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Author(s): Kevin Enns-Rempel.

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Mennonites in the Escondido Valley

Today when Mennonites in California speak of "the Valley," one can assume they mean the San Joaquin Valley, home to more American Mennonites than anywhere west of Kansas. But for roughly 10 years, beginning in 1907, a reference to "the Valley" might almost as easily have meant the Escondido Valley. During that brief time there was a flourishing community of Mennonites in and around Escondido with two Mennonite congregations -- one Mennonite Brethren and one General Conference Mennonite.

The first Mennonites to settle in Escondido came there from Long Beach, California, where a small community of Mennonites settled shortly after the turn of the century. Franz C. and Mary Penner, Mennonite Brethren Church members, were the first to move from Long Beach. They took out an option on the Moses Williams ranch at the upper end of the Escondido Valley in January of 1907. The local newspaper noted that the Williams Ranch was "a well improved place and will make an elegant home."¹ The Penner family took up residence in Escondido in late February or early March.

Several Mennonite Brethren families followed the Penners to Escondido during the next months. Jacob J. and Anna Kroeker arrived from Mountain Lake, Minnesota in early May. Jakob J. and Lena Reimer moved from Long Beach later that month. Mr. Reimer took a job at a local hardware store. At least three families arrived in September. John B. and Justina Ratzlaff, who had been living in California since the 1890s, moved from Azusa. Jacob F. and Justina Ediger arrived from Weatherford, Oklahoma. Of particular significance was the arrival of Abraham and Susanna Schellenberg from Buhler, Kansas.

Abraham Schellenberg was a prominent elder in the Ebenezer Mennonite Brethren Church and his coming to Escondido must have provided a sense of stability and leadership for the young Mennonite Brethren community there. The Schellenbergs came west in search of a different climate to help Mrs. Schellenberg's fragile health.²

By 1907 two real estate companies with obvious Mennonite connections were established in Escondido. The German Real Estate Company, managed by P.A. Reimer (previously from Long Beach), evidently did considerable advertising in German-language papers in "eastern states."³ Some of these papers were likely those read by midwestern Mennonites. The Nachtigall Brothers, "Dealers in Real Estate," were also aggressive promoters of the Escondido area among German-speaking settlers.⁴ Neither Reimer nor the Nachtigalls seem ever to have joined the MB congregation in Escondido, but both had many friends and relatives in the church. The Nachtigall brothers, Peter and Jacob, may have been Seventh-Day Adventists. A striking number of "Mennonite" names can be linked to the Adventists in Escondido newspapers of the time, including Nachtigall, Toews, Baerg, Epp, Abrahams, Voth, Nikkel, Heinrichs, Wall, Neufeld, Peters and Ratzlaff. It is unclear whether all these people were members of an Adventist congregation, but their names often appeared in connection with Adventist camp meetings, schools, weddings and funerals.

A Mennonite Brethren congregation began meeting in Escondido as early as September of 1907, shortly after the arrival of Elder Schellenberg. At that time the group was holding services in a school house on Lime Street but there

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Members of the Bethania MB Church in front of their meeting house, date unknown (courtesy Evangeline Kroeker).

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is also evidence that they sometimes met in private homes.⁵ Early in 1908 the group gathered at the home of Peter Nikkel to organize the Bethania Mennonite Brethren Church, with Abraham Schellenberg as leader. The organizational meeting evidently took place in April though one account claims that it occurred in January.⁶

One of the congregation's first concerns was to secure an adequate building. A few weeks after the organizational meeting Johann Böse donated to the church a 100' x 165' parcel of land, valued at \$30.00. Construction of a 28' x 40' meeting house began in May and was completed in July. Construction costs were \$813.16.⁷ The congregation dedicated its new building in September.

On September 20, 1908, 42 individuals became charter members of the Bethania Mennonite Brethren Church, as follows:

Franz C. and Maria Penner
Jacob and Anna Kroeker (daughters Maria and Aganetha)
Wilhelm F. and Margaretha Ewert (daughters Helena, Eva & Anna)
Jacob and Justina Ediger
Peter R. and Susanna Nikkel (children Henry and Katharine)
John and Margaretha Nikkel
John and Justina Böse (children Benjamin and Katherine)
Henry J. Böse
Benjamin and Susanna Adrian
Peter C. and Anna Ediger
Henry and Sarah Goerz
Jacob J. Kroeker
Henry P. and Helen Adrian
John B. and Justina Ratzlaff
Jacob J. and Helen Reimer
Herman and Katherine Goerz⁸

Within the first year and a half the membership had grown to 64; it stood at 71 in 1912.⁹ At this time Bethania's membership was second only to Reedley among the six Mennonite Brethren congregations in California.

