

# California Mennonite Historical Society Bulletin

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*Goldie, Margaret, and S. G. Shetler circa 1911. Bishop S. G. Shetler of Hubbard, Oregon, oversaw the Corning Mennonite congregation around 1916. Photo credit: Archives of the Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana.*



*Ferdinand and Anna Isaac, Arcadia, California, 1921. In 1916, the General Conference Home Mission Board transferred F. J. Isaac from Los Angeles to Woodlake, California, to become the minister there. Photo credit: Mennonite Library and Archives, North Newton, Kansas.*

## *Churches that died on the vine:* Short-lived California Mennonite Congregations

*by Kevin Enns-Rempel*

During the first few decades of the twentieth century, Mennonites scattered across small towns of the Central Valley. Some of those settlements—Reedley, Shafter, Lodi, and others—soon developed into successful Mennonite communities. Others struggled for existence and lasted only a short time. In some cases congregations were organized in these communities; in others groups of Mennonites only met informally. In either case,

these communities withered away, as members either moved to another town or began to worship with another denomination.

The stories of these churches that “died on the vine” are difficult to reconstruct. Since they often did not organize as a congregation at all, they created few of the records common to more established churches. What records might have been created were most often lost as members soon scattered to other loca-

tions. The best surviving sources for telling these stories are the letters sent to Mennonite periodicals by community correspondents. Such reports were a significant part of these periodicals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and helped the far-flung members of various conferences maintain contact with each other. The reports are filled with the comings and goings of church members, reports of building proj-

*“... groups such as the Mennonites at Corning relied on visiting ministers to conduct services.”*

ects and church events, descriptions of weather and climate, and assessments of the economic situation in each community. By reading these reports we can assemble an incomplete but informative picture of the Mennonite settlements that flickered for a brief moment before vanishing entirely. This article will describe what we know about four such California Mennonite congregations—three that were part of the Mennonite Church, and one from the General Conference Mennonite Church. Additional stories may appear in future issues of the Bulletin.

### Corning

A few Mennonite Church families had moved to Corning, a small town in the northern Sacramento Valley northwest of Chico, by 1907. A report in the *Herald of Truth* in November 1907 indicated that two Mennonite families had settled there “and there is a prospect of others of our faith settling in the same locality.”<sup>1</sup> John Hygema, a Mennonite minister from Indiana who was staying in

California for health reasons, visited Corning in June 1908, and reported that “they have their trials, being somewhat alone, three families and a few single people.” Hygema noted that the little group had bought an old Methodist church building and expected to have Sunday school, and worship services once they had a minister.<sup>2</sup> Mary Schrock, who moved to Corning with her husband Valentine L. Schrock in 1908, reported several months later that the group was meeting regularly for Sunday school and worship in the Methodist church building.

Generally lacking ministers of their own at first, groups such as the Mennonites at Corning relied on visiting ministers to conduct services. Many of these ministers traveled down from Oregon, where a larger Mennonite Church community existed. By 1916 the little groups in California had been placed under the oversight of Bishop S. G. Shetler from Hubbard, Oregon. Shetler and John P. Bontrager from Albany, Oregon, were perhaps the most regular visitors to the scattered flock in California. Given how few church members lived in these communities, it is remarkable how often visiting ministers came to conduct services among them.

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On 5 March 1911 the Corning congregation organized itself, and Emmanuel Stahley was ordained to the ministry there. Despite tak-

ing this formal step of organization, the Corning congregation soon went into decline. Within a few years Stahley had moved to Porterville, leaving the congregation again without a minister. Other Mennonite families apparently left as well, since in 1916 traveling evangelist John P. Bontrager reported that Valentine and Mary Schrock were “the only ones of our faith at this place.”<sup>3</sup>

*“... they reported to the Herald of Truth that they were living in tents.”*

### Dinuba

Today the town of Dinuba is best known among Mennonites as the home of a large Mennonite Brethren congregation. Few people, however, know that there was for a short time a Mennonite Church congregation there as well. The dates of its existence are roughly the same as those for the Corning congregation.

The first members of the Mennonite Church to move to Dinuba apparently were Emmanuel C. and Lydia Weaver, who arrived there in late 1905 or early 1906. By the end of January they reported to the *Herald of Truth* that they were living in tents, “which reminds of us of the children of Israel.”<sup>4</sup> The Weavers were evidently the only members of their church living in the area, and they reported attending worship services with other Mennonites, Baptists, or Dunkards.

By June 1907 several of the Weavers’ adult children had moved to Dinuba. By the end of the year there were eleven members there, and the Pacific Coast Conference of the Mennonite Church had begun working on finding a minister for them.<sup>5</sup> With-



*Maria and John J. Engbrecht of the Woodlake General Conference Mennonite Church, n.d.*

out a regular minister, they relied on visiting Mennonite Church ministers who came occasionally to provide services for them.

In the spring of 1909 the Dinuba Mennonite Church organized itself with seventeen members, though they still were without a regular minister.<sup>6</sup> The following month the congregation reorganized its Sunday school. The list of Sunday school leaders gives us the earliest known list of people associated with the church, including Roscoe Bebb, Odessa Kilmer, Ernest Isgrigg, Odessa Kilmer, Orva Kilmer, and E. C. Weaver. Without a regular minister, the church chose Jesse Bledsoe and later Gabriel Shenk as “exhorters.” In June of 1909, the average Sunday school attendance was reported to be twenty-one.<sup>7</sup>

At some point in 1910, B. L. Horst was chosen as minister of the Dinuba church. The first re-

port naming him minister, however, also indicated that he was ill, and by March of 1911 the little group was apparently again without an active regular minister.<sup>8</sup> By October 1911 Horst and his family had moved to Porterville. With his departure, Gabriel Shenk took responsibility for Sunday preaching.<sup>9</sup> Membership had declined to twelve by the end of 1911.

