



Mennongespräch

Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario

September 1986

Vol. 4 No. 2

The Lost Tribes of the Niagara Plain Folk

by Harold Nigh

[We are pleased to present this slightly modified article, initially presented to the May 10, 1986 meeting of the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario—ed.]

Foreword

The 1841 census shows that there were hundreds of Mennonites, Quakers and Tunkers then in the Niagara peninsula, with wide geographical distribution. Today there are only two congregations of Swiss Mennonite origin and one Quaker church in the area. The Tunkers, now Brethren in Christ, have only one small congregation in the area near Lake Ontario, where they first settled.

The Niagara Peninsula has the earliest settlements of Mennonites, Tunkers, and perhaps of Quakers, in Canada. Only here were these three groups of Plain People found together. They were diverse in culture, language and in some religious beliefs, but had many of the latter in common.

It was a strong movement, now largely lost. Finding the lost is an evangelical task, and is a neglected but important part of Canadian history. This paper takes a small step in that direction.

In addition to the histories of this movement already written, much credit goes to Reg and Kathy Good for generating interest in Mennonite and Tunker history when they visited the peninsula in 1984 with MennoVan. Reg also uncovered some new information.

Settlement

The Quakers were probably the first of the Plain Folk to settle in the Niagara Peninsula. A.G. Dorland says that when the Pelham Monthly Meeting (which included Black Creek) organized in 1799 there was already a meeting house which had been in use for up to fifteen years. John Hunt, visiting Pelham in 1800 thought this building made "of flattened logs" was "small and crowded."¹

There was another early building in Black Creek, on an old road not now in existence. It was situated on what is now the south side of Gilmore Road, halfway between the Point Abino road and Bugar Road. Howard Fretz,



Harold Nigh

whose farm is adjacent, reports this building is said to have been the oldest Quaker church in Canada. Quakers thus must have arrived in the Peninsula before 1785.

Among the early Quaker pioneers was Asa Schooley. There is a memorandum to the Commanding Officer of the Niagara Garrison from Hartwick, Sussex County, New Jersey, dated April 20, 1788. It certifies "on behalf of Asa Schooley, the bearer [sic], that he is an orderly and peaceable man, and is a member of the Society of The People called 'Quakers.'" The memorandum was signed by eleven men, including seven Wilsons, two Lundys, a Widdifield and a Willette.²

Both Schooley and Samuel Wilson appear as signatories in 1793 of the "Memorial of the Inhabitants at Sugar Loaf."³ Asa Schooley took up land on what is presently the Cherry Hill golf course near Ridgeway. Another early meeting house had been built here, facing the Garrison Road.

The Mennonites and Tunkers came to the Niagara Peninsula first in 1786. L.J. Burkholder wrote "The grant of land made to Jacob Seivts in 1797 shows that he came in 1788. This is the earliest known record of a Mennonite family coming to Upper Canada."⁴

An elaboration/correction of this comes from the late Leslie R. Gray, a past President of the Ontario Historical Society. He wrote that "a family Bible of a daughter of Christian Zavitz says that Christian came to Canada in 1786, built the Sugarloaf Mill, then returned

to Pennsylvania, got married, then persuaded most of the family to settle in Canada. They came in the spring of 1788. Their names were on the 1788 (Pa.) tax list, then crossed out. I have seen the original."⁵

A Zavitz family history suggests that this family was originally Swiss Brethren that migrated to the Palatinate, from which some of the family came to America. George and Barbara Zavitz came to Bucks County in Pennsylvania. Their son, David, had three sons (Henry, Christian and Jacob) who came to Canada in 1788.⁶ The Zavitz family had been millers for generations, but it was natural that Christian would build a mill at Sugarloaf.

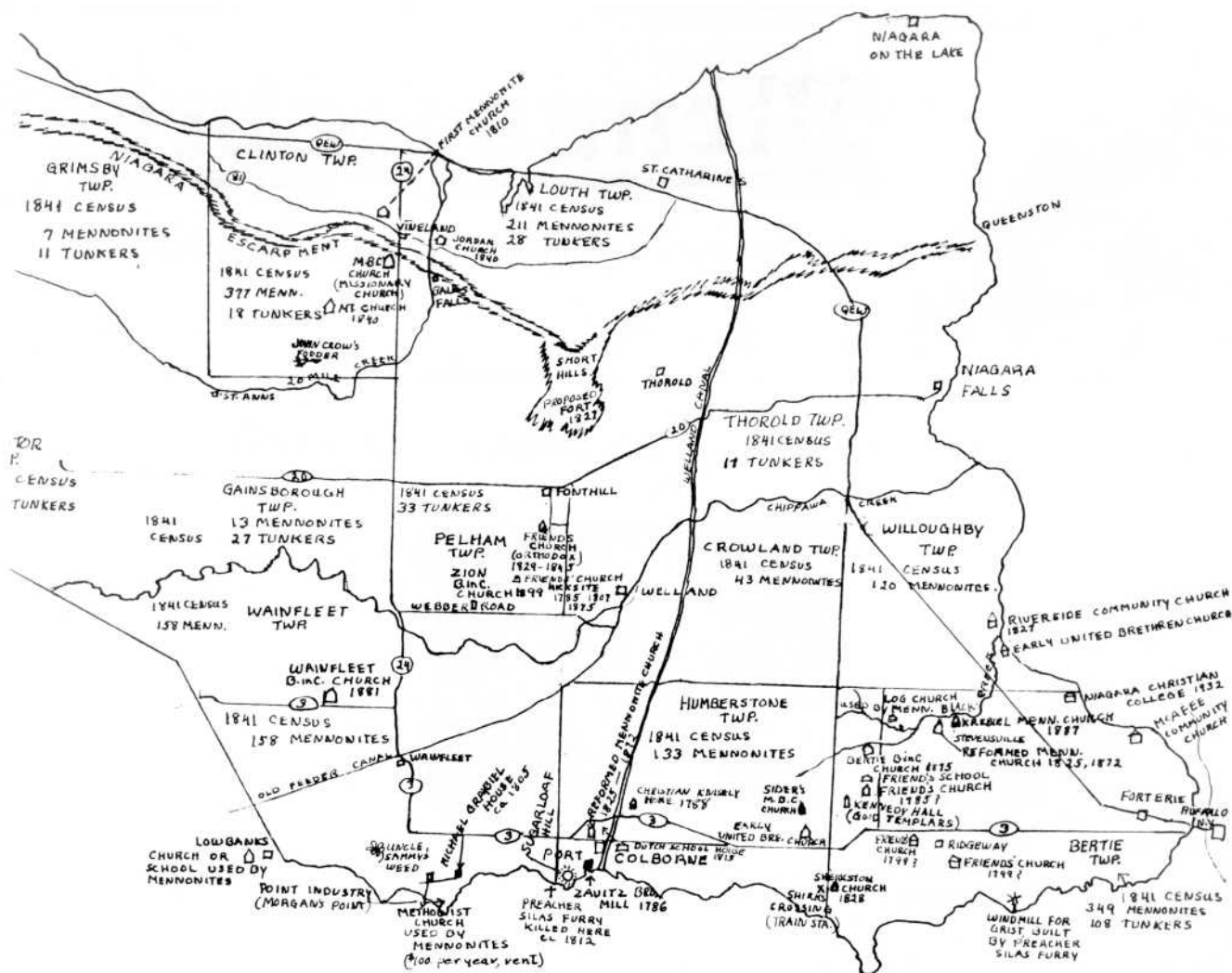
Christian lived at Sugarloaf for many years. He went later to Elgin County with his family. In that area they were known as Quakers. It is not certain whether Christian was Mennonite while at Sugarloaf, but it is likely. He lived in a predominantly Mennonite settlement at Sugarloaf.

