

the context of the "Anabaptist vision of discipleship and the mission in the life of the church." At the 1969 triennial Conference, the BCL received authorization to proceed with a two volume history of missions, a new history of the MB church, a series of biographical pamphlets, and the establishment of a commission to work with the BCL in "coordinating the work of historical research, establishing archives, gathering oral materials . . . on a conference-wide basis." It was the most extensive set of commitments to nurturing memory ever made by an MB conference. The inspiration clearly came from Fresno.

The work of the Historical Commission became particularly significant during the decade of the 1970s. Charged with preserving the historical materials of the denomination and "revitalizing the historical consciousness," it moved energetically. Archival and research centers were established as affiliates of the denominational schools in Winnipeg, Fresno and Hillsboro. These Centers for Mennonite Brethren Studies began the systematic locating, gathering and classifying of archival materials.

The 1978 publication of the English translation of P.M. Friesen's monumental work, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia, 1789-1910*, was a joint project of the Board of Christian Literature and the Historical Commission. It became a popular symbol of the growing hunger for memory

among Mennonite Brethren. It was both a history of the Russian past and a tangible artifact whose presence seemed to link people into the past.

It was in the early stage of this renewed climate of MB historical activism that J.A. Toews began working toward his *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*. Published in 1975, it became the authoritative interpretation of the Russian and North American MB story. He spent the 1971-72 academic year in research and writing in Fresno. His salary was funded through the joint efforts of the Seminary, Board of Christian Literature and Historical Commission.

This MB historical activism in Fresno in the 1960s and 1970s is reminiscent of the "Anabaptist recovery" that took place in the (old) Mennonite Church at Goshen College under the leadership of Harold S. Bender. For the (old) Mennonites, history became a way to fix their identity and place in the American denominational system. It provided for a recentering of that denomination. The Mennonite Brethren historical renaissance, beginning four decades later, came to a people more urbanized, occupationally diversified and theologically fractured than the Mennonite Church of the 1960s. Whether the rediscovery of the Anabaptist and Mennonite Brethren story will do the same for the MB denomination remains unclear.

Paul Toews

## Highlights from the Historical Society's Annual Meetings: 1969-1990

Perhaps the most enduring and important Historical Society function during its first twenty-five years has been the annual meeting. No other society event has brought together so many people for a common purpose. In this way the annual meetings have been crucial in maintaining a sense of group identity for the Society. Without these meetings the Society likely would no longer exist. Given the important role they have played, it seems appropriate to review highlights from past annual meetings in this issue.

**1965:** The first attempt at holding an annual meeting hardly qualifies as a "highlight"—it was cancelled for lack of reservations. To the Society's credit, this remains the first and only time an annual meeting has been called off due to lack of interest.

**1969:** During the years 1966-1968 the Society's annual meetings were simply business sessions, with no formal program presentation. This year marked a departure from that pattern. Peter J. Klassen, President of the Society, presented a lecture on "Zwingli and the Zurich Anabaptists"; Robert Holland and Henry Krahn from Pacific College offered responses to Klassen's lecture.

**1971:** For the first time, the Society invited a non-local scholar to speak at the annual meeting. Cornelius Krahn, professor of history at Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas, presented an illustrated lecture entitled "Russia Revisited."

**1972-1973:** The Society cooperated with Pacific College and the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary to sponsor the "West Coast Anabaptist Conference." The annual meetings for these years were session within those conferences. Guest speakers were Mennonite Church scholars Myron Augsburger and John Howard Yoder.

**1974:** This year's annual meeting departed from the lecture format to feature the premiere of Urie Bender's drama, "The Past Is Yet to Come," a historical pageant about the origins of the Mennonite Brethren Church.

**1979:** For the first (and only) time, the annual meeting took place outside of Fresno. Held at Hodel's Restaurant in Bakersfield, the program featured Peter Klassen. Klassen presented a pictorial review of Mennonite history and

previewed the Mennonite Heritage Tour to Europe that he would be leading later that year.

**1981:** Church historians have generally focused on the deeds and experiences of men and thereby excluded the equally important deeds and experiences of women. The Society responded to that bias this year by inviting Katie Funk Wiebe to speak on "Mennonite Brethren Women: Images and Realities."