Despite its tiny size, the Dinuba Mennonite Church had proposed that it host the 1912 meeting of the Mennonite Church Pacific

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Coast Conference. But with a membership “growing smaller all the time,” that became impossible.<sup>10</sup> Membership continued to dwindle, and in 1916 J. P. Bontrager reported that Delilah Shearer was “the only member of our faith left at Dinuba.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Porterville/Terra Bella**

The first report about Mennonites in Porterville appears in the Gospel Herald on 27 May 1909. In that issue Menno B. Weaver reported that there were “three of our belief” living there at the time, and that they were meeting with local Baptists.<sup>12</sup>

By October of 1912 the membership of the church had increased to twelve. Sunday school and young people’s meetings took place every week, with preaching twice a month. Attendance at the preaching services was as high as fifty.<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Stahley had moved from Corning to Porterville

by at least 1914 and became the first regular minister there. In late 1915 J. R. Miller reported that "We have cottage prayer meetings every Wednesday evening and preaching services every Sunday evening with good attendance."<sup>14</sup>

By 1915 at least some of the church members had changed their address to nearby Terra Bella. Whether this is because they moved or were simply picking up their mail at a different post office is unclear.

As in the other small California Mennonite Church communities, the role of the traveling minister was of crucial importance. In 1917 Mollie Hartzler reported that

The community here has just enjoyed a spiritual feast of good things from the Word of God. Bro. J. P. Bontrager of Albany, Oreg., has been with us, holding a series meetings at the 'Saucileto' school house. These meetings were well attended. . . . Two souls were led to accept their Savior. Others too were heavily convicted. . . . Baptismal services were held at Bro. J. R. Miller's on Tuesday evening, Feb. 6, Bro. Bontrager leaving for home the same evening.

*"... the role of the traveling minister was of crucial importance."*

We dreaded to see him leave us, for we feel like a 'flock without a shepherd.'<sup>15</sup>

By 1917 the Porterville/Terra Bella group had still not formally organized as a church, though they had established a mission station. Minister Emmanuel Stahley had moved to Los Angeles, where he was a Bible school student. J. R. Miller issued a

plea to readers of the *Gospel Herald* for others to join them: "If any one wishes to change locations or locate in California, we would be glad for you to locate with us.... We have a good climate, good land and ask your investigation. Our prayer is that God will send more workers in this part of His vineyard, as the harvest is great and laborers few."<sup>16</sup> The lack of a minister continued for the next several months. In January of 1918 "a sister" wrote, "How we wish that we could have a minister stationed with us. Haven't had

one to preach for us since last July or August. Pray for the work here, and that the Lord might put it upon some minister to come and break unto us the bread of life."<sup>17</sup> By 1920 Emanuel Stahley had apparently returned to Terra Bella and was again preaching on a regular basis.<sup>18</sup>

Despite meeting together for several years, the Porterville/Terra Bella apparently never formally organized as a congregation. A "Portersville" church is mentioned in the Mennonite Year-Book and Directory for 1916, but showed no



Henry A. Bachmann, of the Woodlake General Conference Mennonite Church, n.d.

*“By late 1918 the average attendance in Woodlake was about thirty.”*

members or minister. The church is never again mentioned in subsequent yearbook editions.<sup>19</sup>

### Woodlake

General Conference Mennonites first settled in Woodlake, a small foothill community northeast of Visalia, in 1912. In December of that year A. A. Sommer reported to *The Mennonite*, “We are now at Woodlake and intend to stay here. We have several reasons for locating here: 1. the fine, dry climate; 2. the comparative cheapness of land; 3. the fact that some Mennonites are now here; 4. the prospects of having regular religious services in the near future.” Shortly after sending this report, Sommer had organized a Sunday school at Woodlake.<sup>20</sup>

Since Woodlake was only about thirty miles from the well-established General Conference church in Reedley, that

congregation played a significant role from the very beginning in supporting the new group. As early as January 1913 Reedley minister H. J. Krehbiel was already preaching occasionally in Woodlake, and by early 1914 was preaching there once or twice a month.<sup>21</sup>

The Mennonites at Woodlake soon took steps toward more formal organization. In spring of 1916 H. A. Bachmann reported that the congregation had appointed a committee to find land for a church building and to raise money for the same. Later that year the General Conference Home Missions Board transferred F. J. Isaac from Los Angeles to Woodlake to serve as minister there. Isaac stayed in that position until 1918, at which time J. J. Engbrecht was appointed minister.<sup>22</sup>

By late 1918 the average attendance in Woodlake was about thirty. Since they were still so few in number, the group had not yet erected a building for itself.<sup>23</sup> In April 1919 the congregation announced that it was ready to begin construction, but one month later J. J. Engbrecht reported that the high cost of

building materials in the area was delaying the process. By May 1920 the Woodlake congregation had reluctantly decided that it could not afford to build at that time.<sup>24</sup>

J. J. Engbrecht resigned as minister in April 1920 so that he could return to South Dakota and care for his elderly parents. H. A. Bachmann took his place, but died only a few months later. The Reedley congregation agreed to send a visiting minister to preach for the group, but it remained without a regular minister for several years. In 1924 the Pacific District Conference offered to help pay the salary of D. B. Hess if the congregation would agree to call him as minister, but a year later Hess reported that the conference plans could not be carried out.<sup>25</sup> By the mid-1920s Mennonite families were moving away from Woodlake, and those that remained apparently were worshipping in other local churches.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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