

Going on Foot: Revisiting the Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba

John Warkentin, *York University*

It is over forty years since I did the fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation entitled “The Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba.” Much, of course, has changed since then. Not only are there great transformations in southern Manitoba itself, but several generations of scholars have studied the Mennonite communities since my time, and their researches are readily available.

Since in terms of my own fresh research I had little new to say, I was extremely reluctant to give this talk when Royden Loewen telephoned me. Nevertheless, I allowed myself to be persuaded, if only to relive my earlier experiences by reading the new work that has been published. And I’m glad I did.

I proceeded by jotting down a few of the issues that have interested scholars in the humanities and social sciences since the 1950s when I did my research. Here are some of them: Space and Communications; Environmental History; Social History; Gender Studies; Native Studies; and the Role of the Creative Arts in the Social Sciences. As I read what had been written in the past 40 years on the Mennonite communities, it quickly became clear that significant work had been done on all of those issues - on some topics much more than on others.

I will consider a few of those themes in this talk, and since I will cover much ground very quickly, I will list what I intend to do so you won’t get lost: 1)

Mennonites and Space; 2) The Mennonite *Darp* and Going on Foot; 3) The Mennonite Will and the Non-Mennonite Mind; 4) Creating a Culture Area and the Literary World of the Mennonites. I warn you to be ready to participate in this presentation by imagining in your mind's eye a few maps and photographs that I will describe as I go along.

Mennonites and Space

I start with the idea of "The Edge." To introduce and emphasize this, here is an excerpt from a poem by Patrick Friesen, titled "backbone beat," published in a recent volume of poems on Winnipeg, *St. Mary at Main*:

this is the city that should have given its keys
to charlie watts
that backbone beat
upon which anything can happen

the edge of things here
the shield butting at our shoulder
the lake we live in
this is all risk and sudden death
we keep drumming
so we won't perish on the edge of the prairie
our trains rumbling through the nights
we keep drumming
so the northern lights won't overwhelm us
we build our music against the sky
that drumbeat
and our improvisation at the edge¹

Friesen shows us how in Winnipeg, located in the prairies, we leave the Canadian Shield and enter a New World within Canada. The land which the Mennonites settled was at this Edge -- a world of new spaces and (in some ways) new lives.

What was this land like, and how sharp, how recognizable is The Edge? To find out let us turn to David Bergen's novel, *See the Child*, published last spring (1999). Paul Unger, a character in the novel, is driving from Furst (Steinbach) to La Broquerie, a route many of you know very well. "The straight strip of road, the rich farmland disappearing. The soil sandier, the trees scrubby and twisted, rocks growing out of the fields."² Bergen catches succinctly the landscape on the eastern side of the East Reserve, astride The Edge, on the margin of the forest and the grassland. Pioneers considered that transition zone an ideal place to settle. In the United States that is how people ventured onto the plains, staying close to the woods for shelter and fuel, but taking advantage of the good blackearth grasslands ready for

immediate cultivation. In Manitoba it is in that kind of a transition zone that the Clearsprings settlement was situated, and, in part, that is why the East Reserve was located where it is: on The Edge.

Next, to learn more about life on this land before the Mennonites arrived, I want to draw to your attention two maps by Peter Fidler, the well known early fur trader and surveyor. Both maps are now in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives in Winnipeg. The first is a map drawn by Fidler in 1817 to illustrate the encounter between the Métis and the Selkirk settlers that has been called the Massacre of Seven Oaks.³ Our own interest in the map are the inscriptions on the land by humans. The map shows only the area of present Winnipeg, with the sweeping curves of the Assiniboine and Red Rivers dominating the scene. But on this map Fidler has also sketched the sharp parallel lines of the long farm lots he had laid out in 1813 for the Selkirk settlers on the west side of the Red, north of the Assiniboine. The lines he drew mark the first inscribing on a map of the new agricultural civilization beginning to occupy the land of The Edge. A revolution was beginning. And Mennonites were shortly to be a part of it.

