



*Construction of the First Mennonite Church, 1908.
(Photo courtesy of First Mennonite Church Archives.)*

REEDLEY FIRST MENNONITE CHURCH Celebrating its Centennial Year

by Corinna Siebert Ruth

In November 2006, members and friends will celebrate the centennial year of the founding of the Reedley First Mennonite Church. In preparation for this season of festivities, the centennial committee has prepared a series of vignettes for presentation on Sunday mornings. One of the vignettes depicts the lives of Daniel T. (D.T.) and Babetta (Ruth) Eymann and their family of nine children who were not only founding mothers and fathers of First Mennonite Church, but also the very first Mennonites in Reedley.⁴¹

When the church observed its 50th anniversary in 1956, it invited charter members to the celebration. Several members, unable to attend, sent letters instead. One of those letters from D.T. Eymann's son, J.J. Eymann, provides insight into the way that his father attracted new members in the early days of the church. The Eymanns were Swiss Mennonites who had migrated to America from the Palatinate in 1845. They settled in Ohio, then moved to Iowa and Kansas before

coming to Reedley. They still had many friends in the East, and D.T. Eymann tried to interest them in coming to Reedley. The following is an excerpt from the letter written by J.J. Eymann:

"Fifty years ago when this church was organized, there was only a handful of Mennonites around Reedley and less than 1000 people in Reedley. Our father was anxious to have a Mennonite settlement here, including a church. He made a fast trip east as far as Indiana, Ohio, and Min-



*The Daniel T. and Babetta Ruth Eymann family, circa 1895
(Photo courtesy of First Mennonite Church Archives.)*

“Our father was anxious to have a Mennonite settlement [in Reedley], including a church.”

nesota to interest people in coming to California.... Father realized his dream come true when the church was organized; also a building was erected.... It would be very gratifying for father to see how the church and community have grown in 50 years, and instead of a handful of Mennonites there are several thousand around Reedley.”^{b2}

Daniel T. Eymann became one of the charter members of First Mennonite Church; but his wife Babetta (Ruth) Eymann, though she had been an active participant in the life of the church, passed away on February 29, 1906, slightly over four months before the church was founded on June 10, 1906.

Babetta was, in fact, a charter member and president of the first Ladies’ Missionary Society organized on February 9, 1905. The Sunday school had also been organized prior to the time that the church was founded. Of the twenty-five members, ten were Eymanns. In addition there were seven Bergtholds, and four couples whose names were Hess, Kintzi, Schroeder, and Suderman.

One of the founding members, Cornelius Schroeder, along with T. Sommerfield and M.J. Welty, built the First Mennonite Church building in 1908. When the church celebrated its 75th anniversary in 1981, Cornelius Schroeder’s daughter Rosa (Schroeder) Bergthold was the sole surviving charter member. Her husband, Rudolph Bergthold, had passed away in 1964.

The life of Rev. H. J. Krehbiel has been the basis of another Sunday morning vignette. Rev. Krehbiel, the church’s first minister, has become a legend at First Mennonite Church. He served the church

for nineteen years, longer than any other minister to date. In addition, he was the only American to attend the first Mennonite World Conference in Basel, Switzerland, in 1925. While traveling in Europe, he visited cemeteries for the war dead of World War I, which intensified his conviction that peaceful methods must be found to settle international differences. His trip inspired him to write a book titled *A Trip Through Europe*. The following is an excerpt from one of the chapters, “The Plea for the Abolition of War.”

“War is the greatest collective sin, which humanity can commit

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against God, and it is the greatest crime against the human family. If the intelligence of the human race had come together to devise a plan to settle international difficulties, they could not possibly have found a plan that is more costly and more hellish than war.... That war is the negation of everything declared in the New Testament, that it means everything which Christ did not mean, and means nothing which Christ did mean, is becoming more and more apparent to our increasing number of

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Christians. . . I think the Mennonite mission in the world is none other than to lead the Christian world in the abolition of war.”⁴³

Rev. Krehbiel served the church during the World War I years, guiding his German-speaking flock through the anti-German attitudes of that turbulent period. He devoted much time and effort to the goal of obtaining official U.S. government recognition for conscientious objectors during that time.

The founders and early families of First Mennonite Church were courageous people with a belief that God sustained them when they were forced to move from their beloved homelands and start a new life in a new country for the sake of their religious beliefs. The Eymanns, the Bergth-

olds, the Hesses, the Kintzis, the Schroeders, and the Sudermans saw the need to establish a church and carry on the faith of their Anabaptist forbears. The Eymanns had migrated from Switzerland to Alsace, then to the Palatinate, and finally to America to escape severe persecution and ethnic discrimination. Their sojourns led them from Ohio to Iowa, to Illinois, to Kansas, and eventually to Reedley. The Bergthold story leads us from Switzerland to the Palatinate, to Galicia, Austria (which is now in the Ukraine) and then to America where they settled in Butterfield, Minnesota, before they came to Reedley.

