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Highlights of Mennonite History in the Markham Community

Prepared and presented by Paul H. Burkholder at the 1969 Fall Meeting of the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario at the Cedar Grove Mennonite Church.

Much of what I say today about this church and Mennonite community life in York County was told to me by my father Lewis J. Burkholder. He possessed a very keen interest in local history and genealogy. He also collected many old books and records, preserving some of the most valuable in the "Mennonite box" at the Provincial Archives in Toronto. He was commissioned by Ontario Conference to prepare a written record of Mennonite settlement and life; the resulting book, A Brief History of Mennonites in Ontario, was published in 1935.

Introduction

The early Mennonite settlers who came from Pennsylvania to York County, or the Home District, as it was known in 1800, were motivated by the same reasons that brought their brethren to other parts of Ontario, or "Canada West." It has often been suggested that they turned east at Dundas toward York, because of the land title difficulties experienced along the Grand River in 1803. However, it seems almost certain that a few hardy fellows had made trips to York and scouted into the woods north of that town prior to 1803, when the Henry Wideman family arrived at Markham.

Early Arrivals

We find people with Pennsylvania German

names owning land in Vaughan Township as early as 1798. A large group of settlers arrived in York County in 1804, many of them relatives who travelled together. There was Christian Reesor and his four sons and two daughters, one of whom was married to Abraham Stouffer, the family for which Stouffville is named. Christian's eldest son, Peter had been to this area earlier, as evidenced by his barter of horse, saddle and bridle, for 400 acres of Whitchurch Township.

There were three Hoover brothers. Casper Sherk was a brother to Joseph Schoerg, who settled on the Grand River in 1800. These all came to the Markham area in 1804. Abraham Nighswander and his family came about the same time.

The Groff (Grove) and Barkey families came a few years later. The Ramer family was detained for two years on the American side of the Niagara River and did not reach Markham until 1809. The Deacon Jacob Schmitt family came to Vaughan soon after the war of 1812. This brief struggle marked the only interruption in a slow, but steady, flow of settlers.

By 1826 over thirty heads of Mennonite families had arrived in the Markham area. The following is a list of names found in York County in 1830: Barkey, Byer, Eyer, Brownsberger, Brillinger, Burkholder, Brundage, Detweiler, Break, Eby, Grove, Herr (Hare), Hoover, Horner, Kindy, Koch,

Kreider, Lehman, Miller, Mishler, Musselman, Nigh, Nighswander, Oberholtzer, Pike, Ramer, Reaman, Reesor, Schmidt (Smith), Shaffer, Shank, Shirk, Shunk, Snider, Steckley, Strickler, Stouffer, Troyer, Wideman, Witmer, Wismer and Strohm.

Farm Settlements

Almost all of these early settlers were farmers. This was the life they had known in Pennsylvania, so they moved onto land which they immediately began clearing, and were soon growing crops to support themselves and their livestock.

Governor Simcoe had ordered the surveying of the Home District. This was begun in the late 1700s and completed in Markham Township in 1796. Much of the land had already been granted by the crown when the first Mennonites arrived.

Many of these crown patents were held by people who were non-resident, perhaps living in York, or by favorites of officials. Some were granted to soldiers in the service of the British army which had access to more land than money. The soldiers much preferred the solid silver of the Pennsylvania Dutch to 200 acres of wilderness no matter how good the soil was under the trees.

And it was good soil: a deep loam over gravelly clay that provided good drainage. In the whole of Markham Township there is no waste land such as sand hills or swamps.

There were great pine trees covering some of the knolls of lighter land, and the pioneers used these in home building. It is said that when Chris. Wideman was about to build a larger house on Lot 33, fifth concession of Markham, he bought one standing pine tree over on the third, had it cut and sawn. It provided all the needed lumber and trim for the large brick home now occupied by his great grandson, Ken Reesor. Wideman had paid the sum of One Dollar for the tree.

Business Enterprises

Some of the businesses which grew up along with the farm community were mills.

Saw mills, grist mills, flour mills, and woollen mills were found at many a turn in the big and little Rouge Rivers.