Little is known of the middle brother, Henry Zavitz. But there is no question about the religious identification of the youngest brother, Jacob. His wife, Catherine Learn, is listed in the 1851 census as a Mennonist. Their oldest son, George, was first on L.J. Burkholder's lists of Mennonite ministers in Welland County.⁷ However, George's brother, Jacob Zavitz III, married Elizabeth Pound, a Quaker. They moved to Middlesex County and became part of the early Quaker settlement there.

There was another settlement of Mennonite families about three miles northwest of Sugarloaf Hill. This one was established between 1788 and 1790, and included the families of Christian Stoner, Christian Knisely and Abraham Neff. In 1817 Stoner wrote (original spelling retained):

1817 Novbr 6 To all whom coserned
This is to certfy that Christian Stoner,
Christian Knisly and Abraham Neff setlet
in the setlement of shugarloaf. I Cristian
Stoner was in this Cuntry in the year
1788 when Col hunter comanded at
Niagara fort and he gave mee leave to
setel in this cuntry and then the folowing

(Continued on page 14)



This map, covering what is now the area of Regional Niagara, is not exhaustive. It gives the location of all the Plain Folk meeting houses, and a few other related ones, in the first century of their settlement in Niagara. There were Mennonites west of Lowbanks, but not enough is known of them to include. There are two references on the map to agricultural innovations. John Crow's fodder was twigs and leaves of trees which kept his cows healthy throughout the winter before he could grow enough hay (a practice used by the Romans 2000 years ago). Uncle Sammy's weed as alfalfa, introduced to the Lake Erie region sometime in the 19th century by Samuel Sherck.

summer 1789 I came in the second time when Col hars comanded and he gave mee leave to make improvement and was sent to Esq warn he was then athorised to let people settle there then he gave me leave to make an improvement and he promised to save hit one year for mee then in the year 1790 I moved my famely in and knisly and Neff moved in with mee and they was alowd to settle and to be careful to leave on another room.

I can certyfy that knisly was very sickly when we went for our tickets and he went sometime after to the genrl surveyor smith and he told me he would make it right and there was a ticket gave out before the ofice was moved to York so much frome your frind and well wisher
Christian Stoner⁸

Another early document from this settlement reads:

We the undersigned Inhabitants of the Township of Humberstone and Nigh neighbours to Christian Knisely of said

Township do hereby Certify that the said Christian Knisely has a barn and well and 12 Acres improved on the North End of Lot No. 30 in the Third Concession of Humberstone and that no other person is living or has improved on that half Lot.

Witness our hands at Humberstone Oct 21st 1817.

Cristian Stoner
Abraham Neff

Jacob Neff
Abraham Augustine
Casper Kinsy
Levi Doan
----- Zimmerman
Christian Zavitz
Abraham Hershey
Emanuel Winter
David Neff
Daniel -----
Peter Sherck⁹

In her genealogy of the Zavitz family, Helen Zavitz Clark says "Christian Stoner located

in Humberstone Township where a colony from Bucks County was beginning to be established . . . Mr. Stoner took no part in public affairs, but was a firm adherent of the Mennonite Church."¹⁰

(Continued on page 15)

Mennogespräch is published semi-annually by the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario, Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3G6.

Editor: Sam Steiner

Editorial Committee: Herb Enns
Margaret Good
Reg Good

Mennogespräch is received by all members of the Society. See membership form for current rates. All correspondence should be directed to the editor.

Assistance received from the Ontario Ministry of Culture & Citizenship is gratefully acknowledged.

ISSN 0824-5673

(Continued from page 14)

That Christian Knisely was Mennonite is attested to by a Council Meeting note in Jacob Moyer's bible: "1819 on January 23rd meeting was held at Sugar Loaf at Christian Kneislis, text John 14:23."¹¹ This entry both confirms the existence of a Mennonite organization at Sugarloaf, and that Knisely was one of its leading members. It also establishes a connection between The Twenty Mennonites and those at Sugarloaf.

Florence Neff Young says Christian Knisely had married Anna Stoner, a sister of Christian Stoner. Christian Stoner had married Elizabeth Neff, a sister of Abraham Neff. The Stoner bible is in the Lundy's Lane Museum. All three families were Mennonites, and most of the next generation was Mennonite. In the third generation they became Methodists, etc.¹²

Reformed Mennonite Church records indicate that Christian Stoner's sons, John and Abram were their first ministers, ordained before 1841. Florence Neff Young asserts they were ordained in 1825, the year the first Mennonite church was built in Humberstone.

Thus we have a continuous Mennonite community in Welland County, Ontario as early as 1786 and no later than 1788. That Mennonite community finished a chapter of its history with the sale of the Sherkston church in 1931 to the Brethren in Christ. The Reformed Mennonites continue as a Stevensville-Port Colborne congregation at their Stevensville meetinghouse.

