

After Fifty Years

Gering



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A brief discussion of the history and activities
of the Swiss-German Mennonites
from Russia who settled in
South Dakota in 1874

by

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PREFACE

In presenting this booklet to its readers the author has a two-fold object in view. Primarily to familiarize the present generation of American-born Mennonites with the history and achievements of their ancestors and the price that was paid to establish them in this privileged land of the New World, and secondly to place before their neighbors a brief statement of facts concerning the Mennonite Church. Since the year 1924 rounds out fifty years of continuous and uninterrupted residence by these people in this community and only a very few of the pioneers who can still tell the story abide here the eleventh hour for recording their tales has struck. If this work shall succeed stirring this generation to a better appreciation of their Americanism and to enlighten the public in a measure on the history and mission of the Mennonite Church then its publication shall be fully justified.

JOHN J. GERING

Marion, S. D., August 6th, 1924.



REV. JOS. KAUFMAN



REV. CHR. KAUFMAN



REV. C. MUELLER



REV. DERK P. TIESZEN



DANIEL UNRUH



REV. JACOB R. SCHRAG

THE HEROES OF 1874.

On the “wild and wooly” prairies
Where the howling coyotes roam,
On the hills and in the narrows
Our dear fathers sought a home.

Tho the winds were cold and blowing
And with snowdrifts stalked the land,
Naught but danger near-by roving;
Onward moved this hero band.

Facing hardships, hunger, sorrow,
Sleeping 'neath the mantled sky;
Waiting anxious for tomorrow,
Thus passed many long nights by.

Locusts, floods and prairie fires,
Blizzards, drought and summer heat,
Road-less plains and treacherous mires
Could not force them to retreat.

Soon they made a habitation
Where the cold wind's howling roar
And the coyote and the Indian
Could not harm them any more.

Now the sod-house and the shanty
Have departed from the plain,
And they live in peace and plenty
Safely roofed from storm and rain.

Where the Indians in their tepees
By the sparkling waters dwelled,
Now stand churches, homes and cities
And school-houses unexcelled.

On the hills in peaceful slumber
Rest our loved ones pure and true,
Many of their silent number
Having toiled for me and you.

“Wild and wooly” thou hast prospered
Ever since our fathers came,
From a few and humble homesteads,
Thou hast grown to wealth and fame

“Wild and wooly,” Western garden,
May thou ever prosperous be,
May thy loved sons be thy guardian
And thy daughters garnish thee.

May the Stars and Stripes: “Old Glory”
Ever wave unfurled o'er Thee,
And their message be the story:
“Home of Brave and Land of Free!”

—J. J. G.

CHAPTER I.

EUROPEAN WANDERINGS AND PERSECUTIONS

The history of the people referred to in this booklet is so closely identified with their church that they are far better known by their church affiliation — The Mennonites — than by their true nationality. So in attempting to find a starting place or point of beginning for this narrative, it is necessary to go back to the beginning of the movement which eventually became the Mennonite Church.

In the first stages of this movement the reader will look vainly for the term “Mennonite.” History speaks of this movement as “Anabaptism” and its followers are termed “Anabaptists.” The Mennonite denomination was named after Menno Simon, one of the early leaders in this movement, altho not in the strictest sense its founder. The movement sprung into existence during the Reformation period when so many different and distinct attempts were made to revive ancient Christianity and to re-construct it in accordance with the doctrines of the New Testament.

Europe was just going thru a period of storm and distress, experiencing a social, political and religious turmoil that threatened its very existence, but at the same time was full of opportunity. The corruption of government officials, the oppression of the poor, the decay of civilization and the indifference of the churches furnished ample ground and justification for this movement to correct and better existing conditions. The clash between civil and ecclesiastical authorities, due to the effort of the church to also control governmental affairs, was likewise a great factor in the founding and progress of this movement.

It was in this movement to bring order out of chaos, peace out of strife, freedom from oppression and to establish Christianity on a basis of brotherly love that the Mennonite Church was born.

The little Alpine country of Switzerland was the birthplace of the Anabaptist movement and its activities were somewhat limited to the north central cantons of Bern, Zurich and Basel. The language spoken in these cantons is almost exclusively German, which accounts for the term "Swiss-German Mennonites," which shall be considered the official name of the people whose history will be reported in the following pages.

Due to the radical departure of the founders of the Anabaptist movement from the form, dogma and practice of the state churches of that day, they became footballs of abuse and contempt in the hands of their officials. Their number was naturally small in the beginning but their growth was rapid considering the strong and extremely unfriendly attitude taken towards them by the state church of Switzerland. .

No reform of any kind is ever brought about without difficulties of some character. So, as indicated before, this Anabaptist movement soon became an object of suspicion and its followers exposed to certain restrictions at first and later to punishment. A persecution of their members then followed in the land of their origin which has scarcely an equal in the history of Europe. Beginning about the year 1500 the persecution continued until 1815, by which time the faith was nearly annihilated in every part of Switzerland except in the settlements of Canton and Bern. Church and state united in their bitter and relentless attack on these helpless people, confiscating their property, offering rewards for information leading to their arrest, forcing them to attend the state church and to have their children baptized there, condemning them to serve as galley slaves, casting them into filthy prisons for life, banishing

them to foreign lands, inflicting the death penalty and subjecting them to almost all known methods of cruelty and torture.

While Switzerland was the birth place and original home of the Anabaptists, it was not long before they made settlements in the Netherlands where they were accorded the best of treatment and as a consequence thereof experienced a healthy growth. When news of the persecution of their brethren in Switzerland reached the Anabaptist settlement in the Netherlands in 1641 they immediately took steps to investigate the matter and a delegation was sent to Bern for the purpose of learning more about it and to give them such aid as they may be in need of. This delegation was also prepared to assist them financially. Upon reaching Switzerland, they took it up with the government officials pleading with them for leniency, but received no consideration or encouragement. They were even prohibited from extending any financial aid to them. Having failed with the Swiss government, the delegation returned home and asked their own government to intervene. They succeeded in getting the State General of the Netherlands to dispatch a note to the government of Switzerland in which he made a strong plea for leniency to these stricken people and spoke at length of their harmless character, good citizenship and economic value to his country. But the Swiss reply was that they would make no concessions and could not tolerate them within their borders. So the future in their native land was darker and more uncertain than ever.

About the year of 1670 there ruled over the Palatinate (Rheinpfalz) the noble Count Karl Ludwig. The Thirty Years' War had left its usual and terrible marks of devastation on his land and this official was anxious to have those lands re-habilitated. He knew of the Mennonites and their thrift so he extended a hearty invitation for them to come and make their homes in his dominions. About 100 families responded

to this invitation and wandered into the Palatinate carrying their small belongings on their backs. A most pitiful sight. Men, women and children, people 80 and 90 years of age, stripped of all their holdings with decades of persecution and suffering stamped on their faces, sadly and slowly wending their way from their native land to seek shelter among strangers. The Relief Society, formed by the Dutch Mennonites was a great help to them. The City of Mannheim became a veritable distributing center of Mennonites. From here they were located on farms and hired out as laborers. This was the beginning of the emigration from Switzerland.

When this first group of Mennonites left Switzerland it seemed for a while as if the lot of the remaining ones would improve somewhat, but only for a short time when it became worse than ever. Why a land like free Switzerland with its old civilization and record struggle for freedom from oppression should inflict such torture and suffering on a religious sect and eventually force them to leave seems inexplicable. But upon close study of those times the fact is revealed that some of the heads of the Reformed State Church there were mere politicians, criminally indifferent towards the other churches and their difficulties, and that their acts of permitting and ordering these persecutions to go on were not in harmony with the voice of the masses. So group after group the Mennonites began to leave Switzerland, some going to Germany, others to the Netherlands and still others direct to North America settling in Eastern states, largely in Pennsylvania. According to the best information obtainable the forefathers of the Swiss-German Mennonites of Turner and Hutchinson Counties, South Dakota, emigrated from Switzerland to Einsiedel, Austria, about the year 1790, and seven years later into Russia-Poland.

In closing this chapter it may not be amiss to mention the fact that due to the hardships the Mennonite

Church endured in the three centuries of religious persecution in Switzerland, it never made a complete recovery therefrom. Driven into the remotest corners of the cantons and keeping themselves in hiding places their opportunities for prosperity were limited and to this day it seems that the members of the Mennonite church are not as prosperous in Switzerland as in the other countries where they have settled.

CHAPTER II.

IN THE LAND OF THE CZAR

The circumstance which eventually led to the Mennonite immigration into Russia dates back to the year 1697 when Czar Peter the Great made his historical tour of western Europe, and remained for some time in the Netherlands. It was here that he learned of their thrift and skill along agricultural lines, altho he had known of them before in as much as his private physician was a Mennonite. This young ruler had learned by comparison that his people were half-barbarous and was also aware of his own inferiority to the rulers of western Europe. So in undertaking this prolonged trip and residence in several of these western countries his sole object was to study conditions away from home and then apply some of the lessons learned in the development of his own domain. But there is no evidence that any invitations were made to the Mennonites to come and settle in Russia during the reign of Peter.

In 1762 Catherine II., ascended to the throne of Russia. She commands little respect as a character but deserves much credit as a ruler. During her reign the borders of Russia were extended to the Black and Caspian seas, after carrying on several successive wars with Turkey. These regions were at least in part inhabited by half-civilized wandering bands of Turks and Tartars and large regions of this conquered, undeveloped territory became crown land desirable for settlement and which she was anxious to develop. She herself was of German blood and when looking around for desirable settlers for this undeveloped tract of land she turned to Germany and other central or North European countries. It seems that she made a special bid for the religiously oppressed

people of those countries in that she offered them special inducements. On July 22, 1773 she issued an imperial edict for the Mennonites in which they were granted full religious freedom, exemption from military service and from taxes for a period of ten years, the right to own and hold property and permission to use their own language in their churches, schools and local government, and invited them to come and settle in her kingdom.

When the terms of this decree were first announced the Swiss-German Mennonites were still living in Switzerland, then the land of persecution for them. The attachment of these people to their native land was remarkable and particularly so in view of the fact that they had invitations to settle in neighboring countries where they were assured religious freedom. They remained in Switzerland until 1790 and then emigrated to Austria. Very little is known of their living in Austria but the mere fact that they only remained seven years would indicate that they were not entirely satisfied with conditions there. Another reason for leaving Austria so soon was no doubt the fact that the Russian offer was tempting to them. In 1797 they made their next move landing in Russia-Poland this time.

