

Recentering a Denomination: the Revival of Mennonite Brethren Historical Identity in the 1960s and 1970s

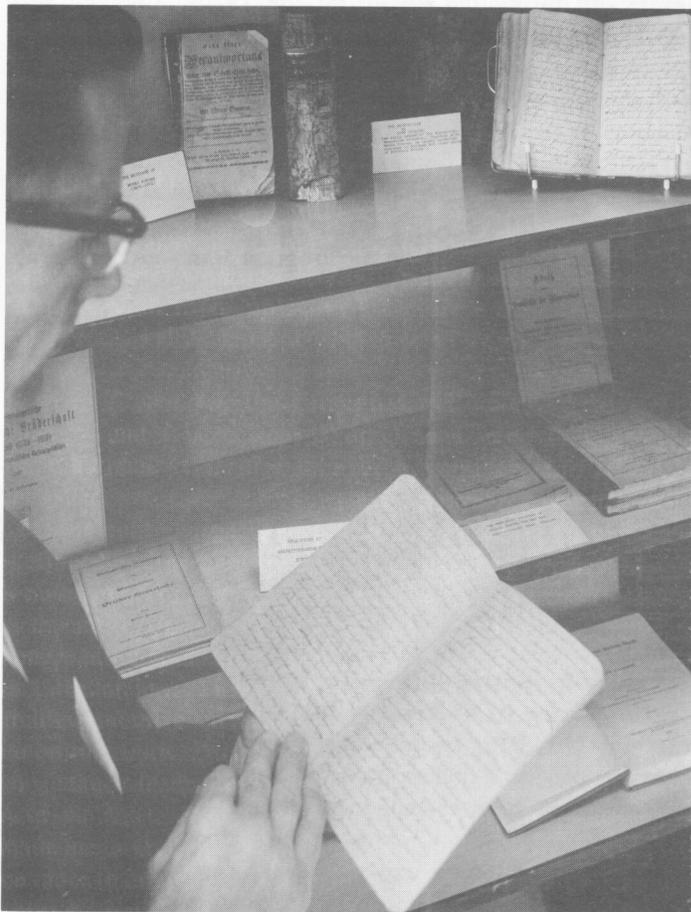
The 1965 birth of the Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the Pacific Coast was part of a much larger revisiting of Anabaptist and Mennonite history that took place in Fresno during the 1960s and 1970s. A reclamation of Mennonite history and identity took place at both Pacific College and the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary during that period. Both institutions became catalysts for a historical recovery that was to shape much more than just Fresno.

The Mennonite Brethren Church was born in 1860 of varying influences. Some founders reached back to the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement to provide direction for the fledgling denomination. Others reached out to contemporary evangelical and pietist influences for inspiration. The pluralism of 1860, the subsequent aloofness from the larger Mennonite world and the migratory quality of MB people all contributed to confusion about MB history and identity.

The story of Pacific College and the Seminary during the 1960s and 1970s is in many ways the story of recovering that history. The recovery began with Arthur Wiebe's accession to the presidency of Pacific Bible Institute in 1960. He recruited a young faculty, for the most part still pursuing graduate degrees. Among them was Peter J. Klassen, recently doctored in Radical Reformation studies. His coming to the college in 1962 was the first time since Cornelius Krahn left Tabor College in 1945 and I.G. Neufeld left Tabor in 1948 that an MB school in the United States had a faculty member trained in Anabaptist-Mennonite history. Other young faculty members—Dalton Reimer, John E. Toews and John H. Redekop—participated in the Mennonite Graduate Student network and were familiar with the historical scholarship among other Mennonite groups. Henry Krahn, also a Reformation scholar, joined the faculty in 1967. The determination to give the fledgling college an Anabaptist cast resulted in "The Pacific College Idea," a remarkable mission statement. College buildings were renamed—Sattler, Marpeck, Strasbour and Witmarsum. They were names previously unknown to the MB religious lexicon but familiar to those knowledgeable in Anabaptist history. In 1965, largely because of Klassen's leadership, and with the assistance of I.G. Neufeld, a Mennonite Historical Library and Archives were established as part of the College and Seminary library.

The refashioning of the Seminary into a more Anabaptist institution coincided with the 1964 beginning of the J.B. Toews presidency. Within the first four years of Toews' administration there was an almost complete turnover in the Seminary faculty. The first addition, A.J. Klassen, had been a student of H.S. Bender, the dean of Mennonite historians, at Goshen Biblical Seminary. As Academic Dean from 1968-

1974, Klassen helped reshape the curriculum to reflect Mennonite theological concerns. Courses in Anabaptist history and theology were introduced as requirements.



