

Swiss Mennonite Oral History Summary

Monday, July 14, 2014

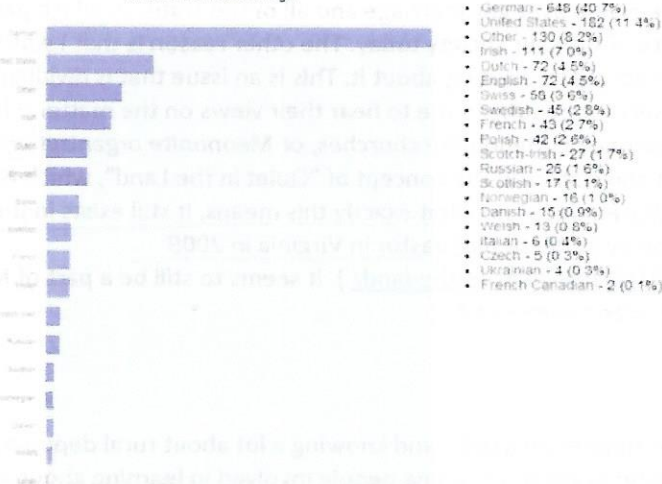
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Dear SMCHA:

First I would like to thank those who participated in this oral history project and Keith Albrecht for organizing the interviews. And it was a pleasure to speak to such a large audience in July. I am sending you a copy of my PowerPoint presentation and some other reading materials I put together while preparing, plus the following observations and possibilities for future SMCHA projects. I also noticed that Heather made a lot of typographical, spelling, and other errors in the transcripts, which won't take long to correct if you would like us to correct them. That is just the nature of transcribing audio files. I marked up the transcripts, so it wouldn't be difficult to fix the errors.

One thing that struck me, and I probably should have known this having read a lot about Mennonites over the years, was a comment made by someone after my presentation. I was talking about Russian Mennonites, and she said the Swiss Mennonites don't identify themselves as Russian Mennonites. Maybe I got the impression that they did from interviews with those on the other side of Turkey Creek and the fact that the Swiss Mennonites came to Kansas from Russia. I have a book titled *An Introduction to the Russian Mennonites*, by Wally Kroeker, and I mistakenly lumped you in with the others who immigrated from Russia. After looking through the book again I see that it does make a distinction between Russian Mennonites and "Swiss-German Mennonites" in a couple of places. I think this is important because it makes you even more interesting and sets you apart more clearly as a distinct ethnic group within Mennonite and other communities of south-central Kansas. It also means that you might have a greater responsibility to make yourselves more known to the state of Kansas, which of course means more work! And this also helps me better understand the historic Turkey Creek division. I took away from those interviewed that the bitterness of this division is mostly gone now, and especially in younger generations. However, in my investigation of organizations and university programs that might assist SMCHA in future projects, I learned from someone at the Kansas Sampler Foundation in Inman that it might still be pretty bitter. I am also curious about this graphic that shows a small percentage of people in Moundridge today identifying their ancestry as Swiss. I have not done any further research on this, but I wonder if it because there are so few Swiss Mennonites left or because some identify with German or another ancestry. Someone at my presentation also mentioned this.

Ancestries in Moundridge



In the next section I will share some observations about things that stood out to me in reading through the transcripts. Keep in mind that these are things that interested me, surprised me, or stood out to me for one reason or

another, but I obviously have much more limited knowledge and experience with the Swiss Mennonite community than all of you do, so please remember that these are my personal observations and interpretations.

Doctrine of Peace and Pacifism

JH: There is still quite a bit of discussion in your church at Eden about peace?

AW: Oh yeah, peace has never been second fiddle at all, it's always been A+

JH: But I have gathered, in talking to other people, that the churches in Inman, in....

AW: You're talking about Mennonite Churches?

JH: Yes, Mennonite Churches....that it's not much of an issue anymore, if at all.

AW: I think you're probably right, but conference-wise and everything, that issue of peace has never been minimized.

The above dialogue between Arnold Wedel and me was part of my quest to learn where different Mennonite churches and individuals stand on the issue of peace and war. I am aware that the Mennonite Central Committee still strongly advocates for peace and does wonderful work in helping victims of war and bringing warring people together. But in my oral history project with harvesters (most of them across Turkey Creek) I got the impression that it wasn't emphasized as much in the local churches. I have not read those interviews for a long time, however, and could be mistaken. I would like to learn more about the Eden Church's views on this subject and if there is an interest in working with other groups on peace initiatives. I have a relative-in-law who chairs of the board of directors at the Dayton International Peace Museum in Dayton, OH. His name is William Shaw and I asked him if they have interest in working with other groups on peace issues, and said they do. So this could be a future project if you are interested.

