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West Coast MCC: A Brief Overview of its Origins, Development and Activities

West Coast Mennonites, and particularly those in California, have been closely involved with the work of Mennonite Central Committee since its beginnings in 1920. California Mennonites played significant roles in the events leading up to MCC's founding in the years immediately following World War I, and remained closely involved in the decades after its creation.

As early as 1917, California Mennonites gathered to discuss the plight of their fellow church members in Russia and to discuss how they might address this situation. In 1919, two California Mennonites, Martin B. Fast and Wilhelm P. Neufeld, accompanied a shipment of relief supplies to Siberia. They did so one year before MCC sent its first relief workers to Russia. Mennonites in the Reedley area conducted the first "MCC relief sale" in 1922, over twenty years before such events were to become commonplace. In the late 1940s, West Coast Mennonites did their share in helping to create a network of Mennonite mental hospitals across the United States. In 1975 West Coast MCC became the first formally organized regional MCC office in the United States. Though far removed from Akron, Pennsylvania, West Coast Mennonites have played an integral part in planning for, giving birth to, and developing Mennonite Central Committee.

In recognition of MCC's seventy-fifth anniversary, this issue of the Bulletin offers glimpses of MCC work on the West Coast. While not a complete history of MCC West Coast, these snapshots from the past suggest the depth of concern and support among Mennonites of this region for the work of MCC.

-Kevin Enns-Rempel

February 1917

In the March 8, 1917 issue of *Christlicher Bundesbote*, Otto Lichti reports on an informal meeting in Reedley regarding the immigration of Mennonites from Russia. Wilhelm P. Neufeld, a member of the Reedley First Mennonite Church and himself a recent immigrant from Rus-

sia, spoke at this meeting on the unfortunate experiences of these Mennonites since the beginning of World War I.

After Neufeld's presentation, a committee was elected to arrange the purchase of land in southeastern Arizona on which to settle these Russian Mennonites. All interested persons were asked to buy a section of this land at \$3.00 an acre, which they would then re-sell to the Russian immigrants at the same price. The committee reported that there was a plan to build a large dam in this area for irrigation purposes. If enough local Mennonites were to cooperate with such a plan, the immigration problem for the Russian Mennonites would be solved.

For whatever reasons, this plan seems never to have appeared in the Mennonite press again. Large-scale immigration was impossible during the war, and restrictive United States immigration policies after the war made the success of this plan doubtful. Furthermore, the situation in Russia delayed any significant Mennonite migration until well into the 1920s. Though in retrospect the plan had little hope of success, it does mark perhaps the earliest West Coast Mennonite response to the plight of Mennonites in Russia. Such responses from Mennonites across the country finally resulted in the establishment of Mennonite Central Committee in 1920.

1919

In early 1919, Martin B. Fast, a member of the Zion Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church near Dinuba, received a letter from Siberia describing the desperate need for clothing among Mennonites in that region. Fast issued a call for assistance, and local Mennonites responded by gathering large quantities of clothing, eventually filling fifty-two sea chests. In early summer of 1919, Fast and his relief cargo left San Francisco on the *Shinyo Maru*.

While Fast waited in Vladivostok for his shipment to clear customs, Mennonites in Reedley commissioned Wilhelm P. Neufeld to join him on the relief mission. Neufeld sailed in August and caught up with Fast in Vladivostok. After an overland journey of over four thousand miles, the pair reached the Mennonite settlements in Siberia, where they distributed the clothing. Their mission accomplished, they turned homeward, arriving back in Reedley on November 25, 1919.

Almost immediately upon his return, Fast began traveling to Mennonite churches on the West Coast and in the Midwest, reporting on conditions among Mennonites in Siberia and requesting additional aid. Neufeld, in addition to visiting some churches as well, wrote a lengthy account of their mission, which appeared in serialized form in both *Mennonitische Rundschau* and *Der Wahrheitsfreund*. Their message was important in raising awareness among North American Mennonites about the plight of their sisters and brothers in the Soviet Union, and helped encourage the various local groups that would eventually form Mennonite Central Committee.

January 4, 1920

While traveling through the Midwest after his Siberian relief mission, M. B. Fast attends the organizational meeting of the Emergency Relief Committee of the Mennonites of North America, a precursor of Mennonite Central Committee. He is elected general secretary for that organization.