Here they were at last in a land to which they were invited and which assured them the very things for which they suffered untold hardships for generations in Switzerland. Eduardsdorf was founded here named after Count Eduard, a very warm friend of the newcomers. A large tract of land was leased and like beavers they went to work, felling trees and converting the woodlands and waste into a beautiful and thriving community. While a considerable part of their number remained here, a few families moved about seventy miles north-west in 1837, leased land and founded the village of Horodischa. Still later, twelve more families went some ninety miles east, bought land and founded the little village of Waldheim. Other villages founded by these people were

Kotosufka, Dubroka, Futor, etc. In most cases the land was leased but in Waldheim, one of the smaller villages, it was owned. About all of the land bought or leased in and around the villages was covered with a heavy growth of timber. This required years of toil to clear and make fit for cultivation. But, given an opportunity to work and their long hoped for religious freedom, they never shirked a task or faltered in the presence of a difficulty in their effort to build homes in the land of their adoption.

It will be noticed that in Russia they lived in villages exclusively. This custom of a few families banding themselves together in groups and settling in such villages instead of on isolated farm homes was brought from Switzerland and was a result of their persecutions. They found it advantageous to live in groups for mutual help and protection. It was also more convenient for church attendance, which was always very strong among these people. They also required school attendance of all their children who were able-bodied. These villages were exceedingly picturesque. They were built on both sides of a roadway and the buildings were far enough apart so that each house was surrounded by a large fruit orchard, extensive and well kept gardens and flower beds. The entire village was generally surrounded by hedge or tall forest trees. The village school and church buildings were located at a convenient place near the center. On each side of the road or street running thru the center of the village and between each home were nicely constructed and well kept up wooden board fences. The buildings were simply constructed and all built on the same style, being larger or smaller as the means of the family would permit. They generally consisted of a dwelling house, a barn and a large granary. The granaries had to be large for most of the grain was stored in them in fall and threshed during the winter months inside with the old fashioned wooden flail by hand. There was no common ownership of property in the

village except the church and school. Each family had its own land, live stock and machinery, but they were always helpful to one another and particularly so in case of sickness or misfortune.

The local government of the village was largely in the hands of the moderator known in those days as “Schultz” who was elected at the annual meeting of the church society. It was his duty to see that order is kept, settle disputes arising between individuals, look after the poor and to represent the village in all legal or political affairs. The size of these villages varied from as few as six families to as many as fifty or more. Church attendance was strictly required of all members and their larger children and attendance at the village school was also compulsory. A strict church discipline was observed and ex-communication was often enforced. Preaching services were held on Sunday forenoons and the sermons were usually read from a book. Preachers and teachers were selected from their own midst by a vote of the members of the church. In the village schools the young people were given instruction in the German, Russian and Polish languages and the curriculum was limited to reading, writing, arithmetic and bible. Farming always constituted the chief occupation of the Mennonite settlements but here in Russia they were also widely known for their successful dairying. From Switzerland they brought their cheese and butter making skill and their product found a ready market in all of the larger neighboring Russian cities. Soon after their settlement in Russia they began to plant and cultivate fruit trees and within twenty-five years after their arrival on these woodland wastes they could show some of the finest orchards of the kingdom. Their gardens also attracted wide attention as did their bee culture.

About their only near neighbors were the Russian serfs or peasants who were at that time nothing less than slaves of the capitalists and landowners. They were extremely ignorant and superstitious and

the majority of them illiterate. These were the only outside people the villagers came in contact with except what little visiting was done between villages which was rather infrequent due to the distance, roads and means of travel.

In this fashion there dwelled and prospered in the domain of the Russian Monarchy these privileged Mennonite villages, communities to which the government pointed with pride. Their wonderful development of the wastes and woodlands into veritable flower gardens, the clean streets and well kept houses, the attractive yards and fruit bearing orchards, their large dairy herds and rich growing grain fields, their peaceful living and loyal church and school attendance attracted the attention of the Czar himself and high government officials paid frequent visits to the villages. This prosperity continued unmolested for a period of sixty years.

Just before the close of the Crimean War, Alexander II. was elevated to the throne of Russia. This was about the time of the beginning of the great European class struggle between its nobility and peasantry. This feeling spread rapidly and Czar Alexander was aware that it was over-running his country. He was a careful student and close observer and soon felt that in order to quiet down this spirit of unrest and revolution in his kingdom it was necessary for him to make some move or attempt to create more equality between the nobles and serfs. He therefore issued the great Emancipation Code of 1861, the "Magna Charta" of the Russian Serf. This was one of the most remarkable documents ever issued by a ruler and won for Alexander a place among the immortals of history. Thus, by a single stroke of the pen he emancipated forty-six million serfs. But even this failed to accomplish what was expected of it. Despite the emancipation, the serfs continued to remain poor and falling into debt became the victims of heartless usurers. In addition to this the upheaval in church affairs brought boundless

misery to the new ruler. Finally the old troubles with the Turks were beginning to renew themselves and a war between Russia and Turkey seemed inevitable. It was during these times of unrest that the privileges extended to the Mennonites in 1873 by Czarina Catherine and reaffirmed in 1800 by Czar Paul were brought into question. It is more than probable that complaints reached the Czar and he was finally persuaded to yield and recall the edict containing these privileges, which placed the Mennonites into the military ranks of Russia.

When the news of this new decree first reached the villagers but little attention was paid to it. But as new and conflicting reports were received from time to time it was finally agreed to send a delegation to St. Petersburg to ascertain the real facts concerning these rumors. This delegation consisted of Rev. Jacob Stuckey and Rev. Tob. Unruh, who visited the Capital City in 1871. They remained there for some time and made repeated demands to get interviews with officials of the government but were given short and evasive answers. They failed to learn anything certain about this matter but the mere fact that so much secrecy was evident gave them sufficient proof that it was serious. Disappointed they started back to their homes. On their return trip, when a little ways out of the village of Ostrok, they met a small party of government officials with whom they formed a speaking acquaintance. From these officials they learned the principal contents of this new decree recalling the edict of 1773. It recalled and cancelled all of their principal privileges including that of exemption from military service and gave all Mennonites who are unwilling to submit to this new decree ten years in which to emigrate. If they fail to emigrate within this ten year period, they become full subjects of Russia and forever surrendered their rights to passports. The purpose of keeping this secret was to let the ten year period run by and thus automatically make them full subjects of Russia, for

Alexander disliked very much to see these people emigrate. With this information the two delegates hurried back to the villages.

CHAPTER III.

THE DEPUTATION'S JOURNEY

Having satisfied themselves of the withdrawal of their exemption from military service by the Russian government, the question of what course to pursue in the future became paramount with the villagers. An appeal was made to St. Petersburg for a modification of this decree but the response was not very encouraging, altho courteous. Memories of their ancestors' wanderings from country to country were still with them. Emigration seemed inevitable but the question of a new location was a vexing one. A number of meetings were held among the neighboring villages where this matter was discussed freely and fully. It was almost the unanimous opinion of the participants at these gatherings to emigrate as soon as a suitable location could be found. The mention of North America received very little applause at first as it was considered by most of these people merely a place for adventure where one would have to carry a revolver in his hip pocket all the time to protect himself from the savage natives. Australia was also considered but received even less support. There was no European country to which they could go and better their condition thereby.

After long deliberation the villages of Molotschna, Mariapol and of West Prussia came to the conclusion, in the spring of 1873, to send a deputation to North America. The sole purpose of this venture was to make a study of conditions and locations in the New World with the object in view of a settlement over there. The villages of Horodisch and Waldheim, from which most of the Swiss-Germans came, were represented by Mr. Andrew Schrag and Tob. Unruh. The entire deputation consisted of

twelve men representing the villages and congregations of South Russia and West Prussia. Their names were: Wm. Ewert, Jacob Buller, Tobias Unruh, Andrew Schrag, Jacob Peters, Henry Wiebe, Cor. Bour, Cornelius Toews, David Claassen, Paul Tschetter, Leonard Sudermann and Lorenz Tschetter.

This deputation sailed from Hamburg, Germany, May 14th, 1873, thru the North Sea past the fortress Helgoland and along the coast of the Netherlands to Havre, France, reaching there on the morning of May 16th. About noon of that day they left Havre, sailed thru the English Channel and were soon out on the Atlantic arriving at New York May 22nd, 1873. At New York they were met by representatives of the Northern Pacific Railway. Here the party separated and Mr. Schrag with one of his traveling companions went to Philadelphia where they were furnished with a guide and continued their journey to Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Duluth, Minnesota. At Duluth they observed a large, well equipped immigrant house erected for the comfort and convenience of the landseekers and they were very much impressed with the scenery of Lake Superior. Duluth was then four years old and had a population of 5,500. From Duluth they continued their journey westward to Dakota. The largest part of the country between Duluth and Dakota was wilderness and not until they approached Moorehead, Minnesota, were there any signs of settlers. Here at Moorehead they crossed the Red River and spent the night at Fargo in the Northern Pacific Hotel.

The next day a special train with an official of the Northern Pacific took them west of Fargo over their line where they viewed a large open prairie well adapted for settlement. The soil appeared rich and seemed to keep the moisture well as they observed a large number of small lakelets, but only a very few and far scattered settlers. They spent the night on the Cheyenne River, 66 miles west of Fargo

and returned to Fargo the next day in the forenoon, when they decided to continue their trip northward into Canada. No railroad was yet running north from Fargo so they took the only avenue of travel open to them which was a boat trip up the Red River. They left Fargo on a small flat bottomed river steamboat, named "The International" which belonged to the Hudson Bay Company, with Winnipeg, Canada as their destination. The banks of the river were lined with trees which afforded some beautiful scenery but the river was full of curves and travel slow. On June 16th they arrived at Pembina, only a short distance south of the Canadian line. The vicinity of Pembina made a very favorable impression on Mr. Schrag and on his return home he recommended it to his people for settlement. Late in the evening of June 17th they reached Winnipeg.

