are not necessarily practicing Christians. Some consider themselves spiritual, but not religious.

However, for those Mennonites who strive to be followers of Jesus Christ, the association with a local church remains significant. Here is where group solidarity is formed, personal and theological values clarified, and strong social networks are cultivated. It is in a church setting where young people are nurtured and family life strengthened. For a variety of reasons, many contemporary Mennonites generously continue to invest their time and money in establishing viable local congregations, both Mennonite and non-Mennonite.

Two main Mennonite conferences of churches

In BC there are two major Mennonite denominations: the Mennonite Brethren Church and the Mennonite Church. According to 2014 denominational statistics, there are 100 Mennonite Brethren churches in BC with 19,711 baptised members¹⁴ and 31 Mennonite churches with 3,200 baptised members.¹⁵

Among BC Mennonite-affiliated churches, membership and attendance patterns vary considerably. For instance, the Willingdon Church in Burnaby in its fifty year history has become “the biggest mega-church in B.C. [with] thousands of people from diverse ethnicities ... [and] which specialists believe is the second-largest Protestant congregation in Canada after Calgary’s Centre Street Church.”¹⁶ While this Mennonite Brethren church reports a membership of 2,558, its average weekend attendance more than doubles that number at 5,280. By contrast, many BC Mennonite churches report higher membership statistics than atten-

(cont’d on p. 4)

Genealogy and Family History

Why I am an Amateur Historian

by Ernest Braun

Earlier this year while I was browsing through an old edition of the *Mennonite Reporter*, 1974, a special edition prepared by Frank H. Epp for the Mennonite Centennial celebrating the arrival of the first Russian Mennonites to Manitoba in 1874, I was reminded of the chance encounter I had with the noted editor and writer.

In August 1972, my wife and I happened to be in Akron, Pennsylvania, for orientation. Our destination was Bolivia, my wife to work as a health promoter and I as a teacher under TAP (Teachers Abroad Program). Earlier we had filled out the psychological questionnaire, and that day we met with the psychologist to hear the results. While I was waiting for my wife to finish her interview, I dawdled around in the outer MCC office probably irritating the secretary, when another man entered the room. He seemed vaguely familiar, but I did not know him. Probably to smooth over the awkwardness of having two people in one small room who did not know each other, the secretary introduced him to me, as *Mennonite Reporter* Editor Frank H. Epp, in Akron to do some consultation or whatever. I was introduced to him as a Mennonite from Manitoba.

That started it. He looked me up and down, and asked where I was from and when my people had come to Canada. I

said Grunthal / Steinbach, and 1870s. So he said, you are Bergthaler, which is correct but I am not sure I knew that at the time, thinking I was Chortitzer, and probably confusing church names with colony names. He inclined his head to the back room that he likely had been assigned as a temporary office, indicating I was to follow him there. I knew roughly who he was—having read some of his work in the Mennonite papers—so I did, although more than a little puzzled about where all this was going. What did the widely-known academic, journalist, and churchman want with me, a *bosch-hos* [bush rabbit] from the East Reserve? Maybe I had fouled up my psychological examination so badly,

MCC needed to break it to me gently that somebody this unbalanced would not be accepted into the Teachers Abroad Program after all.

He sat down at the desk, asked me to pull up a chair right beside him, which made my anxiety escalate substantially. Saying something like: “This is who you are,” and he proceeded to draw a bonspiel chart in reverse, at least that is what it looked like to me at first. Then he gave me a pretty detailed history lesson on Mennonite migrations: from various places in the Netherlands, to Poland, to New Russia, to Manitoba, to USA, to Mexico, etc., the whole nine yards. I think he later published a refined version of that chart in the 1974 Centennial edition of *Mennonite Reporter*, which I recognized when Conrad Stoesz gave it to me recently. He traced the exact line of our migrations, and when I told him that we had actually had a short

chapter in Paraguay, he gave even more detail.

It was a pivotal 15 minutes, for I date the beginning of my fascination with Mennonite history to that short time frame. Up to that moment I took my heritage for granted, as a given, and not needing further exploration, although family tree books do run in the family. That hand-drawn chart and the accompanying running commentary with Frank H. Epp expanded my understanding of the long chain of migrations that culminated in my being here in this place, and piqued my interest in all things Mennonite.



Ernest Braun of Niverville, Manitoba, received the Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba's award for Historical Preservation and Promotion May 8, 2014 at Government House. The accolade recognizes Braun's 20 years of documenting the history of Mennonites in Manitoba through the creation of an inventory of aerial photographs of the East Reserve, the restoration of the province's first Chortitzer church, membership in several local historical societies, and contribution to books on settlements of the East Reserve including a forthcoming volume of maps. L-R: Manitoba Historical Committee past president James Kostuchuk, Honourable Lieutenant Governor Philip Lee, and Ernest Braun. Photo: Courtesy of News Media Services.

Black Krim Query

The Black Krim tomato is an heirloom variety that originated in the Crimean region of Russia.

Its spread to other regions was aided by soldiers returning home after the Crimean War (1853–1856).

Was this tomato grown in Mennonite gardens in Russia?

Contact Ken Reddig at kenwr2174@gmail.com, if you have information.

Queries:

Send queries to Conrad Stoesz, 600 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, MB R3P 0M4 or email: cstoesz@mennonitechurch.ca.

Recent Books

If you have recently published a genealogy or family history book, please send us a complimentary copy and it will get noted.

Mennonites in BC

(cont'd from p. 2)

dance.¹⁷ Increasingly, the meaning or relevance of formal membership is declining.

Even a cursory examination of Mennonite church life in BC points to a huge diversity in congregational names, worship styles, and congregational life. Probably attempting to be “seeker friendly” and culturally sensitive, Mennonite churches in BC are identifying themselves in a wide diversity of ways. Of the 31 congregations affiliated with the Mennonite Church, all but five use the name “Mennonite” in the way they formally identify themselves. Not so among the Mennonite Brethren churches, where only 28 of the 100 congregations use the “MB” designation in their official names. Many have simply resorted to calling themselves “community churches.” Moreover, increasingly there appears to be a practice where local congregations avoid any label that overtly identifies them as churches or spiritual communities, with names such as The Centre, Emmaus, Faithwerks, House For All Nations, Meta Communities, Reality Vancouver, The Abbey, or The Fire.