June 20, 1920

Representatives from the Mennonite Brethren, General Conference and Krimmer Mennonite Brethren churches in the Reedley area gather at the Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church to discuss the needs of Mennonites in the Soviet Union. After hearing several first-hand accounts of the situation there, the group agrees to appoint one member from each congregation to a committee that will address the needs of Mennonites in the Soviet Union and help coordinate a response to it. The committee consists of chairman B. B. Reimer (Mennonite Brethren), secretary Wilhelm P. Neufeld (General Conference) and treasurer M. B. Fast (Krimmer Mennonite Brethren). It was agreed that the first project of the committee would be to gather information and investigate the possibility of these Russian Mennonites immigrating to South America.

September 1920

A delegation of Russian Mennonites consisting of Benjamin H. Unruh, A. A. Friesen, Kornelius Warkentin and J. J. Esau arrive in California to inform Mennonites there of the situation in Russia and to explore options for immigration. Members of the delegation speak in Lodi, Reedley, Dinuba, Paso Robles, Shafter, Bakersfield, Los An-

geles and Upland. The group also visits potential settlement sites in Madera County and Kern County with Mennonite land agent Julius Siemens. As with earlier immigration proposals, external circumstances prevented any Russian Mennonites from coming to California at this time.

June 1921

Mennonites in Reedley organize an immigration society for the purpose of buying 115,000 acres of land in Mexico. The land is intended for a settlement to include Mennonites from both Russia and the United States. While some Russian Mennonites did migrate to Mexico during the 1920s, it does not appear that this California society ever purchased its land or otherwise played a significant role in relocating Russian Mennonites to Mexico.

June 30, 1922

Local Mennonites gather at the farm of John K. Warkentin on Road 56 near Avenue 116 south of Reedley for an auction to raise money for Russian Mennonite relief. The auction raises \$1750, most of which is cabled to Russia the following day for use by MCC workers there. Today, this event is recognized as the first Mennonite Relief Sale in North America.

December 1924

The three Mennonite churches in the Reedley area donate about five tons of dried fruit for the starving people of Germany. The Raisin Association of California agrees to prepare and pack the fruit free of charge. This apparently marks the first time that West Coast Mennonite relief efforts were directed at a group other than Russian Mennonites.

1946

After its first flurry of activity in the early 1920s, MCC went into dormancy until the demands of World War II brought it back into existence. This also seems to have been true on the West Coast. There is little evidence of inter-Mennonite relief activity in this region until 1946, when an MCC Clothing Center is established in Reedley.

In the spring of that year a three-person delegation from the main MCC offices in Akron, Pennsylvania, comes to Reedley to help establish the new West Coast center. Ann Snyder, a member of the Akron delegation remains in Reedley to serve as the center's first director, which originally is located in a cement block building on the campus of Immanuel High School. She holds that position until 1948.

1947

In 1947 Mennonite Central Committee opens a regional office in Reedley to facilitate its programs on the West Coast and to provide a closer link with the constituency there. Arthur Jost serves as the first administrator of the West Coast Regional Office.

Also in that year, MCC appoints a West Coast planning and advisory committee to study the possibility of establishing a mental hospital in that region. The committee, consisting of H. R. Martens and D. C. Krehbiel of Reedley and Sam Eicher of Salem, Oregon, reported to Mennonite Mental Health Services, a branch of MCC.

Spring 1948

Land for a Mennonite mental hospital near Reedley is purchased in the spring of 1948. Because of the property's close proximity to the Kings River, the future institution is given the name "King's View."

Summer 1949

Mennonite Central Committee establishes a voluntary service unit at Camp Paivika, a camp for crippled children in the San Bernardino Mountains of southern California. Each unit member serves as a counselor and cares for four to six children during each two-week camp. MCC continues this project for several years.

November 20, 1949

The groundbreaking ceremony for King's View Hospital takes place in November 1949. Mennonite Central Committee Chairman Peter C. Hiebert and California Mental Health Commissioner Frank Tallman give the main addresses at this event.

April 1950

The first issue of the *West Coast Regional Newsletter* is published in April 1950. Intended to give "news of special interest to the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ constituency in the West Coast area," its first editor is Arlene Sitler. In the mid-1960s this publication came to be known as the *Reedley Monthly*; today it appears under the title *West Coast Memo*.