Here they were given the very best of treatment and a strong efforts were made to induce them to select a spot of this country for settlement. High officials of the Province of Manitoba invited the deputants to dine with them and painted wonderful word pictures of the opportunities up there. They emphasized their rich soil, coal supply, timber lands, lakes and mining possibilities. Nearly two weeks were spent traveling thru and viewing Manitoba and some very inviting spots were seen. They met settlers there who were very enthusiastic about the country but a few warned them to keep away because of the long and cold winters. They left Manitoba just as the roses were in full bloom while grain fields were growing and bushes clothing themselves in a wonderful green. Returning the same way they came, over the Red River by boat, they arrived at Fargo July 6th. From Fargo another expedition was made into the Dakota land and again they viewed some very promising lands. They took particular notice of the rich native grass and here and there a small potato patch. From Fargo they went on to Breckenridge, Minnesota, from which point they looked over some

Minnesota lands under the supervision of the Minnesota land commissioner, continuing on to Wilmar, St. Peter, Mankato, Mountain Lake and Worthington. Leaving Worthington, they traveled south-west to Sioux City and Council Bluffs, then crossed the Missouri into Omaha where they viewed some Nebraska lands, stopping off at Fairmount, Columbus, Kearney, Red Cloud, Plattsmouth, Hastings, Lowell and Lincoln. In Nebraska they observed a variety of changes in the soil and crop conditions. A lot of Buffalo Grass was seen with numerous buffalos and antelopes grazing on it. The question of traveling thru Kansas and Texas was also raised but only two of the party decided to undertake it as reports were that the best lands in both of those states were already taken. The remainder of the party returned to Elkhart, Indiana, by way of St. Louis and Chicago. Their purpose of stopping at Elkhart, was to become acquainted with the old Mennonite settlements in Indiana. On August 15th the two deputants who traveled thru Texas joined the other ten at New York where preparations were made for the return trip to Europe.

The date set for their sailing was August 20th, and they were just packing their trunks at Castle Garden when they met with the most agreeable and unexpected surprise of the entire trip. It was the meeting with Mr. Daniel Unruh, who had just arrived with his family and a small party from Crimea, Russia. Mr. Unruh was well known to Mr. Jacob Buller, one of the deputation, as they were old friends and neighbors from Molotchna before Unruh moved to Crimea. They only had a few hours together but this short visit established a friendship between Mr. Schrag and Mr. Unruh that continued thruout the period of their lives. Before parting they knelt down in prayer and expressed the hope of meeting again. The deputation sailed that day while Mr. Unruh remained in New York a few days, then went on to Elkhart, Indiana, where he left his family for a few



REV. J. L. WIPF



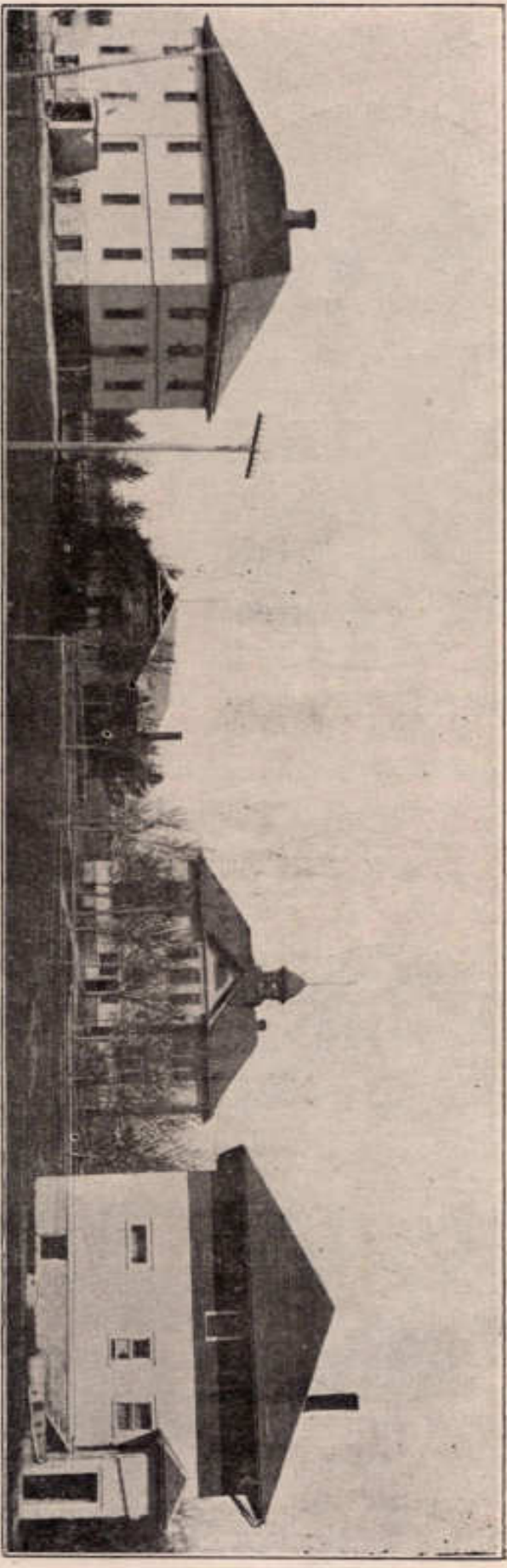
F. C. ORTMAN



REV. C. EWERT



JACOB J. WALTNER



Dormitory and
Dining Hall.

Gymnasium-
Auditorium

Administration
Building

Ladies'
Cottage

FREEMAN COLLEGE CAMPUS

months while he toured the country for a location. After an absence of nearly two months during which time he traveled thru most of the middle and western states, Mr. Unruh finally decided to locate in the vicinity of Yankton of what was then Dakota Territory. He viewed land west of the present site of Menno and was within a few miles of where he homesteaded the following spring. He brought his family to Yankton about October, 1873, and there rented a house for the winter. During the winter he bought a large number of oxen and wagons and all spare time was spent in breaking the oxen for duty in spring. Mr. Unruh was a man of considerable means and a very desirable neighbor. Without him the poorer settlers would have suffered much more for he gave them financial aid when they could not get any elsewhere.

On the return trip the boat in which the deputation was traveling encountered one of the most violent and destructive tornadoes on record in the annals of maritime history. Some 250 boats were reported lost and the experience of the passengers and crew on this boat staggers description but it was eventually saved by a miracle. They finally reached their homes safely during the first week in September. En masse the villagers turned out to greet Mr. Schrag and multitudes of questions were addressed at him. The curiosity of his people was unbounded when he pulled out from between the pages of his bible pressed leaves of a cedar tree.

CHAPTER IV.

THE EMIGRATION

The return of the deputation from their tour of North America, with a favorable report, not only fully settled the question of emigration but also the further and more difficult question of a location. The next task was that of making preparations for the journey which included the disposition of their property holdings and the securing of passports.

Before they made any efforts to dispose of their land holdings a committee, consisting of Jacob Wedel, Andr. Gering and a Mr. Foss, was appointed with instructions to proceed at once in the matter of securing passports. This committee took it up with officials at St. Petersburg but received only discouraging and evasive replies. Seeing that this task of obtaining their passports would be even more difficult than they at first expected, they engaged the services of a Russian Lawyer, named Iliasiewicz, to assist them. After giving this matter considerable attention their lawyer finally made an application to the governor of the Province or state of Volynia. Here they succeeded in obtaining an interview with an official and the first question this official asked them was where they had learned of the recall of that decree which annulled their exemption from military service. This they answered truthfully and without hesitation. He then advised them that he would take it up with the war officer at St. Petersburg but that it was first necessary for them to prepare a petition at once in which they had to show the date of their entry into Russia, the reasons or inducements for coming, their nationality and religion, what property and property rights they have enjoyed while living in Russia, their reasons for leaving,

their number, their destination, etc., etc. This petition was prepared during the night and presented to the governor the next morning. From then on repeated demands for additional information were made on them and they were getting uneasy because of the delay. At last the passports arrived in the spring of 1874. They guaranteed free passage across the line and permitted the taking along of personal belongings and money. Their cost amounted to the sum of nearly \$50.00 each and was considered excessive until they learned that it was necessary for their lawyer to offer tips to certain under officials in order to assure the presentation of the applications to the war officer.

It was getting late in the Spring of 1874 and most of the families were not ready to start as they had not even disposed of their holdings yet. This was due to the long delay in the issuing of the passports. So Mr. Schrag with ten other families, who were ready, decided to go ahead of the rest and took their departure for the new world about April 10th, 1874. They traveled thru Austria, Germany and across the channel to England from where they sailed for New York. Their trip was not marked with any serious delay or extraordinary difficulties and they arrived at New York, about May 20th, 1874. Here Mr. Schrag was apprised of the fact that Mr. Daniel Unruh had chosen the vicinity of Yankton for settlement so the Pembina region, which Mr. Schrag had selected on his trip the year before, was dismissed from their program and the party proceeded on to Yankton, arriving there about May 27th, 1874.

At Yankton Mr. Schrag made arrangements for temporary quarters for his party and with a few other men hired a livery rig to take them out to the Unruh settlement, of which they already knew. Upon their arrival there they found that Mr. Unruh had already erected a comfortable dwelling and had considerable breaking done. This country made a very favorable impression of Mr. Schrag and his associates

and the further fact that they were anxious to settle close to Mr. Unruh was sufficient inducement for them to abandon their Red River and Pembina plans and they at once decided to remain here. Hurrying back to Yankton they bought oxen and wagons, loaded their families, baggage and a few boards of lumber and started for the settlement. Some of the oxen were not well trained and without a traveled road the trip was slow and weary-some. On the third day after leaving Yankton they reached the Unruh settlement, which was on the same spot where Mr. John Unruh, a son of Daniel Unruh, still resides. Most of the land neighboring to Unruh was already taken but these new comers succeeded in buying out the homestead rights of the settlers and a beginning was made. They started breaking and built up dwellings from the sod and even succeeded in raising a little Welsh corn and some potatoes that fall.

