

# California Mennonite Historical Society Bulletin

No. 50

Spring 2009



*Five of the author's father's younger siblings, along with four of his nephews and nieces. The house is built of adobe bricks. (1961) left to right: Elizabeth (Enns) Dyck; Aganetha (Enns) Funk, deceased; the little boy in front of her is nephew Abram Martens, deceased; Anna (Enns) Rempel, holding niece Katharina Enns; Susana (Enns) Wiens; nephews Jacob Enns, Franz Enns; and Isaak Enns, a younger brother.*

## *Old Colony Mennonites of Mexico:* **A Separate People**

*by Katharine Enns*

The story of the mass migration of several thousand Old Colony Mennonites from Canada to Mexico in the 1920s is one of the most fascinating yet little-known chapters of Mennonite history. For decades this group remained largely unknown to the rest of the world, and as Walter Schmiedehaus, the German consul in Chihuahua, stated in 1948, "They are a people of many mysteries."<sup>1</sup> Old Colony Mennonites were the "quiet in the land," referring to themselves as "Strangers and Pilgrims" and avoiding exposure to the outside world wherever possible. The dynamics of this group are interesting but highly complex.

Old Colonists are a branch of the Russian Mennonites and share a common ancestry with other Mennonite groups in that they are also direct descendants of the Anabaptist movement that began in Europe in

the 1500s. This group practices a much more conservative way of life than most other Mennonite groups, and maintains a history of cloistered, modest living.

Historically, migration has played a significant role in the maintenance and perpetuation of Mennonite identity, and the move to Mexico was no exception. In fact, the Old Colony migration to Mexico fits into a long tradition of Mennonite migrations motivated largely by religious factors. For instance, the passing of the Manitoba School Act in 1890 created great uneasiness among Old Colony people.<sup>2</sup> Mennonites had enjoyed the freedom in conducting their own private schools where instruction was entirely in German.

The new government School Act required instruction in English and uniform education standards. If Mennonites wished to retain their private schools,

*Jacob and Katharina Enns with their three oldest children: Jacob Jr., Katharina Jr., and Peter (the baby in his mother's arms.) Peter is the father of the author. (1939). Both Jacob and Katharina were teenagers when they moved from Manitoba to the state of Chihuahua, Mexico in the 1920s.*



*Susana Enns. (1959) Susana, the author's mother, was born in Mexico. Both of her parents chose to migrate from Manitoba, Canada to Chihuahua, Mexico during the 1920s.*

the government required them to comply with the new regulations. While some Mennonite groups yielded to the government's demands, the Old Colony Mennonites refused. They felt that surrendering freedom of education was the equivalent of surrendering freedom of religion. Their reasoning was that it was not just the English instruction that was disconcerting, but the influence that exposure to English would have in the long term. For this reason, a group of Mennonites migrated to Mexico—to maintain their free-

“separate people” who have no abiding place in this world (Hebrews 11:13). They are “in the world, but not of the world.” They remained separate not only from the world, but also from certain other Mennonite churches that they deemed as being worldly. Old Colonists developed a vision of themselves as a distinct people and became known for living in isolated communities, protected from the world by physical and cultural barriers. What many of the “outside world” do not know is that the Old Colony Mennonites

people of the land. As in the past, they continue to live close to the natural world—planting and harvesting, raising animals for food and for farm work. Wherever they settled, Russia, the Canadian prairies, Mexico and later in Central and South America, they became known for their skills in transforming the land into orderly, productive fields. For generations, their dependability, resourcefulness and strong work ethic have earned them the respect and admiration of the society around them.

Owning land has become a measure of wealth and status. While Old Colonists practice a variety of skills and trades, being a landowner conveys a sense of status that other occupations do not. Land is a man's identity, his career, his worth; it is what validates him. His success in life will be determined to a large extent by how successful he is in farming.

To the outside observer, life in a typical Mennonite village has an almost “otherworldly quality of rustic unhurriedness.”<sup>3</sup> Unless

### *“Old Colony Mennonites viewed themselves as a ‘separate people’...”*

dom of religion. The Mexican government offered conditions that the Mennonites felt were suitable for designing and implementing their vision. The early settlers established colonies in the states of Durango and Chihuahua.

