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A Centennial History of Mennonites in the Paso Robles Area

In 1897 a group of Mennonites in the Paso Robles area of San Luis Obispo County established the first recognized Mennonite congregation in California. Though Mennonites had been in the state on a permanent basis since at least 1886, this event marked a significant milestone in the development of a Mennonite presence in California.

In the fall of 1997 the First Mennonite Church of Paso Robles celebrated its centennial. In honor of that event, Phyllis Bergman and Robert Toevs prepared a congregational history entitled History of the Mennonites in the Paso Robles Area. The following article is adapted from that history.

In 1893 Jacob Hege and his family came to the United States. Jacob had visited the country previously and had seen several settlements of Mennonites in different states. He had been a farmer in Bavaria, and consequently was anxious to find a suitable location for farming in the United

States.

Having been a successful farmer, Hege had no reason to leave his homeland in order to better himself financially. Since the Mennonites of South Germany, however, were not accorded exemption from military service, Hege decided to emigrate so that his sons would not have to go into the army.

The Hege family made their new home in a small Mennonite settlement at Wisner, Nebraska. The Mennonites there had a congregation, but no pastor. During the years they lived at Wisner, Hege served as that group's pastor.

Through his son-in-law, Dr. Jacob Horsch, who lived in Los Angeles, Hege became interested in California. Doctor Horsch had become acquainted with a Mr. Brunner, whose company had thousands of acres of land for sale in San Luis Obispo County. Rev. Hege decided to travel there to see the farming conditions.

In March 1896 Rev. Hege wrote a letter to the Mennonite newspaper *Christlicher Bundesbote*, describing his trip to California during the months of January and February 1896. He had traveled through several different areas and had found that there were several areas that would be suitable for settlement. One such area was located about two hundred miles south of San Francisco, eight to ten miles from the ocean, and six to fifteen miles from the railroad. Hege commented that the coastal area of California had a healthy, mild climate that would be good for elderly or sickly persons. He also thought that the land would be very suitable for farming. Hege wrote that he hoped to hear by May 15 from any other Mennonites who might be interested in this land, since negotiations to buy it needed to be made by July 1.

Jacob Claassen, a resident of Beatrice, Nebraska, read Hege's letter. He, too, had come to the United States so that his sons would not have to serve in the German army. The Claassens had lived in West Prussia. They arrived in New York on October 5, 1888, and then traveled by train to



Elizabeth and Jacob Hege

Beatrice.

Claassen wrote to Rev. Hege, and in June 1896 the two men traveled together to San Francisco. From there Mr. Brunner took them to San Miguel, and they looked at land both east and west of the Salinas River. Hege liked the



Johanna and Aron J. Wiebe

Estrella plains (east and northeast of Paso Robles), but Claassen preferred the Godfrey Ranch (northwest of Paso Robles and now know as Heritage Ranch). Claassen decided to rent several thousand acres there. The two men returned to Nebraska by way of Los Angeles and began preparations to move to California. They also looked for others to move with them.

In October 1896 the Heges, Claassens and two other families packed their belongings on a train. In addition to their furniture and personal belongings, they brought horses, cows, pigs, poultry, wagons and farm equipment. Henry and Abe Claassen, the two oldest sons of Jacob and Anna Claassen, took care of the livestock during the journey. The entire group arrived in San Miguel on November 1, 1896.

The two other families who decided to move to California were Gerhard and Helene Schroeder, and Edwin and Lina Leisy. The Schroeders settled at Godfrey Ranch with the Claassens and the Leisys at Estrella with the Heges. Other families arrived

in the following months. Others coming to Estrella were Samuel and Anna Hunsinger, Heinrich and Mary Hodel, and Heinrich and Barbara Hege. Those who settled at Godfrey Ranch included Herman and Maria Giesbrecht, and Kornelius and Anna Tiahr. Also coming from Beatrice in the fall of 1897 were Aron and Maria Wiebe, and Johannes and Lisette Thimm. They settled in the nearby Adelaida area. In early 1898 they were followed by the families of Johannes and Katherine Hamm, and Johannes J. and Elizabeth Dueck. These two families settled in the Castle Rock area, between Adelaida and Godfrey Ranch. Several single men also moved to these areas.

