

## MAYNARD AND MARLENE KREHBIEL TALK ABOUT MENNONITE HISTORY

*Maynard and Marlene Krehbiel farmed near McPherson, and Marlene taught high school English and German. They were interviewed by Jason Holcomb on June 23, 2011.*

JH: Do you know why [the Hopefield and Eden Mennonite churches] split? ... Different theology, different doctrine?

MAYNARD: No, it wasn't theology as much as it was ... money.

MARLENE: Over money and leadership.

MAYNARD: Well, yeah.

MARLENE: Leadership was a big part. Elder Jacob Stucky, that was the leader that brought them from Russia, when he died in 1893, on his deathbed he didn't want them to fill his shoes with people from within the congregation. He wanted them to get somebody from the east, he always said. Which would be ...

MAYNARD: Illinois.

MARLENE: Yeah, or Low Dutch people, rather than within his own Swiss brotherhood. He didn't think anybody ... was really smart enough to do it, or had the leadership qualities to do it.

JH: So he wanted to get someone from ... not just outside of the Kansas community, but somebody who was not a Swiss Mennonite?

MARLENE: Right, a Mennonite, but not a Swiss Mennonite. And for whatever reason. ... So that deathbed wish, some people said you abide by a deathbed wish no matter what, and others said, it doesn't make sense. And then money was also a factor in that, and the land ... the church owned some land. When the split came, to this day we really don't know in black and white, or any other way, what the final breaking point was.

JH: So those that wanted to keep his wish stayed with the Hopefield Church?

MARLENE: Probably more or less.

JH: And those that did not formed the Eden Church?

MARLENE: They called those the more progressive. The people that became the Eden Mennonite Church were the more progressive group. In other words, they were more into educating their youth beyond eighth grade and German school as they had done previously. They were ready to send them to Halstead to an academy and so forth. But they were more progressive, they were called the progressive group. And the others felt that if you could read and write and do sums, your place was to work on the family farm. ...

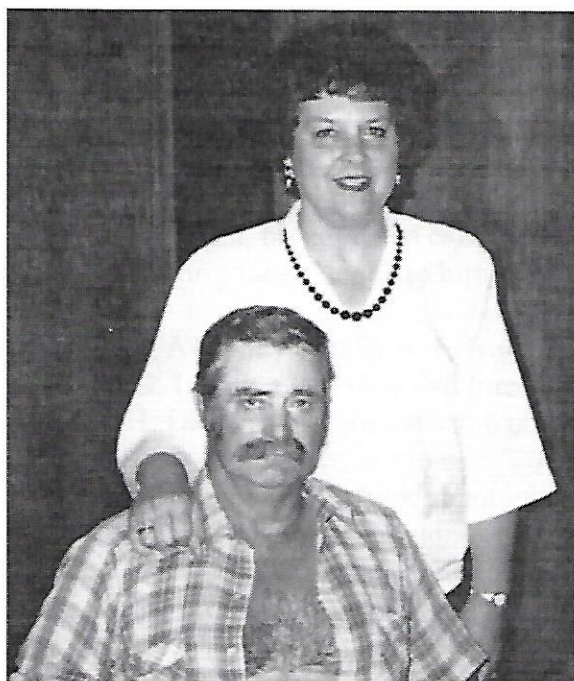
JH: Did your family ever talk about work, about that work ethic and where that came from?

MAYNARD: It's always been there. It's always been there, it's always been part of the people. ...

MARLENE: You know, [in Europe] when the head person, the government or politician died or changed hands or changed their minds and said they had to fight, do conscription or something, then we would find a new place. In fact, at one point some of them were even in a Hutterite community, almost for safety's sake, in a sense. But wherever they went they had a tremendous knack of taking a piece of ground and making it produce, it was just ingrained in them. It was what you would call a gift. So when they were invited by Catherine the Great to come into Russia to do the same thing they did ... they grew by leaps and bounds in Russia ...

MAYNARD: Catherine the Great was a big factor in the Mennonites going to Russia and being like they were, and when she died, that's when everything went to crap. Because she was born in Germany.

MARLENE: She was born in Germany so she allowed





them to keep their language, their church, their schools, but when that next leader came in and she died they began to take that away from them. ... My great-grandma [Anna Schrag Stucky] was 16 when she came, almost 16, and she talked a lot about Russia. She lived at our house for a couple of months when she was 96 years old, and I asked her every question in the book, over and over again. Because I could do the German enough to ask the questions, and I could understand all the answers. What a tremendous, beautiful, Vaterland, to them it was – a fatherland. But the beauty of the land ...

JH: The Steppe, in Russia?

MARLENE: Yeah, she called it Vaterland.

JH: What kinds of things did she say about the fatherland?

MARLENE: Interesting things, she described how their houses were, you know, and the school and the church were always sort of at the end of the villages. ... They had a lot of trouble with certain fellows [who] would always go out with the cows, with the milk cows or horses, whatever animals they had as they grazed and then bring them in at sundown. At times, certain times a year, in the summer and stuff, they would take them out at night and let them graze, because of weather or whatever reason, and they had a lot of trouble with the Russians ...

