

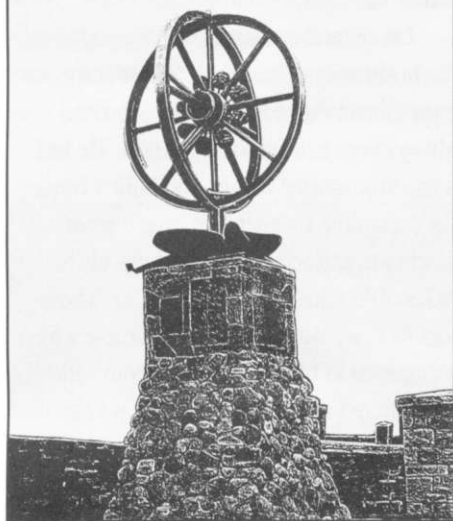
Ontario Mennonite History

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Thomas Reesor's Reflections on the Reesor Settlement

Thomas Reesor, an Old Order Mennonite minister from Markham, Ontario, assisted Mennonites from Ukraine in starting a new settlement at Mile 103 on the Canadian National Railway between Kapuskasing and Hearst in northern Ontario. The community, begun in 1925, became known as Reesor in honour of his leadership. After flourishing for a few years, it dwindled through the 1930s and eventually disappeared.

*From a report written by Thomas Reesor,
Pickering, Ont., in May, 1927*

In May, 1925 I was chosen to accompany four of the Russian Mennonites to investigate the possibilities of establishing a colony in northern Ontario. Mr. R. C. Biette, of the Lands Settlement Branch, Canadian National Railways, Montreal, accompanied us on our first trip.

We left Toronto at 9 p.m. and arrived at Hearst at midnight the following night. The next day we hired a livery to view the surrounding district. We were favourably impressed with its possibilities as a farming country. This is known as the great clay belt and comprises a large district, situated on the Hudson Bay slope. When cleared, it will be one of the largest farming districts in the world. The land is clay in its virgin state, but when plowed and cultivated, together with the action of the sun, wind and frost, it becomes pulverized and has an ashy colour, becoming very productive.

At Kapuskasing, 70 miles west of Cochrane, the Spruce Falls Pulp and Power Co. have a large pulp mill. They are at present spending five million dollars in enlargements and this has created a splendid market for pulpwood for miles along the railway. Kapuskasing is a thriving town with several fine stores and hotels.

There is an experimental farm of 650 acres at Kapuskasing on the site of the internment camp used during the war, 1914 to 1918. This land was cleared and stumped by the prisoners and demonstrates what can be grown in the North Country. Oats, peas, barley, clover and timothy, potatoes, turnips and mangels all do well, as well as strawberries, raspberries and many kinds of vegetables. Apple trees do not grow. Bees



*Thomas Reesor (Mennonite Archives
of Ontario photo)*

do well, sometimes gathering as much as 16 pounds per day per hive. Pasture grows well and cattle thrive. Sheep do not pay on account of the prevalence of dogs and wolves. The superintendent recommends seeding down new land and pasturing while the stumps rot, where the stumps are poplar.

Early on the second morning of our stay we took the local train to Hearst for Mile 103. We arrived at 5 a.m. Having secured the services of a guide, we took some provisions and immediately started on a tramp to investigate the possibilities of the locality as a future home for these unfortunate people. This district was virgin forest, uninhabited, except for one settler. There were three other homesteads taken up, but not occupied.

After a tiresome tramp we arrived at the lake at noon. To me it was a beautiful scene. On every hand we were surrounded by forest, which had never been entered except by hunters and trappers. A few of our company dropped out on the way, having become somewhat nervous as there was no possible way of making the trip except on foot. If anything had happened to any of us,



Partially cleared forest at Reesor, Ont. (Mennonite Archives of Ontario photo)

we would have been in an awkward position.