**1984:** The Mennonite experience in literature and song was the focus of this year's meeting. Jean Janzen and Wilfred Martens read from their writings; Larry Warkentin led a choir in singing hymns from the Mennonite tradition.

**1987-1988:** During these two years, the Society heard stories from those who had actually participated in events important to West Coast Mennonite history. The 1987

meeting featured Peter A. Enns, Dan Friesen and Bill Neufeld reminiscing about their participation within the Pacific District Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches; the 1988 meeting highlighted stories of Civilian Public Service by Arthur Wiebe, Dan Neufeld and Marvin Hein. The year 1987 was also significant in that the Society concluded many years of meetings in Fresno Pacific College's Alumni Hall. The 1987 dinner took place in the British Columbia Lounge of the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, where it has remained since that time.

**1990:** This year's meeting was the first to focus on a Mennonite-related museum exhibit. The program segment of the meeting took place in the main gallery of the Fresno Metropolitan Museum, where the group viewed the exhibit, "Colorful Quilts and Quiet Lives: Mennonite Textile Arts."

*Kevin Enns-Rempel*

## Families of the Elders: Part III The Family of Johann Claassen

One name stands out whenever the first years of the Mennonite Brethren Church are examined: Johann Claassen. He was one of the eighteen charter members. He was the public spokesperson for the new church. He represented the fledgling congregation before Czarist officials in St. Petersburg. He experienced the direct opposition of both civil and religious leaders. Finally, he left his imprint upon the church—often providing it with stable, sensible structure when other experienced leaders went to unfortunate extremes.

Johann Claassen was a wealthy landowner and merchant in the village of Liebenthal in the Molotschna Colony. He operated a thriving retail business with his brother-in-law, Cornelius Reimer. This Cornelius Reimer, and another brother-in-law, Jacob Reimer of Gnadenfeld, were also important members of the early Mennonite Brethren Church of Molotschna Colony.

Claassen had married Katharina Reimer, the sister of Cornelius and Jacob, on January 31, 1847. She and her brothers were the children of David Reimer, a wealthy landowner whose private estate, Felsenthal, was a renowned garden spot and refuge on the northern border of the Molotschna Colony.

Johann and Katharina had a total of ten children but only three lived to adulthood.

1. **Jacob** was born July 19, 1852, and married Emilie Prachnau on October 17, 1877.

2. **David** was born May 9, 1855, and married Anna Reimer on April 10, 1882. This son was usually known as David Ivanovitch Claassen. He was a prominent leader of the Russian Mennonites during the Revolution, and died around the year 1925. His son Dr. Nicolai Claassen was shot and killed during the revolution.

3. **Aganetha** was born April 1, 1863 and married Johann Berg.

Claassen's wife Katharina died on July 25, 1869 in the Kuban Mennonite Brethren settlement. He married for a second time on March 1, 1870 to Catharina Schmidt, the daughter of Abraham Schmidt of the Chortitza Colony. They had a total of five children, four of whom lived to adulthood, as follows:

4. **Catharina** was born December 6, 1870 at Wohldemfürst, Kuban. Catharina migrated with her mother, step father Peter Thiessen, and sister and brothers to the United States on July 4, 1884. She married Isaac Neufeld, a son of Heinrich Neufeld of Einlage, Chortitza Colony. She died on July 26, 1910 in Fairview, Oklahoma.

5. **Anna** was born February 20, 1872 in the Kuban settlement. She married John Flaming. Anna died on June 3, 1906 in Fairview, Oklahoma.

6. **John** was born November 11, 1873, and married Maria Hiebert of Cooper, Oklahoma on March 21, 1897. He died in Wichita, Kansas, on December 22, 1907.

7. **Dietrich J.**, the youngest son of Johann Claassen, was born on April 20, 1877, almost four months after the death of his famous father. He became a well known school teacher and lay church leader. He married August 2, 1901 to Helena Duerksen of Hillsboro, Kansas, the daughter of Jacob and Katharina (Funk) Duerksen.

Johann Claassen died on December 24, 1876, at Wohldemfürst, Kuban at the young age of 56. In spite of his short life, he left behind a legacy reflected in a strong and ever-growing Mennonite Brethren Church. To a large degree that church owed its existence to this capable man who led it through troubled waters in its earliest years.