About the time Mr. Schrag's party left Russia preparations were going on for the second and much larger party who were trying to get away at the earliest possible moment. Some 53 families made up this band and the day of their departure will never be forgotten. The Russian peasants who had been their neighbors for nearly three quarters of a century assembled in large numbers and wept as they bade them farewell. The people who bought their land took the entire party to the railroad station of Slavuti, a Russian city about 50 miles from the Austrian border. Here they took the train and in a few hours were crossing the line into Austria. The Russian border city was Razaville and on the Austrian side was Brodde. The line was crossed without difficulty and they were not required to undergo a physical examination but had to exhibit their passports.

An incident here at Brodde proved a bitter experience for the entire party and particularly to one family. Peter Graber, a member of this group incurred the ill will of a real estate dealer in Russia before leaving there in that he refused to swear to a

falsehood in connection with a land deal. A suit was started against him and officers were sent from Russia to intercept him and bring him back to face these charges. This was bound to take a few weeks of time and it was impossible to hold back the entire party, so he finally decided to go back and his sickly wife with two small children went on with the group. The agony of this poor wife and mother to continue the trip alone with the constantly painful thought of her husband's fate before her, is almost beyond imagination. But Mr. Graber knew he was innocent and preferred to make the sacrifice of going back and obtain his acquittal, rather than to proceed a fugitive from justice, for he was beyond the Russian border and could not be compelled to return. Upon his return he was promptly acquitted and a few weeks later he joined another party who were destined for Kansas and he made the trip with them as far as New York and soon was again united with his family.

The party spent about two days at Brodde sleeping in the depot at night and on the third day left on a special train for Lemberg. Another stop of nearly two days was made at Lemberg and during that short space of time a few of the group fell in love with the place and decided to locate there. The rest of the party continued the trip to Breslau, Germany. At Breslau they were offered accommodations at the City Park during the day and at night slept in an annex to a big saloon. This was a very trying night as they had no beds and only their baggage for covers and in addition to that they were annoyed and insulted nearly all night long by the late patrons of the saloon. Gladly they stepped on the train the next morning which took them thru Berlin during the night and the following day they reached Hamburg. Nearly a week was spent at Hamburg where they were taken care of in the emigrant house, a building specially constructed for this purpose. The accommodations were fair here and they had a nice opportunity

to rest up a little and also to take in the sights of that important city. From Hamburg they were taken across the English Channel on a small transport boat to Hull, England. At Hull they took particular notice of the big, heavy, English draft horses. One lonely horse hitched to a large transfer vehicle hauled most of the baggage of this party from the boat landing to the train. They now continued their trip on the train to Liverpool. Here they underwent a physical examination and a few families who were found to be afflicted with some eye trouble were forced to stay behind for a few weeks while the rest of the party went on. This too was a bitter experience for the unfortunate few who had to be separated from their associates. They were picked up a few weeks later by another group of emigrants from Russia, some of whom they knew, destined for Kansas and they traveled together at least as far as New York. This was the same group with which Mr. Graber came.

It was about the first week of August when this first party left Liverpool on a boat belonging to the Inman line. Due to lack of sufficient funds they were compelled to travel third class so their accommodations on the boat were not the best. Colored cooks and waiters were employed exclusively. One interpreter was furnished by the boat thru whom they could make their wants known and from whom they could obtain such information as they needed. The ocean voyage lasted about two weeks and was full of new experiences for all of them, but ended without any serious mishap except the death of one small child which was buried at sea. They also traveled a very rough sea for 24 hours bouncing the boat around like a toy and causing much sea-sickness but the following morning the sea was calm again and continued calm to the end of the trip. At last they were nearing New York harbor, a sight never to be forgotten and the opening of a new epoch of their lives. The largest and most perilous part of their

journey was now left behind and they were privileged to step on American soil. The large boat was anchored a small distance from the wharves and was met by small transport boats who picked up passengers and their baggage and unloaded them at Castle Garden. Here they entered the large immigrant house.

Here they were given a rigid physical examination, their passports were carefully studied and what little money they brought over was exchanged into American Dollars. During their stay of several days at New York representatives of various railway and colonization companies were busily at work among them. Before they started on their trip from Europe the party selected Rev. Pete Kaufman, Chr. Schrag and Chr. Kaufman as their leaders so these agents directed their efforts and centered their attention largely on them. Among the various agents was Rev. David Goertz from Kansas, who extended a very cordial invitation for these people to settle in central Kansas but very few of this number went there. Mr. Goertz later became one of the leading figures of the Mennonite Church in North America and won distinction as the founder of Bethel College, Newton, Kansas, a Mennonite institution of learning of collegiate rank and Bethel Hospital at the same place. His mission to New York was merely to offer his services to the newcomers and to apprise them of the opportunities Kansas had to offer at that time but he was very courteous and used very little persuasion. Kansas then contained quite a number of Mennonite settlements and a few of this party decided to locate there. But the largest number of them were determined to follow that smaller party of their kin who had preceded them under the leadership of Mr. Schrag and had already located at Yankton, Dakota.

A special immigrant train was made up at New York to transport this party to Dakota and the equipment and accommodations offered on this train

were one of the most disappointing features of the entire trip. Plain, hard, wooden benches were the only furnishings in the coaches. No provision made for sleeping on the train, no tables and no comforts of any kind. In addition to that the train crew was criminally indifferent towards the welfare of the passengers. The train would only stop to replenish its fuel and water supply and often refused to wait long enough for the passengers to step down and buy the most urgent food supplies. The trip took them thru Buffalo and they could see Niagara Falls from a distance. A fire broke out in the baggage cars and a considerable part of their baggage was destroyed at Buffalo, but the railroad company paid them for all losses. From Buffalo they continued westward until they reached Chicago. This was just a short time after the great Chicago fire and the City was almost in ruins yet. Leaving Chicago they kept moving westward, the train crew still refusing to stop long enough for them to be able to buy food and when it reached Sioux City the men stepped off and like an army walked down the street buying something to eat. The engineer whistled and whistled but they paid no attention to it so the train started but they ignored that too. The train moved on a little ways out of town then backed up again and by that time they were back and ready to proceed. This was the last run and they reached Yankton that afternoon.

CHAPTER V.

ON THE DAKOTA PRAIRIES

The first night at Yankton was spent under the open sky with their baggage used as beds as the number was so large that no accommodations could be found. The next day quarters were secured in a building owned by one Peter Seydel which was built for a store. They were very much crowded here but it afforded shelter. In this building they were able to prepare some meals and also do their washing. A delegation was then sent out to look over the country and to find the Schrag-Unruh settlement. They went up north of Yankton and upon reaching the Turkey Creek valley discovered the comfortable dwelling of Mr. Unruh and the small huts and sod shanties of the Schrag company. The land looked good to them and they were ready to settle down here. Returning to Yankton they ordered out a surveyor and had their homesteads located. It is said that it was a custom among the Swiss to look for a small lake or stream and then pick a claim near by. As soon as a satisfactory claim was found he would drop his coat or hat there as a warning to others that that particular claim is taken. All who could afford it filed on lands and moved out with their families, while a few who were too poor to pay the filing, locating and expenses of building a shanty remained in Yankton and hired out as laborers. When everything was ready they bought oxen, wagons and some lumber and with their baggage and families started on their trip across the prairies. The oxen were slow and some of them barely broken so progress was slow and they covered only about half of their 35 mile trip to the settlement that day traveling from early morning until late in the evening.

They spent the first night near a small lake sleeping on the ground with such shelter as they could provide with their baggage and the few boards they brought with them. A few of the young people who had along their old fashioned muzzle loaders tried their skill on some ducks who were spending the evening on that little lake with the result that they tasted the first wild game in their new location the next day. Early the next morning the trip to the settlement was resumed and late in the afternoon they arrived at the Turkey Creek valley. How glad they were to be again united with those who had gone ahead and were now already settled down.

Having arrived at the spot that was to be their future home they went to real work to provide shelter for themselves. Most of the families spent almost all of what little money was left from their trip to buy oxen and wagons. Now it remained for them to build dwellings with the least possible outlay. The few who could still afford it built small frame huts while the majority dug holes into the ground and then built up walls from sod. A few pieces of timber were laid across the top and then covered with sod for a roof. It was getting late in the season and they had to crowd themselves to get their shanties up. In the meantime they kept a look out for work as there were settlers in the neighborhood of Swan Lake and south towards Yankton who had been there a little longer or were of larger means and glad to give employment to the new comers if they were in need of help. It was too late in the season to put in any crops as there were already frosts at night when they came.

That same fall the settlers experienced their first prairie fire, one of the most dangerous and dreadful means of destruction that the newly settled regions are exposed to. The unending open prairie with the large dry grass in fall was a fertile field for the devouring flames. From a long distance the smoke of the approaching fire could be seen and with

spade and plow the new-comers rushed out to provide fire breaks around their buildings. The rising clouds of smoke from the flames eclipsed the sun and the heat was terrific. Some sought shelter in wells, cellars or dugouts and a number of settlers lost their homes with all belongings. Several lives were reported lost in this fire altho this particular community escaped with only the loss of property.

Some sixty families of the Swiss-Germans were now settled in this vicinity, most of whom filed on land in the neighborhood of Turkey Creek and a few miles north. A few families were still in Yankton working out and trying to save up a little money so that they could homestead too. Still others rented places in the neighborhood of Swan Lake. The family names represented in this group were: Albrecht, Fliginger, Gering, Graber, Kaufman, Mueller, Preheim, Ries, Schrag, Senner, Stucky, Schwartz and Waltner.

Other Mennonites who settled in 1874 in this vicinity were the four Ortman brothers, Karl, Heinrich, Friedrich and Christian, hailing from the village of Adelhof in the Russian province of Kalish, who arrived at Yankton in May and settled north-east of Silver Lake along the west fork of the Vermillion River. About that time the first Hutterische Mennonites arrived, coming from the village of Hutterthal, New Hutterthal, Johannesthal and Hutterdorf in the province of Taurien, South Russia, and located west and south-west of Silver Lake, bringing the names of Hofer, Tschetter, Wipf, Stahl, Gross, Wollmann, Waldner, Walter, Kleinsasser and Mendel. Paul Tschetter and Lorenz Tschetter represented the Hutterische Mennonites on the deputation the year before. The present Wolf Creek Colony settled on the East side of Silver Lake in the early summer of 1874 and built up five large houses. They filed on land but only spent one winter there and in the spring they sold out to the Karlsvalder settlement who likewise left Russia in 1874 under the leadership of Rev. Peter

Becker, but most of their number spent the winter of 1874-75 in Newton, Kansas, and a few in Pennsylvania. Among the Karlsruwalder group the names Buller, Unruh, Becker, Koehn, Boese, Nickel and Deckert are noted. On disposing of their interests east of Silver Lake the Hutterite Colony moved to and settled on the James River bottom where the Wolf Creek empties into the river, and thenceforth were known as the Wolf Creek Colony. Their object moving to the James River valley was to get the use of the river's water power for the purpose of building and operating a flour mill.