There is some question about the authenticity of the claim of Mennonite affiliation concerning the 1786 party that came to The Twenty along Lake Ontario. The four families that comprised this party were those of Jacob Culp, Tilman Culp, Staats Overholt and Frederick Haun. They are considered to have been Mennonites.¹³

However Tilman Culp and both John and Jacob Culp (likely the sons of pioneer Jacob Culp) are listed as Tunkers in the 1818 Lincoln Militia Return.¹⁴ Also listed as Tunker is Conrad Tufford (Dofert) who also came in 1786. According to Gary Culp, Conrad Dofert in 1776 was confirmed at the age of 16 in the German Evangelical Lutheran Church of Easton, Pennsylvania.¹⁵ Were the two Culp families and Conrad Tufford's family Tunker when they came in 1786? It is likely that they were. It is not likely that they "were drawn into the . . . Tunkers . . . in that region," as John Ruth suggests.¹⁶ The Tunker center was in Pelham, miles beyond the escarpment. Nonetheless, there is not conclusive evidence that they did not become Tunker after their arrival. The 1841 census lists 18 Tunkers in Clinton Township and 28 in neighboring Louth, a combined total greater than in Pelham (33), the supposed Tunker center.

If the 1786 Culp's were not Mennonite when they came, then what of the Haun and Overholt families? Gary Culp indicates information on Frederick Haun is very scanty, and that it is very possible he died shortly after his arrival.¹⁷ John Ruth writes that "in their new settlement the Overholt family became the nucleus of a Baptist fellowship" and "as

late as the war of 1812 the Baptist congregation noted that Staats and Susanna Overholt could not walk with us because we bore arms."¹⁸ This suggests that although the Overholts soon became Baptists (who were close by) they still had pacifist leanings 26 years after their arrival. There is no reason, then, to doubt that the Overholts were Mennonites when they arrived. However, none of the 1786 immigrants to The Twenty effected a Mennonite organization, as the early settlers in Sugarloaf evidently did.



The Sherkston church, built in 1917 and sold to the Brethren in Christ in 1931.

(CGCA photo collection)

Development

The Welland County Mennonites suffered a division quite early. In 1825 John Herr organized the Reformed Mennonite church, first in Humberstone and then in Stevensville, taking the conservative and apolitical Mennonites into that body. Since both the parent body and the Reformed church were known as Mennonites in 1825, it is difficult to trace the non-Reformed organization of that area.

The 1841 census listed a total of 291 Mennonites in Humberstone and Wainfleet (formerly Sugarloaf), almost as numerous as the 377 Clinton Mennonites or those in Bertie (349). Even if it is assumed half of these were Reformed Mennonites, we remain with a substantial number of (Old) Mennonites even after the division. Who were these Mennonites and who were their leaders?

We know from various sources that Augustine, Bearss, Zimmerman, Hershey and Sherk were Mennonite names. Florence Neff Young adds the names Barrech, Minor, Graybiel, Rathfon and perhaps Morgan.

It seems the Neff-Knisely-Stoner group was very conservative, and kept away from local politics. But Michael Graybiel, who immigrated in 1797, married Mary Hershey and built the large stone house now known as Rathfon Inn (on Lake Erie). Graybiel acted as squire (tax collector) for John Graves Simcoe (1752-1806) first Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada. Simcoe visited the Graybiel farm personally to pick up the tax money. James Bruce, Earl of Elgin, who was Governor-General of the United Canada from 1846-1854, was a guest at the Graybiel home when he visited the area to "investigate dissension concerning the waterways."¹⁹ The 1875 biography of W.H. Merritt, one of the

prime movers in building the Welland Canal, indicates Merritt "met Mr. Grabel, who with Mr. Hoover was the leader of the Mennonites in this area, and a strong supporter of Mr. Merritt."²⁰

Some interesting information exists on the Minor family. Dr. Harold Miner provides various versions of how a Henry Minor of Highbanks went through the ice on the Grand River with his team and sleigh. In the mishap he lost his wife, Mary Neff, and nine-month-old child by drowning. Henry Minor himself

was rescued by his Labrador dog. He was married twice after that to two Bearss sisters, and fathered a total of 21 children. The note relevant to our study is that when Henry Minor died, "he had the biggest Mennonite funeral ever seen in that area."²¹

Where did these Mennonites worship? Paul C. Fehrman, the present Reformed Mennonite bishop of the Stevensville-Port Colborne area, recalls hearing about overflow church services at Lowbanks (a church or school?) and at the Morgan's Point church. There is one tradition that the Mennonites and the Methodists built the first frame church jointly on the location of the present Morgan's Point United Church.²² An Ellsworth family tradition says that the Mennonites rented it from the Methodists for \$100 a year.²³ It's also possible that the "Dutch" school of 1815 now at the Port Colborne museum was also used for worship. But then why would Jacob Moyer have held the 1819 council meeting at Christian Knisely's rather than at the school?²⁴

Even more puzzling is trying to identify the ministers of these Sugarloaf Mennonites. Early Reformed Mennonite ministers after John and Abram Stoner included George Augustine (1861), Wilson Near (1871), Jonathan Kinsey, Jonas Anthes (1891) and Wilmer Steele (1899).²⁵ I have not found one solid name of an (Old) Mennonite preacher in this area. The only clue is a reference to a John Rathfon, Jr., who emigrated to Canada in 1892. He married a Priscilla Augustine, took over the big Graybiel stone house and "was a farmer and Mennonite minister."²⁶ As slight as this information is, that of the preceding century is even slighter. We don't know as yet who the (Old) Mennonite ministers were, if there were any for this area.

(continued on page 16)

(Continued from page 15)

Before we leave the Sugarloaf area, there are two more mysteries to be posed. Why were there absolutely no Tunkers in either Wainfleet or Humberstone Townships in 1841? There is a story that suggests early in the 19th century an 18 year old girl was drowned in a winter baptism in Lake Erie, and that that incident put an end to such baptisms.²⁷ It's pure conjecture that this was a Tunker baptism, but it is possible, and it could have been related to the disappearance of the Tunkers in that area.

The other mystery is the identification of Preacher Silas Furry. He was killed by Indians a mile or two west of Sugarloaf Hill sometime after 1812. Was he a Quaker as reported? I've not been able to confirm this from other than a single article on him.²⁸

No mention of Furry is made in Dorland's history of the Quakers, or in early church records at the (Orthodox) Friends church in Pelham. His prodigious strength and his engineering feat of building a windmill large enough to grind grain at "Windmill Point" are of the stuff that legends are made of. But the legend is an uncertain, if a romantic, one.