Wherever Mennonites settled, they always held Sunday services. Since they were a small group, these families met at first in homes. As more families arrived, homes were too small for services, and so they began meeting at the Wellsona school house, about five miles north of Paso Robles. This location was about midway between the two groups.

The Mennonites in the Paso Robles area were served by two ministers: Rev. Jacob Hege as elder and Rev. Aron J. Wiebe as assistant. In November 1897 the two groups of settlers decided to formally become a General Conference Mennonite congregation. Reverend Hege, Rev. Wiebe and Jacob Claassen were appointed to draw up a constitution.

In 1898 the congregation decided to erect a church building on the San Marcos Ranch near Chimney Rock (about a quarter mile west of the Nacimiento Lake Road and Chimney Rock Road intersection). Elizabeth Dyck and Agnetha Claassen loaned the congregation \$500 for construction costs. The building was dedicated on October 23, 1898.

The location of the new building made a shorter distance for the Godfrey Ranch-Adelaida group to travel, but a longer distance for the Estrella group. The latter began meeting in an adobe church building located on Airport Road. (It is still in existence and has been restored). About



The San Marcos Mennonite Church, 1923

Photo: Mennonite Library & Archives, North Newton, Kansas

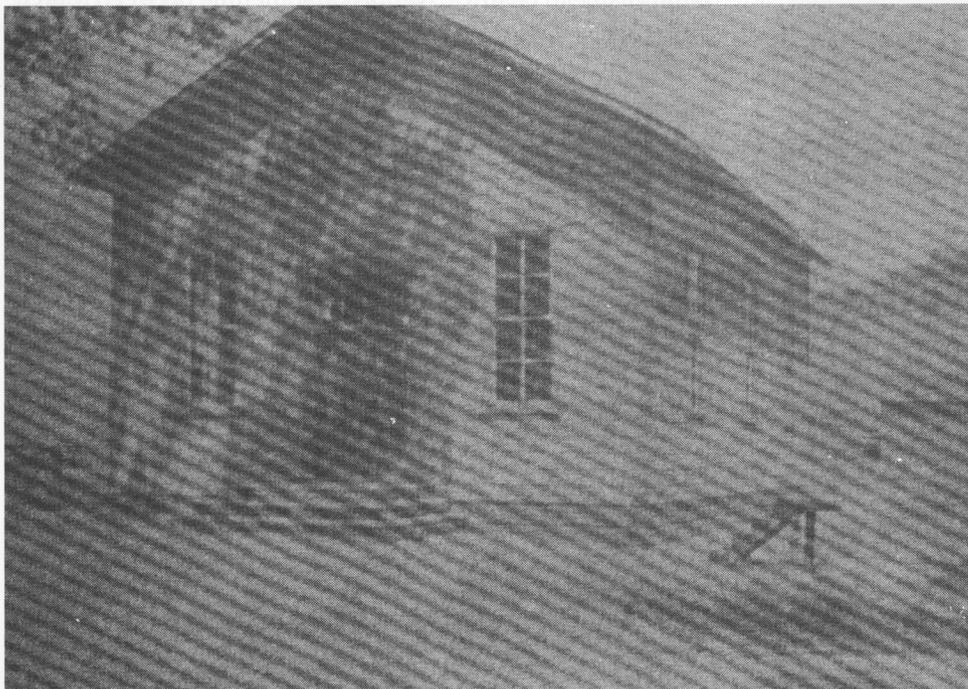
once a month the two groups met as one.

The two ministers, Hege and Wiebe, worked as farmers during the week to support themselves and their families. They did not receive compensation from the congregation. At first they took turns preaching the Sunday sermons. After the two groups began meeting separately, the ministers requested that assistants be appointed. John K. Lichti was chosen for the Estrella group and Frank F. Jantzen for the Godfrey Ranch/Adelaida group.