Just a few weeks after the arrival of the second installment of Swiss-Germans from Russia another group of Mennonite immigrants from the same place stepped off the train at Yankton and located just north of this former settlement, west of the present site of Marion. These were a division of the Molotchna group of South-Russia and represented the Regier, Tieszen, Schmidt, Berg, Goosen, Buller, Vogt, Peters, Ratzlaff, Dalke and Nachtigall families, under the leadership of Derk Tieszen, who later won considerable renown as a bonesetter. The following year most of these joined with the Karlsruwalder settlement and still later the Bethesda Mennonite Church was founded and Rev. Peter Becker was their elder. The Ewert, Tiahart, Schartner and a few other families came a little later. A small Mennonite settlement was also started in Bon Homme County in 1874 by Ewert, Ratzlaff, Schultz, Dirks, Boese and Unruh families, coming from the village of Heinrichsdorf, Russia.

All of the above Mennonite immigrants came to this country under the identical circumstances as the Swiss-German Mennonites, and for the identical purpose - that of founding a home in a free land and escape from the throes of European militarism. They came from different villages and communities, bringing along slightly different customs and dialects, and were not all related by blood but were one

in purpose, one in hopes and one in aspirations.

Then followed their first winter, that of 1774 - 1775 and a bitter experience it was for most of them. It not only came sooner than they were ready for it but was much more severe than they expected it would be. When they first arrived at this spot they were so thankful that they did not locate at Pembina, near the Canadian border, which Mr. Schrag had selected the year before for their settlement. They heard so much of the rough winters in the Northland and were glad to have come South. How disappointed and overcome they were when the snow began to fly and the thermometer dropped below the zero point. Crowded in their small, hastily constructed sod houses with poorly fitting doors and windows, without heaters and only the tall grass twists to burn, with a poor supply of clothes and bedding, they were exposed to untold suffering from the cold. Snow fell for days and the genuine old-time Dakota blizzards, like howling lions, swept over the bare prairies laying siege to the little sheltering places of the settlers as if bent on annihilating them. Some could not leave their shanties for days on account of the immense drifts of snow blockading their openings. Food supplies became scarce and some families were compelled to live on corn bread and water. Entire families remained in their beds most of the time to keep from freezing and the only water obtainable was by melting snow. This is just a faint word picture of the experience of these settlers the first winter and is still fresh in the memory of the surviving ones.

At last spring was on the way. The sun went up higher, the days became longer and the snow began to melt. But there was little to encourage the settlers for the advent of spring only brought them relief from the cold, but their plight for food was worse than ever. In their perplexity they appealed to the Mennonite Committee of Relief, which was an organization made up of the older Mennonite settlements

of Indiana, Ohio and Pennsylvania for the purpose of assisting the needy church members and particularly those in new settlements. The Committee's prompt and liberal response was most commendable and literally saved the settlement. Two representatives of this relief organization, a Mr. Yoder and Mr. Nafziger, arrived at Yankton that spring with money enough to buy 2000 sacks of flour for distribution among the most needy ones. A local committee consisting of Andrew Schrag, Daniel Unruh and Derk Tieszen, was appointed to make a survey of the needs and thus assist the men in the distribution of this flour supply.

As soon as the frost was out of the ground the settlers went in with their breaking plows, and started turning the sod. The work was slow and difficult. The oxen had not recovered yet from their near starvation sufficiently to stand up under this heavy work. Except in the small bottom lands of the Turkey Creek the ground was stony and it was often necessary to hitch four oxen to one plow. Since most of the families of small means only had one yoke of oxen each, it took the combined power of two families to run one single plow. From one half to three quarters of an acre a day was about the average amount of ground one rig could turn over. As soon as a little patch of ground was ready they sowed rye, wheat, planted potatoes and some Welsh Corn. There was plenty of moisture and sunshine and their crops began to grow. How grateful they were for every tiny sprout that broke thru the ground and with what care and diligence they watched over their growing fields which went up like walls between them and starvation - their first crop.

But the plights of the pioneer are many and the toils and hopes of weeks and months may be wiped out in one solitary flying hour and fall a prey to the elements. A grasshopper cloud came up from the northwest obscuring the sun for a while, then settling down like invited guests at the very tables of

the struggling settlers. Panic-stricken and helpless they stood and watched these miserable locusts devour their promising fields. The grasshopper visit was only brief and with another northwest wind they raised up and were off again. Only a little of the crop was saved. They harvested some potatoes, a little wheat and made some hay for their oxen and for fuel. Wherever possible the needy ones looked around for some work where they could earn a little, and this was often 10 or more miles away from home which distance they had to walk, and 75 cents a day was considered good pay for the hardest work.

Then came the second winter for the settlers and the year 1775 soon belonged to history. Again it proved to be a rough and extremely cold season but the suffering of the settlers was not quite as severe as the winter before for the reason that they were a little better prepared for it. The shanties were patched up in every respect and every possible provision was made for fuel. Food was scarce again and only by practicing the utmost economy did they survive the winter.

But seasons come and go and the cold North Wind carrying Jack Frost on its wings must give way to the breezes from the South and the gentle sunshine of early spring. As nature awakes in the spring time and dresses in a new robe, so human nature revives and with fresh courage and new hopes begins to move about. So the settlers tried to forget their hardships and privations of the first two seasons at their new home and began to prepare the ground for another crop. The oxen were a little stronger than the spring before and considerable new breaking was done. By generous sharing with one another and with what little credit they had at Yankton, they succeeded in collecting enough seed to put in their second crop. Again the grain began to grow and assured them that their soil was productive. Harvest was only a few weeks away and every one was of good cheer. But their hopes were to be shattered

again. About noon one day, on the crest of a strong northwest wind the grasshoppers returned, whirring and whizzing thru the air in numbers so immense that they virtually overshadowed the sky. They settled down and proved more numerous and destructive than the year before, and again the settlers were helpless and desperate. To make their plight worse the wind changed the next day and for fully two weeks blew from the South. This prolonged the visit of the locusts as they made several attempts to leave but could not move against this strong South wind. At last the wind changed to the northwest and the grasshoppers went with it leaving want and devastation in their wake. The crop was destroyed completely and all they saved was a little grass to make hay. The loss of their second crop was fatal to the settlers and they faced the future with dread. They were discouraged and many longed to return to their old homes but they had burned their bridges behind them and were now destined to live or die on the frontier.

The fall and winter following the second grasshopper plague saw much misery and want among the settlers. It was next to impossible to get any work or earn anything as practically the entire settled area was impoverished as a result of the grasshoppers. In addition to that the winter was a severe one. Reports were that in some homes they were compelled to break up and burn most of the furniture in order to keep a fire. At Yankton it was learned that a party on the Nebraska side of the Missouri was looking for workers to fell trees and cut them up into kindling wood to be sold. So after New Year a party of nine men from this settlement crossed the river at Yankton and hired out at the rate of 75 cents per cord for felling the trees, cutting them up and splitting it into kindling wood. They found a deserted Indian block house in which they made headquarters and in which they also found an old wood - burning stove. They spent about six weeks here until

about the middle of February when the cold weather suddenly yielded to a warm South wind and the snow and ice began to melt. Fearing that the river may not freeze up again and knowing it would be a long time before a boat could go, they decided to take chances on walking across the ice. Each man took two long canes using them as skids. The ice was so thin in places that it cracked and they would quickly retreat and try another direction. They kept this up for some time and after changing their course again and again, they reached the other side safely.

When spring was near an inventory of the seed grain on hand was taken and the discovery made that a large number of the settlers were without a kernel of grain in their possession. During the cold winter days they ground up what was intended for seed in their small coffee mills and used it for bread. Others had no equipment with which to put in crops. So Mr. Schrag and Rev. Jos. Graber made a flying trip to the east for a personal interview with the Mennonite Committee of Relief and see if they could get help. They succeeded in raising the sum of \$7,400 in cash for which they had to make themselves personally responsible and then came home and loaned it out among the settlers on notes drawing 6 per cent interest with such security as they could get. This averaged about \$100.00 per family and gave the settlers another chance.

The summer of 1877 they succeeded in raising a small crop and for the first time in their new homes were they able to provide their own food. The grasshoppers came back again this year but not in large enough numbers to do much damage. But the cultivated area was so small yet that one settler reported eight farmers hauling their entire crop to a threshing machine several miles away and getting it threshed in one day. Straw was very scarce and valuable in those days and often hauled for ten miles by farmers in the winter time for feed. The only

market towns were Sioux Falls and Yankton, 40 and 35 miles distant. The water problem was a rather serious one with those who settled any distance from Turkey Creek. The surface water in the shallow, dug wells was not reliable and when that gave out it became necessary to haul it from the Creek in barrels while those still further north had to get it from Silver Lake. This was especially difficult in the cold winter months. A few settlers who filed on claims on the nice level lands north of Turkey Creek abandoned them and moved back to the creek bottom preferring to live on the rough and stony land and be assured water the year around.