While I was sitting by the lake, enjoying the rest in the sunshine, I was reminded by the guide that we must not tarry. This proved to be good advice since walking was difficult in places. There was some deep snow, other places had been burned over, making progress difficult on account of fallen timber. We reached the railway pretty well tired out, having tramped twelve hours.

We were well pleased with the district, but the question arose of how these people could make a success without some facilities for shipping pulpwood. The success of the undertaking rested on this point; so I promised to build a siding, provided ten would take up homesteads. Nothing further was done on this trip, each delegate reporting his view of the possibilities on our return.

In June, some 15 having decided to settle in the north, the group, accompanied by Mr. Biette and myself (I to act as interpreter), left for the North again. On our arrival in Toronto trouble developed. The government had passed an order-in-council allowing only half a lot to each settler, 75 acres instead of 150 as formerly. This appeared for a time to block the whole proposition and it took a lot of persuasion to make the settlers go farther.

We arrived at our destination at 11 o'clock at night. Our party consisted of 14 men, two women and several children. Thirteen of us got off at Mile 103, Mr. Biette and the rest of the party went on to Mattice. As the night was dark, it

took some minutes to get my bearings in the wilderness. We were, however, some forty rods from our camping grounds. We followed the railway to an elevated spot. The boys lit a fire, and we soon enjoyed a cup of tea and rolled into our blankets for the rest of the night.

Mattice, where the rest of the party spent the night, is a small town of possibly 300, mostly French. It is seven miles farther west on the Missinaibi River.

There is a Hudson Bay Co. trading

post where many Indians come with their furs. They come early in May and remain throughout the fly season. Mattice is also the starting point for prospectors who go down the Missinaibi in canoes.

One family from the west met our party at Mattice. It was somewhat difficult to find accommodation for them and both families had to be crowded into one small hut. On arrival of Mr. Biette and his party, the prospective settlers immediately commenced looking for suitable sites to build their homes. On their return they appeared rather discouraged with wet feet and their faces badly bitten by black flies. The weather had been extremely wet; the muskegs were full of water and the black flies made their presence known by the millions. They creep in at every opening, up our pant legs and under our collars. The wet weather also made walking very difficult, especially through the muskegs. The whole North has these patches of low land, very lightly timbered and very wet at this season. One would think it was absolutely no good for farming, but when cleared and ploughed it makes the best land. Although there is a foot or more of moss, there is a clay bottom. In this North Country all rivers and streams are low-lying, the land is slightly rolling and it makes a beautiful country when cleared.

Mr. Biette offered to share his tent with me. He was to act as chief cook and I was expected to keep him supplied with firewood. He, no doubt, expected flies as he procured a few yards of cheesecloth. The

next night, most of the boys slept on the floor of the shack. Mr. Biette and I occupied the tent, each having two yards of cheesecloth to protect us from the flies. We were all very ready for a good night's rest, but to our consternation, the flies crawled into every small opening, every bite bringing blood. Our cheesecloth was absolutely useless. At midnight, Mr. Biette, giving up the notion of getting any sleep, got up and built a fire, sitting by the fire the rest of the night. He said he might have withstood the bites, but the music was too much for him. For the rest of the stay he went to Hearst for the night.

The next night I occupied the tent with a settler and his sixteen-year-old son. We tried to sleep but it was out of the question; the boy was almost delirious from the fly bites. At midnight we built a fire, raised the flap of the tent and a slight wind brought the smoke into the tent, chasing out the flies. A cool rain and breeze followed and we went to sleep, sleeping till eight o'clock.

For the rest of the men, Mr. Biette brought a large tarpaulin from Cochrane which they stretched over a roofless cabin, making an excellent shelter. The cabin was large enough for two fires, necessary to keep out the flies. Sleeping in a tent had no more charms for me, so I stayed in the Radio Hotel at Mattice where one could get a peaceful rest if one got used to the huskies which kept up a continual howl the whole night through. Boarding at the camp was, however, quite agreeable. Condensed milk, canned tomatoes, beans, pork etc. was our bill of fare.

