

# CALIFORNIA MENNONITE HISTORICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN

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## California In Their Own Words: First-hand Accounts of Early Mennonite Life in the Golden State

The first-person, eyewitness account is surely one of the most vivid colors on the historian's palette. Such accounts bring past events to life in a way unlike any other historical technique. The words of actual participants provide a perspective that sometimes is lost when reading only narratives written by someone else many years after an event actually took place.

The seven excerpts that follow each demonstrate this idea. All were written by Mennonites personally involved in the early settlement and work of the church in California. Most were written at the time of the events being described, and thus possess an immediacy that aids in our understanding of those events. Two were written many years after the fact, but still draw on the actual experiences of the authors.

Each of the passages deals with a different aspect of early Mennonite life in California. With only a minimum of editorial comment at the outset of each section to provide background and context, we will allow the words of John P. Bontrager, John J. Gerbrandt, Regina Becker, John Hygema, Anthony S. Shelly, Elmer F. Grubb and an anonymous correspondence from Paso Robles to speak for themselves in bringing this era to life.

-Kevin Enns-Rempel

### SURVEYING THE TERRITORY

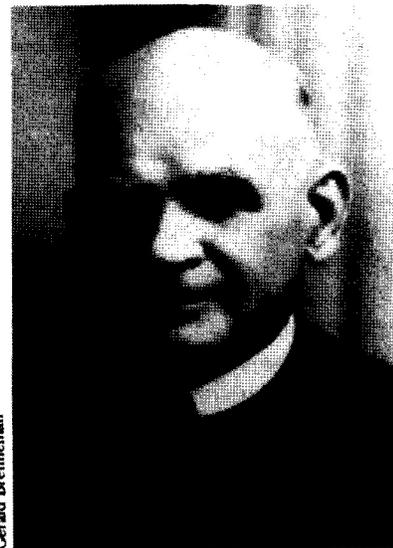
*Numerous Mennonite leaders visited California during the first decades of Mennonite settlement there; some of them wrote and published detailed reports of these visits, providing an overview of the congregations as they then existed.*

*One such person was Mennonite Church minister and evangelist John P. Bontrager (1872-1949), who published an article entitled, "My Trip to California" in the March 30, 1916 issue of Gospel Herald (p. 859). Bontrager's report is particularly interesting because it was written at a time when the Mennonite Church had probably less than one hundred members in California, scattered from Corning in the northern Sacramento Valley to Pasadena in southern California.*

*A few years later Bontrager himself moved from Oregon to*

*California. He became a leader in the recently-established Los Angeles Mennonite Church, now known as the Calvary Mennonite Church in Inglewood. Bontrager lived in California for the rest of his life, and died in Atwater on June 8, 1949.*

"On Monday afternoon, Feb. 7, I left Albany [Oregon] for the California field for a few weeks' evangelistic work. Our first stop was Corning. At this place we visited Bro. and Sister V.L. Schrock. Though they are the only ones of our faith at this place, they are still holding to the plain Gospel truths as taught by the Mennonite Church, and despite their age are quite active.



Gerald Bremmen

John P. Bontrager

Photo: Oregon Mennonite Historical & Genealogical Society

"From Corning we went to Reedley. Here we visited with Bro. and Sister Augustine, formerly from Oklahoma. They seem quite anxious to move where there is a Church.

"From here we went to Dinuba . . . and visited Sister Delilah Sharer, the only member of our faith left at Dinuba. Here as

well as at Corning, there was at one time an organized church of our people, but all have moved away except these few.

“Leaving Dinuba early in the morning for Porterville, we arrived there at 11:45. We were met by Bro. Emanuel Stahley, who took us out to the place where meetings were to be held. At this place we had ten days meeting [sic], also gave seven Bible lessons. There were two confessions, and many under deep conviction. There are at present fifteen members at this place, and the prospects seem good for an organized church. Bro. Stahley is preaching the Word with good results. They have a good Sunday school and Bible reading every Sunday and preaching in the evening.

“Our next place to hold meetings was Pasadena. At this place we found a few brethren and sisters earnestly contending for the faith. Among this number are Bro. Geo. Erisman and family, also Bro. and Sister Lantz, formerly from Lancaster, Pa., and a few others who were eager that some work be started in Pasadena, and they were willing to do all that was in their power to do for the lost and perishing. Here, as well as at Porterville, communion and the washing of the saints’ feet were observed; also a ten-day meeting was held at this place. At the request of the brethren we spent some time looking over the field with the object of starting a mission Sunday school if a suitable place could be found. A location was finally decided on and steps taken to organize the work. . . . As the number at this place is quite small they will greatly appreciate any help that you may feel to give for this work.