Thus, the Mennonite exodus from Canada to Mexico can be viewed as somewhat of an idealistic movement. Old Colony Mennonites viewed themselves as a

consciously have chosen ways of living that seem quaint and peculiar in order to maintain a safe distance from “the world.” This has included their style of dress, their refusal to use modern farm equipment and automobiles, as well as their opposition to education beyond the elementary level.

The Old Colony way of life has been rooted in agriculture for centuries—Old Colonists are a

it is a lengthy distance, travel is done by horse and buggy. Clothes are mostly homemade, and food is made from scratch—most of which they raise themselves. Their farms are run in an orderly fashion; in their daily lives there flows a quiet rhythm of work, play and casual chats with neighbors where news is exchanged and ideas are gleaned.

Each family member has a role to play in helping maintain the smooth operation of farm, gardens and fields. Work is done with pride and dignity; and there is honor in physical labor. Children are integrated into the rhythm of work from an early age and are expected to help as they are able. It is a moment of pride for both mother and daughter when a teenage girl is able to take charge of the household in an efficient man-

*“Each family member has a role to play in maintaining the smooth operation of farm, gardens and fields.”*

ner. Vacations are unheard of and the community celebrates holidays at Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. For generations, these holidays have been a time for family gatherings. Kinship ties are strong.

In varying degrees, Old Colony people possess common beliefs, rituals and traditions; knowledge tends to emerge from religion and experience rather than

from formal education. The individual in this community is secure but not highly differentiated, and the survival of the community supersedes the needs of the individual.<sup>4</sup> A strong collective identity has endured for generations.

Although it cannot be said that social class stratification exists as a deliberately created and sustained

element of the Old Colony Mennonite society in Mexico, differences in economic status are prevalent and tend to carry over into social relations.<sup>5</sup> For instance, there is a noticeable tendency for the well-to-do families to intermarry and there is little marriage between landed and landless families.

Wherever they migrate, Old Colony Mennonites are a self-gov-

erning and to a large extent self-sufficient group. They settle in villages, and the villages form the colony. This way of life promotes a sense of unity and accountability. In times of hardship, illness and death, for example, people help and support one another. This way of life also offers an element of protection; people look out for each other. Everyone knows everyone else, and everyone knows what everyone is doing. Old Colonists are separate from the world, but within the colony these people's lives are fully exposed with little privacy. Residing in such a community, Old Colonists have pronounced awareness of belonging, of *we* as opposed to *them*. Boundaries are clearly defined; anyone who is not Old Colony is an outsider. Church is the hub of the community; to be accepted in



*The author's maternal grandfather, Jakob Enns with his second wife, Elizabeth (Harms) Loewen. The horse and buggy, or carriage, was the standard mode of transportation for the Old Colony Mennonites in Mexico. It was handcrafted of wood. (circa 1970)*

*The house where the author's father, Peter Enns, grew up. It was built in the 1930s from handcrafted adobe bricks. In a country where wood was more scarce than it had been in Canada, Old Colony Mennonites had to learn from local Mexican craftspeople how to adapt their knowledge and skills to a new homeland.*





*These girls are two of the author's aunts, her father's younger sisters. The wagon is loaded with sacks of corn ready to be taken to market. Children were integrated into the rhythm of work from an early age. By 9 or 10, they were taught to drive the team and take their place in the family economy.*

the group, one must be in good standing with the church, and to be in good standing with the church, one must abide by the rules.

Many residents of the Old Colony have made a conscious decision to remain faithful to the vision of their ancestors—to live as a separate people, faithful followers of the will of God. Usually those who left the colonies in Chihuahua and Durango for more remote areas such as Central and South America, did so to protect their traditional way of life and to escape the change they saw coming—change brought in part by other Mennonite churches. These changes mainly include a more modern lifestyle such as use of the automobile, and differences in church doctrine.