On several occasions we enjoyed the hospitality of Mr. John Christianson, a prominent farmer of Mattice who was always very helpful to the settlers. He had a gasoline marine engine and built a frame for a gasoline speeder. Mr. Biette went to Cochrane and secured a set of wheels and axles off a pile of junk. Putting the whole together, we had a speeder, an article which we needed to transport ourselves to Mile 103 and return every day. When we had the car finished, we started on our first trip to try her out. Mr. Biette sat in front and, as our

car was not provided with brakes, we carried a piece of scantling to answer the purpose.

We had not gone over a mile when a cow walked on the tracks. Mr. Biette went through some peculiar performances, waving his hat, trying to induce the cow to move on. We got the brakes working and the car stopped a few feet from the cow. One of the axles was badly sprung and riding was rather uncomfortable. Mr. Christianson was confined to his bed next morning on account of the shaking-up he received. The car did good service transporting settlers and their supplies.

On the third day we decided to build a shack to accommodate the women and children. There was a burned area of about three acres, which we logged and burned, all hands turning in. We commenced a cabin 18 by 20 feet. Settlers became dissatisfied and we became somewhat apprehensive as our men could not agree on locating homesteads. Mr. Biette then brought the Crown Land Agent from Hearst and the choosing of lots began in earnest. At this time we succeeded in getting ten located, three others took a few days to finally decide, but they finally located also, making thirteen for this trip. As soon as each man located and signed up, he struck for the bush with an axe, hunting the line around his farm. This was no easy task, the survey having been made in 1912.

There was a lot a mile from the railway which had been abandoned. A small shack was built, but the inside was chewed considerably by wild animals. A Mr. Warkentin took this lot, the government charging \$100 for improvements. As his family was at Mattice, his luggage was brought over by the section men on a jigger and trailer,

and a farmer took it to the cabin with a team.

As I was very anxious to prospect about three miles north, I decided to go alone, taking lunch. The day was very hot and the flies offensive, so the trip was not very pleasant. I encountered so much water in the vicinity of a small lake that I could not reach my destination. On account of undergrowth the blazed line was hard to find in places. Getting lost is a serious matter in the northern woods. Some never return.

On returning in the afternoon there was a surprise awaiting me. The farmer's horses had mired not more than ten rods from the railway and there was nothing to do but carry in the luggage. The weather was very warm, the flies were bad. I was completely discouraged as I met Mr. Warkentin with a heavy pack on his back, wading in the mud, tired and disheartened. If there had been some way to avoid this scene, I would gladly have gone home. Going farther, I met others carrying heavy packs. Mr. Biette had a sack of flour. All showed signs of fatigue and fly bites.

Colonization roads were a necessity, absolutely, so I promised to do my best. Arriving in Toronto, I immediately called at the Parliament Buildings and had an interview with the Hon. Geo. S. Henry, Minister of Highways. I explained the situation and he promised to see to it that there would be a start made at once for the making of roads through this settlement. Mr. Biette immediately took up the matter and succeeded in arranging for cutting four miles north, commencing at the railway.

Jacob Rempel, one of the settlers who had learned some English, took the whole contract as their leader; he signed the contracts with others sub-contracting at so

much per acre. Trouble soon developed. According to the terms of the contract, fifty percent of the work must be finished before the government would advance any of the contract money, but some of those cutting expected their pay every week. Some were dissatisfied and quit while others finished. Mr. Biette could do nothing as he was not able to speak their language. Early in September he called me to accompany him north again to straighten out the whole complicated mess.

On our arrival at the settlement I found them all in an unsettled state, some on the point of leaving. We were not long getting the matter settled; the whole trouble lay in their ignorance of the English language. The question of building a siding was taken up, the road master giving instructions for location. The settlers all agreed to turn in and help as they were to receive the benefit. The section men brought a lot of shovels and we at once commenced grading, some cutting and burning trees and brush, others digging and peeling off moss.

