

# 138-year-old mystery of missing children is solved

PEABODY, Kansas -- It's a 138-year-old mystery, and it's been solved in 2012.

"We had no idea. We just had no idea there were all those Mennonite children buried right here," says Don Stutzman. "And I grew up in the church that was on this site. We just had absolutely no idea."

Stutzman is the caretaker of the tiny Catlin cemetery two miles outside of Peabody in Marion County. That is where the mystery of the missing children is now solved.

The back story is, in many ways, is incredible.

"And she would tell the story with tears in her eyes. So she always wanted to find out where these children were buried and we never could find out where," says Brian Stucky.

Stucky has his heritage in that tiny cemetery. One of his relatives is buried there. It's Freni Stucky.

For years, Brian Stucky and many others with Mennonite heritage searched.

Stucky has a tear come to his eye when he tells of finally having some closure.

"We just, I always wanted to know. They talked about it when I was young. We always heard the stories," says Stucky.

The story is of Mennonites stepping off the train in Peabody, Kansas in 1874. Searching for religious freedom and a piece of Kansas to call their own, the Swiss Volhynian Mennonite group from Eastern Europe came to Kansas. Many Mennonites came to Kansas. In fact, in 1874, nearly 8,000 came to the wheat state to settle.

Kansas is called the wheat state now, in large part, because the Mennonites brought their Turkey Red Wheat to Kansas. Known as industrious and smart, Mennonite farmers bought land and got to work.

"Hard workers," says Rachel Pannabecker of Kauffman Museum in North Newton, Kansas. "Mennonites have been known as hard workers, good farmers, lawyers, doctors, and well educated people. Soon after arriving, the Mennonites founded Bethel College."

But one Mennonite group in particular had a very tough time upon arrival. It was that Swiss Volhynian group.

"It must have been a time of great upheaval," says Jim Juhnke, retired professor of history at Bethel College.

Juhnke knew his great grandmother, Anna Schrag Goering, growing up. She lived to the time he was nearly a teenager.

Goering had a baby on the journey to Kansas. But Goering's daughter, soon died. So, too, did 16 other children in that group.

"We believe now it was the measles," says Juhnke. "Some believe they got it aboard ship on the way over here."

As soon as the Mennonite group stepped off the train they found shelter in a modest, communal home. The men set off to find land to buy. The women and children stayed behind. But when the men came back, they found the children dead and dying.

"But winter was soon to set in and they were in a new land," says Stucky. "They had to keep moving forward. So they buried their children, grieved, and moved on. They had to build homes, get crops planted and then get started on their survival."

Years past. The Mennonites thrived.

Then, generations past. But it seemed nobody knew where their ancestors were buried. They just lost track.

"As far as I know, she never went back to the site," says Stucky.

Still, Stucky and Juhnke wanted to know. As did many others.

Katerina. That's the name of Anna Schrag Goering's baby girl.

"Katerina did not live long," says Juhnke. "And my great grandmother had her just two days into the journey by ship."

"My great grandmother was very important to the family. I did learn about all of it. Some of my great grandmothers children even interviewed her and wrote up her story. There are some pictures of her (Anna) with all her descendants. Huge group because she lived so long. And keep in mind Anna's husband at time died four years after migration. Then she married again."

Married again. Moved on with life and now has many, many descendants.

It's that kind of spirit of perseverance that kept Stucky and others on the trail of the lost children.

"We got a break," says Stucky. "Got a break in the case. I had stayed in touch with a professor from Bethel. And he had heard of someone who knew someone who knew something."

Six degrees of separation. It paid off.

"He said to me, 'I wonder if they are not buried in the Catlin Cemetery?'"

Stucky says the children died in 1874. Then, in 1875, there was a small mention of the children in a publication called The Herald. That old Herald article was tracked down.

The news in that article was specific. Stucky started to get excited.

The Herald mentioned, "They seem well pleased with the country. Brother Stucky's party buried about fourteen children here on Brother H. Hornberger's farm."

Stucky immediately got out the oldest map he could find of Marion County. It was from the 1800's.

"And sure enough, there is mention of the old Hornberger property," explains Stucky. "The Hornberger property."

That Hornberger property outside Peabody is farmed to this day by a Mennonite farmer, Lawrence Andres.

But just off to the side of the Andres field is that tiny Catlin Cemetery.

"We just never knew," says Stutzman. "And I heard the story of the Mennonite Children before."

Today, Stutzman cares for that little plot of land.

"Oh, I used to fall asleep on the back bench in the little cracker box of a church that stood here until the 1960's," says Stutzman. "I moved away and then I came back. Now I mow the place and keep it up."

Now, with the mystery of the Mennonite children solved after 138 years, Stutzman has something new to mow.

"Glad to do it," says Stutzman of the mowing job.

Stutzman mows around a new grave marker. A large stone with 17 names. It's a stone to remember the Swiss Mennonite children and all that heritage that has finally come to light.

A memorial stone seemed appropriate and funds were easily and quickly raised to raise the memorial.

Just off to the side of the Andres field, a stone stands sentinel to Mennonite heritage. All the names of the children are now memorialized 138 years later.

"There is power in a person's name," says Stucky. "Power. If you remember someone, then their life stands for something. That is why we remember."

---

<http://www.ksn.com/news/local/story/138-year-old-mystery-of-missing-children-is-solve...> 11/27/2012

Reported by: Craig Andres