The second map is a transcription Fidler had drafted 15 years earlier based on a sketch map drawn by a First Nations informant, Ki oo cus, of a large segment of the western part of the Great Plains.⁴ This map shows an area extending roughly from present southwestern Saskatchewan through southern Alberta to the Rocky Mountains, and south to the Missouri River. Rivers aligned like streamers across the vast plain are predominant, but what struck me the first time I saw this map thirty years ago in the Hudson's Bay Company archives in London, England, where the maps were then located, was the clearly demarcated, curving border where knowledge abruptly ends. Surely that margin was a magical defining line. My first impulsive impression was that right there before me on the Great Plains the "End of the Earth" was explicitly marked, where you would fall off the earth's surface if you went too far and crossed the edge. That first impression has always remained with me. I'll come back to that feeling shortly.

You are just beginning your imaginative tasks. We move forward in time, and now you have to imagine one of the most important maps ever made in Canada. This is a map of 1877, a map produced by Sandford Fleming, Engineer-in-Chief of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), depicting the area from Lake Superior right across the prairies to the Pacific Ocean.⁵ In my view, this map is a geographical masterpiece because it so effectively shows two cultures meeting. It is a continuation, if you like, of the 1817 Fidler map. The background information on Fleming's map is from the famous Palliser map of the West published in 1865, which shows the land before agricultural settlement. This is the homeland of nomadic Native peoples, and the map shows hills and escarpments, rivers, lakes, the limits of grasslands and woodlands. These are all natural features, drawn in curving free flowing lines. But there is, as it were, a second map superimposed on the one we are looking at. Harshly slashed on these gentle curves in hard, discordant, straight-as-a-ruler thick black lines is the proposed main line of the CPR piercing right across the prairies, with the proposed place names of imagined towns and villages sticking out like menacing

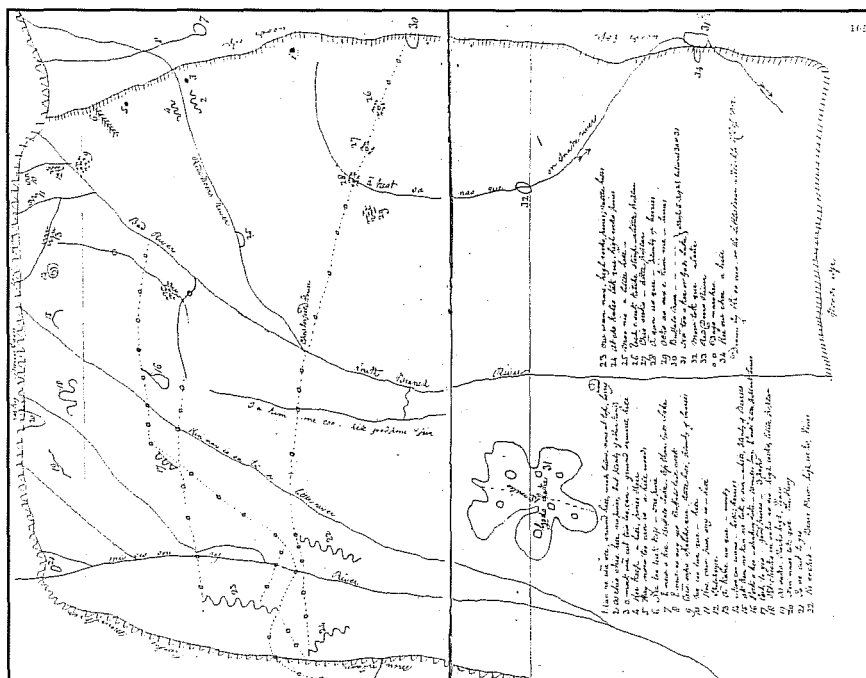


Figure 2 - The Prairie region as seen by a First Nations Chief. Peter Fidler's transcription of a map drawn in 1892 by Ki oo cus, a Blackfoot Chief. The Rocky Mountains are on the left, and the Woods Edge at the top (North) is south of today's Edmonton and Saskatoon. This is the land where Arnold Dyck's four travelling *struckfoarma* ran out of gas. The present Alberta/Saskatchewan border runs almost through the site of Chesterfield House, located on the South Branch River (i.e. the South Saskatchewan River) which flows through the middle of the map, and Herbert, Saskatchewan, of today would be just to the southeast. The big lake in lower right is an inset enlargement of a lake in the northeast part of the map. (From Richard I. Ruggles, *A Country so Interesting*. Original map in the HBC Archives, Public Archives of Manitoba.)

little daggers in measured intervals along the length of the track. These places represent the future western Canadian urban system, which in all its many ramifications was to affect Mennonite settlement so greatly.

