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Always a Greener Pasture:
Mennonite Settlement in the Western United States, 1885-1940

Kevin Enns-Rempel

Peter T. Duerksen was born on September 28, 1881, in Hillsboro, Kansas, the son of German-speaking Mennonite immigrants from Russia who had come to this country in the 1870s. In 1898, Peter's family moved to Weatherford, Oklahoma. He was married there in 1903 to Katharina Neufeld. Katharina had been born in South Russia (present-day Ukraine) in 1883, and migrated with her parents to Hillsboro in 1891 before moving to Oklahoma.

In 1909 Peter and Katharina Duerksen left Oklahoma, and began a remarkable odyssey across western North America that would continue for the next quarter-century. They moved in that year to a newly-established Mennonite settlement at Escondido, California, near San Diego. A series of hard winters and loss of church leadership caused several families, including the Duerksens, to leave Escondido a few years later. Peter and Katharina did so in 1915, moving north to another new Mennonite settlement at Fairmead, in Madera County. They stayed in Fairmead for about two years, and after living briefly in the nearby town of Madera, the Duerksens joined the large and well-established Mennonite community at Reedley, California. They remained there until 1919, at which time the family left California and moved to Dallas, in Oregon's Willamette Valley. After only a few months, they moved to Portland and then returned south by ship to San Francisco, where they stayed briefly before settling at Lodi, California.

The 1920s were as full of movement for the family as had been the previous decade. From about 1921 to 1924, the Duerksens lived in Reedley; then in Bakersfield, California, until 1926. In that year they moved to a new, short-lived Mennonite settlement at Kerman, California, in Fresno County. Disillusioned with that location, the Duerksens returned to Lodi later in 1926. Turning his sights further afield, Peter Duerksen moved his family to Mud Lake, Idaho, in 1927.

That location did not live up to the land agent's claims, and the family moved to Salem, Oregon, in 1928. It was back to Bakersfield later that year and then on to the Fraser Valley of British Columbia in 1929. Three days of incessant rain in B.C. soured Peter on that location, so he hooked the as-yet unloaded trailer back to their vehicle and returned to Salem. They stayed there until 1930 and then moved back to Bakersfield.

Another land agent caught Peter's ear in 1931 and lured the family to Coldwater, Texas. Within a year, however, they had packed to move back to Dallas, Oregon. But first Peter decided to visit relatives in Weatherford, Oklahoma, whom he had not seen for twenty-three years. He died of a stroke there in 1932. Katharina and the children went ahead with the move to Dallas, but soon relocated to nearby Salem in search of work. Within a year the family moved again to Bakersfield. In 1934 Katharina was struck by a car and killed while crossing a street, thus ending the saga of the wandering Duerksen family.¹

I do not wish to suggest that the story of my great-grandparents during these years was the typical Mennonite story. It was not. At the same time, I would suggest that—in an extreme form—their story illustrates the convoluted process by which German-speaking Mennonites from Russia scattered across and settled the far corners of the western United States during the decades of the 1880s through the 1930s.

But first, some background on these Mennonites who would eventually scatter across western North America. Mennonite are the spiritual heirs of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement, which forms part of something often called the “Radical Reformation.” The term “Anabaptist” means “rebaptizer,” and refers to the fact that they rejected infant baptism and instead used baptism as a symbol of an adult decision to follow Christ. Anabaptists rejected the hierarchy of the Catholic (and many other Protestant) churches, and tried to practice a church in which the community interpreted scripture together and held each other accountable in a “priesthood of all believers.” Anabaptists rejected the linkage between church and state, and

claimed that governments had no right to enforce religious beliefs or affiliation. Most of them also rejected violence, and therefore generally refused to participate in the military.

These beliefs, perhaps particularly the rejection of church/state linkages, brought the wrath of the established religious/political order down upon the Anabaptists, and they were exiled, imprisoned, and killed by the thousands during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The original movement was strongest in Switzerland, parts of present-day Germany, and the Netherlands. Faced with bitter persecution, many Anabaptists (who later came to be known as Mennonites after an influential leader by the name of Menno Simons), began migrating to other regions that might offer them greater toleration. Many Swiss Mennonites and their Amish cousins moved to other parts of present-day Germany, and by the late 18th century some had found their way to Pennsylvania and later to other eastern states and provinces.

