

# California Mennonite Historical Society: Celebrating Fifty Years

by Hannah Keeney

What do fifty years of California Mennonite history look like? A library and archive? A seventh generation of GRANDMA? Scholarships and grants? European tours? Publications and presentations? It looks like all of this and more!

On March 5, 1965, a group of thirteen young historians organized around a growing need to raise awareness and interest in Mennonite history. Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the Pacific Coast was born of a larger revival of interest in Anabaptist and Mennonite history in the 1960s and '70s.

This newly created historical society quickly established the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, a historical commission, and a library and archive collection dedicated to the history of both the Mennonite Brethren

Church and the Anabaptist story. In the 1990s the name was changed to California Mennonite Historical Society to better reflect the organization's focus on the larger Anabaptist story within the West Coast context.

The work of founding officers—including Peter J. Klassen, I.G. Neufeld, and Alan Peters—has resulted in annual meetings that have effectively provided a platform for public engagement and support. The genealogy database, GRANDMA (currently in its seventh version, with an eighth in progress), and the collection of Mennonite research material that is the Mennonite Library & Archives at Fresno Pacific University are the most prominent accomplishments, but others include joint conferences with international partners, historical tours, scholarships to fund research and



lecture sponsorships, as well as a small number of publications.

Almost exactly fifty years after its first organizational meeting, the California Mennonite Historical Society held its annual meeting March 7, 2015. Recognition was given to the tireless efforts of many, including Peter Klassen, Alan Peters, Paul Toews, Jane Friesen, and Kevin Enns-Rempel. As we celebrate this anniversary, the society is also looking forward and considering some new structures for the future of Mennonite historical studies in the West Coast and beyond.



CMHS founding president,  
Peter J. Klassen.

## Board Members to Retire

Three key figures from CMHS's 50-year history have announced their retirement from the board:

**Jane Friesen** joined the board in 1977, bringing a special emphasis on outreach to churches outside the Fresno area. She has been very involved in the GRANDMA project and served as the Society's president from 2002 to 2006.

**Peter J. Klassen** was central in the founding of the Society. He was its first president and has been an active member of the board throughout its history. He is a prominent Mennonite historian with a specialty in the history of Mennonites in Poland.

**Paul Toews** became the first director of the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies in 1982 and has served on the board continuously since then. He is a prolific author, contributing to an understanding of Mennonites in North America.