

MENNONITE LIFE

DECEMBER 1977



In this Issue

It is a common occurrence that immigrants, particularly if they migrate in larger numbers or as a group, will try to reconstruct in their new homeland many of the social institutions and practices which they knew and loved in their old homeland. There is certainly also a strong desire to avoid the unpleasant or less desirable aspects of their old society, but in building a new society on a new frontier the inspiration, the models and ideals will be firmly rooted in the old world experience.

The accounts of various Canadian Mennonite immigrant groups and the manner in which these immigrants tried to re-establish, on Canadian soil, many of the social structures, organizations and institutions of their old homeland have been repeated in many different books. There is something heroic and inspiring in the accounts of these brave new beginnings. There is, however, another and subsequent development about which much less has been written thus far. The old world organizations and structures are rarely fully portable. They inevitably need to be changed and adapted to new and unusual conditions in the new homeland, and many are sooner or later entirely abandoned and very significantly changed.

The process of change, adaptation and abandonment of old Mennonite organizations can be documented in many Mennonite communities. This issue of *Mennonite Life* focuses on that particular development in three Canadian Mennonite communities. These three communities cover a wide range of Mennonite experience. Each is unique and different; yet the process of adaptation and the abandonment of unique organi-

zations and practices is common to all three.

In his book *The Founding of New Societies*, Louis Hartz has developed the concept or model of the immigrant fragment. Through immigration a fragment or a piece of an old society is broken off from its old environment and transplanted in a new environment. There the fragment develops and adapts itself to new and changing circumstances and events. The three articles that follow do not constitute a real testing of that model. The model does, however, provide an interesting and useful frame of reference within which each of the articles can be better seen and understood.

The authors of the three articles are all natives of the communities about which they write. Lorna Bergey is a housewife, local historian and archivist who still lives in or very near to the Ontario community about which she writes. Leo Driedger is a frequent contributor to *Mennonite Life*. He is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Manitoba. Ted Regehr, the Canadian editor of *Mennonite Life*, is Professor and Head of the History Department, at the University of Saskatchewan.

Ted D. Regehr

To be pastor of five small congregations, teacher, choir director, writer, composer, farmer, carpenter, cabinet maker, and father of thirteen children is a remarkable range of roles to play. This is the story of Jakob Ellenberger, 1800-1879, of Friedelsheim as told by his great granddaughter, Amelia Mueller of Halstead, Kansas. A brief photo essay on Ellenberger will follow in the next issue.

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"After the morning service," Southern Manitoba, c. 1955. Photo—Canadian Mennonite Conference Archives.

Back Cover

The Sommerfeld Mennonite Church west of Altona, Manitoba. Photo—Canadian Mennonite Conference Archives.

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Mennonite Change: The Old Colony Revisited, 1955-1977

by Leo Driedger

In 1955 I made an intensive study of the Old Colony Mennonites in the Hague-Osler area of Saskatchewan (Driedger, 1955, 1958a, 1958b, 1973).¹ This summer I restudied (1977) this settlement and found that many changes had taken place.² The purpose of this paper is to show how the village structures of the Old Colony have changed, and to try to isolate some of the processes which contributed to this change. Like a photographer who takes color slides we shall take a shot of the 1955 Old Colony community, and then compare it with a frame of the 1977 community. To my knowledge no one has made a systematic longitudinal sociological study of Mennonites before. Although relatively few studies of revisited communities are available there are several classics, including Robert and Helen Lynd's (1929 and 1937) studies of Middletown, and Robert Redfield's (1930) study of Tepoztlan, restudied by Horace Miner (1951) years later.

A COMPARISON OF COMMUNITY STRUCTURES

To determine what changes have taken place in the Old Colony during a 20-25 year period, we shall describe various facets of the village community structure during 1955, and compare it with the present structure in 1977. The village organizations, social institutions such as the churches, the schools and the family, cultural changes, and informal associations will be compared.

Old Colony Village Organization

Most of the fifteen Old Colony

Mennonite villages established in the Hague-Osler area beginning in 1895 were still in existence in the 1955 study. Neuanlage (established in 1895,) Neuhorst (1898), Rheinland (1898), Blumenthal (1898), Gruenfeldt (1899), Gruenthal (1899), and Blumenheim (1900) were flourishing (Driedger, 1955, 1958a). Other villages such as Chortitz (1898), and Rosenfeld (1905) were declining. Osterwick (1899), Hochstädt (1902), Kronsthal (1902) and Schoenwiese had declined to a few farmers only (Driedger, 1955).

By 1977 many changes had taken place. Neuanlage (40 resident families), and Neuhorst (40 family residents) were still the largest villages but the population had changed Blumenthal (15 families), Gruenthal (12 families), Blumenheim (10 families), Rheinland (7 families), Gruenfeldt (7 families), and Chortitz (6 families), declined considerably. The villages of Rosenfeldt (4 families), Hochstädt (4 families), Hochfeldt (3 families), Kronsthal (2 families), Osterwick (1 family), and Schoenwiese (none) were no longer in existence, except for a few farmers who lived on or near the original village sites (Driedger, 1977b).

Originally all of these villages were organized along the Russian Mennonite village pattern which included a wide village street; a row of homes and farmyards on each side of the street totalling 20-50 families; usually a German school and often a church and graveyard located at one end; a common pasture for all the cattle; house-barn

combinations with a distinct architecture; and a village *Schultze* and his elected committee. In addition to a section or a half section of land on which the village and pasture were located, and which was held in common by the villagers and its committee, each family took a homestead of one quarter of land surrounding the village (Driedger, 1955). This basic village pattern existed for about twenty-five years, until large numbers of the more conservative villagers moved to Mexico in the 1920s. The basic structure was continued, but the solidarity of the pattern was disturbed.

In 1955 when I studied these villages, most of the village organizational structure was still intact. The larger villages such as Neuanlage and Neuhorst had changed where the children attended the government school outside the village. A small store, and a few small entrepreneurs such as a blacksmith or a cobbler had been added, but basically the villages were intact. A few empty lots left by emigrants could be seen here and there. To a somewhat lesser extent the organizational pattern for most of the other villages was also in operation, although villages such as Osterwick, Schoenwiese, Kronsthal, and Hochstädt had begun to disband, partially because they were organized later, they were never as large, nor as well organized in the beginning. Many of the other villages in 1955, although not as large, nor as robust as Neuanlage and Neuhorst, still continued the original organizational pattern.

By 1977 all except one (Gruenfeldt) of the fifteen villages had abandoned their common village titles, and common village pastures, and common village pastures. Neuanlage and Rheinland surveyed their land in 1976 and the common village title was subdivided among the various residents. Neuanlage distributed one section among its residents in 1976; Rheinland distributed one quarter section in 1976. Gruenfeldt still holds the common village land title, although its seven resident families are by no means the largest village in the area in other respects. About half of the villages still elected a *Schultze*, and many had an elected village committee. The role of the *Schultze*, however, had declined from one where he was the leader of all village matters in the early days, to collecting church dues in some villages, to calling meetings to discuss village concerns such as problems of wild dogs, or maintenance of the village street. Former villages such as Osterwick, Schoenwiese, Kronsthal, Hochfeldt, Hochstädt, Rosenfeldt no longer have a village leader and committee. Some villages broke up earlier than others, such as Hochfeldt (a large village), when a very large number moved to Mexico in the 1920s; and Gruenfeldt (which broke up about fifteen years ago) when most of the Old Colony Mennonites moved to Fort St. John (Driedger, 1977b).

The village architecture has changed drastically. While in 1955 there were still some house-barn combinations in most of the villages, by 1977 they could hardly be found (two in Gruenfeldt, two in Hochfeldt, two in Blumenheim). Whereas buildings were never painted in the early days, and many were still unpainted in 1955, most of the houses, barns and churches were painted in 1977 (of 40 only four unpainted in Neuhorst, for example). The styles of houses had changed from wide houses with two small narrow windows in the gable and two larger windows widely spaced on the first floor (common in Russia) to modern style architecture. A few renovated old homes still convey a hint of the original structure but they have been changed in many

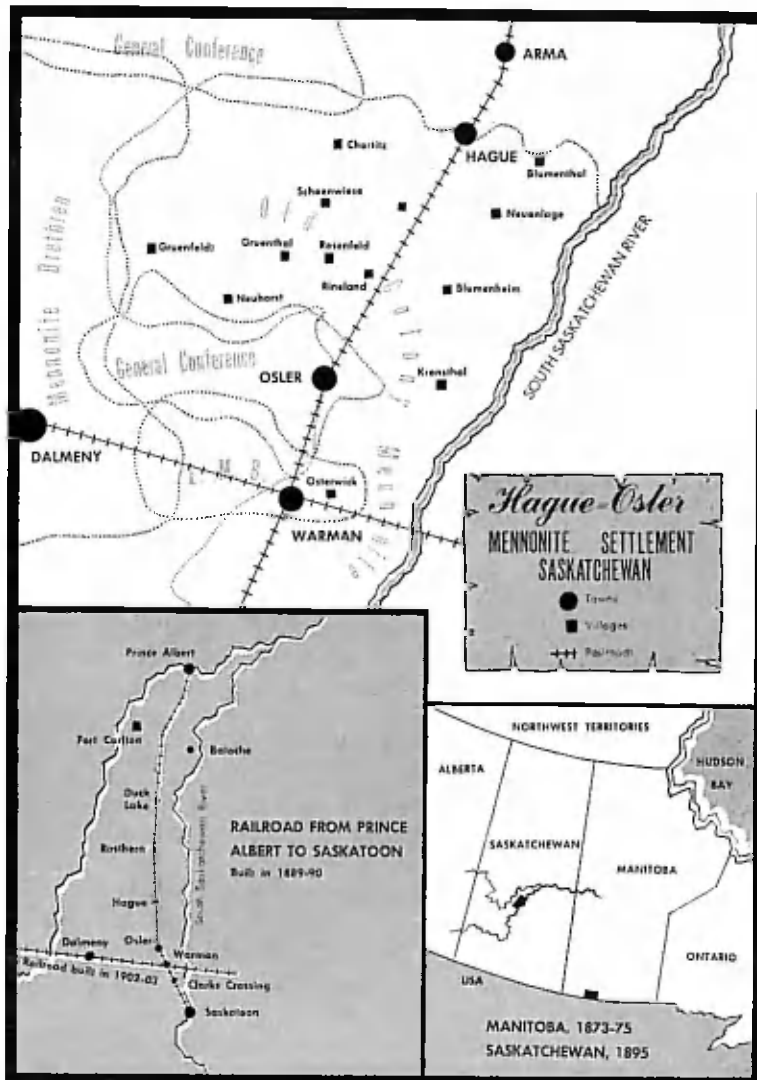


Old Colony house-barn combination in village of Neulage in 1955.

respects. Hip-roofed barns, red barns, long white dairy barns, silos, and a variety of modern styles have replaced most of the original wide, unpainted, wood shingled, small windowed (row on top), barns with attached granary-machine sheds.

Religion and Churches

From the very beginning the Old Colony Mennonites were a religious community holding their village land in common. The village organization, the farm occupations, and their church and religious institu-





One of the modern homes in the village of Neuanlage in 1977, above. Below, Old Colony Mennonite church in Neuanlage in 1955.



tions were perceived as sacred forms of social organization. Churches were not located in all of the villages, but in the early days some held services in the German schools in winter. Churches were always sufficiently near, even in horse and buggy days, so all could attend worship services.

Church forms were also important. The church building remained unpainted (a sign of humility); the shutters of the church were painted grey-blue; the architecture had a Russian Mennonite look. The inside of the building was austere. The blue-grey benches had no backs; there were nails above the seats to hang hats; the stage was on the side of the church; the pulpit was identical to the pulpit from which Menno Simons preached; the four *Vorsaenger* (song leaders) sat on the left, and the minister on the right; and a small room was designated for the ministers. The original form of worship included two

or more hours of worship very slow "olle wies" singing from the *Ausbund* which contained scores of stanzas; the *Vorsaenger* led the singing and part singing was not allowed; several sermons copied from sermons passed on for decades were read; and short low German "*vermanungen*" touched on issues of the day. With very few modifications, most of the above practices were still common in the Old Colony churches in 1955.