A small group of Dutch Mennonites, meanwhile, migrated to the area around Danzig (today Gdansk, Poland) beginning as early as the 1530s. They were joined over the next decades by Mennonites from other parts of Europe, and created a small but flourishing community in this early outpost of European religious freedom. This area eventually became part of the Prussian Empire, and by the late 18th century governmental pressure to serve in the military caused many Mennonites to seek a new homeland. They found such a place in “South Russia,” lands north of the Black Sea recently acquired by an expanding Russian Empire. Empress Catherine the Great desired settlers to help consolidate Russia’s control over this territory, and invited many potential settlers, most German-speaking, to settle there. The first Mennonites joined this wave of immigration in the 1780s, and they continued to settle in Russia over the next fifty years. There they were given considerable autonomy with regard to local government, schools, and freedom from military conscription.

By the 1860s, however, Russia had begun to implement a policy of “Russification” for their foreign settlers in their midst. This involved pressure to teach German in the schools, and

threats to take away military exemption. As a result, about 18,000 Mennonites (roughly one-third of the total population) left Russia in the 1870s and early 1880s, and resettled in the United States and Canada. They established communities in Manitoba, Minnesota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas, far to the west of where their Swiss Mennonite counterparts had begun settling almost a century earlier.

So, in 1880 the western frontier of the North American Mennonite world existed along a more-or-less straight line near the 98th parallel. It began in the north near Winnipeg, Manitoba, and extended south through Hutchinson and Turner counties in South Dakota, York and Jefferson counties in Nebraska, and McPherson, Marion, and Harvey counties in Kansas. Looking west from the 98th parallel in 1880, one would have found only a few dozen Swiss Mennonites and Amish in the Willamette Valley of Oregon. Other than that tiny outpost, the western half of the continent was devoid of Mennonites.

But within twenty-five years, the situation would have changed profoundly. By the end of the 19th century, there were Mennonite settlements in Oklahoma, Texas, Colorado, North Dakota, Saskatchewan, Alberta, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, and California. And by 1940 there were—or had for a time been—settlements of Mennonites in every western state and province except Utah and Nevada. From a few dozen members in 1880, the number of Mennonites west of the 98th parallel had risen to almost 25,000 church members by 1940. If non-member adults and children were included in this count, the actual number of total settlers would be considerably higher.

This internal migration across western North America took place with little centralized planning or leadership. These Mennonites did not decide together on a few major settlements to which most of them would move and then coordinate their efforts in that direction. Instead, the migration was characterized by many scattered, isolated settlements, some of which eventually flourished, but many more of which faded quickly into oblivion. As communities

perished, the Mennonites there traveled on to the next greener pasture that beckoned them. In too many cases, that new location proved no better than the last. The Duerksen family may be an extreme example of this phenomenon, but they are not as unusual as one might think.

This story of restless migration is not, of course, unique to Mennonites. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America was a nation characterized, in the words of historian Thomas J. Schlereth, by “migration and movement, mobility and motion.” In this context Schlereth quotes Norwegian novelist Knut Hamsun, who noted that in America, “Everyday is moving day. . . . The population is only half-settled.”² My story, then, is not a distinctly Mennonite one, but rather an effort to understand how Mennonites wrote their own chapter in a larger American story.

When most Mennonites think back on their history as a pilgrim people, they remember the great migrations undertaken for reasons of conscience or persecution. They recall Mennonites of the Netherlands and Switzerland fleeing to new homes in Poland, the Palatinate, and Pennsylvania; of Prussian and Russian Mennonites leaving their homes rather than submitting to military service; of twentieth-century Russian Mennonites fleeing the horrors of the Soviet regime. But the migration I am describing today does not fit into that idealized tradition. It was, with only a few exceptions, a migration in search of physical betterment and economic improvement; religious motivations or persecution had very little—and usually nothing—to do with it.

The majority of those who joined this migration that began in the late 1880s had come to North America from Russia only a decade before. What would have driven them to relocate across almost half a continent so soon after their arrival in this country? There were two primary motivations—health and land. While most of these migrants moved for the latter reason, many of the earliest ones to go West (especially those who came to California) did so for reasons of health.

The belief in the curative powers of climate was widespread in the United States of the late nineteenth century. The prevailing medical wisdom of the time suggested that warm, dry climates were beneficial for the treatment of tuberculosis, asthma, rheumatism, and many other respiratory and pulmonary diseases. This belief brought thousands of health seekers—of which Mennonites were only a very small percentage—to the western United States, particularly to southern California. Thousands of them flooded this region during the last two decades of the nineteenth century.³

Recent Mennonite immigrants from Russia made up only a very tiny percentage of the total population of Mennonite health seekers during this time. Most of those Mennonites who came west for this purpose instead were those of Swiss and South German lineage who had originally come to the United States in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and had first settled in the eastern states. The bulk of these health-motivated settlers went to LaJunta, Colorado, and the area around Upland, California.⁴