The religious meetings in the settlement were held at private houses until 1880, when the first exclusive church building was erected on Section 34 of Rosefield Township, on the site of the present Salem-Zion Church. It was known as Salem Church in those days. Another one was built on Section 7 of Childstown Township just east of the present home of P. J. Kaufman and was called the Zion Church. These two united about 1895 under the name of the Salem-Zion Congregation, and they still maintain that name. In 1902 a storm destroyed the Zion Church building and it was never built up again, but in the year 1906 a new one was built in the north-east corner of Section 16, Childstown Township, and is known as the Salem Church. The pioneer ministers who came with these settlers were John Schrag, Peter Kaufman and Jos. Graber, all of whom were quite old. In the year 1878, Chr. Kaufman and Chr. Mueller were ordained as ministers of the Salem Congregation at the wish and request of the elders Graber and Kaufman who were anxious to retire because of their advanced age. At the Zion congregation Jos. Kaufman and Jacob R. Schrag were elected and ordained at the request of elder Schrag. Rev. Kaufman served as minister and elder uninterruptedly until his death in 1906. Rev. C. Mueller continued his work until 1910 when he retired due to

sickness and advancing age and was succeeded by Rev. C. Hege. He died at the ripe old age of 81 years, in 1923. Rev. J. R. Schrag moved to Oregon in 1897 and later to Washington where he died in 1922. Rev. Jos. Kaufman is the sole survivor of the four and is at this writing in delicate health residing at Freeman and his work has been taken over by Revs. Alfred P. Waltner and John J. A. Schrag, ordained in 1907. Rev. Tob. Unruh, who was a member of the deputation of 1873, served as a minister in the North end of the settlement before the founding of the Bethesda church but died a few years after his arrival here. He was succeeded by Rev. Peter Becker and Abr. Willems. Other pioneer Mennonite Ministers of this vicinity were Rev. C. Ewert of Bon Homme County, Rev. Johann L. Wipf of Hutchinson County, Rev. Derk P. Tieszen and Rev. Jacob Schartner of Turner County.

As soon as the settlers were beginning to raise crops in sufficient quantity for the market the need of a closer market place became apparent. Sioux Falls and Yankton, at distances that required three to four days travel for one trip, were too far. Rumors were current that the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Ry. would extend its line from Algona west and thru Swan Lake Town. These news were too good to believe but the day soon came when the surveyors were at work. The survey was made and construction work commenced soon thereafter, but the route selected by the surveyor was nearly fifteen miles north of Swan Lake. The building of the railroad gave employment to a large number of settlers and long before the rails were laid little towns sprung up which were a great help to the settlement as they could buy some of their necessities nearer home. Before the year 1879 was tolled off the black, whizzing monster made its first run thru this new country and the towns of Parker, Marion and Freeman were placed on the map bringing the market from five to fifteen miles of this settlement.

Altho the building of the railroad was the greatest factor in the growth and eventual prosperity of this county, it dealt a death-blow to the hopes and aspirations of Swan Lake around which so much of Turner County's early history is woven. Here nature did a wonderful piece of handi-work as the lake was a beautiful sight the year around. A bathing resort in summer and a skating rink in winter. A fisherman's paradise and a hunter's delight. The scene of Indian wigwams and trapper's huts. But it was not only because of nature's charms that this place was frequented. Swan Lake was the administrative center of the county. Here was located the land office, the first newspaper, the general store and post office and the halting place for the Sioux Falls-Yankton stage. One by one the few buildings were moved from the lake to Parker and once more quiet reigned on its shores. Swan Lake is still here and fast developing into a popular summer resort but its ambition to become a city and county seat are mere memories.



SALEM MENNONITE CHURCH



SALEM-ZION MENNONITE CHURCH

CHAPTER VI.

PIONEER EXPERIENCES

When Mr. Unruh and Mr. Schrag arrived at the Turkey Creek valley for settlement in the spring of 1874, they found a few settlers already located and established along the bottom land of the creek. Mr. Jas. A. Childs, after whom the township of Childstown was named, with his brother settled here in 1871 and lived on the present John J. Waltner place. A few more followed and as Swan Lake was the only post office, they made application to establish a new one a little closer by. The following year, 1872, this application was granted and the post office was named Childstown while Mr. Childs was appointed postmaster. The mail was brought by stage from Yankton to Swan Lake and by carrier from Swan Lake to Childstown and on west, giving only weekly service at first. Mr. Childs sold out in 1877 and moved away and Mr. Andr. Schrag was named his successor and continued to fill his trust for a period of seventeen years. All the settlers who came here before 1874 were eventually bought out by the new-comers.

The spring of 1875, following that first and terrible winter, found a few of the settlers with empty flour bins, face to face with hunger. So the head of one of these stricken families made a trip to Yankton in what he feared was a vain effort to buy flour on time, as he was absolutely penniless. The oxen had barely survived the winter and were extremely poor so that only very little progress was made. He spent two nights on the way and on the third day, when only three miles from Yankton, they gave out again and compelled him to unhitch. Stopping near a small farm he was invited by the farmer to come and spend the night at the house, which he gladly did. In the

morning he was offered a light breakfast and on leaving the house the farmer demanded fifty cents for his lodging and meal. The poor traveler, not being able to use the English language, turned out his pockets to prove he had no money so the farmer took his overcoat and started for the house. The traveler hitched up his oxen and with a heavy heart started for Yankton when the farmer called him to halt and returned the coat. Arriving at Yankton he walked from store to store trying to get flour and was about to return empty when he discovered another small store where he found a German storekeeper, who proved to be C. Buechler, who later became a prominent citizen and business man of Freeman. Mr. Buechler trusted him with a nice supply of flour and some other groceries and also lent him fifty cents to pay his benefactor on the way back.

That same year the glad news reached the settlement that a physician was locating at Swan Lake. One of the settlers who was renting a farm near the lake was engaged by this physician to haul a load of lumber up from Yankton with which to build an office. He made the trip down and on his return when within a few miles of Swan Lake, one of the oxen dropped down and was dead. Being unable to carry on his farm work with the one ox and not having the means to buy another one, he was forced to sell it, quit farming and work out on wages.

When these settlers located here there were hardly any Indians left and the few who were still abiding were living near Swan Lake. There were larger Indian settlements along the James River and also along the Missouri, near Yankton, but they were some distance away and caused very little fear in the immediate neighborhood. But the year 1876 will long be remembered as it brought rumors that the Sioux Indians were preparing for a final and destructive struggle against their white intruders. The excitement did not reach its climax until the news of Custer's massacre at the Big Horn River became

known. That same message also bore the appendix that the Indians were on their way to this part of the state, plundering and murdering as they went. Many settlers abandoned everything and took flight to Yankton where a large fort and stockade was erected for protection from the Red Faces. A distant light at night was taken for a campfire of the savages and a little move in the grass at night sufficed to drive an entire family into hysterics. Neighboring families went together at night for mutual protection. It happened one night when a number of families were gathered at one house that the regular War-whoop, "How", "how!" was heard. The house was located near a small lake and the cry came from a distance at first, but with every yell, was nearing the place. A glance thru the window of the darkened room revealed the outline of several horsemen with feathers in their hair moving about thru the yard as if getting ready to make a charge. While the majority of inmates were trembling with fear one brave settler mustered up sufficient courage to open the front door a trifle and discharge his old musket into the dark mantle of the night. Silence reigned for a moment and immediately the sounding hoofs of retreating horsemen were heard. No one left the house that night and in the morning tracks were discovered to and from the yard. The alarm continued until news reached the settlement that the government had intervened and that all danger was over. Those who went to Yankton returned and went to work again. Later it was learned that the horsemen who scared the settlers were disguised pale faces.

Late one night, a pioneer was walking across the prairie to a somewhat distant neighbor for he had run out of tobacco. The night was dark and a light wind was blowing. Suddenly he spied a light a little distance ahead of him. The first thought that came to him was that it may be the beginning of a prairie fire and he hastened towards it taking his coat off hoping that he could extinguish the same.

As he came nearer he noticed that it was moving. Thinking it may be a lantern carried by some one he was just about to address this unknown party, but before he could utter a word, the light suddenly took a leap of about twenty yards to the right of where he first noticed it. By this time the poor pedestrian was a little startled for he noticed that the light was flickering as tho it was about to expire or getting ready for an explosion. Terror seized the pioneer and he took to the opposite direction never looking back until he reached his shanty. He did not miss his tobacco until the next morning. A number of other pioneers reported the same experience with Will-o'-the Wisp.

To illustrate the many disappointments of pioneer life an old settler reports this experience: He and his wife were renting a farm for two years near Swan Lake and in 1876 he filed on a homestead near Marion. They were building their sod house working on it hard, early and late. A hole was dug in the ground about two feet deep and the walls and roof made of sod. For rafters he bought a few light pieces of lumber at Yankton and then packed it heavy with sod so it would be warm and waterproof. They had just finished their sod house and went back, expecting to move in the next morning with the furniture. During the night a heavy rain came and when they reached their home the next morning a pile of dirt was there to mark the spot of their labors. The weight of the roof saturated with rain water was too heavy for the light rafters and broke them, the roof dropped down and the walls caved in. He built another house in fall which was partly a wooden structure and made a very cosy home, but the day after Christmas it burned down and they were obliged to spend the winter with generous relatives.

The great flood of the Vermillion River of July, 1879, was an appalling experience for this settlement. It came about midnight during a heavy thunder

and lightning storm as a result of a cloudburst farther up the river. The local rainfall was not particularly heavy but the river kept rising steadily. The families of Jacob Gering, David Ries and Jacob Goosen were living on the banks of the stream and were awakened that night by the storm. Looking out thru the window at the moment of a flash of lightning, they saw the river out of its banks and surrounding their houses. Quickly they dressed and left the house. The Gering family saw their home already surrounded with water and fearing to wade it he hitched up his team and started from the yard with the family on the wagon. Being dark and the waters already reaching the wagon box, another wave came and swept them into the flood. His wife, one son and two daughters, two children of the David Ries family and Jacob Goosen were carried away and drowned. Mr. Gering saved himself when a feather comforter floated by him in the dark and he grasped it. The bodies were all recovered, the last one fully eight days after the catastrophe. A number of other families living on the river bottom saved themselves but lost most all of their property.

On October 15th, 1880, the settlers experienced one of the severest blizzards that ever raged over this section of the country. Coming so early in the fall, it caught most of the farmers unprepared for the winter and such an amount of snow fell that travel was about impossible. Early in the winter the flour supply with most of the families gave out. For a while they tried to grind wheat on their small coffee mills, and in a few instances where they had no fit coffee mill, they were just compelled to boil their wheat and live without bread. The nearest flouring mill was at the Wolf Creek Colony, nearly twenty miles away, and a trip was considered a useless attempt. At last six farmers decided to try it. They took six teams and each one loaded on a few sacks of wheat. One team would break the frozen snow for about half a mile at a time, then the next one, the

third, fourth, fifth and sixth one, until the first one's turn came around again. This way the teams divided the hard work which one could never stand and the trip was made.

