

Learning About Swiss Mennonite, Low German, and Hutter Kin in Freeman, South Dakota

What a beautiful sight the pioneers must have seen of hills, valleys and grasses when they came



to Dakota Territory in 1874. Today, fields of corn, soybeans, wheat and hay are planted in this Turkey Ridge Valley southeast of Freeman, SD.



The 43 Kansans on the Swiss Mennonite Cultural and Historical Association-sponsored bus tour, July 18-20, could appreciate this place where some of their ancestors had settled in 1874. Some on the bus knew that relatives were buried in South Dakota.

In this three-part series, I will write about the July 18-20, 2017 tour to Freeman, South Dakota and Henderson, NE. Participants' comments are in italics.

- 1) Three ethnic and religious groups settled in the Freeman area that are cooperating in many ways.
- 2) Freeman sites and the story of the five children who perished in the 1888 Blizzard.
- 3) Henderson NE and the first water drilling operation there.

Freeman is the only location in all of North America where three distinct ethnic groups—Swiss Volhynian, Low German, and Hutterites-- settled in close proximity. All three groups grew out of the Anabaptist movement in Switzerland in 1525. The Anabaptists believed in believer's baptism and were pacifists. Since they disagreed with the established church of the time, they were deemed to be heretics and enemies of the state. All three groups were persecuted for their faith and looked for a better place to live out their faith. All three groups found their way to Russia by the early 19th century. Surprising to me was the fact that these groups actually interacted some in Europe and Russia.

Catherine the Great invited German-speaking farmers to come live in Russia and improve the land there because she was aware of their work ethic and abilities. All three groups benefitted from her promise of exemption from military service and permission to have their own schools and churches. All three groups left Russia in the 1870s when their privileges were withdrawn and settled near what later became Freeman, South Dakota. Each spoke their own dialect but

have taken to leave a comfortable lifestyle, of the hopes of again seeing his grandchildren which never happened (they had moved in 1874 to Moundridge) and most of all the trust he had in his heavenly Father. He could not have known that his brief sojourn in America would be remembered by many of his descendants. As I pointed to his name for the pictures taken, at least three people on the tour piped up, "that's my great great great grandfather also."

Even though Johann Gering was one of those with wooden grave markers that burned at Salem-Zion, it was holy ground for me.



Robert Engbrecht, associate pastor of Salem Mennonite Church, talked about the Low German Mennonites, originally from the lowlands of Holland, who moved from Prussia and settled near the Molotschna River in South Russia in three settlements: Chortitza, Molotschna, Alexanderwohl. Separate factions had appeared in Holland and Germany suggesting they were not a cohesive group. The Low Germans developed advanced educational and agricultural programs: mutual aid, homes for the aged, hospitals, mental health, a teachers' college, a school for the deaf, steam powered flour mills.

In the 1870s, 18,000 of these Anabaptist groups left Russia for the United States (1,000 Swiss, 1254 Hutterites and the rest were Low Germans). Two-thirds of the Low German Mennonites stayed in Russia and endured the Russian Revolution, some even being sent to Siberia. Tobias Unruh brought some to settle in the Silver Lake and Dolton areas north of Freeman. Low Germans settled also in Nebraska and Kansas and Canada.



Norman Hofer, Hutterisch leader, told us about communal and private ownership of Hutterites. The Hutterite movement originated in the Tyrol of Austria. They fled persecution for their beliefs to Moravia and later to Raditschewa, Russia. Here communal living was abandoned but considered later again. They moved to Molotschna where a wealthy Low German landowner, Johann Cornies, helped them to establish the Hutterthal settlement. Because of their pacifist beliefs, they immigrated to America, north and west of Freeman. They built one of the first flour mills in the Freeman area. The difference between Hutterites and Mennonites is the holding of private property, a belief which they base on their literal translation of Acts 2 and 4 and their acknowledgement that the early church lived communal.

In 1874-79 of 1250 Hutterite immigrants, 450 decided to form three colonies in South Dakota where the land seemed similar to their Russian farmland. Communal ones were Bon Homme, Wolf Creek, and Old Elm Spring. Eight hundred of 1250 chose private ownership and are often

referred to as *Praireleut* (people of the prairie) or “Hutters”. They are part of the Mennonite Church and are comfortable with the term of Hutter.

We visited the Oak Lane Hutterite Colony, northwest of Freeman, a very large and impressive community of 131 people in 26 families.

The Oak Lane Hutterite Colony was amazing, still holding fast to their Anabaptist beliefs, yet embracing new technology.

Learning about their beliefs and their business operations was an illuminating experience. They are to be greatly admired for how they live their daily life and act out their beliefs.

The Oak Lane Hutterites invited us to enjoy lunch in their dining room after a tour of their 10,000 acres of wheat and hay, large gardens, hog and Jersey cow operations, and turkeys (they raise 90% of the turkeys in South Dakota). We saw the modern enormous combines and tractors as they headed for wheat harvest. Young children are cared for by older women while their parents work on the farm. At age 15, boys and girls are considered adults and take on responsibility of driving machinery or managing the kitchen duties. Teachers are state accredited. South Dakotans pay no income taxes but have high property taxes. Only one colony mailbox is needed for the manager and treasurer leaders. John, the colony leader, shared their concerns about diversification and liability insurance and need for modern marketing. Lunch was nutritious fresh food from their gardens and prepared with restaurant-style large appliances. We were allowed to take photos. After we sang our beautiful #606 hymn as a blessing to them, a group of their young adults sang for us.



