

Schrag works to preserve

local dialect

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NORTH NEWTON — In a play written by former McPherson dentist J.O. Schrag, some of his characters made a revealing discovery. Reflecting upon their Swiss-German Mennonite heritage, they realized that only through history, through an examination or preservation of the old ways, could they understand who their people were.

Part of that quest into the past involved the preservation of their language, a transplanted 16th-century Swiss dialect long Germanicized, Slavicized and Anglicized. Schrag's play is itself such a quest, yet it is only one fragment of a larger effort.

Schrag spoke about his work on Wednesday, in connection with National Foreign Language Week, March 1 through 7.

The Swiss-German Mennonites ("Schweizermennoniten"), whose language Schrag has tried to preserve, settled around Moundridge, Pretty Prairie, Kingman and Freeman, S.D., among other places. But their language revealed a more ancient past, a history extending to the Anabaptist Reformation of the 1520s.

Having been driven from their Emmental Valley homeland in the Canton Berne of western Switzerland, Swiss Mennonites wandered through parts of France, Germany, Poland and Russia. In the 1870s, they began a series of migrations to America.

At each location, Mennonites adopted words from local populations, and the Swiss-Germans' language slowly reshaped itself. In Europe, Rhenish Franconian and other Germanic influences were probably foremost, for after moving east, the Mennonites (like so many other East European Germans or "Volksdeutsch") tended to live in German-speaking enclaves with their language mingling less with Slavic tongues than it had with other Germanic dialects.

Once emigrated to the states, the Swiss-Germans' language was inundated with English, and today, were it not for the likes of Schrag, it would be threatened with extinction. Yet Schrag said some Mennonites still use the language for telling stories or even routine communication. He said

he and his wife, Esther, use it when visiting Swiss-Mennonite friends.

One of Schrag's first efforts at preserving the dialect began in the 1970s, when he compiled materials for a record entitled "Unsere Leit," or "Our People." Included on the record were rhymes, nicknames, idioms, folk sayings and poems in the Swiss-German tongue. As such, the project helped preserve Mennonite literature as well as language.

Furthermore, Schrag belongs to the Swiss Mennonite Cultural and Historical Association, a group committed to preserving the dialect and the legacy of the Swiss Mennonites' past. Each year in which they find a deserving candidate, the group offers a scholarship to one Swiss Mennonite student wishing to attend a Mennonite seminary. And they always employ a sample of the language (perhaps a prayer or poem) in their programs.

In addition to the record, Schrag has completed two plays, the first described above, and the second entitled "The Matchmaker." Schrag's plays have been performed at Bethel College and in the Swiss Mennonite areas of South Dakota.

Some would like to see a course in the language offered at Bethel, but officials there have complained of insufficient interest, Schrag said. Nevertheless, he has completed a Swiss-German word book for those who wish to study it on their own.

The Mennonites' dialect, as it survives in Moundridge and the other settlements, now seems quite different from the tongue of modern Bernese speakers. Schrag said the immigrants' language seems "more German" than what he's heard in modern Berne, but he remembered a dialect heard in Alsace-Lorraine, near the French-German border, which sounded familiar.

"It was exactly the way we speak it," he said.

There are at least two major reasons why the language of modern Berne and the language of the Mennonites appear so different. First, as Cora Anne Miller, who wrote a master's thesis on the Swiss-German tongue, pointed out, dialects among emigrants often become conservative in their evolutionary processes; dialects change more rapidly in their

mother countries.

Secondly are the foreign words absorbed. English words representing new concepts to the immigrants (such as "electricity") were adopted wholesale, and as each generation of U.S. Mennonites was assimilated more completely into Protestant America, English was used with greater frequency.

Today, differences between the immigrant's Swiss-German dialect and the Low German spoken near Inman or the so-called official German taught in schools encompass both pronunciation and vocabulary.

The German indefinite article "ein," for example (the English "a" or "an"), becomes "ain," rhyming with "brain." "Frau" (woman) becomes "Frah," and "Jahr" (year) becomes "Johr."

But some differences are more extreme. "Etwas" (meaning "something") changes to "ebis," and "Pferd" (horse) is replaced with "Gaul." In a few cases, noun genders (something which English is peculiar among European languages by not employing) also change. "Die Ecke," for example (a feminine noun meaning "the corner") becomes "das Eg" (a neuter noun).

"In general," noted Schrag, "you use contractions whenever you can, and it's not quite as definite ... we leave off some sounds."

This can partly be explained by the informal useage of the Mennonites' dialect. It was never written, and standard German appeared in both educational and liturgical literature. Interestingly, as Ms. Miller observed in her study, the Swiss-Germans' religious vocabulary is closer to standard German than is their dialect in general.