Further, BC Mennonite churches now reflect a rich linguistic diversity. Eleven of the 31 Mennonite congregations represent non-English speaking fellowships. Mennonite Brethren, in addition to English and sign-language, offer services in sixteen languages.¹⁸

A further expression of diversity is mirrored in the many ways congregations arrange their corporate time. The Bakerview MB Church in Abbotsford has

for a decade now been offering parishioners a choice of three distinct Sunday morning worship services: traditional, contemporary, or liturgical. The Artisan Church, meeting in the Vancouver Public Library, describes itself as “reimagining their lives as his followers, and participating as ‘co-artisans’ in God’s movement of renewing all things.”¹⁹

Other Mennonite groups

In addition to the two large Mennonite denominations that have chosen largely to assimilate to Canadian culture, there are two Evangelical Mennonite congregations—one in Burns Lake and one in Vanderhoof—that have made similar cultural adaptations. However, there are other branches of the Mennonite family in BC that have been more resistant to acculturation, based on their theological convictions. Presently, there are seven Church of God in Christ (Holdeman Mennonite) congregations in BC, with a combined membership of 459.²⁰

Old Colony Mennonites are also present in BC. In 1940, the British Columbia and Saskatchewan governments and the Canadian National Railway cooperated to relocate 25 Old Colony Mennonite families from the Hague-Osler and Toppingham areas of Saskatchewan to the Burns Lake District.²¹

According to Leonard Doell’s account, Old Colony Mennonite “wanderlust was in full blossom in the spring of 1961.”²² With a generous land-clearing loan from the BC government, some 86 families moved from Saskatchewan, to begin life north of Fort St. John, with each family having the option of settling on 480 acres

of land.²³ The Old Colony Mennonite Church in Prespatou was formally organized in 1963. In 1974, it affiliated with Chortitzer Mennonite Conference, and in 2010, the membership was about 500.²⁴

Finally, the Eastern Mennonite Pennsylvania Church is present in British Columbia (Chilliwack, Burns Lake, Vander-

hoof, Montney) with a total membership of about 240 members.²⁵

Mennonite contributions to BC life

1. *Music.* It can fairly be said that Mennonites arrived in British Columbia singing. From the outset, the cultivation and love of music were core values of congregational life. Indeed, Marlene Kropf of the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary says that “singing is the most important thing that happens in Mennonite worship.”²⁶ A familiar agenda at early provincial church Conferences included planning for musical workshops and area choral performances.

Over the years, this musical love and expertise has expressed itself in significantly creative ways, such as through the making and restoration of musical instruments. Rudy Bandsmere in Abbotsford, Herman Janzen in Mission, and Heinrich Friesen in Yarrow have all received much acclaim.²⁷ At a competition in Chilliwack, a visiting concert violinist was persuaded to perform with three violins: a Stradivarius, a Guarneri, and a Friesen. When the audience was asked for a response, the most enthusiastic applause was accorded to the Friesen violin.²⁸

Another recognized expression of Mennonite music-making is the emergence of contemporary composers, such as Larry Nickel of Vancouver, who is an active choral clinician with the Canadian Music Centre. His doctoral work was issued in the composition, “Requiem for Peace”, which in 2010 was presented at Vancouver’s Orpheum theatre with the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra and the Vancouver Bach Choir. Nickel’s impressive discography gives witness to a very creative and productive composer.²⁹

However, the most widely enjoyed and appreciated contribution of Mennonite music-making has been through the large number of choirs and special performance groups. In 1967, Rudy Baerg conducted 600 voices comprised of 20 choirs in a rousing performance to a full house at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre in Vancouver. In 1976, he initiated the Valley Festival Singers, a choir, now several conductors later, has delighted audiences in many venues.³⁰ Other Mennonite choirs that regularly attract obliging audiences include the Pacific Mennonite Children’s Choir, the West Coast Chamber Choir, Evensong, Menno Simons Singers, and the Abbotsford Youth Orchestra.

2. *Education.* From the outset, Mennonites have placed a high premium



Westside Church, 777 Homer Street, downtown Vancouver, formerly the Centre for the Performing Arts. In 2013, the Mennonite Brethren church plant acquired this property when “The Centre” went up for sale. Photo: Courtesy of David Giesbrecht.

on training their young people. In a stimulating reflection on Mennonites and education, James Pankratz notes how Mennonites have been zealous in beginning schools, but not nearly as successful in maintaining them.³¹ So it was in BC. By October 1930, barely a year after its founding, the Yarrow MB Church established a Bible school and that autumn began offering classes. Two years later, members of the newly established South Abbotsford MB congregation began their own Bible school, while nearly simultaneously, the Mennonite Church established the Bethel Bible School in Abbotsford. At various times, Mennonites in BC have operated six such schools.³² Over time, all of these BC Bible training centres have been amalgamated to become Columbia Bible College, a degree-granting undergraduate school in Abbotsford with an enrolment of about 400 students in 2014.

A distinct recognition among many BC Mennonites is that an expanding congregational base requires a commensurate supply of trained ministers. Accordingly, in 1988 BC Mennonite Brethren entered into an association with six other denominations to create the ACTS seminary (Associated Canadian Theological Schools) on the campus of Trinity Western University in Langley. Under the leadership of Bruce Guenther, the MB seminary, with its several campuses across Canada, has become a collaborative, flexible clergy training institution. Very significantly, “22% of Mennonite Brethren ministry positions in Canada ... are filled by MB Biblical Seminary alumni.”³³

More recent developments in post-secondary education in BC include the creation of the Mennonite Faith and Learning Society. Under its auspices, teaching/research centres are being established at both the University of the Fraser Valley in Abbotsford and at Trinity Western University in Langley.

Mennonites also continue to place a strong emphasis on grade-school education. During their sojourn in BC, they established high schools in Yarrow and Abbotsford. In 2014, the Mennonite Educational Institute (MEI), the sole inheritor of these earlier efforts, is also the largest religious independent school in BC. It now operates a preschool, an elementary school, a middle school, and a high school on its campus in Abbotsford, with a combined enrolment of 1,500



Tabor Court Assisted Living Facility opened in 2006 and is part of the Tabor Village collection of housing services for seniors in Abbotsford, which also includes Tabor Home and Tabor Manor. Photo: Courtesy of David Giesbrecht.

students. Anyone observing the flourishing school that MEI has become, could hardly conceive that during the late 1960s, when threatening loans had made debt management tenuous, the board chairman offered to turn the school keys over to the local banker.³⁴

Why have separate schools? The aim is not for exclusivity, as some 10% of the MEI students come from Sikh or other non-Christian homes. However, private school-oriented Mennonites continue to believe that certain kinds of values and attitudes are worth preserving, and would be more difficult to cultivate in the pluralistic setting of a public school system. Among some parents there may also be the perception that a private school enforces a greater degree of discipline; and hence, it is perceived to offer a healthier learning climate.