In a few days the work was so well advanced I was able to leave for home. With the assurance of a siding, the settlers' chances were very much improved. They worked with a will and by winter there were 22 homesteaders. By spring they had loaded 110 carloads of pulpwood, which we thought very good for a start.

In May, 1926, Col. W. R. Smythe, Superintendent of Northern Settlement of the Ontario Government invited me to accompany him to the settlement to inquire into their condition. The road contract being held over, the settlers were anxious for the balance of their pay for work done. Jacob Rempel had left, leaving

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the work unfinished, so we decided to cancel the contract. After considerable delay, each man was paid in full for work done. The government sent in a supervisor who paid 30 cents per hour for work done, cutting and burning stumps and wood. This arrangement is very satisfactory as all those who wish can earn a living during the summer months when there is no work at home. Satisfactory progress was made on road construction and all went well.

During the winter I succeeded in inducing the government to build a house to accommodate newcomers, as there was



*H. Bergen home, Reesor, Ont.
(Mennonite Archives of Ontario photo)*

no accommodation whatever. The question of building a school was taken up. The government gave a grant of \$500 according to the act governing schools in unorganized districts. They were unfortunate in choosing



Eilber School at Reesor, Ont. (Mennonite Archives of Ontario photo)

a site. The intention had been to extend the settlement north, but later it was decided to open up a reserve of 64 half-lots to the south. As a result the school is situated in the north-west corner of the settlement, an unsatisfactory arrangement.

The Mennonites succeeded in employing as teacher a Mr. Heidebrecht who holds a Manitoba certificate and has a permit to teach here. He teaches German one hour in the morning, but every word in English for the rest of the day. He also teaches English at night for the grown settlers.

Log cabins can be built very cheaply. A location is selected, a clearing made (16 by 20 feet is the minimum size of the cabin),

logs are cut the proper length and notches are cut for the corners. The logs are built up to the height of eight feet, then a stout timber is put on for a ridge. Smaller poles are placed from the ridge to plate, close together. The whole roof is covered in this way, moss being spread over the poles and roofing nailed over the moss. When putting down the floor, straight poles are laid on the ground close together. An adze is used to hew the logs to centre. If well laid, this makes a fairly level floor. Holes are cut for doors

and windows, the gables are filled with logs, partitions built with poles, the cracks filled with moss, the hole cut in the roof for a stove pipe and the house is finished.

This, of course, is the cheapest grade of house. Some are built two stories high with lumber for partitions. A blanket is tacked on the joist over the table to keep the dust from falling on the victuals. Some of the houses are plastered inside and out with clay. This gives the house a fine appearance and contrary to my expectation, this stood the test of winter.

Water can usually be had at about eight feet from the surface. Quicksand is encountered at this

depth. This makes it very hard to curb, as it rises up from the bottom. However, there is usually water in quicksand. A long pole is used to raise the water bucket, the pole being balanced on a post, the large end up.

They expect to have the colonization road from Hearst to Cochrane finished this year. This will improve their condition very much. Where clay roads are properly graded, they are very firm and smooth. Clay is usually hauled on low, mucky ground and this makes a firm surface. Some of the main roads are gravelled, but in some districts gravel is scarce. There is a highway close to the railway from Cobalt to Cochrane and from Cochrane to Hearst. This road follows the railway most of the way, except through rocky districts. There are very few hills in the clay district. The provincial highway between North Bay and Cobalt will be finished this year. In a year or so there will be a road all the way from Toronto to Hearst, 600 miles.

In the spring of 1926 our settlers asked me and my Waterloo friend to buy them a portable sawmill and a second-hand steam engine. I happened to mention the matter to Mr. C. H. Fullerton, Director of Northern Development for the Ontario government. He very kindly offered the loan of a mill which had been used in the Haileybury district during the great fire several years ago. He also loaned them a 45 h.p. steam engine. This was shipped to them free of charge.