Peter J. Klassen examining material from the historical library during the mid-1960s. The Historical Society played a major role in establishing this collection.

Photo: Center for MB Studies

During the first decade of reorientation, the Seminary faculty became involved in varied activities that moved the denomination toward a reconsideration of its Anabaptist roots. The 1965 establishment of a General Conference Board of Christian Literature (BCL) and the establishment of the Historical Commission (1969), while done under the auspices of the Conference, were initiated and energized by the new Seminary faculty. A.J. Klassen and Elmer A. Martens (who joined the Seminary faculty in 1969) provided the leadership for the Board of Christian Literature. The first publication of the new Board, *The Church in Mission* (1967), edited by A.J. Klassen, sought to understand the MB mission impulse within

the context of the "Anabaptist vision of discipleship and the mission in the life of the church." At the 1969 triennial Conference, the BCL received authorization to proceed with a two volume history of missions, a new history of the MB church, a series of biographical pamphlets, and the establishment of a commission to work with the BCL in "coordinating the work of historical research, establishing archives, gathering oral materials . . . on a conference-wide basis." It was the most extensive set of commitments to nurturing memory ever made by an MB conference. The inspiration clearly came from Fresno.

The work of the Historical Commission became particularly significant during the decade of the 1970s. Charged with preserving the historical materials of the denomination and "revitalizing the historical consciousness," it moved energetically. Archival and research centers were established as affiliates of the denominational schools in Winnipeg, Fresno and Hillsboro. These Centers for Mennonite Brethren Studies began the systematic locating, gathering and classifying of archival materials.

The 1978 publication of the English translation of P.M. Friesen's monumental work, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia, 1789-1910*, was a joint project of the Board of Christian Literature and the Historical Commission. It became a popular symbol of the growing hunger for memory

among Mennonite Brethren. It was both a history of the Russian past and a tangible artifact whose presence seemed to link people into the past.

It was in the early stage of this renewed climate of MB historical activism that J.A. Toews began working toward his *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*. Published in 1975, it became the authoritative interpretation of the Russian and North American MB story. He spent the 1971-72 academic year in research and writing in Fresno. His salary was funded through the joint efforts of the Seminary, Board of Christian Literature and Historical Commission.

This MB historical activism in Fresno in the 1960s and 1970s is reminiscent of the "Anabaptist recovery" that took place in the (old) Mennonite Church at Goshen College under the leadership of Harold S. Bender. For the (old) Mennonites, history became a way to fix their identity and place in the American denominational system. It provided for a recentering of that denomination. The Mennonite Brethren historical renaissance, beginning four decades later, came to a people more urbanized, occupationally diversified and theologically fractured than the Mennonite Church of the 1960s. Whether the rediscovery of the Anabaptist and Mennonite Brethren story will do the same for the MB denomination remains unclear.

Paul Toews

Highlights from the Historical Society's Annual Meetings: 1969-1990

Perhaps the most enduring and important Historical Society function during its first twenty-five years has been the annual meeting. No other society event has brought together so many people for a common purpose. In this way the annual meetings have been crucial in maintaining a sense of group identity for the Society. Without these meetings the Society likely would no longer exist. Given the important role they have played, it seems appropriate to review highlights from past annual meetings in this issue.

1965: The first attempt at holding an annual meeting hardly qualifies as a "highlight"—it was cancelled for lack of reservations. To the Society's credit, this remains the first and only time an annual meeting has been called off due to lack of interest.

1969: During the years 1966-1968 the Society's annual meetings were simply business sessions, with no formal program presentation. This year marked a departure from that pattern. Peter J. Klassen, President of the Society, presented a lecture on "Zwingli and the Zurich Anabaptists"; Robert Holland and Henry Krahn from Pacific College offered responses to Klassen's lecture.

1971: For the first time, the Society invited a non-local scholar to speak at the annual meeting. Cornelius Krahn, professor of history at Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas, presented an illustrated lecture entitled "Russia Revisited."

1972-1973: The Society cooperated with Pacific College and the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary to sponsor the "West Coast Anabaptist Conference." The annual meetings for these years were session within those conferences. Guest speakers were Mennonite Church scholars Myron Augsburg and John Howard Yoder.

1974: This year's annual meeting departed from the lecture format to feature the premiere of Urie Bender's drama, "The Past Is Yet to Come," a historical pageant about the origins of the Mennonite Brethren Church.

1979: For the first (and only) time, the annual meeting took place outside of Fresno. Held at Hodel's Restaurant in Bakersfield, the program featured Peter Klassen. Klassen presented a pictorial review of Mennonite history and