3. *Mission.* Central to the purpose of many BC Mennonite faith communities has been both domestic and foreign mission work. At the second meeting of the BC Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches on 25 October 1931—then comprising three congregations—delegates began formulating plans for evangelistic outreach in the province.³⁵ These early outreach efforts set an enduring evangelistic agenda that has resulted in the establishment of Mennonite Brethren congregations throughout BC.

But it was in the promotion and advocacy of global mission that mission-minded BC Mennonite churches have singularly applied their energies. The need to find revenue for such outreach was historically the catalyst for the frequent mission auction events. Women’s fellowship groups were particularly active in contributing crafts and baking to these auctions, thereby

garnering significant financial support for mission endeavours. Consistent with their stated mission and priorities, congregations sent many of their members to overseas assignments through agencies such as the Mennonite Brethren Board of Missions, the General Conference Church Board of Missions, or the Mennonite Central Committee.

4. *Social services.* Those Mennonites faithful to historic Anabaptist values believe that it would be inconsistent to profess a Christian faith while at the same time being indifferent to the human needs around them. Wherever sizable populations of Mennonites live in BC, they sponsor fundraising events or relief sales, raising funds for disaster relief.³⁶

By far the biggest and best known Mennonite mission in BC is the Mennonite Central Committee. While in the public mind the organization is primarily focused on overseas ministries, the fact is that MCC also takes serious its mandate to serve the local community. These provincial initiatives include such diverse supports as the Fraser Valley Rent Assistance Project providing one-time emergency loans to needy families, HIV/AIDS project supporting people living with AIDS, and the Refugee and Newcomer Assistance Project supporting refugees and newcomers in the areas of sponsorship, family reunification, settlement, and integration into Canadian society.³⁷

5. *Elder care.* Contemporary Mennonites are heirs to a tradition that pays thoughtful attention to the care of their elderly. In Abbotsford, there are two major, government-funded Mennonite care homes. In 1953, the Mennonite Benevolent Society (MBS) was formed to provide housing and long-term healthcare

(cont'd on p. 10)



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McRoberts and his Photos of Mennonites in Paraguay, 1928–1929

by Conrad Stoesz

In March 2014, the Mennonite Heritage Centre acquired a series of six photograph albums that were once owned by New York banker and land financier, Samuel McRoberts (1868–1947). McRoberts became a key player in the movement of Manitoba Sommerfelder, Chortitzer, and Saskatchewan Bergthaler Mennonites to Paraguay beginning in 1926. At first, McRoberts was uninterested in helping the Mennonites. However, when he mentioned to his wife, Harriet, about a visit from a Mennonite delegation, she insisted that the delegation come to dinner.

Delegate Bernhard Toews reports that they were served bread, meat, baked potatoes, coffee, and an assortment of other delicacies. The Mennonites sang a German and Russian song for their hosts. Harriet Pearl Skinner McRoberts, a poet and song writer herself, gave a copy of one of her songbooks to Bishop Aron Zacharias. She was impressed with the delegation and insisted that the Mennonites were good, God-fearing

people and that helping them “would be a real service to Christianity and the Church.” And so it was that Samuel McRoberts agreed to help the Mennonites sell their land in Canada and buy new land in Paraguay.

Starting on November 28, 1926, a group of 279 families consisting of 1,765 people left for Paraguay with high hopes, although they had been advised to send only 100 families, to ascertain the conditions first. Upon arrival, the immigrants experienced a series of setbacks. Leaving the Canadian winter behind, the immigrants arrived in the Paraguayan tropical summer season. The land was not adequately surveyed for settlement, so the immigrants lived in crowded tents and makeshift shelters for many months. Hot weather and cramped, unsanitary living quarters gave rise to illness and disease such as typhoid fever. In total, 185 people died, most of them waiting to be allowed to settle their new land.

Friends and family back in Canada were growing anxious and informed McRoberts of the situation. McRoberts arrived in Paraguay and, together with the Mennonites, organized a final expedition to make land selection in July 1927. However, it was only in April 1928 that the immigrants could move onto their land and begin to settle. Without McRoberts, surely the process would have moved even slower and more people would have suffered and died.

McRoberts’s business associate, A.M. Roger, wrote an energetic letter to the Chortitzer Mennonite leadership in Manitoba in 1928, inviting them to a meeting in Winnipeg to view photos and exhibits. After a meeting of the ministers, *Waisenamt* officer Henry Klippenstein informed Roger that they did not want a meeting, nor want the photos shown. Roger angrily shot back, “I think you are making a very great mistake ... Such action on your part looks as though



Bishop Martin C. Friesen in Osterwick, Paraguay at the table with his family. Samuel McRoberts Photo Collection #71. Photo: Courtesy of Mennonite Heritage Centre.

someone wished to prevent people from going to Paraguay.”

Roger followed up with another letter, reassuring Klippenstein that the photos would not be shown in churches. He also indicated that he declined lucrative offers that would have seen the photos shown “in all the moving picture houses in the United States.”

By the end of 1928 and start of 1929, McRoberts (or one of his associates) took another series of photographs of the settlers in their new homes. These 231 photos are now at the Mennonite Heritage Centre. The photos, and the descriptions that were provided by Fred Engen, suggests that the photos were taken to show the successful development of the Menno Colony villages and farms, possibly to encourage further settlement. The photos show sturdy buildings, flourishing gardens, nurseries, and fields filled with a wide variety of crops.

These photos provide a unique glimpse into the early years of Menno Colony. However, over time these photos have suffered from the acidic glue used to affix them to the pages in the albums. The glue has migrated to the surface of the photos, severely damaging the photos. At this point, the details in the damaged areas are still faintly visible, but the photos will continue to deteriorate over time. The good news is that with digital technology, the photos can be restored. The process is tedious and requires special skills and tools. If you would like to help fund the restoration of the photos, please contact Korey Dyck or Conrad Stoesz at the Mennonite Heritage Centre.

Save the Date!

Saturday, November 15, 2014.

The Mennonite Heritage Centre, Winnipeg, is organizing a one-day academic and community education workshop celebrating the 225th Anniversary of the Prussian Mennonite immigration to Russia. Guest speaker: Dr. Mark Jantzen, Professor of History, Bethel College, Kansas, and author of the book, *Mennonite German Soldiers: Nation, Religion and Family in the Prussian East, 1772–1880*.

