



## Bulletin

### Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario

WATERLOO - ONTARIO

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#### SESQUICENTENNIAL OF THE AMISH MENNONITES IN ONTARIO

"The Pilgrimage of a People"

J. Winfield Fretz

There is something beautiful, something psychologically right, about observing this Sesquicentennial Celebration during this annual Thanksgiving season. A heritage is something for which one always ought to be able to be grateful. At this 150th anniversary of the coming of the Amish to Ontario, I join you in a prayer of thanksgiving for what God has been able to accomplish through his people, through the past century and a half.

The word "pilgrim" and "pilgrimage" are used generously in Christian literature. A pilgrim is a wanderer. One who travels or who goes on long journeys is said to be on a pilgrimage. John Bunyan, the 18th Century English pietist, in his famous allegory, Pilgrim's Progress, dramatically uses the concept of a pilgrim to describe the journey of a devout Christian as he travels on this earth on his way to heaven.

On this occasion, I want to apply the pilgrim concept to the Ontario Amish, not by tracing the journey of the forbears over land and sea from restless 19th Century Europe to the peaceful forests of Upper Canada. I want, rather, to trace their pilgrimage in thought, in behavior, in life style and in value systems. It is after all primarily for ideological reasons that the Amish left Alsace and Bavaria for Canada. Their pilgrimage was not primarily for pleasure or for adventure, or even for material gain.

The concept of "pilgrim" suggests such human qualities as sincerity, humility, simplicity, piety, curiosity and sensitivity to things of the spirit. It has often been used to refer to peace loving individuals in search of a "holy grail." The term is not used to des-

cribe a military warrior, a militant crusader or a political conqueror. The 19th Century Amish who came to Canada were, in many ways, true pilgrims.

#### Amish as Pilgrims

It took courage for poor, humble, devout men like Christian Nafziger to leave his insecure family and wander off, on foot, to Amsterdam there to beg money for his passage to America. It took courage for him to land in N. Orleans rather than Philadelphia or New York and thus face the task of walking an extra thousand miles to reach his destination. It took courage to come penniless to Canada in search of land for his people. It took courage for the small groups of Amish families to set out on high seas for up to three-month journeys in small sailing vessels. It took courage for them to establish new homes in a strange land without adequate funds, food or clothing. But it is precisely that courage and the fruits of that courage of one generation that become the heritage of succeeding generations. It is to those pilgrims of courage in the past that we pay tribute in this Sesquicentennial celebration.

The title of this address is "Pilgrimage of a People." I want to take a moment to comment on the second word in that topic, namely, "people." The word "people" denotes a body of persons united by a common character, culture, or sentiment. It is all the individuals of a distinctive group. A people may be a race, a tribe, or a nation, such as the "black people," the "Indian people," or the "Canadian people." The word "people" is used again and again in the Bible: "They are my people," "Let my people go," "Comfort ye my people," "You are.....a peculiar people." It is in this sense, then, that I am using the

word "people" to designate a distinctive group historically so considered by themselves and so designated by the larger society.

#### How Did the Amish Mennonites Become a People?

The Amish were originally a part of the Swiss Mennonite Church which at the time was a distinctive group within Swiss Protestantism. They became a separate, distinctive and peculiar people following 1693 when they split from the Mennonite church under the leadership of a young minister by the name of Jacob Ammann. Even before the split, however, Mennonites tended to think of themselves as separate people and were so considered and treated by the publicly supported church and state in Switzerland. Their becoming a peculiar people was enhanced by their stubborn resistance to all social change and by their firm insistence on practicing their New Testament faith regardless of its unpopularity and its consequent persecution and suffering.