One of those who came west for health reasons was J. J. Voth, who moved from Kansas to Pasadena, California, in about 1898, and reported that he had found seven other Mennonite families in that city, presumably there for similar reasons.⁵ Peter Wall wrote from Azusa, California, in 1902 that he was feeling better in California than he had in the Midwest, but still was not rid of his rheumatism. He noted a few months later that “the stiffness goes away more quickly here than in the east, though I still have attacks.”⁶

Health seekers often did not plan to become permanent residents of the places where they went to heal themselves. Many hoped that a few months there would cure them and they could return home. Reports from these communities frequently describe the influx of temporary residents during the winter months and the corresponding outflow in the spring. They also frequently comment on the difficulty of establishing strong Mennonite congregations when so many members and even ministers were recuperating from illness. J. J. Voth commented from

Pasadena in 1900 that, “ministerial visits are rare as rain in the California summertime. They only come when their doctors advise them to do so, and then they come more to recuperate than to work. For example, Br. Gädtert was with us six months last year for convalescence. When he was not able to preach, we exploited his knowledge in Sunday school. Upon his departure he led a communion service and preached for us. We thank God for him.”⁷

Mennonites in southern California felt a duty to assist others who came west for health reasons, and in 1914 established the Mennonite Sanitarium at Alta Loma, near Upland. The sanitarium struggled for survival almost from the beginning, at least in part because the California “health craze” had peaked before the sanitarium even opened. By 1900, doctors were placing less faith in the curative powers of climate, and fewer recommended the journey west to their patients. While many individuals still came west for that reason, the numbers were declining by the time the Mennonite Sanitarium opened. It closed in 1923.

Even before the opening of the Mennonite Sanitarium, the primary motivation for Mennonite resettlement in the West was switching to a different kind of temporal motivation – that of land and agricultural opportunities. Most of the Mennonites who came from Russia to settle in the Midwest beginning in the 1870s were, of course, farmers, and were drawn to this area by affordable and available land. Already by the late 1880s and early 1890s, however, the supply of land in the original Russian immigrant Mennonite communities of the Midwest was disappearing – and the price of what remained was going up. While most of the original 1870s settlers had all the land they needed, many of them hoped also to establish their children on land of their own, preferably in close proximity to the original family farm. But in the facing of shrinking supply and increasing demand, this goal became more difficult to achieve.⁸ The situation was exacerbated by the fact that many Mennonites, fearful of too much involvement with governments, were reluctant to homestead on public land.⁹ Limited by their own choice only to buying railroad and other private land, Mennonites were facing a crisis in almost all areas where they

had settled in the 1870s. In Kansas, land that still sold for \$15 an acre in the early 1890s was going for \$270 an acre by the end of that decade.¹⁰ In Jefferson County, Nebraska, meanwhile, census records show that by 1900 less than 40 percent of Mennonite families there actually owned land.¹¹

Mennonites facing this situation had few options. Subdividing the original farm among the children was rarely feasible. Such subdivided farms quickly became too small to remain viable. Some parents passed the farm on intact to the oldest child, but that left the other siblings to fend for themselves. The fact that Mennonite families of the time commonly had six or more children (and sometimes more than a dozen) meant that many of them could not fulfill the goal of farm ownership in their original communities. Some without land of their own rented farms, though this was less desirable than farm ownership. Still others left the farm and sought occupations in nearby towns. This also was considered a step down from the agricultural ideal of the time. The remaining option was to seek land elsewhere. This was the option pursued by many Midwestern Mennonites beginning in the late 1880s, and was the single largest factor fueling the migration of this period.¹²

Mennonite historian James Juhnke suggests that this shortage of land, coupled with a long-established tradition of migration for reasons of persecution, made the Mennonites particularly susceptible to migration fever in the late nineteenth century. He notes that,

ever since Reformation times Mennonites had been on the move, impelled by persecution or quest for new opportunities and new mission. In America, quintessential land of freedom and mobility, they became even more mobile. . . . Joining the Mennonites' own subculture to the American environment practically guaranteed mobility. . . . To the superficial observer Mennonite farms and communities may have appeared solid and stable. In fact, they were continually being divided, recombined and transferred.¹³

At first, most of these land-seeking Mennonites looked to new regions in close proximity to their original North American settlements. The lands of western Oklahoma, only recently made available to Euro-American settlement, became the first such destination, and many Menno-

nites participated in the various land runs there in the late 1880s and 1890s. Other Mennonites began settlements in eastern Colorado, North Dakota, or Saskatchewan. A few even reached the West Coast at this time, though the bulk of that migration would not occur until the early twentieth century.

