

Pretty Prairie Men Church 125th anniversary Drama
Aug. 7, 2009 written by Chris Krebbs

PEOPLE OF PROVIDENCE

I will sing of the Lord's great love forever; with my mouth will I make your faithfulness known through all generations. Psalm 89:1

Where did we come from and why? Is it important to know? John 4:34 says "Beware lest you forget. I have sent you to reap a harvest in a field where you did not work, others worked there, and you profit from their work." To quote from A History of the First Mennonite Church: "Each generation makes its contribution and each succeeding generation inherits the fruits of that contribution. To forget what other generations have done is to ignore God's hand in history. As heirs of a rich legacy, we are grateful to the pioneers who created and nurtured the Pretty Prairie Mennonite Church." So come with me across the great sea to Russia.

Our forefathers were part of the Anabaptist movement which started in 1525, when a group of Swiss believers led by George Blaurock and Conrad Grebel broke completely with the Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed churches and were baptized upon confession of their faith as adults. The movement spread very rapidly in Switzerland and to Germany and Holland. On January 12, 1536, Menno Simons, a Dutch Catholic priest, accepted the faith of the Anabaptists and joined them as an ordained minister. His followers were called Mennonites. These Mennonites believed in the authority of the Bible, baptism as adults on confession of their faith, separation of church and state, freedom of religion and conscience, and in allowing each congregation to choose and ordain its own minister. Because of these beliefs, the prevailing Swiss orthodoxy persecuted the Mennonites even as their numbers grew. The Mennonites left Switzerland and fled to Germany, Poland and France. In 1789, at the invitation of Russia's Catherine the Great, the German Mennonites were promised free transportation, free land, a loan to support the families until the first harvest, complete religious freedom, complete freedom of language and education, military exemption, self-government and a ten year tax exemption. But with that, they could do no religious evangelism among the native Russians. What good Mennonite could pass up a deal like that?

Catherine, however, did not remain in power, and the succeeding Czars did not honor her promises. The new Czars wanted the Mennonites to learn the Russian language and most of all join their military forces. To escape persecution for non-compliance with the new military service law and increasing demands to conform to Russian ways, approximately 18,000 Mennonites (one third of the Mennonite population of Russia) emigrated to America in the 1870's. Ten thousand five hundred settled in Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota and Minnesota. Our ancestors were Swiss Volhynians. Our founding fathers left Russia in 1874 and journeyed to Liverpool, England where they boarded the SS City of Richmond to sail to New York. Some of these Mennonites then went by special immigrant trains to South Dakota. Because of the harsh winters in South Dakota, several families decided to move to Kansas—some to McPherson County and some to Reno County. About 30 families purchased nine sections of land in Reno County from the Santa Fe Railroad for \$6 to \$7 dollars per acre. They worked together to get established in their farming and they met together in homes to worship on Sundays. On October 10, 1884 the Mennonite Church of Albion Township was officially organized with 88 members. One of the charter members of this church was Andrew Schwartz.

(Enter Andrew)

This dream of mine has finally come to pass. I have my own land in a country that allows me to worship my God without fear of persecution and without fear of conscription into military service. I didn't know if this dream would ever be fulfilled when I was still in Russia. It was a rough start. My parents died when I was two, but the Vorans were good to me and took me in until I was old enough to go out on my own. They taught me how to love the soil and make it produce. And most of all they taught me about God and His faithfulness.

But it became more difficult to make a living in Horodish, my hometown. Catherine the Great, who had promised my people freedom of worship, self-government, exemption from military service was no longer in power. Czar Alexander II had become annoyed with our people and he began to take away our promised privileges one by one. A group of Mennonites including my young wife, Elizabeth, and I wanted to leave Russia and go to America where we would have religious freedom once again. But to get to America we needed to purchase passports in Katosufka, a large town fifty miles away. It was dangerous to be traveling so far alone with so much money. If anyone was suspected of carrying money, they could become a victim of roadside bandits. I devised a plan to prevent being robbed and volunteered to go myself. To conceal my identity, I dressed and acted like a beggar. I walked the fifty miles to Katosufka dressed in rags with the 500 rubles hidden in my rags. I begged for food and lodging along the way. It took me two days to get to my destination. Once in Katosufka, I was able to get a good night's sleep and rest. I purchased the passports the next day, put my ragged clothing back on and returned home the same way, begging for food and spending the night on a bench in a tavern, just another beggar passing through.

