



FRESNO PACIFIC  
UNIVERSITY

FPUScholarWorks

---

**The West Coast Mennonite Relief Sale: the “first MCC relief sale.**

Author(s): Kevin Enns-Rempel.

Source: *California Mennonite Historical Society Bulletin* no. 22 (1990): 1-3.

Published by: California Mennonite Historical Society.

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/244>

---

FPUScholarWorks is an online repository for creative and scholarly works and other resources created by members of the Fresno Pacific University community. FPUScholarWorks makes these resources freely available on the Web and assures their preservation for the future.

## **The West Coast Mennonite Relief Sale: The “First” MCC Relief Sale**

The spring of 1922 was a dark time for Mennonites in the Ukraine. Events of the last several years had taxed them beyond anything they could have imagined a short while earlier. Civil war and anarchy had followed the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. Many lost their lives at the hands of roving bandits or epidemics that followed in their wake.

In 1920 nature had joined the conspiracy against the Ukraine. Almost no rain fell in the region during that year; by spring of 1921 conditions were so dry that the grain was blowing out of the ground by the roots.<sup>1</sup> Almost no rain fell throughout 1921 and by November famine was widespread. The 1922 grain harvest in the Ukraine was less than 12% the size of the 1914 harvest; the number of horses and cattle in the region had dropped by 80% and 50% respectively since 1914.<sup>2</sup> Without wheat, hungry people ground up leaves, bark, corn stalks and even thistles to make flour. A visitor to the Mennonite colonies at the time reported that he did not hear the sound of barking dogs—they had all been eaten.<sup>3</sup>

Word about this desperate situation eventually reached Mennonites in North America, including those on the West Coast, who resolved to help their starving sisters and brothers in the Ukraine. West Coast Mennonites had already been active in Russian relief for some time before the 1922 crisis. In 1919 Mennonites here had gathered clothing for the relief of suffering Mennonites in Siberia. California Mennonites M.B. Fast and W.P. Neufeld went to Russia to distribute the clothing. In 1920 Mennonites in the Reedley and Dinuba area organized the Pacific Branch of the Relief Committee for the Suffering Mennonites in Russia. This West Coast organization was one of numerous Mennonite relief agencies that met together in Elkhart, Indiana on July 27, 1920 to found the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC).

In the spring of 1922, North American Mennonites heard new calls for help from the Ukraine. MCC workers there wired urgent messages back to the United States requesting immediate aid for the famine sufferers. In response to these pleas

for Ukrainian assistance, California Mennonites decided to hold a relief sale—an auction of used items, the proceeds from which would be sent to the MCC relief effort.

Auctions of this kind were not a new idea for most Mennonites. Midwestern Mennonite congregations such as the Ebenfeld Mennonite Brethren Church in Marion County, Kansas had conducted them since the 1880s.<sup>4</sup> While individual congregations usually conducted these sales for the benefit of their women’s missionary societies, organizers of this auction intended something on a larger scale. This auction would not only include more than one congregation, but would encompass several Mennonite conferences. In the spirit of MCC, it was to be an inter-Mennonite event.

On June 30, 1922, local Mennonites and others gathered at the farm of John K. Warkentin south of Reedley, bringing with them various items to be sold at the auction. Members from all three Mennonite groups in the area—Mennonite Brethren, General Conference Mennonite, and Krimmer Mennonite Brethren—attended the auction, as well as members from the local Church of the Brethren and Methodist congregations. Sale items were spread out under the shade trees on the property awaiting the beginning of the sale.

At 9:30 in the morning the auction began. “Brother Fast” [most likely M.B. Fast of Dinuba] began the day with a scripture reading. Reverend Brower from the Church of the Brethren offered the opening prayer and Rev. Hicks from the Methodist Church gave “a short but fitting message.” Following these opening words, the sale began. Jakob Siebert and Georg Knak were the auctioneers; Philipp E. Thiessen was the clerk. All three men were members of the Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church. Items sold ranged from coffee tables to tractors. By sundown, the auction had raised \$1750, most of which was cabled to Russia the following day for use by MCC workers there.<sup>5</sup>

The Reedley auction of 1922, despite its impressive results, was a one-time event; no subsequent sales for MCC took place

in the area during the following years. Probably none of the participants that day on John Warkentin's farm realized that this seemingly isolated event would become known as the first MCC Relief Sale.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, probably none of the organizers of a relief sale in eastern Lancaster County, Pennsylvania during the mid-1940s realized that they were reviving an idea born a quarter-century earlier in Reedley, California.