The accepted Brethren in Christ history is that John Winger and Jacob Sider came to Pelham and settled in the Short Hills in 1788. Shortly after their arrival Bishop Jacob Engle came from Pennsylvania and ordained John Winger as bishop of the Tunkers, really called River Brethren. We now know from a Moote family history that a Johan Groh came with Winger and Sider. He anglicized his name to John Crow and also settled in Pelham.²⁹ Two Damude brothers also arrived with this party. In 1799 Winger and Sider moved to Bertie Township.

Of course there is the possibility that the Culps and Conrad Tufford, who came in 1786, were also Tunkers, as discussed earlier. If we add the Tunkers in the 1841 census from Clinton, Gainsborough, Louth, Grimsby and Thorold Townships to the Pelham Township number, we have a total of 134, more than the 108 of Bertie Township. Thus it is evident there was a thriving Tunker movement in Pelham and adjacent areas following John Winger's departure.

A fascinating reference to Tunker appearance and preaching in Pelham Township appears in a September 14, 1825 letter from James Linsey to Lieut. Governor Maitland, complaining about the Tunkers. Linsey was a local school teacher who went to hear a visiting Tunker preacher from the United States, Jason Shephard. Linsey wrote:

He was speaking against all Christian sectarians as he termed it. His beard was long, down to his breast and his hare [sic] over his shoulders. I sure perceived that he did not hold with the doctrines of the scripture, or that he was bent on despection [sic] . . . He first asserted that he would preach Jesus Christ and himself our humble servant for Christ's sake and that his commission to preach was from his father. He next turned his ridicule against all civil authorities throught [sic] Christendom and



John and Elizabeth Moote were Tunkers in in Pelham. She was the daughter of John Crow (Groh) who came with John Winger in 1788. This photo, ca. 1860 shows buttons and frills not characteristic of Bertie Tunkers. (Photo courtesy of Harold Nigh)

was very much displeased with the idea of justice in the civil courts, and as much as said all justice was done away in Christ, and nothing but mercy was acceptable to God and that we not only ought to forgive them, but clear them from all punishment and brought forward a similer [sic] in this way saying: 'if I murder my fellow creature you would disobey the laws of Christ if you put me to death . . . ' I call upon my superiors to inform me whether it is lawful, whether it is safe, whether it is politik, whether it is consistent with a Christian government to let such dangerous doctrines be calmly introduced with[out] interruption . . ."³⁰

Linsey then proceeded to give this choice description of Tunkers: "They wear beards like the barbarious robbers on the deserts of Arabia and I fear the heart is as near in resemblance to the Arabian as the outside."

These Pelham Tunkers in 1825 were not exactly "the quiet in the land," if Shephard's sermon as understood by Linsey is any indication of their character. There was a stridency against other Christian "sectarians" and against civil authorities for using capital punishment. This was not in character with the milder Winger and Sider reputations. One wonders if this spirit was already present in 1799 in Pelham, and was a factor in John Winger's departure. Or might they have learned some agitation against authorities from the Quakers? We know that William Lyon McKenzie visited "my old friend Mr. William Wilson" in Black Creek in 1833, just four years before the rebellion.³¹ Wilson, a Quaker schoolteacher, was obviously no shrinking Dutchman.

John Bossert reports a family tradition that there was trouble among the Tunkers in Pelham Township before John Winger left, and that it may have been over the claim to be Loyalists. Winger and Sider didn't want to be known as Loyalists because of the military overtones to the name, but some other local Tunkers pressed for that distinction, with its accompanying advantages.³²

John Winger's daughter, Anna, married Henry Damude in Pelham. Within three

generations her descendant, A.B. Damude, became Reeve of Fonthill and then M.P. for Welland County for two terms, with the highest majority ever polled there.³³ In Bertie Township the Brethren in Christ have generally kept clear of political involvement (until recently when some members campaigned for the present incumbent of the Erie riding). Is it coincidental or causative that in Pelham the Tunkers lost their separateness and their identity relatively early, while the Bertie Tunkers have retained both until recently?

Whatever the reasons for Tunker decline in Pelham in the 19th century, it did not come early. The 1851 census gives Tunker names of Howell, Brown, Rinker, Patterson, Wiggins, Hendershot and Pattison (a three year old child was named Wealthy Pattison). The 1861 census adds Solie, Laws, Simpson, Namp, Sure, Mitchell and Martin. But by the time of the 1871 census, there was only one Tunker listed in Pelham — Susan Mitchell, aged 73. The Rinkers were listed as Mennonites. John Bossert says that most of the Pelham Tunkers became Baptists. Elinor Mawson says that most of the Clinton Tunkers became Disciples (Church of Christ).

The Pelham Township Tunkers weren't obliterated however. Around 1900 evangelists came to the area with the new Brethren in Christ Wesleyan holiness preaching. A local resident, Seth Willford, testified to a knowledge of salvation because, "When he got converted the desire to stick his pig with the fork was gone." A Sunday school was started in U.S.S. #6, bush meetings were held at the corner of Webber and Balfour Roads, and a church was built in 1899. In 1907 a revival meeting was held lasting six weeks, followed a little later by baptismal services. It was December 24th, and the temperature was 8° below zero F. Ben Pattison, who was a thrasher, brought his traction engine, and used the steam to heat up a tank of water for the ceremony by tine immersion. The 1899 church, called Zion church at the corner of Webber and Church Roads, later was moved

to become the Boyle Brethren in Christ Church.³⁴

It's not within the scope of this paper to outline the history of the Mennonites of The Twenty. That has been done elsewhere. But it is noteworthy that the Mennonites survived and the Tunkers disappeared around Lake Ontario, whereas the reverse happened along Lake Erie. In each instance the more liberal movements lost their Mennonite or Tunker identity while the traditional or conservative groups remained. Thus in Bertie and Humberstone only the Reformed Mennonites bear the original name. This is better illustrated for the Tunkers by the Beverly members who became United Brethren. With the Quakers, however, the phenomenon was reversed. The tradition Hicksite Quakers disappeared completely in Black Creek and in this century in Pelham Township.