Contact Korey Dyck at
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for more information.

Ann Klassen and her Moro Spear

by Jon Isaak

In August 2014, Arli Klassen donated several items to the Centre from her aunt, Ann Louise Klassen (1930–1988), long-time Mennonite Brethren missionary in Paraguay (1960–1988). The items included a photograph of Ann, several pages of reflections on the life of this remarkably gifted woman, a painting, and a very sharp Moro spear from the indigenous Ayoreo people of the Paraguayan Chaco, popularly called Moro.

Those acquainted with the Mennonite mission story in Paraguay will know of the well-publicized story of Mennonite missionary Kornelius Isaak killed by an Ayoreo named Jonoine with one such Moro spear in 1958.¹

Missionary Ann Klassen—known for her hearty laughter, generous and caring spirit, assertive character, and strong leadership—had her own Moro spear story. Among the documents deposited by Arli was this account written by her family in Canada.

“It was well understood in the [Paraguayan] church colonies that the death of [Missionary] Isaak was for a purpose and further contacts [with the Ayoreo people] were to be sought. It was also noted that the search for oil in the tribal areas by large oil companies was causing problems for the feared tribes but further contacts by the missionaries were being planned and an opportunity developed. The two Mennonite missionaries authorized to proceed with the plan decided to ask Ann Klassen to accompany them, since she was proficient in two related native languages and had good experience in dealing with ‘friendly’ tribes [Lengua] who had also taught her some Moro [Ayoreo] words.

“This turned out to be most dramatic. They entered a clearing in the bush where the Moros were reported to have been seen. Indeed, several male figures appeared from the bush across the clearing, each party taking slow steps and frequent stops as they surveyed each other. The missionary troop kept gesturing friendship and an eagerness to give them gifts they were carrying for that purpose.

“When the distance between them grew smaller, Klassen boldly stepped forward and offered the leader (holding an

infamous Moro spear) some candy bars, which she illustrated by eating some. The leader approached her, but instead of reaching for the offered candy, he grabbed at the string of pearls she was wearing. This had been a planned gift by Klassen, knowing how precious such jewelry was to the Indians. Her response was a pronounced display of agreement, but with a condition. She motioned that she wanted his big long spear in exchange for the pearls. His letting go of the spear and taking the pearls signified a fair deal. More gifts were given; and just as they had appeared, they disappeared back into the bush.

“It can be reported that this encounter led to further contacts and a certain degree of peace developed out of this experience. Ann Klassen brought this spear [see photo] back to Canada on one of her furloughs and used it effectively to tell her stories at mission conferences and Sunday school sessions. It has been in her family’s keeping for many years. Understandably, many viewed it as a fearsome and deadly weapon.

“Ann Klassen died of cancer in the mission field in 1988 and the Lengua [people] honoured her life and contributions by burying her under her favourite tree in their village square. The grave site is well cared for and was an item of special display at one of the Mennonite World Conference tours at the assembly in Paraguay in 2009.”²

When Arli Klassen, niece to Ann Klassen, visited Paraguay in 2011, she spoke with some of those who remembered Ann’s work among the Lenguas. Here are some of things they told Arli about her aunt.

“After Ann came back from a stint in Canada, Ann worked with the Lengua women as a social worker—a new job that no one had ever done before.

“Lots of Indians were Ann’s friends, and Ann took them inside her house. Ann taught us how to bring them inside our homes.

“The Indians were a hunting and gathering society, which meant that the Mennonites saw this as largely ‘begging.’ Ann saw this as part of their hunting and gathering traditions, and would give them things as much as she could.

“Ann was always talking and laughing. The Indians love to laugh. Ann was always laughing with them. They loved being with Ann.”³

Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies



In 1979, Ann married widower Peter Wiens in Yalve Sanga, Fernheim, Paraguay, and embraced yet another challenge with her customary enthusiasm—this time as spouse and mother to Peter’s six children. Of their nine years together, she said: “We were able to serve the Lord together in our family, church, and community.”⁴

Endnotes

1. See A.E. Janzen, *The Moro’s Spear* (Hillsboro, Kansas: Board of Missions of the Conference of MB Church, 1962); Harry Loewen, “The Spear of the Moros,” in *No Permanent City: Stories from Mennonite History and Life* (Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 1993), 177–180; Dick Benner, “Forgiving the Murder” [report from Mennonite World Conference Assembly 2009], *Canadian Mennonite* (August 17, 2009): 11; and *Mennonite Historian* 35/3 (September 2009): 1–2, 9.

2. Submitted by the John Klassen Family, 2014. Ann Klassen Collection, CMBS, Winnipeg. Pictures of the grave site are also in the collection.

3. Stories about Ann Klassen as told to Arli Klassen, 2011. Ann Klassen Collection, CMBS, Winnipeg.

4. Obituary of Ann Louise Klassen/Wiens, *Mennonitische Rundschau* (August 24, 1988): 25.



Missionary Ann Klassen (1930–1988) holding the spear she received in exchange for her pearl necklace, a trade she made with an Ayoreo tribesman several years after a similar spear killed Missionary Kornelius Isaak in 1958. Ann’s spear is now housed at CMBS, Winnipeg. Photo: Courtesy of Arli Klassen.

Establishing a Chair in Mennonite Studies

by Harry Loewen

In the spring of 1978, while teaching at Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, I received an unexpected telephone call from George K. Epp in Winnipeg. “Harry, as you may have heard,” Epp said at the other end, “we are establishing a Chair in Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg.” I had heard about it, but what had that to do with me?

As a member of the search committee at the University of Winnipeg, Epp said that he had been asked to invite me to consider this new position. I felt, however, that Epp himself must have been asked first to fill the new post, and I was right. So I asked, why *he* didn’t accept the position. Epp said that he had recently agreed to become president of Canadian Mennonite Bible College (CMBC), so he couldn’t. But he had promised the Chair’s financial donors and the University of Winnipeg to help them find a suitable inaugural Chair holder, hence the invitation to me.

The Chair in Mennonite Studies came about as a result of several factors, among them the federal government of Canada’s policy of multiculturalism, with Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau enthusiastically behind it. In the second half of the 1970s, the government established several multicultural or ethnic teaching programs (called Chairs) at selected universities. While the government certainly saw the political advantage of such a move among Canada’s ethnic groups, there also was the hope that these university programs would facilitate the study of the culture, language, and tradition of Canada’s ethnic peoples, thus enriching Canadian cultural society.