That is not all that there is to be seen on this magnificent map. South of present day Winnipeg another highly alien discordant feature of machine-man is shown. This is the rigid, unswerving geometrical gridiron of the regular section land survey, just beginning its rapid, uncompromising spread across the plains. It looks to all intents and purposes like a controlling, enclosing, cage. Here then on the map we see a new civilization coming in - the one just hinted in the 1817 Fidler map — inexorably dispossessing the Native peoples. A life of free movement over the

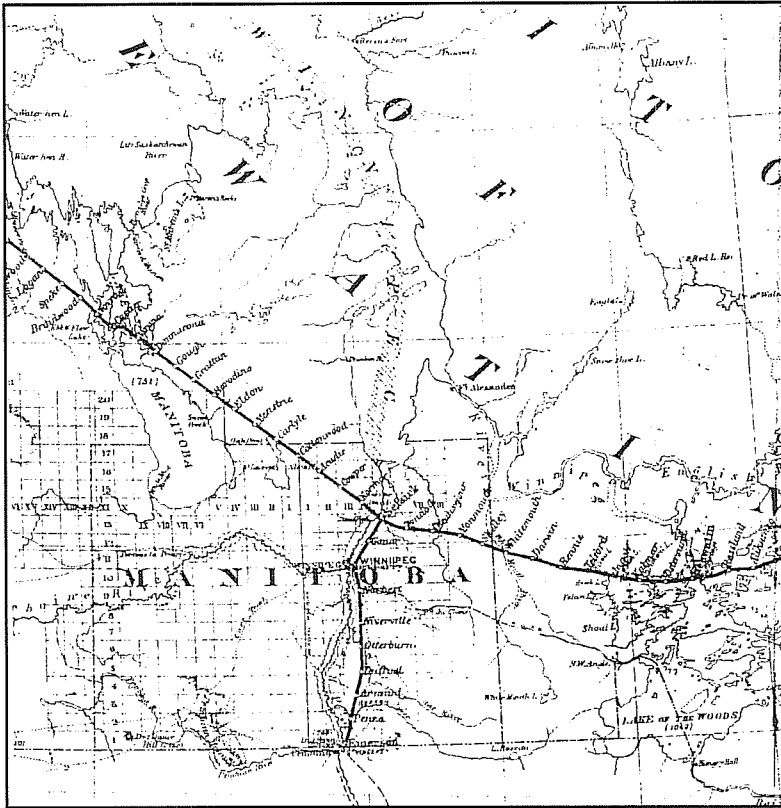


Figure 3 - Two civilizations clash. The ruler-straight segments of the proposed route of the CPR, and the square lines of the rectangular land survey, are thrust over the free flowing curves of nature, the home of First Nations peoples and buffalo. Sanford Fleming, *Report on Surveys...* "Map of the Country to be Traversed by the Canadian Pacific Railway to Accompany Progress Report on the Exploratory Surveys 1877".

plains, chasing buffalo, and freely following cross country trails, is being replaced by a confined life based on property, where commodities, not people, move. Mennonites were an integral part of this new civilization. In the 1870s they were in on the creation of a new Manitoba; part of a powerful agricultural civilization overriding the pre-existing, vulnerable hunting civilization. Awareness of the Mennonite-Native Peoples connection is increasing, and Professor Leo Driedger, Dora Dueck, and Sarah Hiebert, have discussed early Mennonite relations with Native peoples.

Before we leave the Fleming map, I want, as an important aside, to say something about the urban system it so vividly foreshadows. The urban system must be emphasized in any study of Mennonites because it is a vital element in the enor-

mous pressure that the larger Canadian society was to exert in the future on the Mennonite communities. It can be considered an unconscious pressure; that is, the larger society made no deliberate effort to use the urban system as an instrument of change, or to even read it that way. Just by existing, by being there, the urban system represented a potent alternate society to Mennonite life in the farm villages. Of course, Mennonites as commercial farmers were part of this system. Indeed, almost from the time that they came to Manitoba some Mennonites actively participated as entrepreneurs in that commercial society, as is increasingly shown by recent research. Let me give you an example. In Manitoba's official Diamond Jubilee publication of 1930 there is an intriguing photograph of about 1880, part of an important full-page spread devoted to discussing early shipping and commerce in the province. The photograph shows two substantial men on a street in Winnipeg: one is Erdman Penner, the other Otto Schultz. Let me read from the accompanying story:

