Many Roads to the San Joaquin Valley: Sources of Mennonite Settlement in the Reedley/Dinuba Area

Before the fall of 1903 there were no Mennonites in Reedley. Indeed, the total number of Mennonites in all California was quite small. At that time there were only two areas in the entire state with concentrated numbers of Mennonites—Upland and Paso Robles—totalling less than 100 General Conference Mennonite members between them. In addition, an indeterminate number of other Mennonites—mostly General Conference and Mennonite Brethren—were scattered throughout small towns around Los Angeles. While these Los Angeles-area Mennonites met together with each other as they could, they were too thinly spread to function as a cohesive group.

In October of 1903 the family of Daniel T. and Babetta Eymann moved to Reedley and took the first steps toward radically changing the face of California Mennonite settlement patterns. Though they could scarcely know it at the time, the Eymanns were the leading edge of the first of several waves of Mennonite migration into the Reedley and Dinuba area. These migrations eventually would result in the largest concentration of Mennonites in the United States west of central Kansas.

At least four distinct sources of Mennonite migration into this area can be identified from 1903 into the 1930s:
1) Mennonites of Swiss and South German background who had migrated to various parts of America in the mid-nineteenth century and began coming to Reedley beginning in 1903;
2) Mennonites of Russian background who had settled in the midwest in the 1870s and 1880s, and beginning in 1904 were part of the first wave of out-migration from that region;
3) Krimmer Mennonite Brethren with Hutterite background from South Dakota who settled near Dinuba in 1910;
4) The “Harbin” Mennonites, who had fled the Soviet Union into China in the 1920s, some of whom came to the Reedley area beginning in 1929.

I. The Swiss/South German Mennonites

The first Mennonites to come to Reedley, Daniel T. and Babetta (Ruth) Eymann, were part of the Swiss and South German Mennonite tradition. Mennonites of this tradition first immigrated to North America in the late seventeenth century, settling in eastern Pennsylvania. Several waves of these Mennonites from Switzerland, the Palatinate and Germany followed over the next century and a half. They settled in whatever area had by then become the American frontier—western Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa. The Eymann and Ruth families came from Eichstock, Germany in the 1850s, settling in Lee County, Iowa. Here they eventually became part of the General Conference Mennonite Church. In 1881 Daniel and Babetta Eymann moved to Moundridge, Kansas where they lived for about 22 years.

Shortly before the turn of the century, the Eymanns turned their attention to settlement in California. Reedley, though it became their ultimate destination, was not their first choice of locations. The Eymanns originally set their sights on the established Mennonite settlement at Upland. The Eymanns visited the Upland area as early as the late 1890s and in 1902 Mr. Eymann purchased a 20 acre orange grove about five miles northeast of Upland. The following year The Eymann family, with most of their children and brother Herman, moved to Upland.

The Eymanns were not long in Upland, however, when the elder Eymann became dissatisfied. Land prices in Upland were high, and Eymann feared that his children would be unable to continue farming in this region. Looking about for less expensive property in California, Eymann learned of land available in Reedley. He and son August travelled there to see the area and were favorably impressed. Eymann purchased sixty acres west of Reedley extending to the Kings River.1

After only six months in Upland, the Eymann family relocated to Reedley in October of 1903. While most of the family travelled north in the relative luxury of a train car, the three youngest sons transported the family’s goods from Upland to Reedley by wagon. At the time there were no graded roads across the mountains. A friend who had made the trip before gave them a rough map by which they navi-
gated up the San Joaquin Valley to Reedley in ten days. In Reedley the Eymanns did not have the ready-made Mennonite community they had enjoyed in Upland, and so Daniel Eymann set about to attract other church members to the Reedley area. He made more than one trip back to eastern states to stimulate interest among Mennonites in migration to Reedley. In the town of Butterfield, Minnesota he contacted a group of Mennonites who had settled there from the Galicia region of eastern Europe and who expressed interest in Eymann’s reports of the San Joaquin Valley. In the winter of 1903 the Ed and Gus Bergthold families came from Butterfield to Reedley. The Jacob Bergthold family followed in 1904 and the Rudolph Kintzi family at about the same time. The Bergtholds and Kintzis were of South German descent before their time in Galicia, and so also fall into the general category of Swiss and South German settlers in Reedley.

Swiss and South German Mennonites continued to move into the Reedley area over the next years. Most of them became part of the General Conference Mennonite congregation there. The subsequent migration of Russian Mennonites would soon dwarf this relatively small first migration, but it retains a unique significance as the first group of Mennonites to settle in Reedley.

