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How our ancestors made peace with death

About 150 people gathered Sept. 23 near Peabody, Kan., to dedicate a stone marker in memory of as many as 17 children from Swiss Volhynian Mennonite immigrant families who died in 1874. This article is condensed from remarks presented at the dedication.

By JAMES C. JUHNKE

Our immigrant ancestors who arrived at Peabody, Kan., in the fall of 1874 were a small fragment of some 15,000 Mennonites who left eastern Europe in quest of land and freedom in North America. A few hundred of our people lived in temporary housing near the Peabody railway station. Most of the men left to look for land where they wanted to settle.

While the men were gone, an epidemic of disease, possibly scarlet fever or measles, afflicted all the Mennonite children in Peabody. About 17 children died in a short period of time. We are not sure how many died, or the name of each child.

The children were buried in a cemetery on the Henry and Mary Horner farm. That family cemetery later became the official cemetery of Catlin Mennonite Church. Here we have an instance of early cooperation between two kinds of Mennonites who would come to be known as "Old" Mennonites and "General Conference"

Mennonites. The graves were not marked by permanent stones. This should not surprise us. These burials took place in a time of great transition and upheaval. It may be that none of the parents visited this site again. Moreover, our Mennonite ancestors had not erected permanent engraved stone markers in cemeteries back in Volhynia, even for adults. Those of us who go back to Kotosuffka, today in the Ukraine, will not find any Mennonite cemeteries with permanent markers from the 19th century.

It is a challenge for us to comprehend the role of disease and death in people's lives 150 or 200 years ago.

Twenty-five to 40 percent of children in Europe died before reaching age 5. Our peasant ancestors in Volhynia, who knew little about sanitation and medicine, probably buried about a third of their children.

Modern medicine and sanitation have transformed our attitude toward death. When a child today dies, we ask what

In memory of the Swiss Volhynian Mennonite children, who died at Peabody on the journey from Russia to Kansas in 1874, and were buried here are among the following:

JOHANN ALBRECHT Dec. 9, 1873-Sept. 13, 1874	ANNA KREHBIEL Nov. 15, 1871-Sept. 10, 1874	FRENI STUCKY Oct. 16, 1873-Sept. 9, 1874
TOBIAS DIRKS Nov. 18, 1872-Sept. 1874	ELIZABETH KREHBIEL Mar. 2, 1872-1874	ANNA VORAN July 18, 1871-1874
FRENI FLICKINGER Jan. 24, 1872-Sept. 1874	ELISABETH SCHRAG July 23, 1873-1874	JACOB VORAN Oct. 29, 1873-1874
KATHARINA GERING Aug. 7, 1871-1874	KATHARINA SCHRAG Oct. 16, 1872-Sept. 15, 1874	MARIA WALTER Aug. 1, 1872-1874
PETER GERING June 21, 1873-Sept. 1874	ANDREAS STRAUSS Jan. 28, 1872-1874	FRANCES WEDEL Oct. 29, 1869-Sept. 25, 1874
PETER R. KAUFFMAN Feb. 24, 1871-Sept. 15, 1874		SALAMON WEDEL Mar. 10, 1872-Sept. 25, 1874

Created by the Swiss Mennonite Cultural and Historical Association, 2012

After 138 years, the burial site of as many as 17 immigrant children at Peabody, Kan., is finally marked.

We can name this attitude toward death a kind of optimistic fatalism.

gration and gave birth to another baby, Frenhi, the third day at sea. Frenhi survived the Peabody epidemic.

Anna's experience with death gives a face to the mortality statistics. Three of her siblings died in Volhynia in the village of Sahorez, ages 4, 9 and 11. In 1878, less than four years after arriving in Kansas, Anna's husband, Christian

Schrag, died of pneumonia before his 30th birthday. Frenhi, the infant who survived the Peabody epidemic, died of an infected foot in 1901, at age 27, one year after giving birth to her fourth child.

My mother, Meta, Anna's granddaughter, said Anna had a fatalistic attitude toward death. When a child died in the community, Anna told her family to give thanks. God had taken the child unto himself, and now the child would not have to bear the world's burdens and sufferings.

Mennonites believed children were innocent and accepted by God, with no need for infant baptism. For Catholics and Lutherans, the deaths of these unbaptized children would have been more of a problem.

Mennonites were more like Quakers, whose attitude was more optimistic. For Quakers, death was not to be feared or abhorred but welcomed and embraced. That surely was true for my great-grandmother, and, I assume, for others in the migration of 1874.

We live in a vastly different world from that of our immigrant ancestors. Modern medicine, sanitation and health care have transformed life expectancy. Birth control has reduced the size of families.

Anna Schrag Schrag Goering lived in the presence of death. But her children raised large families almost completely without the death of children. Her son, Jonas, my grandfather, had 12 children, and all survived to adulthood.

It is appropriate to memorialize our ancestors here today in a spirit of wonder and mystery. It is an open question whether our denial of death and expectation of human control is preferable to our immigrant ancestors' optimistic fatalism.

We can name my great-grandmother's attitude toward death a kind of Anabaptist-Mennonite optimistic fatalism. Anabaptist-

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