About the year 1880 the settlers experienced a plague similar to that of the Egyptians in the days of Pharaoh, only it was of shorter duration. The settlement along the Turkey Creek bottom was literally covered with little frogs. They came and hopped on from the South-west into a North-easterly direction, continuing their procession for about three days when they were by and gone again. Thousands of them were killed on the roads and in pastures by live stock and driving teams. It was hardly possible to walk across the yard without stepping on a few of them. They did very little damage as they were quite small but were extremely annoying for they were everywhere and the large number of them killed on the roads was a most offensive sight.

An event that recalls more terror in the minds of the pioneers of this community than perhaps any other is the storm of 1888. The morning of January 12th dawned with no unusual signs of an impending disturbance in the atmosphere. About ten o'clock snow flakes began to fly and the wind whistled louder and grew stronger. Soon the houses began to tremble and the snow fell so thick and fast that any one a few rods from the house could reach it only with difficulty. All the remaining hours of that day and night it seemed as if the very elements of heaven were in revolution. The mercury dropped almost out of sight. The children who went to school that day failed to return. When morning came and the storm was still raging, the father of a child who went to school the day before but failed to return for the night, plowed his way thru the snow to the school house, only to be informed by the teacher that five pupils strayed away into the storm the evening before while trying to reach a farm house only fifty rods away. The report spread over the community

like wildfire and a search for the lost ones begun which lasted for several days. On the fourth day after the storm the frozen corpses of five boys were found on a field which proved to be the missing school children. Three brothers, John, Henry and Elias Kaufman, Peter Graber and John Albrecht were the victims of this storm, and they were found together kneeling in the snow.

Prairie fires were frequent occurrences in this new settlement and particularly so during the earlier years. Much as they dreaded and with all the care and precautions the settlers took, they still recurred at intervals. One of the last and most devastating of these prairie fires was recorded April 2nd, 1889. It is said that this fire was started from a burning straw stack west of Silver Lake and traveled to the South-east leveling with the ground nearly everything that came into its path. A large number of farms were totally destroyed and all efforts to stem its tide were utterly fruitless. The storm was so violent that the flames were carried thru the air and over every fire break as if it were only a yard wide. The smoke and heat were so intense that one could not see ahead one rod. People picked up their clothes and ran out on the large plowed fields as that was about the only place of safety. In her flight from this fire, Mrs. Ratzlaff ran into a fence where she got her dress tangled up in the wire and before she could release herself the flames were over her. She was so badly scorched that she died the following night. The fire continued on with unabating fury until it reached the railroad track of the Running Water branch, where it died down. This fire left the settlers who were in its path in a pitiable condition. What stock was saved had to be taken away where it could feed and people had to seek shelter with neighbors. In this fire Elder Peter Becker hid the family's clothes and other articles in a dry well to save it from the flames and they fled from the house. When the fire was over it was discovered that by some miracle

the house was saved while the things hid in the well were burned.

After the grasshoppers ceased their destructive work with the crops of these settlers, they harvested every year, with some variation, except once. The exception noted was the season of 1894 when the entire crop was literally burned up because of a continued drought throughout the growing season. Great black clouds would form in the west alive with thunder and lightning with every indication of an approaching rain storm, but would disappear again from the horizon in a short space of time as if they were merely a fog. Hot South winds would blow for days and the corn, grain and vegetables dried up completely. This total crop failure was a severe blow to the settlers as it left many of them without wheat for flour and without seed for the next season. The following spring it became necessary for the County Commissioners to buy seed and supply the ones who had none in order to make it possible for them to put in a crop at all.

A number of very destructive hailstorms visited the north edge of the settlement at various intervals but ordinarily these only covered a narrow strip of territory so that if one farmer even lost most or all of his crop, his neighbor saved his and together they were assured a new start the next season.

CHAPTER VII.

THE RELIGIOUS LIFE

The Mennonite denomination is credited with being one of the three oldest of the Protestant Churches and in its struggle for existence has suffered more than perhaps any other denomination. This was largely due to its unalterable belief in the doctrine of civil liberty and religious toleration, which was then novel but has since established itself as a fundamental requisite of civilization. Being one of the smaller denomination it is not as popularly and well known as some of the larger ones.

The Mennonite Church was named after Menno Simon, a native of the Netherlands born in 1492, who was ordained to Roman Catholic priesthood in 1520. He became attached to the doctrine and practices of the much despised Anabaptist sect so in 1536 he withdrew from the Catholic Church and the following year he was rebaptized and joined the Anabaptist movement. He was soon thereafter ordained an Anabaptist minister and being a man of more than ordinary training, experience and ability he at once became a leader in this movement and his first task was to unite its scattered members of Germany and Holland.

This Anabaptist movement, whose followers became the Mennonite Church of today, sprung up in central Europe during the activities of Zwingli and Luther, about the year 1520. They demanded a more radical departure from the system of that day than either Luther and Zwingli finally adopted. It was a demand for a strictly independent and voluntary church with only one object in view, that of religious worship and the carrying into practice of the teachings of the New Testament. They stood for a

complete separation of the Church and State, religious toleration, a study of the bible and interpretation thereof by the individual. The Sermon on the Mount virtually became their creed and love the ruling force in all dealings among themselves. Believing that the church should be voluntary they did not encourage tithing or church taxes and held that political force could not and should not dictate in religious matters. They held it was wrong to take human life under the New Testament doctrines, whether it be under military force or under judicial process; that baptism should be on confession of faith only; that a Christian should not take an oath; and that the church should be kept pure by banning or ex-communicating unfaithful members.

No doubt the outstanding doctrine of the Mennonite Church is its attitude towards war or the taking of human life. This doctrine is as old as the church itself the first written record of same dating back to 1527, and has been respected by virtually every civilized government throughout this period of time in that certain exemptions from actual military service were granted to its members in good standing. In the late World War the Mennonites at the training camps were assigned to the Quartermaster, Medical and Engineering Corps only, the same having been designated by the President of the United States as noncombatant branches of the service. Perhaps ninety per cent or more of the young men who were members of the Mennonite Church and were called to the training camps under the Selective Service Law signed up for work in the said three departments and made creditable records, winning promotions to first class privates and sergeant in some instances. While it is true that there were a few instances where Mennonites refused to perform any military service whatever and had to be furloughed out to farm work or even stood court-martial and were sentenced to terms in the federal prison these cases were the exception and not the rule and their number only a

very small percentage of the total number inducted or enlisted. Then these cases were matters of individual views and not the result of any encouragement or orders from the church. The fundamental principle of the anti-war doctrine of the modern Mennonite Church is not a mere effort on the part of its members to seek easy tasks behind the firing line and let the other fellow face the cannon's mouth but the voice of a war-weary world, a sincere desire to abolish war entirely. The calling of the disarmament conference at Washington, the resolutions of the National Educational Association, the Student Volunteer Conference and of a number of the largest churches within the last year going on record against war are ample evidence of the correctness of this doctrine. Disputes among nations should and could be adjusted across the table before a fair and impartial tribunal as justly and readily as differences between individuals are settled in a court of justice. War legalizes and encourages among nations what is considered among individuals as the most serious crime and carries with it the most severe penalty known to civilized society, that of homicide. But war cannot and will not be abolished until the majority of the people of the world demand its abolition. The Mennonite and Quaker churches alone cannot do it. All preparations and demonstrations for war must be discouraged. The experience of Germany in the late World War should be a lesson to all advocates of preparedness. There must be sentiment against war first and then legislation will follow.

The Mennonite Church is a firm believer in organized government and its attitude towards same can best be expressed by quoting from the Mennonite Articles of Faith, viz: “- we hold ourselves in duty bound towards our lawful government to regard the same as God's servant for good, to honor it with due reverence, to be obedient to it in all things that are not in violation of God's Commandments or of one's good conscience, to pay cheerfully and faithfully all

proper taxes and assessments, and to devoutly pray for it,”

After the entry of the United States into the World War the Mennonite Church urged its young people to register for the Selective Service, encouraged its members to provide for the soldiers in buying their allotment of bonds and particularly to support the Red Cross, Y. M. C. A., and Salvation Army work. Where individuals in isolated cases failed to do their bit in this respect, it was without the sanction or encouragement of the Church. In the early stages of the church its members were discouraged from functioning in their rights as citizens but this practice has long been outgrown and today the Mennonites can be found voting, serving on the jury, holding office and in all other respects perform their full duties as citizens. Law obedience has always been encouraged by the church and all Mennonite communities have as a rule given a good account of themselves in this particular.

Not only was the Mennonite Church one of the earliest organizations to recognize the wrong of taking human life and to voice its opposition thereto, but it was also a forerunner in the fight for the abolition of slavery. The year 1688 was made memorable in the history of the little Mennonite Community of Germantown, Pennsylvania, by issuing the first public protest ever made on this continent against the holding of slaves. These pioneer advocates of universal liberty, seeing that even their Quaker neighbors seemed to wink at and in some cases to be guilty participants in the traffic of slaves, promptly entered an earnest protest thus starting a little rill which grew into a mighty torrent and less than two centuries later swept the accursed institution from the soil of this fair land. This document was signed on the 18th of April of that year by Gerhard Hendricks, Dirk Op den Graeff, Francis Daniel Pastorius and Abraham Op den Graeff and emphatically declared that slavery was wrong and that the

participants therein were on a level with the bloody Turks.

The leaders of the Mennonite Church have long maintained that education was necessary to build up an effective and useful church membership, so they have always supported schools. Even during the time of their persecution they maintained schools in secret. While living in illiterate and superstitious Russia they kept up a village school at their own expense in which not only bible study was carried on but their children were taught the language of the land. During the early years of their settlement here poverty prevented them from giving the young people the opportunity for an education, but as soon as they became a little prosperous they founded Freeman Academy which is today a Junior College, offering two full years of college work with a Normal Department accredited by the state and strong bible and musical courses.

Church and Sunday School attendance were always urged among the Mennonite Denomination, and only in case of bad weather or poor roads is the minister obliged to preach to empty benches. Musical concerts are regular features at their churches and much time is devoted to choir and orchestra practice. Foreign and domestic missions receive hearty support from the Mennonite churches. Four young people from this immediate vicinity are missionaries in far away China today.