It was hard to leave the land that had provided our livelihood for so many years, but we knew it was necessary and we knew God was with us. So we boarded the SS City of Richmond and came to America. At first we settled in South Dakota, but found the winters to be too long and cold with a very short growing season. After ten years there, we decided to move to land near a small Kansas farming town of Pretty Prairie in 1884. Here we bought land and began farming. The first three years were total failures. It took courage to stay at it as everybody, without exception was in debt. To borrow money was almost impossible and if they could borrow, several signers were needed, and as much as 24% interest was paid. As a result many lost their farms, and those who still held on were in debt for all their land was worth then. When times got better, some bought back their land, while others bought other land here. 1889 and 1890 were good corn years, with corn selling from 10 to 17 cents a bushel. At that time Pretty Prairie had as many corn cribs as it had houses, and before the elevator was built all grain had to be scooped by hand. But farming and life gradually improved. Elizabeth and I had eleven children on this land. What a blessing they have been in my life. Many things grow well in this sandy loam. I started an orchard with pear, apple, peach, apricot, plum and cherry trees, and my pride and joy, my concord grape vineyard. Those grapes made good wine which I used for medicinal purposes and for guests on special occasions. I also provided the wine for communion services.

Our community was growing and it became difficult to meet to worship in our homes. The need for a church got me to thinking. I wanted to do something to make this little community on the prairie a better place to praise the God who had been so good to us through all our journeys. That was when I decided to donate a corner of my land for the church.

I'm old now, and living in town growing a garden of vegetables and flowers instead of an orchard and wheat fields, but we still have our place of worship—the fifth building on that land. God has been faithful.

(Andrew exits)

(Narrator): The Mennonites had come from a far away land to a brand new place to preserve their freedom and escape persecution. Their religion was an integral part of their lives. They had met weekly in Andrew Schwartz's home where the leaders, in the absence of a minister, read scripture and gave a short meditation and closed with prayer. But they felt the need for a minister. And soon the homes would be too small for all the new families who were coming. But who should or could preach? Very few had any formal education at all. Another charter member, JJ Flickinger, was destined to fulfill that role.

(JJ Flickinger enters)

As I look out over this congregation this evening my heart is filled with gratitude and praise to God for His mercy and faithfulness to this day. Take another look about you, and acknowledge the fruitfulness and prosperity God has bestowed upon us. All this comes from the hand of God. As I consider the providence of God on our behalf my mind goes back to the beginning of my 35 years of service as minister to this church. And even further back to our village home in Horodish, Russia. At that time, America seemed like a far away place that was impossible to get to. But a delegation of our church leaders had been to the new world, and had come back to Russia with a good report. God seemed to be leading us, and, like our ancestors before us, we would follow Him. "Vo Gott fahren, folgen wir" 'where God leads, we follow!', but how? We met in the church and brought our petition before the Lord in fervent prayer. This hour of prayer left an indelible impression on me which I shall never forget. Many of our number had very little in the way of worldly goods, but after this time of prayer, it was agreed that poor as well as rich would go to America where we would be free to worship and live peaceful lives. Preparations were made to immediately sell what we had and purchase transportation to this new land. Even then, since many still had insufficient funds to make this trip, we were blessed to be able to borrow from the Mennonite Board of Guardians, a relief organization something like the MCC of today. It was funded by Mennonites living in the eastern United States who were already well-established in this country, having come long before our group. Thank God for His providence and for their spirit of generosity to us that helped pay the railroad and steamship fare. So we came to

this land of opportunity, sojourners, strangers, and debtors. . . I was only 17 when we left Russia, but I knew it was a holy calling. Our group traveled by immigrant train from New York City to South Dakota, where we settled as pioneers. While we were living there, I married Marie and we started a family of our own. We had three children there before we moved to Kansas. The believers here had already started farms and were meeting together in homes and we were glad to join their fellowship. But the community was growing and more leadership was needed. The brethren decided to have an election for a minister on October 10, 1884. I remember the details of that day very clearly. Twenty one men were elected by vote and of those men, one would be chosen by lot. A prayer meeting was held and we asked God to lead and direct in this drawing that everything might terminate according to His holy will and to the welfare of this church. The drawing by lot was held in the home of Andrew Schwartz, and the result was that all 21 that had received votes drew blanks except myself, and so by God's grace and providence, I, John J. Flickinger, was to be the minister of Pretty Prairie Mennonite Church. As you can imagine, it was a bit frightening to be the leader. I took very seriously the call of God upon my life, but I had no formal education and my library consisted of only my German Bible. How could I lead these people? I sought help from the leadership of the Western District Conference and was greatly blessed by our partnership over the years. Our congregation grew rapidly as more families joined us, month by month, from South Dakota and from McPherson County. Three years later, John G. Graber was elected as assistant pastor and Peter A. Graber as lifetime deacon. The three of us served together, without pay, for the next 30 years.