For various reasons, including travel distance and cultural differences, there were disagreements between the two groups. As a result the Estrella group organized itself separately in the fall of 1903, and began meeting in the town of Paso Robles.

The Paso Robles group bought land at 24th and Spring Streets, where the Flamson Middle School now stands. They cut their old building into sections to move it, and reassembled it on the new site. The building was dedicated the following year. The congregation incorporated itself in 1905 as the Mennonite Church of Paso Robles. There was preaching and Sunday school every Sunday both in town and in a schoolhouse three miles east of Estrella. This made it more convenient for some families. The Godfrey Ranch-Adelaida group continued to meet at the San Marcos Church, and organized itself as a congregation in the spring of 1904. Both congregations were affiliated with the General Conference Mennonite Church.

During the following years several families from both groups moved away. Three families of the San Marcos congregation and nine families from the Paso Robles congregation moved to Aberdeen, Idaho, including Rev.



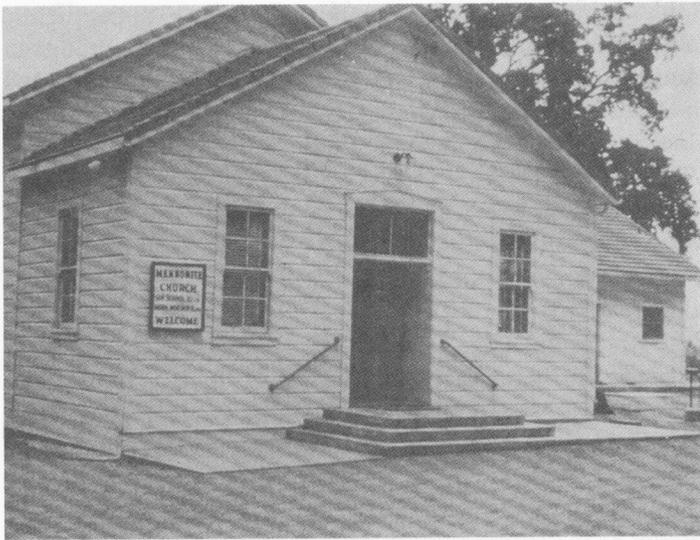
Mennonite Church of Paso Robles at 24th and Spring Streets

Jacob Hege. John K. Lichti became the minister of the Paso Robles congregations after Rev. Hege left. In 1913 the Lichti family moved to Madera, and the church was left without a minister. Guest ministers would preach whenever possible, or one of the deacons would read a sermon. In 1915 Rev. Hege returned and again became the minister. He retired in 1920. His son, Christian Hege, who had moved to the Paso Robles area in 1919, then became the minister. When he retired in 1944, the congregation called Rev. Orlo Kaufman.

Meanwhile, several families from the San Marcos congregation moved to the Willow Creek area, southwest of Paso Robles. In 1909 the San Marcos congregation decided to hold services occasionally in the Summit School near there. In the spring of 1911, the San Marcos church building was taken apart and rebuilt on property donated by Abraham Claassen at the corner of Vineyard Drive and Dover Canyon Road. The newly-located congregation became known as the Willow Creek Mennonite Church. Reverend Aron J. Wiebe continued to serve as minister of the Willow Creek congregation until his death in 1922. Frank F. Jantzen served as minister until 1946. He was assisted for a time by David D. Schultz. In 1946 Rev. W. Harley King accepted the call to minister the Willow Creek church.

The transition to the use of English in the Paso Robles church began in 1921. At that time the congregation added an English sermon once a month during the evening service. In 1929 the congregation agreed to have English preaching twice a month in the morning. In 1936 they decided to have a German sermon only on the first Sunday of each month, and to use English at all other times. Finally in 1942 the decision was made to have all services in English. The Willow Creek church decided in 1935 to have both a German and English sermon each Sunday. After several years, German services were reduced to one per month and later replaced by all English services. Both congregations kept one or two German Sunday school classes for many years after the move to English-only services.