Spring 1950

The MCC West Coast Regional Office reports that plans are underway to establish a Mennonite Central Committee unit to work among migrant farm laborers near Winton, California. A committee consisting of members from local Mennonite churches works to provide housing, transportation and teaching supplies for this project. This MCC work among migrant farm workers would eventu-

ally focus in the Coalinga-Huron area in western Fresno County, and continued there for several years.

February 11, 1951

King's View Hospital is dedicated in February 1951. The program begins at the Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church, where Rev. J. B. Toews gives a message. From there the program moves to the hospital grounds, where Dr. Ralph Gladden, superintendent of the Modesto State Hospital, offers greetings from the state of California. Doctor H. A. Fast of Newton, Kansas, Vice-Chairman of MCC, gives the dedicatory message. The building was completed at a cost of \$90,000.

1953

West Coast MCC staff members begin operating the ambulance service for the Reedley ambulance district after private local service there is discontinued. A non-profit organization called the Sequoia Safety Council takes over the administration of the ambulance service, and asks MCC workers to operate it for them.

January 1955

The MCC Clothing Center and West Coast Regional Office moves into a new building at 1600 I Street in Reedley. The Clothing Center had previously been located in the basement of a medical building on West Avenue. The facilities there were extremely crowded and generally inappropriate. The new building measures 30' x 70' with a concrete floor and corrugated aluminum walls and roof.

1965

Norman and Eunice Wingert become the new directors of West Coast MCC.

March 4, 1966

The West Coast Relief Committee discusses the possibility of organizing a relief sale for MCC on the West Coast. West Coast MCC Director Norman Wingert is asked to explore the idea in more detail.

May 1966

Otto Jost is appointed to organize a West Coast relief sale.

April 20, 1968

The first West Coast Mennonite Relief Sale takes place at Richland Packing Co. between Reedley and Dinuba. Approximately five thousand persons attend the event, and total proceeds for MCC amount to \$17,600.

September 10, 1968

Mennonite Central Committee establishes a Social Concerns Committee "to look further into the needs of the people in West Fresno." In 1969 MCC volunteer Vernon King is assigned to this project, which focuses on improving race relations, community service projects and housing assistance for the residents of West Fresno. This project soon evolved into a separate corporation, known as "Concerns Enterprises, Inc." This organization focused most of its efforts in housing rehabilitation and homeowner assistance programs throughout Fresno.

Summer 1969

West Coast MCC completes a new building to house its soapmaking project and warehouse facilities. The new facilities are a great help to the soapmaking project, begun by Otto B. Reimer of Reedley several years earlier.

September 1970

Otto and Rachel Jost are appointed as directors of the West Coast MCC, replacing Norman and Eunice Wingert. Rachel Jost continues as sole director for a short time after her husband's death in 1973.

Summer 1974

A Presbyterian church in Hoopa, California asks West Coast MCC for assistance in a ministry of outreach and caring on the Hoopa Valley Indian Reservation in northwestern California. The West Coast office establishes a six-person unit to help in educational and recreational programs sponsored by the Presbyterian church and to work in medical and tribal projects in the community. This project continues until 1979.

Also during the summer of 1974, Ken Neufeld becomes the new director of West Coast MCC.

January 17-18, 1975

The MCC Annual Meeting in Winnipeg, Manitoba approves the establishment of West Coast MCC, the first separately organized regional MCC body in the United States. Though a West Coast MCC office had existed for almost thirty years, that office had up to this time functioned as a branch office of the main MCC headquarters in Akron, Pennsylvania. Under the new arrangement, West Coast functioned as an independent organization, with its own Executive Committee and annual assembly with elected delegates.

Evidently this new entity on the West Coast, far away from the main office in Akron, was a source of concern to some MCC officials. They seemed to have feared that this might lead the West Coast constituency to pull away into

its own organization, and that other regions would follow suit, weakening the effectiveness of MCC. While other regions did follow the West Coast's lead in creating their own regional MCC organizations, the feared disintegration did not occur. Indeed, many observers believe that the existence of regional MCC programs has served to strengthen the overall effectiveness of MCC, and has kept local support stronger than if all administration had remained on the East Coast.

June 1977

The West Coast Mennonite Men's Chorus is organized, patterned after the successful Kansas Mennonite Men's Chorus. The original board consists of Leon Thiessen, Dietrich Friesen, Walter Friesen, Robert Plett, Lewis Clasen, Robert Toevs, Leroy Enns, Lowell Bergman, Spud Heinrichs, and Eldon Franz.