“Some one may ask, Why start a work at this place with only so few? There may be many reasons, but one reason especially is that many of our brethren and sisters are going to Pasadena and vicinity, and some are lost to the Church by being drawn into some other church, and some because of no place to worship will fall away and do not hold to any Church at all; so taking all into consideration we thought it best to try and supply the need along this line and by your prayers and help we are made to believe that a work of this kind can be carried on at this place and that our people going to Southern California may have a place to worship. There are at this time quite a few of our members in California who are away from the Church, and have no place to worship. . . .

“From Pasadena we went to Upland, and held a few meetings; also visited all the members at this place. Here we have no organized church; yet our people here have the privilege to attend worship at the River Brethren Church and Sunday school.

“From here we again went to Pasadena, thence to Porterville, stopped for a special meeting at this place, leaving early next morning for our home at Albany, Oreg., where we arrived Saturday evening after five weeks away from home.”

## WHAT A LONG, STRANGE TRIP IT’S BEEN

*Simply getting to California was a remarkable adventure for many of the early Mennonite settlers in the state. The trip could be filled with all manner of difficulties, as illustrated by these excerpts from John J. Gerbrandt’s privately-printed booklet, Destination California. While most early Mennonite travelers to California went by train, the Gerbrandt family set out from*

*Manitoba by automobile in 1922. They discovered that, even in the 1920s, the American West could be a very wild place.*

“The first attempt of our journey from Winnipeg, Manitoba to Reedley, California ended in failure at Grand Forks, North Dakota. Because of inadequate preparations and a mechanically poor motor, we were forced to return and spend another month in preparation before our long journey. It was October 28, 1922, when all things were finally packed. The motor in the 1918 model Studebaker had been overhauled and was in running condition.

“Ten people in the seven passenger [open-top] Studebaker fairly well filled the car, so the suitcases and boxes were fastened on the outside. Some suitcases were fastened together by a strap over the hood of the car or wedged between the hood and the front fenders. The eight-inch running board on the left side of the car was enclosed to the top of the car doors. In this section the dishes and cooking utensils were packed. Outside, fastened on the back of the car, were other household utensils, such as the wash tub, washboard, folding chairs, and the 9x12-foot tent.

“Inside the car, in addition to the ten of us, we kept all the quilts, blankets, sheets and pillows, plus a few pads to soften the night’s sleep for Mama and Papa. . . .

“The route we planned to take was known as Highway 81. . . . Highway maps were very scarce and none of us knew how to follow one anyway. When we had a map, it was generally very incomplete and road markers few and far between. But with ten people watching the road, what one person did not see maybe the other one would. . . .

“It was beautiful fall weather as we traveled along through the State of North Dakota. . . . Through all of this we were made aware that winter was around the corner. We had so much hoped that we would be farther along to the land of eternal summer by this time—now we were a month behind schedule. . . .

“At Yankton, South Dakota, we faced the first natural barrier—the big Missouri River. . . . There was one bridge across the river and it was a ‘floating bridge’ made of pontoons fastened together with short chains. . . . Very hesitantly and fearfully, we started across. Every time the front wheels of the heavily loaded car hit the pontoon ahead, it sank about six inches, placing the car considerably lower than the rest of the bridge. It gave us a feeling of sinking beneath the swirling waves of the ‘Big Muddy’ Missouri River. All of us children were asked to recite Bible verses, while Mother prayed as we slowly edged forward from one pontoon to another, ‘O Herr Jesu [bewahr] uns über diesen fluss’ (Oh Lord protect us over this river). The Lord answered her prayer, as we made it over safely—a good half mile across. . . .

“Now we were in Nebraska. The road here was only a rough gravel trail with deep chuckholes. We thought everything on the inside and outside of the car would break or fall off and be lost. . . . As a result of the bumpy, gravel road, we experienced considerable tire trouble. Whenever we could, for the sake of economy, we would buy used tires and some of these would only last two to three days. How many tires we used on the trip no one will ever know. . . .

*(continued on page 4)*

We are now learning that the influx of non-Dutch Anabaptists into Prussia began as early as 1535, when sixty Anabaptist families, totalling two hundred persons, were expelled from Moravia and came to the area around Thorn and Graudenz in the Duchy of Prussia.<sup>2</sup> These constituted the core families in the Mennonite churches of that region.<sup>3</sup> Goertz believes that these “High German” immigrants from Moravia constituted the main core of the Montau Mennonite Church for more than four hundred years.

The *Chronicle of the Hutterite Brethren* relates how the persecutions of the early Anabaptist churches in Austria, Moravia, Silesia, Bavaria and Hungary caused the scattering of believers to many locations throughout eastern Europe. The *Chronicle* does not specifically mention the migration of 1535, but does state that a group of believers moved to Poland in 1536.<sup>4</sup> From that year on, the *Chronicle* relates dozens of new settlements and relocations throughout Europe caused by persecution and exile.