In 1977 the basic structure of the buildings and services were similar, but there were also some changes. The church buildings were painted and Sunday school rooms had been added either in an adjoining building, an attached building, or in the basement. The inside was renovated to include electric lights, backs were added to the benches, hatracks had been removed, a room for women with small children had been added, and the pulpit and platform had been moved from the side to the

end. These changes were fairly similar in Neuanlage, Neuhorst and Blumenheim where churches still existed. The worship service was two hours long; the singing was somewhat faster but in unison; and the remainder of the service was much like the original. On a typical Sunday morning worship service in Neuhorst, there were forty worshippers present. About half of the worshippers were male, about twenty were above fifty years of age, and about ten were young people (Driedger, 1977b).

During the depression there was a move to modernize the "olle wies" in the church services to a somewhat faster pace of singing, but there was considerable resistance so that a group called Bergthaler Mennonites separated from the Old Colony church. In 1977 the Bergthaler attended churches in Gruenthal, near Blumenthal and in Blumenheim where they shared a church with the Old Colony Mennonites. Persons from both groups and others indicated that the difference between the Bergthaler and the Old Colony was minimal. A second split from the Old Colony church occurred during the 1940's when the Rudnerweider (now called the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference), left the Old Colony because they wished greater evangelical emphasis. Several churches were established and the churches are still thriving today, although fewer Old Colony members are now joining this movement. A third source of drainage away from the Old Colony church already in evidence in 1955, was the joining of many Old Colony young people with the General Conference churches in Osler, Hague, and Neuanlage, and this continued into the 1970s.

The two most recent moves away from the Old Colony church have been the Pentecostal church in Gruenthal, and the Osler Mission Chapel in Osler. These two represent the greatest change between 1955 and 1977. The Pentecostal church in Gruenthal had begun in 1955 but it was struggling. At present the Pentecostal church has 300 members, attendance is higher, and they have built a new church in

the village area. By 1977 there were only two Old Colony families in Gruenthal. About eight families from Neuanlage attend the Gruenthal Pentecostal church which holds its services only in English (although most of the members are of Mennonite origin). The Pentecostal church seems to be an important factor in changing the village of Gruenthal so that the village disbanded about fifteen years ago.

The newest church, located in Osler a few years ago, is the present attraction of many Old Colony and Bergthaler young couples. Jacob Wiebe, a young Old Colony minister who wanted a more evangelical emphasis and who wished to make changes within the Old Colony church, found the resistance too great, so he founded a new Chortitzer Mennonite Church (named the Osler Mission Chapel). About 140 attended the new church; most of them were young couples, young people and children; the service was enthusiastic, vibrant, with a restrained evangelical emphasis. Most of the participants are of Old Colony background, although Bergthaler, and some others attend as well. The services and Sunday school are in English, and the format is very similar to an evangelical Protestant church service. One of the young Old Colony Mennonite ministers thought this movement was from the devil, while another minister and a *Schultze* were fairly noncommittal and tolerant about the new church.

Education and Schools

In the early days most of the villages held German schools based on a curriculum consisting mostly of reading, writing and arithmetic. The six grades were usually taught by a member of the village who often did not have very much education himself. By the 1920s the Saskatchewan government insisted that provincial schools would be established which would be instructed in English and follow a provincial curriculum designed for eight grades. The Old Colony Mennonites resisted this intrusion vehemently by keeping their children out of these schools for which they



Renovated Old Colony Mennonite church in Neuanlage in 1977, including a Sunday school building, above. Below, Gospel Mission Chapel (Chortitzer Mennonite Church) newly built in Osler, 1977.



had to pay heavy fines. This contributed to the emigration of hundreds of Mennonites to Mexico in the 1920s. The government was forced to build schools outside the villages, staffed by teachers they hired.

By 1955 all Old Colony Mennonite children in the villages attended these government schools; very few if any German Mennonite schools remained. In 1977 some of the Old Colony Mennonites in Rheinland discussed the potential for establishing a German Mennonite school, but none were in existence as yet. Since Sunday schools are organized by this time, some German is taught there, but it is very limited. Whereas no Old Colony Mennonites attended university in 1955, and very few went on to high school, this has changed somewhat where more attend these higher forms of education.

Whereas in 1955, one or two room

schools near the villages were the norm, by 1977 all elementary and high schools were consolidated. All the one room schools have been abandoned and children are bused to the elementary schools in Osler, Hague, Warman and Martensville and the high school students attend in Warman and Hague. Since the settlement is largely Mennonite, most of the students in these schools are Mennonite, although a large number of the children are of a more liberal Mennonite origin. Many of the teachers are Mennonite. Some of these were formerly Old Colony, although none are presently of Old Colony Mennonite faith.

The Mennonite Family

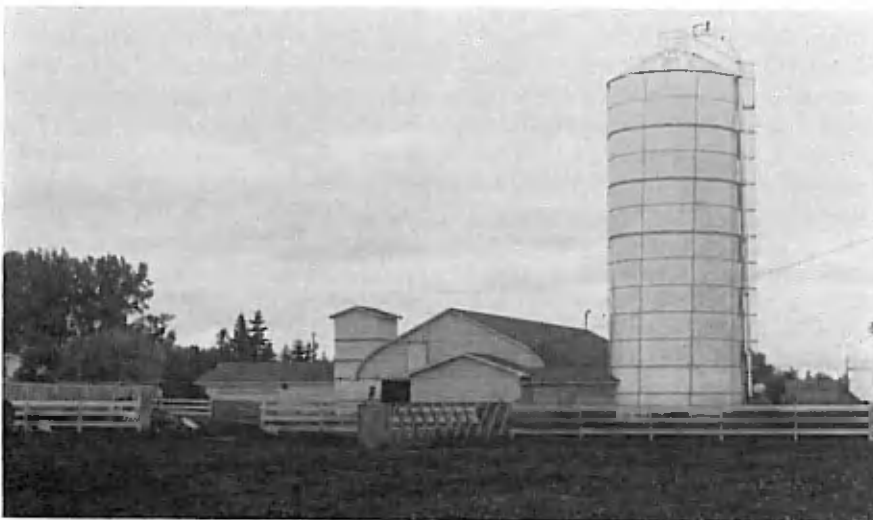
The Old Colony family too, has changed. When the Mennonites were farmers, children were an asset. Many families had ten children or more; a number had up to fifteen or more children. Although the



German village school in Blumenthal in 1955, above. Below, modern consolidated elementary school in Osler, 1977.



A few farmers still used horses for farming in 1955, above. Below, a large modern farm in the village of Neuanlage in 1977.



average family size in 1977 is still above the national average, many families now have between two and six children. Since a small percentage of family heads are now in agriculture, children are less of an asset, and even farm families are much smaller. Mennonite endogamy is still high—over ninety percent of the Mennonites marry other Mennonites, although not always of the same Mennonite group. A lot of dating takes place within the villages, although the automobile, and the consolidated school system provide many more contacts with others, so that dating is much more diversified—mostly among Mennonites though. Before 1955 divorce and separation was almost unheard of; by 1977 very few cases of divorce were found.

By 1955 an interesting change in naming children occurred. Earlier boys were named the standard John, Jacob, Peter, Henry, Abram, Dietrich, Cornelius, Bernhard, Frank, Isaac, and girls were named Mary, Tina, Helen, Susie, Margaret, and the like. By 1977 a variety of other names were used, with the occasional traditional name occurring. Elementary school records and tombstones in graveyards revealed that the change from biblical names to modern names occurred after the Second World War, so that by 1977 the change was almost complete.

Customs and Culture

Before 1955 Low German was spoken in all of the Old Colony homes, while High German was used in church, with some Low German comments. By 1955 the children at home were beginning to speak English to each other, especially since English was the language of the school. A great deal of Low German is still spoken in the homes, and most of the children still understand and usually can speak Low German. Many younger families however, are beginning to use English at home because they attended English schools, and are now speaking English at work. Whereas most of the business transactions in the villages and towns were in Low German formerly, now the language is swinging to English.

However, most of the storekeepers, post office, service station, and business personnel speak Low German freely when older Mennonite customers prefer to do so.

Whereas Old Colony men never wore ties formerly, some do so occasionally, although never in church. Suits worn at church services in 1977 were dark; no ties were worn, although some of the men and boys were beginning to wear lighter colored shirts. In church the older women wear black or dark blue embroidered kerchiefs, long dark solid color dresses and shawls, while the younger girls wear more flowered dresses without shawls and many do not wear kerchiefs. During the work-a-day week older women tend to wear traditional dresses, while younger women follow the fashion trends increasingly. Women never wear slacks to church, and older women never do so at work either. Dress is changing, although Old Colony Mennonites can usually still be spotted even in an Eaton's department store in Saskatoon (Anderson, 1972).

Perhaps food and eating habits change the slowest. All of the Mennonite dishes of *plume mous*, *verenicke*, *borscht*, farmer sausage, smoked ham, various kinds of soups and baked goods are still the favorites. However, some other foods are beginning to enter the menus as well.

Informal Associations

Visiting relatives and friends and cracking sunflower seeds are one of the favorite pastimes on Sundays and holidays. This is still very common in the villages especially among the older people. The younger people, however, in 1955 already supplemented such activities with softball (including tournaments), and hockey. By 1977, due to easier transportation, movies, bowling, professional spectator sports and other activities were getting to be popular as well. The older Mennonites, however, frown on too much sports, movies and entertainment. For many television is still taboo, although radios can now be found everywhere, at home, in cars, in the cabs of tractors, and dairy barns.

Gatherings for hog slaughtering was standard practice in 1955. By 1977 this had diminished; often only families slaughtered hogs; or in many cases a village butcher slaughtered animals for sale. Earlier barn raisings were common; now this has largely disappeared. Farmers do still band together to seed a neighbor's fields if he has suffered prolonged illness or an accident. Auction sales still take place occasionally, but they are not as popular as they used to be. Often a retired farmer sells his machinery and cattle privately, or he sells it to his sons who continue to farm.

Mutual aid in the form of fire, health, accident, hail, and life insurance has declined. Government and insurance agencies have substituted for much mutual aid. Mennonite hail insurance is still available, as well as several other forms of mutual aid, but it has become more commercialized. The *Brandt Schultze* (fire insurance man) of each village is no longer in existence.

PROCESSES OF CHANGE

At least four processes (migration, transportation, industrialization, and liberalization) seem to have changed the Old Colony Mennonite villages.

Mennonite Migrations

Mennonites have always migrated frequently, but the Old Colony Mennonites especially have developed a form of survival migration so that when industrialization and modernization creep up on them, a traditional remnant leaves for more isolated regions (Driedger, 1973). The first migration from Saskatchewan took place in the early twenties, when hundreds of families left the villages for Mexico. One of the major reasons for the emigration was the school question. The Saskatchewan government enacted a law which required that the major language of instruction in school be English, and that the provincial school curriculum be taught. Up to this time the Mennonites had taught their children in the German schools in their villages, using their own curriculum. The very large exodus

to Mexico left numerous gaps in the village structure. Some villages were more devastated than others. This exodus resulted in the disruption of the village structure, the religious and school programs, family networks, and general community organization. The isolated, segregated village pattern could never quite be as integrated after the emigration. Furthermore, the conservatives left, leaving behind those who were less well to do, or more prone to acculturation.

At the same time in the twenties when many Old Colony conservatives left for Mexico, a large group of Russian Mennonite immigrants arrived. Some of these new immigrants bought the land of those who left and settled within or near the villages. These were more liberal Mennonites who used more modern technology, and in some villages they established other Mennonite churches, such as in Neuanlage. Thus, more liberal religious influences, more liberal economic methods, and some residents not a part of the village organization tended to act as a seductive model which drew people away from the traditional village life.

Additional migration leakages took place in the 1930's when scores of Old Colony families moved to a more isolated region at Fort Vermilion, Alberta. In the 1950's and 1960's the drain continued to a new more isolated northern settlement in Fort St. John, British Columbia (Driedger, 1973). The occasional family still moves to these northern settlements; these are usually the more conservative Mennonites, leaving the more liberal ones behind.

A fourth migration development was the creation of a rural town of Martensville halfway between the villages and the city of Saskatoon in the 1950's. Martensville began in 1953 and has now grown into a town of over 1000 residents. When I studied the area in 1955, it was not yet apparent that Martensville, only ten miles away from Saskatoon, would become a halfway house for those who worked in the city. Roads from the villages (20-30 miles) to Saskatoon were very poor. Many of the younger families left

the villages to work in Saskatoon, but still wished to live in the less expensive village-like Martensville, where they had Mennonite neighbors.