The first Mennonites to settle in California primarily for agricultural purposes did so in the community of Paso Robles, about halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles. The first Mennonite settlers arrived there in 1896, and quickly established two General Conference Mennonite congregations in different parts of the Paso Robles area. They would eventually merge, and one Mennonite congregation still remains in Paso Robles today.

The part of the state that would attract the most Mennonite farmers, however, was the Great Central Valley, and no place in the valley would attract as many such settlers as the Reedley/Dinuba area. The first Mennonites to arrive in the Central Valley were the family of Daniel T. and Barbara Eymann. The Eymanns were Swiss Mennonites who lived in Iowa before moving to Kansas, and who then migrated to Upland, California, in 1902. High land prices in southern California, however, soon caused them to look elsewhere for farming opportunities. Daniel Eymann and a few of his sons visited the Central Valley for that purpose, and he purchased land in Reedley, near the Kings River, in 1903. Several of the homes built by the original Eymann family settlers still stand on Reed Avenue between J and K Streets.

Eymann aggressively promoted Reedley as a destination for Mennonites seeking affordable farmland, and many families soon followed. It took only a few months for six families to establish the Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church in 1905. The General Conference group in Reedley followed close behind, organizing the "First Mennonite Church" in 1906 (though, it should be noted, they actually were the *second* Mennonite church to be organized in the city). The two congregations built places of worship one block apart from each other on L Street, where they remain to this day. Both grew quickly; in only ten years, the Reedley Mennonite

Brethren Church had over 300 members. Eventually it would become the largest Mennonite congregation in North America, with a membership that peaked at over 1400 by the 1950s.

The settlement in Reedley was merely the first of many in the Central Valley, and by 1940 Mennonites had settled in numerous Valley communities, from Glenn in the North to Bakersfield in the south. Today, the Central Valley remains the region of California with the highest population of Mennonites.

Though settlements such as those at places like Paso Robles and Reedley were successful almost from the start, not all Mennonites who came west had the same experience. For many, loneliness and isolation were stark realities. While some Mennonites migrated in large groups or as extended families, others did so in very small groups or even as individuals, and the absence of fellow Mennonites was difficult for them. Gerhard and Helena Rempel, together with their children settled on an eighty-acre farm two miles east of Redding in northern California in 1885. Gerhard wrote to the *Mennonitische Rundschau* from Redding in 1886, "In temporal terms it goes fairly well, though not spiritually. We are so alone, without any brothers and sisters in the faith nor any Mennonite worship. In our area are Methodists, whose worship services are not very edifying for us, because we don't understand the English language."¹⁴ As their children approached adulthood with almost no other Mennonites living near them, Gerhard and Helena became concerned that they might marry outside the Mennonite church and possibly lose their Mennonite faith. After reading reports about a Mennonite settlement in the Willamette Valley of Oregon, the Rempels sent two of their sons to investigate. Finding the conditions there favorable, the Rempel family moved to a farm near Dallas, Oregon, in 1894.¹⁵

Just as the Rempels were leaving California, Johann and Justina Ratzlaff moved from Henderson, Nebraska, to Glendora, California, in hopes of renewing Justina's health. They were soon able to report being "physically well but spiritually lacking. We miss our fellow believers here."¹⁶ In 1898, Jakob Wedel wrote from San Diego to the *Christlicher Bundesbote*

that many who come West seeking restoration of health become very lonely in California, “and at such times the ship of faith nearly sinks.”¹⁷ From Hicksville, Washington, Peter and Katharina Siemens reported to the *Zionsbote* in 1909 that they had no congregation, no Sunday school, no fellowship. Their neighbors were almost all “Americans,” mostly bachelors who played baseball on Sundays.¹⁸ Not surprisingly, the Siemens family soon moved away from such an unwholesome environment.

In an effort to remain connected to their far-flung friends and relatives and to encourage others to join them, many Mennonites turned to their church-related periodicals, as I’ve just suggested in the previous examples. Large sections of these papers—such as *Christlicher Bundesbote*, *Mennonitische Rundschau*, and *Zionsbote*—were devoted to reports from the various communities in which church members lived. Correspondents frequently would wax eloquent—even poetic—in extolling the virtues of their particular settlements. Those reporting from California were particularly fond of singing the praises of that region’s climate, gleefully—sometimes almost sadistically—contrasting it with the harsher eastern regions from which they had come—and in which many of their unfortunate friends and relatives still struggled to live.