Separation of Church and State

Arnold Wedel believes that separation of church and state is "biggest issue in the country" and that "we've forgotten about that completely as a Mennonite group." He said you never hear a sermon about it. This interested me because it is a very different view than a lot, maybe most, Christians have on this issue, especially evangelical Christians. But I do not know how many other Mennonites share Mr. Wedel's view on this. This is a problem of trying to make generalizations about a large group based on interviews with a small number of people. Nevertheless, I do find it interesting that he is strongly opposed to prayer in school, and he would be criticized for this view by many Christians. Another issue related to church and state that a couple of interviewees brought up was homosexuality. I mention this for two reasons, one being the divide over gay marriage and all of the states in which gay marriage is legal. There seems to be growing acceptance of it in our society today. The other reason is that I was surprised when they brought up the subject. I had not even considered asking about it. This is an issue that is dividing families, churches, and other institutions, so it was very interesting to me to hear their views on the matter. I have no idea if their views are representative of other Mennonites, Mennonite churches, or Mennonite organizations. I see this as related to the issue of separation of church and state and the concept of "Quiet in the Land", which is another topic that interests me. Although people have different ideas on what exactly this means, it still exists in the Mennonite consciousness, as demonstrated in a sermon by a Mennonite pastor in Virginia in 2009 (<http://kgbuckeye.wordpress.com/2009/04/18/the-quiet-in-the-land/>). It seems to still be a part of Mennonite identity, even if many younger Mennonites aren't aware of it.

SMCHA Membership

As I read the article about Swiss Mennonite generational drift, and knowing a lot about rural depopulation, I thought about the future of your organization and how to get more young people involved in learning about and preserving Swiss Mennonite culture and history. I am sure you would like to have more young SMCHA members and wonder how to get more of them interested in working on projects. Have you considered a membership drive that targets younger people?

Future Projects

After learning a lot about the Swiss Mennonites through the oral history interviews and reading about religious landscapes, I thought of several projects that interest me and will share some as ideas if you happen to be interested and have the time and money. I have already shared some of these in an email I sent to Keith before my presentation. Here are potential projects that would interest me, in no particular order. These are only ideas that interest me, and please keep in mind that I know little about the future goals, ambitions, funding, and manpower of the SMCHA.

1. A membership drive to attract more young people to SMCHA in order to pass on Swiss Mennonite history and traditions. Some of the folk stories in the interviews were fascinating and will be lost if young people don't hear them.
2. Doing some research on the Swiss Mennonites' experience in Russia. How important is this to the "founding story"? Only Marlene Krehbiel had any personal knowledge of her ancestors' experience in Russia and what they thought of Russia. There may be more and maybe the SMCHA has a lot more information on this than I am aware of.
3. Working with Swiss Mennonites in Pretty Prairie or Kingman or South Dakota? Could you pool resources to work on commemorating additional sites with some kind of markers? I realize it would be difficult. I ran across another group of Swiss Mennonites around Whitewater, who came later, and don't know if SMCHA has had any communication with them. They came directly from Switzerland (see below).

Swiss Mennonite Church (Whitewater, Kansas, USA)

Swiss Mennonite Church (General Conference Mennonite Church), located near Whitewater, Kansas, was organized by about ten families who left Emmental, canton of Bern, Switzerland, in 1883 and settled in Butler County, Kansas. At first the Swiss worshiped in the Emmaus Mennonite Church. Other Swiss Mennonites joined this group. Soon separate worship services were started, and in 1890 the Swiss Mennonite Church joined the Western District Conference and in 1892 the General Conference. D. Gerber was the first minister. In 1921-1926 John Roth was the leader. In 1929 the membership was 62 and the Sunday-school attendance 180. Theodore Roth was the leading minister 1930-1955. Since 1955 Dan H. Dalke has been the pastor. In 1957 the group had a membership of 141. The change from the German language to the English took place in recent years. After World War II the congregation built a new meetinghouse.