This mill will be open for custom work for all settlers in the district. This will be a great help as they were obliged to buy their lumber by car lot at Valrita, a small town about 20 miles away. They built a shed about 70 feet long to cover the mill and engine. The loan of this outfit was a very generous act on the part of Mr. Fullerton as it shows the sincere desire of the government to cooperate in every way to ensure the success of the settlers who show signs of thrift. I cannot speak too highly of all the officials with whom I dealt. In August, 1926 the settlers, now 45 families, with a population of 175, desired to contract for about 5,000 cords of pulpwood with the Spruce Falls Pulp and Power Co. When the company's officers were approached they were advised

to contract through the local contractor.

They appealed to me to try to arrange for a direct contract with the Spruce Falls Co. This proved to be no easy task. I immediately took the matter up with Mr. Black at the Head office in Toronto. Mr. Black is president of the company. He gave me the assurance that the wood in question would be contracted for through me and promised to wire Mr. Noble at the pulp mill to that effect. Wiring to Montreal for a pass, I started for the North the next day. On my arrival, Mr. Noble had not received the wire and was not in a communicative mood. I received the assurance, however, that he would send Mr. Miller, their buyer, over the next day if possible. However he did not come.

Next day I went to Kapuskasing to arrange the contract, but the officials were not in a hurry as there appeared to be an understanding with the local contractor. They had received instructions from Toronto and agreed to a direct contract, but refused to pay in advance in the bush. An advance of two dollars is always paid as soon as the wood is piled in the bush. A direct contract, if fulfilled, netted twenty-five cents more per cord. I met Mr. Brander, representative of the Hawk Lake Lumber Co., who took

me back to the settlement with the object of buying the wood, but as he insisted on four-foot wood, the settlers were not disposed to sell. The Spruce Falls Co. buys eight-foot wood, requiring less labour. Finally, they decided to contract with the Spruce Falls people and to do without the advance, wood to be paid for as it arrived on cars at the siding.

As the winter advanced, some of the settlers commenced to feel the pinch of poverty as there were not enough teams available to haul the wood to the siding. The situation assumed a very serious aspect. The local contractor had induced a few to re-contract with him. This proved to be very unsatisfactory as it put him in a condition to control everything they required. Seven re-contracted before relief came as they were in a very destitute condition. Five of these got discouraged and left the settlement with their families.

I concluded that a cash loan from the government was the only way out of this very serious situation so I called on Mr. Fred Dane, Superintendent of Settlers' Loan Commission for the Ontario government. Application forms were sent to the settlers and on their return the application called for \$4,700. An inspector was sent to report on

improvements and he recommended a loan of only \$400. A loan of \$1,000 was absolutely necessary as they required at least two teams with sleighs and harness. At this time the local contractor got busy with the government, trying to block our progress. I spent a great deal of time trying

to get a loan, but without success. Finally I succeeded in making arrangements for \$1,000. Mr. Black of the Spruce Falls Co. agreed to collect for the government from the proceeds of wood delivered at the mill. Twelve settlers gave their homesteads and cut of wood as security for the loan, the loan to be extended over two years. Until this arrangement was made, I considered their chance of success very doubtful.

Gong north on December 30, 1926, I got the interested ones to sign the necessary papers and arranged for a short credit at Kapuskasing. They immediately got their outfits together, got some feed and were soon hauling wood. Two of the teams hauled over 1,000 cords each, 265 cars were loaded on the siding this season. Included in this number were a few loaded by the French. The present indications are that these settlers are on a fair way to success. Their houses are of the best one sees in the North. The clearance inspector gives a clearance each year for the amount of wood each settler may cut. The purchaser withholds two dollars per cord unless clearance papers are produced. This goes to the government. A settler usually gets a clearance for 150 cords. The land must be cleared and burned. After the first burning it is logged and burned a second time. This usually makes a clean job.