There had been two or three Quaker churches in the Ridgeway area. Two have been mentioned — one on Asa Schooley's farm, the other next to the school visited by William Lyon McKenzie in 1833. There was also a third in the heart of Ridgeway, across the road from the Friends' cemetery still located there. Indeed Ridgeway takes its name from the Ridgeway family which owned the land on which the village was later built. The Quakers also used the community Riverside church at Sherk Road and the Niagara Boulevard, known to Mennonites as the Miller church.³⁵

All of these Quaker churches were traditional Hicksite (and the object of some censure from Thomas Shillatow, a visiting evangelical Quaker) well suited for early pioneer days with their emphasis on silent worship and spontaneous exhortation. However they were unable to compete with the preaching of the Methodist circuit rider and the emotionalism of his camp meetings. In 1869, Black Creek Preparative Meeting was "laid down," and one of the oldest Protestant congregations in Upper Canada ended less than a century after it began. The Pelham Hicksites were active until around 1920, and the Orthodox (evangelical) Quakers still have a strong congregation.³⁶

Leadership, Language and Charisma

What role did leadership play in the decline, growth or stability of these early churches? For the early Black Creek Quakers, no leader emerges except the shadowy figure of Preacher Silas Furry. However, Pelham Quakers had an outstanding leader in William Wetherald, a noted educator and preacher and the father of poetess Ethelwyn Wetherald (1820-1899).³⁷ He was at the height of his powers when Black Creek Preparative Meeting was "laid down." His strong leadership must have contributed to the relative stability of Pelham Quakers, as lack of leadership contributed to Black Creek decline and demise.

Mennonite historians have noted that lack of leadership contributed to the decline of Black Creek Mennonites. Now that we're learning a little more of the Sugarloaf Mennonites, the same would seem to be true for them. As previously mentioned, I have found only one brief reference to a non-



The Riverside church, known to Mennonites as the Miller Church.

(CGCA photo collection)

Reformed Mennonite minister in Wainfleet, John Rathfon Jr. (1844-1933). Both leadership and meetinghouses are hard to find in Wainfleet. If there had been more Jacob Moyers on both sides of the peninsula, Mennonite history may have followed a different course.

On the other hand, George and John Zavitz and Jacob Miller seemed to have been quite strong Black Creek Mennonite leaders, but there was little communication between the Zavitzes and The Twenty or Waterloo leadership. Language may have been one barrier. John Zavitz, sometimes referred to as a bishop, preached in English (his wife could not understand German). Michael Sherk would get very angry when Waterloo preachers came to Black Creek and preached in German: "Why don't they realize that we're living in a country which uses English."³⁸ However, Jacob Miller's German bible is on display in the Willoughby museum, with the caption that its owner was a Mennonite circuit rider who used to go on horseback to Waterloo to preach there. So we have the curious anomaly of a Niagara Mennonite preacher going to Waterloo to preach, likely in German while Waterloo Mennonite preachers came to Niagara to preach — in a German unappreciated by the local congregation. It was hardly a state of affairs which would promote communication!

English speaking Quakers in Niagara without doubt influenced their Mennonite neighbours to the use of English, and thus to earlier acculturation and loss of identity. The conservative Brethren in Christ, however, used English from the beginning (1875) of the Bertie church and did not lose their identity. That was likely due to a continuity of fairly strong leadership. There has been a virtual dynasty of the Winger and Sider families in the bishop's office in Bertie. Coupled with the centralized authority inherent in that office, it has provided stability. The evangelical missionary activity of the United Brethren, for instance, among the Mennonites in the peninsula after 1860 didn't seem to touch the Brethren in Christ. They had Pietistic roots of their own. While they had some trouble absorbing Wesleyan holiness teaching around the turn of the century, they had already had a strong

revival movement around 1875. Asa Climenhaga wrote, "The largest revival the Bertie district ever had was in 1875. It started at Sherkston and spread throughout the whole district. No evangelist was engaged, and the membership continued to increase from the results of this revival for several years after. There were one hundred and three baptized in Lake Erie in one year."³⁹

Such spontaneous religious renewal, probably without equal in the annals of Niagara Plain Folk history, complicates historical analysis. There was a leaderless charisma at work which was not specifically Mennonite, Tunker, United Brethren or Methodist, but the Tunkers seemed to reap the harvest. The revival started at Sherkston, a Mennonite center miles away from the new Bertie Tunker church erected in that year. The revival ended by giving a powerful impetus to the growth of the first Tunker congregation to have a church building in Canada.



"Bishop" John Zavitz and his wife.

(CGCA photo collection)

Queries and Conclusions

A question to be posed, but impossible of definitive answer might be stated: How did the Brethren in Christ Pietistic teaching of the New Birth fit in with the Quaker insistence on the importance of "The Inner Light" and the Mennonite insistence on the work of the Holy Spirit both in inward renewal and in conduct of life? Was the triumph of "New Birth" teaching over "Inner Light" and "being guided by the Spirit" and indication of a greater appropriateness for its time, or was it due to other factors?

That leads to further queries about the influence of Plain Folk on each other. Why did the Tunkers first call themselves "The Society of Tunkers in Pelham," using the same term later in Black Creek. Obviously "Society" was borrowed from the Society of Friends and used by others for all dissenting groups, but it seems that only the Tunkers adopted the term for themselves. Did the use of the word "Society" for the Tunkers have anything to do with the strong tradition that Tunker bishop John Winger was the first minister outside the Church of England to be granted the right to perform marriages? The Quakers with their non-liturgical marriage had had that right from the very beginning.

(Continued on page 18)

(Continued from page 17)

Does the early Tunker emphasis on the "New Birth" have anything to do with the fact that the Pelham Friends' church is now the only Orthodox (evangelical) Friends church in Canada? Did the Quaker readiness to go into politics after 1833 when an affirmation, rather than oath, of allegiance was made legal have any influence on the Pelham Tunkers losing their anti-political stance? Was the Tunker insistence on baptism by immersion the reason the Pelham Tunkers mostly went to the Baptists and the Clinton Tunkers to the Disciples rather than to the Mennonites? Why was Tunker-Mennonite change of denomination mostly from Mennonite to Tunker in the peninsula and from Tunker to Mennonite in Waterloo County?

Since we're so late in getting into the history of the Plain Folk in the peninsula, we may never have enough evidence to answer these questions satisfactorily. However, the Mennonite and Tunkers, and Quakers to a certain extent, had many ideas in common which were new in Canada and important for the development of our character.

