



150 Years — The Long and the Short of It

by Alan Peters

As most California Mennonites know, 2010 marks the 150th anniversary of both the Mennonite Brethren Church and the former General Conference Mennonite Church. Each conference was founded in 1860—a long time ago.

Perhaps it's my age (I'm nearing half of those 150 years myself), but somehow 150 years ago does not seem quite as ancient to me as it used to. For example, I still vividly remember, as a Tabor College student, attending the conference sessions in 1960 at Reedley where we officially celebrated the centennial of the Mennonite Brethren Church. My happy memories of that conference include the presence of my parents and grandparents. All four of my grandparents were still living at the time, and all four of them had connections to the earliest days of the Mennonite Brethren Church.

For example, the marriage ceremony of my Peters grandparents was performed by Elder Abraham Schellenberg, who was one of the early Mennonite Brethren elders, and who personally knew the original eighteen founders of the church. My grandfather's first wife, who died shortly after their marriage, was the niece of Jacob P. Becker, one of the eighteen.

There are even more connections on my mother's side of the family. My Grandmother Kasper's parents, Jacob and Helena (Janzen) Reimer were married in Kuban by Elder Heinrich Huebert, one of the eighteen and the first elder in the

Mennonite Brethren Church. This Helena (Janzen) Reimer was a niece of Jacob P. Becker, a niece of two of the other eighteen founders, and a step-granddaughter of yet another. My grandmother told me that she had frequent contact as a child with these relatives who were founders of the church.

A number of us in the California Mennonite Historical Society have made the journey to Ukraine, and have stood in the village of Elisabeththal, Molotschna, where the eighteen men and their wives and families met to make the difficult decision to separate from the established church. There are no homes or other structures left that date back to 1860, but only a few villages away, in the village of Rückenau, one can still visit the first Mennonite Brethren church building, constructed in 1883.

Despite wars and revolutions, and other ravages of time, it has

outlived many more recently-built Mennonite Brethren church buildings. Truly, one-hundred and fifty years is both a long time—and a short time—when you really stop to think about it.

The real clincher of the “shortness” of one-hundred and fifty years is this: There is at least one grandchild of a founder of the Mennonite Brethren Church still living. Henry W. Hodel currently resides in Northern California. He will turn ninety-nine in May, having been born on May 10, 1911, in Orienta, Oklahoma, to John L. and Helena (Becker) Hodel. Helena was a daughter of the same Jacob P. Becker mentioned above.

Thus, there are people alive today who are just a few steps removed from the people and events of one-hundred and fifty years ago. That makes distant history seem very close. Mr. Hodel is living proof.



The Mennonite Brethren church building, constructed in 1883 in Rückenau, Russia (now Ukraine.) It became the main center of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia. (Photo credit: Alan Peters.)