

California Mennonite Historical Society Bulletin

No. 47

Spring 2007

Mrs. D. D. Neufeld with daughters Anna and Maria in front of their home in Escondido. While no record of this family exists in church records, local newspaper reports indicate they lived in Escondido from approximately 1907-1913.



Editor's Note: This issue of the bulletin features a reprint of an article about Mennonites in the short-lived Mennonite community at Escondido, near San Diego. The article, written by Jane Marsh Parker, ran in *The Overland Monthly*, a California-based magazine, in September 1911 (vol. LVIII, #3.) Kevin Enns-Rempel, archivist at the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, wrote the endnotes to Parker's article in order to clarify some of her references. In addition, Enns-Rempel brings historical insight to Parker and her observations on Mennonites in the second article of this issue. In the genealogy section, Alan Peters presents the families of Bethania Mennonite Brethren Church, Escondido.

The Mennonite in Southern California

by Jane Marsh Parker

The Mennonite emigration to Southern California, which has been going on now for some five years, has attracted surprisingly little interest, considering the significance of the movement to the Pacific Coast. The emigration is largely from the well-established and growing Mennonite colonies of the Northwestern States and Canada. Of the two pioneer colonies in Southern California last year, that at Escondido in

San Diego now alone remains. The larger and seemingly more prosperous of the two, that at Martinsdale, Kern County,¹ was wrecked through worthless titles given the Mennonites for land in exchange for their farms in Oklahoma, Kansas and Oregon. It is hoped that justice will be done the defrauded Mennonites, now that action has been taken to have the deeds set aside; but the colony at Martinsdale has been abandoned and that

at Escondido increased by some forty families or more through the disaster.

Not only has there been surprisingly little interest in the movement, outside of the Escondido Valley, but ignorance as to who these Mennonites are accounts for a prevailing impression in San Diego County that their permanent occupancy of the most desirable localities is a serious menace to prosperity. The history alone

of this peculiar sect of religionists should save them from classification as undesirable citizens, difficult as their harmonious adjustment may be to most "worldly" communities.

The Mennonites are one of the Martyr sects of the Reformation; its roots were in the Anabaptist revolt of the sixteenth century against the Church of Rome. The first Mennonites who came to the United States were those who joined William Penn's colony about 1683, in response to his worldwide invitation to the persecuted for religious faith everywhere to come to his haven of Brotherly Love. The Mennonites who then settled in Pennsylvania are the ancestors, largely, of the Amish of to-day — straightest of the orthodox branches — conservators of the early faith.²

Mennonites of every branch are emphatically clannish; but none are communists.³ All are separatists—even to the extent of boycotting outside professions and callings when they can. Therein lies their objectionable feature as fellow-citizens. And yet with all their rigorous exclusiveness and sturdy aggressiveness they are a humble non-resistant people, and like the Quakers, claim exemption from military duties "for conscience' sake," and from certain civic duties as well. Strict observance of the Sabbath is their



Although Parker notes that the Mennonites of Escondido are not like the Pennsylvania Amish, still she sees a likeness and refers to Helen Martin's Tillie: A Mennonite Maid several times throughout the article.

marked characteristic, and severe economy. Large families are the rule. Anything like a display of the vain things of the world is contrary to their law of righteousness.

The Mennonites of the United States are Germans, or of German descent. A large proportion of the elderly folk cannot speak or read English. The young men, the leaders of this exodus, are of the "advanced" type, and likely to make the sect in Southern California a less peculiar people. They do not

wear the garb that the Amish and other orthodox branches still retain. Nor are they disinclined to friendly intercourse with "world-folk," taking some interest even in civic and political affairs.

The Mennonites could not have found in all Southern California a more desirable place for their new settlement than the Escondido Valley, famous for its vineyards, citrus groves, ideal climate, alfalfa crops and stock farms—for all that ample irrigation and superior soil can produce. At the heart of the valley, sheltered from the ocean, is the breezy little town of Escondido, rapidly growing, its population about fifteen hundred, and yet less than twenty years ago it was little more than a blacksmith's shanty on the San Diego trail. The future Pasadena of San Diego, it is now called.

When one of the young Joshuas of the advanced guard of pioneers was asked what would happen to the Escondido Valley when the Mennonites were the possessors thereof, he replied by telling the story of the county in Kansas, from which he came; how less than thirty years ago some four or five families of exiles had arrived from Russia (German-Russians) "and to-day," said he, "every civic and county office but one is held by a Mennonite." The office of judge a Mennonite might not accept—his faith forbade it. With the

Endnotes

¹All references to "Martinsdale" and "Martinsville" should actually read "Martensdale."