Many of the Old Colony people have also moved to Saskatoon. The Old Colony Mennonite church does not have a church in Saskatoon, so some of the youth join more liberal Mennonite churches, and others do not frequent churches at all. This drain of youth from the villages has left behind many of the older people who are less well to do, and who retire in the villages. It is true that there are some prosperous young farmers, often living adjacent to the village, but these are very few. There is some reverse migration, where some of the Mennonites working in the city, now with better roads have returned to live in the villages and commute to their jobs in the city.

Transportation and Communication

A second major change since 1955 is the new roads. The railroad line between Saskatoon and Prince Albert, which served Hague, Osler and Warman, was built in 1889-90 (Driedger, 1955). When the Mennonites arrived in 1895, they came by rail, and they established their villages so that several villages were within a mile or two of the tracks. Since the railroad stations were in the hamlets of Osler and Hague, and since the trains were confined to their rails, the means of transportation did not threaten early Mennonite isolation and segregation. Only occasionally, a few would take the train to Saskatoon, although later the train was used more frequently.

When the automobile emerged in the 1920s, the church banned those who acquired cars, seeking to restrict mobility which might lead to inroads on isolation and segregation (Driedger, 1955). Since the automobile was versatile, more flexible, and within the means of some, it presented a threat. Some who purchased cars were banned, and some of these joined more liberal Mennonite churches where this was permitted. Nevertheless,

for those who owned cars, Saskatoon was far away, the roads were unpaved and poor, and during the depression and the Second World War relatively few had the means to travel widely. This was still largely the case in 1955, although there were signs of change.

Since 1955, enormous changes in transportation have taken place. Roads have been generally improved and gravelled, some of the country roads are paved, and a big new paved highway was built recently, cutting through Mennonite country. The distance from Osler to Saskatoon has been cut in half, the time it takes to travel has been reduced to half an hour. The big highway has brought the villages closer to Saskatoon, so that many have become rural satellite suburbs for Mennonites who work in the city. Others are buying acreages on the highway, so that soon it will become a strip city extending from Saskatoon to the villages and towns of Mennonite country.

Influence of Industrialization

The Old Colony Mennonites believed strongly that God wished them to be farmers in the rural setting. In the early days they were all farmers; the church leaders frowned on other occupations, and occasionally used it as cause for excommunication (Driedger, 1955). Most of the residents in the villages in 1955 were still farmers. There were a few who were involved in keeping a store, working as a blacksmith, or as a shoemaker, or as a schoolteacher in the village. A few began to work in the city of Saskatoon, but these usually moved to the city or to Martensville.

By 1977 the economic structure in the villages had changed completely. Most of the villagers were in non-farm occupations, and large numbers worked in the city. To illustrate, of forty residential homes in Neuhorst in 1977, two were farmers; in Neuanlage, six of forty were farmers. The others worked in various occupations in Saskatoon or in towns and other industry. In the other smaller villages the ratios were similar: Rheinland (2 farmers, 5 non-farmers); Gruenfeldt (2

farmers and 5 non-farmers); Gruenthal (5 farmers, 2 non-farmers); Chortitz (3 farmers, 3 non-farmers); Hochstädt (4 farmers); Hochfeldt (3 farmers). The larger villages seemed to maintain their size by increased non-farm populations. It seemed that the smaller villages consisted mostly of a few farmers and very few others. The villages have declined drastically, and in a few cases like Hochfeldt, Chortitz, Hochstädt, Schoenweise, Kronsthal, and Osterwick all but a few farmers have left the village. However, villages like Neuhorst and Neuanlage, closer to Saskatoon on the new highway, are able to maintain their population, albeit the villages have changed mostly to non-farmers. There was evidence that women also were beginning to work outside the home. Six Neuanlage women and four Neuhorst women were reported working for wages outside the village (Driedger, 1977b).

The influence of the capitalist free enterprise system was also evident along with the changes in occupation. Several of the farmers were located on the outskirts of the villages with very large operations. Tall silos and extensive barns indicated that they are large dairy farmers. Others have many granaries, large and modern machinery, which indicates that they are large grain farmers. These farmers are involved in farming specialties. Of the farmers who were left, only a few older farmers represented the old small diversified farm which kept cattle, chickens, large gardens, and grew a variety of crops of wheat, oats, barley and rye. Large scale farming was in evidence, and many of these farmers also left the village to live on the open fields surrounded by their many acres of land.

Liberalization

Liberalization is a fourth influence which is changing the Old Colony in Saskatchewan. When the Mennonites came, they built their German schools in the villages where the schoolteacher, who himself had limited education, taught six grades. One of the reasons many

conservative Old Colony Mennonites left for Mexico in the 1920s was that the government required that all children attend public schools where English classes and the provincial curriculum were taught. Many Mennonites paid heavy fines when they sent their children to their German schools, rather than the government schools. The government schools, often located a half mile outside of village territory, were in those early days, almost empty (Driedger, 1955).

By 1955 all of the children in the villages attended these government schools, and few of the Mennonite German schools were still in existence. However, these government one or two room schools usually had a Mennonite school board, a Mennonite teacher, and the students were almost exclusively Mennonite. In effect the schools were Mennonite schools teaching the provincial curriculum in English, with a half hour of German taught at the end of the day. By 1977 this had changed drastically by school consolidation. The high schools were consolidated in the towns of Warman and Hague, and the elementary schools were consolidated in Osler, Hague, Warman, Martensville, and other surrounding towns. The one-room schoolhouses near the villages were abandoned, and the school children are now bussed. Since the Hague-Osler-Warman area includes mostly Mennonites, these consolidated schools hire many Mennonite teachers, and a majority of the children are of Mennonite origin. However, consolidation has further changed segregation, isolation and control over the educational process. Many Old Colony Mennonites who continue to move to Fort St. John and Fort Vermillion and elsewhere give this encroaching liberalization in education as one of the reasons for emigration. As conservatives continue to trickle away, the liberalization process continues.

Secondly, the liberalization process continues in religion. As stated earlier, the Old Colony Mennonites only have churches in Neuanlage, Neuhorst, and Blumenheim. When the villages were first established, there were only Old Colony Menno-

nites. Slowly this religious solidarity has been eroded. First the Bergthaler separated when they wished to have liberalized singing and some changes in tradition. When the Mennonites from Russia came during the 1920s, they established more liberal General Conference Mennonite churches in Osler, Hague, Neuanlage and Warman. For years, many Old Colony young people already joined more liberal churches before our study in 1955. This trend is continuing.

In addition to the Bergthaler and General Conference Mennonite liberalization, there was a separation of the Rudnerweider (later called Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference), all of whom were of Old Colony background. Very recently the Olser Mission Chapel (Chortitzer Mennonite Conference), was established in Osler where large numbers of younger Old Colony and other conservative Mennonites moved out of the Old Colony church together with one of their young ministers (Driedger, 1977b). These larger migrations away from the Hague-Osler area, and the many splits away from the Old Colony church, have left less than a thousand Old Colony members in the area. Their descendants have either moved away, or joined other more liberal Mennonite churches.

CONCLUSIONS

Migration, transportation, industrialization, and liberalization have contributed to the decline of the Hague-Osler Old Colony community. These processes continually undermined the Old Colony village social structure, so that many villages have disappeared, and others have changed drastically. An assimilationist would cite this as a good example of community decline, and minority assimilation. I agree that this Old Colony community has declined, and that the Old Colony villages will likely disappear as they were originally established. However, I do not agree that the Old Colony Mennonites have assimilated.

First, as elaborated in our study before (Driedger, 1973), most of the descendants of the original pioneers are no longer in the Hague-

Osler area. They have migrated to Mexico, Fort Vermillion, British Honduras, Fort St. John, Bolivia, and elsewhere where they are still flourishing in isolated, segregated villages and communities. The Old Colony Mennonites have developed a form of survival migration which is functional to the perpetuation of a traditional remnant. Voluntary migration of a conservative remnant from urbanizing territories to more isolated areas have provided a mechanism for siphoning off the faithful from those who were inclined to yield to accommodation. They did not assimilate; they migrated and established communities elsewhere (Driedger, 1973).

In the second place, many who stayed in the Hague-Osler community did not give up their Mennonite faith, but joined more liberal, or new Mennonite groups within the community. As stated in another work (Driedger, 1977a), the Anabaptist identification ladder was at work, where more conservative Mennonites remained Mennonites by joining more liberal groups. We conclude that the Old Mennonite villages in the Hague-Osler community have declined and will likely disappear; but they live on in far away communities, and in more liberal forms of Mennonitism. It is not assimilation; it is migration and accommodation through which they continue to survive.

FOOTNOTES

¹ The author made an intensive study of the Hague-Osler Old Colony community in 1955 by interviewing as many older Mennonites as possible. Many of these were present at the founding of the villages, and had lived in the villages all their lives. This included Mr. Friesen who founded and named Blumenheim, Mr. Peters who played with the wood blocks coming from the Neuanlage church when it was built, Mr. Loepky of Neuhorst, and many others. This was reported in an M.A. thesis (Driedger, 1955) written by the author for the University of Chicago. A resume of the study was reported in *Mennonite Life* in two articles in January and April, 1958. Most of those interviewed in 1955 are no longer alive.

² The author visited the Hague-Osler villages almost every year since 1965. A second survey of all the villages was again made in 1977. Numerous persons were interviewed including Julius Enns, the Old Colony Bishop living in Warman; Jack Quiring, a young Old Colony minister and *Schultze* of Rheinland; Abram Unruh, a *Schultze* in Blumenthal; Jacob Peters a minister of the Bergthaler church living in Neuanlage; Jacob Driedger (aged 86), who lived most of his life in Blumenheim; Cornelius Driedger and his wife (in their 80's) who lived most of their lives in

Rosenfeldt; Jacob Wolff and his wife in Neuanlage; Jacob Wiebe, young minister of the Gospel Mission church in Osler; Henry Friesen, first convert to the Pentecostal church in Gruenthal; Peter Wiebe, the last remaining village storekeeper in Gruenfeldt; George Guenther, last Guenther resident of the "Guenther village" in Hochstadt and others. I attended church services, interviewed storekeepers, visited farmers, and spoke to retired residents, etc.

Photographs for this article were taken by Jake Buhler of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, and by Leo Driedger, the author.

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Mennonite Change: The Rise and Decline of Mennonite Community Organizations at Coaldale, Alberta

by Ted D. Regehr

Introduction

Many immigrant groups settling in western Canada sought to recreate, perhaps in improved or idealized form, the society and institutions they had known in their former homeland. The Mennonite people who left Russia in the 1920's and settled at Coaldale, Alberta, were one such group. They were a fragment, broken off from the larger Russian Mennonite community and transplanted in the new environment of western Canada.

Some of the basic structures and institutions of the Russian Mennonite Commonwealth, notably an exclusive land reserve and a village structure based on the model of the German and Mennonite colonies in Russia, could not be recreated in western Canada in the 1920's and 1930's. Many Mennonite economic, social, medical, cultural and educational institutions, however, could be and were established at Coaldale. They served the Mennonites and many other people at Coaldale for many years, but almost all have now disappeared or been taken over by larger non-Mennonite agencies.

This article seeks to outline some of the factors which led first to the establishment, and then to the disappearance of these distinctive Mennonite community organizations.

A Place To Build

The Mennonites who settled at Coaldale in the 1920's and 1930's were almost all immigrants escaping the horrors of revolution and civil war in Russia. Most idealized the pre-revolutionary Russian Mennonite Commonwealth and wished to re-establish it in Canada. They

learned very early, however, that the Canadian government could not offer them the same concessions it had offered to the Russian Mennonites who came to Manitoba in the 1870's. Western Canada no longer had large empty tracts of land which could be set aside as new Mennonite reserves. Returning soldiers, moreover, were to be given priority for all remaining homestead lands. Homesteading on large tracts of reasonably good land, reserved exclusively for their use, was therefore not a viable option for most of the Mennonite immigrants. In addition Canadian land patent and ownership laws, and the establishment of municipal governments, made the creation of new Mennonite villages very difficult, if not impossible. There was finally the bitter problem of those Canadian Mennonites who had been granted reserves in Manitoba in the 1870's and in Saskatchewan in the 1890's but who were leaving Canada for Mexico in the 1920's because of disputes with the government over school legislation. For all these reasons it quickly became clear to both the Canadian Department of the Interior and to the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization that new Mennonite reserves and villages could not be established. The Mennonites coming to western Canada in the 1920's came as individual farmers, subject to all Canadian land, school and municipal government legislation. Thus the most distinctive Mennonite institutions and social structures were not transplanted.