Pasted from <[http://www.gamco.org/index.php?title=Swiss_Mennonite_Church_\(Whitewater,_Kansas,_USA\)](http://www.gamco.org/index.php?title=Swiss_Mennonite_Church_(Whitewater,_Kansas,_USA))>

4. Commemorating additional sites. The more I learn about Turkey Creek the more important it becomes in the settlement history of this region. I wonder if SMCHA could work with Mennonites across the creek or use resources of the Kansas Humanities Council to somehow commemorate it. It looks significant enough to me that it should have a state historical marker. And there might be other places that deserve commemoration. What places would SMCHA like to see commemorated?
5. Founding fathers and founding story. You already have a lot of historical information on the SMCHA website, of which I have read only parts, but I wonder if there are other people, men and women, who you think deserved to be recognized in the official history of the Swiss Mennonites?

Resources

- 1 The CECD (see below) at K-State might have resources. I emailed the director, David Procter, but have not heard back from him. I will contact him or someone else at CECD again and let you know what I find out.

Center for Engagement and Community Development

Pasted from <<http://www.k-state.edu/cecd/>>

2. The Kansas Humanities Council has Heritage Grants (see below). I had a Kansas Humanities Council grant in 2010 for the oral history project with Mennonite Custom Harvesters. My sponsor was the Mennonite Heritage & Agricultural Museum. There may be opportunities here. It would be important for the SMCHA to come up with priorities and decide on a project.

Heritage Grants

Pasted from <http://kansashumanities.org/kansas_grants/heritage_grants/>

3. The Kansas Pride Program might have financial resources to assist with commemorating sites or planning a celebration if you have something in mind. I don't know any more about the program than what I have read on the website, but here is that information.

What is the Kansas PRIDE Program?

Pasted from <<http://www.kansasprideprogram.ksu.edu/p.aspx?tabid=14>>

4. The Kansas Sampler Foundation. I emailed Marci Penner and a colleague there (they are across Turkey Creek at Inman). She said they don't have financial resources, but they know a lot about rural Kansas and their mission is to help rural communities flourish. They are working on a big project now that will take a pretty long time to complete but might be able to share their knowledge after it is finished.

Our Cause: Preserving and Sustaining Rural Culture

The Kansas Sampler Foundation is a public non-profit 501(C)(3) organization.

Our mission is to preserve, sustain, and grow rural culture by educating Kansans about Kansas and by networking and supporting rural communities.

Pasted from <<http://kansassampler.org/>>

I will keep in contact with Keith Albrecht about the activities of the SMCHA, and if time permits I would be interested in working on future projects. I will be going back to Kentucky for another school year at Morehead State University and then return to Iowa next May. I am pretty sure I will head to Kansas again for wheat harvest next year.

Sincerely,

Jason P. Holcomb

Holcomb Speaks To SMCHA

By **RANDY FOGG**
THE LEDGER STAFF

MOUNDRIDGE - Jason Holcomb, who teaches at Morehead State University in Kansas, has helped a Kansas farmer with custom harvesting since his days as a student at the University of Kansas.

In 2011, Swiss Mennonite Cultural and Historical Association Board member Keith Albrecht asked Holcomb to interview some Schweitzer farmers.

Holcomb visited with Martin H. Goering, Fern Goering, Maynard and Marlene Krehbiel, Wayne Ensz, Toby Goering, and Arnold Wedel.

Holcomb shared some of his impressions of the interviews during a presentation Sunday, July 6 at the Pine Village Wellness Center.

In his time as a custom harvester, Holcomb said he got to know Mennonites from Sterling; Corn, Okla.; Mexico; and Bolivia.

"Mennonite are everywhere," Holcomb said. "They may not be in large groups. There is a connection everywhere."

When he started the project, Holcomb said he had the question: Why are there so many Mennonite custom harvesters in Kansas?

"Mennonites have the reputation for being industrious," Holcomb said. "That came with them from Russia and Prussia."

Holcomb said he found that



LEDGER PHOTO

JASON Holcomb, who teaches at Morehead State University in Kentucky, has helped a Kansas farmer with custom harvesting. In 2011, Swiss Mennonite Cultural and Historical Association Board member Keith Albrecht asked Holcomb to interview some Schweitzer farmers. Holcomb talked about some of his findings during a presentation Sunday, July 6 at the Pine Village Wellness Center.

with German settlements in Kansas most of the Mennonites went to Buhler, Inman, Moundridge and Goessel.