The Chair in Mennonite Studies was the second such ethnic-religious program at a Canadian university. Some might ask, why a Mennonite Chair and not an Anglican or Baptist or any other religious program? The government considered Mennonites an “ethnic-religious” people and not a religious denomination, hence Mennonites were included in the government’s multicultural programs like other ethnic groups in Canada.

These multicultural Chairs required initial funds from the community or individual donors and the government

usually matched these local funds. The David Friesen Family Foundation provided half of the funds (over \$300,000) toward the endowment of the Chair, and the federal government, through its secretary of state for multiculturalism, provided the other half for a total of over \$600,000.

I did not really want to leave Waterloo for Winnipeg. Being the head of the German Department at WLU, and with teaching German as my first love, I had no desire to switch to Mennonite Studies. But colleagues and friends encouraged me, saying that academically it would be good for me and for the large Mennonite communities in Manitoba. My wife Gertrude also encouraged me to accept the position. While still much in doubt about the move, I was assured by the vice-president of WLU that if for some reason I wished or had to return to Waterloo, I would have an open door for two years.

In May 1978, I flew to Winnipeg for an interview with the search committee, headed by Dr. Harry Duckworth, president of the University. Present were also the heads of most academic departments and also representatives from the Mennonite colleges in Winnipeg. In the end, I had the feeling that all hoped that I would accept their invitation. I was offered tenure at the University immediately, and I would come in as full professor. My work description was simple: To plan and develop teaching courses and a program for Mennonite studies, to teach two courses in each semester, and to become involved in the Mennonite community, including representing the new program in schools, churches, and cultural groups. At the end of the summer in 1978, my wife and I left Waterloo and moved to Winnipeg.

My first two years in the program were both enjoyable and difficult. I loved to plan, develop, and teach courses in Mennonite history and literature, and I sensed that students, both Mennonite and non-Mennonite, responded positively to Mennonite studies. As I remember, there were eighteen students in my first class. In addition to teaching two courses, I also taught an evening course to draw and accommodate students who were gainfully employed during the day. I also enjoyed appearing in schools and churches to talk about the new program.

My difficulties in the first two years revolved around what I believed my role at the University was and what some

members of the Mennonite community expected of me. One churchman told me that there was no point in teaching Mennonite studies at a secular university. Propagating the Mennonite-Christian faith, he implied, was another matter. In other words, my role at the University was that of a missionary, winning adherents to the Mennonite church. It took some time to convince some that the University was not the place to propagate my Mennonite-Christian faith, but to teach the history and culture of Mennonites, including their faith, as one teaches any other university subject.

One of my greatest frustrations came from the attempts by some influential and financially powerful Mennonites to impose their views concerning how a professor—especially a Mennonite professor—ought to function. Here is one example. During the first year, I met periodically with three Mennonite leaders for the purpose of reporting on my program: the late Gerhard Lohrenz, George K. Epp, and David Friesen. Lohrenz and Epp were ministers and teachers, while Friesen was a builder, businessman, and lawyer, who had partially endowed the Chair. In giving their advice, I am sure they all had the success of the Chair’s program in mind, but I felt that the well-meaning men wished to control me in my academic activity. Friesen, for example, told me in no uncertain terms that I should teach courses only and not waste time in “writing books.” “My professors,” he said, “never wrote books, but simply taught courses.”

While I respected David Friesen and appreciated his part in establishing the Chair, I hoped that Lohrenz and Epp—both authors of books themselves—would come to my support. At first, they remained silent, obviously not wanting to contradict the man who donated generous funds to Mennonite education in Winnipeg and elsewhere. “With all due respect, Dr. Friesen,” I finally said, “if this is what you think the role of a professor should be, you obviously got the wrong man.” Both Lohrenz and Epp shifted uneasily in their chairs. “Traditionally a university professor has basically three functions,” I continued, “to teach—and I love teaching and I will teach as well as I can; to research, write, and publish; and to serve the community.” Turning to Lohrenz and Epp, I asked, “Am I not right gentlemen?” Obviously

nervous, Epp finally said, “Yes, Dr. Friesen, Dr. Loewen is right, that’s what the role of a professor is.”

David Friesen had the good sense to back away from a position, once he was persuaded by good arguments and by people he respected. Sometime later at a function at the Fort Garry Hotel he told me with his usual good-natured smile, “The Mennonite program at the University is developing somewhat differently from what I had envisioned, but I am pleased with what you are doing and have accomplished. I wish you well and continued success.” We shook hands, and I felt that he meant what he said.

Following this interaction, however, I suggested to President Duckworth that I would like to broaden the composition of the committee to which the Chair reported by including some academic representatives as well. He agreed, and so we set up a list of persons who would form an advisory committee for the Chair. The list included names from the two Winnipeg universities, the Mennonite colleges, Mennonite church and educational leaders, and of course, members of the David Friesen Family Foundation. The advisory committee met subsequently once or twice in each semester in an advisory capacity and to hear reports from the Chair. For all academic functions the Chair was responsible to the Dean of Arts and Science, like any other department. With this new arrangement I breathed a sigh of relief.

As my first two years were drawing to a close, I had to inform WLU whether I would return to its German department or not. I realized by that time that two years were not sufficient to establish a new program, so I decided to stay in Winnipeg. In the years that followed, I not only taught courses, but also organized annual conferences on subjects in Mennonite history and literature, published scholarly and public articles and books, and founded an academic journal.

In 1983, the first issue of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* (JMS) appeared. The editors of two other Mennonite journals, the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (MQR) and the *Conrad Grebel Review* were most encouraging, agreeing that another Mennonite journal focusing on Russian-Mennonite history and literature would be most welcome.

The new journal got financial support

from several sources: the multicultural program of the federal government, some generous donors, including organizations such as Friesen Printers of Altona, Manitoba, and from Mennonite historical societies. An editorial committee was struck to assist me with the editorial process. Al Reimer, Victor Doerksen, Leo Driedger, James Urry, Roy Vogt, and George Epp are a few from the committee that I thank especially for their encouragement and help in creating a journal that today enjoys the respect of scholars worldwide.

With the founding of JMS and the beginning of publications in Mennonite studies—and my feeling that I was well accepted by both the University and the community—my stay at Winnipeg was sealed. But when Menno Simons College and Canadian Mennonite University (CMU) came into existence, both David Friesen and some at the University of Winnipeg strongly pressured me to become part of these new institutions. I believed, however, that the Chair should remain part of the University of Winnipeg and not become part of a religious institution.