Cultural, social, religious and economic considerations neverthe-

less persuaded Mennonites in many settlements to establish community organizations of their own. The situation at Coaldale was particularly conducive to this development because many of the older established business and social structures in the community had become obsolete and unsuited to the changing needs of the local people.

Coaldale is located in the semi-arid region of the Canadian prairies where annual precipitation figures often fall to eleven or twelve inches and where, in dry years, as little as three inches have fallen during the growing season.

Ranchers moved into this area in the 1880's but were partially replaced by American dry-land farmers in the 1890's when the region experienced abnormally high precipitation. Those ranchers that remained in the 1890's were generally Englishmen, and a very large proportion of these enlisted for active military service during World War I. Only a small proportion ever returned, and those that did found that their influence and prosperity generally had declined seriously. A serious slump in cattle prices on world markets immediately after the war drove many of the ranchers out of the region.

The dry-land farmers who sought to replace the ranchers suffered equally serious reverses during and immediately after the Great war. From 1917 through 1921 southern Alberta experienced abnormally low rainfall. This, coupled with the collapse of grain prices after 1919, forced the dry-landers to leave in large numbers.

The reverses of the ranchers and



Del Monte General Store in Coaldale, above. Below, the doctor's office on the right along the main street of Coaldale.



Hauling sugar beets near Coaldale, below.



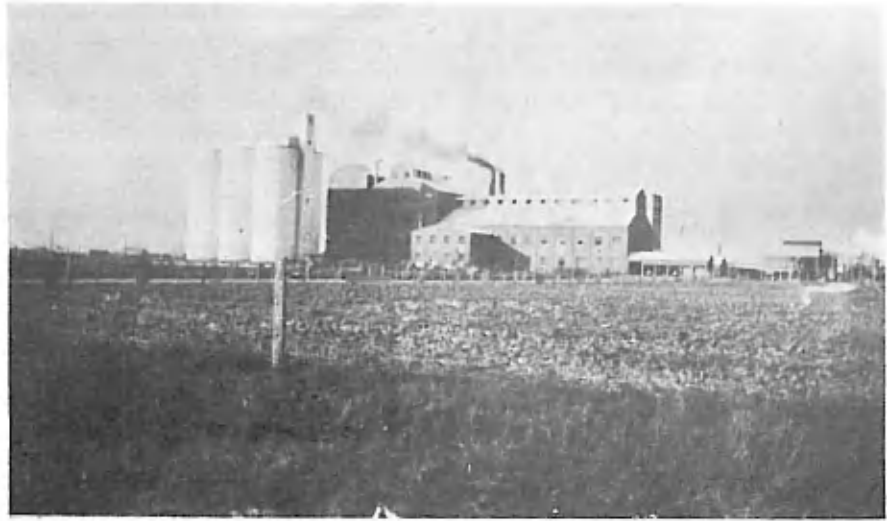
dry-landers encouraged the Canadian Pacific Railway and affiliated companies which had come into possession of large tracts of land in the area, to expand existing irrigation projects and to initiate new ones. Some of these projects had been started in the 1890's, but progress had not been rapid due to resistance from ranchers and dry-landers. Now the time seemed right to expand the irrigation projects and search for industrious farmers who would undertake the heavy labour involved in irrigation farming.

It was precisely at the time when the Canadian Pacific Railway and its affiliated companies were pondering the future of their southern Alberta lands when Mennonite leaders approached them with a request for transportation credits and assistance in obtaining land for thousands eager to escape from Soviet Russia. The company's managers soon concluded that the large families of industrious and skilled but destitute Mennonite farmers might prosper on the newly irrigated lands, and in 1925 and 1926 appropriate arrangements were made. The most important of these was the willingness of the C.P.R. to arrange and expedite purchases of land by the Mennonites from local owners, mainly ranchers or dry-landers, and to build, furnish and equip so-called "ready-made farms." These were then sold to the Mennonites on rather unusual terms. A purchase price was set, but often no down payment whatsoever was required, and the amount of the annual payment was not fixed. The new Mennonite settler was simply required to set aside and plant a fixed acreage with sugar beets, the most important cash crop on the irrigated lands. The crop harvested from this acreage was to be delivered to the sugar factory for the credit of the C.P.R. The proceeds were used to retire the purchase debt. This meant that in poor years only very small payments were sufficient, while in good years the debt and accumulated interest were retired more quickly. It was a scheme designed to incorporate the best features of purchase and sharecropping arrangements. It established many

Mennonites on land in southern Alberta.

The C.P.R. also took a direct interest in organizing and establishing a local sugar factory which operated on a modified co-operative basis. The sugar factory was certainly not a profitable investment for the C.P.R., and the railway company sold the factory as soon as continued operation was assured. The company participated in an effective lobby to persuade the federal government to place a protective tariff on sugar and this certainly helped the local situation, but initially the C.P.R. accepted less than competitive rates of return on the money it invested in southern Alberta. As owner of much of the land, promoter of the early irrigation schemes, carrier of all the settlers' freight traffic, promoter of the sugar factory, and a major creditor of the Mennonite settlers, the C.P.R. found it in its interest to take a fairly enlightened view of the welfare of the entire community. It could not demand profits on each of its separate ventures every year if such profits put the people out of business. For the Mennonite people at Coaldale the C.P.R. and the federal tariff became major benefactors—a rather unique circumstance in western Canada.

The Mennonites at Coaldale and elsewhere responded with hard work, gratitude and, despite the depression, the repayment of nearly \$2,000,000 in transportation debts and \$10,000,000 in land purchase debts, both these figures including both principal and interest paid. Their gratitude was perhaps best and most effectively expressed in 1937 when C.P.R. President Edward Beatty visited the prairie provinces. The country was in the depths of depression and Beatty personified eastern Canadian financial and corporate power which many western Canadians blamed for their troubles. Premier Aberhart had won a stunning political victory in 1935 by his advocacy of Social Credit and his denunciations of the "fifty big shots." When Edward Beatty, one of the biggest of the hated big shots, visited them in 1937 the people of Alberta made no secret of



Sugar beet factory at Raymond, Alberta, above.



The Coaldale Mennonite Brethren Church built in 1934 with the enlarged Bible School building, above. Below, the old Coaldale hospital.





The General Conference Mennonite Church in Coaldale, above.



"Topping" sugar beets near Coaldale, above. Below, irrigating sugar beets.



their displeasure. But it was not thus when Beatty visited the Mennonite sugar beet farmers at Coaldale. A special thanksgiving service was arranged by the local Mennonite churches. A number of specially selected recitations, addresses and prayers of thanks characterized the service. Two young girls presented Beatty with bouquets of flowers. Coaldale was a veritable oasis in the desert for Beatty. The Social Credit newspaper in Calgary, meanwhile, grumbled about Coaldale's "sugar daddy."

Irrigation and the sugar beet industry transformed the entire region. Older community organizations, establishments and institutions which had served the ranchers and dry-landers, became obsolete. The Russian Mennonites were dynamic, aggressive, and sometimes inconsiderate of the established interests. They soon concluded that the existing social, economic, cultural and educational institutions did not adequately serve their interest, and set about creating their own.

A TIME TO BUILD

German cultural organizations

The first distinctive Mennonite institutions established at Coaldale were the churches — Mennonite Brethren and General Conference. This article, however, will not deal with the churches since their establishment and later development is, in several important respects, different than the cultural, social, economic and educational organizations established by the Mennonites. Similarly private business ventures by individual Mennonite entrepreneurs will not be dealt with here, because these also developed rather differently than the co-operative Mennonite business and community enterprises.

The first cultural organization established by the Mennonites at Coaldale was a small German Library. The library, established in November of 1927, required each member to donate annually one book. The books were catalogued and kept in the home of the librarian appointed for the purpose. Readers could borrow these books,

paying a very small user fee which provided funds to purchase new books and to operate the library. The library began with eighty volumes and eventually came to hold approximately 1,500 German books.

The administrators of the library exercised a substantial degree of censorship. Books were carefully reviewed and those deemed unsuitable rejected. Novels, particularly those with no specific religious orientation, were the main victims of censorship in the early years. In the 1930's, however, the German Consulate at Winnipeg offered free gifts of German books. This offer was initially attractive to the small library, but local censorship carefully reviewed the books received, and rejected Nazi propaganda writings. The local interests were almost entirely cultural and religious; those of the German Consulate were mainly political. Consequently relations between the two cooled long before the outbreak of World War II.

Closely allied to and at times almost indistinguishable from the German Library was a society for the preservation of the German language. The activities and interests of this society, which was affiliated with similar organizations elsewhere in Canada, were almost entirely cultural and literary. Evenings were spent reading and discussing German writings, including German theological works, but the minutes of the society reveal no interest or concern for German culinary arts, crafts, folk music or dress. The meetings were generally serious affairs, with only the occasional readings from Fritz Reuter or Arnold Dyck providing merriment and levity.

The community also established a number of German Saturday Schools. These were designed to teach children the fundamentals of the German language and of the Christian faith. Lacking their own public schools, the Mennonites sought to enrich the educational experience of their children through the medium of the German Saturday Schools. These schools undoubtedly achieved their basic purpose of teaching at least some German

and religion, and they slowed the general use of the English language in the Mennonite churches, but attendance could not be made compulsory and depended on the commitment of the parents to the German language. In many cases that commitment wavered from the beginning, and declined during and after World War II.

Economic organizations

A number of economic organizations were also established in the early years of Mennonite settlement at Coaldale. The first of these was a co-operative insurance scheme providing protection against fire, lightning and storm damage. Established in 1928, the Coaldale Mennonite insurance scheme was modeled on similar schemes in Russia, and underwriting arrangements with Manitoba Mennonite trust and insurance organizations (*Waisenamt*) were immediately obtained. This arrangement continued until 1942 when the Manitoba government passed legislation forbidding out of province underwritings by local co-operative insurance organizations. An underwriting with some of the Saskatchewan Mennonite trust and insurance organizations was then arranged, but this ended in bitterness and charges of bad faith a year later. The Saskatchewan organizations insured only private dwellings and farmsteads. The Coaldale group insured a building which served both as the residence and the office of their doctor. When this building was severely damaged by fire the Saskatchewan organization refused payment on grounds that the building was a business establishment and therefore improperly insured. Thereafter the Coaldale Mennonite insurance office proceeded on its own, but had to restrict rather severely the total value of any single policy.

The desperate conditions of the depression years in the 1930's led to the establishment of another economic undertaking which in time became the focus and from whose offices most of the other Mennonite organizations ultimately operated. That was a Mennonite promoted co-operative cheese factory, which



The Alberta Mennonite High School at Coaldale, above.



The old Mennonite brethren Church with the Bible School in the foreground, above. Below, Saturday School students and teachers at Coaldale.



began business in 1938. This undertaking was modeled directly on a similar venture in Russia in which one of the local settlers had been involved, and on a successful Mennonite cheese factory operating in the Linden-Swalwell area of Alberta.

The basic purpose of the cheese factory was to provide the local farmers with facilities to produce a marketable commodity. Pasture, feed grains and beet pulp, a by-product of the sugar beet industry,

provided inexpensive cattle feed. Local markets for cheese and dairy products were thought to be much better than world markets for grain or cattle.

Cheese factory shares were sold at \$20.00 for every cow owned by interested prospective shippers. Nearly 600 shares were subscribed in 1938 and a small building erected. The cheese was sold under contract to the meat packing and distributing firm of Pat Burns and Company. The building was enlarged

and then replaced by a new one in 1945.

Numerous subsidiary undertakings were operated under the general sponsorship of the cheese factory administration. Lumber, gas and oil were sold for a time. Egg grading facilities were installed, the eggs also being sold under contract to the Burns Company. After the new cheese factory building was completed the old building provided space for a cold storage locker. The German Library was also moved from the home of the librarian to the old cheese factory building.

Coincidental with the establishment of the cheese factory in 1938, a new Mennonite Agricultural Society was created. The purpose of this society was to provide funding for those without land who wished to purchase farms but could not find accommodations at the commercial banks. This organization had clear precedents in Russia, but it never found substantial support at Coaldale. Only \$478.00 was pledged. Seven families received small loans, but in 1943 the Society was liquidated. In its place the Coaldale Mennonite Savings and Credit Union Ltd. was established. The Credit Union received strong support both from the provincial government and the local Mennonites. It provided important financial services for those not adequately served by the larger commercial banks, and it kept the savings of local people at work in their own community. It operated for many years out of the offices of the cheese factory. Of all the Mennonite organizations the Credit Union was the most successful in adapting itself to Canadian conditions and still survives.