In conclusion, I would say, my only desire was to help these unfortunate people, who lost their all through the cursed Bolshevik. If I have been instrumental in establishing homes for them, I consider myself well repaid for the time spent on their behalf. There were some among them who were a disappointment, but many were deserving and honourable, but very unsettled, viewing the imaginary golden hills far away, apparently being constrained to following the setting sun. Some, according to reports, are going to the Peace River Valley district.



This stone was erected by descendants of the settlers at Reesor, a community of 450 people which gradually diminished until 1967. (Mennonite Archives of Ontario photo)

The Award of Excellence

The Mennonite Historical Society of Canada presents an Award of Excellence to honour those who have given many years of service in helping the Mennonite community remember its history. In 2007, this award was given to Lorna Bergey, a charter member of the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario, who served 32 years as secretary of the board. Because of the Lorna's frail health, the presentation was made in March, 2007, in the presence of her family and the executive board of the Ontario society.

In 2008 the award was given to Gerhard Enns, a charter member of the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, who presented a Low German radio broadcast for 34 years and also edited *Der Bote*, a High German newspaper, for many years.

Lorna Bergey was also the first recipient of the G. Elmore Reaman Historical Award for her 37 years of volunteering with the Pennsylvania German Folklore Society of Ontario. This award was presented at the Folklore's annual meeting at Nith Valley Mennonite Church on October 27, 2007.



Sam Steiner of the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada presents the 2007 award of excellence to Lorna Bergey. (Photo by Barb Draper)

New additions to the Mennonite Archives of Ontario

By Sam Steiner

Among the recent personal collections added to the Mennonite Archives of Ontario are those from Una Cressman, Mabel Cressman and Abram Honderich.

Una Cressman (1905-1996) grew up in the Kitchener area where her family attended First Mennonite Church. She trained as a nurse and served as a missionary in Argentina. Her collection includes photographs and some travel diaries.

Mabel Cressman (1914-) was a sister to Una and also trained as a nurse. She served in England and the Netherlands during and after World War II and also served as

a missionary in Argentina. Her collection also includes diaries, correspondence from Argentina and some speeches/talks she gave when she was on furlough.

Abram Honderich (1873-1961) was a Reformed Mennonite minister. The collection primarily includes correspondence, some printed sermons by Reformed Mennonite ministers, some family history and some material relating to the Reformed Mennonite mutual aid fund. The archives rarely receives material from Reformed Mennonites; these items are from non-Reformed Mennonite descendants.

Brubacher House Update

By Brandon and Bethany Leis

Over the past two years the Brubacher House Museum has undergone several physical changes. In September 2006, renovations began to replace the roof's aging cedar shingles, the eaves troughs, the inefficient windows, and the rotting back porch. These renovations took just over four months to complete, and we enjoyed a much warmer winter as a result.

A new DVD was also unveiled in 2006, providing a great overview of local Mennonite life in the 19th century. This has been very well received by the public, and has added a nice modern touch to the Museum tour. We have also sold several copies of the DVD to visitors, the proceeds of which go to the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario.

The past few Canada Day celebrations have been very successful. In 2006 we

had 139 visitors, while in 2007 the nice weather brought out 220 visitors including University of Waterloo president David



Brubacher House

Johnston and the featured Canada Day performer Ron Sexsmith.

The Brubacher House Museum remains open for tours from May through October, Wednesday-Saturday, from 2pm-5pm. Tours can also be arranged outside of these times by calling 519-886-3855, or emailing: bhouse@watserv1.uwaterloo.ca.

New Books

Growing Up in Turbulent Times: Memoirs of Soviet Oppression, Refugee Life in Germany and Immigrant Adjustment to Canada. Waldemar Janzen. CMU Press, 2007, 290 pages.

Janzen tells the story of his growing-up years as he and his mother coped in difficult situations in Ukraine, as refugees in Germany, and as immigrants in Canada. Janzen completed high school in Kitchener-Waterloo and went on to teach theology at Canada Mennonite Bible College. He is able to provide lots of detail of his early life because he regularly wrote in his "little brown book".