The most significant entry in the *Chronicle* describes the effort in 1604 to establish a Hutterite community in the region around Elbing, Prussia, where many Mennonites already lived. The migrating group was led by Joseph Hauser and Darius Heyn from Moravia to establish a community at Wengeln, Prussia, in the so-called “Kleinwerder” near Lake Drausen.<sup>5</sup>

It should be noted that the much-later records of the Thiensdorf and Marcushof Mennonite churches show unmistakable traces of this Hutterite settlement. There are many non-Dutch names reflected in the church records, which begin in 1772, including Funk, Hein and Martens. It is likely that the Prussian Mennonite Hein family stems from this Darius Heyn who led the Hutterites to this area. In addition to these non-Dutch surnames, the records of these two Mennonite churches contain numerous first names that are very uncommon among the Dutch, but frequent among the Hutterites. These include such names as Darius, Tobias, Zacharias, Matthias and Absolon. Many families in the Thiensdorf and Marcushof Mennonite churches are even recorded as living in the very village of Wengeln where the Hutterites tried to establish their community.

Horst Penner also describes the significant influence that the Hutterite Anabaptists had upon the Mennonites of Prussia. He suggests that most of the Frisian Mennonite churches of the Vistula River Valley (Montau, Schönsee, Przechówka and Obernessau) were largely “High German” in their origins, and that most of the families in these churches were descendants of exiled Hutterites from Moravia. He further notes that when the Hutterites of Moravia were expelled in 1622, many of the “tens of thousands” of fleeing Hutterites joined their religious “cousins” in Prussia.<sup>6</sup>

Even though it seems that most of the High German influences were felt within the Frisian Mennonite churches of the Vistula Valley and the Kleinwerder, the Flemish Mennonites were also impacted. The early records of the Danzig Flemish Mennonite Church, for example, have a number of references to a man named Adam Tiroller. With our current understanding of the Hutterite influence in early Prussia, it is likely that “Tiroller” was not his surname, but rather an indication of his geographic origins in the Tyrol region of Austria, where the Hutterite

movement had its roots. Even his first name “Adam” and his wife’s name “Ursula” show more of a High German flavor than a Dutch, or Low German, one.

So now, many years after fifth grade, I look at my own family heritage, and see there such names as Reimer, Kasper, Voth, Wedel and Nachtigall. I suspect that the bulletin board display was probably all wrong. Granted, there certainly is a considerable amount of Dutch ancestry in my Low German heritage. However, we Low Germans now appear to have a serious streak of High German background.

In his 1976 study of the Montau Mennonite Church, Adalbert Goertz concluded that Prussia Mennonite names, so long considered exclusively Dutch, were probably in reality seventy percent Dutch, twenty-five percent High German or Swiss, and five percent of local Prussian origin. As time goes by, I am beginning to think that the High German influence in our Low German heritage may be much higher than Goertz, or anyone else, has ever realized!

Alan Peters

#### NOTES

1. Adalbert Goertz, “The Marriage Records of Montau in Prussia for 1661-1704,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 50 (1976): 240-250.

2. Horst Penner, “West Prussia,” *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1959), 922.

3. Goertz, 240-250.

4. *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren*, vol. 1, trans. & ed. by the Hutterian Brethren (Rifton, N.Y.: Plough Publishing House, 1987), 155-156.

5. *Ibid.*, 561-564.

6. Horst Penner, *Die ost- und westpreussischen Mennoniten in ihrem religiösen und sozialen Leben in ihren kulturellen und wirtschaftlichen Leistungen*, vol. 1 (Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1978), 76.

(“In Their Own Words,” continued from page 2)

“As we continued traveling south on Highway 81, we arrived in Columbus, Nebraska, sometime after the first of November. This town was the junction at Highway 30, leading west. We felt that we had reached a great milestone as we now turned west toward California.

“Merrily we rolled west along Route 30, hugging the banks of the Platte River—the scenery was beautiful. . . . For several days the road followed the winding river. Finally, the river turned into the north-west and Highway 30 turned due west. Our faces were turned west, for ahead of us lay our destination—Reedley, California. We had not traveled far in the State of Wyoming when we reached Cheyenne. Here we had our first encounter with the highway patrol. . . . The officer explained that he could not let us go any farther west on this route because it was too late in the fall season. He said the winter storms had already begun in the Rocky Mountains and the roads were very hazardous. He urged that we not continue because it could mean disaster for the whole family. . . . [He] suggested we travel south . . . through Denver, Colorado, and into New Mexico. Our first reaction was to disagree with the officer, as this new route seemed a lot longer and we were determined to continue west. Upon further study of a map and consultation with the officer, we turned south. . . .

"We traveled on south, past Colorado Springs and Pueblo, Colorado; finally reaching . . . Raton Pass. It seemed that the world was closed before us with mountains. Again we all prayed, but this time it was, 'Lord, help us over those mountains.' . . .