²Parker is incorrect in referring to the Mennonites of Pennsylvania as the "ancestors ... of the Amish." The division between the Amish and Mennonites occurred in South Germany in 1693-1697. Most Amish and Mennonite immigrants came to Pennsylvania after that event, and already understood themselves as belonging to separate groups when they arrived here.

³Parker may not have been aware of the Hutterite Brethren, another Anabaptist group, whose belief in "community of goods" can be characterized as a form of "communism."

⁴This is a reference to Elder Abraham Schellenberg (1845-1920), who moved from Buhler, Kansas, to Escondido in 1907. Schellenberg and his wife Susanna moved back to Buhler in 1913.

⁵Parker appears to believe that all Anabaptists practiced baptism by immersion, which was not the case. ⁶She apparently means "Mennonite Brethren."

⁷It is not clear to what common missionary work or annual conference she is referring. Most of the North American Mennonite groups still remained quite separate and independent from each other at this time. Neither Mennonite Central Committee nor Mennonite World Conference had yet come into existence by 1911.

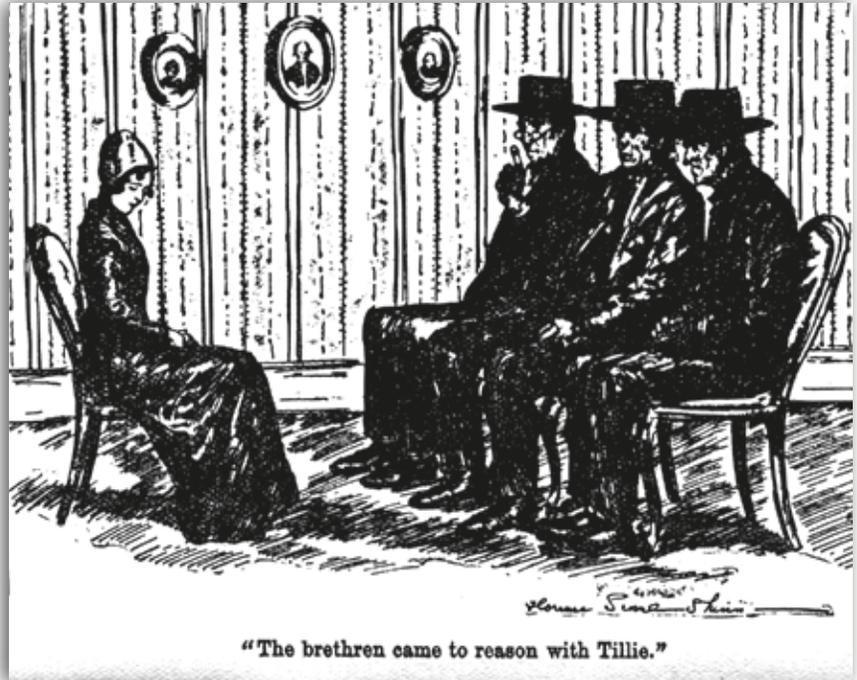
⁸There were no Mennonite missionaries in Japan until 1949. Parker also fails to mention Mennonite missionary work in Indonesia.

exception of that office they held everything worth holding. And why were they coming to Southern California? "For the climate," to exchange the severe winters of the Northwest for almost perpetual sunshine and out-of-door life." Then, we are a missionary people. We can see a wonderful outlook for missions in California. When the Panama Canal is opened, a host of aliens, from Southern Europe and Asia, will be landed upon the Pacific Coast. Great steamship lines are already making preparations for their transportation. The Mennonites will be ready to meet an invasion threatening the future of this country."

The Mennonites of Mrs. Martin's stories ("Tillie, the Mennonite Maid," and others, portraying life among the Pennsylvania Amish), are not the Mennonites of the Escondido colony, and yet the family likeness is pronounced. The sect numbers over sixty thousand communicants to-day. The admission of a communicant means that a severe ordeal of examination and discipline has been passed.

The venerable leaders of the sect bear marked resemblance, in their sturdy trampling underfoot, of the sinful world, to the grim old pilgrim fathers of New England; and there is reason to believe that they, too, will lay permanent foundations for the good of the future commonwealth.