Relief sales as we know them today had their beginning with this Lancaster County group, which organized a sale known today as the Gap MCC Relief Sale. Mennonites in other regions—Ohio, Michigan, Virginia, Kansas, Ontario and Manitoba—followed Pennsylvania's example during the next few years and decades, particularly during the 1960s. The rapid spread of relief sales in that decade caught the attention of Mennonites on the West Coast as well. At its March 4,



Aerial view of Richland Packing Co. during the 1968 West Coast Relief Sale.  
Photo: Center for MB Studies

1966 meeting the West Coast Mennonite Relief Committee first discussed the possibility of organizing such a sale in California. The committee favored the idea and appointed MCC West Coast Director Norman Wingert to explore the idea further.<sup>7</sup> Initial responses to Wingert's inquiries were generally favorable and in May of 1966 Otto Jost of Reedley was appointed to take initiative in launching a west coast sale.

Neither Jost nor any of his west coast colleagues were sure how one went about organizing a relief sale. Norman Wingert likened the proposed sale to "a migrating bird that is still circling but hasn't struck out yet in a straight line . . ." <sup>8</sup> To get the "bird" on a definite course, the West Coast Relief Committee sent Otto Jost to Chicago in January of 1967 to meet with other MCC relief sale organizers. Shortly after returning from Chicago, Jost and Wingert sent a letter to all Mennonite pastors within a 100-mile radius of Reedley asking them to send representatives to a planning meeting in April. Only about a dozen people attended the meeting, but they agreed to take the matter back to their churches for further input.<sup>9</sup>

Interest in a relief sale quickly spread beyond the twelve people who attended that April meeting. Responding to this growing enthusiasm, the Relief Committee gradually formu-

lated a clear plan for carrying out a west coast sale. One major question was the location of the event. The committee gave attention primarily to two sites: the Fresno Fair Grounds and the Richland Packing Company facility between Reedley and Dinuba. Given the high costs of renting the fair grounds, Richland was the unanimous choice of the sale committee.<sup>10</sup> The date of the sale was set for April 20, 1968.

Enthusiasm for the sale increased as the event drew nearer. By the fall of 1967 people began bringing items to Reedley for the sale; in the days before the sale truckloads of goods came in from San Jose, Paso Robles, Upland and Oregon. It seemed clear that this "new" idea of a relief sale had struck a responsive chord with west coast Mennonites.

The day of the sale began at 6:00 AM with a sausage and pancake breakfast for those working at the sale. At 9:30 the sale began with words of welcome from chairman Otto Jost. Henry H. Dick, pastor of Shafter MB Church and member of the MCC Executive Board, gave a short talk on "Why MCC" and offered the opening prayer. Throughout the day, eight auctioneers worked the crowd of some 5000 people. The chief auctioneer was Dan E. Friesen, a former pastor of the Reedley MB Church, who travelled from Denver, Colorado to call at the auction.

The event was, by any standard, a great success. A Ford tractor brought \$900, evidently the highest price paid for a single item that day. Demand for *Portzelki* was such that several women worked at home to supplement those made at the sale site itself. The rummage sale netted almost \$3000. About 150 quilts and blankets were sold, at an average price of \$40 each. Sale treasurer Alvin Fast made three trips to the bank during the day, accompanied by Tulare County sheriff's deputies, to deposit rapidly accumulating funds. So many items had been brought for the auction that at the end of the day several remained. These were moved to a vacant building in Reedley, where selling continued for several days. Net proceeds for the sale were \$17,600.<sup>11</sup> A pleased West Coast Relief Committee met several weeks after the event to recommend that the sale take place again the following year.

Subsequent sales followed in the successful tradition established in 1968. Net proceeds for the 1970 sale increased to \$19,000; by 1975 the quilt auction alone brought in that amount. In 1976 net proceeds passed the \$50,000 mark; in 1980 they exceeded \$100,000. The 1989 sale set a record with net income of \$184,000. That year a single quilt sold for \$9750, more than half the total proceeds of the 1968 auction. Since 1968 the West Coast sale has netted over \$1,800,000 for the work of MCC.