From the 16th to the 18th Centuries religious intolerance in Europe did not permit religious differences. Political rulers of the territory determined the religious faith of all citizens under their control. Not only was church membership controlled, but so was religious ritual, doctrine, behavior and even thought. Persons who deviated from party religious lines were quickly branded as heretics and as enemies of the people. Once branded by the epithet "heretic", a person was open game for anyone. He could be ridiculed, harassed, tortured, executed or exiled. He was classified as a public enemy either to be shut up, locked up, sent away or destroyed. Only by renouncing their religious beliefs could they be restored to full membership in the larger society.

Because most Mennonites took their New Testament instructions seriously and refused to surrender what they considered their most precious treasure, they were naturally singled out for punishment. To protect themselves and to assure survival of their faith they in time went "underground" or into hiding. They sought secluded places to live and worked in

out of the way areas. Often this meant in undesirable areas where they could find jobs which others preferred not to do. Sometimes nobles engaged them to develop swamp lands or to reclaim agricultural areas destroyed by war. The Amish sought to live inconspicuously. They worked hard to prove themselves meritorious in the eyes of their employers and their often skeptical neighbors. These factors helped to develop their reputation as those who were the quiet in the land.

Their religious services were held in their own homes where they could be assured of privacy during worship and fellowship. They gradually gave up their earlier evangelical zeal and concentrated on nurturing inner devotion. In their social isolation they disdained pursuit of earthly pleasures and political influence. Both Amish and Mennonites in the course of time tended to translate necessities into virtues. What they at one time viewed as inescapable adversities as a result of the consequences of their faith, they in time came to look upon as blessings for which to be grateful. Practical customs of one generation became the sacred traditions of the next. That which becomes sacred--whether a material object like a family heirloom, a cherished custom or a particular ethical or religious principle--is difficult to alter or part with.

When in 1693 Jacob Ammann split from the Mennonites he did so because he feared the Mennonite Church in the late 17th Century was becoming too worldly. By this he meant that its people were accommodating too rapidly to social changes and thus sacrificing older virtues for new comforts which he saw as vices. He tried to freeze all social and cultural change to the then existing patterns. John Hostettler, the foremost contemporary scholar on the Amish, points out that there are five basic moral principles around which Amish society has been and still is organized. These principles were designed to preserve the Christian values as the Amish see them.\* These five principles are: 1) Separation from the world; 2) The vow of obedience to the church; 3) The rules for living; 4) The punishment of the disobedient; 5) Living close to nature.

One can neither understand nor appreciate the Amish Mennonites unless he does so as a religious people or as the sociologists designate them, a religio-cultural group. It was a religious reason that accounted for their coming into existence; and it was commitment to Christian discipleship that enabled them to sustain their character as a religious minority through centuries of persecution. It was of course these religious views also which brought the wrath of the established churches in Europe upon them.

A people, like a person who has been scorned, chastized, ostracized, and treated brutally, will generally seek in time to protect themselves by withdrawing and accommodating their behavior and practice to some degree in order to survive and live in peace. Social rejection century after century and generation after generation results in indelible cultural imprints on a people. They develop a character which reflects the impact of the repeated experiences of their environment. The Amish Mennonites over the centuries accommodated to their hostile environment by withdrawing into closed communities, fixed religious customs, and reliance of mutual aid within the brotherhood. They rejected the use of political power as a means to their end. Social separation from secular activities as well as from other religious groups became a way of life. All of these factors and forces accounted for the Amish becoming a people.

#### Evidence of a Pilgrimage

This Sesquicentennial provides the occasion for the Amish Mennonites of Ontario to look at what changes have taken place in their heritage over the past seven generations. It also provides opportunity to evaluate those changes in the light of the group's professed aims and goals. From my point of view as a student of history and as a sociologist by profession, I should like to share the following observations.

The Amish Mennonites of Ontario as a people have demonstrated once again the inability of

a social group to resist social and cultural adaptation. Once more we see how both physical and cultural environment shapes and bends the character and the values of the religious groups within it.