"Heading west on Highway 66 we were officially in Indian territory. All along the road we saw their villages. . . .

"We reached Flagstaff, Arizona, about the middle of November. Flagstaff has an elevation of over 7,000 feet above sea level, so nights were cold at this time of the year. A rainy spell had set in and this added to our discomfort. . . .

"The lack of bridges across the creeks . . . plagued us. Often when it had rained the creeks were swollen and too high for the car to get through. Whenever this occurred, we stopped while Papa would . . . take a stick, and measure the depth of the water. If the water would measure over the running board, we would set up camp and wait until the next morning or until the water receded. . . .

"Closer and closer we came to the Promised Land. Maybe tomorrow or the next day we would reach the border. But there were other barriers. First, another range of mountains had to be crossed. . . . Second, the great Colorado River had to be crossed. Shortly after leaving Kingman [Arizona], we began the climb up Oatman grade, winding and twisting, the road getting narrower at every curve. The curves became so sharp that we could not negotiate them. Many times we had to stop, back up a bit, and take a second try at the curve. While this jogging back and forth with the car was going on, Mother would close her eyes so she would not see the sharp curves and the steep canyons on the sides. I can still hear her pray for God's protection through these mountain passes.

"After crossing the Colorado River which marks the Arizona-California border, we soon reached Needles, California. . . . Oh, how we all rejoiced when finally we entered this 'Land of Milk and Honey' with all the oranges and grapes we had heard about!

"However, our joy was dampened by Papa's announcement that he was out of money. . . . Papa . . . sent a telegram to Reedley, California, for some additional money. While we were waiting here for several days for the money to come, . . . we lived off the fruit of the land. . . . Here at Needles it was onion time, so onions we would eat! We ate more onions during that waiting period than we did in the next several years to come.

"After several days of waiting, the money finally arrived. With our stomachs loaded with onions and some extras in a bucket tied on the back of the car, we started out from Needles on the last lap of our journey. Now the large Mojave Desert lay before us. People in Needles warned us to be sure and carry water with us at all times. We heeded this warning and later were glad we had, for water through the desert was hard to

find. . . .

"[In] Bakersfield . . . we had our last flat tire. But Papa had said he was not buying another tire, so we drove the last 100 miles from Bakersfield to Reedley on the rim of the wheel. . . . We arrived in Reedley on Thanksgiving Day, November 28, at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Over-joyed with the consciousness of having reached our destination, we gave thanks to God for His grace, guidance and protection. . . .

"I remember my parents saying to each other many times that, had they known and fully realized the distance, the circumstances and hardships involved, they would have made the trip by train."

## HAVE I GOT A DEAL FOR YOU

*Mennonite settlers chose their final destination in California for a variety of reasons. For many the presence of other family members in a particular place drew them there. For others, real estate agents provided the advice and encouragement that led them to a certain location. Perhaps the most famous—some would say infamous—of these agents was Henry J. Martens. Martens established a Mennonite colony several miles east of Shafter in 1909 on land that he allegedly owned. Not until a few months later did the unsuspecting settlers of "Martensdale" learn that this was not the case, and found themselves evicted from the land by the true owners.*

*Regina Bergen Becker, a young girl at the time, described the experience many years later in her book, A Bundle of Living (Shafter Historical Society, 1986).*

"All was going quite well in the summer of 1909 when Dad, and perhaps Mom, too, got involved with a realtor, Mr. Martens, who came from Kansas to Fairview and Weatherford, Oklahoma [where the Bergen family then lived]. Mr. Martens highly and effectively praised California as the 'land flowing with milk and honey.' He came to our home in a topless car. We had seen a few cars at a distance, but he gave us our first



Henry J. Martens (kneeling front center) and a group of Mennonite excursionists to California, 1909.

Photo: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies

ride. Wherever Mr. Martens went, he was sure to attend midweek prayer service with a big Bible under his arm. Such a man was deemed honest and trustworthy.

