

California Mennonite

HISTORICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN

No. 56 • Fall 2012



Peter Pankratz (left), grandfather of Carl Pankratz (far left), left his South Russia homeland for Kansas in 1886. His descendants continued to live in Kansas and Oklahoma until the dust storms of the 1930s forced their migration to California.

With the expansion of the Great Northern Railway Center, Carl Pankratz' parents, Abraham M. and Elizabeth (Froese) Pankratz, left Oklahoma to seek new opportunities for farming in Chinook, a small town in the north central part of Montana. It was in Chinook where Carl was born, but the family moved back to Cordell, Oklahoma, in 1919 when he was only six months old. In spite of struggles with droughts, grasshoppers, and crop failures, farmers managed to make a living in Oklahoma until dust storms in the early 1930s ravaged the soil and left much of the area unfit for farming. In 1937 the Pankratz family joined the crowds of people who left the Dust Bowl of Oklahoma to try to find their fortune in California.

From the Dust Bowl to California

The Life of Carl Pankratz

by Corinna Siebert Ruth

When Congress passed the Homestead Act in May 1862, a steady stream of settlers flowed into the Midwestern United States. Although it was known as the Great American Desert, the news of free land attracted people who were looking for an opportunity to purchase their own farms. The advent of the railroad, which was expanded to the Midwest by the 1870s, opened wide farming areas for settlement, and gave farmers the ability to ship their grain to market. Moreover, the Land-Grant Act awarded the even-numbered sections of land to the railroad and, in turn, allowed the railroad companies to sell excess land to the settlers. With millions of acres to sell, the railroad companies worked at a feverish pace, printing fliers for mass distribution throughout the eastern United States and as far away as Europe.

At this same time, in 1871, the Russian Czar, Alexander II, rescinded the manifesto in which Catherine the Great had granted a list of privileges to Mennonites in 1763. For Mennonites in Russia the loss of their privileges, such as their exemption from military service which the manifesto had granted to them in perpetuity, coupled with the Czar's

plan of Russianization of all citizens, was a devastating blow. When they were not able to receive an audience with the Czar, it became obvious to them that he would not grant them any concessions. Many of them believed that if they were to uphold their pacifistic beliefs and maintain control of the education of their young people, the only solution was to emigrate. By 1874 emigration fever ran high among the Mennonites in Russia. When the Czar realized that he was about to lose thousands of his most valuable farmers, he sent his emissary General Todtleben, but it was too late. The news of inexpensive or free land in the United States and Canada, where they would have the freedom to practice their religious beliefs, had filtered into their villages, and by 1874 the South Rus-

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sian Mennonites had joined a mass migration movement that would eventually number 18,000. The members of entire churches left for America en masse.

Peter Pankratz, grandfather of Carl Pankratz, did not leave his homeland in South Russia until 1886, however. It was not until after the death of his aging mother that he, too, decided to join his friends in America. In the meantime he was called to minister to the few remaining members of the Alexanderwohl congregation. Cornelius C. Klassen, grandfather of Mennonite historian Dr. Peter J. Klassen, was familiar with the Alexanderwohl congregation and

often attended their meetings in South Russia before and after the great migration. In his memoirs, Cornelius C. Klassen wrote:

When the inhabitants of Alexanderwohl left for America, about 100 members of the church remained. These now chose as their minister Jakob Richert, but he also soon left for America. During this time preachers from other churches served the Alexanderwohl congregation, and usually this was the minister Bernhard Harder.... David Epp organized a choir, and under the leadership of preachers Peter Pankratz and Abram Harder, we had regular Bible study meetings. Pankratz later moved to America, but his legacy of Bible study continued until World War I.¹

When Peter Pankratz eventually moved to America, he became one of the ministers of the Alexanderwohl Church near Goessel, Kansas, a church that was organized and named after the church its members left behind in Russia. Here, too, Peter Pankratz was instrumental in conducting Bible study as he had done in Russia. Later, he moved to Oklahoma where, over a period of time, he founded three General Conference Mennonite churches in Washita County: the Bergthal Church, the Herold Church, and the Sichar Church.

