

Genealogy Project Update

64,000+ names in database

The number of names in the Genealogical Registry and Database of Mennonite Ancestry (GRANDMA for short) has now passed the 64,000 mark. Most of the entries are for Mennonite Brethren families who migrated from Russia to the United States in the 1870s and 1880s. Also included are about two-thirds of the persons listed in the 1835 Molotschna Colony census. The committee continues to focus on adding data for persons who lived prior to 1900.

The GRANDMA database is now available for the public to use during regular hours at the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Fresno. The database is loaded on the Society's new Pentium computer and uses the advanced and user-friendly "Brother's Keeper" software. Center staff members are available to help users unfamiliar with Brother's Keeper. Society members may print reports from the database in a variety of standard genealogical formats at a nominal cost. Members may also download portions of the database to disc for use on another copy of Brother's Keeper or other GEDCOM-compatible genealogy software. Non-members of the Society are welcome to use the database and print ancestor charts, but all other printing and downloading privileges are reserved for Society members.

Russian and Prussian records

For years Mennonite genealogists feared that most records about our ancestors during the Russian period were irretrievably lost, and that many of those family lines would never be completed. Since the fall of the Soviet Union some of these records thought to be lost have been uncovered. The best known example is the 1835 Molotschna census, but it appears that other equally important records may soon become available. Obtaining these records and entering them into GRANDMA is a major focus of the Genealogy Project Committee.

Much information exists about Mennonites in Prussia from 1770 until their migration to Russia. The data is not arranged by family groups, but rather is a chronological record of births, baptisms, marriages and deaths. Committee member Alan Peters is painstakingly transcribing this data from microfilmed congregational records and organizing it into family groups. He has completed all records through the year 1794. This huge task has never been done by anyone before, and may well take Alan several more years to finish. Eventually he will connect with the first census of Mennonites in Russia (1808) as reflected in Benjamin H. Unruh's well-known book, *Die Niederländisch-niederdeutschen Hintergründe der mennonitischen Ostwanderungen im 16., 18. und 19. Jahrhundert*. A comparison of the Prussian records with this 1808 census should allow for a fairly complete genealogical picture of the earliest Mennonite settlers in the Mol-

otschna.

Committee members have also investigated Lutheran and Catholic church record books in the area of Prussia where Mennonites lived. They have found many Mennonite names recorded there, a practice that probably was required by law. Some of these records pre-date Mennonite records by one hundred years, so the committee is hopeful of taking some family lines back almost to the Dutch period with these records.

Name merging program

A major obstacle that has inhibited the growth of our database is its inability to find duplicate entries in merged databases. We have much information on diskettes that has been contributed by other genealogists, but until now we have not been able to merge that data with our main database. The official GRANDMA database still represents largely the work of Alan Peters.

Recently, Genealogy Project Committee member Jay Hubert of San Rafael, California, has helped develop software to link duplicate entries in merged databases. We have not received this new software yet, but are told that it has been tested and that it works very well. This promises to accelerate the growth of GRANDMA in the coming months.

The committee needs your help

The work of the Committee now focuses on three areas: organizing the activities of Low German genealogists throughout North America and communicating with them as regularly as possible, obtaining more Russian records, and responding to requests from interested persons desiring family information. These activities are progressing, but we need two things if we are to continue moving in these directions: volunteers and money.

There are several areas in which volunteers can give very meaningful assistance to the project, including data entry, data processing, and responding to mail. Anyone who wishes to help in these ways should contact Jeff Wall at 563 E. Salem Ave., Fresno, CA 93720.

The need for money is also a pressing one. The new computer equipment was purchased mostly through regular Historical Society funds, and special donations are needed to offset this unusually large purchase and thus allow the Society to continue its other regular projects and events. The committee is also incurring expenses for publishing a project handbook, postage and long-distance telephone charges. Finally, we anticipate that there will be costs in acquiring new genealogical resources that may become available in Russian archives. These combined items will cost several thousand dollars. Anyone who is interested in making financial contributions that will help move this work forward more swiftly should send them to the Society at 4824 E. Butler, Fresno, CA 93727.

Jeff Wall