Medical institutions

The doctor's office and residence which became the subject of dispute between Coaldale and Saskatchewan insurance organizations was itself a local co-operative Mennonite venture. Medical care in Canada was expensive. Prolonged illness could lead to financial disaster for individual settlers. To prevent such disasters and to attract competent doctors at reasonable cost a medical society was organized. Each mem-



The new Coaldale Community Hospital.

ber family paid a monthly fee of \$1.00 and in return received medical care at substantially reduced rates. The Society paid the doctor for work done according to an accepted fee structure. The doctor was also at liberty to serve non-members, but these had to pay regular fees.

The medical society was organized in 1928 and was followed in 1931 by a Hospital society. This society charged its members \$1.00 per month and then arrangements with the Galt Hospital in Lethbridge for group rates at \$2.00 per diem for society members, the \$2.00 being paid by the Society. This arrangement lasted for only one year, after which the Galt Hospital raised its rates. The society then decided to organize its own hospital. Temporary and rather inadequate hospital facilities were provided in the local hardware store where a portion of the main floor was cordoned off and remodelled. Soon thereafter a separate building was remodelled as a hospital. This hospital served the entire community for twenty years, after which a larger new community hospital was built. Later still the Mennonites also built a home for the aged for those not ill enough to be hospitalized but no longer able to live in their own home.

If neither the doctor nor the hospital met the needs of afflicted individuals the Mennonites had yet another organization. They provided their own cemetery and established a fund, on a co-operative basis, to meet funeral expenses of deceased members. Thus, as one local writer claimed, the Mennonites

at Coaldale even supported one another in death.

Educational institutions

Another area of major concern to the Coaldale Mennonites was that of education. In Russia the Mennonites had enjoyed substantial control over the education of their children, although the Russian government insisted on some curriculum matters. In Canada education was firmly under the control of provincial governments, and the Mennonites who came to Canada in the 1920's had no illusions about the fact that their children would attend government controlled public schools.

Acceptance of the public schools did not indicate an indifference to religious instruction. In part the churches, and particularly the Sunday Schools, were expected to provide religious instruction. To a lesser extent the German Saturday Schools performed a similar service. The public schools were expected to provide little more than the necessary fundamentals of a general education. After a person had acquired these it was thought more useful to spend one or several winters in concentrated and directed Bible study. Winters were long, and farm work rarely demanded the full time attention of all family members. What better way for young people to spend the winter months than in Bible Study. This would fill the gaps left by the public schools and encourage young people at their most impressionable and idealistic age to accept and commit themselves to the Christian way of life.

The Coaldale Bible School also

offered another attraction, particularly in the early years. Many teen-aged Mennonites coming to Canada were really too old to begin again their public school training, but lacked a sufficient knowledge of English to join students in the higher grades. It was the Bible School which attempted to meet their needs by offering not only Bible instruction, but also some instruction in elementary English, with the curious result that many of the students learned only a King James version of English.

The Coaldale Bible School, founded in 1929, was from the beginning a project of the local Mennonite Brethren Church although attendance in the early years was not restricted to Mennonite Brethren. The Bible School certainly influenced many students in a very fundamental way. It offered a deeply appreciated service to many.

A second rather different educational venture began in 1946 when a private educational society consisting mainly of Mennonite Brethren was formed to organize and operate a local high school which became known as the Alberta Mennonite High School. The High School, like the Bible School, initially drew some support and students from non-Mennonite Brethren ranks but was essentially a Mennonite Brethren institution.

The facilities, particularly the library and laboratories, were never really adequate, but the calibre of the teachers was very high and many graduates of the Alberta Mennonite High School went on to university and distinguished professional and academic careers. The teachers tried to harmonize secular and religious instruction and to give the students an integrated approach to both. Periodic revival meetings and an emphasis on academic achievement, greatly enriched by good choral and orchestral music, characterized the school year. School inspectors often ignored obvious physical shortcomings of the school since the students achieved results equal to or better than those achieved by students in the more amply equipped public high schools.

The supporters of the Alberta

Mennonite High School raised funds on a voluntary basis, from membership levies, and student tuition fees. They were nonetheless also obliged to pay the regular school taxes. They in fact subjected themselves for eighteen years to a system of double taxation in order to provide their young people with an alternative to the secular education of the public high schools.

Two anniversaries

The high point of the various community organizations of the Mennonites at Coaldale probably came in 1951 when the Mennonite Brethren there celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of their church. It was a time of pride and thanksgiving for all that had been done and all that had been achieved. The anniversary addresses and souvenir publications expressed confidence, pride and gratitude.

There were probably very few in 1951 who really thought that all the community organizations would soon disappear or undergo radical change. They seemed to be serving the community well; yet within the next two decades almost all the Mennonite economic, social, cultural and educational institutions at Coaldale either disappeared entirely or underwent such radical change that, for all practical intents and purposes, they lost their Mennonite identity.

When the Mennonite Brethren at Coaldale recently celebrated their fiftieth anniversary the contrast between that celebration and the one twenty-five years earlier was remarkable. The community was certainly very prosperous in 1976; there was much reason for thanksgiving, but the affair lacked focus and spirit. The Russian Mennonite fragment at Coaldale had disappeared as a readily identifiable entity. By the standards and measures usually employed to assess assimilation the Mennonites at Coaldale had become institutionally assimilated into the larger Canadian society.

THE DECLINE OF MENNONITE ORGANIZATIONS

The reasons for the decline of Mennonite organizations at Coal-

dale are varied and complex. Assimilation can be examined and measured and explained in many different ways. In the following paragraphs no particular theoretical model is used. The methodology is that of simple descriptive history. Minute books, correspondence, legal documents, task force reports and the reminiscences of people involved in the community organizations provide the explanations given below. This is not a sophisticated excursion delving into the hearts and minds of the people; it is an attempt to present in a coherent manner the reasons for the decline of Mennonite community organizations at Coaldale as these merge from a reading of the relevant primary sources.

Decline of the German language

The first, and perhaps most important factor in explaining the decline of Mennonite community organizations was the gradual decline of the German language as the primary language of communication among the Coaldale Mennonites, and a widely perceived notion that English was at least equal and probably superior in its linguistic and cultural connotations. This directly and significantly reduced enthusiasm and support for and commitment to institutions such as the German Saturday Schools, The German Library and the Society for the Preservation of the German language. It also weakened support for many other institutions simply because these had traditionally provided service in the German language to those patrons who had not yet mastered the English language. Legal, medical and major financial services had all been made available in both the English and German languages, but as people became more proficient in English they also became more discriminating in selecting those agencies which set the lowest rates or offered the best professional service.

Economic rationalization and consolidation

Economic rationalization and consolidation of many business ven-

tures and the increased specialization of many farmers, both made possible by rapidly improving transportation and communication systems, constitute a second factor in the decline of Mennonite organizations. Small local economic ventures catering to small diversified mixed farming operations simply became obsolete and were gradually replaced by larger ventures which could better achieve economies of scale in their operations. Large commercial dairy operations in Lethbridge diminished the need for the services of the local cheese factory and drew from the local institution its largest and best shippers. The services and operations of the local cheese factory were consequently diminished until it was taken over by a much larger commercial corporation and converted to a specialized cheese processing plant. This was followed in October of 1977 with the permanent shutting down of the cheese factory which was once the hub of Mennonite economic activity in the town.

Similarly the egg grading station failed to remain competitive with larger nearby operations and was forced to close down. The local Mennonite insurance agency had operated for many years because the large national and international companies followed very cautious policies with regard to rural operations. When property values rose, communications improved, and the larger companies demonstrated a more active interest by offering more attractive services and appointing local people as agents, the Mennonite agency found it very difficult to compete. The larger companies had the one very significant advantage that they could set the individual policy risks against a much larger volume of business or obtain an underwriting participation from other companies. Similarly the credit union, which offered a local service at a time when the chartered banks and trust companies adopted very cautious lending policies toward farmers and charged higher interest rates at rural branches with low turnovers than at larger urban centres, now found that it could only compete

with difficulty. Thanks to improved economic conditions and decisive provincial credit legislation, the banks began to treat their rural customers as more than mendicant country cousins. The better and larger accounts gradually transferred to the commercial banks, leaving the credit union in difficulties despite the fact that credit unions in Canada have always enjoyed a wide range of tax concessions. The Credit Union still survives, but it is no longer the main financial institution used by Mennonites in the community.

Social and welfare policies

A third factor of considerable importance was the growth of social and welfare policies and programmes of various governments which took over some services and significantly altered the conditions under which others could be provided. Medicare finished off the local medical society, while provincial hospital grants were often given under conditions which forced the Mennonites to relinquish effective control over both capital and operating policies. The governments wanted community hospitals and, increasingly, Union Hospitals. The Coaldale hospital has in fact been greatly expanded to serve an increasingly large area, but this expansion had clear and inescapable consequences. The administrative structure had to be enlarged and accommodated to the standards, procedures and granting formulae established by government bureaucrats.

The Mennonite Old Age Home still continues, but the government has very recently completed construction of a new home for the aged in the community. The prospects of the Mennonite home are not bright unless it obtains significant government aid, and the failure to reach an agreement whereby the Mennonite home might have become a government project in some way significantly reduces the prospect of such aid.

Social welfare policies have undoubtedly met many needs, but they have also rendered redundant some of the voluntary and co-operative

agencies which formerly provided those services. There is probably no way in which non-governmental agencies can compete in areas where full government services paid from tax revenues take over.

Internal divisions, fundamentalism and revivalism

The support for Mennonite community organizations which were at least in part secular was also undermined by fairly fundamental internal divisions, particularly within the Mennonite Brethren Church. These were periodically inflamed and exacerbated by the influence of North American fundamentalism and revivalism.

Initially this division focused largely on a group of Mennonite Brethren which came from the more recently settled Siberian and Asian Mennonite colonies. This group insisted on rigid and rather legalistic observances of various tenants of Mennonite Brethren social conduct. In particular avoidance of "the world" and of so-called "worldly" amusements and activities was stressed.

These legalistic tendencies were strengthened during periodic revivals. Many of the revivalists did not have a firm grounding in traditional Anabaptist theology and borrowed heavily from North American fundamentalism. Great stress was placed on the conflict between "spiritual" and "worldly" ideals and aspirations. The aim of many of the revivalists was often to set the "spiritual" component of an individual believer's personal and lifestyle at warfare with his secular, carnal or "worldly" aspects. Instead of stressing the integrity and wholeness of the gospel and the salvation of the whole person, only a "spiritual" salvation was emphasized.

This emphasis left many individuals with no credible basis for cooperation in ventures which were in part motivated by religious ideals, but which were also in part secular in nature. Symbolically the peculiar two-world ideology of this group probably found one of its clearest expressions in the opposition of some members to proposals that the cheese factory and other Mennonite

organized endeavors be allowed to hold their business meetings in the basement of the Church, which was the largest and in many ways the most suitable place for such meetings. These same people, however, also objected to the holding of those business meetings in the local town hall because dances were held there on Saturday nights and the place was therefore "worldly" and highly suspect. To avoid problems of this kind it was easier to close down the Mennonite institutions and deal in a more remote way, and without any involvement or responsibility for management decisions, with outside and non-Mennonite agencies.

It was the Alberta Mennonite High School which probably suffered most severely from this group, since it very obviously sought to mix religious and secular education. A particularly severe clash between the church leadership and one of the high school teachers arose over a seemingly harmless issue. The choir and orchestra, led by one of the high school teachers, prepared and presented a performance of Handel's *Messiah*. There was some initial grumbling that this was "worldly" music, but the matter became more serious when a Lethbridge funeral home offered to sponsor a second performance in the large United Church in Lethbridge. The church leader, a product of one of the pietistic German Bible Schools and supported by the more narrowly legalistic elements in the church, vigorously opposed this "worldly" sponsorship and arranged a special church service for the same evening that the performance was scheduled. The *Messiah* was performed, but the ensuing furor led to the resignation of both of the men directly involved, and significantly narrowed the local basis of support for the high school.

Leadership Problems

The *Messiah* affair clearly revealed a serious leadership problem as well as a theological issue. The majority of the Mennonites at Coaldale certainly took more tolerant attitudes in such external matters, but the abrasive, highly combative and emotional leadership cre-

ated havoc and confusion which prevented decisive action of any kind and virtually paralyzed the will of the majority.

The General Conference Mennonite Church at this time had a different, almost opposite problem. Leadership there was unassuming, quiet and lethargic. It was alleged, probably quite correctly, that the Mennonite Brethren were having much too lively a time of it while the General Conference was not lively enough. It should, however, be mentioned that at least some of the General Conference leaders had been involved, only a few years earlier, in an equally serious crisis relating to the Rosthern Junior College.