He [Otto Schultz] and a Mr. Penner went into the flat boat business, supplying the Mennonites, etc., with necessities of life, and continued to do so until the steel arrived. They then have the distinction of building the first line of stores in Manitoba, stretching from Gretna to Morden. Later the business was confined to Winnipeg. Their store at Niverville was established in 1878. Schultz & Penner shipped the first carloads of grain for export from Winnipeg through the United States and to the markets of the world.⁶

John Dyck has written on Erdman Penner, and his association with Schultz, a businessman of German descent, and there are errors in the above passage, but the important point here is that a few entrepreneurial Mennonites, directly upon their arrival in Manitoba, made use of that urban system -- that alternate society -- we saw forming on the Fleming map.⁷ And in Manitoba's Diamond Jubilee official monograph Mr. Penner was recognized for his contribution to the economic development of Manitoba.

But back to space and landscape. So far we have only examined the land of the East Reserve, though I have been laying the groundwork for a look at the West Reserve.

Arnold Dyck in his novel *Koop en Bua opp Reise*, set in the 1930s, indirectly catches the special challenge of settling the West Reserve. Dyck rarely describes the broad Manitoba landscape; instead, in the travels of his characters westward across the province there are vignettes of the local relief at the banks of the Red River or in the deep Pembina Valley, and, of course, the frustration these breaks in terrain caused our travelers. We have to turn to Dyck's description of Saskatchewan to get the essential generic characteristics of the land just to the west of the Red. Driving on the plain west of Regina toward Herbert, Saskatchewan, the four travelers find nothing to see, there is nothing alive. Over-awed and deeply disturbed in this flat, treeless, empty land, they are frightened by the relentless space and loneliness. Dyck even terms the land "a wilderness." Then they run out of

gasoline. After due deliberation, one of the party, Wiens, goes off on foot, heading westward carrying an empty can, to find gas: “Dee dree opp’e Koa weare wada stell jeworde enn kjitjte Wiense hinjarun. See sage, woo hee langsomm kjarta word. Eascht felua hee de Been, dann daut Meddelstetj, dann uck dän Kopp. Enn Stootje daunst siene Mets dann noch auleen bowr’e Ead, oba mett eenmol duckt uck dee unja.”⁸

You see, Wiens had reached the “end of the earth” - that conceptual margin I described to you in the map Peter Fidler transcribed from Indian knowledge - and suddenly he was gone. In my view, Dyck’s description of the land, represents symbolically the stark, overwhelming environment that Mennonite colonists faced in the West Reserve. [In the discussion at the end of the talk, Professor Al Reimer, combining Dyck and Ki oo cus, kindly explained to the audience where Wiens had gone. If you read *Koop en Bua* you will find that Wiens, who headed west and after some hours inexplicably returned from the east, must have walked right around the world. Fortunately he now carried a full can of gas. Clearly, once you reach the “end of the earth” anything can happen.]

We have a wonderful opportunity to see the landscape Arnold Dyck described, that is, as it existed in Manitoba, in a photograph taken in September, 1872, by a member of the International Boundary Commission Survey, shooting from a high vantage point at North Pembina, directly across the river from present Emerson. The photographer pointed his camera toward Rosenfeld of today. In the foreground



Figure 4 - On the threshold of the West Reserve in September, 1872. The U.S. crew surveying the 49th parallel is camped at North Pembina, Manitoba, but the important thing to look at is the empty, treeless, sublime, challenging landscape in the far distance, which Mennonites began to enter about three years after this photograph was taken

is a sentry and the neatly composed square of the surveyors' tents, but for us the important part of the scene is in the far distance: the absolutely bare, absolutely level plain - the difficult environment the Mennonites began to move into three years after this photograph was taken. It is the kind of land that the *Koop en Bua* sojourners experienced in Saskatchewan.

To sum up, these then are the contrasting *spaces* the Mennonites colonized in Manitoba in the 1870s: first, the Edge of the East Reserve, and second, the terrifying, sublime, plain of the West Reserve. How did they cope on these lands?

The Mennonite *Darp* and Going on Foot

Since 1960, a number of very fine histories of various Mennonite villages have been written, including books on Blumenort, Blumenfeld and Reinland. And I am sure there are others. Moreover, there is much source material in Hanover Steinbach Historical Society's magazine *Preservings*, and documents series on the East and West Reserve have been published. These sources, many new to me, contain marvelous material, and I want to pick up a few of their themes. In particular, I have always wanted to know what life was like in the villages, and from these publications we can learn much of this.