Consider the Threshing Stone. Jacob J. Rempel, translated and edited by

David J. Rempel Smucker. Pandora Press, 2008, 179 pages.

Jacob Rempel who grew up in Ukraine reflects on his life as a medic serving on a ship in the Black Sea during World War I and the devastation

experienced by Mennonites during the lawless years after the Russian Revolution. His writings have been translated and edited by his grandchildren.

One Quilt, Many Pieces: A Guide to Mennonite Groups in Canada. Margaret Loewen Reimer. Herald Press, 2008, 139 pages.

This fourth edition again gives up-to-date information on

all Mennonite groups in Canada. It includes a brief history of each group and a description of what makes them distinctive.

Remember Us: Letters from Stalin's Gulag (1930-1937), Volume I: The Regehr Family. Ruth Derksen Siemens. Pandora Press, 2007, 407 pages.

Siemens has put together a collection of old letters that were smuggled out of a Russian prison camp in the 1930s. The letters were written on various scraps of paper by the Jasch and Maria Regehr family and give a first-hand description of their suffering. The story of how these letters were re-discovered in

an attic in 1989 is also told in a documentary on DVD, *Through the Red Gate*.

We Bear the Loss Together: A History of the Mennonite Aid Union. Laureen Harder.

Pandora Press, 2008, 125 pages.

For 140 years, Mennonite Aid Union was a vehicle that organized mutual aid in the case of loss by fire or storm. In the 20th century, as farms and businesses grew larger and risks escalated,

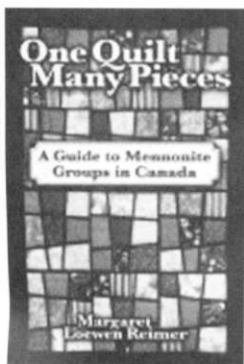
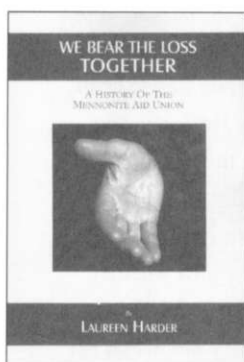
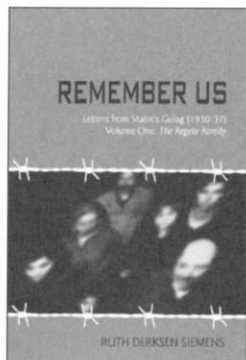
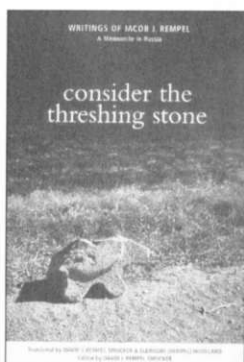
the Mennonite Aid Union faced many challenges. In recent years, Mennonite Aid Union was able to band together with other Mennonite mutual aid organizations to form MAX Canada, a Mennonite insurance company.

Mennonite History conference held at Conrad Grebel

Instead of a fall meeting, the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario supported the "Family and Sexuality in Mennonite History" conference held at Conrad Grebel University College October 12 and 13, 2007. The Conference was organized and hosted by the Institute of Anabaptist Mennonite Studies at Conrad Grebel in conjunction with the Divergent Voices of Canadian Mennonites Sub-Committee of the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada and with support from Shalom Counselling Services. The conference did not try to cover all possible topics, but offered a sampling of recent research on themes of family and sexuality in the Mennonite past.

Twenty-nine different papers were presented at the conference which included such topics as: "The Russian Mennonite Saga as Seen in the Life of One Family" by Anne Konrad Dyck; "Reflections on Writing Family History: A Case Study of Frances H. Davidson and her Nieces" by Lucille Marr; "Mennonites, Marriage and the Emergence of Civil Society in the Netherlands" by Michael Driedger; "Interpretations of Biblical Teachings on Marriage Within Mennonite Confessions of Faith" by Lydia Neufeld Harder; "What's she going to do now? Ontario Mennonite Conference women debate nonconformity" by Laureen Harder; "Family, Religion and Migration in the Lives of Low German-speaking Mennonite Women" by Kerry Fast and "Sexual 'Sin' and its Consequences among the Kleine Gemeinde in 19th century Imperial Russia" by Ralph Friesen.