The result was that the basis of support for a number of the Mennonite institutions, particularly the High School and the Bible School, grew steadily smaller. Once this was recognized some determined efforts were made to broaden the base. Since both schools were essentially Mennonite Brethren institutions, attempts were made to solicit support and participation from the Alberta Mennonite Brethren Conference. In this attempt, however, the geographic distances separating the northern Alberta Mennonite Brethren Churches from Coaldale created serious problems.

Occasional suggestions were also made that the schools be reorganized on an inter-Mennonite basis, thus hopefully gaining much needed support from the General Conference Mennonites. That, after all, was the model for most schools of that kind in Russia, but the suggestion encountered very strong and determined opposition from a number of Mennonite Brethren preachers and was never given serious consideration. The result was that the support for the schools continued to dwindle until continued operations became impossible.

Population changes

The problems within the church led to considerable disillusionment, particularly among the young people. At the same time the larger cities of the province offered enticing new challenges, and a very

large percentage of the young people growing up in the late 1950's left Coaldale to seek a freer and more tolerant atmosphere in the cities. This deprived the community of many of its most dynamic, intelligent and promising members. Since the local disputes had centered to a large extent around Mennonite institutions, notably the High School and the Bible School, these young people brought an antipathy to such institutions to the emerging urban churches which they joined in Lethbridge, Calgary and Edmonton. As a result the Mennonites of Alberta who once led the country in building their own distinctive institutions, now have fewer such institutions than the Mennonites of any other Canadian province in which a large number of Mennonites reside.

The departure of many of the young people was offset to a considerable extent by the influx after World War II of a new group of Russian Mennonites. The migrants of the late 1940's and 1950's, however, were much further removed from some of the traditions and ideals of the Russian Mennonite Commonwealth than those who had settled in Coaldale earlier. The later Displaced Persons had remained in Russia in the 1920's only to see their villages collectivized and to be forcibly uprooted, relocated and severely harassed and culturally and religiously assaulted during the purges of the 1930's and the disasters of war. Many had been forced to abandon the institutional and cultural trappings of Mennonite life to which North American Mennonites still adhered. Others found the North American Mennonite institutions sufficiently different from those they had known that it was difficult to adjust. Arrogance, suspicion and even hostility on the part of the established Mennonites added further problems for the newcomers who, in any case, had to give immediate economic survival priority over the preservation of old institutions. Displaced Persons after World War II participated enthusiastically in the local churches, but their support for other Mennonite organizations was less enthusiastic.

The new highway

With the construction and improvement of the highway between Coaldale and the City of Lethbridge less than ten miles away, residents in Coaldale have been enticed, in increasing numbers, to take employment in the City, but to retain their residence in the Town. The Town Council has been progressive in providing water, sewer and other services, thus giving their town a significant advantage over others as a dormitory town. In addition many of the local farmers, particularly Mennonite farmers, have decided to retire in Coaldale. As a result the Town has become a dormitory and retirement centre dependent on government social policies, and economic forces at work in the City. The continued role of distinctive Mennonite organizations in such a setting is questionable.

CONCLUSION

The specific causes for the decline of Mennonite organizations in Coaldale can be enumerated, and each can be, in itself, quite convincing. Yet such an enumeration is superficial. It fails to define the attitudes, the community spirit and the social dynamics preceding and prevalent during a period of rapid and radical adjustment. Each of the organizations and institutions referred to was once an integral part of the community. Each has, for one reason or another, outlived its specific usefulness and become obsolete. But with each institution went a part of the life of the community.

It is not at all clear what organizations should replace those that have disappeared or are disappearing, or how these various replacements might be integrated and harmonized into a coherent community life. The fact of the matter is that Coaldale has ceased to be a Mennonite community in respect of its organizations and institutions, other than the churches. It has become a Canadian community with institutions and objectives indistinguishable from those of other similarly situated communities.

Some observers, noting the apparent decline of distinctive Menno-

nite organizations in Coaldale, have lamented that this is evidence of a loss of community spirit, of concern for the welfare of others, and of dedication to a Christian lifestyle. The Mennonite institutions, after all, were community oriented and cooperatively owned and managed for the benefit of all. The new and larger organizations are generally profit oriented, or extended as a government service. The ideologies of neither really meet the theological precepts of a dedicated minority seeking to live according to an ethic not thought to be sacred by secular society. It is a mistake, however, to conclude that community spirit, concern for the less fortunate, and dedication in building a better society have disappeared with the distinctive Mennonite organizations. The commitment to missions and to relief organizations such as the Mennonite Central Committee, and to many other relief and mission agencies, remains extraordinarily high, and any major misfortunes within the community still evoke sincere sympathy and much practical assistance. These activities, however, lack the focus they once had in the distinctive Mennonite organizations. The salt has not lost its savour; but some of the salt shakers designed and built by Mennonite hands have been replaced with others designed by governments and entrepreneurs to dispense a much broader range of societal spices.

Historians of the Canadian West have long protested that the famous American frontier thesis enunciated by Frederick Jackson Turner cannot be applied to Canada. Turner argued that the frontier was the great instrument of Americanization, transforming immigrants from diverse backgrounds into nationalistic Americans. The frontier, according to Turner, was a cultural melting pot. Canadians maintain that their frontier produced not a melting pot but a cultural mosaic. Recent American historians, however, have detected considerable cultural lumpiness in their melting pot, while Canadians have found their mosaic becoming increasingly

mushy. Strong forces of homogenization and assimilation are at work in Canada. The Mennonite community at Coaldale is an excellent example of the process of cultural and organizational homogenization and assimilation. The fragment transplanted in 1926 is a fragment no longer. It has been Canadianized to the point where its organizations, other than the churches, are indistinguishable from its surroundings.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE:

This article is based on research in a number of primary sources. The most important of these, particularly for the early period, is the collection of Canadian Pacific Railway Papers, 1886-1958, at the Glenbow-Alberta Institute in Calgary. These papers deal with colonization work of the C.P.R. and subsidiary organizations. Land, coal and irrigation activities are included.

The minute books, some correspondence files and other materials created by the various organizations were also used extensively. Many of these were made available to me by my father, Mr. Isaac I. Regehr, who helped to build many of the organizations discussed here. He served as secretary for some of the organizations. I am also grateful to my father for reading an early draft of this article and making a number of very useful comments and suggestions.

A further very useful source was the material written or collected by my father's cousin, Mr. Peter H. Regehr. His lengthy personal memoirs, a long and detailed account of the affairs and disputes in the Mennonite Brethren Church, and written histories or historical notes on the cheese factory and other economic ventures were very helpful.

A wide variety of published materials, from school year books to anniversary publications by churches, the local Board of Trade, and various organizations, provided further information and insights. Since I grew up in the community personal experiences, observations and recollections inevitably influenced the writing of this article.

Mennonite Change: The Life History of the Blenheim Mennonite Church, 1839-1974

by Lorna L. Bergey

In 1976 a rural Mennonite meeting house in southwestern Ontario became an informal retreat centre for the Mennonite Conference of Ontario. The well kept building and spacious grounds of the Blenheim Mennonite Church which is located in a pastoral setting on the southern fringe of the Pennsylvania-German Mennonite settlement in Waterloo County, approximately sixteen miles southwest of Kitchener, Ontario, was closed in 1974 by decision of the 50 active members.

The congregation was organized in 1839 by descendants of Pennsylvania-German Mennonite pioneers in Waterloo Township, who had been attracted to a large tract of rich land covered with primeval forest directly west in Wilmot Township.

Settlement in Wilmot

This desirable tract of land was owned by the Canada Land Company which was organized in 1824 to relieve the British Government of heavy colonial administration costs required in the development of the Crown Lands and Clergy Reserves in Upper Canada. Large tracts of the Crown Lands were purchased and developed by the Company to attract a desirable class of settlers from the British Isles. Their holdings included lands located to the east of Waterloo Township, the northern and southern portions of Wilmot Township, and the

large Huron Tract extending west from Wilmot to Lake Huron. To facilitate the development of these lands the company organized the towns of Guelph in the east and Goderich on the shores of Lake Huron to the west.

Around 1828 the Company built the Huron Road to create an over-

land transportation route between Guelph and Goderich. This road also provided access to the undeveloped lands in the southern portion of Wilmot Township.

A number of Pennsylvania-German settlers interested in agricultural, lumbering and milling industries obtained land from the Canada



Wedding of Gilbert and Angeline Bergey, 1902. He was a deacon from 1921 to 1949.



Blenheim Mennonite Church meetinghouse built in 1901, the second building erected by the congregation on this site, left.



Peter Bricker and wife, c. 1840. He was a member of the building committee for the first meetinghouse in 1850. Below, Moses H. Shantz, minister 1907-1938, c. 1905.



Company. The heavy stand of oak and pine trees measuring six feet at the base indicated excellent soil conditions and the strong flowing streams and springs of fresh water were attractive to these people.

Consequently, between 1830 and 1850 there was a steady influx of settlers who formed a settlement along the southeast border of Wilmot Township in Waterloo County and the northeast section of Blenheim Township in Oxford County. Armed with their heritage of hard labour, perseverance, and sense of sound business practices, they carved homes out of the frontier forest and there has emerged a prosperous agricultural community second to none.

A school house was built on the Joseph Hallman farm prior to 1839. Since no documentation has been found that there was a public school program conducted at this site, it has been assumed by local historians, that the building was built by the Mennonites to provide a place for the children in the settlement to receive a basic education in the three R's and also to provide a meetinghouse.

Organization of Congregation

When the group organized a congregation in 1839, Jacob Hallman became the pastor. He had been ordained a few years earlier in the Latschar congregation located four miles northeast, but he resided on a farm near the new place of meeting. A meetinghouse was built by the congregation in 1850 on land

purchased from Peter and Susannah Erb, Waterloo Township settlers, who held considerable land in Blenheim Township which they had no doubt purchased for some of their children and for speculation.

The congregation was designated as Blenheim since it was the only meetinghouse of the Mennonite Conference of Ontario built in Blenheim Township. Mennonite meetinghouses erected by the Pennsylvania-German Mennonite settlers in the Waterloo County district were known by the surname of the owner of the land upon which the facility was built, i.e. Biehn, Eby, Geiger, Latschar, Martin, Shantz, Snyder, etc. Some local Mennonite historians of an earlier generation were convinced that their congregations worshipped in meetinghouses for some time before a deed was procured from the property holder. This would suggest that until a clear title could be obtained, an oral agreement between the congregation and the member who owned the property was sufficient. Thus the meetinghouse was known by the property holder's surname. Prior to 1834 any Mennonite meetinghouse was held by a deed containing a clause "for the use of all denominations." It was not until after 1834 that all Mennonite meetinghouse deeds included a clause "held in trust for the Mennonite Society" or "on behalf of the Mennonite Society of North America."

C. B. Sissons in *Ryerson—His Life and Times* tells us "Freedom of worship was general in the colonies but . . . dissenting groups such as Methodists and Baptists were denied the right to hold property." The Constitutional Act of 1791 contained certain provisions for the Protestant Church in Upper Canada but these were interpreted by the Anglican Church in such a way that "Protestant Church" meant the Anglican Church to the exclusion of

*David and Louisa Bergey, c. 1924.
He was a deacon from 1889 to 1921.*

all others. All Protestant denominations with the exception of the Lutheran Church experienced a difficult struggle for religious equality and freedom in Upper Canada (Ontario).

Although the Blenheim meeting-house was erected in the midst of a prosperous Mennonite community, the congregation was destined to remain on the fringe of the Waterloo County Mennonite settlement, with an average membership of fifty.

Contributing Factors to Limited Growth

The focus of this presentation is to examine a few apparent contributing factors which led to the decision of the members at Blenheim to terminate 135 years of organized activities in a small rural church.

Due to the fringe location of the settlement, the young people were isolated from the main Mennonite settlement so there was considerable socializing with non-Mennonite neighbors of English and Scottish origin, and quite a number of marriages with non-Mennonites occurred. This usually resulted in a loss to the Mennonite congregation because these "outsiders" were not attracted to a group where the majority spoke a Palatinate dialect in the home and church until 1900. Consequently many Mennonites became assimilated into the surrounding churches.