Hold on a moment. I used that magical phrase the *New World* above. In one way, of course, the Mennonites were entering a New World by crossing the Atlantic to North America, as other millions of immigrants had done and were going to continue to do. In another sense it was **not** a New World that the Mennonites were heading toward. It was a land where they intended to re-establish the culture they were bringing with them, something their forebears had done before. But every culture is dynamic; nor does it exist in isolation. Who knew what would develop? That lay in the future. In the meantime, when they arrived in Manitoba in the 1870s the Mennonites set about, insofar as possible, in creating their own communities in the traditional ways they had known.

Much organizing had to be done to establish the Mennonite village settlements. For the thousands of individual immigrants who applied for homesteads in the government's regular rectangular survey, that had been so swiftly laid out across the West, the homesteading procedures and pattern of dispersed settlement had been planned and fixed by the federal authorities and their land surveyors. This was not so for the Mennonites. Apart from the size of the homestead, and the framework of the land survey, they laid out their settlements on their own plan. Their first months in the new lands were complicated: they had to organize villages, locate them, decide who would go where, lay out village streets, and measure out lots. In a few instances entire villages from South Russia settled as a complete village in Manitoba, though that was likely exceptional. Dozens of new communities were almost instantly created. Just the administrative complexity of arranging the new settlements in both land reserves boggles the mind. Some of the details of how this was done - the arrangements made, including a few village agreements that

were signed by all the farmers in a village - have emerged in the new research. I'm sure as investigations continue much more will be pieced together on this astonishing period when a novel kind of agricultural landscape for North America was imprinted on the land. And it was a pleasant landscape.

In any literature on pioneer life in North America, whether in Ontario, the United States, or elsewhere, a great deal is always made of planting orchards and gardens, once settlers get past the initial hard toil of locating on the land. Orchards and gardens symbolize the creating of a home. Listen to this eloquent passage, quoted from Peter Zacharias's history of Reinland. It is from the reminiscences, written many years after the events described, of Jacob Fehr (1859-1952) who migrated in 1875 from Kronsthal, Chortitza, to Reinland in the West Reserve. Note the precise, touching, memories of a 16-year old boy, saying good-bye:

When I had observed all these things (cherry and plum trees)... I walked out of the garden and closed the gate. I remained standing at the gate and looked at the garden once more and said to myself, "I will never again enjoy your fruit." My eye filled with tears. Thereupon I left the garden, walked across the yard, and entered the house where they were busily packing different articles that were to be taken along to America.⁹

Once in Manitoba young Jacob Fehr spent six weeks on the banks of the Red River, close to where that 1872 photograph of the boundary surveyors' camp and the Manitoba prairie was taken, presumably while the men were out selecting sites for villages and measuring out lots. He calls the banks of the Red a "place of mourning," of "sadness." Why? "There was still a yearning for the true friends which had to be left behind, for the beautiful *Heimat* with its precious orchards. Here in contrast, we saw only a rolling prairie."¹⁰ That rolling prairie was the kind of terrifying landscape Arnold Dyck had described.

In Manitoba, Mennonite settlers soon planted seeds for gardens, and seedlings for trees: they were making homes. On each side of the village streets carefully placed trees quickly grew. A shelter was being created, a shield against the wilderness. To appreciate what a village is, and in small part grasp what it means to live there, you have to walk it, as you can still do today in the villages of the West Reserve. It is then that you begin to feel the village.

Let me, accordingly, turn to walking, going on foot, and after that continue on to consider relations between villages. You can learn much about these topics from the journals kept by ministers, since ministers in the nature of their responsibilities did a lot of traveling. In August, 1874, Rev. David Stoesz walked eleven miles from his new home at Bergthal, East Reserve, near present Blumenort, to the immigration sheds, near today's Niverville, to deal with some problems. In 1877, he traveled twelve to thirteen miles by oxen and sleigh to visit someone in another village; but shortly afterwards he began to use horses.¹¹ In the early years in the East Reserve it is often recorded that men walked thirty or so miles to Winnipeg for supplies. Royden Loewen describes in his book on Blumenort how on January 5, 1875, seventeen brethren walked to Gruenfeld (near today's Kleefeld) for a brotherhood

meeting, about nine miles and three hours from their home in newly founded Blumenort.¹² Environment Canada has Winnipeg weather records for that day: the minimum temperature was -30.4°C and the maximum -3°C, and the sky was clear - weather in the East Reserve would have been very similar. In my mind I see this cluster of men heading directly toward Gruenfeld, the edge of the woods on their left, and surely the bare beginnings of shelters in some of the new villages were in sight as they trudged across the snow-swept prairie. In the West Reserve, in the history of Reinland, we learn that young people would walk from Schoenfeld, north of present Winkler, to Reinland for baptismal instruction services - about fourteen miles one way.¹³ These examples suffice to indicate one way in which people got about in the early years.

