

# Dedication of the Memorial Stone at Catlin Cemetery remembering the Mennonite children who died in 1874

By Alan Stucky, pastor of Pleasant Valley Mennonite Church at Harper, Kansas

As I prepared for what I was going to say today I found it strangely difficult to find the right words to say. The reason is that as I have thought about what this event means and what this stone really represents, I find myself feeling rather unworthy and very humbled. I'm humbled because I realize that the reason that I'm able to stand here today in 2012 is because 138 years ago my ancestors packed up their basic belongings, sold what they could and set off for an unknown land. They picked up their families and headed for the unknown of a new life. Faced with a government that was compelling them to go against the Gospel of Peace, they left their home following their conscience, moved and empowered by their faith.

This monument now stands as a testimony to one small part of the story. Let us rejoice that what was once considered lost has now, in part, been found. But let us also remember that there are many others whose final resting places still go unmarked but hopefully not unremembered. Let us remember that this marker is not the end all and be all of this story but that it is merely a road sign that points us to many more unanswered questions.

And as we stand here in this moment in time let us remember that this monument not only serves to point us to the past but also to inspire us for the future. The reason that I am humbled by this memorial and this service is that it forces me to ask myself whether or not I have lived up to the legacy of those who have come before me. Have I lived in such a way that the sacrifices of these families were not in vain? What's more I must ask myself whether I too possess the faith and the courage that they did. Would I have the faith and the trust in God to pick up and move half a world away they that they did? As we celebrate and remember the families that are represented on this stone these are questions that we all must wrestle with.

This stone is a monument to a particular time and place and is a small part of the story. But let us not forget that the story is still unfolding and that we are writing the next chapters of the story as we speak. So yes, let this monument stand as a testimony to the past but let the true monument be our lives. Let the conviction of our ancestors give us strength for the future. Let our lives be the living, breathing legacy of those who came before us. Let us remember that this silent stone stands as a witness to a living history.

## Prayer

Would you pray with me. Oh Lord we give you thanks for the opportunity to gather here together in your name. We trust that your Holy Spirit has been here with us today just as it was with our ancestors who came before us. Lord we give you thanks for the strength and the courage that you gave to our ancestors as they were willing to follow your Son Jesus Christ to the ends of the Earth. Lord we pray that those whose names are represented here are now resting peacefully in your arms. Lord we also trust that those people whose final resting places remain unknown are not lost to you. Let us trust that even though memories may fade and even Heaven and Earth will pass away, you still know and care for each of your beloved children.

Lord, as we leave here today let us be inspired and encouraged to continue legacy of our ancestors and walk faithfully the journey of faith. We pray that you will guide us and lead us, all the days of our life. We pray these things by the grace and power of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

## In Memory of Those Who Died in Peabody, Fall 1874

By James Juhnke, Catlin Cemetery Memorial, September 23, 2012.

We are gathered to remember the story of the Swiss Volhynian children who died at Peabody in 1874, and the parents who grieved their deaths.

Our immigrant ancestors in Peabody were a small fragment of some 15,000 Mennonites who left eastern Europe in a few years in quest of land and freedom in North America. After arrival in the fall of 1874, 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. Some cultivated ground and planted winter wheat on two rented farms in McPherson County that had been arranged for that first season.

While the men were gone, an epidemic of disease, possibly scarlet fever or measles, afflicted all the Mennonite children in Peabody. Some seventeen small children died at Peabody in a short period of time. Some of the families went further by train to Halstead, where even more children died. We are not absolutely sure how many died at each place, or the names of each child who died. So the stone here reads, "Those believed to be buried here are among the following."

Meanwhile the Santa Fe Railway company was building an immigrant house at the site of today's Hopefield Mennonite Church. From Halstead our ancestors moved to the immigrant house until they could build houses on new homesteads.

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

The grave or graves for these deceased children in 1874 were not marked by permanent engraved stones. We can imagine that someone put up a wooden cross or more crosses that disappeared in the course of time.