The entire membership of the Mennonites of North America is estimated at approximately 100,000, divided into seventeen separate groups. This dissension among its members is one of the greatest weaknesses of the church and is due largely to slight differences of opinion in practice on the part of its leaders. The communistic colony, known all over the state as the "Mennonite Colonies," with their common ownership of all property and uniform method of dress, is not and never has been a feature or doctrine of the Mennonite Church. It is simply a

practice followed by a small number of one of the seventeen groups of the Mennonite Church. Less than one percent of the members of the church live in these communistic colonies. The Swiss-German Mennonites and their neighbors to the north are members of the General Conference group, the second largest and in most respects leading division of the church.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN CONCLUSION

In the preceding pages the writer has attempted to narrate the story of his people and their church. A large part of the material used herein was obtained from personal interviews with the few remaining pioneers of 1874 whose love for peace and freedom drove them across the Atlantic fifty years ago to build their hearths and homes in a new land. They built better than they knew, and their choice of a new country was a wise one indeed.

Half a century has passed into history and their ranks have been reduced to a mere handful, now bent with age and wearing silvery crowns. With faltering footsteps they still ramble about their yards and with trembling hands will they peruse these leaves. Their work is done and well done and they are only waiting for the return of the tide. Every change of the season adds new marble and granite markers to the city of the silent and soon the bells will toll the departure of the last one of their number. But the story will not end with the toll of the bells. Their names, with those of a thousand more who came from other countries and climes to brave the wilderness in an effort to found homes, are enshrined in the hearts of the present generation and inscribed on every building and growing tree that went up as a result of their toil.

For the privilege of being Americans today this generation owes a debt of gratitude to the pioneers of 1874 that cannot be repaid in gold and silver. It is no longer necessary to make the tiresome oxen trips to Yankton and Sioux Falls, nor are they required to live in sod houses on corn bread and water. No longer need they be exposed to blizzards without

heaters and to build fire breaks for protection from prairie fires. Comforts and conveniences of every nature and description are at their disposal and while enjoying them and countless other blessings, may they cherish the heritage from their fathers and prove themselves worthy of it by living a life of purity, unselfishness, honesty with gratitude to God and loyalty to their country.

“Our fathers’ God to Thee
Author of Liberty,
To Thee we sing.
Long may our land be bright
With Freedom’s holy light;
Protect us by Thy might,
Great God our King.”

EIN AUS-WANDERUNGS LIED

(Gesungen bei der Angelegenheit der Abfahrt unsrer
Eltern von Ruszland nach Amerika.)

Jetzt ist die Zeit und Stunde da
Dasz wir ziehn nach Amerika,
Viel Tausend Seelen gehts dort gut,
Dasz troestet uns und macht uns Mut.

Jetzt ist die Zeit und Stunde da
Dasz wir ziehn nach Amerika,
Die Wagen stehn schon vor der Tuer
Mit Weib und Kinder ziehen wir.

Jetzt ist die Zeit und Stunde da
Dasz Wir ziehn nach Amerika,
Die Pferde stehn schon angespannt
Wir ziehen in ein fremdes Land.

Ihr all die mit uns verwandt
Reicht uns zum letzten mal die Hand;
Ihr Freunde weinet nicht zu sehr
Wir sehn uns nun und nimmermehr.

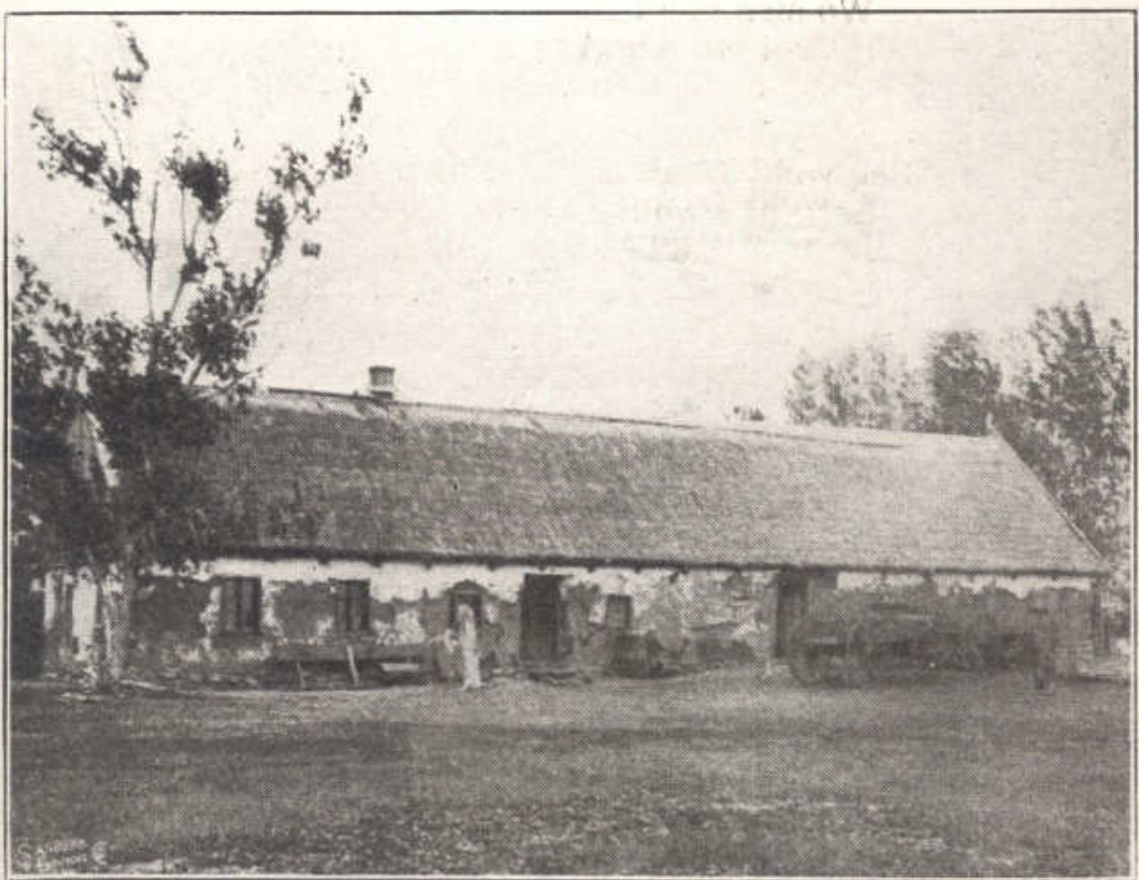
Seid all maennlich und seid stark,
Macht uns den Abshied nicht zu hart,
Wir ziehen ja nicht aus der Welt,
Auch da ist Gott der uns erhaelt.

Wenn unser Schiff zur See einschwimmt
Dann werden Lieder angestimmt;
Wir fuerchten keinen Wasserfall,
Der Liebe Gott ist ueber-all.

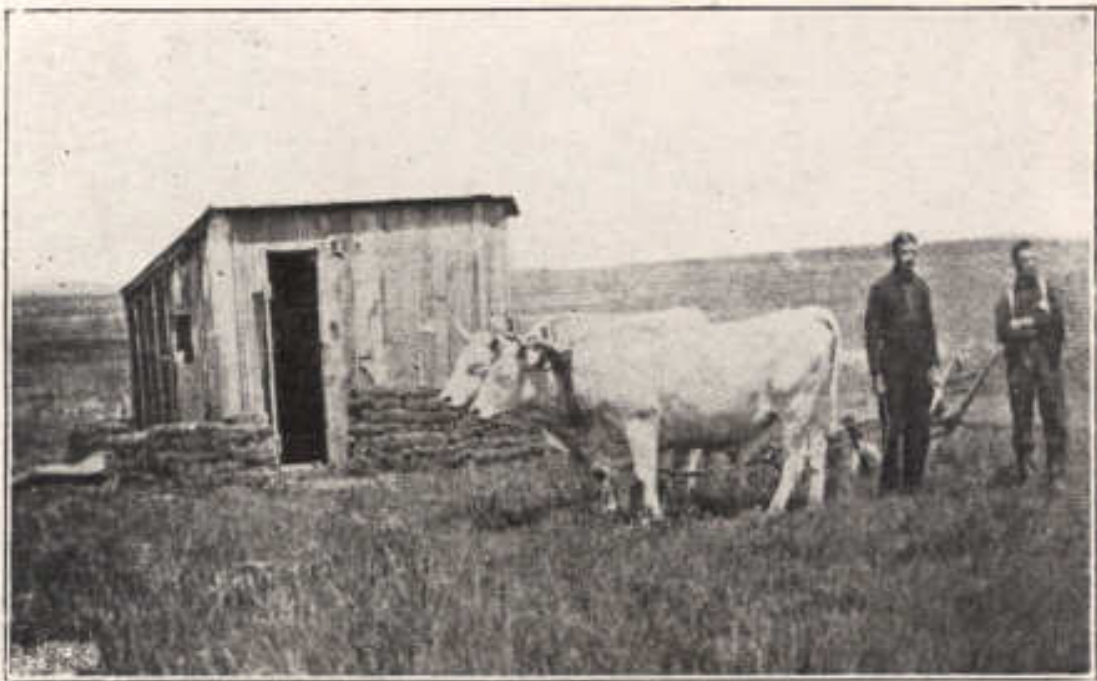
Und kommen wir gen Baltimore
Dann heben wir die Haend empor,
Und rufen laut "Victoria!"
Jetzt sind wir in Amerika.

Wilkommen fremdes Vaterland
Wo sich mein Herz hat hingewandt;
Du Land wo ich geboren bin
Musz meiden und musz weit dahin.

Leb wohl du altes Vaterland,
Lebt alle wohl die uns gekannt;
Wir werden uns einst wieder sehn
Dort wo die Friedens-Palmen wehn.



COMBINATION HOUSE AND BARN BUILT OF CLAY BY EARLY
MENNONITE SETTLERS.
(Courtesy Parker New Era.)



A FARM HOME IN 1874.
(Courtesy Parker New Era.)



FIFTY YEARS LATER

A FARM HOME