In this same period of time the inroads of the Methodist Church became evident throughout the area. The strong appeal of the English language, Sunday Schools, faster tunes in singing, prayer and revival meetings attracted those Pennsylvania-German Mennonites who had intermarried, who preferred the use of the English language, and favored total abstinence from the use of alcohol and tobacco.

There is evidence that this exposure to Methodist influence in the



community prepared the setting for the schism which occurred in the Ontario Mennonite churches in the 1870's. This led to the formation of The Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church, later known as The United Missionary Church and lately as The Missionary Church. Approximately twelve families left the Blenheim congregation and eventually formed the nucleus of the present New Dundee Missionary Church. The talents and activities of this group and their descendants bears evidence of the loss sustained by the Blenheim congregation.

As late as the early 1900's there was considerable effort expended by the MBC group to attract young people from the Blenheim congregation and especially young married couples who moved into the community from adjoining Mennonite

congregations. Although members of the Blenheim congregation attended MBC camp meetings, participated in community singing schools, and socialized quite freely with their MBC neighbors, there was no shift of membership in that direction until 1960-1974.

From 1895-1950 the membership hovered around fifty. In 1935 there was an increase to seventy-six and by 1945 it peaked at eighty but from that time to 1974 it slowly declined to fifty. This fact was a major influence in the decision to terminate an organized program at Blenheim.

What was the reason for the increase of the 1935-45 era, and what brought about the decline by 1974? One apparent reason for the increase in the 1935-45 era was the presence of six families with six or

more children each, plus the fact that the average age of baptism in that period was thirteen years, and most family members remained with the family unit until the age of twenty-one. This same fact also contributed in part to the general decline in the 1955-74 period as these young people relocated at the time of their marriage or when entering their vocation.

During World War II five young men enlisted in the military service. Each one eventually withdrew his membership. Between 1945 and 1974, eleven members transferred their membership to the United Brethren Church: two couples with their families, five who intermarried into that church, and a widow and her daughter. Three couples joined the Missionary Church between 1960 and 1974. Several of these sensed the incompatibility between their fundamentalist belief and the Anabaptist concept of the Believer's Church.

In 1947 three members joined a communal society known as The Community of the Brethren, located six miles west of the church. The pastor of the Blenheim church resigned and became involved in the colony program for a time. Later he left this community and became active in a recently formed small splinter group of members from various Mennonite conferences in Ontario called the Conservative Mennonite Fellowship. This movement in 1960 attracted two more couples from this congregation. Mennonite families moving into the nearby village of New Dundee tended to maintain their membership in their home congregation. The age of the auto permitted greater mobility.

Until 1940 the members were engaged in farming. Between 1895 and 1915 there were four school teachers in the entire congregation and these all from one family. In 1924 a young member enrolled in the University of Toronto but shortly thereafter withdrew his membership.

The following information illustrates the gradual shift from resident members on a farm setting to non-resident members, from a sim-

ple rural people to a people possessing a sophisticated blend of professional, business, and service skills.

In 1940 there were twenty-one households in the congregation. Seventeen depended entirely on a mixed farming operation for their income. Two families operated small butchering plants on their farms and attended farmers' markets. One family manufactured its entire milk supply into cheese which was sold at local farmers' market. Three sons from one household worked in the local Farmer's Co-operative Creamery. Two members of single adult status were elementary school teachers, another a trained nurse, and several were enrolled in college.

By 1960 out of the twenty households in the congregation one was located outside of the area. There were eleven active farmers, and four retired farmers. Other members were gainfully employed in the following occupations: one in a meat packing plant, two in the local creamery, one in construction; one a purveyor of cheese. In addition there were two store clerks, two office secretaries, one bank teller, one music teacher, two elementary school teachers, and two trained nurses.

Fourteen years later, in 1974, there were twenty-five households but seven were not located in the immediate area. There were seven active farmers, six retired farmers. Other occupations included one carpenter, one office manager, one purveyor of cheese, one meat packing employee, one salesman, one electrical engineer, one secondary school teacher, four elementary school teachers, two nursery school teachers, one ambulance driver, one medical laboratory technician, one medical doctor, and two store clerks.

Of note is the fact that in contrast to 1940, many households had two or more sources of income. This applied to cases where the wife was employed outside of the home as well as young people who boarded at home but were employed outside of the family farm operation.

Another subtle factor in the declining membership was the fact that between 1955 and 1974 seven

Mennonite owned properties located in the church community were sold to non-Mennonites. Thus the church building became surrounded by non-Mennonites. The congregation was fast becoming a commuting congregation.

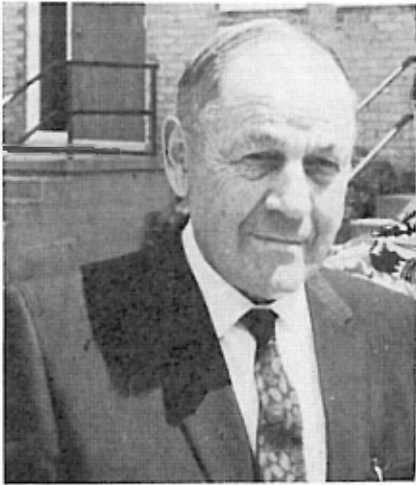
The institutional character of the present Mennonite Church contributed to the problems of this small congregation. Up to 1940 the primary focus and concern was for the local congregation. At Blenheim this was reflected in positive leadership in word and example by mature and experienced members. The local church received first consideration and respect by most members when planning group or personal activities. This was true even though there was an option for participation in an active women's program in the conference and an inter-congregational young people's program in the district.

Until 1950 the minister was self supporting. From 1961-67 the congregation provided partial support. This obligation plus the anticipated remodelling of the church building created a problem in meeting the budget for both the congregation and conference program.

Facing the Facts

Around 1965 some concerned members of the Mennonite churches in Wilmot Township began to question the feasibility of maintaining six church buildings to accommodate 500 members. Since Pennsylvania-German Mennonite churches in Ontario were usually built only four to five miles apart, many small congregations were formed in close proximity. Mennonite Church councils of the Wilmot District held their first meeting in 1965 to discuss the future program of their congregations.

By 1966 members of the Blenheim and Manheim congregations were faced with the problems of securing new pastors. It soon became evident that potential candidates expected full support requiring heavy financial obligations for a small congregation. Full support of a pastor, plus the rising maintenance costs for the church buildings and parsonages, plus commit-



Walter C. Shantz, 83 year old lifelong member of the Blenheim congregation; active in Sunday School program for over fifty years.

ments to the conference budget demanded a realistic approach to the problem.

The two congregations located five miles apart decided to enter into a dual pastorate in 1967. Each congregation maintained its autonomous program with the exception of the Youth Fellowship which

amalgamated. When the arrangement was reviewed in 1974 it was the consensus of both congregations that the dual pastorate arrangement was not conducive for congregational growth.

The Manheim congregation wished to continue as a separate congregation with a part time pastor. It saw possibilities for future growth as a result of its location near an expanding city.

At this time the Blenheim congregation decided to reconsider an invitation received in 1966 from the Biehn congregation to amalgamate with them. This small congregation five miles to the west of the Blenheim church had a newly erected church building and was located in the midst of a Mennonite rural community. Both congregations were approaching the termination of their pastoral arrangements. After holding conjoint services in the Biehn church building on a three month trial basis the Blenheim congregation decided to dissolve their congregational program on December 31, 1974.

Following this action the majority of members amalgamated with

the members of the Biehn congregation in 1975 to form The Nith Valley Mennonite Church. The newly combined organized congregation has an approximate membership of one hundred and fifteen representing fifty family units. The services of a full time pastor have been secured. The Blenheim property was turned over to the Mennonite Conference of Ontario. In 1976 the building was renovated to serve as a retreat centre for the conference and community. Ministers who have served the Blenheim Congregation have been the following:

- 1839-1878 Jacob Hallman
- 1879-1897 Joseph Nahrgang
- 1897-1907 Isaiah Rosenberger
- 1907-1938 Moses H. Shantz
- 1939-1947 Moses N. Baer
- 1947-1951 Interim & supply pastors
- 1951-1960 Arnold Cressman
- 1961-1966 Vernon Leis
- 1967-1974 Gordon Bauman

The above list of ministers indicate that the shortened tenure of the ministerial term resulted in the congregation having four ministers in the last twenty-five years whereas the same number served for one hundred years previously.

Jakob Ellenberger

Pastor, Teacher, Musician, Writer — Part I

by Amelia Mueller

He must have been quite a man, my great grandfather, Jakob Ellenberger—a pastor on Sunday, ministering to as many as five small Mennonite congregations in the Palatinate at the same time; a teacher during the week, instructing pupils of all ages in a parochial school at Friedelsheim, Germany; a choir director, writer, composer, farmer, amateur carpenter and cabinet maker; and the father of thirteen children.

Among the books left by my aunt, Selma Ellenberger, at the time of her death, I found a small booklet published in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1879, a biography of Jakob Ellenberger, teacher and minister of the Mennonite Congregation of Friedelsheim, based on a handwritten autobiography which was found at his death.

Recently I translated the material into English, and when I had finished, I stood in front of a picture of my grandfather which had always hung in Aunt Selma's bedroom. Looking at the serious, gentle features of a man in an ill fitting dark suit, standing formally erect, with his hand resting on the shoulder of his wife, who was seated primly beside him, I thought, "Now I feel as though I know this man, and I wish that we could actually talk to each other."

In the biography, which quoted liberally from the autobiography, the personality and character of Jakob had come through clear and strong—his complete consecration to his Lord and Master, Jesus Christ; his confidence in the goodness and faithfulness of God; his dedication to his work; his gentle kindness; his love of people and animals; his

talent in the areas of music and literature; his quiet, unassuming, but forward looking and persistent leadership among the South German Mennonites in the areas of education, music, missions, and literature; and his physical stamina and energy.

Jakob Ellenberger was born on October 18, 1800 at Gönheim, near Friedelsheim, in the Bavarian Rheinpfalz. He was the fourth of five children of Abraham Ellenberger and Katharina, also Ellenberger. According to the description given in Jakob's autobiography, his parents were pious and God-fearing, and highly respected by the other villagers for their honesty and sincerity.

They lived quietly and simply, keeping themselves aloof from everything that was worldly and ungodly. Their Christianity was earnest and sincere; the Bible was their guide; and their faith and love were expressed not only in words, but even more in deeds.

The children were very early encouraged to pray and to read God's word. "And all of this was done in such a natural and unforced manner that the children imitated their parents with delight and love."

School Boy in Napoleonic Times

Jakob was a school boy during the turbulent time of the Napoleonic Wars, which for him and his playmates was much more interesting and enjoyable than for his parents. The military drama of the brightly decorated, uniformed soldiers of the various countries, both on foot and on horseback, the roll of the drums, the blare of the trumpets, and the rhythm of the military music fasci-

nated Jakob. But one evening while the Russian army was quartered at Friedelsheim something happened which gave him an entirely different feeling toward the military.

Jakob was running an errand for his father when two soldiers grabbed him on the street and took him along to a barn where they ordered him to hold the light for them while they tied up some hay.

It was a bitterly cold night, and Jakob could see that the work would continue for a long, long time. So he thought up a plan of escape, which he promptly carried out. He simply blew out the lantern and ran!

By the time the Russians, with their heavy riding boots and stiff pants, got out of the dark bin and over the four foot threshing floor wall, Jakob had a definite headstart. And when noticed that his pursuers were gaining on him, he darted into a *Hof* with which he was familiar, through the barn into the garden, and by a shorter route, home.

While the soldiers, with increasing anger and exasperation, were still looking for him in the house which they had seen him enter, he had long since reached home and was sitting quietly behind the stove.

From that time on, his feeling toward the soldiers changed. Each time he heard the tramp of their boots, he was sure it was his pursuers coming to get him.

As he grew older he began more and more to dread the time when he would be conscripted into the army. From his reaction, we can assume that the Mennonites of the Palatinate did not stress the doctrine of nonresistance, *Wehrlosigkeit*, at this time. Jakob's aversion to military service seems to have

stemmed not so much from religious conviction or church doctrine as from personal feelings.

When he was a child, he had had a pet lark that was free to fly where it wanted to during the day, but always came back to him in the evening so that he could put it into its cage. One evening at twilight, his sister accidentally stepped on the bird in the darkening room, injuring it so that it died.

Another time, Jakob had thrown a stone at a robin that was sitting on a wall, intending to startle it into flight, but accidentally hitting it so that it fell from the wall dead.

Both times Jakob had wept bitter tears of grief and remorse. When even the death of birds and animals was so painful to him, how could he ever bring himself to take part in the wounding and killing of fellow human beings?