Most beliefs held by the Old Colony Mennonites are ultimately based on the Bible, which is the source of authority for the church leadership. It is assumed by the laity that the clergy is interpreting Scripture correctly, and that truths long embraced and taught by the church continue to be valid. Thus, tradition serves as a guide to, and the source of Old Colony beliefs. That which was adopted by their forefathers and has stood the test of time, must be true.

According to sociologist Calvin Redekop, tradition has been the anvil upon which decisions are made in the Old Colony Church.<sup>6</sup> The clergy made the interpretations that dealt with spiritual matters, but the problem of population and its impact on the socio-religious system cannot be adequately understood by the leadership because of its incapacity to think in nontraditional terms. A traditional society has no philosophy or experience in dealing with change. There is no understanding of change as a fact of life, of its implications, or the way in which a community can meet it. Thus, the only reaction is the assertion of the authority of the past in an ever-increasing authoritarian manner,

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preparing the way for explosions and rebellions if a sophisticated response from the more enlightened members is not forthcoming.

In 1948, Walter Schmiedehaus wrote that “the school system will determine the future of the Old Colony.”<sup>7</sup> His concern about the quality of Old Colony education was well-founded. As Schmiedehaus points out, histori-

cally Mennonites have followed high standards of education for their people, but in Mexico the system greatly weakened. In fact, the education system of the Old Colony in Mexico has not prepared the younger generation for the rapidly changing technological society in which they live. Consequently, they are educationally unequipped for other positive employment options. Education and sophistication are signs of apostasy, which explains why the presence of enlightened, educated members in the community is generally not welcome.

Typically, the Old Colonists have large families, and due to the rapidly expanding population and the agricultural lifestyle,

there is an ongoing need for more land. Eventually, a landless class developed in the Chihuahua colonies, and unless they were fortunate enough to find other means of earning a living such as blacksmithing or carpentry, those without land tended to gravitate toward the lower end of the economic ladder. Generally, they are regarded by the well-to-do as the

“undeserving poor” who have been too “unenterprising” to make something of themselves.<sup>8</sup> When important decisions are made with regard to village or colony politics, the landless have little or no voice. For example, my father (a landless person) was informed at one of the village meetings, “You have no land therefore you have no say in what goes on.”

Beginning in the 1950s (but only evident after approximately mid-1970s) many landless people in the Old Colony have made a break from tradition. In order to earn a living, they began to farm on land outside the colony, land rented from native landowners. To be able to travel the distance to their farms, these Old Colonists had no choice but to modernize their farm equipment, replacing steel wheels with rubber tires for instance. Eventually automobiles followed. By doing so, they went directly against church rules, incurring not only excommunication from the church body, but also disapproval from the wider Mennonite community. Tensions developed; disunity and discontent ran deep. These circumstances caused a great deal of spiritual and emotional pain; the rifts never healed. The effects of disharmony are evident on many levels of Old Colony Mennonite society today. Spiritual, social and emotional problems continue to exist in the lives of many families and individuals.

Gradually, a marginalized class has developed—a group of misfits, so to speak. They have fallen out of favor with the Old Colony community, and some have found it relatively easy to integrate into another Mennonite church community such as the General Conference Mennonite Church or the Kleine Gemeinde,<sup>9</sup> but others have not. They have lost their anchor. Many are spiritually and socially alienated. Poverty, alcoholism, involvement with illegal drugs, do-

*“A traditional society has no philosophy or experience in dealing with change.”*

mestic violence, and physical and sexual abuse have become increasingly common among the disenfranchised.