Other early families came to First Mennonite Church soon after 1906 when the church was founded. Their stories are filled with hardships, suffering, and misfortune. Jost Krayenbühl, the ancestor of H.J. Krehbiel, fled his home in Zaziwil, Switzerland, under the threat of severe Anabaptist persecution in 1671 and settled in the Palatinate. As was true of the majority of the Anabaptists in Switzerland, his money and property were confiscated which left him in a new country with no resources. After living in the Palatinate for several generations, the Krehbiel family finally migrated to America in 1831.

Ernest Ruth, father of Paul Ruth, came to Reedley in 1908 soon after the church was founded. His ancestors too were Swiss Anabaptists who left their native Switzerland under the threat of persecution. It is thought that they fled to Alsace and then moved to the Palatinate in the region of the Weierhof. In 1818 they moved to Upper Bavaria where they purchased the Eichstock estate near Dachau, Germany. When the draft was threatening to take their young men, the Eichstock Mennonites migrated to America en masse. Christian Krehbiel, who

later married Susanna Ruth, wrote about his oldest brother, Jacob, who had already been drafted. They left the Eichstock region because there were five more brothers nearing draft age.⁴⁴

The Ewys, another early Swiss Mennonite family of First Mennonite Church, came to Reedley via Galicia and Butterfield, Minnesota. They left their Galicia environs with their only child, a six-year-old daughter Emilie, but she died on the ship only one day out of the New York harbor.

The Harder family came to First Mennonite Church from Chinook, Montana, in 1916. Although the expansion of the Great Northern Railway Center attracted them to Chinook, the severe weath-

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er, which often dipped down to 60 degrees below zero, and the primitive living conditions proved to be a harsh reality that drove them and other Mennonite settlers to seek a warmer climate.

Another Swiss Anabaptist family, the Lichtis, came to Reedley in 1917. Before Rev. H.J. Krehbiel accepted the call as the full-time pastor of First Mennonite, Otto Lichti, a student at the University of California at Berkeley, occasionally served the church as a visiting pastor.

Although the founding mothers and fathers and early families of First Mennonite Church were mostly Swiss Anabaptist/Mennonites, many families came from other parts of Europe. As early as 1911, with the pervasive



Meeting of the Pacific District Conference (General Conference Mennonite Church) at First Mennonite Church of Reedley, 1910. (Photo courtesy of First Mennonite Church Archives.)

and widespread rumors of the Russian Revolution on the horizon, Herman Neufeld's parents, Wilhelm and Margarethe (Rempel) Neufeld, sacrificed their comfortable home and Wilhelm's position as director of the Halbstadt Zentral-schule to emigrate to the United States when Herman was fourteen years old. They brought their family to Reedley and First Mennonite Church. In 1919, when there was an urgent call to help distribute clothing to poor families in Siberia, Wilhelm went back to Russia where he met M.B. Fast in the Soviet Union. Together they took the long, strenuous journey

to Siberia where they were received with gratitude by needy families.⁶⁵

In 1922, Wilhelm and Margarethe returned to the Ukraine to help in the famine relief program. When they returned to Reedley, they brought back six of their nieces and nephews whose parents had died of war-related diseases.

The church grew rapidly and by 1920 First Mennonite Church had 241 members. The church experienced a steady growth that had reached 464 members by 1935 and would reach its peak of 633 members by 1953. This did not in-

clude the 250-plus children who were not on the membership list.

The early First Mennonite Church members who faced religious persecution, ethnic discrimination, economic hardships, forced conscription, and the terrors of war have heavily influenced First Mennonite Church. Their stories, filled with privation and suffering, tell of faith in God in spite of supposedly insurmountable trials. With deep respect for the people from First Mennonite Church who have shared their stories with us, we have submitted them for publication in our 2006 centennial book, *First Mennonite Church, Celebrating our Centennial: The Unfolding of our Story*.

END NOTES

¹ Kevin Enns-Rempel, "The Eymanns: Reedley's 'First Mennonite Family'." *California Mennonite Historical Society Bulletin*, no. 24 (April): 6-8.

² First Mennonite Church Archives, Reedley, California. "Fiftieth Anniversary Celebration."

³ H.J. Krehbiel, *A Trip Through Europe* (Newton, Kansas: Herald Publishing Company, 1926), 89-107.

⁴ Christian Krehbiel, *Prairie Pioneer: The Christian Krehbiel Story* (Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press, 1961), 21.

⁵ Kevin Enns-Rempel, "The Siberian Journey of M.B. Fast & Wilhelm P. Neufeld," *Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the West Coast Bulletin*, (April 1990): 4.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Corinna Siebert Ruth teaches English at Reedley College and is the archivist for First Mennonite Church. She was editor for the book, First Mennonite Church, Celebrating our Centennial: 1906-2006, The Unfolding of Our Story. The book will be available in the Fall 2006.