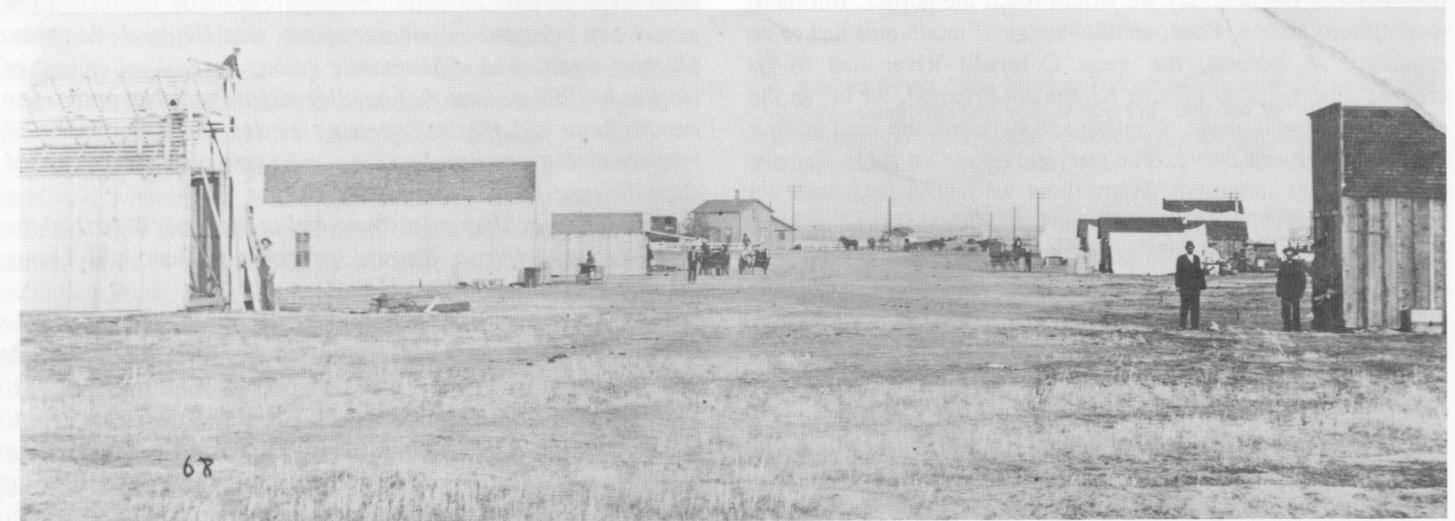
“He concentrated his sales talk to communities of German Mennonites and Adventists. He persuaded about 55 men, many with their wives, to go with him on an excursion tour to California. Grandpa Fast and Dad joined the group to see the ‘wonderland.’ They traveled by train through the southern portion of California. Upon seeing the citrus groves, the prosperity and beauty, Grandpa remarked, ‘The half has not been told!’ Dad mailed a postcard home, saying, ‘I dealt with Martens today.’ . . .

“Soon after Dad returned home, he arranged an auction sale. . . . During the sale, someone heard a fellow boldly declare, ‘If there were two kiln, one with a rattlesnake and the

drawn by three locomotives, arrived at the Lerdo, California, siding on the Southern Pacific Rail Line, six miles east of the present city of Shafter, California. The sixty-five happy, optimistic families got off the train and were crowded into a large tent that Mr. Martens had set up for our shelter until houses could be built on each family’s appointed acreage. Mr. Martens had also established a lumber yard there for the convenience of the newcomers. . . .

“Early that first morning the families gathered for a Thanksgiving service to praise the Lord for His protection and to ask for His guidance for the task before them. Then the freight cars were unloaded.

“A U.S. Post Office was established there and was named ‘Martensdale,’ but the community was known as Lerdo. My grandfather, J.J. Fast, was the postmaster, as he had been in



*Martensdale, California, winter of 1909-1910. Located at the present intersection of Highway 99 and Lerdo Highway.*

*Photo: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies*

other with Mr. Martens in it, and if I had to get into one of the kiln, I would choose the one with the snake.’ . . .

“Our 240 acres were signed over to Mr. Martens, according to the contract, in trade for 60 acres in California. We were ready to say goodbye to Oklahoma.

“Meanwhile, a special train was assembled at Fairview, Oklahoma, where about 65 families prepared to leave for California. A large crowd gathered at the depot to bid a sad farewell to relatives and friends who were leaving, it seemed, for a very far-off land.

“It was near midnight, October 5, 1909, when the train arrived in Weatherford after a sixty-mile journey. Soon our freight car was connected to the train. . . . Our family . . . joined the Fairview people in the train’s passenger cars. Many of the men, including my Dad, rode in the freight cars and took care of the livestock. Dad milked our cows and brought us the milk when the train stopped at a station. . . .

“Late in the evening on October 12, 1909, the . . . train,

Corn, Oklahoma. The Mennonite settlers erected a large one-room building in Martensdale for worship services and for a day-school. . . .

“The sixty acres of land we were assigned was two miles south of the Lerdo station. We hitched our horses to our carriage and set out to find it on that first morning after our arrival. We had to cross a wide ditch which was filled with water. The horses swam across, pulling the floating carriage. We were fearful, but all went well.

“We found an old, abandoned three-story tankhouse with a large tank (unusable) on the top floor. An old well had to be renovated, but soon supplied us with water. This, along with ditches and irrigation checks, showed that earlier settlers had been here before us and had abandoned the land. The ground floor of our tankhouse had piles of old straw which housed rattlesnakes. Owls and other birds had enjoyed their undisturbed life in this building with broken windows. . . .