In 1923, George and Christina Goering reported from El Nido, just south of Merced, California, that “We have moved here from Dolton, South Dakota. Oh, what a difference between South Dakota and California! When we left there it was stormy and cold, but when we came to California we found the trees in full bloom, everything beautifully green and the weather warm and pleasant.”¹⁹ Along the same lines, Peter P. Toews reported from Winton, California, that “from time to time reports appear in the *Rundschau* describing how cold it is or how bad the weather was last week. These reports make those of us in California feel like the child whose mother gives him something good to eat with the warning, ‘But don’t show it to your brothers and sisters, or they’ll want some too.’”²⁰

Reports on behalf of a particular settlement sometimes took on a decidedly competitive tone. An anonymous correspondent from Paso Robles wrote to *The Mennonite* in 1921,

The last few years many people are coming to California to make this state their home. . . . But it seems strange that no Mennonites locate here, not even to visit to look over the country. Is our fair city not found on the map? . . . We would like any one looking for a new home in California to give Paso Robles a fair trial. Why should all the Mennonites move to Reedley and Upland?²¹

Sometimes these reports went even further, not merely praising a particular community, but denigrating rival ones. Martin B. Fast, then living in Atwater, California (though later a resident of Dinuba), provided an example of this in 1912, when he reported to the *Mennonitische Rundschau*,

After reading the report by [August] Klingenberg from Bakersfield last week, I felt a reply was in order. Klingenberg is a land agent, and most land agents will praise the areas in which they live while looking down upon other areas. If it is so beautiful in Bakersfield, then why aren't the people who move there staying? I have been to Bakersfield several times. What I have seen there, and what I have been told by people who have moved from there, is visible evidence that most of the city is of very inferior quality. In moral and Christian terms, the conditions there are sad.²²

Fast mentions land agents in his critique of Bakersfield, and such agents did play a significant role in directing the migration of Mennonites throughout the West. The Mennonite papers of that era regularly contained advertisements by land agents and railroad companies extolling particular settlements. During a few months of 1904 alone, for example, the *Menno-nitische Rundschau* featured advertisements for colonies in Montana; the San Joaquin Valley of California; Oakes, North Dakota; Herbert, Saskatchewan; Kentucky; and Quill Lake, Saskatchewan.

Peter and Katharina Duerksen chose at least a few of their many settlement locations with the help of these Mennonite land agents. While such agents did not cause the rush for western land, they certainly helped heighten the enthusiasm for migration among Mennonites already predisposed in that direction.

The best known—and most infamous—of these Mennonite land agents was Henry J.

Martens. From his Kansas headquarters, Martens directed several land settlement schemes in various parts of the western United States and Canada. His best known project began in 1909, when he announced plans for a large settlement north of Bakersfield. During that year he led four well-publicized train excursions from Kansas to California to see this land. Several hundred Mennonites participated in these events. Fueled by reports from enthusiastic excursionists and shameless articles in his own newspaper, *Der Deutsche Westen*, which frequently blurred the line between journalism and advertising, Martens whipped the Midwestern Mennonite community into a near-frenzy about his California settlement. In October of 1909 the first group of settlers, numbering about 250, moved to their new home, which had been christened "Martensdale" in honor of its founder. The area was quickly transformed from barren land to a small but thriving town with several businesses and even a hotel.

In only a few months, however, the initial excitement turned to despair. Residents learned that Martens had only taken out an option on the land, and had never actually completed the purchase. Most of them had turned over their Midwestern farm deeds and additional cash to Martens in exchange for this land, but that money apparently had gone to pay debts from his previous projects rather than to secure the land in Kern County. By spring of 1910 the true owners had evicted the Mennonite settlers and Martensdale was no more.²³ Most of the displaced Mennonites moved to nearby locations in Kern County or to established settlements such as the one in Reedley, about eighty miles to the north.

Next to Henry J. Martens, the best-known Mennonite land agent was Julius Siemens. Siemens began his real estate career in southern Manitoba, but moved to eastern Washington in 1894. There he settled in Ritzville, and encouraged many other Mennonites to do the same. While living in Washington, Siemens worked as a colonization agent for the Northern Pacific Railroad, and in that capacity traveled widely in Mennonite communities across the Midwest, promoting settlement projects in various western locations.