The West Coast sale has diversified and grown in other ways over the years. New features such as a book sale, self-help store and a variety of ethnic food booths have added to the festive nature of the sale. What began as a one-day event has grown into two days. Increasing numbers of people come Friday evening for a barbecue meal and a chance to preview auction items.

The success of the sale brought with it new problems, the most pressing being adequate space and facilities. As early as 1974 the Relief Sale Committee raised the issue of alternative sites for the sale. Crowding and lack of sufficient parking at



Rev. Dan E. Friesen calling the auction at the 1968 Relief Sale.

Photo: Center for MB Studies

Richland Packing Company was becoming a serious problem. Among the sites considered in 1974 were Grewan Packing, Corrin Cold Storage and the Kearney Field Station, all in the Reedley/Dinuba area.<sup>12</sup> The question arose again the following year. Locations suggested this time were Immanuel High School, Reedley High School, the Fresno Fair Grounds and the Reedley Saddle Club. The committee also explored the possibility of buying property for a permanent sale site. Each of the alternative proposals contained sufficient problems that the committee decided to remain at Richland in 1975 as it had in 1974.<sup>13</sup> The sale remained there until 1982, when it moved to its current location on the campus of Fresno Pacific College.

Relief sales have become a major institution within the total work of MCC. In 1985 there were thirty-three of them across the United States and Canada that together had raised \$28,500,000 for MCC over the years. In 1985 22% of United States constituency giving to MCC was raised through the twenty-one relief sales in this country.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps no aspect of MCC work generates such grass-roots support and participation as do the relief sales.

On the surface, relief sales of the 1990s look very different from that first MCC sale in 1922. The 1922 event commenced with little fanfare or even expectation and passed with almost no attention in the Mennonite press. With the passing of the Ukrainian drought and famine, no one saw the need to make the sale an ongoing event. Even when the West Coast sale was revived as an annual event forty-six years later, few of the participants remembered that it had been done before. Yet the West Coast sale today is very much a continuation of the spirit of 1922. Then as now Mennonites saw a need and found a practical means of meeting it. Today the need is more diverse and less focused on those of "our own kind," but it arises out of the same desire to be of service and aid to our neighbors around the world. We owe a tribute to those faithful

Christians in 1922 who had a vision for relief and service. Our modern relief sales stand as a witness to the continuation of that vision.

Kevin Enns-Rempel

#### ENDNOTES

1. Arthur W. Slagel, "Organizing Feeding Operations in the Ukraine," in *Feeding the Hungry: Russia Famine, 1919-1925*. (Scottsdale: Mennonite Central Committee, 1929), p. 205.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 213.
3. A.W. Slagel, "Unsealing the Closed Door of the Soviet Republic," in *Feeding the Hungry*, p. 200.
4. *The Ebenfeld Church in Action: 1876-1976*. (Hillsboro: Ebenfeld Mennonite Brethren Church, 1976), p. 16.
5. *Zionsbote* (July 19, 1922), pp. 5-6; "From a Rocking Chair: The First MCC Relief Sale," *MCC Contact* (April 1988), p. 2.
6. "From a Rocking Chair," p. 2.
7. Minutes: West Coast Relief Committee, Reedley, California, March 4, 1966. (Record Group S145, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, California [Hereafter WCRC]).
8. Director's Report to the West Coast Relief Committee, November 18, 1966. WCRC.
9. Director's Report to the West Coast Relief Committee, May 26, 1967, WCRC.
10. WCRC, August 18, 1967.
11. "First West Coast Relief Sale Draws Large Crowd," *Mennonite Weekly Review* (May 2, 1968), p. 1; Director's Report to the West Coast Relief Committee, May 17, 1968, WCRC.
12. Minutes: Inter-Mennonite Relief Sale, July 28, 1974. (West Coast MCC Office, Reedley, California).
13. West Coast Relief Sale special meeting, May 12, 1975. WCRC.
14. Robert S. Kreider & Rachel Waltner Goossen, *Hungry, Thirsty, a Stranger: The MCC Experience*. (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1988), pp. 361, 364, 369.