



Researching Mennonite Family Roots: Fifty Years Later

by Alan Peters

*W*hen the California Mennonite Historical Society was established fifty years ago, Mennonite genealogy was largely still a “Mennonite game.” Discovering relationships was a popular conversation item, and obituaries in the church publications were widely read and discussed. But there were few family books. Family records were limited to the well-kept family Bible records and the occasional private journal.

Official records were difficult to find, largely because most families had roots in Russia, and the political climate was such that those distant records were either lost entirely or hidden away and impossible to secure. War and politics made access difficult, and the very survival of records was a constant worry. Many of the early records from Mennonite churches in Poland were known to survive and were gathered together at the Mennonitische Forschungstelle in Germany. However, records in Russia and Ukraine were unavailable and feared lost. This created for many a “missing gap” in their family history, with families unable to make family connections all the way back to Poland.

What a difference fifty years has made! The intervening years have seen tremendous discoveries and serendipitous historical events that have opened up new avenues for genealogical research. Here are a few of the stunning accomplishments of recent years, which have revolutionized Mennonite family research:



Peter Braun, from the "Peter Braun Collection" of Molotschna Colony records, Odessa State Archives.

New Access to Archival Records

The end of the Soviet Union in the 1990s miraculously opened up most of the formerly unavailable Mennonite records in Russia and Ukraine. The discovery of the stunning "Peter Braun Collection" of Molotschna Colony records at the Odessa State Archives was the first of many such discoveries at numerous archives in the former Soviet Union, and these records provided much genealogical information that had been feared lost.

Advancement of Computer Technology

Fifty years ago, genealogical records were kept on file cards and other pieces of paper. If these were not published somehow, the knowledge that they contained was limited to those with ready access to the "paper" records. The

development of the computer and the miraculous existence of the Internet have changed all that. A multitude of valuable records have been digitized, and are now available at our fingertips. Dozens of websites contain copies of these records, and email and other computer-based capabilities enable virtually anyone to communicate immediately with others around the world and gain access to information that we didn't even know existed fifty years ago.

Our society has been instrumental in making Mennonite family information available by establishing the GRANDMA (Ge-

or unavailable to learn from their own genetic makeup vital facts about their origins and relationships. For example, many Wiebe families have family traditions that they are directly descended from Adam Wiebe, the renowned engineer for the city of Gdańsk, Poland. (He famously provided the city with its defensive bastions and its water supply.) The theories of today's Wiebe families' connection with Adam Wiebe have never been proven; no records have yet been found that provide conclusive evidence regarding the descendants of his sons. DNA studies, however, have shown that

"[DNA research] is now enabling people whose family background is unknown or unavailable to learn from their own genetic makeup vital facts about their origins and relationships."

neological Registry and Database of Mennonite Ancestry) program which serves as a collection point for genealogical discoveries by virtually all Mennonite genealogists worldwide. Submitted records are organized and linked, resulting in a merger of the work of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of family historians around the world. Currently the program contains records on more than 1,300,000 persons and is continually growing as new records are added.

Development of DNA Research

The newest genealogical tool is the use of human genetics to assist in family research. Deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) has made it possible to study ancestral roots and human relationships through the study of each person's genetic makeup and comparing one person's genome with another's. This is now enabling people whose family background is unknown

all male Wiebes who have been genetically tested have identical Y-chromosomes, indicating that they are all descended from a common male ancestor. As a result, we can conclude that all of these otherwise "unrelated" Wiebes are related and have a common male ancestor, who certainly could be the famous Adam Wiebe of Polish history. Many similar discoveries have been made because of this new technology.

These past fifty years have seen monumental advances in the understanding of Mennonite family history. Moreover, our own historical society has played a prominent role in discovering, collecting, and preserving Mennonite family records. Records once hidden or thought to have been destroyed have instead been uncovered and are now available to us all as we endeavor to study our own roots.