II. The “Russian” Mennonites

In the 1870s and 1880s several thousand Mennonites from the Ukraine and Crimea migrated to the midwestern states of Minnesota, Nebraska, Kansas and the Dakota Territory. Their arrival in North America marked the third major stopping point for this migratory group, which had originated in the Netherlands in the 1500s. Some Dutch Mennonites migrated to the Vistula River Delta region of present-day Poland beginning already in the sixteenth century. In the late eighteenth century many of these “Prussian” Mennonites left there for the Ukraine. After less than 100 years in Russia, a large portion of this pilgrim people again left its adopted homeland for North America.

Given their proclivity for migration, it seems unreasonable to expect that these Mennonites would have stayed put once they reached the midwestern plains. And indeed they did not stay put. In about 1890 they again began moving beyond the boundaries of those original settlements—this time in search of new and less expensive agricultural opportunities. Oklahoma, Texas, Colorado, North Dakota, Idaho, Washington and Oregon—none of which were home to Russian Mennonites before the 1890s—all witnessed the organization of numerous communities of land-seeking Mennonites beginning in that decade. California, too, was a recipient of settlers from this relocation of midwestern Russian Mennonites, though significant numbers did not arrive there until after the turn of the century.

The first Mennonites of Russian background to enter Reedley were not far behind the Eymanns. It appears that G.G. and Margaretha Wiens were the first Russian Mennonites to settle in the Reedley area, purchasing five acres
between the present-day airport and Campbell Mountain in January of 1904.3 G.G. Wiens was prominent in the Russian Mennonite community of the Midwest, having served as editor of the widely-read Mennonitische Rundschau from 1899 until August of 1903. As with D.T. Eymann, Wiens also set about the task of promoting the Reedley area to the Mennonite public. He became an agent for the Santa Fe Railroad, and took out several advertisements in the Christ-licher Bundesbote, a General Conference Mennonite newspaper, to promote the Reedley area.4

Whether because of Wiens’ promotion or for other reasons, other Russian Mennonites soon followed. In September of 1904 Peter T. and Maria Harms purchased 80 acres west of the Windsor School, Heinrich G. and Maria Pauls purchased 40 acres from C.W. Clarke and J.D. Wiens purchased 20 acres in the Windsor Tract,5 C.E. Schroeder, a friend of D.T. Eymann, arrived from Oregon in October.6 Dietrich T. and Margaretha Enns, unhappy with the cold winters in Buhler, Kansas, sold their farm there and came to Reedley in November, purchasing 20 acres three miles south of Reedley on Frankwood for $4000.7 Johann J. & Maria Suderman arrived from Lehigh, Kansas in the spring of 1905, settling two and a half miles south of town. The joined their son Johann M. Suderman who had already come to the area some time earlier.8

These early arrivals were only the tip of the iceberg. Russian Mennonites from the Midwest flocked to the Reedley/Dinuba area in the following years. By 1910 the Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church had about 100 members; by 1912 that number had roughly doubled and before 1920 it doubled again. The First Mennonite Church, made up both of Swiss/South German and Russian Mennonites, also grew rapidly though not as quickly as the Mennonite Brethren Church.

The migration of Russian Mennonites to Reedley from the Midwest received an added impetus in the 1930s. Large numbers of Mennonites, particularly in the Oklahoma and Texas panhandles and southwestern Kansas, joined the general exodus from that region in the face of the economic and agricultural calamities of the Dust Bowl years. Many of these people found their way to California, not a few of them to Reedley. The Reedley MB Church, in particular, was a beneficiary of this migration. From the years 1930 to 1940, the congregation grew from a membership of about 530 to approximately 1060. Of those 530 new members only 63 joined by baptism—the other 467 transferred their memberships from other locations.9 Not all these new members came to Reedley as refugees of the Dust Bowl, but many did.

III. The Kleinsasser Colony

In 1910 a third Mennonite group introduced itself to the Reedley/Dinuba area when nine families from the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church in South Dakota moved onto land several miles southwest of Dinuba. Though members of the KMB Church at the time of their move to California, they had only a few decades before been Hutterites, an Anabaptist group related to the Mennonites that originated in Moravia.