The book [Pacifists in Chains](#) tells the story of four Hutterites drafted and court martialed for their refusal to bear arms, sent Alcatraz and Leavenworth.

I particularly enjoyed the Hofer, Engbrecht and Kaufman stories of how the area was settled by Schweitzers, Low Germans and Hutter groups, their leaders, their stamina as pioneers.

The stories that were shared throughout the three days were very meaningful and make me even more grateful for my Mennonite heritage.

Learning about Freeman, South Dakota and a sad story there - #2

Freeman, South Dakota was the destination of 43 Kansans on the bus tour sponsored by the Swiss Mennonite Cultural and Historical Association (SMCHA) on July 18-20, 2017. Many had ancestors who settled there in 1874.

The area around Freeman is spectacular reminding me actually of Central Kansas but with more hills and valleys. Freeman is the only location in all of North America where three distinct ethnic groups—Swiss Mennonite, Low German, and Hutterites—settled in close proximity, groups with a very similar background. As they have cooperated in activities, they are a great role model for accomplishments by diverse peoples.

The town of Freeman, population 1308, services about 8,000 residents in all directions. The Low Germans, Swiss, and Hutterites of the Freeman community together began South Dakota Mennonite College in 1900. It later became known as Freeman Junior College and Academy. Today Freeman Academy serves students grades 1-12, teachings based on Anabaptist principles.

In 1959, Freeman residents established the well-known Schmeckfest, showcasing foods from these distinct groups and fabulous music programs, attended by enthusiasts from all over the nation and world.

Heritage Hall Museum and Archives is dedicated to the preservation of rare artifacts used by our ancestors. They have collections illustrating the daily life of early German-Russian immigrants, a wide range of autos, a 1927 bi-plane, natural history displays, antique Bibles and historic books about the Anabaptist movement; outside is old Bethel Church, Diamond Valley School house, a Reformed Church, and the Ludwig Deckert house (that is on the National Registry of Historic Places) all moved on the site.



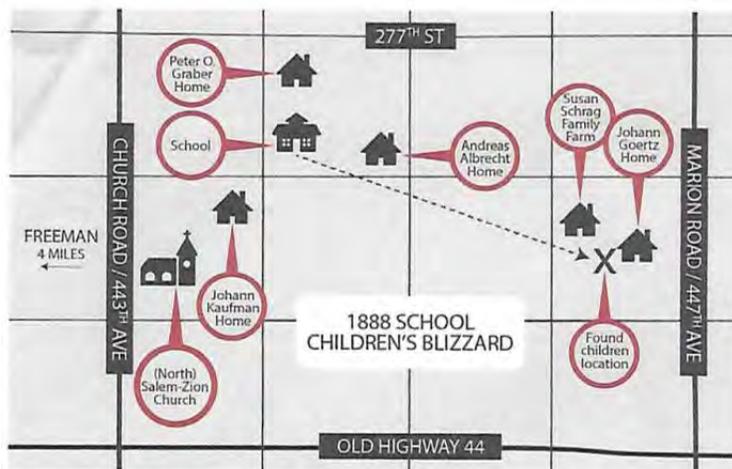
Another community effort involved turning 40 acres of pastureland into a Prairie Arboretum. Lyle Preheim and others designed the ponds, a rose garden, an amphitheater, and planted sugar maples and conifers. More than 400 tons of rocks were brought in to protect the pond shorelines from natural erosion. Volunteers manicure and weed and plant. A gazebo was



added. A Norman Epp sculpture stands north of the amphitheater. The Freeman Fishing Derby attracts young and old. Their advertisement reads: "More than a mile's worth of walking paths take visitors from the frenzy of day-to-day life and transport them into a new, special and calming world." The most recent addition is an Interpretive Center where we met to hear Lyle Preheim talk about this amazing project.

A sad remembrance of the Freeman region is the death of five schoolboys who lost their way home in a blizzard in 1888 and were found frozen. Many of us have read the story documented in the book, *The Children's Blizzard*, by David Laskin (2004 by HarperCollins Publishers) and now our bus drove around the sections where this event actually happened.

Seven children went to their one-room country school on January 12, 1888, a mildly cold day with some snow on the ground, but with just light jackets. One boy stayed home to help with chores. At 11:00 a.m., the blizzard came suddenly and with awful force; the boys and their



This map shows the area starting 4 miles east of Freeman relative to the story of the Jan. 12, 1888 blizzard that took the lives of five Swiss Mennonite boys after they got lost walking home from school. As a starting reference point, the Salem-Zion (North) Mennonite Church is the building pictured farthest to the left.
TABITHA SCHOENWALD / GRAPHIC DESIGNER

teacher were alarmed and contemplated whether they dared to walk home or should stay at school. The Peter Graber home was just about 1/8 mile north, so they set out walking. The snow was blinding and they held on to each other as they fought the wind. At one point, one let go of the hand of another to get the ice from his face so he could breathe and the five were separated and hopelessly lost, never to see their friends again. The five continued across the field and were found in the pasture, frozen together, and then were buried together at the Salem-Zion Cemetery. A

memorial stone was placed as a lasting memorial to a tragic ending. Three boys were from the Johann and Anna Kaufman family—Johann, 17; Heinrich, 11; and Elias, 8. Peter and Susannah Graber's son Peter, 16, died. Peter had two brothers who survived. Johann, 13, son of Andreas and Maria Albrecht, died.

