

"GRANDMA" Registry is a Big Success

GRANDMA" has taken the Mennonite genealogical world by storm! By GRANDMA we mean, of course, the Society's own CD-ROM project: the Genealogical Registry and Database of Mennonite Ancestry. This is a computer database that contains genealogical and family information regarding more than 268,000 persons of so-called "Low German" Mennonite ancestry.

The project started a number of years ago when several of our Society members joined hands to computerize the family records that they had been manually working on for many years. The index card collection that Alan Peters had been collecting for decades was technologically massaged by Jay Hubert who, joined by Bob Friesen, represented the computer "whiz kids" of the group. Additional records, including those collected by Society members Jane Friesen and Kevin Enns-Rempel, were added, and the entire project benefited from the organizational genius of our "legal beagle," Jeff Wall. The "user's perspective" was supplied by Nona Johnson, who added her own deep family history interests to the mix. This group received Society board approval to establish the Genealogical Project Committee, and soon were developing a massive file of genealogical data on thousands of persons of Mennonite ancestry around the world.

As word of the project became better known, many other Mennonite genealogists and family historians indicated that they wanted to join the effort and merge their data collections with those of "GRANDMA." Jay Hubert was able to marshal technological assistance to create a program that electronically merged computer databases in a way that identified and eliminated the

duplicates, so that a relatively pure and consistent single file of data resulted. This was the beginning of the GRANDMA CD-ROM project.

Within a relatively short period of time, computerized family records were flowing into the Society, causing GRANDMA to grow from a moderate, compact collection into a massive collection of enormous scope. It brought together in one place the life's work of dozens of genealogists, and is now regarded as one of the major resources world-wide for the study of Mennonite genealogy and family history.

The GRANDMA master file is maintained in Fresno, and a continually-updated version is available at the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies at Fresno Pacific University. The Society has already published two versions of the database, and as more data flows in, it will be necessary to periodically reissue new compact disks that contain all the data collected since the last version appeared.

GRANDMA 2 was issued in late 1997, and contains data on more than 268,000 persons. The information contained on the CD includes not only the typical recording of birth, baptism, marriage, migration, death and burial dates and places, but also notes and comments for many of the persons recorded in the database.

The data is organized by use of a popular genealogical software program called "Brothers Keeper," created by John Steed. This program not only links each person to his or her ancestors and descendants, but also provides attractive screen formats for the information, and makes the data usable in a wide variety of ways: it searches for specific persons, prepares a wide variety of reports and charts, cites the sources of each piece of information, if known, and

provides many other tools that a genealogist or family historian can use to keep track of family data.

To put it mildly, GRANDMA 2 has been a rousing success! It is widely cited by genealogists around the world as perhaps the best source available for Mennonite family information. Internet web sites and bulletin boards quote it regularly, and it has found its way into the hands of individual researchers and libraries around the world.

The Society has sold over 500 copies of the GRANDMA 2 CD-ROM to researchers throughout North America and overseas. The enormous success of the CD has not only caused the data to be available for many doing family research, saving them from duplicating the efforts already accomplished by others, but it has brought enormous world-wide recognition of our Society and has resulted in significant contributions to it—not only in terms of revenue, but also in the large amount of family information and data that has been contributed by those who want their work to be included in the database.

The Genealogical Project Committee wants to thank all of you who have joined us in this effort. Our dreams for a comprehensive, and hopefully eventually complete database of Mennonite family records, have already become true. Indeed, they have already grown far beyond what once were our wildest expectations. We will be issuing GRANDMA 3 in the months to come, and it will further broaden the scope of our data. In short, GRANDMA has come of age, and is a project and a product that we in the California Mennonite Historical Society can point to with considerable pride and a deep sense of accomplishment!

—Alan Peters