

125th Anniversary

ANNIVERSARY HONORS THE PAST, FACES THE FUTURE

by Esther Bohn Groves.

North Newton, KS.

They came, they saw, they cultivated. The emigration of Swiss-German Mennonite farmers to North America in 1874 from Volhynia, Russia, was celebrated recently in 125th-anniversary festivities at rural Hopefield and Eden Mennnonite churches near Moundridge. Survival was not easy. "Family livelihood depended on child labor," said Rachel Waltner Goossen, Topeka. One large family borrowed ship money, then, faced with drought and grasshoppers, indentured a 10 year-old son for five years of service to pay off the transportation loan. He rejoined the family afterward, reported Melvin Graber, Moundridge.

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A readers' theater directed by John McCabe-Juhnke, North Newton, told of the howling three-day blizzard that suddenly struck Freeman, S. D., in 1888. Five children (three were brothers) did not return home from school and were finally found huddled by a fence--frozen.

The emigrants were hardworking, careful farmers. To this day, there's little bindweed on the farm handed down from Jacob Wedel, said Duane Wedel, Moundridge.

"Grandma can pitch hay and milk cows as well as any man," Marlene Krehbiel, Moundridge, once said of her great-grandmother, Anna Schrag Stucky. Anna came from Russia at 15, milked cows into her 80s, wore a little bag of onions and garlic around her neck in winter to ward off sickness, and quoted her minister father, who said that when you pray, "God only hears and speaks German."

Before hunting-bag limits, a man could shoot 80-90 ducks in a few hours for family and friends, said Rynell Schrag, Urbandale, Iowa. His engineer great-grandfather, John J. Schrag, changed the ecology of McPherson County by buying land in the big basin and draining it with dikes and ditches, using a machine that augered dirt and his invention of a homemade steam shovel. The drainage caused droves of toads to migrate through town so thickly they were crushed by vehicles.

James Juhnke, North Newton, told of the same John Schrag. The German-speaking Burrton Mennonite would not buy war bonds during World War I because he believed Christians should not pay for killing fellow humans. On Armistice Day a mob told him to buy bonds and carry a parade flag. He refused, was smeared with yellow paint and taken to be hanged., but the head of the Anti-Horse Thief Association intervened and jailed Schrag, then had him removed to the Harvey County Jail. When a mob arrived at night to break in and get Schrag to kill him, he was no longer there. Impressed by Schrag's non-retaliatory, saint-like behavior, a member of the mob later became a pacifist.

Mennonites were unpopular during World War II, although Civilian Public Service (CPS) was an alternative to military service for peace-churches. One man in a CPS T-shirt during a baseball game attended by spectators from the area, when asked by a spectator what the letters stood for, avoided controversy with, "Catchers, pitchers and shortstops!"

South Dakota farmer Charles Kauffman wanted to show others the beauty he saw in nature, said his great-niece Alice Suderman, North Newton. Kauffman learned taxidermy by correspondence, preserved a variety of Great Plains songbirds and ducks, carved a pioneer family from wood and dressed them in authentic clothes down to high-button shoes. The Kauffman Museum at Bethel College preserves his vision.

But in 1874, Mennonites buying land from the Santa Fe at \$2.50 an acre did not know how much America would change them. As Harley Stucky, North Newton, asked, "If they had known, would they have come?"

Harvard theologian Gordon Kaufman, Cambridge, Mass., thought they wouldn't have; after all, they left to preserve their faith and culture--Swiss-German dialect, tightly-knit agricultural communities, Christian pacifism and conservative theology. Today only some older people know the dialect, only a small minority still farm, descendants have scattered from the original settlements at Moundridge, Pretty Prairie and Freeman to across the nation and the world, and their theology is comparatively liberal.

But if America changed them, they also changed America. The hard red Turkey wheat they brought made Kansas a bread basket for the world, and their values and faith contributed to local communities, said Rep. Jerry Moran, R-Kan., of Hays; also, their teaching of nonviolence and reconciliation has become more respected in a violent society.

The 846 Swiss emigrants (more than half had the same surname--Gering-Goering-Gehring, Graber, Kaufman, Stucki-Stucky) were but a small part of the 1874 exodus of 18,000 Mennonites to the U. S. and Canada, Goossen said. In Russia the Swiss had lost much of their original Amish culture (e.g., coats with hooks and eyes). In this country, she said, they found it easier to avoid arguments with Lutherans than to avoid tensions within the church as they changed from a separated group choosing ministers by lot to General Conference Mennonites with seminary-trained pastors.

As first, intermarriage between Swiss and the much larger group of Low-German-speaking Mennonites was distrusted. Dale R. Schrag, Newton, related that Gordon Kaufman's grandfather pointed across Turkey Creek toward the Low-German settlements with, "There live the Philistines!"--perhaps a joke, for one characteristic of the "Schweitzers," Schrag said, is humor.

Another characteristic is love of music. Commissioned for the celebration and performed by choir and instrumentalists was "A Hymn of Heritage" with lyrics by Gladys Graber Goering, Moundridge, recalling the past with thanksgiving, and music by Steven Stucky, Ithaca, N. Y., combining the traditional four vocal parts with the invigorating dissonance of contemporary praise.

Kaufman called attention to changes. "We have become very different from the pioneers and have no desire to return to the kind of life that they were preserving." Yet., like those pioneers, Mennonites are entering a new world, he said. No longer separate from others, most accept that there is much to be learned from the wider culture even as they believe they have something to offer the world--their basic belief that fellow humans are to be loved even when disagreement exists. New inventions like Mennonite Disaster Service promote sacrificial love and peacemaking in new ways.

Both Kaufman and Goossen called listeners to recognize the gifts of peoples with other ethnic-cultural-racial backgrounds, and Kaufman challenged Mennonites to enter a new era with the

same courage and creativity as their pioneering ancestors, even though, as for them, the changes that the future holds cannot be seen.

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e-mail: webmaster@swissmennonite.org