Selected papers from this conference will be published in the 2008 issue of *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, edited by Royden Loewen of Winnipeg. He can be contacted at 204-786-9391 or r.loewen@uwinnipeg.ca.



Families re-connected after 80 years

By Barb Draper

When Renee Sauder was serving as the interim pastor at Leamington United Church early in 2007, she got to know 85-year-old Jacob Tiessen. He had been a baby of about 18 months when he arrived in Canada, part of the large group of Russian Mennonites who came to Waterloo in July of 1924. Among the more than 800 immigrants who arrived that day was the family of Peter and Elizabeth Tiessen with eight children who were hosted by the Aaron Hoffman family near Heidelberg. They very much appreciated the kindness of the Hoffmans and their neighbours who provided a house to live in and work for the family. On March 6, 1925, six months later, the family moved to the Ruthven area of Essex County and lost touch with the Hoffman family.

Many years later, Jake Tiessen invited his pastors to come to his farm for lunch. As they visited, Jake recounted the story of his family's journey out of Russia and how they arrived at the train station in Waterloo and he showed Renee a memoir that his older brother had written about their experiences. As Renee glanced through the pages she noticed the reference to the Hoffman name and Heidelberg. Renee had grown up in St. Jacobs and was familiar with the area, so she asked if Jake knew anything about the family or the location of the farm where his family had been billeted.

Jake said that there had been no contact and he had wondered all those years where the farm might be located. At one time some of the Tiessens took a drive around near Heidelberg, trying to find the farm, but they were never sure. Renee said that the next time she was back in her home area she would ask her relatives if they knew of a Hoffman family near Heidelberg.

Before Renee had a chance to do that, she was at the Schneider Haus museum in Kitchener in the spring of 2007, giving a



The Aaron Hoffman farm today, Heidelberg, Ont. (Photo courtesy of Christy Hoffman)

presentation to the staff, explaining some of the customs and traditions of the Old Order Mennonites and how they are similar to the Mennonite life portrayed by the museum. At the end of her talk, one of the staff spoke to her, discussing her own experience with Old Order Mennonites. When Renee heard that her name was Christy Hoffman, she immediately asked where the Hoffman family was from. When Christy said her husband's family was from Heidelberg, Renee asked if she had any idea whether this Hoffman family had hosted a Tiessen family back in 1924. Christy knew that her husband's great-grandfather was Aaron Hoffman, but she wasn't sure if they had hosted Mennonites from Russia.

Renee and Christy were able to confirm that this was the right Hoffman family. In fact, Christy and her husband, Craig, live on the home farm where Jacob Tiessen and his family came to stay. Although Jacob had no personal memories of that time, he had heard lots of stories. When the family arrived at the Hoffmans they were invited

to a fully laden table, but the food was all very strange. The Tiessens had never seen pie before! They were amazed that meat was served three times a day! Frank, the oldest child, was 19 years old and he soon gained 30 pounds. The family had nearly starved in Russia and they were not accustomed to seeing such an abundance of food.

In the summer of 2007, Jake and his sister, Agatha, made the trip from Leamington to visit the farm near Heidelberg. Christy said, "We served pie, of course!" In September, Jake arranged another visit to meet with Craig's great-aunt, Katie, who was eight years old when the Tiessens were there. Katie had helped to look after baby Jake. They had a great visit, even though neither could really remember those months when they lived together.

Jacob was delighted to be able to see the farm and the family who had been generous when his family was in need eighty years earlier. "May the dear Lord bless you greatly for all your kindness," was his message to the Hoffman family.