Royden Loewen reports four ways of conveying news in the villages - let's say it is an invitation to a wedding -- walking down the street and telling folk the news; circulating one copy of a letter, with people passing it on from house to house along the village street; a courier system arranged amongst neighbouring villages; and later on by mail.¹⁴

One of the best ways to appreciate the constant traveling within the Mennonite communities is by reading Rev. Heinrich Friesen's journal. He lived in Hochfeld, near Blumenort in the East Reserve, and always seems to have been off somewhere by buggy or sleigh. He made numerous trips to Bergfeld, a distance of seventeen to twenty miles from Hochfeld, depending on which route he took, which was his longest journey, and to many other villages lying in between. A typical trip was February 25th and 26th, 1905, on a Saturday and Sunday. He reached Rosengard, nine miles south from home, by Saturday noon; for *faspa* he was in Schoenberg two miles away; and he spent the night in Burwalde, another two miles on. Sunday morning he was in church in Burwalde, presumably participating in the church service; that afternoon he travelled back north seven miles to visit someone in Ebenfeld, and then continued on another four to five miles back home to Hochfeld.¹⁵ Rev. Friesen's son Abraham, often helped out doing farm work in villages close to Hochfeld, travelling back and forth from home. Connections between villages were frequent, but it is also easy to exaggerate the social associations favoured by close proximity. Research is throwing much new light on the cultural aspects of these connections, analyzing marriage records for example, and it shows that despite close spacing of villages, social bonds within each village, and within religious denominations, remained strong.

Nowadays, of course, all this travelling continues. As you learn in Armin Wiebe's *Salvation of Yasch Siemens* young folk walk in the village, drive vehicles on the middle road and along the double dyke, and tool up and down the paved roads. In David Bergen's, *A Year of Lesser*, everyone seems to be constantly in motion, speeding somewhere along the highways, between town and farm, town and rural residence, or heading to more distant places.

There were regular, even if not close, connections between the villages and the outside world, that is to Winnipeg and the trading towns. I don't have time to discuss the towns, important as they are, and that is why earlier on I at least

introduced the urban system and the role of Erdman Penner. There were small stores in the villages, but the village streets did not become commercial streets except in Steinbach, and that special case is not our story tonight. Here our concern is the character of the farm villages, and what can still be seen of the old village landscapes in the West Reserve. Not only the street, but the side ditches, fences, and trees, and also the buildings. In Reinland, Peter Zacharias speaks of the villages as an expression of community, and with great insight considers the role of the recent buildings that have been put up amongst the old. He says that the modern bungalow "seems to be at ease with the village", and "it is imperative that they [the bungalows] speak the language of the *darf*."¹⁶

In my interviews in the 1950s, time and time again, I learned about the reasons for the break-up of the land arrangements associated with the farm villages, but I did not obtain any clear information on the legal procedures that were involved, though I often wondered about it. Now documents are appearing on the legal process associated with the land changes, and we are learning how the land transfers were done. It was not easy; transferring property can be a very vexing task. The numerous, old, long, narrow, farm strips (*koagel* in Low German), cultivated from the villages, are all long since gone, but farm villages remain in the West Reserve, and farmers go out from the villages remaining to work quarter sections. [It was only on this visit to Winnipeg that I learned about the work Parks Canada is doing to preserve Neuberghthal in the West Reserve as a National Heritage site. This is going ahead just in time. Peter Priess has kindly sent me copies of their reports.]¹⁷

In the recent books, essays and biographies that have been published I have learned much about village society, but I have time to make only two brief references to this life. Health care was provided for within the community. What particularly demonstrated and incisively personified this for me was the important local role of mid-wives described in so many biographies of Mennonite women. They were intrepid community health workers, and were kept extremely busy. Birth rates were high, and families large. That was entirely characteristic of this period in all parts of Canada, including, for example, Québec and Ontario.