Other Mennonites also found their way to Escondido. The General Conference Mennonites dedicated a meeting house there in 1911 and organized a congregation with 19 charter members in 1912. A.A. Sommer was the congregation's first minister. The local newspaper claimed at the time that this was the *third* Mennonite congregation in Escondido. The other two supposedly were Mennonite Brethren and "German Seventh-Day Adventist", further evidence of the significant number of former Mennonites who had become affiliated with the Adventists in Escondido.¹⁰

The regular arrival of new settlers and organization of congregations must have made the future seem bright to Mennonites in Escondido. Soon, however, came the first indications that all might not be well for the young settlement. F.C. Penner reported to *Zionsbote* in March of 1913 that many in the area lost most of their harvest during the

previous year and all of it this year.¹¹ Instead of welcoming more new arrivals, the Mennonite Brethren congregation watched significant numbers of members leave for new homes elsewhere. Heinrich and Margaretha Dick, Abraham and Katharine Klassen, Franz and Anna Nikkel, J.J. and Anna Warkentin, Benjamin and Susanna Adrian all left in 1913. Perhaps the hardest blow for the congregation that year occurred when Elder Abraham and Susanna Schellenberg returned to Kansas, leaving the church without the only leader it had ever known. H.P. Unruh was chosen to fill the void left by Schellenberg. Faced with a dwindling membership, the Bethania congregation, on May 11, 1913, discussed whether they should sell their church building. The members decided not to do so at that time.¹²

A few new Mennonite families did move to Escondido during this time, but even more left for new homes, generally in other parts of California. A new Mennonite settlement in Shafter claimed several Escondido families during 1916-1918, including the Abraham Sieberts, the Peter Thiessens, John and Margaretha Nikkel and Peter and Susanna Nikkel.

Faced with an ever-dwindling membership, the Bethania Church decided to sell their building to a German Methodist congregation. The exact date of sale is unclear but it probably took place in 1920 or 1921. The Bethania Church survived for a few years after the sale. In 1924, with a membership of seven, it reported for the last time to the Pacific District Conference.

After Bethania's closing, some former members worshipped with the German Methodist group in the old Bethania meeting house. The Los Angeles Mennonite Brethren Church sent ministers to Escondido to visit the few remaining Mennonite Brethren families in Escondido, but soon even those occasional visits were discontinued. The General Conference Mennonite Church, too, dwindled away until it closed in 1934.

The only members of the Bethania Mennonite Brethren Church to stay in Escondido after the 1920s seem to have been Johann and Justina Ratzlaff. In 1940 they reported to *Zionsbote* that they were attending a Nazarene Church. Justina Ratzlaff submitted the last report from Escondido to the *Zionsbote* in 1945, thus bringing to a close this chapter of California Mennonite Brethren history.

--Kevin Enns-Rempel

1. *Escondido Times*. January 18, 1907, p. 3
2. Herbert Kroeker. *The Ebenezer Story: 1879-1979*. Buhler: Mennonite Brethren Church, 1979, p. 71
3. *Escondido Times*. October 4, 1907, p. 2
4. *Ibid.* January 18, 1907, p. 3; November 8, 1907, p. 7; March 13, 1908, June 3, 1910.
5. *Ibid.* September 27, 1907, p. 3; *Gemeinde Chronik*, p. 1. Record Group CB542, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, CA
6. *Gemeinde Chronik*, p. 1; Bruderberatung am 7. April, 1908, p. 2 (Record Group CB542, CMBS)
7. *Gemeinde Chronik*, p. 1; *Zionsbote*. July 24, 1908, p. 7; Bethania Church minute book, p. 9-10
8. "Bruderberatung am 19. April 1908" p. 3
9. *Zionsbote*. January 12, 1910, p. 4; Bethania Church minute book, p. 26
10. "Mennonites Organize a Church at Escondido", *Escondido Times*. October 13, 1911, p. 4
11. *Zionsbote*. March 12, 1913, p. 5-6
12. Escondido Church minute book, p. 32