“Dad soon brought lumber from Martens’ lumberyard and

built a room twelve by twenty feet in size with a lean-to on the side. . . .

"In 1959 and 1960 I saved some clippings from the 'Fifty Years Ago' column in the Bakersfield Californian newspaper, from which I quote here:

"October 20, 1909 - 'Mennonites are building many homes in the Lerdo area.' . . .

"December 8, 1909 - 'The Mennonites have developed big wells in the Lerdo area.'

"January 10, 1910 - 'Indignation meetings of enraged Mennonites have been held around the Southern Hotel for the last few days. They claim they had been unfairly treated by Mr. Martens.' . . .

"February 3, 1910 - 'Mr. Martens denied this week that he is an employee of the Southern Pacific.' . . .

"These news reports no doubt aroused the interest of the readers, but to the colonists they spelled disaster. Where was Mr. Martens? Where was the money he had received for the sale of our homesteads back in Oklahoma? Why had he not paid for our land at Lerdo according to the agreement? Why must we pay for the land now or move off? Who has money to buy land?

"I remember my father, thirty-seven years of age, sitting on the floor of the kitchen where Mom, thirty years of age, was busy. Dad was worrying about the uncertainty of our future, and Mom comforted him by saying 'God will take care of us.' She was right. In spite of our loss, we were never homeless or without a supply of food.

Dad heard that our former homestead had been sold to a friendly neighbor. Dad wrote to him, hoping that his payments might be directed to us. The reply was that Mr. Martens sold land for cash only. Our neighbor had paid \$8,000 for our 240-acre homestead in Oklahoma.

"The only solution was to leave the area. Land was found about eight miles south of Martensdale, west of the Rosedale store. Since we lived south of Martensdale, we saw many houses loaded on wagons and moved to the Rosedale area during the month of March, 1910. Optimism had changed to disappointment, but, as Christians, we chose to trust in God and not despair. The church building was also moved to Rosedale, where the Mennonites organized and used the building as a place of worship for many years.

"During a seven-month period of time, Martensdale had grown from barren land into a thriving, proud little town, and returned to barren land. . . .

"We, too, had to leave Martensdale. Dad made a land deal with a man at Rosedale. We loosened our two-room dwelling from the tankhouse and placed it on two four-wheeled wagons which were drawn by four horses, and there were two drivers. Our house was moved and set on a twenty-acre plot about two miles southwest of the Rosedale store on April 4, 1910.

"We hung an old canvas over the open end of our lean-to where it had been attached to the tankhouse. Dad said that the lumber for our house was the only thing he received from Mr. Martens because he never paid Martens for it."

## TO CURE WHAT AILED THEM

*One of the primary motivations drawing Mennonites to California in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the promise of renewed health. The best medical wisdom of the time suggested that California's warm, dry climate could cure a wide array of common ailments, including asthma and tuberculosis. Many thousands of health seekers flocked to California during these years, among them several hundred Mennonites.*

*One such Mennonite invalid was John Hygema (1864-1908), a Mennonite Church minister from Wakarusa, Indiana. He moved from there to Upland in 1907 and eventually found his way to a sanitarium in Chico. Hygema sent several reports about California to various Mennonite Church papers, which are excerpted below.*

*Most Mennonite health seekers in California were satisfied to let the climate alone do its work. Some, such as Hygema, preferred more deliberate—and unusual—measures. In spite of these efforts, Rev. Hygema died in Corning on June 21, 1908. His body was returned to Indiana, where it was buried on June 28.*

*Herald of Truth, 19 December 1907, p. 473.*

"I left my home near Wakarusa, Ind., Nov. 28, 1907, and remained with the brethren in Chicago until Dec. 2, when the through cars left for California, arriving safely at Upland on the morning of Dec. 6. . . . We left Chicago with snow on the ground and found California with flowers, oranges and lemons, nearly ripe enough to pick. Wonderful scenes presented themselves before us, and especially wonderful to one who has never been far away from home. I stood the trip well."



*John Hygema*

*Photo: Archives of the Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana*

*Herald of Truth, 23 January 1908, p. 28.*

"Here in California things differ a great deal from the Eastern and Northern states. They have had one frost since I am here . . . but so light that there was no damage. Orange trees that are well cared for are loaded with nice, good fruit. . . .

"I am at Long Beach at present . . . The weather here is fine. I can sit by the seashore barefooted and in my shirt-sleeves and am comfortable. People bathe in the ocean nearly every day; the waves keep up a perpetual noise. . . . I should like to give a photograph of the nice flowers and green trees that grow here at present. . . . My writing may be doubted by some people in the

East. People now in sight are sitting under umbrellas to shade themselves.

“There are many pleasant things here, but unpleasant ones as well. . . . Nights are very cool, often very foggy, so that rheumatic or asthmatic people must either keep indoors or away from the shore, where it is dryer.”