Another thing that shines through in biographies is the vital role of the family in the community. In this hard working rural society, if a husband or wife died it was necessary to maintain the family structure. This is very evident from the accounts of second or even third marriages. If one unfortunately became a widow or widower and there were children, there was a tendency to marry quickly again so that life in complete households could continue. Another important element of life in the early Mennonite community is the relationship to the larger society, and I turn to that theme next.

The Mennonite Will and the Non-Mennonite Mind

Anyone who lived in Steinbach in the 1950s and hung around Derksen Printers, as I did, soon got to know "newspaperman" Armour Mackay. Armour, as he in-

sisted on being called, even by my five-year old daughter, was a good friend of [printer] Eugene Derksen's, indeed, of all Mennonites, and an indefatigable worker for the general good of Manitoba. Armour Mackay was a deeply contemplative writer. For some years he was the *Winnipeg Tribune's* western Manitoba correspondent based in Brandon, and knew Manitoba well. In June, 1941, he published an article in *Saturday Night* magazine titled "Can Canada Assimilate the Ontario Mind."¹⁸ I have pilfered my heading from Armour Mackay, although I have modified it a little so the meaning is clearer. Mennonites in Manitoba, of course, associated with the non-Mennonite society around them, and Manitoba until the years between the World Wars was very much possessed by the Ontario Mind referred to by Armour Mackay, to which I will return later.

Before I look at the social context within which the Mennonites lived in Manitoba, I want to provide a broad historical Canadian framework, and briefly describe and categorize some very general attitudes that ethnic groups in Canada over time, have held toward one another. My generalizations are based in large part on ideas expressed by the sociologist Nathan Keyfitz. Until approximately the mid-nineteenth century there generally was a feeling of **indifference** and **tolerance** toward different ethnic groups, simply because settlements were isolated and there was limited contact between groups. Then, after the time of Charles Darwin, there was a period of **racist** beliefs; that there were biologically inferior and superior human stocks, and that northern folk were of superior stock. You find this sort of thinking in books written at the turn of the nineteenth century. The 1890s to the 1940s was a period of **assimilation**, with the larger British and French Canadian societies wanting to make good Canadians of the diverse immigrant population that was increasingly important in Canada. After the 1940s there has been a period of **acculturation**, with a greater appreciation and respect for other ethnic groups than one's own. Of course, there is much overlap in the time periods, and at any given time all attitudes have co-existed, as indeed they do today, but the four categories provide a useful perspective on what has been most characteristic in given periods. At all times there will inevitably be interaction between cultural groups, and from the research being done by Mennonite historians we are learning more and more of the associations of Mennonites with other social groups. When Mennonites settled in Manitoba they experienced the first category in the framework above, i.e. considerable indifference and also tolerance, and then somewhat later the third category, i.e. strong attempts at assimilation into the larger society.

I want to approach the theme of Mennonite interrelationships with the larger society through asking whether there was any exceptionalism within Canada in the treatment of Mennonites as a collective group. That is, did Mennonites receive any special consideration that was not available to other Canadian citizens? To do this in the time I have available, let me just quickly identify particular issues, without going into any detail. Mennonites were given large land reserves for their exclusive settlement, but that was not really exceptional treatment because the federal government which was in charge of natural resources in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta until 1930 made special land arrangements for many groups. As pacifists,

Mennonites were given exemption from military service as part of the agreement in migrating to Canada, and had special, that is, exceptional, collective rights. Professor Adolf Ens has explained this exceptional treatment very clearly.¹⁹ There was religious freedom in Canada, but because Mennonite churches were closely involved in internal community administration and education, complications arose in these matters in relationships with the state. Participation in local municipal administration was a problem for Mennonites because many believed in a fundamental separation of the Mennonite communities and the state, or at least as much as possible in a democracy. This relationship has been studied by a number of scholars, and there will likely be considerable more research in the future on the issue. The presence of towns that were fully functioning constituent parts of the Canadian urban system was, of course, a very salient factor in the development of local government amongst the Mennonite communities. These are all important issues, but the only one that I have time to discuss in a little more detail is education.