Like the Mennonites, Hutterites were no strangers to migration. Originally located in the Austrian and Slovakian regions of Europe, Hutterites experienced fierce persecution in the 1700s, which nearly eliminated them. In 1767 a small group of Hutterites fled across the mountains from Transyl- vania into present-day Romania. In 1770 they were offered asylum in the Ukraine, several hundred miles north of the Mennonite settlements that would later be established at Chortitza and Molotschna. In the 1840s the Hutterites relocated to an area next to the Molotschna Colony. The Hutterites, with many of their Mennonite neighbors, left Russia in the 1870s, settling in South Dakota.

Hutterites historically have been distinguished by their practice of “community of goods,” an economic system in which the community rather than private individuals own all property. For much of their history, however, only part of the Hutterites actually chose to live in a community of goods. Among those in South Dakota who chose to own property privately, a significant number left the Hutterites to become part of the General Conference Mennonite Church or the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church (a branch of Mennonites founded in the Crimea in 1869) beginning in the late nineteenth century.

The leader of the KMB migration to California was Johann Z. Kleinsasser. He was born in a Hutterite colony in Russia and remained a member of Hutterite communities in South Dakota until joining the KMB Church in 1887. Kleinsasser became dissatisfied with South Dakota and began searching for a new home several years after switching to the KMB Church. This search led him and two of his sons to California in 1909, where they purchased 20 acres near Kerman on which they intended to plant a test crop of alfalfa. The two sons were to remain in California to conduct the test while

Dedication of the Zion Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church, 1911.
Photo: Center for MB Studies
the elder Kleinsasser returned to South Dakota. Before returning home, Kleinsasser stopped in Reedley, where a land agent interested him in the Kennedy & Clarke Ranch near Dinuba. Kleinsasser abandoned his plans for the Kerman property and purchased 3200 acres of the ranch for $85 an acre.

On April 15, 1910 Johann Z. and Anna Kleinsasser and eight other families arrived at their new home in California. All eight of these other families were in some way related to the Kleinsassers, either through birth or by marriage. On March 17, 1911 the new group organized itself as the Zion Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church. By this time, a few KMB families of Russian Mennonite background had joined the Kleinsasser group. As more Mennonite families moved to this area many purchased portions of the Kennedy & Clarke Ranch from the original settlers, who had discovered that 3200 acres were more than nine families needed or even could manage.10

IV. The Harbin Mennonites

From 1910 until 1929 Mennonite migration into Reedley and Dinuba settled into established and predictable patterns. Increasing numbers of Swiss/South German Mennonites, Russian Mennonites and Hutterite KMBs found their way to the area from a variety of places in the Midwest. This pattern changed significantly beginning in 1929 when several small groups of Mennonites came to the area from the Soviet Union by way of China.

The story of this unlikely migration began in the mid-1920s when Russian Mennonites started settling along the Amur River, which divides the eastern Soviet Union from China. Unwilling to remain in the Soviet Union, yet unable to receive permission to emigrate, many of these Mennonites used their location along the Amur as a way to escape the Soviet Union into China beginning in 1928. Most of these Mennonite refugees found their way to the Chinese city of Harbin, where they contacted the American embassy and requested permission to immigrate there. Because of strict limits on American immigration, however, it appeared almost impossible for these Mennonites to reach their intended destination.

Hearing of the plight of these Mennonites stranded in China, American Mennonites went to work with the United States government on their behalf. P.C. Hiebert, a Mennonite Brethren leader from Kansas active in resettlement issues at the time, even appeared before President Herbert Hoover to plead the Harbin Mennonites' case. These petitions were successful, and in 1929 256 of the refugees received permission to enter the United States. These 256 were only a few the total Mennonite refugees in Harbin, the rest of whom mostly settled in Paraguay or Brazil.11

In the summer of 1929 two representatives from the Harbin group, Johann Friesen and Jakob Isaak, arrived in Reedley to scout the area as a possible place of settlement for those refugees entering the country. Evidently they liked what they found, because on September 13 of that year the first group of twelve refugees arrived at Reedley, where they stayed in the home of MB Church minister D.C. Eitzen. By late October three groups of refugees had arrived in the Reedley area, and more arrived in early 1930.12 All Mennonite churches in Reedley received new members from the Harbin groups. Evidently some immigrants were particularly attracted to the South Reedley MB Church (today the Dinuba MB Church) because it used the German language more consistently than did either the Reedley MB Church or the First Mennonite Church.13

Another group of Harbin refugees settled in eastern Washington, but their settlement was less successful than that in California. The land reportedly was rocky and difficult to clear and some of them found their way to Reedley as well.14

The Mennonite migration to Reedley and Dinuba clearly was a multi-faceted event. To the casual observer the Mennonites there might appear to be a single unified group. Yet each of the four main groups that settled the area came with a different history and personal experiences. In the almost 90 years they have resided in the area many of these differences have become less pronounced, but each of these groups still carry with them diverse origins and backgrounds that add to the richness of this largest Mennonite community in the far western United States.