First, we agreed on the principle of self-determination in religion. We all rejected the idea that God's grace comes through liturgy, or that it is imposed on any individual or any territory. In two of our groups infant baptism was rejected; in the case of the Quakers baptism was only of the Spirit. All agreed baptism was only for the prepared soul. It was only a short step from personal freedom in religion to freedom of religion for others.

We also agreed that war was not a proper means to solving conflict. Commandeered Mennonite and Tunker horses may have strengthened British military power (as did food from local farms), but the idea of the renunciation of war was a much stronger force for peace than all our teams combined.⁴⁰ Peace movements everywhere in the world are following an idea totally new to Canada in 1800, an idea before its time — that an alternative to war must be found.

Third we agreed that Christian faith was a matter for the workplace. We didn't want to hold land in clergy reserves; we worked it. Our preachers all worked for a living, and were available to each congregation. One preacher, Peter Sherk, had the good sense not to preach again after he tried it once. Some never did well; others did very well indeed. They all shunned professionalism in religion, for very practical reasons, at least in part because of their concept of the church as a community of believers. The church in the workplace is a concept that we had originally, but now have all but lost. Other denominations, especially the Catholic Church, are picking up that idea. All churches must get into the workplace if they are not to be irrelevant to today's world.

An old public school history text says that the contribution of these early settlers to Canadian life can't be overestimated. Perhaps the Mennonite bicentennial year is a time to do some estimation, neither over nor under, of their work.

Notes

- 1 Arthur Garratt Dorland, *The Quakers in Canada, a history* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1968), p. 82.
- 2 Lloyd R. Schooley, *The Schooley family in America*.
- 3 See J.C. Fretz, *The early history of the Mennonites in Welland County, Ontario* (Reprint from *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, January, 1953).
- 4 L.J. Burkholder, *A brief history of the Mennonites in Ontario* (Markham: Mennonite Conference of Ontario, 1935), p. 31.
- 5 Leslie R. Gray to G.D. Zavitz, November 2, 1973. There were two bibles with similar inscriptions, both written by descendants of Christian Zavitz. One was with an Augustine family at Stromness or near there. The other was with a Sutherland family at Glencoe. This Christian Zavitz was a brother to the Jacob Sevitz mentioned by L.J. Burkholder. The Leslie R. Gray papers, which represent many years of research on the Zavitz family, are in the Weldon Library, University of Western Ontario, London.
- 6 Helen Annette Zavitz Clark, *Benjamin Zavitz and Esther Augustine, their ancestors and descendants* (1983).
- 7 Burkholder, p. 50.
- 8 The original is in the possession of Florence Neff Young at Port Colborne. A photocopy is at Conrad Grebel College.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Clark, *op. cit.*
- 11 "The Jacob Moyer bible: translation of its contents," *Mennogespräch* Vol. 3, No. 1 (March, 1985), p. 4.
- 12 Florence Neff Young lives in Port Colborne and is a direct descendant of Abraham Neff.
- 13 Gary M. Culp, "Dielman Kolb of Tunicum Township: the father of the first Mennonites in Canada," *Mennonite historians of Eastern Pennsylvania*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (September, 1984), p. 3-4.
- 14 J.A.C. Kennedy, ed., "Lincoln Militia return, 1818," *Families*, Vol. 10 (1971), p. 13-14. This was brought to my attention by Reg. Good.
- 15 Gary Culp in a November 22, 1985 letter to Muriel Tufford.
- 16 John L. Ruth, *Maintaining the right fellowship* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1984), p. 162.
- 17 Culp, "Dielman Kolb . . .," p. 4.
- 18 Ruth, *op. cit.*
- 19 Donna Guglielmin, "Pioneer home . . .," *Port Colborne news* (January 16, 1980).
- 20 J.P. Merritt, *Biography of the Hon. W.H. Merritt, M.P.* (St. Catharines: Leavenworth, 1875), p. 143. This

reference was supplied by Reg Good. Note the change in spelling from Graybiel to Grabel. A Wainfleet resident, Roy Grabel, says that this ancestor went to California in the gold rush of 1850 and was converted while there. Upon his return to Canada he was offended by the conduct of the Wainfleet Graybiels that he changed the spelling of his name to Grabel.

- 21 Dr. Harold Miner spent many years collecting bits of Sugarloaf history, but he died before the information was organized. We don't know where the collection is. This story is from a March 12, 1965 letter to Nina and Henry Hill, now in the possession of the author.
- 22 Mrs. Franck Canby in an article of Wainfleet Township, 1962.
- 23 The Ellsworth family has been Reformed Mennonite.
- 24 Florence Neff Young says that Christian Knisely's stone house had windows high up on the first floor. Perhaps it was built as a house church. Robert Gourlay's *statistical account of Upper Canada* says the only "church or place of worship" in Humberstone was Mennonite, as was the only preacher there. (London: Simpkin & Marshall, 1822), p. 456-457.
- 25 Supplied by the Reformed Mennonite bishop, Paul C. Fehrman.
- 26 Guglielmin, *op. cit.*
- 27 Told to Florence Neff Young by her grandfather, Elihu Neff.
- 28 Harold Melick, "Centennial year sketches," *Dunnville Chronicle* (Feb. 8, 1967).
- 29 Elinor Mawson, *A very singular Moote* (1979).
- 30 Linsey actually uses the term, "Dunker." There is the possibility that there was an enclave at Dunkers (German Baptists) who also wore long beards like the Tunkers.
- 31 Dorland, p. 162.
- 32 John Bossert is a Brethren in Christ lay preacher from Stevensville.
- 33 Fonthill Women's Institute, *History of the village of Fonthill* (Fonthill, 1944).
- 34 John Bossert, in a history of the Zion church.
- 35 Mrs. Ivan Sals, telephone conversation.
- 36 Dorland, p. 162.
- 37 Dorland, p. 187-189.
- 38 Sals. She is Sherk's granddaughter.
- 39 A.W. Climenhaga, *History of the Brethren in Christ Church* (Nappanee: E.V. Publishing, 1942), p. 201.
- 40 The Quakers refused to allow their teams to be used by the military.

Book note

Stephen Scott, *Why do they dress that way?* (Intercourse, Pa.: Good Books, 1986), 160 pp.

The book, to be published in November, fills a gap in popular understanding about Mennonites, Amish and related groups who wear distinctive "plain" clothes.

Although the orientation, as with other books by this publisher, is primarily toward the tourist market in Southwestern Pennsylvania, this book is a cut above some of the earlier titles in the series.