Jacob Amman not only set out to resist change but to repudiate it. He excommunicated those who accepted the slightest modifications in social behavior. He identified social change with evil and resistance to change with good. Many of his successors sought to do the same thing. Among Conservative Amish, even today resistance to change is practically endemic. The most conservative church leaders have never succeeded in eliminating change; they have only slowed down the rate of change. They have changed their life styles but at a much slower pace than the rest of society, hence there is still a gap between them and society at large. This gap or culture lag is still a significant reminder that there is always to be a separation between the Christian and the world. The Amish Mennonites represent that segment of the original Amish of Ontario which has adapted to change in the hope and belief that the essence of the Christian faith can still be retained even if contained in new vessels and practiced in new forms.

A second observation I wish to make pertains to the amazing bilateral relationships carried on through the past generations with neighbors, the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and United Church. Not only did they live peaceably among them, I was told by an elderly retired Catholic farmer that as long as he could remember he and his Mennonite neighbors helped one another during haying and harvest seasons as well as during any crises periods. The point had been expressed to me by Catholics, Lutherans, and Mennonites on numerous occasions that throughout the history of their presence in Ontario, the social interactions and community relations have been friendly, cordial, and cooperative. A long history of mutual respect reflects not merely a superficial or surface courtesy but a long-lasting relationship. What this means is that the Amish Mennonites in Ontario have been able

to carry on a relationship with "outsiders" in such a way as to accept courtesies and goodwill as well as show it.

I point this out because this has not always been the case. Amish and Mennonites have often been resented by their neighbors, not because they were not law-abiding, trustworthy, or kind. They were disliked or even hated because they implied superiority of virtue. They showed love to others but did not accept love and kindness in return. As a newcomer to Ontario ten years ago, I was impressed with the out-going spirit of friendliness and openness of the people whose heritage we are today re-examining. This reminds me of what Francis Bacon once said about Hospitality:

"If a man be gracious to strangers, it shows that he is a citizen of the world and his heart is no island, cut off from the other islands, but a continent that joins them."

A third observation is that Ontario Amish Mennonites are demonstrating the final stages of what sociologists call the sect cycle. This refers to stages through which a splinter group, separating from a larger body, moves from the time it separates until the time it rejoins the original body. The Amish division occurred in 1693, two hundred and eighty years ago. I doubt that it will be many more years before this particular group will again be totally merged with the Mennonites from which they originally separated. It is already identified at many points organizationally. More importantly, there is already in existence a oneness of spirit -- that transcends any organization.

What has happened in this province and with this group has illustrated once again that the movement of a separating group is ultimately forward and not backward. It is in the direction of accepting change not rejecting it. The ways of the Amish Mennonites have demonstrated this by the adjustments they have made to the traditional moral principles mentioned above. As in all progress, some values are lost, but other and greater values gained.

In conclusion, what can be said about the presentation of the five basic moral values around which Amish life has traditionally been organized:

1. Separation: The Amish Mennonites in Ontario still emphasize separation from the world but imply this to be a spiritual rather than a cultural or social separation.
2. Obedience: The Amish Mennonites still take vows of obedience at the time of baptism but the vows are made to God and allegiance pledged to Jesus Christ rather than to the brotherhood and its man made rules and regulations.
3. Rules for Living: There are still rules for living but these rules are now given as guidelines. Adherence is encouraged through teaching and admonition rather than through what in the past often seemed like a threat of excommunication as a means of securing conformity.
4. Punishment: Punishment of the disobedient is no longer called by that name but is today thought of as correction through redemptive counselling. The concern of the brotherhood is still one of keeping the offending member in the fellowship by having him voluntarily conform to the congregation's norms.
5. Closeness to Nature: This principle is no longer stressed nor interpreted as compulsory since farming is not taught to be the only honorable vocation for Amish Mennonites to follow.