For me it was a hard struggle and I spent many sleepless nights over it. In the end, however, the new president, Dr. Marsha Hanen, told me, “Harry, we hear you loud and clear; the Chair will remain at the University of Winnipeg.” Also, not only

would the program continue after I retired, but a successor would be appointed, and JMS would continue with the support of the University as well. I was overjoyed.

The University had no mandatory retirement age, but with the assurances of the Chair’s future, I decided to retire at age 65. In 1996, we sold our house in Winnipeg and moved to Kelowna, British Columbia.

The current Chair holder, Dr. Royden Loewen, and his staff have greatly expanded the Mennonite program and continue to teach Mennonite courses, publish books and articles, and are well received by the Winnipeg universities, the Mennonite schools, and the Mennonite communities in Manitoba. By remaining squarely lodged within the University of Winnipeg, courses and conferences in Mennonite Studies continue to be accessible to both Mennonite and non-Mennonite students, especially to those who not otherwise go to one of the more religiously oriented Mennonite schools. I am happy for these developments and for the collaborative relations between the schools.

This article is largely based on my autobiography in Between Worlds: Reflections of a Soviet-born Canadian Mennonite (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2006), 234–240.



Signing of the agreement to establish the Chair in Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg (spring 1978). Standing L-R: Harry E. Duckworth, President of the U. of Winnipeg, Katherine (Loewen) Friesen; Ruth (Friesen) Hastings, Robert Friesen, George Epp, President of CMBC, Henry Krahn, President of MBBC. Seated L-R: Gerhard Lorenz, The Honourable Norman Cafik, Minister of State for Multicultural Affairs, and David Friesen. Photo: Courtesy of Mennonite Heritage Centre (492.149).

Plain Coats, Cape Dresses and Bonnets

by Sam Steiner

Prior to the last decade of the 19th century, Ontario Mennonites taught simplicity of dress, but not uniformity in dress styles. “Simplicity” meant that women and men did not wear jewelry, women were discouraged from wearing bright ribbons and or lacy fringes on their clothing, and men did not wear fancy neckties or use expensive tie pins. This simplicity, similar to that of Quakers, aided a sense of separation from the world that had been also augmented by use of the German language, and a measure of geographic isolation on rural farms or small towns.¹

When separation through language and isolation began to decrease, this placed more emphasis on dress. Surprisingly, the loudest calls at the end of the 19th century for uniform dress styles came not from rural Mennonite bishops, but from Mennonite innovators who also promoted Mennonite higher education and the entry of Mennonites into urban and overseas mission work. They included John S. Coffman, father of Samuel F. Coffman, long-time Ontario Mennonite leader, George L. Bender, father of Harold S. Bender, and two Kolb brothers from Ontario who worked for John F. Funk’s *Herald of Truth*. Aaron C. Kolb was born in Waterloo County, Ontario, went to high school with future Prime Minister Mackenzie King, and joined his brother, Abram B. Kolb, in working for the Mennonite Publishing Company in 1889.

In 1895, Kolb spoke at a Sunday school conference in Waterloo County, Ontario,

on “Simplicity and Uniformity of Attire—the Need of It.” He quoted John Wesley against “costly array,” noted Timothy’s call that “women adorn themselves in modest apparel” (1 Timothy 2:9) and suggested this teaching should be extended to men as well. Uniformity of dress allowed rich and poor to live and worship together without any sense of inferiority or superiority. The discussion noted that soldiers can identify friend from foe by their uniforms.²

The following year, Barbara Sherk, an Ontario native who had worked at the Mennonite mission in Chicago also used the military image when she wrote in support of plain clothing, and said that “the soldier is not at all ashamed to wear his uniform, nay, he is proud to do so, that he may show that he *is* a soldier.”³

This emphasis on uniformity called for men to wear the “plain coat” (a coat with no lapels), and for women to retain wearing the cape dress and bonnet well into the 20th century, after the wider society had stopped using the cape, and changed from bonnets to hats. Indeed, the bonnet issue led to a 1924 split in First Mennonite Church, Kitchener, the largest and most influential Mennonite church in Ontario at the time.

Endnotes

1. The best history on the development of dress among “Swiss” Mennonites is still Melvin Gingerich, *Mennonite Attire through Four Centuries* (Breinigsville, PA: Pennsylvania German Society, 1970).
2. A.C. Kolb, “Simplicity and Uniformity of Attire—the Need of It,” *Herald of Truth* (August 1, 1895): 226–228. See also C.B. Brenneman, “Report of the Annual S.S. Conference of Waterloo County, Ontario” (August 1, 1895): 234–235.
3. Barbara Sherk, “Separation,” *Herald of Truth* (March 1, 1896): 66–67.

Mennonites in BC

(cont’d from p. 5)

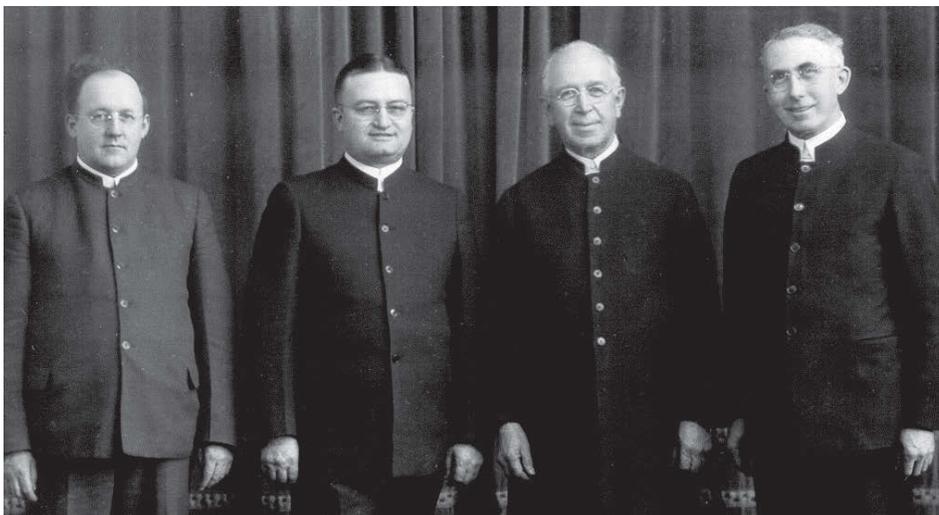
for seniors. From operating a 26-bed retirement home in the early 1950s, MBS has grown to become “one of the major long-term care and housing organizations in the province.”³⁸ Its present facility provides shelter for 700 residents, with a staff of 600 and several hundred volunteers.