Religious reasons, historical development, and detail about individual items of plain garb are all discussed. Particularly interesting is the author's argument that Mennonites were distinctive in their dress at least as early as the 17th century. This is a departure from much modern Mennonite scholarship which assumes a distinctiveness from our neighbors came only later in the 19th century. Scott documents numerous sources in support of this position, and almost persuades me.

Material about Mennonites and Amish in Ontario is included in the book, and many of the generalizations about dress in Pennsylvania would apply here as well. Detailed charts include the Amish in the Milverton area and

the Old Order Mennonites of the Region of Waterloo.

In many ways this book supersedes Melvin Gingerich's *Mennonite attire through four centuries*. The illustrations, bibliography and style are first rate. Scott's work deserves wide circulation.

—Sam Steiner

Mennonite Genealogical Resources: the Grace Schmidt Room, Kitchener Public Library

by Susan Hoffman, Local History Librarian & Archivist

The Grace Schmidt Room officially opened to the public on October 14, 1984. The two major collections housed in the GSR belong to the Kitchener Public Library and the Waterloo Historical Society. The library has been collecting local documents for many years, as a result of the efforts of former chief librarians, Mabel Dunham and Dorothy Shoemaker. The Waterloo Historical Society, after its formation in 1912, has kept its archival documents in the library. A third collection kept in the GSR is the book collection belonging to the Waterloo-Wellington Branch of the Ontario Genealogical Society.

Grace Schmidt was a librarian at KPL for 35 years until she retired in 1980. She is a long-time member of the WHS and has been on the Publication Committee since 1960. She is also active as a volunteer for the Schneider Haus in Kitchener and as a member of the Waterloo Regional Heritage Foundation. The library was pleased to name the local history room after Grace.

Books and Periodicals

KPL has been collecting books about Mennonites and their faith for many years. Anyone involved with Mennonite genealogy should become familiar with basic books about Mennonites, especially in Waterloo County. A good genealogist must be aware of the history of his area of interest. This is particularly true with Mennonite genealogy.

Some standard titles available in the GSR are:

Burkholder, L.J. **Brief History of the Mennonites in Ontario.**

(Markham, 1935)

Epp, Frank H. **Mennonites in Canada.**

Vol. 1 — 1786-1920;
Vol. 2 — 1920-1940 (Toronto, 1974, 1982)

Reimer, Margaret Loewen. **One quilt, many pieces — a concise reference guide to Mennonite groups in Canada.**
(Waterloo 1984).

These books will help a genealogist sort out the different Mennonite congregations and the different migration patterns into Ontario and other parts of Canada.

The book collection also includes many genealogies. Ezra Eby's book **Biographical history of early settlers and their descendants in Waterloo Township** (1895, 96, reprint Kitchener 1971) is one of the most valuable sources for Waterloo County genealogy. However, individual families have compiled their family trees as well.

KPL has subscriptions to many periodicals which will be useful to a genealogist. Some titles in the collection are:

Mennogespräch (March 1983-)

Mennonite family history

(January 1982-)

Pennsylvania folklife (1969-)

Pennsylvania Mennonite heritage
(1985-)

The GSR collection contains many of the standard genealogical tools, such as the Waterloo County census for 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881 and 1891, early county directories, assessment records, newspaper and oral history tapes. Following are other possible sources of information for the genealogist:

Gore District Census and Assessment Records

These microfilms were purchased from the Ontario Archives and represent early census records between the years 1816 and 1850. Four Waterloo County townships are included on the films: Waterloo, Wilmot, Woolwich and North Dumfries. Not all years are available for each township.

These records include the time period when this area was part of the Gore District (1816-1842) before it became part of the Wellington District. They do, however, only list the head of the household, although some indication of the number of people in each household is often listed. Different census include a great deal of information about the farms, animals etc. that each family possessed.

Naturalizations Records

The GSR collection has two sources of information about naturalization records. The early records are contained in a transcription of the Upper Canada Naturalization Registers for the Wellington District 1843-1850. The transcription was prepared by Frances Hoffman, using records found in the Public Archives of Canada. The volume has been indexed, and each entry includes the person's name, his residence at the time, and the date of expiration of the seven year residence period.

The second source of information is a microfilm which includes cases heard between 1853 and 1872. There is an index at the beginning of the microfilm reel which has an alphabetical list of names and the folio numbers. In all, there are 339 cases of proceedings in which citizenship was granted.

Birth, Marriage and Death Records

One of the most challenging aspects about Mennonite genealogy is the lack of church records, especially in the first 75 years of Mennonite settlement in Ontario.

However, there are other sources of information about births, marriages and deaths that help fill in some gaps. For a number of years, we have been indexing the early German newspapers for birth, marriage and death notices. The earliest newspapers to be indexed are:

Canada Museum, 1835-1840

Deutsche Canadier, 1841; 1844-1862

Berliner Journal, 1860-1879

The announcements are translated into English and are kept in a rough alphabetical order. The translating work continues, and these indices have been well used since the project began. The early announcements are particularly important before 1869, when the Ontario government started to keep records.

Another source worth checking is the copy of the record book of the Rev. F. W. Bindemann. The original is kept by St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Kitchener.

Rev. Bindemann came to Canada from Pennsylvania in 1834 and began a ministry which continued until his death in 1865. His record book contains baptisms, confirmations, marriages and deaths. The marriage records are very valuable because Rev. Bindemann was known as the "marrying pastor" — he kept extremely busy marrying people. The marriage records have been translated into English, and are accessible through the groom's or bride's name. Although he was a Lutheran pastor, Rev. Bindemann's records show that he married a great number of people whose families were Mennonite.

Between the years of 1858 and 1869, clergy were required to report the marriages they performed once a year. The original reporting forms are at the Archives of Ontario, but there is a microfilm copy for Waterloo County in the GSR.

Unfortunately the forms were not filmed in chronological order. However the GSR staff has examined the film and made a list of the churches that could be identified. There are a number of Mennonite congregations included on the microfilm. The GSR staff can show the list of churches to anyone interested in these records.

One other source of Mennonite baptismal records was compiled by Isaac R. Horst, called **Baptismal Records 1842-1980**. According to Mr. Horst, he has attempted to publish records of Waterloo County Mennonites until 1889, continuing with the Old Order Mennonites until 1980. The book also lists the Bishops who served from 1812 until 1980.