In 1914, Peter's son and daughter-in-law (Carl's parents) moved from Cordell, Oklahoma, to Chinook, Montana, where they had homesteaded their farm. It was there where Carl was born. Free land and the expansion of the Great Northern Railway Center attracted his family to Chinook, but the severe weather, which often dipped down to 60 degrees below



Carl Pankratz and his family in Oklahoma, just before they moved to California. Carl's parents, Abraham and Elizabeth (Froese) Pankratz, are in the front row on the right; Carl is in the back on the right, 1936. Credit: Photo courtesy of Sheila Pankratz Barnes

Carl Pankratz at home in Reedley, early 1940s. Credit: Photo courtesy of Sheila Pankratz Barnes



zero in the wintertime, and the primitive living conditions drove them back to Cordell in 1919. They had left most of their relatives in Oklahoma and were happy to be living near their extended family once more. Back in Cordell, the family attended the Sihar Church where Carl was baptized when he was thirteen years old.

Life and farming on the plains had its advantages. As was true in Russia, the soil was rich and productive, and Mennonite farmers thought it would yield good crops if they worked hard. Here, too, they were free to worship as they pleased and free to teach their children in their own way and in their own language. There were, however, disadvantages to farming in this harsh, rugged country. The weather was not dependable. In wet years the land produced a good yield, but in other years the rainfall was as low as twenty inches. Crop failures were frequent during those times, and, without modern irrigation, farmers often watched as their crops simply dried up in the sun.

The central plains region of

the United States had been covered with native grasses before the new settlers arrived. The buf-

“Carl remembers the dirt that was piled as high as the fences...”

falo grasses provided adequate grazing for the animals and also prevented the strong winds and rain from eroding the soil. Most

of the area was sown in wheat in the early 1920s due to the large demand for this grain. The central plains soon became known as the “breadbasket of America.” A massive amount of land was under cultivation, but the wheat left the soil with relatively little protection from the wind and rain, and, as a result, the soil began to shift.

Although there had been dust storms earlier, the most severe storms began in the early 1930s. During these devastating storms it was impossible to see more than a few feet, and people covered their faces with masks to protect their noses, throats, and lungs. When the storms receded, houses were almost hidden behind the drifts of dust that resembled snowdrifts.

Carl remembers the dirt that was piled as high as the fences and covered any evidence of a

fence line between the neighbor’s fields and theirs. One could see the dust storm in the sky in the form of a big cloud that brought



The winds of the Dust Bowl piled up large drifts of soil against this farmer’s barn near Liberal, Kansas. Arthur Rothstein, photographer, March 1936. Photo credit: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-USF34-002505-E

with it the dirt that often came all the way from Colorado. The red dirt of the Oklahoma countryside was miraculously transformed overnight to pale shades of yellow. Inside the house, dust slid from the windowsills that could contain no more of the fine, powdery soil. During the drought, temperatures would occasionally reach as high as 113 degrees Fahrenheit. Wells went dry, and chickens lay dead in the middle of the farmyard. The grass dried up in the fields, and feed for the cattle was extremely scarce. The cows became too weak to stand upright, and farmers tied them to a post so that they could stand while they were eating the meager food and drinking the little water that could be found. Out of pity for the animals and because of the desperation of the farmers, the government paid \$12 for each milk cow. Then the farmers shot the animals and dumped the carcasses in a canyon for the coyotes and birds to devour.

As the drought continued, many farmers left the region. Land was worthless, and families were forced to sell 160 acres of farmland with a house and farm buildings included for as little as \$100. When the Pankratz family moved to California in 1937, Carl's brother Abe Pankratz loaded the family in his own car that pulled a two-wheeled trailer, which allowed them to bring only the bare essentials. They had sold most of their goods at deplorable prices. Most items were auctioned at 5 cents or 10 cents apiece. An entire wagonload of tools and farm equipment would often sell for \$1.

Carl was seventeen years old when his family moved to Reedley. His oldest brother, Ed Pankratz, had already moved to Sanger, California, in 1932, where he was working as a mechanic in a garage. Henry Rose, a friend of Carl's father, helped the family arrange the rental of a house near

"[Carl] refers to his years with MDS as 'the best years of his life.'"

the city park in Reedley.