About the time that members from the Mennonite Church were planning the Menno seniors’ complex, their Mennonite Brethren counterparts met in 1959 to organize the Tabor Home Society. With the help of government funding, a facility was constructed in 1960 that could accommodate 39 people. Over the years the facility was enlarged to add a range of accommodations and services from acute care to independent living. The Abbotsford campus is collectively called the Tabor Village allows dignified living for approximately 300 seniors.³⁹

With Abbotsford having the status of a retirement community, several private initiatives offer creative opportunities for retirement living. In 1975, the Clearbrook Golden Age Society was formed under the leadership of Abram Olfort. Soon after, with a provincial government seniors’ grant, the Society purchased the former MEI property and commenced providing a broad range of services. A major milestone was achieved in 1997, when the Society was able to construct the Garden Park Tower, with 111 residential suites, a large community centre, and a commercial floor with numerous professional services. From this centre, the Society endeavours not only to serve the interests of local Mennonites, but also to “facilitate participation by the wider community.”⁴⁰

Changing public perceptions about Mennonites

Crass public distemper towards Mennonites has vanished over the past 75 years. While media coverage might on occasion censure Mennonites for invading secular space (e.g., see news report of the recent purchase of Vancouver’s downtown Ford Theatre by Westside Church to be used as an MB church⁴¹), more often than not, public response is positive. When, at their March 2014 meeting, Abbotsford City councillors debated the merits of a newly proposed Mennonite museum, councillors were effusive in their recognition of Mennonite contributions to the community. Although



Ontario Mennonite Bible School Faculty in 1939 in plain coats. L-R: Jesse B. Martin, Clayton F. Derstine, Samuel F. Coffman, and Oscar Burkholder. Photo: Courtesy of Mennonite Archives of Ontario.

the new building site is on property zoned for agricultural use, the motion passed easily, as the building envisioned will be a Mennonite Heritage and Agricultural Museum. It is scheduled for opening in the fall of 2015.

In very tangible ways, the experience of many Mennonites in BC reflects the great Canadian dream. With hard work and determination, it is possible to become financially and socially established. The first Mennonites arrived with few assets other than memory banks of a viable past and a steely determination to build a sustainable future. After these pioneers laid down a spiritual infrastructure, they soon mapped out prospects for their material needs. With growing affluence, they became a people of widening influence.

Over time, many Mennonites have shifted their views and attitudes considerably, as least compared to their forebears. These shifts have not come without tensions and losses that call for ongoing assessment.⁴² Nevertheless, those BC Mennonites that have chosen to assimilate have left their imprint on the communities they live in, as they have become involved in education, medicine, business, the arts, and even in local, provincial, and national political life.

Endnotes

1. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995).
2. See David Giesbrecht's survey in Part 1, *Mennonite Historian* 40/2 (June 2014): 2, 4–5.
3. *Vancouver Province* (December 4, 1943): 14.
4. *The Victoria Daily Times* (December 16, 1946): 22.
5. *Vancouver Province* (June 10, 1950): 8.
6. *Globe and Mail* (November 9, 1990): C4.
7. *Vancouver Province* (April 23, 1977): 28.
8. Peter C. Neuman, *The Canadian Establishment*, vol. 2, *The Acquisitors* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1981), 50–51.
9. *Globe and Mail* (April 25, 1994): B1.
10. Harold J. Dyck and Marlene A. Sawatsky, "Yarrow's Soldiers" in *Village of Unsettled Yearnings*, edited by Leonard Neufeld (Victoria: Horsdal & Schubart, 2002), 95–105.
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19. [http://www.artisanvancouver.ca/who-we-](http://www.artisanvancouver.ca/who-we-are/vision-and-values.html)

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22. Leonard Doell and Jacob Guenther, eds., *Hague-Osler Mennonite Reserve, 1885–1995* (Saskatoon: Hague-Osler History Committee, 1995), 439, 444.
23. Doell and Guenther, 44.
24. Steiner and Thiessen, "Prespatou Mennonite Church."
25. Jesse Neuenschwander, "Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church," GAMEO, September 2010.
26. <http://www.thirdway.com/menno/?Topic=160|Mennonites+and+Music>
27. <http://www.janzenviolins.com>
28. Robert Martens, "Heinrich Friesen, Violin Maker," in *Village of Unsettled Yearnings*, 262–269.
29. <http://larrynickel.com/CanuckComposer/Bio.html>
30. Rudy Baerg, Interview, May 22, 2014.
31. *Direction* 30/1 (Spring 2001): 33–44.
32. Henry C. Born, "Reflections on the Mennonite Brethren Bible School Movement in British Columbia," *Mennonite Historian* 19/3 (September 1993): 7–8; and Bruce Guenther, "Training for Service: The Bible School Movement in Western Canada, 1909–1960" (PhD thesis, McGill University, 2001), 143–146.
33. Gathering 2014 Event Book: Multiplying for Mission, p. 27.
34. Dave Loewen, Interview, June 10, 2014.
35. http://cmbs.mennonitebrethren.ca/inst_records/british-columbia-conference-of-mb-churches
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David Giesbrecht, Abbotsford, BC, retired as librarian at Columbia Bible College in 2000. This is Part 2 of a two-part series, focusing on the contributions of BC Mennonites and the changing public perceptions of Mennonites in BC. See Part 1 in the June 2014 issue.

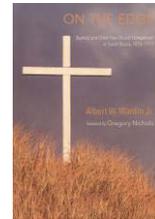
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Book Reviews

Albert J. Wardin, Jr., *On the Edge: Baptists and Other Free Church Evangelicals in Tsarist Russia, 1855–1917* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 533 pp.

Reviewed by Abe J. Dueck



On the Edge is a truly ambitious work by a historian who is perhaps the foremost authority on German Baptists in Slavic countries and also more generally on the Protestant free church

movement in these countries. Mennonite Brethren historians will recognize Wardin as someone who has written extensively on German Baptist/Mennonite Brethren relations in Russia during their respective formative periods.

Wardin's book is divided into six major sections: a Prologue and five partially overlapping chronological divisions. Each of the sections contains a number of chapters focusing on particular groups (German Baptists, Mennonite Brethren, Ukrainian Stundists, etc.), or on various themes (suppression, theological education, etc.).