The many promoters of new town projects, which are cutting up big ranches into small holdings, look askance upon the Mennonite who, cash in hand, pays in full, as a rule, for the land he buys. "One Mennonite means more Mennonites," they say; "the story of the county in Kansas." Well, and why object, if good citizenship stands for anything? Have we drifted so far away from the traditions of Puritan New England that anything like a survival in the California Mennonites is beyond



"The brethren came to reason with Tillie."

Illustration from Martin's *Tillie, A Mennonite Maid*.

toleration, notably the keeping of the Sabbath?

To-day there are about eighty Mennonite families in the Escondido Valley, not including the Martinsville contingent. They are a thrifty folk, of the peasant type, the majority in humble circumstances; their homes are cheap cabins on small ranches, but paid for or sure to be—as a rule. The men hire out as laborers often, as clerks and farm hands—the young women, even those of well-to-do fathers make good housemaids. The bankers of the locality will tell you that the most of the men carry bank accounts; that the houses they live in, the plain clothing worn by their wives and daughters, is no indication of poverty; but rather of increasing hoard.

There is no surplus of non-essentials for comfort in the homes of the well-to-do; but a Mennonite is never a public charge; the household of faith looks after its poor and needy. Caste distinctions based upon worldly goods are condemned by a creed based upon

brotherhood and separation from a "wicked world." Novel reading, athletic games, are sins for strict discipline by the church. Explaining why I could not find a Mennonite maid who had ever heard of "Tillie," or of one who would accept the loan of a copy. The little Mennonites of the Escondido Valley must attend the public school until the colony has a school of its own other than its German school, held for some three months of the year, and conducted along strictly sectarian lines. The attendance upon the public school is a rare opportunity for the general broadening of the little Mennonites; but one they are likely to be deprived of soon, as the opening of a Mennonite school is anticipated. They are said to be exceptionally receptive as pupils, alert and keenly observing, holding themselves apart, however, presumably in obedience to parental command.

There are large ranches in the Escondido Valley to-day, which for years were carried on at considerable loss, but have become

good-paying investments under Mennonite ownership. The richest of the Mennonite ranchmen work like common laborers, only at longer hours; the female contingent of the household is a great saving in hired service, both indoors and out. Fine bungalows that were centers of social life have undergone a marked change under Mennonite occupancy. Tennis courts and rose-gardens, weekend auto parties, card parties and picnics have disappeared. "We don't favor the vain things of the world; we are plain," said a Mennonite maid, picking lemons in the late twilight for her rich father. "This house is vainer than it ought to be for us."

The Mennonite chapel is in the center of the flat, broad citrus groves, low bungalows, shaded by pepper and eucalyptus trees, chicken yards at every door. It suggests a meeting house that has run away from old New England, so marked is its resemblance to a common feature of the back country of the North Atlantic coast, only that it is steepleless and more Quaker and Shaker all in all than Presbyterian or Baptist; its two doors, "male" and "female," the outward sign of the rule observed in the seating of the congregation, and the Bible classes which include all the attendants upon the Sunday morning service (beginning at nine-thirty.) One hundred can be crowded into that little chapel, and are sure to be at every service; a marked feature of the congregation being the majority seen of the sex notably absent from public worship elsewhere. These United Brethren keep the Christian year, as do all of the Mennonites, observing appointed feasts and fasts by faithful attendance upon the services. The Bible class teachers are trained expositors of Scripture according to the Mennonite literal interpretation and understanding of the same. The



Illustration from Martin's Tillie, A Mennonite Maid.

minister does not receive a salary. He must work for his daily bread as did St. Paul at tent-making. The Bible class teachers are his co-workers; two short discourses by one of them usually following the pastor's sermon. The shepard [sic] of the Escondido fold is a venerable German, greatly beloved by his people, an exile from Russia to Kansas in his middle life, and now again a pilgrim in a strange land, but seemingly more than content, a sunny nature; an honored and recognized leader of the whole sect.⁴

The singing of the congregation is a marked feature of the Sunday service, a fervid uplifting in the mother-tongue of old German hymns that have been the inspiration of martyrs for the faith. Strong, sweet, German voices, natural as those of the mocking birds of the valley. Another marked feature is the number of worn-out Bibles. Where else may worn-out Bibles, showing signs of long and thorough use, be seen in these

days? Holding their closed Bibles as they sang, we "of the vain world" could hear the Waldenses singing in the hidden places of the Alps; and could understand what the spirit of the Reformation must have been. "I felt nearer Martin Luther than ever before," said a worldling of a Mennonite service in the Escondido Valley.