While many Mennonites have prospered in Mexico and become highly successful in farming or business, economic conditions in most colonies have deteriorated in recent decades. The devaluation of the peso and free trade agreements, exacerbated by years of drought in some colonies and the hesitancy of the more conservative colonies to allow agricultural reform, have motivated many Mennonites to look elsewhere for their economic wellbeing. With rights to Canadian citizenship, many have returned to Canada. Initially some returned as seasonal laborers but increasingly, they are settling permanently.<sup>10</sup>

Through migration, the conservative Old Colonists have been

amazingly successful in retaining their traditional way of life with minimal change. If they can continue to find undeveloped land to which they can retreat, this segment of the Old Colony has the potential to survive for a period of time. But here, as Redekop says, the illogic of isolation through migration emerges.<sup>11</sup> The rest of the world is not standing still. The irreversibility of progress and the increase of world population in an exorable fashion make the isolation strategy impractical. Groups that refuse to accept change and progress cannot survive in the long term.

The conservative Old Colony society is a small group in a vast and complex world. It is a group that evokes admiration and respect from some, and criticism and ridicule by others. Many of the Old Colonists are intelligent,

*The author's mother Susana, along with four of her sisters. From left to right: Katharina Enns Jr. (deceased); Maria (Enns) Peters; Elizabeth (Enns) Enns (deceased); Susana (Enns) Enns; Anna Enns (deceased.) (1959)*



*Several months after they posed for this photo, Anna, age 15, was struck by lightning and killed. Their mother considered her death to be a wake-up call from God regarding the family's lifestyle and pride. She encouraged her daughters to adopt more humble standards by getting rid of these print dresses, which she deemed “too showy.” She also encouraged them to take their spiritual life more seriously and to spend more time reading the Bible.*

strong, and morally upright citizens, yet, various positions taken by this group have created serious problems for them. For instance, the hard line they took on technological innovation, education, and excommunication have helped create a spiritual, financial and community crisis that is of serious concern. Many have given up their loyalty to the traditions of their forefathers and have joined

more progressive churches or are disconnected from church altogether. But for some Old Colonists,

no price is too high and no sacrifice too great to remain a "separate people."

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Katharine Enns was born into the Old Colony community in the state of Chihuahua. During her childhood and early adolescence, the family moved between Canada and Mexico a number of times before finally settling down in Southwestern Ontario, Canada. Currently, she is working toward a Masters Degree in Marriage Child and Family Counseling at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno, California, and plans to return to Ontario after graduation.*

#### Endnotes

- 1 Walter Schmiedehaus, *Eine feste Burg ist Unser Got: Der Wanderweg eines christlichen Siedlervolkest* (Cuauhtemoc: Blumenort, 1948), 268.
- 2 Calvin Wall Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites: Dilemmas of Ethnic Minority Life* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), 12.
- 3 Harry Leonard Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 289.
- 4 Al Dueck, "Psychology and Mennonite Self-Understanding," in *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. by Calvin Wall Redekop and Samuel J. Steiner (New York: University Press of America, 1988), 203.
- 5 Sawatzky, 297.
- 6 Redekop, 210.
- 7 Walter Schmiedehaus, *Die Altkolonier-Mennoniten in Mexiko* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1982), 129.
- 8 Sawatzky, 297.
- 9 The Kleine Gemeinde, or "Little Church," had its beginning in 1812 in the Molotschna Colony of Russia. In the 1940s a group from this church also left Manitoba for Mexico. They are somewhat more progressive than the Old Colony but are still viewed as a fairly conservative church.
- 10 David Quiring, "Intervention and Resistance: Two Mennonite Visions Conflict in Mexico," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 22 (2004): 93.
- 11 Redekop, 222.

CALIFORNIA MENNONITE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

# 2009 Annual Meeting

**Saturday, April 18**

*Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary  
4824 E. Butler Ave., Fresno, California*

4:00

*Manitoba Room*

**Video: Through the Desert Goes Our Journey**

6:00

*British Columbia Lounge*

**Dinner & Business Meeting**

*Reservations required*

7:30

*Chapel*

**"Missing the Point": The Development of  
Mennonite Brethren Church Building  
Design, 1880-1960**

*Kevin Enns-Rempel*

*Dinner tickets are \$10 for Historical Society members, \$15 for non-members. New memberships (\$25) paid at the door will qualify for the member ticket price. There is no charge for the afternoon video or for the 7:30 program alone. Dinner reservations must be made by April 11 by calling 559-453-2225.*