The 150 year pilgrimage through changing patterns of thought, behavior and values has been no less filled with uncertainties, distress and hardships than have some of the earlier physical pilgrimages. The spiritual pilgrimage over the past century and a half has required courage and daring. It is the true substance from which life is made. It is a demonstration from history and a confirmation from experience of what Jesus reminded us when he said man does not live by bread alone.

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## AMISH SESQUICENTENNIAL A SUCCESS

The foregoing was the address given by Dr. J. W. Fretz at the opening ceremonies of the Amish Sesquicentennial, September 30 to October 9, 1973.

Over 6,000 people saw the Pageant, "This Land is Ours," at the Avon Theatre in Stratford. Written and produced by Urie Bender, the pageant was brilliantly directed by Loretta Yoder of Indianapolis and Margaret Voht of Clarence, N.Y. The cast of 80 was drawn from the local area.

A history of the Amish of Ontario written by Lorraine Roth became the main feature of a souvenir book 150 Years edited by Dorothy Sauder. Among other valuable historical records, is a 1830 survey map showing the original settlers of Wilmot Township. The book is available from Mennonite Historical Society, \$1.50.

Beyond this Land, a 90-minute full-color documentary on the celebrations produced by Friendship Productions of Kansas, is available for rental from the Mennonite Historical Society.

## PUBLICATIONS

The Amish of Canada -- by Orland Gingerich, Conrad Press, 1973. 244 pages. Paper \$5.95, cloth \$7.95.

Mennonites of Ontario, by J. W. Fretz, first published in 1967 is nearing exhaustion and plans are to reprint a revised edition.

The Oxbow, a history of Bloomingdale Mennonite Church (18 pages, mimeographed), researched by Ina Snyder and written by Dorothy Sauder was prepared for the 100th anniversary of Bloomingdale Church on September 9, 1973.

History of the Leamington United Mennonite Church by Elder N. N. Driedger. The book contains approximately 130 pictures from the early settlements in 1925 to the present. It is available in German \$7.00; English \$6.00, plus postage, in hard cover, from Peter J. Enns, 1½ garrison St., Leamington.

Mr. Henry B. Tiessen of Kitchener has written 50 Jahre in Kanada. Paperbound, 105 pages, with line drawings by the author. Obtainable from H.B. Tiessen, 291 Weber St.E. Kitchener.

A History of Canadian Mennonites is currently taking shape under Frank H. Epp's pen. It is expected to be ready for publication by 1974.

## TRAIL OF THE CONESTOGA TO BE PRESENTED

A 3-act play depicting the settling of Waterloo County by Penna. Mennonites will be presented on April 26, 28, 29 at Waterloo Collegiate. Mrs. Norma Rudy, author, will direct the play.

AND THEIR TIME HAD COME, a film on the emigration of Mennonites from Russia is available for rental from Conrad Grebel College--Tel. 885-0220.

## NATIONAL FILM BOARD TO MAKE MENNONITE FILM

Mrs. Lorna Bergey and Dr. J.W. Fretz were appointed by the Historical Society as Ontario representatives on a five-man special advisory committee for the preparation of a film on the Mennonites.

## SPRING MEETING OF THE MENNONITE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF ONTARIO

The Spring Meeting of the Society will be held on June 16, 1973, in Elmira. Mennonites and Tourism will be the theme of the meeting which will include an afternoon tour through the Elmira area.

## GIFTS TO THE SOCIETY

Biography of Oscar Burkholder written by Norma J. Shantz

List of persons migrating to Paraguay, Brazil Mexico and Argentina from Moscow via Germany in the early 1930's.

Wooden chain carved by Simeon Reesor.

Genealogies: Enoch Burkhart, 1715-1970  
David Klaassen, 1700-1971

## Church Histories:

Nairn Church by Ruth Arnell  
Tavistock Church by Alvin Ramseyer.

## MEMBERSHIPS:

Renewals and new memberships are solicited. Send \$3.00 to Secretary, Lorna Bergey, c/o Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario.

- Compiled by Dorothy Sauder