I believed that education was going to be vital in this new country and I set out to educate my family which would eventually grow to eight children. Two of my daughters were born deaf-mutes and Marie and I struggled to know how to raise them. How does one teach a child to speak and read if they cannot hear? We wanted them to be able to lead a productive life and raise a family, so we sent them to the school for the deaf in Olathe, Kansas. There they learned to sign and were at last able to communicate with others. Now they are married with children of their own. Later, my youngest son, Amos, went to Bethel Academy for two years after high school to better equip him for service. Unfortunately, many in our congregation believed that higher education was not necessary and there was some friction in the church over that issue as well as the issue of choosing a minister. These issues caused such disunity among our people that we sought help from the conference to help us avert a split in the church. After several uneasy years, a resolution was reached, some changes were agreed upon and now our ministers are called from outside our congregation.

I was glad to be of service to the Lord and accepted my duty to minister to the congregation for 35 years. Now it is time for younger and better educated ministers who can speak English to carry on the work of the church. God will be faithful to them in this new land just as He was faithful to our forefathers and to us. And for them and for you, may it also be true "Vo Gott fahren, folgen wir". Where God leads, we follow.

(Exit J.J. Flickinger)

(Narrator): As the church struggled through growing pains, the world around them was changing, too. For hundreds of years, we Mennonites were expected to stay to ourselves. In fact we could not even try to tell others of our faith under threat of death. But in the New World, we began to steadily meld into the mainstream. We were in a new land and learning to do new things. Social life and the church life were intertwined. And our customs and traditions gradually changed.

(Enter Emma)

Ach to lieber! What is all this talk about the way things used to be? I can tell you how it used to be and it was good then. Why do things have to change? They sure are done different now. You know, my Hilda is getting married next month and it's nothing like it used to be. In the old country the bridegroom would send the steckelman to the bride-to-be's home to ask for their daughter's hand. Now the children just decide on their own. I suppose Hilda's going to want her father to walk her into the church instead of her and Benny together. And what if they kiss in front of the whole church after they're pronounced man and wife? I know Anna and Jake did at their wedding and her daddy was not happy. Hilda asked if she could wear some lipstick on her wedding day. Ach, I told her we didn't wear any cosmetics--the girls were naturally pretty! And we didn't wear wedding rings or jewelry, either. That was considered worldly to wear them.

I am so thankful that my Hilda is marrying one of our good Mennonite boys. I heard that John P is going to marry an "Englischer" in the fall. What is going to happen to us? We are just going to become too worldly. Will she be able to learn our ways?

I just don't know when we will get everything done. We have to get the basement ready for the reception after the wedding. We have to make sure we have enough cooked bologna and pickles and cheese and, of course, the peaches. It will be such a happy time for them. They will have their wedding party the week after the wedding. Ya, and it better be a good one so they don't get chivareed! Ach! I don't know when I will get Hilda's wedding dress finished. For the last two weeks we've had Bible School. That's another thing that's changed. In the old days we had Bible School for two months and the men taught Scripture reading, Bible verse memorizing, prayer and singing. Now that the town schools go for nine months, we have only two weeks and now the women do most of the teaching. The boys really like recess when they can play ball. We never knew about baseball till we came to the new country. Our farm boys can really swing a bat and throw a strike! We have many happy times in our lives,

but sadness comes all too often here on the prairie. Today I heard that Emil died so the wake will be tomorrow at his house. We'll be there singing till midnight. Chore time is going to come awfully soon after that. It used to be that Peter Kaufman or Christian Graber made the coffin. Nowadays, we can buy one for \$50 or so. But it's still a sad time for poor Esther. I am thankful that we have a God who will comfort her. We have our promises of being with our Lord for eternity. That's one thing that doesn't change!