Cemeteries are one of the richest sources of information available for the genealogist. In Waterloo County, the Waterloo-Wellington Branch of the Ontario Genealogical Society has been working hard to record all the cemeteries in the county. Completed transcriptions of many cemeteries are now available in the GSR, and the work continues on other cemeteries.

The Genealogy Committee of the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario has also been listing the Mennonite cemeteries in Waterloo County. Copies of the completed lists are being given to the Waterloo-Wellington Branch of the OGS and are also available to interested researchers.

(continued on page 20)

Tweedsmuir Histories

One other resource that is available to genealogists is a microfilm set of Tweedsmuir Histories. These histories are collections of local history that have been kept by branches of the Women's Institutes. Most of the microfilm in this set represent branches in North Waterloo. They contain a great deal of information about the area's people, farms and industries.

The Grace Schmidt Room is located on Level 1 of the Main Branch of the Kitchener Public Library, 85 Queen St. North, Kitchener, ON N2H 2H1. The hours of the GSR are limited, so researchers are advised to all ahead — 743-0271 ext. 252.

A Mennonite Petition of 1787

by E. Reginald Good

While doing research on behalf of the Mennonite Bicentennial Commission, the writer discovered an important document in the Public Archives of Canada (Ottawa). It is a petition from a Mennonite family for a land grant in Canada, dated 1787. It is the only known claim from Mennonites for pre-1792 loyalist lands, and thus sheds significant light on early Mennonite immigration to, and settlement in, presentday Ontario.

Possibly the reason the petition has been overlooked thus far is because the family name on it was written "Obenholt" (the German spelling) rather than "Overholt" (the English spelling). The family was definitely Mennonite (see John L. Ruth's *Maintaining the Right Fellowship* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1984), p. 160), evidenced by the fact that the petitioner affirmed, instead of swore, to the validity of the claim presented. It reads as follows:

"Proceedings of the Loyalist Commissioners, Montreal, 27 Aug. 1787"

827. Claim of Widow Obenholt, late of Pensilva.

The oldest son of John Obenholt appears. Claimt. affirms.

That this is a Claim of his Father's Estate. It is entered in his Mother's name, but was sent home by Claimt. & was intended to be a Claim for the whole family.

His Father, John Obenholt, was a native of America. Lived in Bucks Co., Pensilva. He aided the Brit[ish] all he could. Joined them at New York in the year [17]80. He had been active in assisting Brit[ish] officers to get [a] cross the Delaware, this being known he was obliged to fly. He had been committed for high Treason, broke Gaol & got to New York. Died there in [17]80. Made no Will.

Left Elizth., his Widow, now living in Bucks Co. Claimt., his eldest Son. John, now about 16 years of age, now in the Colonies.

Claimt. lived with his Father when the Rebellion broke out. He staid till his Father went to New York. Claimt. had been active in carrying some of the soldiers who were taken Prisoners under Burg. He went to New York once or twice on this Business to carry in Prisoners, on no other occasion. Continued in the States till last Fall.

His Father had a farm, 6 miles, in Bucks Co., purchased 24 or 25 yrs. ago. There were 260 acres, a grist mill, 2 houses & 2 Barns. The Deeds are in the Colonies but a Copy has been sent to England. Thinks his Father gave 700 or 800 £ for it. This Estate has been valued at 1,100 Pensilv. Cury. It has been confiscated & sold. A certificate of Sale is sent to England.

His Father had considerable moveable Estate, which were seized & sold.

3 horses, 5 Cows, 12 Sheep, 6 Hogs, considerable furniture, Hay, taken & sold.¹

The petition indicates that both John Overholt, Sr. and John Overholt, Jr. served the British in noncombatant roles during the Revolutionary War. The Americans convicted John Overholt, Sr. as a traitor for having assisted the British in this way, and confiscated his real estate and chattels. John Overholt, Jr. came to Canada in Fall 1786 — probably with other Bucks County Mennonite immigrants — and sought economic relief from the British for his destitute mother, siblings, and self.

Interestingly, the Loyalist Commissioners in Canada rejected Overholt's petition, giving the terse judgment that he was "no loyalist, nor

[was] any member of the family now living," and therefore undeserving of relief. The strict definition of a loyalist was one who "had adhered to the Unity of the Empire, and joined the Royal Standard in America before the Treaty of Separation in the year 1783," or the spouse of such a person.² Apparently this definition was interpreted to exclude pacifists and/or persons who had been impressed into service. At any rate, Mennonites were effectively denied loyalist benefits, evidenced by the fact that no known Mennonite was permanently placed on the United Empire Loyalists list.³

The rejection of Mennonite claims, as represented here by the Commissioners' response to the Overholt petition, may help to explain why more Mennonites did not emigrate to Ontario in the 1780's. The grounds on which the Overholt family based their claim, on the other hand, may help to explain the motives behind the migration of a few Mennonites at this time.

Because Mennonite claims were rejected, most Mennonites who settled in presentday Ontario did not bother to petition for land grants until after 1792 when Simcoe changed the criterion for receiving them. Simcoe resolved to issue settlement — as opposed to loyalist — grants to the "King's subjects" and repentant republicans who immigrated from the United States.⁴

After 1792, therefore, there are many records of Mennonite petitions for land grants. But the Overholt petition is one of only a few, rare documents which shed light on the earliest years of Mennonite settlement in Canada, 1786-1792.

Notes

- 1 RG1, L3. Claim of Elizabeth Obenholt, 27 Aug. 1787.
- 2 The Old United Empire Loyalists List (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1969), p. 127.
- 3 An Elizabeth Oberholt, possibly the one mentioned in his article, appeared on the I.E.L. list of 9 November 1789 but she was expunged by an Order in Council dated 23 May 1802.
- 4 Public Archives of Ontario, *Report*, 1929, pp 18-19, 27-28, 187-92.

I would like to become a member of the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario. I will be informed of all Society events, will be eligible to serve on the various committees of the Society, and will receive *Mennogeschpräch* as part of my membership.

NAME _____ PHONE _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ POSTAL CODE _____

SPECIAL INTERESTS _____

Memberships:

Student - \$5.00
Regular - \$10.00
Additional memberships
at same address
(one mailing) - \$5.00
Sustaining - \$15.00

Mail to:

Secretary, Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario
c/o Conrad Grebel College
Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3G6