Clearly evident throughout the book is Wardin's extensive knowledge of the various individuals and groups during this period. Wardin himself has gathered an extensive collection of documents, most of which are housed in the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives in Nashville, TN. While Mennonite Brethren scholars have used this material to some extent, it promises to continue to be useful for further research. Wardin's earlier work, *Evangelical Sectarianism in the Russian Empire and the USSR*, is an indispensable tool for those wishing to study the period.

For Mennonites, this work is particularly impressive, both because of the amount of material about Mennonite Brethren and because it documents the extent of interaction between Mennonite Brethren and other Protestant free church groups. Most of the major works on Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren history, while acknowledging the influence of pietists and German Baptists, have been much narrower in their focus.

In Part II, three chapters focus on MBs, two of which deal with the relationship with German Baptists. Part V has a

chapter entitled, “Tolerated Confession: Mennonite Brethren 1885–1905.” Part VI contains a chapter entitled, “Mennonite Brethren: Prosperous and Challenged, 1905–1914.” In addition to those sections which focus specifically on Mennonite Brethren, readers will find that Mennonite Brethren figure very prominently in many of the other sections of the book.

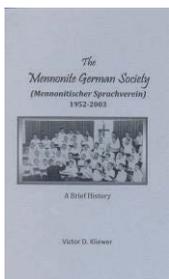
Mennonite Brethren identity has been the subject of much debate throughout their history and continues to be an issue today. During the first fifty or sixty years the issue was particularly whether Mennonite Brethren were more Baptist or Mennonite in their essence. It is clear that Wardin believes that Mennonite Brethren had a closer affinity with German Baptists than their historians have generally acknowledged. The question of special privileges that were tied to Mennonite identity is raised repeatedly.

Those who are well informed about the period will certainly discover occasional factual errors (e.g., Johann Reimer should be Jakob W. Reimer [290]) and a few typos (identify/identity [79]). Somewhat distracting are the departures from the use of the past tense (e.g., “While a number of Gnadenfelt members will remain, others, however, will leave” [61, cf. 67, etc.]). The use of the term “sanitary service” (69) for those who worked in medical service units during the war is unfortunate.

In general, the book is well written and has extensive documentation, several maps and photos, and detailed bibliography and index. The book is produced in a large 7 in. by 10 in. format; otherwise it might easily have required 700 pp. It will undoubtedly provide a substantial basis for further analysis of Mennonite Brethren essence and identity.

Victor Kliever, *The Mennonite German Society (Mennonitischer Sprachverein) 1952–2003* (Winnipeg and Steinbach: The Mennonite German Society, 2014), 82 pp.

Reviewed by Lawrence Klippenstein



“We did it!” Coffee and a small desk in a Steinbach Mennonite church library office is all it took to celebrate the completion of the book project. But it did have a lengthy gestation period, admitted Victor Janzen, the last

secretary of the *Sprachverein*. Nevertheless, Victor Janzen did find a way to keep his promise to his colleagues, asking Victor Kliever to put the history of this more-than-half-century-old organization into a book for permanent preservation.

The modest 82-page publication takes on the large task of documenting the enormous energy and time given by those who conceived of an organization dedicated to maintaining and cultivating the German-Mennonite identity. Their challenge, of course, was to create such an organization within the Canadian context, a context that was perceived as a threat to the values and goals held dear by the German-speaking communities.

The *Sprachverein* was led by a group of trained and experienced teachers and ministers and lay people who shared the vision of recreating a community in a foreign land that could survive and thrive again after leaving their beloved *Heimat* in Russia in the 1920s. They were united in seeking above all to hold on to the German language and curb the disintegration of the culture and values connected to it, something that they believed would almost certainly happen.

The history of the *Mennonitischer Sprachverein* offers a well-composed portrait of what could be achieved in the more than fifty years of its existence. In clear and purposeful prose, it sets out the aims of the Society, brings forward its constitution, and shows how a working plan formed. The result was an organized network of activities organized by the Society’s chapters from Ontario to British Columbia.

Gerhard H. Peters, N.J. Neufeld, V. Schroeder, Heinrich D. Wiebe, Victor Kliever, Gerhard Ens, Victor Janzen, A.H. Unruh, and numerous others took on the task of leading an entire program that managed to rouse considerable enthusiasm for language learning that cut across denominational lines. Activities included: library construction, presentation of choral music, and publication of materials both inside and beyond the Canadian Mennonite church communities.

Ultimately, the project lost steam as the inevitable forces of assimilation took their toll. However, as a testimony to the serious intentions of those who stayed with the *Sprachverein*, sufficient funds were made available for the publication of the Society’s history.

Reports of from the annual meetings of the Society give evidence of the achievements of the *Sprachverein* to 2003, when the general consensus emerged that the work of the Society seemed to be complete. It was clear that interest had shifted to other aspects of life. Acculturation could not be held back and a gracious closing was negotiated with arrangements made to keep alive the memory of this effort for posterity in the form of a book. Perhaps most telling is the simple fact that while the Society worked hard to maintain the German language, its history book is written in English.

An example from the annual report dated April 4, 1980, illustrates the kinds of activities undertaken by the Society. That year, 656 sets of minutes were mailed out to Society members and others. Two long-standing German newspapers, *Die Mennonitische Rundschau* and *Der Bote* again received full descriptions of work done during the past year. Two hundred boxes were prepared for mailing out copies of a much-appreciated book of poetry edited by Henry Wiebe and George Epp, *Unter dem Nordlicht*.

Victor Kliever also notes the letters written to the German government and the German teachers’ associations to gain more support for the Society. Three hundred report cards are mailed out to students of German schools in St. Catharines, Ontario. Plans for producing a new record of songs, titled *Liederschatz*, are discussed. Preparations for an exhibit of books for the August *Folklorama* cultural festival in Winnipeg are recorded, and the list continues. In this way, the scope of activity covered by the program are documented.

Most of the advocates of the *Sprachverein* viewed the possible winding down of the work of their beloved *Verein* with trepidation and some regret. However, they did recognize the large accomplishments that had been achieved during the lifespan of the *Verein*. They could truly say, “We did it!”

I commend Victor Kliever for his role in producing this book. It is a tribute to the vision of the *Sprachverein*, a vision for keeping the cultural piece of the German-Mennonite life alive for posterity. “It was the least that should be done,” says Victor Janzen, “and we did it for that reason.” Thank you, Victor and Victor.