Siemens turned his attention to California in about 1910. He vigorously promoted a settlement north of Chico at Los Molinos, which he claimed would become “the greatest Mennonite settlement in California.”²⁴ An outbreak of malaria among the settlers there in 1911, however, brought the Los Molinos settlement to a quick end. Siemens then turned his attention to Fairmead, in Madera County, where Peter and Katharina Duerksen bought land from him in 1915. Despite much fanfare from Siemens, and more claims about this being the next “greatest Mennonite settlement,” the Fairmead colony also struggled. It almost died when the expected influx of settlers did not materialize, but held on and still exists today as a Mennonite Brethren congregation in the city of Madera. Siemens attempted to establish several other Mennonite settlements, but none amounted to much. His tendency to lead eager Mennonite settlers to obscure and remote locations with the promise of founding “the greatest Mennonite settlement” earned him a controversial reputation, if not the same contempt reserved for Martens.²⁵

Some voices within the church spoke out publicly and specifically against the practices of land agents, and sometimes even against migration itself. In 1909 the *Zionsbote* reported on a meeting at the Ebenfeld Mennonite Brethren Church near Hillsboro, Kansas, in which representatives from various congregations met “to discuss what we should do with regard to imprudent land deals in which many of our members are involving themselves.” They agreed to publicly announce that the Hillsboro Mennonite Brethren Church had excommunicated land agent Henry Martens because of inappropriate business dealings, and warn church members against engaging in transactions with him. Finally, they noted that “those of our brethren who work for land agents should not be inconsiderate of the fact that they will be called to accountability for their dealings.”²⁶ Given the Martensdale debacle that unfolded *after* this announcement, it is evident that many church members chose to ignore these warnings.

A 1905 editorial in *The Mennonite*, entitled “Our Scattered Membership,” also addressed this concern, noting that,

Among our people, more than among others, it seems “land hunger” has much to do with the weakening of the congregations. The habit of moving from place to place, with which persecution had much to do in the old days, still clings to our people, attractive lands, just now, go as far as persecution ever did toward scattering them. As long as they . . . settle in communities with others of our faith it is only the local congregation that loses, the church as a whole is likely to gain by it. But when a family becomes isolated and Mennonite associations are impossible then the church soon loses that family and very often they are lost to Christ. . . .

We have yet to discover an efficient way by which our isolated communicants will get a proper spiritual care and be kept in touch with the affairs of the church.²⁷

At least one Mennonite editor took a more confrontational approach to expressing his disapproval of migration. Abraham L. Schellenberg, as editor of the *Zionsbote*, occasionally inserted parenthetical comments into the reports from western communities that appeared in his paper, questioning both the quality of those places and the settlers' motivations for moving there. In a report from Hollywood in 1909, Anna Janzen commented that “I don't know why we must live so alone, but I am sure God has a reason.” To which Schellenberg parenthetically replied, “Is it really God's will that you are there or mostly your own wills?”²⁸ In 1912, Mrs. F. F. Becker wrote from El Modena in Orange County, California, “We are renting here, until the Lord shows us his will for us.” Schellenberg retorted in print, “The Lord has something for you, but it is in Oklahoma.”²⁹

Other church leaders attempted to direct the migration rather than oppose it. In 1910 the Western District of the General Conference Mennonite Church formed a colonization committee to help guide the migration among its people. The committee hoped to direct church members toward large Mennonite settlements in which it would be easier to establish congregations than was the case when individuals chose their own destinations. Within six years, the committee had come to the conclusion that “our people are too independent to pay attention to the judgment of the committee,” and in 1918 it was dissolved.³⁰

As the opening example of Peter and Katharina Duerksen so vividly illustrates, this migration was often characterized by multiple relocations. Few Mennonite families moved as

often as did the Duerksens, but it was common for many of them to move several times in the space of only a few years. The search for greener pastures often resulted in misguided and ill-fated settlement choices, forcing families to move on soon after their arrivals.

In 1912 P. P. Giesbrecht wrote to the *Mennonitische Rundschau* with his particular tale of ongoing migration:

I first took up my walking stick to venture into the West in March of 1899, while living in North Dakota. We traveled by train to Oregon, renting a forty-acre farm in Newberg. I still regret leaving that place, since it was not necessary to do so. We decided, however, to go to Dallas [in Oregon, not Texas]. That was not such a good situation for us. The soil was very different there; it stuck to the wheels in the rain.

From there we went to Alberta and lived there for six years. We found that we didn't like such a cold area and so returned to Oregon. There was nothing available for us there and so we went to southwestern Washington, twenty-five miles north of Portland, Oregon. There the climate is similar to that in Oregon. If there was a down side, it was that it rained even more there than in Oregon. We moved from LaCenter, Washington, to California because we did not want to be isolated from our church. In California I find that there is little rain, even in winter. We would like to have more rain for irrigation.³¹

The story to this point has been of a people driven to migration by economic factors rather than persecution. While this generally is true, there are exceptions to this rule. As conditions for the Mennonites who remained in Russia began to turn for the worse after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, some of them sought to flee the Soviet Union and migrate to other countries. Many of these refugees settled in western Canada, Paraguay and Brazil during the 1920s and 1930s. Very few individual families came to the United States during this time, however, due to immigration restrictions imposed by Congress during the 1920s. Only one significant group of Mennonite refugees were able to enter the United States during this time, a group that came to be known as the "Harbin Mennonites."