One participant said, *"The landmarks and stories of the Graber, Kaufman and Albrecht boys' death in the 1888 blizzard brought a sobering realization of the sorrow those families experienced. It was made real. The book made it fact but being in the Freeman area and the cemetery made it real. There was a profound sadness for all those involved."*

Another participant remarked that his parents didn't talk about the blizzard happening though we lived close by, maybe because it was too painful to talk about.

Many survived the horrific events of grasshoppers, fires, lost crops, and so much trauma in the early days of the pioneers. Some endured through tragedies like the blizzard of 1888. The town has continued to thrive as ethnic groups work together, a tribute to sturdy and compassionate people.



Visit to Henderson, Nebraska

43 Kansans on the bus tour sponsored by the Swiss Mennonite Cultural and Historical Association (SMCHA) on July 18-20, 2017 visited Freeman, SD and Henderson NE. We learned that Freeman is the only location in all of North America where three distinct ethnic groups—Swiss Mennonites, Low German, and Hutterites—settled in close proximity. All three groups grew out of the Anabaptist movement in Switzerland and fled persecution through Europe, and were found in Russia before coming to the United States.

On Highway 81 coming back to Kansas, we turned west 15 miles to Henderson, Nebraska where 35 Low German families had settled. The book *Henderson Mennonites, From Holland to Henderson*, published by the Henderson Centennial Committee tells the story of the settlers that came to America from the growing Molotschna Colony south of the Baltic Sea to escape bearing arms in the military and buy land for their people.

They arrived in America with some means to begin farming and purchase land. They were promised exemption from military service in America as they had in Russia. The trains arrived first in Lincoln, Nebraska, and the weary travelers stayed in the immigrant house there until the decision would be made on whether to settle in Nebraska or move to Kansas. Six men inspected the area and decided for the land in York and Hamilton counties. For the next month they prepared for the move which allowed the B & M Railroad time to build an immigrant house for them. The women and children took the train to Sutton, but the men drove the horses and wagons cross country from Lincoln to Henderson. The women and children then walked the 17 miles from Sutton to the Immigrant House. On October 14, 1874 they arrived and began making their lives in and around Henderson.

In 1874 the Low Germans established the first Bethesda Mennonite Church. We stopped to see this beautiful church, now one of the largest in Mennonite Church USA. Currently being remodeled



, we were impressed with the faithfulness of its members planning events and its future.



Just north of Henderson is the Henderson Mennonite Heritage Park - Museum. Special for us was seeing a replica of the original Immigrant House filled with artifacts representative of that time built by the Burlington Railroad to house the first Mennonite settlers in the area. A wall



picture showed the likely lifestyle. We know that Railroad companies provided similar houses for immigrants in locations around the Central U.S., to help these early pioneers get established and obviously also as an inroad to provide future transportation for their crops.

Also on the Museum site are a turn of the century farm house, summer kitchen, windmill, outhouses, a fully restored barn built in 1911, and machine shed/shop. A Country Mennonite Church was built there to resemble a typical country church that both branches of the

Mennonites built in original District #73E building of the artifacts, historical



rural Henderson in the late 1800s. The fully restored Country School house is located at the park. A replica original Henderson railroad depot is filled with railroad pictures and equipment.

In the recently-added Henderson farmers to develop a way in 1939-1940 to bring water to the thirsty land--irrigation wells.

exhibit building is a new display of the steps taken by three

Lois Preheim, in her book, *A Pact: Three Men and a Spade: The beginning of deep well irrigation for three Henderson, Nebraska farmers, 1939-1940*, wrote about her father, John J. Thieszen, and his brothers – Daniel Thieszen 34 and Abraham J. Thieszen 31--who dug by hand the first two irrigation wells and then kept improving their techniques using materials found in John's iron pile or from scrap yards. The three



young innovative farmers answered a tremendous need for water for crops following the drought stricken 1930s when Nebraska farmers found it difficult to raise crops. Dryland farming was hardly worth the investment. The bank at first refused to loan them funds for this new enterprise. They suffered much criticism as some accused them of not trusting God to supply water. John at one point answered the ridicule by saying that God supplies the water above the ground and below the

ground. He knew the Ogallala Aquifer is located in Nebraska, Kansas, and other states. Abe had the first machine-drilled deep well for irrigating crops in the community, completed November 10, 1940. As our bus drove through the countryside around Henderson, we could see what a contribution these men made — fields of green and flourishing crops.



After the tour, the volunteer docents shared information and the wonderful Low German specialty, Prieshki.