*Herald of Truth*, 12 March 1908, p. 86.

“I have improved some since I came to California, yet just at this time it is almost too damp and cool to improve very fast. At first when I came to Long Beach it was nice and I improved faster. Long Beach is a fine place for tourists. It has a very nice beach. . . .

“On the 18th [of January] I started for Dinuba, stopping at Los Angeles. . . . I arrived at Dinuba on the 19th and found the people generally well. They had just had a spiritual feast, as Bro. Bontrager of Oregon had been here to hold meetings. One precious soul turned to her Redeemer. They had a Bible conference, too, and were much encouraged. . . . I expect to leave on the 25th for Chico; so the readers can address me there in care of Henry Landis.”

*Herald of Truth*, 26 March 1908, p. 102.

“We certainly have fine weather here at Chico, Calif. About twenty miles from Corning . . . they had several frosts; once it was 27 degrees. . . . It is about 72 degrees in the shade and 76 in the sun. . . .

“My health in general, I think, is improving here at the sanitarium. They give no medicine, only electric baths and hot and cold water baths, rubbing and working with the patients, and instructing them how to diet and live. Rheumatics are brought here and healed; insanity even is cured—a great blessing to many a sufferer. All diseases are treated, and there are very few patients who are not restored to health if they closely follow instructions.”

*Herald of Truth*, 9 April 1908, p. 118.

“I lost about ten pounds, going through the sweat-cabin and baths. I weighed only 133 pounds; but now I am gaining a little again.”

*Gospel Herald*, 18 April 1908, p. 42.

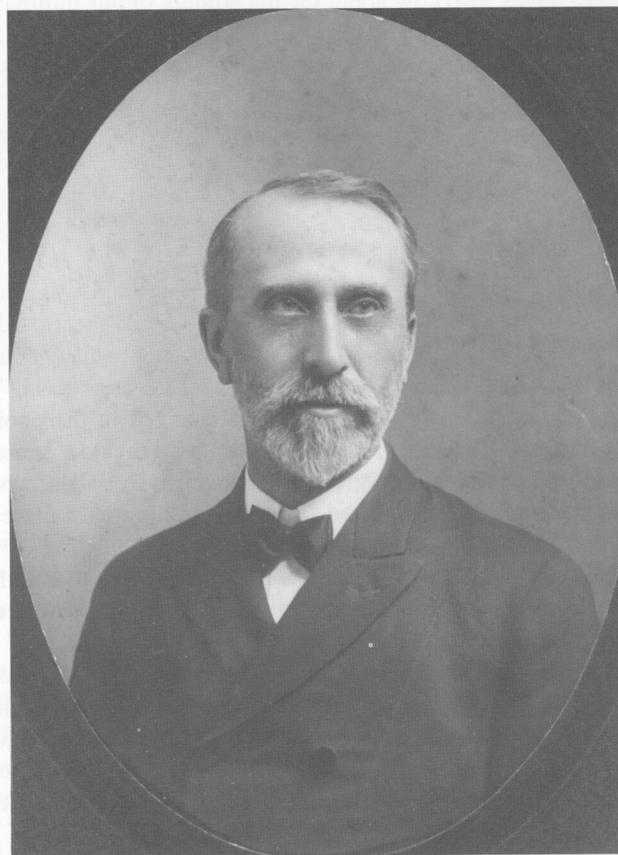
“Perhaps many of you know that I am at the Chico Sanitarium in California. I have not been able to do a good day’s work for over eight years. I can hardly stay long enough to get a complete recovery, but I feel as if I had received some benefit. I have been here for five weeks. I am placed in an electric bath-cabin with 36 lights, which sweats one, then a wash-off and a good rubbing; no medicine, but dieting, which should be practiced more among healthy people so that they might remain well.”

## A CONSTANT COMING AND GOING

*Many Mennonite health seekers did not intend to make California their permanent home. They came for a few weeks or months, often during the winter, returning to their homes in the East at springtime. This phenomenon created a somewhat erratic attendance situation in some California Mennonite congregations, particularly those in southern California. The Upland First Mennonite Church, for example, experienced a temporary increase in attendance every winter, accompanied by a corresponding drop the following spring.*

*In 1915 Anthony S. Shelly (1853-1928) became minister of the Upland congregation. About one year later he submitted the following report in the April 13, 1916 issue of The Mennonite (p. 2), in which he comments on drawbacks and benefits of the attendance situation there.*

“These months have been filled with experiences of such variety as naturally come to one in a new field increased in this case by the kaleidoscopic changes in the make-up of our audiences from week to week by reason of the constant stream of tourist visitors coming this way during the year and the many



*Anthony S. Shelly*

*Photo: Mennonite Library & Archives, North Newton, Kansas*

temporary residents who come here for a few weeks or months.