The Willow Creek group enlarged its building in 1922 and 1935. In 1951-1952 a fellowship hall was added. Meanwhile, in 1924 the Paso Robles school board began looking for a site for a new high school. The board finally decided on a site that included the Paso Robles Mennonite Church property. The church sold its building to the school board and moved to its present location. In 1948-1949 this building was extended to the south. The addition was used for Sunday school rooms and additional



Willow Creek Mennonite Church

seating in the main auditorium. Early in the 1960s construction was begun on a new building. It was dedicated on April 14, 1963. The old building was then used for Sunday school rooms and a fellowship hall.

On a January morning in 1966, telephone calls spread the word that the Willow Creek church building was on fire. Some things, such as the Hammond organ and a piano, were saved, but the structure itself was lost. The congregation held several meetings to decide whether or not to rebuild. Since many of the members were middle-aged or older and there were few young families, they finally decided by majority vote not to rebuild. Instead they asked to merge with the First Mennonite Church of Paso Robles. After meetings of representatives from both groups, the merger took place with a special service in September 1966.

The Mennonites of Paso Robles—whether as separate congregations or a single group—have been involved in giving and praying for Conference missions, missionaries, and Mennonite Central Committee relief work. They have also been involved in Mennonite Disaster Service work through physical labor and financial support. The Willow Creek Church was involved with one service per month at the county jail for many years. Both congregations were involved with a camping program—first at Lake Sequoia and now at Camp Keola. The church also sponsors the Rainbow Bright Christian Preschool. For many years the church held services in a local nursing home twice a month. A five-minute message entitled “Light for the Way” is aired every Sunday morning on a local radio station. Individuals within the congregation have done many other things, including serving as a Blood Bank representative, driving for Meals-on-Wheels, and taking clothing to the Hopi mission in Arizona.

The Mennonites of Paso Robles have never been large in

numbers, but have had an impact on the community that will never be fully known here on Earth. Many lives have been touched and influenced by what these Mennonites have done. Our prayer is to continue to serve God in whatever he calls us to do, not in our own strength, but in his strength and with his help.

Biographical sketches of early Mennonite settlers in the Paso Robles region

Most of the following brief biographical sketches are drawn from Phyllis Bergman's and Robert Toevs' History of the Mennonites in the Paso Robles Area. The sketches of the Leisy, Lichti and Hege families are from Bill Dellard and Barbara Dellard, eds., Centennial Family Memories: Paso Robles, California (Paso Robles: The Daily Press, 1989).

Reverend Aron Wiebe was born in West Prussia and moved to the Trakt, a Mennonite settlement east of the Volga River in Russia, possibly in the late 1860s. He married **Maria Fieguth**, whose family also lived in the Trakt region. They had six children—Gerhard, Anna (Mrs. F. F. Jantzen), Jacob, Henry, Katherine (Mrs. E. H. Schroeder), and Marie. Maria Fieguth Wiebe died in 1891. In 1893 Rev. Wiebe married **Johanna Fieguth Bergmann**, Maria's sister. The Wiebe family came to Beatrice, Nebraska, sometime between March and June of 1896. In early fall 1897 they moved to the Adelaida area near Paso Robles. Their farm was near the junction of Klau (Adelaida) Road and Chimney Rock Road. The Wiebes made their land payments to the land agent, but he did not give those payments to the land company, nor did he give the Wiebes receipts. As a result, they lost the land in the early 1900s. The Wiebes then moved to the Oak Flat area, where they lived for about a year. They later bought property in the Union area, where they farmed together with their son, Henry. There were two houses on the property, so each family had its own home. In 1913 A. J. Wiebe sold the land to Frank J. Ernst, though it is still known as the “Wiebe place.” The Wiebe family then moved to Paso Robles, where they lived in a small home just south of Pacific Avenue. There they raised chickens and sold eggs. In 1918 or 1919 a small house was built on the John Bergman property on Willow Creek Road (now Vineyard Drive), and the Wiebes moved there. Reverend Wiebe died on May 11, 1922. Mrs. Wiebe continued living on Willow Creek Road until her death on November 15, 1931.

In 1893, **Jacob Hege** and wife **Elizabeth** and their twelve children migrated to Wisner, Nebraska, from Germany. In