Russian Mennonites had begun to settle along the Amur River near the Manchurian border in western Siberia in the 1920s, hoping for more freedom from the Communist oppression they had experienced elsewhere. They soon discovered that the loosely-guarded borders in this region might also facilitate their escape. Beginning in 1928, several groups of Mennonites fled

across the frozen Amur River into China. Most eventually found their way to the Chinese city of Harbin, from where they hoped to arrange emigration to North America. In Harbin, however, these Mennonite refugees discovered that neither Canada nor the United States was willing to accept them, and that they might be forced to remain there indefinitely. But word of the exiles' plight reached Mennonites in North America, and some there began working to bring them across the Pacific. These efforts paid off, and beginning in 1929 the United States allowed about 250 of the Harbin Mennonites to enter the United States. Most settled in the Reedley/Dinuba area of Central California, while a smaller group established a community in eastern Washington. The Washington settlement soon failed, but today many descendants of the original Harbin immigrants can still be found in Central California.³²

Meanwhile, the Great Depression of the 1930s provided one last impetus for large-scale Mennonite migration across the western United States. While the entire nation was in the grip of economic depression during this decade, drought and dust storms made life for Midwestern farmers like the Mennonites even more devastating. Settlements in Oklahoma, western Kansas, Texas, and eastern Colorado, which had drawn so many Mennonite land-seekers of the 1880s and 1890s, were now being abandoned by those same people. By the 1930s, Oklahoma was home to more extinct Mennonite settlements than any other state.³³

As was true for the larger population, many of these depression-era Mennonites headed for California. While California was not spared the ravages of the depression, its diversified economy did allow the state to remain more prosperous than most during this decade.³⁴ Church records for the Sichar Mennonite Church near Cordell, Oklahoma, show that, during the worst of the depression, thirty-five of its eighty-nine members were living in California.³⁵ No area in California received more depression-induced Mennonite migration than Reedley, in southern Fresno County. Already a flourishing Mennonite settlement, it grew at a phenomenal rate during the following decade. In 1930 the membership of the Reedley Mennonite Brethren Church

stood at 530; ten years later it was double that number. While most of that influx came from the Midwest, Reedley also attracted Mennonites from other parts of California. J. J. Unruh wrote from Dos Palos in 1933 that the depression was very evident in that location. However, he had also heard that the depression was over in Reedley and he expected that everyone soon would be living there.³⁶

By the end of the 1930s this unorganized, undisciplined movement of Mennonites across the western United States had for the most part come to a close. Mennonite migration in the region did not end, but it took on a different character. Subsequent migration flowed either into well-established rural communities or—more often—into urban areas. The new demands and opportunities of a wartime economy during the 1940s did much to pull Mennonites away from the search for agricultural opportunity and into the cities. They increasingly looked to occupations in industry and the professions for their livelihood, and thus the ceaseless wandering in search of greener agricultural pastures became less important. This movement of Mennonites into the cities and professions became the dominant demographic theme of the post-World War II era, and brought to a close a unique era in the history of North American Mennonites.

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NOTES

1. This chronology is based on the memories of my grandmother, Erma Neufeld, the daughter of Peter and Katharina Duerksen, who was born at Fairmead, California, in 1917. She recalls that she never completed an entire academic year in one school during her eight-year education.

2. Thomas J. Schlereth, *Victorian America: Transformations in Everyday Life, 1876-1915*. The Everyday Life in America Series (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 7.

3. Kevin Starr, *Inventing the Dream: California Through the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 54-55; John E. Baur, *The Health Seekers of Southern California: 1870-1900*, with a Foreword by John W. Caughey (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1959), vii-viii, 34.

4. For a more detailed description of the sanitarium in California, see Kevin Enns-Rempel, "The Mennonite Sanitarium at Alta Loma, California: 1914-1923," *California Mennonite Historical Society Bulletin* no. 25 (November 1991): 1-2, 7-11.

5. J. J. Voth, correspondence from Pasadena, California, 19 July 1898. *Christlicher Bundesbote*, 4 August 1898, 5.

6. Peter and Maria Wall, "Aus California," *Zionsbote*, 26 November 1902, 2-3; Peter and Maria Wall, correspondence from Azusa, California, 10 January 1903, *Zionsbote*, 21 January 1903, 3.