“The work of getting acquainted, in any case difficult enough,

especially for an older person, was thus made more so, sometimes almost to the point of being annoying. . . .

“This congregation is especially favorably circumstanced by having in its membership a number of experienced workers whom the search for a climate suited to their physical needs has brought together from different fields, including two former ministers of eastern churches and three once active workers in our mission fields, not to count in this number the former pastor of the congregation, now the itinerant mission advocate of the conference, whose intermissions for rest between his arduous periods of field work are spent here. . . .”

## BE TRUE TO YOUR COMMUNITY

*As several Mennonite settlements sprang up in California, each did its best to attract newcomers. Letters in various Mennonite papers extolling the virtues of one settlement or another were common throughout much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In the September 20, 1921 issue of The Mennonite (pp. 4-5), this anonymous report appeared urging prospective California settlers to consider moving to Paso Robles.*



*The San Marcos Mennonite Church near Paso Robles, 1923.*

*Photo: Mennonite Library & Archives, North Newton, Kansas*

“The last few years many people are coming to California to make this state their home. Paso Robles is also getting its share, but it seems strange that no Mennonites locate here, not even visit to look over the country. Is our fair city not found on the map? Do the Mennonites not know that we have here a famous

health resort? Have they never read that even people of renown . . . stop at this place for months[?] But of course to the good Mennonites it is of more importance to find a church home wherever they locate, and, dear readers, we have it for you, though it may be small. We would like any one looking for a new home in California to give Paso Robles a fair trial. Why should all the Mennonites move to Reedley and Upland? We have room for farmers, business men, and people who live on their interest. I am not an agent, and I would not persuade any one to make Paso Robles his home, only would like to see more of our own denomination here seeing that all the other churches constantly gain in membership through people coming from other states. Looking for a new home and deciding where to locate one must see the country for himself.”

## PREACHING THE GOSPEL TO EVERY CREATURE

*Very early in their time here, some Mennonites turned their attention to evangelistic and social welfare programs. The first major effort along these lines was the River Station Mission, established by the General Conference Mennonite Church in 1909. Originally intended as a city mission among the inner city residents of Los Angeles, it later became a more traditional Mennonite congregation, serving church members who had moved to Los Angeles from other parts of the country. Eventually relocated to Downey, the congregation today is affiliated with the Mennonite Brethren Church and known as the Living Hope Church. Rev. Elmer F. Grubb (1872-1959) was the first superintendent at the River Station Mission. He submitted the following reports to the The Mennonite, in which he describes the special challenges of mission work in Los Angeles.*

*The Mennonite, March 10, 1910, p. 5.*

“The city mission is ready for public services as soon as the necessary furniture has been placed in the hall already rented. It is located at 1432 San Fernando street, north of the business center of the city. The district is bounded by machine shops, railroad yards and the river. The district has been popularly called ‘dog-town,’ a name that would indicate the need of a mission.

“The room rented for the mission was last used as a pool-room. It is near the railroad station, River Station, of the Southern Pacific road. The people of the

district are poor. . . . There are many churches in the city but none have done work here. . . .

“This work demands patience, perseverance and prayer. I go from house to house and put the one question, ‘Are you a Christian?’ . . . Sometimes I have opportunity to speak a few

words that 'to-day is the day of salvation'; sometimes I am permitted to leave a tract. (To give tracts is as much an art as to give medicine)."



Elmer F. Grubb

Photo: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies

that is, he does not look like any picture of any angel I have seen. Perhaps he is more real than the pictures."

"A Letter from Los Angeles," *The Mennonite*, March 16, 1911, p. 4.

"Children's Bible Class meets at 10 a.m. on Sunday. . . . Yesterday we had 15 children from 7 to 13 years of age. These are poor boys and girls, some of whom are dependent upon the mission for their food and nearly all are wearing clothing given by our mission. We have no great tenement houses in this city but some people live in little sheds where I would not think of trying to keep chickens.

"So many children of our district are half orphans, they whose fathers are dead or whose whereabouts unknown. The mothers are doing the best they can to get along but there is so little they can do.

"Our evening services are more largely attended, about all of our Sunday school comes in addition to others who are older. . . .

"But our work is only beginning. I see so many who must be brought into the mission—like in India we must literally bring them on Sunday morning until they get the Sunday school habit. . . .

"I wish you could see the field of our mission—among railroads and factories, a little residence district—without flowers and in California!"

"City Mission," *The Mennonite*, June 16, 1910, p. 4.

"We now have here in Los Angeles, Calif., services Sunday morning and Sunday evening. Our morning service is a 'Children's Bible Meeting.' . . .

"Some of the boys come in just as they are on the street—bare feet and bare heads, wearing only shirt and overalls. Their faces not at all presentable if it were not for the smiles on them. . . . One boy's name is Angel but he does not look it;



Interior of the River Station Mission

Photo: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies