

CALIFORNIA MENNONITE HISTORICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN

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The California Mennonite Historical Society, 1965-1990: Celebrating 25 Years

This issue commemorates the 25th anniversary of the founding of the California Mennonite Historical Society. Organized in 1965 as the "Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the Pacific Coast," the Society has played an important role in the development and maintenance of a Mennonite historical identity on the West Coast and particularly in California.

Two feature articles in this issue will reflect on that role and the larger context in which it arose. Peter Klassen, the Society's first president, offers his recollections of the origins and early years of the Society. Paul Toews, Director of the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, places the Society into the context of a larger recovery of Mennonite historical identity that took place within the Mennonite Brethren Church beginning in the 1960s.

The Society has accomplished many important tasks in its 25-year history. Annual meetings have brought together members and other persons interested in Mennonite history for a variety of stimulating presentations. Lectures, drama, audio-visual presentations, personal stories, readings, music and museum exhibits, though different in form, have all served to remind us of our past and its connection to our present. Genealogists have benefited from the regular presentations on Mennonite family research sponsored by the Society. The *Bulletin*, begun in 1978, has developed from an informal newsletter into a vehicle for original historical research on the Mennonite story in California and the West Coast. The Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Fresno traces its origins to the vision and efforts of the Historical Society. The Society deserves much of the credit for what is today the most comprehensive collection of Mennonite research material west of the Rocky Mountains. Though no longer formally linked together, the Society and the Center still work closely with each other on many projects. The ongoing tradition of the Society presenting a gift to the Center at the annual meeting is an example of how the Center still benefits from the Society's support.

The Historical Society has done a good work in its first 25 years. With the continued support of its members, we can

all look forward to many more years of further contributions to Mennonite historical studies on the West Coast.

Kevin Enns-Rempel

Society Adopts New Name

At their annual meeting held April 28, 1990 the members of the Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the West Coast voted unanimously to change the organization's name to the California Mennonite Historical Society. This issue of the Society's *Bulletin* is the first to reflect the new name.

The Society Executive Committee has identified four reasons for changing the name.

—*Geographical accuracy.* Since its beginning in 1965, the society has drawn most of its paying membership from California. In membership, it has been more a "California" society than a "West Coast" society.

—*Other Mennonite historical societies on the west coast.* A few years ago Mennonites in Oregon established the Oregon Mennonite Historical and Genealogical Society. The Executive felt that our name was no longer appropriate given the existence of this fellow organization.

—*Interests beyond the Mennonite Brethren Church.* The majority of our membership is drawn from the Mennonite Brethren Church, and thus it is no surprise that much of the Society's programming has and will continue to focus on that branch of the Mennonite people. The Executive, however, also recognized that the society has always expressed interest in topics beyond the Mennonite Brethren Church. Annual meeting speakers such as Cornelius Krahn, John Howard Yoder and Jan Gleysteen have spoken to us from their own Mennonite traditions. *Bulletin* articles about Mennonite World Conference and Mennonite Central Committee have also moved beyond

the boundaries of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Our name now reflects this reality.

—*Practicality.* The society's old name was a very long one—eight words in all. The new name cuts that total by half. It will be much easier to remember and use.

The Executive trusts that our new name will better describe the work that we have done during the past 25 years and will continue to do in the future.

To Reclaim a Heritage: The Birth of the Historical Society

In 1965, several persons interested in stimulating a greater awareness of, and interest in, Mennonite history organized the "Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the Pacific Coast." For some time, a number of faculty members from Pacific College, the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary and other concerned people in the community, had expressed hope of creating a better understanding within the Mennonite Brethren Church of its Mennonite heritage. The organization of a historical society was a step toward that goal.

Those who participated in those discussions determined that it was time to take action. Both the college and seminary expressed strong support for the idea of founding a historical society. When I discussed this matter with then-president Arthur Wiebe of the college, he warmly endorsed the proposal. Similarly, J.B. Toews, who had just come to the Seminary, strongly urged us to move ahead. He, of course, soon became directly involved in the work of the Society.

On March 5, 1965, thirteen interested persons held an organizational meeting in Fresno. As one of its first actions, the group elected the first officers of the new body: Peter J. Klassen (President), I.G. Neufeld (Vice President), and David F. Wiebe (Secretary-Treasurer). Klassen continued as president for the next ten years; Neufeld accepted the additional responsibility of librarian, and later archivist, of the Society. In 1973, health concerns forced him to resign. David Wiebe moved away shortly after his election, and the Society appointed Alan Peters as secretary and Joel Balzer as treasurer. Balzer was subsequently succeeded by Marwood Dyck.

An early priority of the Society was to acquire materials for its historical library and archives. I.G. Neufeld spent much of the summer of 1965 writing to other Mennonite societies and various libraries to acquire complete sets of Mennonite periodicals. In this endeavor, libraries of Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite colleges proved most cooperative. Various interested persons made donations of books and documents. An especially significant contribution arrived in 1966, when the Society received several dozen volumes of Mennonitica from the C.F. Klas-

sen estate. Also, through persistent searching in European archives and libraries, the Society acquired an almost complete set of the *Friedensstimme*, the semi-official organ of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia.

During the next several years, and especially during the summer months, I.G. Neufeld devoted much time to building the new historical collection. As librarian at a local high school, he was well equipped to process incoming materials. His wide circle of acquaintances in the larger Mennonite community provided important contacts as he expanded the historical collection. Sometimes, when financial resources of the Society proved inadequate, as in the summer of 1968, Neufeld hired an assistant to help accession books and personally paid her salary. Similarly, he travelled widely to secure historical materials. On one occasion, Neufeld went to Germany to acquire a collection of documents reflecting events in Mennonite villages in the Ukraine during World War II, and issues associated with repatriation and resettlement.

The Society recognized that its work could be successful only with strong public interest and support. Annual banquets were an effective means for heightening awareness of the Society. Recognized scholars such as John Howard Yoder and Cornelius Krahn were among the early speakers at these events. For a few years in the 1970s the Society jointly sponsored an "Anabaptist Conference" with the college and seminary.

Another method used by the Society to heighten public awareness was through an essay contest. For two years in the late 1960s, this contest offered cash prizes for outstanding historical papers.

Eventually, many goals envisioned by the founders of the Society were incorporated into the work of new organizations, such as the Historical Commission of the Mennonite Brethren Church (established in 1969), and the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies. The Society launched a movement that helped to revive interest in the historical heritage, not only of the Mennonite Brethren, but of the entire Mennonite community. To many of us involved in that endeavor in the 1960s, it seemed that the "Anabaptist Vision" had grown dim, at least in the Mennonite Brethren Churches of California. We are grateful that God in His providence used the Society to renew that vision and bear witness to His grace among us.

Peter J. Klassen

Translators needed

The Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies needs volunteers able to translate or transcribe German documents into English. Such persons would need to be able to read the old style German handwriting. Translation projects might include congregational records, diaries, personal correspondence collections and conference minutes.

Please call (209) 453-2225 if you are interested in helping the Center with translation work.