Another thing that has changed. . .so many of the children are learning English nowadays. Seems like they don't even want to speak our mother tongue. That just doesn't seem right. After all we spoke our own language for hundreds of years and now all of a sudden some people want to throw it away. We're even having some of the preaching services in English. Not everyone likes that you know, but what are we gonna do? With the war against Germany, maybe that's not so bad. Sometimes the towns people make me feel a little uneasy when I talk German. But we need to learn to get along. It must be hard for Mary and Jonas to let their boy go to war. At least he doesn't have to fight like our men folk were gonna have to do in Russia. In America they can be—what's that word?—exempted from fighting. I hope this war is over by the time my Johnny is old enough for the draft. Why can't we all just get along? After all God loves us all the same, ya?

Next week is the annual meeting. Now that is something that has changed. Himmel! Those men could get mighty riled up back in the old days. It was sometimes pretty loud. That's why they called it the Hoderschaft. Oh my. Some brotherly love that, eh? The women had to make lunch because those meetings lasted a day and a half and sometimes longer. I don't know why it took those men that long to take care of business. I suspect if they ever let us women vote we'd be able to get things done!

Well, enough of this rambling on about change. We're just gonna have change and I might as well accept it. One thing I do know for sure is that the world around us will always be changing, but our God, ya, He never changes.

(Exit Emma)

(Narrator): We have seen changes, we've gone through difficult times, but we continue to worship the one, true God. We continue to tell our children of His faithfulness and love for His people. Will we tell others of the greatest story ever told or will we remain "De Stil Im Lande"? Our first fifty years we were still and did not send out any missionaries or ministers from our congregation. After all we had come from a country that did not allow us to proselytize (evangelize). However, during the next fifty years our church sent out 13 missionaries, 31 ministers, nurses, teachers and voluntary service personnel to all parts of the world, making our Christian influence felt. Will we continue that rich tradition of fulfilling the Great Commission? How do we move forward in the next 25 years and beyond? We are no longer a rural society. Will we be able to withstand the pressures of a secularized, urban society that doesn't know what a closely knit community that cares for its members really means? Will we be able to maintain our historic "roots" in a "rootless mobile" society?

(Enter Tyler and Jordan and Donovan) There needs to be some humor in here mixed in with the seriousness of our history. The boys are coming up with their own dialogue. These were just suggestions of where to start/what to do.

Hearing all these stories has been pretty cool!

Yeh, Can you believe they used to . . . ?

Men and women couldn't sit together? What's up with that?

There sure were a lot of members who went to be missionaries all at the same time.

Seemed like there were so many right about the same time in the 50's. What motivated them?

Did you see the room that had all the people that have done service of some kind? Man, there were a ton of them.

God must have really talked to them. Man we need to get out there and spill the news.

Talk about missionaries in the past and then how they (the boys and anyone in our church now) can fulfill the great commission. What are the possibilities for service/sharing God's story in the future.

Narrator: To quote Walter Gering, a retired General Conference Pastor, who wrote for our church's 100th celebration: "The role of the Swiss Mennonite as a part of the larger Christian fellowship is one which will not be answered without prayerful, Spirit directed consideration." On this celebration of our 125 years of seeing a faithful, loving God work in our midst, let us renew our commitment to "sing of the Lord's great love forever" and "make His faithfulness known through all generations."

Listen now as Jean Graber, our oldest living church member recites an original poem.

MY CHURCH

A red brick building stands out there in space;
A monument to beauty, endurance and grace.

Once I, a young stranger within its walls
Wandered, an alien among its great halls.

Once its people with tongue so strange
Caused me to wonder how my life would change.

Once my children grew up within those walls.
There they sang songs, and there they learned laws.

In prayer have they knelt at that sacred altar—
In baptism and in marriage lest in life they should falter.

The years have sped by and I have matured.
What love I have found; what Truths I have learned!

And the people, the folks with the language so queer.
Are the very ones whom I now hold so dear.

For God isn't a place, nor only to be found
On familiar, or holy or sanctified ground.

But a part of one's self; if in faith one can come
To the knowledge of God through the gift of His Son.

The cast comes back onto the stage and sits in choir loft.

Rich Ratzlaff will come to the pulpit and facilitate an audience participation opportunity
to reminisce about what they remember from the past or comment about the future.

Following that time, he will announce the singing of the hymn in the bulletin. Rod will
direct.