As his seventeenth birthday approached, he spent much time thinking and praying about the situation. And when, because of poor eyesight, he was declared unfit for military service, he thankfully praised God for His help!

Since Jakob was considered frail physically, his parents decided he should learn to be a tailor, an occupation for which he had no aptitude and even less desire. It was at this time, as he thought and prayed about his future, that an early awakened interest in becoming a minister of God's Word was further aroused and strengthened. His parents encouraged him in this, but were unable to give him any financial help in getting the training he would need.

It was an uncle, Heinrich Ellenberger, who went with him to visit Herr Weidmann, the Mennonite minister in Monsheim, from whom they hoped to get information about a school in Holland where young Mennonites who wanted to enter the ministry could study without charge. This uncle was minister at Eppstein and Friesenheim until 1850, when at an advanced age he migrated to America and in 1851 organized the Zion Mennonite Church, Donnellson, Iowa, the first Mennonite church west of the Mississippi River.

Jakob found out that he could indeed study for the ministry in Holland without any cost to himself, but he would first need to master thoroughly some foreign languages. This he was willing to do, but before he could get information as to where he could study these languages, help came from another direction.

To School at Beugen

An Englishman by the name of Angas, who was active in various areas of mission work, was traveling in Switzerland and Germany, and in some way learned of Jakob's interest in becoming a minister. Through the influence of this sincere Christian and generous philanthropist, Jakob was accepted as a student at the Anstalt Beugen in Grossherzogthum Baden without any cost.

Jakob says in his autobiography that the three years he spent at this school was a time of difficult testing as well as spiritual growth for him. There was a close, friendly, active relationship between the institution at Beugen and the mission school in Basel, so that the students at Beugen often became actively involved in the mission work in Basel. Ellenberger's participation in this seems to have been instrumental in arousing the passionate interest in mission work which he later tried to communicate to the Mennonite churches in the Palatinate.

He also had occasion during these student days to test and defend his Anabaptist beliefs. On one occasion, after the baptism of a child to which the students at the school had also been invited, Inspector Zeller remarked to Ellenberger, "Don't you think that when children of Christian parents, supported by devout godparents, are given holy baptism by a loving, devout minister, then it really does have meaning?"

To which Ellenberger answered, "Yes, indeed! But if the person being baptized could have given his own confession of faith, it would have had even more meaning."

"You are right there," the inspector conceded. And nobody in the group challenged Jakob's statement.

Teacher at Friedelsheim

When his education in Beugen ended in the spring of 1827, Jakob received a call from the Council of the Mennonite Congregation in Friedelsheim to take the position of teacher for their children in their newly organized school. Jakob happily accepted this call and began his teaching career with about twenty pupils.

But in the fall of that same year the government closed the school with the edict, "The parochial school which the Mennonite Congregation in Friedelsheim is maintaining is herewith being closed, and the congregation is being ordered to send their children to the local school until they can demonstrate they have the means to support their own school and have hired a government approved and certified teacher.

Jakob immediately requested permission to take the examination for certification, and at the same time the Church Council petitioned the government for permission to continue temporarily the school until the time of the examination. Both requests were granted, and late in the year 1828 Ellenberger passed the examination at Kaiserslautern with a mark indicating: "Well qualified for the teaching profession."

Since all of the requirements of the government were now fully met, the school became legally approved, and Ellenberger was given all of the rights of a state recognized teacher. He did not receive a government salary, but he had to meet all of the government regulations, and his school was inspected annually by the royal school authorities. He also had to attend the teacher conferences held by the district school inspector, hand in the assignments required for this, join the teachers' reading society, and make his payments to the teachers' burial insurance fund.

Ordained Minister

For five years—from 1827 to 1832—Ellenberger was busy mainly in the school. Then the congregation also called him as their minister, and he was ordained at a

church conference at the Weierhof by the minister Molenaar from Crefeld.

By this time he was married to Lisette Blickensdörfer, of whom he writes: "I found in her a faithful, sincerely devout life companion, and also a faithful, loving, caring mother to the children. This was very good, because our marriage was richly blessed with children: eight sons and five daughters."

Ellenberger's main concern in his teaching was "leading the lambs entrusted to him to the good shepherd" and having them become familiar with God's Word. But he did not neglect the other objectives of education. His students, in the school inspections, showed themselves superior to those in the village school in general knowledge to the extent that one educated man who was not a Mennonite, sent his boys to Ellenberger's school for a time.

Lover of Music

Ellenberger especially enjoyed teaching music. His older students and those who had just left school formed a mixed chorus under his direction, which gained in membership each year. Since new students constantly joined the ranks and no one dropped out, even after they were married, the membership became "the longer, the larger," and constantly more skilled in their performance. No important meeting was held without the choir singing one of its well rehearsed songs.

Later Ellenberger also stimulated the formation of a Men's Chorus Society, which became well known throughout South Germany. He fostered this choir singing especially as a means of strengthening the feeling of togetherness in the congregation. All of the work connected with directing the choir practices as well as the writing and copying of music for the Men's Chorus, was never too much for him.

In the forties and fifties he instituted Christmas festivities in the school with the idea of making Christmas and the Gospel message, as well as their school work, both meaningful and enjoyable to his

students. As minister he worked in this same creative spirit, so that persons from the "state church" came to the quiet little Mennonite Church in Friedelsheim to hear him speak. In his own congregation there was also an active spiritual awakening whose movement spread to other Mennonite churches in the area.

In his book, *Prairie Pioneer*, Christian Krehbiel mentions Ellenberger's school and choir. "I had visited Friedelsheim at Christmas when I was ten years old. The old minister Jacob Ellenberger had a Christmas celebration with his pupils. The schoolhouse was filled because this school had a superlatively trained Mennonite Choir whose beautiful singing moved me deeply. While the pupils opened their packages, the lights were extinguished. In a brightly lighted niche appeared a nativity scene. Surprised, the children stared—and so did I."

Christian literature was important to Ellenberger, and he subscribed to a number of periodicals published by the church group with whom he was associated during his student days at Basel. These he tried to disseminate among members of his congregation and other interested persons. He also made his library available to the members of the congregation, and was happy when someone made use of the books.

Interest in Missions

Jakob's interest in missions, which was stimulated during his student days, continued until his death. His congregation was provided with a tin box with the inscription: "Collection of Christian love gifts for the furtherance of the Kingdom of God." To stimulate interest in missions, he encouraged families to subscribe to the *Evangelischen Heidenboten* (Evangelical Messenger to the Heathen). And once each month, at the close of the Sunday worship service, he related something about the mission field.

Through his influence, interest in missions spread more and more in the Mennonite congregations in the Palatinate. He was overjoyed when the Mennonite Mission So-

ciety was started in Amsterdam. When in 1848 the ministers of the Palatinate started to hold mission festivals, he was much in demand at these first festivals because everyone knew that he had long and faithfully promoted this work.

When the first Mennonite publications began to appear, he enthusiastically tried to spread them throughout his sphere of activity, and occasionally sent in an article for publication. He helped faithfully with the writing of the books used for worship: the catechism, minister's manual, and the hymnbook, for which he composed several hymns. He also composed a tune book for the hymnal, in which the chorales were written in four parts.

Jakob's biographer describes him as a man of average height, well built, his head covered with thick, black hair; his facial features gentle, kind, and serious. His appearance was unaffected and simple, winsome and confidence inspiring, and his bearing quiet, sure, and dignified.

"He was a healthy, robust, active man, even into his old age," writes the biographer. "It would have been impossible for him to carry the heavy burden of his work for so many years if God had not given him such good health."

In addition to his position as teacher, he served not only his own congregation at Friedelsheim, but also the churches in Erpolsheim and Kohlhof.

Served Other Congregations

At Erpolsheim, which was about one hour from Friedelsheim, he had services on Sunday afternoon after he had preached in Friedelsheim in the morning. At the Kohlhof congregation, which was three hours away, he held services only once a month. He walked to and from these villages until he could no longer do so because of his asthma and the decrease of his strength as he grew older. After this someone came for him.

At the beginning of the forties, he also served the congregation at Eppstein as interim pastor for four years. And for twenty years, after the minister for the congregation

at Branchweilerhof bei Neustadt a.d. Haardt retired, Ellenberger also preached there regularly, once a month.

His work, in serving all of these places, was physically and emotionally exhausting. When on Saturday his school work for the week was over, he had to begin on his tasks as a preacher. When he came home on Sunday evening, weary and spent, he knew his school work was waiting for him again on Monday morning.

Time for recreation or relaxation he found only during the few weeks of vacation; at other times he was busy working day in and day out.

In the course of time the worries of a large family were added to the emotional and physical strain of his professions. He had a small personal income, received an annual salary of several hundred guilders, and some annual aid from the Mennonites in Holland. The concerns for the physical existence of his family pressed heavily on him.

Considered Emigration

Several times he seriously considered emigrating to America, where life, at least financially, would have been easier for him. However, he decided not to forsake his congregation, but to remain where he was and to put up with the situation, even though it forced him to exercise the utmost thrift, and he literally had to eat his bread by the sweat of his brow.

While his colleagues from the village school went for a walk after school in order to get a breath of fresh air, Ellenberger went to his carpenter bench to work on various pieces of furniture needed for his home, in order to save as much as possible in this way, too.

Ellenberger was not only a laborer in the spiritual harvest field, but also in the natural, for he bound many sheaves on his small field. This familiarity with hard physical labor on the farm served him well at times in his interaction with other people.

One day during the year 1848, when the spirit of rebellion and revolution simmered and boiled in Germany, Ellenberger and two fel-

low ministers had met to talk over some problems of concern to all three of them. After hours of serious discussion, they decided to go for a walk together to relax.

As they walked past a field where two workers were busy spading ground not far from the road, one of them raised up and said to the other, loud enough so that the ministers had to hear, "Those are also three of the Blackcoats, whose jackets we're going to tear off!"

Ellenberger paused for a moment, then resolutely walked over to the men.

"You do us an injustice," he told them firmly, "if you think we are sluggards and idlers. In addition to doing our spiritual work, we also work with our hands."

Taking off his coat, he grabbed one of the spades, and demonstrated by spading back and forth for several rows, that he had the strength and ability to do this work as well as the men could do it. Then he spoke a few more friendly words to the embarrassed men, who looked down at the ground and let the ministers go on in peace.

Writer of Poetry

The large number of poems he wrote is evidence that with all of the burdens of his work and his worry and concern about his family and his financial situation, he still found time for his creative interests. In fact, as he indicated in his autobiography, it was these creative mental activities which helped him through many a difficult time and often brought comfort and relief to his burdened heart.

Although he worked hard, denied himself all luxuries, and saved seriously during all of his working years, he found that providing for even the most necessary preparation for future professions for the eleven children who lived to maturity was not easy. Only one of his sons, the youngest (my grandfather) decided to follow his father's profession.

"Happy as I was when Adolf told me about his interest in getting a higher education," Ellenberger wrote in his autobiography. "A heavy stone of worry laid itself on my heart, because I knew that such

a course was very expensive and my means were so meager."

When he received help for this matter from some "Brethren in the faith," he wrote, "God still lives! Lord, I am not worthy of all of the mercy and faithfulness that you have done to me!"

Although he continued his position as minister until the end of his life, retirement from teaching was granted him in 1869 because with increasing age his eyesight had become so poor that he was no longer able to do the work. In the fifties, as a state certified teacher, he had been asked to join their new pension plan, and from this he now received an annual pension of 400 guilders, which was almost double what he had received as a salary. With this pension Ellenberger found it possible gradually to pay off all of his accumulated debts.

In 1875 God called his wife from his side. He had grown old in years by this time without having to suffer under any of the physical difficulties which often come with old age. Following her death, however, his health began noticeably to fail. Quiet and withdrawn, he limited himself to the spiritual concerns of his ministry. He continued to serve not only the church in Friedelsheim, but his other churches as well, although by now his eyesight was so poor that he could no longer read the text.

On November 19, 1878 he preached his last sermon at the Kohlhof. On the way home, he became ill, and from then on his strength continued to fail gradually, until on February 8, 1879 he quietly "went to sleep."

Ellenberger closed his autobiography with these words: "With all of my weakness and the insufficiency in my life and in my work, the Lord did great things for me and mine. . . . It is good to be with Him; He helps and blesses where no one else can help and bless.

"Happy is he that hath the God of Jakob for his help, whose hope is in the Lord his God!"

(A photo essay of Jakob Ellenberger follows in the next issue. Ed.)