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ENDNOTES


Harbin Mennonite refugees picking oranges near Orange Cove shortly after their arrival in California. Photo: Center for MB Studies
The Family of John Z. Kleinsasser

John Z. Kleinsasser, the founding pastor of the Zion Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church near Dinuba, was born on July 12, 1864 in Johannesruh, South Russia. His parents were Zacharias Kleinsasser and Maria Hofer. The Kleinsasser family belonged to the Hutterite community, which had survived centuries of persecution and had finally settled in some measure of peace near the Mennonite Molotschna colony in the Ukraine.

John Z.'s father, Zacharias, was born in 1825 and died in the Zion community in 1911. He was often called "Koller Zacharias," probably because his grandmother was an Anna Koller, one of the few Hutterites of that era to carry that rare family name. John's mother, Maria, was born in 1833 to David and Elizabeth (Hofer) Hofer. She was a sister of Michael Hofer, who achieved great distinction by being elected "Oberschultz," or chief mayor, of all the Hutterite villages of South Russia. Certain Hofer families are still identified to this day as being related to this "Oberschultz."

The Kleinsasser ancestry can be traced back to John Z.'s great-grandfather, a certain Mathias Kleinsasser, who was born in 1736 in Carinthia, Austria. He was an Austrian Lutheran, and was one of those expelled from Austria during the reign of Empress Maria Theresa due to their Protestant faith. They resettled in Transylvania, where a number of other Protestants resided. Mathias Kleinsasser died in 1795.

A number of these Austrian Lutherans, including Mathias Kleinsasser and his brothers, became somewhat disillusioned by the practices of the other Protestants in the area, and decided to join with the Anabaptist Hutterites who resided in the village of Creuz, Transylvania. Mathias Kleinsasser's older brother, Johannes Kleinsasser, later became one of the most renowned elders of the Hutterite community, leading them through the often turbulent years that followed when the community was persecuted and finally forced to escape to South Russia. This Johannes Kleinsasser (1723-1779) was, interestingly enough, a great-great-great grandfather of John Z. Kleinsasser on his mother's side!

John Z. Kleinsasser migrated to the United States with his father Zacharias Kleinsasser in 1879. Here John Z. married Anna Hofer, and together they resided in the Old Elm Spring Hutterite Colony in South Dakota for six years. Unhappy with life in the colony, they then settled on their own and started farming near Bridgewater, South Dakota. The Kleinsassers joined the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church and John Z. became the religious leader in the various communities where he lived, starting his own churches wherever he went. In 1910 he moved to California, where he became the founding minister of the Zion KMB Church, located near the small town of Dinuba. John Z. Kleinsasser donated the land where the Zion Church later stood and served as its pastor from 1911 to 1918.

The relationships of John Z.'s family have been a historical puzzle for many, even for some family members. This is due to the fact that John Z. had an older brother Andrew Z. Kleinsasser, born in 1854. This brother was first married to a certain Anna Waldner, and together they had a son John A. Kleinsasser. Shortly after his birth, Anna died, and Andrew Z. soon married Anna Hofer, with whom he had another son, Andrew A. Kleinsasser.

Andrew Z. Kleinsasser then died, and his widow, Anna Hofer, married Andrew's brother, John Z. Kleinsasser. She brought into the family circle the two older half-brothers, John A. and Andrew A., one her son and the other her stepson. She and John Z. Kleinsasser had nine more children of their own: Zack J., Jacob J., Mary, David J., Rachel, John J., Lydia, Anne and Joe J.

In one of the great tragedies for the early Mennonite community in the Reedley area, Anna (Hofer) Kleinsasser and her daughter Anne were both killed on July 29, 1910, when their car was struck by a train. David J. and Joe J. were also in the car, but survived the accident. Anna and Anne were buried in the cemetery on the Zion Church grounds.

After this accident, Rev. John Z. Kleinsasser married Helen Fast, and together they had an additional six children: Anne, Kathryn, Paul, Sam, Martha and Amos. This made a total of 19 children in the family circle, with the oldest, John A., being a first cousin to all but his half-brother Andrew A. Andrew A. was, in turn, both a half-brother and a first cousin to the first nine children of Rev. John Z. Kleinsasser. The last six children were half-siblings to the first nine, but were only first cousins to both John A. and Andrew A. It is