

California Mennonite

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Johannes Dyck
(c. 1875)

In Search of Gold

The first Mennonites to come to California did so for the same reason so many others did in the mid-1800s—to seek gold. Very few Mennonites appear to have been part of the California Gold Rush that began in 1849. Of those, the story of only one has survived in any significant detail.

Johannes Dyck had originally migrated to the United States from Prussia in 1848, leaving behind his fiancé, Helene Janzen, with a promise to return in two or three years. Dyck worked briefly in Wisconsin and Illinois, then joined the throngs heading to California after the discovery of gold there.

He spent about three years in the gold fields, apparently with good success. On the way back East, however, he lost his gold in an attack by Native Americans. Dyck returned to California to seek more gold, but suffered another setback when a partner was murdered while sleeping next to him and their gold stolen again.

Dyck finally returned to Prussia in 1858, ten years after he left, with little to show for his efforts. He married Helene, who was still waiting for him, and together they moved to Russia.

—Excerpted from Kevin Enns-Rempel's "California Mennonites: Beyond the Stereotypes" presentation at Mennonite/s Writing VII, March 12, 2015.



Upland (California) First Mennonite Church Women's Mission Society missions festival at the home of Jacob Schowalter c. 1917. Photo courtesy of the Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, Kansas [2015-0182].

California Mennonites at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

by Kevin Enns-Rempel

What would become the first enduring settlement of Mennonites in California was established, not for religious or economic reasons, but for the promise of renewed health. Their migration brought them to Upland, California, and the area surrounding this southern California town in San Bernardino County. The first migrants were Heinrich and Ella Rees, General Conference Mennonites who moved from Ohio in 1887. Heinrich suffered from a "throat ailment" and came West on the advice of his doctor.

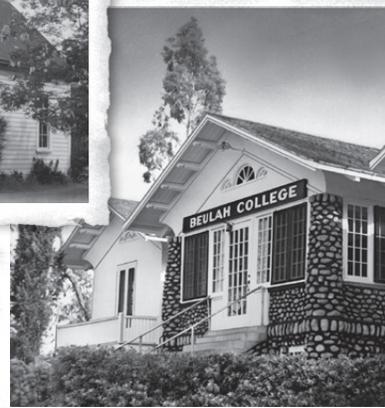
In coming to this region, the Rees family was part of a widespread movement of Americans from the East to California and other western states to benefit

from the region's alleged curative powers. It was thought at the time that warm, dry climates could cure a wide range of diseases, particularly tuberculosis. One of the areas thought to offer the greatest health benefits was the foothill region between San Bernardino and Pasadena, along the northern edge of the Los Angeles Basin. The Reeses moved to Pomona, California, almost exactly into the middle of this region, and soon were followed by other Mennonites hoping to be cured.

By the mid-1890s enough General Conference Mennonites had arrived that they were meeting regularly for worship, and in 1903 they established the First

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Paso Robles First Mennonite Church 1897 (right), the first formally organized Mennonite Church in California. Photo courtesy of the Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, Kansas [2007-0054].



Upland College. Established in 1920 as Beulah College by the Brethren in Christ; the name was later changed to Upland College. Photo courtesy of Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives.

The architecture of Upland First Mennonite Church, with its prominent curved Mission Revival parapet, reflects the California ethos of the first Mennonite church organized in California. Photo c. early 1900s courtesy of Upland Public Library.

Mennonite Church at Upland. Other Mennonites came to Upland as well. By 1906 a few members of the Mennonite Church had arrived, though not until 1934 did they establish a congregation.

By around 1900 there also was a small group of Brethren in Christ in Upland, which organized itself in 1903. The church grew quickly and was quite active in a wide range of programs. In 1920 the Brethren in Christ established Beulah College in Upland, later renamed Upland College.

Upland Mennonites felt a duty to assist others who came West for health reasons, and in 1914 established the Mennonite Sanitarium in nearby Alta Loma. The sanitarium struggled for survival almost from the beginning, in part because the California "health craze" had peaked before the sanitarium even opened. It closed in 1923.¹

While Upland was the center of Mennonite settlement in southern California, individual Mennonite families were settling in various other parts of the Los Angeles Basin, including the city of Los Angeles itself, Glendora, Pasade-

na, Hollywood, Huntington Park, Downey, Long Beach, Anaheim and Orange. Few formally-organized congregations developed from these earliest Mennonite settlers in the Los Angeles area, however, and many of those who came either soon moved elsewhere or joined other denominations.

At about the same time the Upland settlement was taking shape, several General Conference Mennonite families established a community near Paso Robles, about halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco. In 1896 Jacob Hege, a minister from Nebraska, visited this area. He published reports praising the region's potential for health and, more significantly to him, agricultural purposes. He encouraged others to buy land there with him. Within a

few months, four other Mennonite families had moved to the area.² In 1897 another minister, Aron J. Wiebe, arrived. The presence of two ministers offered the promise of leadership and stability that took years to develop in Upland. The group organized itself almost immediately in 1897, the first Mennonite congregation to do so in California.

So as the twentieth century began, Mennonites in California included yet-to-be organized congregations at Upland, families scattered across the Los Angeles Basin, and a congregation at Paso Robles. Most were General Conference Mennonites, with smaller numbers of Mennonite Church, Brethren in Christ, and Mennonite Brethren families living mostly in the Los Angeles area.

ENDNOTES

1. Kevin Enns-Rempel, "The Mennonite Sanitarium at Alta Loma, California: 1914-1923," *California Mennonite Historical Society Bulletin*, no. 25 (November 1991): 1-2, 7-11.

2. Lee Price Campbell, "Seventy-five Years on the Shores of the Peaceful Sea: A History of the Pacific District Conference of the General Conference Mennonite Church of North America," (M.A. Thesis, Western Evangelical Seminary, 1973): 81-83.