April 1, 1978

The West Coast Mennonite Men's Chorus, under the direction of Dietrich Friesen, presents its first annual concert at the Fresno Convention Center Theater. All donations at the concert go toward the West Coast Mennonite Relief Sale and the work of MCC.

Summer 1978

Paul Quiring is appointed as temporary director of the West Coast MCC office.

September 23, 1973

Mennonites in Washington hold their first annual relief sale and auction on the grounds of the Menno Mennonite Church near Ritzville, Washington. Over three hundred persons attend the event, which nets over \$6500 for MCC. The event has continued annually since 1973 and is now known as the "Mennonite Country Auction."

March 1979

The West Coast Mennonite Central Committee, Inc. is registered as a California corporation, the first regional MCC office to receive such a designation.

August 25, 1979

At its August board meeting, West Coast MCC establishes a special committee on the developmentally disabled. The committee, consisting of Silas Bartsch, Carl Loewen, Wilfred Martens, Marlene Penner and John Schantz, is to survey the needs of developmentally disabled persons and prepare a specific program recommendation.

April 1980

Total proceeds from the West Coast Mennonite Relief Sale surpass \$100,000 for the first time.

October 1980

Lynn Roth assumes the directorship of West Coast MCC.

November 13-15, 1981

The West Coast Developmental Disabilities Committee, which became a full board of West Coast MCC earlier in 1981, conducts its first retreat for developmentally disabled persons and their families near Oakhurst, California. Another such retreat took place November 21-22 at Turner, Oregon.

The Developmental Disabilities Committee eventually helps bring into existence Oregon Mennonite Residential Services and Central California Mennonite Residential Services, which each operate several residential programs for developmentally disabled persons.

April 1982

The West Coast Mennonite Relief Sale moves from Richland Packing Co. to the campus of Fresno Pacific College, where it has remained since that time.

March 1984

At the request of the Greater Los Angeles Mennonite Council, MCC U.S. and West Coast MCC hire a half-time staff person to work with immigration concerns on behalf of the Los Angeles-area Mennonite congregations. An office for this program is set up in Glendale.

October 13, 1984

Mennonites in Oregon sponsor the first "Oregon Fall Festival" at the Polk County Fairgrounds at Rickreall, Oregon. The event includes an auction and fun run that nets over \$15,000 for MCC, in addition to \$4,500 in Self Help sales.

November 1984

West Coast MCC sells the material aid center building and purchases a new building on G Street in downtown Reedley. The building is remodeled with the help of local volunteers, and when completed houses the West Coast MCC offices, the material aid center, the Reedley Gift 'n' Nearly New Shop and the quilting center.

October 1985

Stephen Penner is appointed as the new director of West Coast MCC.

1992

West Coast MCC establishes a Refugee and Immigrant Issues program. Staff person Mary Elizondo takes responsibility for relating to refugees and immigrants primarily within the West Coast MCC constituency.

Summer 1993

The Portland Learning, Outreach and Worship (PLOW) program is established in Portland, Oregon. Under this program, groups of young people come to Portland to do service projects and reflect on their experiences in light of their Christian faith.

Revelations From the Past: A Guide to the Use of the 1835 Census

In the last issue of the *Bulletin*, I described the information contained in the recently-discovered 1835 census of the Molotschna Mennonite Colony in South Russia. Since more information regarding the actual census entries is now becoming available, in this issue I will begin discussing how the family researcher can use the census itself in genealogical research.

The first step for the researcher is to make sure, to the fullest extent possible, that the ancestor in question actually lived in the Molotschna in 1835. While this seems to be a clear-cut matter, it may be more complicated than you think!

For example, the census does *not* record the existence of the village of Gnadenfeld. That village was established in 1835 by a large and important migration of Mennonites, largely from the Neumark area of Prussia. Unfortunately, it appears that they arrived only weeks after the census was taken! This excludes an important group of people—from whom many present-day Mennonites in the United States are descended—from the potential bonanza of information that the census would have provided, had it been taken a few weeks later.

For example, the family of Peter Becker, the father of early Mennonite Brethren leaders Jacob P. Becker and Benjamin Bekker, is unfortunately not recorded in the census. This leaves the parentage of Peter Becker still in doubt. If the census had been taken a few weeks later, it would have