Jobs were hard to find, and Carl remembers when he dug ditches for irrigation pipelines to earn money. Ditch-digging was hard work in the hot sun. The family also found work picking cotton near Firebaugh. They had grown cotton in Oklahoma and were experienced cotton farmers. Carl remembers his mother picking cotton in Oklahoma when he was just a young child. He was placed on the cotton sack and dragged along behind as his mother worked her way down the cotton rows. Later they worked in the fruit business in the area around Reedley. They pruned grapes and peaches and also worked in the packing sheds.

In 1945 Carl, in partnership with his brother Abe, bought fif-

ty acres of open land that they planted in cotton. They also planted sweet potatoes to sell in nearby stores and open markets. The decision to grow sweet potatoes proved to be a fortunate business venture for Carl, for it brought a young woman to his doorstep. Carl hired Mildred Denniston to help him plant sweet potatoes, and three months later, on June 5, 1950, they were married. After their marriage they sold the acreage and moved to Reedley. Carl and Mildred were blessed with four children: Sheila, Mark, Eric, and Sharon.

Among other things, Carl had become interested in carpentry after he moved to Reedley. He built houses, drawing his own plans and doing the wiring and plumbing himself. By 1961 Carl and Mil-



Carl at work with Mennonite Disaster Service in Idaho, 1974. Credit: Photo courtesy of Sheila Pankratz Barnes

dred bought another cotton farm near Reedley that was incorporated with a chicken ranch, but Carl continued to work as a carpenter on the side. Mildred (known to her friends as Mickey) was busy working with as many as 4,000 chickens at one time.

Carl and his parents, along with many of his siblings, transferred their memberships from Sihar Mennonite Church in Cordell, Oklahoma, to First Mennonite Church in Reedley on May 8, 1941. In 1950, Carl became involved in Mennonite Disaster Service. He refers to his years with MDS as “the best years of his life.” His passion for helping other people was demonstrated in the work that he did for unfortunate families who had lost everything. In 1964, when Northern California, Oregon, and Washington experienced the most disastrous flood in their history, Mennonite Disaster Service could not respond adequately to those in dire need and consequently decided to reorganize into smaller geographical regions.² In January 1981, Carl Pankratz became chairperson of the region referred to as the Northern California Mennonite Disaster Service. He helped to organize workers and provide funding in order to help people who were the victims of disasters such as floods, earthquakes, windstorms, fires, and mud slides. He also assisted with the cleanup of the Coalinga earthquake. After a subsequent reorganization, Carl became the chairperson for MDS for the entire state of California. According to his wife, Mickey, when Carl became the chairperson, their home became a hotel for people who traveled from a distance to help with Mennonite Disaster Service.

Carl never forgot the difficult Dust Bowl days in Oklahoma. Working with Mennonite Disaster Service, he was able to empathize



Farmer and sons walking in the face of a dust storm. Cimarron County, Oklahoma. April, 1936. Arthur Rothstein, photographer. Photo credit: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USZ62-11491.

“Carl never forgot the difficult Dust Bowl days...”

with people who suffered the ravages of similar natural disasters. MDS provided him with the opportunity to help those people, and he gave much of his life and energy to those who were suffering. This kind of hard work and

endurance has rubbed off on succeeding generations of Dust Bowl immigrants. Their compassion for others has been an asset to many California churches and to the recipients of the work of Mennonite Disaster Service.

ABOUT THE ARTICLE

This article originally appeared in First Mennonite Church: Celebrating Our Centennial, 1906-2006: The Unfolding of Our Story, edited by Corinna Siebert Ruth (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2006).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Corinna Siebert Ruth is a writer who lives in Reedley, California, where she teaches Composition and Literature and Critical Thinking at Reedley College. She serves on the board of the California Mennonite Historical Society and is the church archivist for the First Mennonite Church in Reedley. She is the author of the historical novel Tread of the Pioneers, which was published in July and is reviewed in this issue.

ENDNOTES

¹ From the memoirs of Cornelius C. Klassen, grandfather of Mennonite historian Dr. Peter J. Klassen, Fresno, California. These memoirs are now in the archival holdings of the family of Corne-

lius C. Klassen, which are in the possession of Peter J. Klassen

² Ted Loewen, ed. *Reedley First Mennonite Church: The First Seventy-five Years* (North Newton, Kansas: Mennonite Press Inc., 1981), 82-83.