As adherents to the literal interpretation of Scripture, they obey the command to wash each other's feet (that is, twice a year), as an act of public worship. Descended as they are from the Anabaptists, they are immersionists, of course,⁵ and denounce infant baptism. The Mennonite Almanac fills an important place in the Mennonite household, where little besides the Bible and publications of the sect are ever read. Their Almanac, with its crude zodiacal information, weather forecasts, lunar wisdom, and homely advice, is very like the Almanac of our Puritan forefathers, only that had nothing like the Mennonite reminder of the persecutions, the anniversaries of martyrdoms, the burden of every month. It seems to be the mission of The Almanac now that old things are passing away in the new of a happier dispensation, to keep alive memories better forgotten.

The United Brethren,⁶ it is said by one of their number, are now taking interest in public movements, even voting at elections—"Republicans, of course," one replied, when asked to which party they largely belonged.

Advocates of temperance that they are (a tipling Mennonite is unthinkable) they are not prohibitionists. They will never plow up fine vineyards and burn the vines, root and branch, as fanatics have been known to do in the Escondido Valley. They will raise the best of grapes and make the best of wines. Votes for women will never find a following with a class

of women whose ears are closed to every whisper of a sinful world; and whose sex relations are precisely those of the American Indians—those of master and slave.

It will take but a few years in Southern California to work a marvelous change in the Mennonites, and in the women even more than in the men. It will take longer, perhaps, to advance the women because of their secluded lives, severed from all social interests but those of their peculiar people. If the little Mennonite girls might remain in the public schools, if they might have access to stories like Mrs. Martin's, if they might read our children's magazines and taste the harmless pleasures of life about them, the present dispensation of the female Mennonite would speedily disappear. But the Mennonite maids of the Escondido Valley are not going to walk in the medieval footsteps of their foremothers "all the days of their lives."

"Wherever the Mennonites have a sure hold upon a community, the Christian Sabbath will be strictly observed" was said in substance at a missionary meeting in Southern California not long since, and for that reason, it was emphasized, there was cause for welcoming them to the Coast. A breakwater was needed against the incoming tide of foreign immigration threatening to sweep away what is left of the Christian Sabbath in California. The prevailing desecration of the Sabbath was charged, not alone to the rapidly increasing foreign element, but largely to the tourists for whose entertainment the Sunday of California has become what it is -- a fete day -- its amusements those that many patronizing them would condemn at home. "Have we not all known," it was asked, "church-goers from the East, who took in the Mexican bullfights and athletic contests as a matter of course?" "The bigoted,

boycotting Mennonite," said one speaker, "is a counteracting influence to the Sabbath breaking tourist, as well as the foreign alien from Southern Europe and Asia.

The Mennonite is a missionary. As a missionary field he has chosen Southern California. Defense of the Sabbath has much to do with the present immigration from the Northwest."

The divers divisions of the sect are now disappearing. The twelve or more branches are being drawn closer together, through a common missionary work, and an annual conference, when they meet as one body.⁷ Mennonite missions are already established and sustained in Japan, China and India,⁸ with encouraging prospects for their continuous support and increase. The home field is carrying on mission centers in many leading cities of the Middle West — hospitals, schools and publication concerns. Two or more Mennonite Brethren set forth for Jerusalem when Halley's comet was within sight, hoping to stand upon Mount Zion before the second coming took place. They met the experience common with visionary zealots in Jerusalem. "Fleeced," their appeal for aid to the home brethren was not in vain.

Any fairly equipped reference library will furnish ample bibliography of the Mennonites, a subject of importance to Southern California just now. Is it a menace or a prophecy of increasing good, this immigration of the Mennonites into San Diego County? Does it mean progress along the lines of true American ideals or a blockade of undesirable citizenship? The history of the Mennonites in the United States alone is the best of help in reaching an emphatic answer to that question.



Jane Marsh Parker's article, *The Mennonite of Escondido*, was published in the *Overland Monthly*. A magazine of western literature and people founded by Bret Harte in 1868, it published the early works of writers such as Jack London and Mark Twain. Initially modelled on the *Atlantic Monthly*, it was an important venue for women writers. It began as *Overland Monthly* (1868-1875), began again in 1880 as *The Californian*, which became *The Californian and Overland Monthly* in 1882. In 1883 it reverted to *The Overland Monthly* and in 1923 it merged with *Out West* to become the *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine*, which ceased publication in 1935.