The Reesors were active in milling. Peter built a mill just down the hill from this church; it was later operated by his son, Samuel. Simeon Reesor operated a mill one half mile farther south; this was taken over by his youngest son, David, who, with his sons, established Reesor's Mill in Markham, which still manufactures a complete line of stock feeds.

Two of Peter's daughters married millers: one an Armstrong, and the other, a White.

Pioneer Families

Among the children of Ludwig Huber, who landed in Philadelphia in 1764, were three sons, all of whom came to Markham in 1804. Martin, who was born in Europe, was four years old when he came to America; 44 when he came to Upper Canada. His brothers were John and Daniel.

The story is told that Daniel and his wife had lost a child by drowning in their mill pond in Pennsylvania. They had only begun to settle on their new land, Lot 22, Con. 8, through which the Rouge River winds, when Mrs. Hoover observed her husband studying the lay of the river valley and assumed he was planning a new mill site. Out of concern for her remaining children, she brought pressure on her husband, and they soon re-located three farms north on the brow of a hill with no stream nearby.

This farm is still owned and operated by Willis Hoover, whose son, Kenneth, is the sixth generation of Hoovers in Canada.

The Widemans descended from the German immigrant, Sebastian. His grandson, Henry was born in Bucks County, Pennsylvania in 1757. In 1803 he came to Canada with his family: six sons and six daughters. One son, Christian, was a deacon; another, Adam was a minister. Adam's son, Jacob, was also a minister and the father of Samuel, a

minister and later bishop. Samuel was the father of Jacob, a deacon who still serves the Wideman congregation.

One branch of the Wideman family moved to St. Jacobs, others to Michigan, and the Canadian West. Henry himself was killed by a falling tree in 1810. His homestead was adjacent to the church which bears the family name. The Wideman name has continued strong in the community, being numerically second only to Reesor in the local telephone directory.

I will deal only briefly with the Reesors here. The four brothers and two sisters with their parents, Christian Reesor and Fanny Ruff came in 1804. John, the second son, married Annie Grove and they had fifteen children.

It seems their family had reached number thirteen when one child married and left home. Later another child was born and died. After their fifteenth child was born, there was a community saying, "Drei mal dreizehn kinder cot." Literally this means, "Three times thirteen children had," or "Three times they had thirteen children."

It is told that when John went courting Annie, he asked her father, Bishop Abraham Grove, for the hand of his daughter. The father thought she was too young: she was only sixteen. Reesor asked if she could make porridge and the answer was affirmative. So he insisted that she was old enough and they were married.

Abraham Reesor, another of Christian's sons, married a Detweiler. This couple was Mennonite, but their children became Anglican. One of the most notable was David, a very successful businessman and politician, who became a senator in the year of Confederation. He founded the Markham Economist, which has been published weekly for nearly 100 years. He also directed a very active Bible Class in the Village of Reesorville, as Markham was called in the early days.

The youngest son of Christian was a boy of twelve when his father was killed by a falling tree: he was Christian Junior. The

oldest son, Peter, now took charge of the estate and divided their extensive holdings among the family. He was a man of strong will and many stories are told of his rather unique character. An example of his direct way of dealing with a problem is the following:

One very warm day as he was attending the Sunday morning meeting at Wideman's church, he was seated in front of a window which was either not built to open, or was jammed shut. He mopped his brow with his handkerchief again and again. Finally he wrapped it around his fist and poked out one of the panes, then leaned back to enjoy the fresh air. First thing Monday morning, he went to the village, bought a pane of glass, drove his horse the eighteen miles round trip to Wideman's to install it.

He built the stone homestead on the west river bank in Cedar Grove. His wife was Esther Eby, a sister to "Indian Sam" Eby of Waterloo, and a cousin to Benjamin Eby.

The descendants of Christian Reesor Sr. now number nearly six thousand. They have maintained a family genealogical record and a family reunion has been held approximately every ten years.

The Ramer family became numerous in the community. The first generation was known for longevity. Among them have been carpenters, beekeepers and farmers. Some of the Ramers were very musically inclined.

Speaking of music, there is a man we should mention: Adam Break. His grandfather, Hannes, left Switzerland in 1751, and his father, John, died in Pennsylvania in 1802. His widowed mother with four children started for Upper Canada in the spring of 1806. They had their own four-horse team and wagon, but travelled in company with the Christian Schneider family and others (about 40 in all) and settled near Breslau. Her oldest son, Adam, came to York County one weekend, saw a girl he liked, and soon married 15-year-old Maria Musselman, daughter of Peter

Musselman of Vaughan Township. In 1811 they settled two miles west of the Cedar Grove Church, just north of Box Grove

Adam Break saw and examined a pipe organ once, then set about building his own. He made four of these instruments: three found their way into churches (not Mennonite), but all have now been lost. He also composed words and music and compiled these into several books, all hand-written, with a feather quill.

He always farmed for a livelihood, but it is said he carried a paper and pencil to jot down the inspiration that came to his mind while resting the horses. His large family scattered and none reside in this area, most of them having become active in the Methodist church.

The Influence of Other Faiths and Cultures

The Methodist church gained many members at the expense of the Mennonites. There were a number of reasons for this. In the early years, the German language was used exclusively in our church, so if there was intermarriage with their English-speaking neighbors, the couple often went to a church where English was used.

The Methodist and Evangelical churches carried on a more active program. At one time a new minister came to Locust Hill Methodist church. He opened a six-week series of "protracted meetings," preaching, Bible study and prayer, seven nights a week and people were converted.

The Mennonite settlement in York County was more scattered than, say, Woolwich, so the influence of other faiths and cultures made more inroads.

Mennonite influence did reach into other denominations but usually through our young people affiliating with other groups. By tradition, our Bishops would not marry a couple unless both were Mennonite, so baptism often did not take place until marriage. Energetic young people were attracted to the churches of their more evangelical neighbors. These churches held meetings every

Sunday at the same place. Abram Reesor of Locust Hill said he could not "see reason in driving past four Methodist churches to attend a Mennonite church, when we are all striving to reach the same Heaven."

Further immigrations

To come back to families of the community: John Diller, a young widower, came from Ohio with his teenage daughter at the time of the Civil War. He married John Eby Reesor's only daughter, Susannah. John Diller's daughter married Uriah Drudge who came to Upper Canada from Clarence, New York, to escape being drafted into the Federal Army. So draft-dodgers are nothing new. This had been one of the reasons why many of our ancestors fled Europe.

Both the Drudges and the Dillers became strongly established families in the Markham-Scarboro community.

Two brothers from Jordan, Michael and Mannasah Fretz, married Reesor sisters, daughters of John Reesor and Annie Grove (the little "porridge maker"), so the Fretz name came to Markham. The Myers came directly from Switzerland and married into the Hoover and Wideman families.

Two sets of Reesor brothers--Isaac and David, and Jacob and Albert, married four Rittenhouse sisters from Jordan. The parents, Preacher and Mrs. Abraham Rittenhouse moved to Scarboro in their later years. Two of their sons married Markham girls and located on farms here. Abraham Rittenhouse, Jr. is 96 years of age and still active.

The heaviest concentration of settlement was along concession 8, north of Markham, or Reesorville, as it was known in the early 1800s. The Boyers, now Byer, were a Tunker family who lived just south of the Wideman church. Twin brothers, John and David, lived across the road from one another. One was a minister and services were held in their homes.

Benches were stored on an upstairs verandah for use on these occasions. This was at the farmhouse now owned by Oliver Shank,

The last several generations of Byers have been noted for their skill as apiarists.

A little farther south were Koch farms. Their descendents drifted away from the Mennonite church and very few are found locally.

The Ramers were mentioned, but I should explain that there were many Ramer farms around North Markham or, as it came to be known, Mount Joy. Among this family have been threshers and mechanics. Daniel was a common name among them, so at one time there was "Farmer" Dan, "Thresher" Dan, "Singer" Dan, and "Honey" Dan.

This custom of attaching a prefix to a Christian name was common among all the Pennsylvania Dutch. South of Stouffville, lived "Swamp" Jake Hoover. There was "Stump" Chris and "Splitter" Chris Hoover, "Bush" Sam and "Yankee" Sam Hoover. Three Abraham Burkholders were distinguished as "Slim" Abe, "Fat" Abe and "Little" Abe. The last one was my grandfather.

The Tunkers

I mentioned the Byers as having belonged to the Tunker or Brethren in Christ church. This fellowship grew side-by-side with the Mennonite community. They were situated more in the western part of Markham Township and eastern Vaughan Township. In heritage and practice they were similar to the Mennonites.

There has been intermarriage between these groups. The two denominations developed and made transition to new ways at about the same pace. Their family names include: Winger, Heise, Cober, Boyer, Steckly, Baker, Doner, Sherk, Sider, and others. Their greatest concentration has always been around Gormley.

Meeting houses and Meetings

The Mennonites in this district rotated their Sunday services between the various

meetinghouses. There was the Schmitt church in Vaughan. This church was built in 1824.

In the meeting calendar of the 1850s Huber and Stecklin are listed as appointments. These must have been in individual homes & were discontinued when the Almira meetinghouse was built in 1860 on the fifth concession of Markham. The land was donated by Adam Wideman. This building is still used by the Wissler branch of the Mennonite church.

Cedar Grove Church

The original building on this site (Cedar Grove) was erected by Samuel Reesor, a son of Peter and Esther Eby. He lived just down the hill on the mill road and took over the mills from his father.

1824 is the earliest marked grave in the cemetery, which has been used by people of other faiths in the community.

The original meeting house stood fifty feet east of this location with the gable running east and west. It was a white frame building, the vertical joints of the wide pine boards were covered by nicely shaped batten strips. There were three large windows on each side, made up of small panes in the old style. A long "stoop" extended across the east end of the building facing the road.

There were two doors from the stoop; one entered the main room, facing a centre aisle that led to the raised pulpit at the west end of the church. The other outside door entered a small anteroom, separated from the meeting room by an eight-foot-high wooden partition.

This partition was built around a large box stove which extended through it with the fuel door in the anteroom and the stove pipe at the other end, going up and then running the full length of the building to the chimney. Needless to say, this heating plan was less than adequate, blistering hot

by the stove and nearly freezing at the far end of the building.

In the anteroom was a large wood-box, with a hinged lid. The warmth of the stove made it an ideal place to care for a baby. This was the "Mothers' room." Attached to two walls of the anteroom were low benches. I remember this as my first Sunday School classroom.

The pulpit was raised three steps above the main floor and was flanked on both sides by several rows of cross benches in that end of the building. These, together with the benches facing the pulpit, gave seating to about one hundred and twenty. These benches had only one board for a back rest; this was nearly a foot above the seat and small children, myself included, often fell out the back. Pulpit, benches, partition and flooring, were all of wide pine boards. The whole structure gave an impression of functional simplicity.

When the building was moved and re-modelled in 1950, it was found that the sills had been laid across large pine stumps. These had carried it for nearly ninety years.

Samuel Reesor, Peter's son, had built the original meeting house at his own expense and donated it and the land to the "Society of Mennonites." It served as a shelter for funerals, as the adjoining cemetery was used by community families as well as by the Reesors and local Mennonites.

Cedar Grove was included in the early Calendars of Appointments, as one of the meeting houses among which services alternated. Weekly Sunday morning services were held here in the 1880s. One of the earliest Summer Bible Schools in the province was held here in 1934.

Ministers who served this congregation specifically after the rotating type of services were discontinued, were: Lewis Burkholder until 1939, A. Lorne Burkholder,

1940 to 1957, George Elsasser 1957 to 1960, Lawrence Martin 1960 to 1963, and Glen Brubacher since 1964. The membership has never been large, averaging around forty.

A rather notable incident took place in 1913. Samuel G. Reesor, a deacon, was conducting the opening of the service, with my father in the pulpit beside him. After Scripture reading, they all knelt, and during the prayer Brother Reesor paused and said, "Lord, you know how weak we are." There was another pause and he collapsed on the floor. He was lifted to a bench but had already expired.

The congregation at Cedar Grove is in the process of acquiring land to the west of our existing property for additional property expansion and perhaps a parsonage.

Rissers Church

Rissers church was built in 1857 on the farm owned by John Eby Reesor, another son of Peter. He was a minister, having been ordained in 1836. The earliest services in this part of the settlement were held in his home or in a small schoolhouse just south of the present church.

John's son, Christian, succeeded him as minister and later became the bishop. After the division of 1889 this meeting-house was used exclusively by the Wissler branch of the church.

It, too, was remodelled in 1950. At the present time the Steeles Avenue congregation of the Ontario Conference shares its use with the Wissler Mennonites.

Altona Meeting House

Another meeting house was at Altona in Pickering Township. One Christian Stouffer gave the property for a church building which was erected in 1852. There had been a school on this site previously and a grave in the adjoining cemetery is dated 1835. It would seem this burial had been made in the school yard.

This building is still used every three weeks by the Wissler church.

Wideman Meeting House

The first Wideman meeting house was built about 1817. It has been remodelled and enlarged several times, the present building having been constructed in 1928.

Preacher Henry Wideman was the first Mennonite minister in this community in 1803. Martin Hoover came in 1804 and settled nearby.

Bishop Abraham Grove came from Pennsylvania in 1808, having been ordained there, for his new home in Canada.

After the death of Henry Wideman, by a falling tree in 1810, Martin Hoover and Abraham Grove were ministers in Markham, Daniel Kreider in Pickering, and Chris. Troyer in Vaughan. Widemans and Hoovers have been ministers and deacons at this congregation; Groves and Barkeys have also served. The Wideman congregation has always been the largest in the Markham area.

It will be noted that most of these buildings were erected after 1850. Prior to that time, Widemans and Schmitt were the only meeting houses and other appointments were likely held in the homes.

Conference rotated between the Waterloo district, Markham and the Niagara district. There was a bishop chosen for each of these districts, preaching was in German, and there were no regular meetings, besides Sunday morning, the one local exception being a Christmas Day meeting at Peter Reesor's home when the group sometimes stayed for dinner. Peter's birthday was on December 25th.

Political influences

The rebellion of 1837 had its effect on the Mennonites of York County. Feelings ran strong among the rural people and although they traditionally kept aloof from politics their sympathies must have been divided.

A Philip Wideman was arrested after the rebellion was crushed at the Battle of Montgomery's Tavern. It was at this time that Martin Hoover and his family moved to Ohio and later to Indiana, and Daniel Kreiders moved to Ohio. Thus the community lost two very able ministers.

Mennonites generally leaned toward the Liberals. Some families who left the Mennonite faith sided with the Tories. Of course there were exceptions to this. Senator David Reesor was a Methodist and a Liberal and on election day he was supported by twenty-two Ramers "en masse" at one of the polls in North Markham.

Schism

In the late 1840s the schism led by Daniel Hoch of Jordan, came to a head and resulted in divisions in each of the Conference districts. Abraham Ramer began to preach in the Markham area, as did John Steckley and Joseph Ramer, although none of these men were ordained in the old church.

Christian Troyer of Vaughan joined with Hoch in the early fifties. John Lapp of Clarence, New York, ordained a Jacob Burkholder of Whitchurch Township as a minister in 1852. Later, when Burkholder returned to the "continuing" church, he was allowed to continue preaching, and was reported to be one of the first to use the English language.

These men and their sympathizers of whom there were quite a few, supported Daniel Hoch and John Oberholtzer of Pennsylvania. They favoured a more vital Christian experience and pursued policies which were adopted later by the remaining church.

The followers of Hoch and Oberholtzer later became the General Conference of Mennonites. These early local dissenters seem to have continued, loosely organized, until the early '70s when they identified with the group that became known as the "Mennonite Brethren in Christ." Christian Troyer was one of the four ministers who

were the original ordained body of the New Mennonites, as the M.B.C. were first known. Joseph Ramer continued as one of their preachers at Markham.

This denomination has been very active in York County, and has grown numerically, surpassing the Old Mennonite church. They have congregations at Gormley, Stouffville, Dickson's Hill, Mount Joy and Altona, as well as several churches in Toronto.

Some of their families are of Pennsylvania Dutch origin, but a larger proportion of their membership are not of German ethnic background. I quote from A Brief History of Mennonites in Ontario by L. J. Burkholder: "So it was that in 1874 the most aggressive element of the church was removed, and became the M.B.C. This schism taught the church that more active interest must be taken in the gathering of the young into the fold.

"Some of the methods of the M.B.C. group in a modified form, would have been acceptable to a large section of the church, but there were others of a more conservative type who opposed any measure or method to which they had not been accustomed. This conservative group was strongest in Woolwich Township in Waterloo County, but had sympathizers in the other districts also."

Attitudes toward Sunday School and English preaching were two of the questions on which there was strong disagreement. So in the summer of 1889 another division took place in the local Mennonite community.

Christian Reesor who was the bishop in York County at this time, led the conservative group, who soon affiliated with the Wissler Mennonites of the United States.

There were some very strong feelings on both sides and if each had shown more patience and charity, this split need not have taken place.

The division sometimes went through a family circle. The story is told of a brother Grove, who with his wife was undeci-

ded as to which side they should support, so when meetings were announced by both groups they set out the first Sunday morning still undecided, and when they came to the end of their lane, they just left it up to the horse to turn whichever way it chose. Doubtless many decisions were made with more conviction than was this one.

Locally, the denominational factions took on family names. The Mennonite Brethren in Christ were often referred to as "the Ramerleute", the 'old' Mennonites as the "Hooverleute", and the Wissler Mennonites as the "Reesorleute."

Christian Reesor continued a bishop in the later group until his death in 1915.

Levi Grove was ordained bishop in 1927. Abraham Smith succeeded him and still serves this group, which now numbers about 30.

Samuel Wideman was called as bishop of the Ontario Conference Mennonites in 1885, and served until 1912. Bishops from Waterloo County supplied until 1954 when Emerson McDowell was ordained as bishop or overseer.

Cooperation among groups

During the past fifty years there has been a greater working together and spirit of cooperation among all these groups, especially the last two mentioned. Relief work following both world wars and aid to the Russian Mennonite immigrants of the '20s were efforts on which there was full cooperation.

In 1965 a large proportion of the Markham Wissler group united with the Ontario Conference Mennonites and formed the Steeles Avenue congregation. They worship regularly in Rissers Church.

Mission Outreach

During the early 1900s a Mennonite Mission was established in Toronto. Sam Honderick of Indiana was the first Superintendent. After several locations, a church was built in 1910 at 2174 Danforth

Avenue. The Markham churches supported this work with personnel and funds, as well as by their prayerful interest.

The William Wright family from Toronto and their son-in-law, Floyd Schmucker, moved out from the city church during the '30s, and began holding Sunday School in their home at Hagerman. L. J. Burkholder along with others, gave strong encouragement to this work and Floyd Schmucker was ordained to the ministry in 193u and faithfully served this growing congregation until they were transferred to Monetville several years ago.

Emerson McDowell is presently minister at Hagerman.

Other churches have come into being in East Toronto, sponsored by the Ontario Mission Board, but having their beginnings in the labours of Christian families of the Danforth church, through Sunday Schools in their homes and Summer Bible Schools in these new communities.

The "country churches" of the Markham district have assisted their "city brethren" in many ways, although there now seems to be a trend to more independent congregational life, in both city and country churches.

In 1917 a "York County Mission Meeting" was held to stimulate interest in foreign missions. This has continued as a twice-yearly convention, being held on Good Friday and Thanksgiving days.

Several local young people have gone to South America and Africa and have been supported by these churches. Mary Fretz Snyder served many years in Argentina and Puerto Rico. Esther Reesor was in Brazil for a number of years. Dr. Joseph Burkholder is presently in Ethiopia and Merlin Grove served in Somalia until he met a martyr's death in 1962 at the hands of a Moslem fanatic.

Other activities

Bible Study Conferences have been held annually since about 1920. Singing schools have been held at different times through the years when there was someone qualified to give this leadership.

German classes were held in the early years and there was also German singing school.

Retrospect

In looking back we may say that tradition played a large part in holding the Mennonite church community together. Today there is more emphasis on individual experience and corporate commitment to the Christian ethic.

It is a marvellous fact that the Mennonite church survived at all in York County. It was an isolated community, torn by internal schisms, weakened by the loss of many of its people to other denominations, and still it has survived, contributing much to the church of Jesus Christ and, I feel, still holds within it a great potential for good. There have been many mistakes and failures in the past, but also successes and victories.

May we pray God, together, to use each of us in our communities to build His church here on earth.

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