He noted that in studying census data, a total of 40.7 percent of Moundridge residents consider themselves of German ancestry. However, only 3.7 percent of residents consider themselves to be of Swiss ancestry.

Fern Goering told him that her parents did not learn English until they got an in-law who did not speak German. She still speaks Swiss-German.

Marlene and Maynard Krehbiel had parents that spoke English, but German was spoken at church and home.

In speaking with Marlene Krehbiel, Holcomb said he

heard about "some serious discrimination." She recalled a time when she and her mother were speaking in German while they were shopping in a store in Newton.

A store clerk overheard them and told them, "We have nothing in the store for you."

In his interviews, Holcomb said he learned how Turkey Creek - and the Burmac Road - separates the Low German from the Schweitzers.

Maynard Krehbiel said that his grandfather told his dad as he was pointing across the creek, "Don't go across the creek. That's the land of the Philistines and that's where the Low Germans are."

Holcomb also learned about how common nicknames are in the Schweizer community. Fern Goering told him her dad was Andrew Goering, and there were four Andrew Goerings in the community. Since they lived near a mound, and hibble in the German word for hill, her family was known as the Hibbles.

Marlene Krehbiel talked about her great-grandmother, who came to the U.S. when she was 16 years old. The great-grandmother talked a lot of the beauty of the Russian steppes.

Holcomb noted that the Great Plains in the U.S. and the Russian Steppe have a lot of similarities. He said both were grasslands.

At the end of the presentation, SMCHA officials announced that their annual meeting will be Nov. 11 at the Water's Edge in Hesston.

Part of the article supplied by Randy Fogg of Moundridge Ledger.

Jason Holcomb is a Professor of Geography at Morehead State University in Morehead, Kentucky. He grew up on a farm in Iowa. One summer he came to Kansas to work for a custom harvester at Sterling, Kansas for many years. This custom harvester just happened to be a Mennonite. Jason enjoyed working for him and continued going on the custom wheat harvest every summer with this same harvester all through his high school and college years. The harvester is now retired from custom harvesting but still continues to farm near Sterling and Jason still comes to Kansas every summer to help him with the wheat harvest on his farm.

Working with this Mennonite harvester and farmer all these years Jason has learned a lot about Mennonites. He enjoys reading about Mennonites and especially Mennonite history.

In the summer of 2011, Keith Albrecht asked Jason if he would interview some of the older Swiss Mennonites in this area to preserve some of their memories and stories before they passed on and took these memories and stories with them. Jason and his wife Heather, interviewed several individuals in this area. They have five of the interviews transcribed to print. They are with Fern Goering, Martin H. Goering, Victor Goering, Wilbert Toby Goering, and Wayne Ensz. Martin H. Goering and Toby Goering have passed on but they left us some of their stories and memories.

On Sunday afternoon on July 6, 2014 at 2:30 at the Wellness Center at Pine Village in Moundridge Jason will speak to us about not only what he learned about Mennonites from doing these interviews but also about his impressions about Mennonites from working with one all these years.

Come to this program and be prepared to ask Jason questions and learn what a non-Mennonite thinks of us Mennonite from all the years of working for a Mennonite and doing these interviews. A condensed version of each of the interviews will be available for purchase for a nominal price at the program.

ledger *Thurs June 26, 2014*
**Holcomb To Speak
 On Farming In Kansas**

FOR THE LEDGER

MOUNDRIDGE
 Remember how harvest was back in the old days?

Jason Holcomb, a professor from Kentucky, has helped a Kansas farmer with custom harvesting for many years. He met Schweitzer farmers and was asked to interview several so that others could enjoy hearing about those experiences.

Holcomb will share his impressions and stories from seven local participants at 2:30 p.m., Sunday, July 6, at the Pine Village Wellness Center in Moundridge. The meeting is open to the public and no reservations are necessary.

Refreshments will be served.



HOLCOMB

A condensed booklet of these interviews will be available there for a nominal fee. The Swiss Mennonite Cultural and Historical Association is sponsoring Holcomb's presentation.

HISTORY *Tues June 17, 2014* *Scattered*
**Professor to speak
 on old day harvests**

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He met Schweitzer farmers and was asked to interview several so that others could enjoy hearing about those experiences.

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Holcomb

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This event is open to all. No reservations are necessary. Refreshments

will be served.

A condensed booklet of these interviews will be available there for a nominal fee.

Sponsored by Swiss Mennonite Cultural and Historical Association.