The lack of a permanent marker at this site in 1874 should not surprise us. These burials took place in a time of great transition and upheaval. It may be that none of the affected 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 Kotosufka, today in the

Ukraine, will not find any Mennonite cemeteries with permanent markers from the nineteenth century.

It is a challenge for us in our age of modern scientific medicine to comprehend the role of disease and death 150 or 200 years ago. From 25% to 40% of children in Europe died before reaching age five.<sup>i</sup> Our peasant ancestors in Volhynia, who knew so little about sanitation and medicine, probably buried about a third of their children. In the United States around 1860 the infant mortality rate (death during the first year of life) was about 18% for whites.<sup>ii</sup>

Modern medicine and sanitation have transformed our experiences with, and attitudes toward, death. When a child today dies, our first question is what might have been done to prevent it. Today medical doctors and hospitals carry expensive insurance to protect against law suits from families someone who dies. Our ancestors were more fatalistic. For them death was an ever-present reality-- something beyond human control.

My great grandmother, Anna Schrag Schrag Goering (1854-1947), lost a two-year old daughter in the Peabody epidemic of 1874. The child had been named Katharina, after Anna's mother. Anna was pregnant at the time of the migration, and on August 20 gave birth to another baby, Frehni, the third day at sea. Frehni survived the Peabody epidemic, perhaps because she benefitted from antibodies in her mother's milk.

My great grandmother Anna's experience with death gives a face to the official mortality statistics. Three of her siblings died in Volhynia in the village of Sahorez, ages 4, 9, and 11. She lost her own first-born child, Katharina, here in Peabody. In February 1878, less than four years after arriving in Kansas, Anna's husband, Christian Schrag, died of pneumonia before his thirtieth birthday. Frehni, 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.<sup>iii</sup>

What did it mean for Anna and Christian Schrag to lose a daughter in 1874? According to my mother, Meta, Anna's granddaughter, Anna had a fatalistic attitude toward death that seemed strange. When a child died in the community, Grandma Anna told her family to give thanks. God had taken the child unto Himself, and now the child would not have to bear the burdens and sufferings of this world. We need further study of the immigrant generation's view of death. I suspect that Anna Schrag Schrag Goering's attitude toward death may have been typical in her community.

I think we can name my great grandmother's attitude toward death a kind of *Anabaptist-Mennonite optimistic fatalism*. Anabaptist-Mennonites believed that infants and children were innocent and accepted by God—with no need for infant baptism. For Catholics and Lutherans, the deaths of all these unbaptized children buried here would be more of a problem. The Mennonites were more like the Quakers, whose attitude was more distinctively optimistic. For Quakers, death “was an event not to be feared or abhorred but welcomed and embraced.”<sup>iv</sup> 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 transformed life expectancy. Birth control has reduced the size of families.

Anna Schrag Schrag Goering lived in the presence of death. Her children raised large families almost completely without the death of children. Her son, Jonas, for example, my grandfather, had twelve children, all of whom survived to productive adulthood.

And so it is appropriate for us to memorialize our ancestors here today in a spirit of wonder and mystery. This stone can remind us of two things. First, it is a reminder of a pre-scientific world when death was a far more present reality for our people—and for everyone living in those times. Second, our attitudes toward death have changed. It is an open question whether our own denial of death and our expectation of human control is preferable to our immigrant ancestors' optimistic fatalism in the face of death.

It is appropriate for us to acknowledge how much we benefitted from the risks, sacrifices, and undergirding Christian faith of our immigrant ancestors. May these souls rest in honored peace.

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<sup>i</sup> P. N Stearns, *Childhood in World History* (2005). H. Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500* (2005),

<sup>ii</sup> Michael R. Haines, "Mortality," in *The Child: an Encyclopedia*. (U. of Chicago Press, 2009), 636.

<sup>iii</sup> Orville Goering and Victor Goering, eds., *Descendants of Anna Schrag 1855-1947*(2010), 6-7.

<sup>iv</sup> David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 517-522.