7. J. J. Voth, correspondence from Pasadena, California, 3 January 1900. *Christlicher Bundesbote* 18 January 1900, 4-5.

8. J. Winfield Fretz, *Mennonite Colonization: Lessons From the Past For the Future* (Akron, Pa.: Mennonite Central Committee, 1944), 14-15.

9. Lloyd Chester Penner, "The Mennonites on the Washita River: The Culmination of Four Centuries of Migrations" (Ed.D. dissertation: Oklahoma State University, 1971), 93.

10. Sean Dennis Cashman, *American in the Gilded Age: From the Death of Lincoln to the Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*. 3rd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 292.

11. Royden Loewen, "American Nationalism and the Rural Immigrant: A Case Study of Two Midwest Communities, 1900-1925," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 12 (1994): 124.

12. David Haury, "Hard the Road to Oklahoma," in *Growing Faith: General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma* (Newton, Kans.: Faith & Life Press, 1988), 3-4.

13. James M. Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War: Mennonite Identity and Organization in America, 1890-1930*. The Mennonite Experience in America, Volume 3 (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1989), 189-190.

14. Gerhard Rempel, correspondence from Redding, California, 1 August 1886, *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 18 August 1886, 1.

15. LaVernae J. Dick, "Early Mennonites in Oregon" (M.A. thesis, Oregon College of Education, 1972), 32; Vivian Schellenberg, "The Gerhard J. Rempel Family" (unpublished mss., 1995), 1-2.

16. Johann Ratzlaff, correspondence from Glendora, California, 23 June 1895, *Zionsbote*, 3 July 1895, 4.

17. Jakob Wedel, Jr., correspondence from San Diego, California, 17 February 1898, *Christlicher Bundesbote* 3 March 1893, 4.

18. Peter and Katharina Siemens, correspondence from Hicksville, Washington, *Zionsbote*, 21 April 1909, 7.

19. Georg and Christina Goering correspondence from El Nido, California, 24 April 1923, *Der Wahrheitsfreund*, 9 May 1923, 8.

20. Peter P. Toews, correspondence from Winton, California, 11 January 1925, *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 28 January 1925, 7.

21. Report from Paso Robles, California, *The Mennonite*, 20 September 1921, pp. 4-5.

22. M. B. Fast, correspondence from Atwater, California, 19 January 1912, *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 7 February 1912, 2.

23. Leland J. Harder and Kevin Enns-Rempel, "The Henry J. Martens Land Scheme," in *Anabaptist/Mennonite Faith and Economics*, ed. Calvin Redekop, Victor A. Krahn and Samuel J. Steiner (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1993), 199-222.

24. Julius Siemens, correspondence from Los Molinos, California, *Christlicher Bundesbote*, 20 July 20 1911, 4-5.

25. For a more detailed study of Siemens, see Kevin Enns-Rempel, "In Search of the 'Greatest Mennonite Settlement': the Career of Julius Siemens," *California Mennonite Historical Society Bulletin*, no. 26 (April 1992): 1-2, 6-10.

26. "Bericht von der vorberatenden Sitzung in Ebenfeld, Kansas, am 20. September, 1909," *Zionsbote*, 29 September 1909, 3.

27. G., "Our Scattered Membership," *The Mennonite*, 9 November 1905, 4.

28. Anna Janzen, correspondence from Hollywood, California, 10 February 1909, *Zionsbote*, 17 February 1909, 8.

29. Mrs. F. F. Becker, correspondence from El Modena, California, 1 April 1912, *Zionsbote*, 10 April 1912, 6.

30. Haury, "Hard the Road to Oklahoma," 8-9.
31. P. P. Giesbrecht, "Ein Rückblick," *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 17 April 1912, 3.
32. Accounts of the Harbin story may be found in Abram Friesen & Abram J. Loewen, *Escape Across the Amur River*. Echo Historical Series (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 2001); H. P. Isaak, *Our Life Story and Escape* (Fresno: privately printed, 1976); John H. Thielmann, *Escape to Freedom* (Mountain View, Calif.: privately printed, 1995); Herb H. Neufeld, *Jacob's Journey: Escape from Communist Russia* (New York: Vantage Press, 2000).
33. Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War*, 194.
34. Gregory, *American Exodus*, 23-24.
35. Penner, "Mennonites on the Washita River," 280.
36. J. J. Unruh, correspondence from Dos Palos, California, 16 March 1933, *Zionsbote*, 29 March 1933, p. 6.