MAYNARD: Cossacks.

MARLENE: Cossacks stealing their stuff.

JH: The Cossacks?

MARLENE: Yeah, stealing their animals, they had a lot of problems with that, she would say. ...

MAYNARD: She would be sitting milking a cow and she would get the hair growing long along her neck, and she turned around and there would be a couple of them suckers standing in the barn watching her.

JH: Cossacks?

MARLENE: Yes.

MAYNARD: Well, I don't know if she said Cossacks, but that's what they were. ...

MARLENE: She said those people were so tough that in the dead of winter, you know like in the morning when you'd have to go out and milk or anything, it was not unusual to see one sitting out leaning up against a tree sleeping, with his fur caps and everything. ... She said they were scared of them, but when they would see her milk ... she was a young girl you know, and when they would see her milk they would throw coins. She had the apron and they would throw coins at her feet ... Her dad let her keep those coins, and that was such a precious moment for her because the kids had to give any money they had ... to dad.

JH: Did she say why they threw coins at her?

MARLENE: Just the way she handled the cow. She always said she milked all four udders at the same time. She had big hands and she was a little person. I don't know if she weighed 100 pounds wringing wet, but she had enormous hands. If you shook hands with her and you had a ring on, you had marks for several days, because even at the age of 96 or older ... she had so much strength in her hands. She milked cows here at home until she was 88. They finally sold the cows. She just was so mad at everybody for selling those cows, she just loved to milk cows. ... She [also] just firmly believed that God only talked German, and if you didn't talk German there was no way that you would ever spend eternity in heaven. She ... and I had that discussion.

JH: You mean she really believed that?

MARLENE: She really believed that.

JH: Literally?

MARLENE: She prayed all the time for those who did not know German. She just couldn't see how they ... they couldn't talk to God. ...

JH: What would you call the language, the dialect that your great grandparents, grandparents, and parents spoke?

MARLENE: Schweizerdeutsch.

JH: But it was not the same as Swiss German?

MARLENE: No, it's Schweizer instead of Swiss.

JH: And this is a result of migration, of picking up language as they migrated from Switzerland to Russia, and the places in between. ...

JH: So the Schweizerdeutsch was their first language. And do you know at what point they learned



English?

MARLENE: By the time they went to school they had to learn it, elementary school, first grade. But at home they always talked the German, and at church, the church services, even when we were growing up, until we were about in the eighth grade, we still had total German service one Sunday a month. At first it was all German, and then slowly ... Then, after that, when I was a freshman in high school the new preacher we got when the other one left couldn't talk German.

MAYNARD: Well, a big factor was the Second World War.

JH: I've heard that from others. People didn't feel comfortable speaking German ...

MARLENE: My mother my sister and me, we dare not say a word. I remember this one store, you know everything was rationed, even material was rationed, and Mom sewed all our clothes. So we went to Newton, and she said, "Girls, do not talk to me at all." Because she could get by without having the brogue.

JH: She could get by without having the brogue?

MARLENE: Having the German brogue, accent. Anyhow, I had to go to the restroom and I asked her in German, and that lady said, "Do you talk German?" And Mom said, "Yes." And she said, "We have nothing in the store for you." ...

When I started the first grade I couldn't talk English, and the teacher finally told my mother, "Either you start talking English to this girl" – because she and I couldn't understand each other at all – "or you find her a German School." And so, that's when my folks switched to English on a home basis. ...

JH: So your parents ... if there was this desire to remain separate from the world, the "quiet in the land," did they learn English because they had to? Or did they go to schools where they had to speak English?

MARLENE: Well, during the war here, during the Second World War, and I think it started some in the First World War already, they always had German schools separate from the English schools, but they had to quit the German schools because of the war. ...

JH: So as children they grew up learning English in school, and most of the school year was taught in English.

MARLENE: The government demanded that here. Even though they left Russia for that reason, they still had to do it here.

JH: And your grandmother who was so adamant about speaking German, what did she think about that? How did she adjust to that?

MARLENE: I don't know if she just ignored it or what. Her daughter was my Grandma, and Grandma struggled with English, but she had to stay home and work and she figured out she probably had the equivalent of four years of schooling in her life. She was the second oldest and she had to work at home.

JH: Your great-grandmother witnessed the change from completely German-speaking communities through World War II, and her granddaughter learning English in school, and then eventually everybody speaking English and very few people speaking German. How does that fit in with remaining separate from the world? Are you familiar with the phrase "quiet in the land."

MARLENE: Oh, yeah. We heard that from little on. *Stille im Lande*. From little on we heard that, and that meant that your faith and your church was separate from this outside world, even though ... the old ones really bemoaned the loss of the German. They really did. They mourned that loss because they didn't know how to explain the faith they had and help you to have that same faith because they couldn't speak the English well enough to do it. Once the kids totally lost it, or war was here, ... you didn't dare talk German or any outside origin because there were fights and people made fun of them and everything, but you were not to retaliate. You were to remain quiet and not try to make any waves. The war had a lot to do with that at that point. It did. And I think in Russia, it was the same thing.