Education was a vital meeting place of Mennonites and the larger society. Schools are so vitally important in all our lives, and generate so much heart-felt personal advocacy, because it is almost impossible to direct the course of cultural change except through schools. Children, parents, and the whole local community are all part of that process. Just imagine how today we are always up in arms about our schools, and then project the same feelings back into the Mennonite communities of over a hundred years ago.

Two school systems that profoundly affected the course of Mennonite education were introduced into Manitoba in the 1870s. Each was structured in part by an extremely formidable educational leader. One was Johann Cornies, active in the 1840s in reforming the Mennonite school system in Russia, and the other was Egerton Ryerson, instrumental in the 1840s to 1870s in creating the public school system in Ontario, on which numerous other provincial systems in English-speaking Canada were based. Let me summarize their respective positions. Cornies stressed and supported: teaching in German; basic literacy (because reading the bible was important so that all Mennonites could personally interpret holy scripture); schools financed by the community; the establishment of a model school; high standards of instruction; a system that was inward looking rather than exploratory with respect to the great world of learning. The last point has to be qualified because by the time of the 1870s migration to North America Mennonites in Russia were beginning to introduce more advanced forms of education. Ryerson stressed and supported: teaching in English; basic literacy; that education is a public good so the state is necessarily involved; that in a democracy every child must be educated because this benefits the whole community; "free" schools, that is, schools financed by local property taxes without special fees; a highly centralized curriculum and authorized textbooks to be used exclusively; normal schools to ensure high consistent teaching standards; and provision for higher education. There is some convergence of ideas in the two school systems, but clashes were inevitable, particularly over language.

On their arrival in Manitoba, Mennonites immediately established their own schools, but before long larger outside events forced changes that caused tremen-

dous stress in the community. These external events have been thoroughly, even endlessly, discussed by Canadian historians, and I can only itemize them here. First, Franco-Manitobans and the English-speaking majority in the province battled over the use of French in the schools, and the issue of the compulsory use of the English language in schools was as traumatic for the Mennonites and their use of German as it was for the Franco-Manitobans and their use of French. Second, the availability of public funds based on real property for the support of public schools proved divisive amongst Mennonites, some of whom were tempted to forsake their self-financed private schools for the more broadly financed public schools. Third, the continued migration of non-British folk to Manitoba engendered fear of a fragmented provincial social fabric in the larger society, and the public schools were regarded as essential institutions for the desired Canadianization, the assimilation of these newcomers. Fourth, the flag issue of 1906, that is, compulsory flying of the Union Jack in Manitoba schools, raised concern amongst pacifist Mennonites. Fifth, World War I unleashed anti-German feeling in Canada in which the German-speaking and pacifist Mennonites were collaterally caught. Sixth, there was insistence by the Manitoba Department of Education on a uniform prescribed curriculum and authorized texts, a consequence of Ryerson's extreme views on standardization. Seventh, provincial legislation was passed in 1916 that made English the sole language of instruction in all Manitoba schools, and made school attendance compulsory. Compulsory school attendance was an effective lever to enforce conformity to all provincial education regulations. It is worth noting that compulsory attendance had been long delayed in Manitoba compared to some other provinces. In Ontario compulsory attendance was legislated into law in 1871 and in Nova Scotia in 1882.

In the Mennonite communities there were serious differences over these various provincial education regulations as they were introduced over their first half century of living in Manitoba. Some Mennonites were for public schools, and were willing to accommodate English instruction; others supported private schools and strongly resisted the English language. The existence of the urban system, and the outside society that it represented, was an important factor in affecting the thinking of those Mennonites who supported the public school system. There was much contention amongst Mennonites, and an important point to bear in mind is that there were profound, deeply held convictions on both sides of the school issue. This made the cleavages within the Mennonite community all the more difficult and poignant. It did not help that some Mennonites felt that the *Privilegium* of 1873 had guaranteed Mennonites their own school system, which in fact in its final precise legal language it had not done. In any event, education was a provincial not a federal responsibility, so the school issues were fought out within Manitoba. The upshot of the struggle was that conservative Mennonites felt that their educational entitlements in Manitoba and Canada were shattered, in the same way Franco-Manitobans felt that their entitlements were overridden. The school controversies set in motion the departure of about 7,700 Mennonites from Manitoba and Saskatchewan to Mexico and Paraguay in the 1920s. In 1921, just before the migra-

tions began, there were 21,300 Mennonites in Manitoba and 20,500 in Saskatchewan; about 23 percent of Manitoba Mennonites left for Latin America, and 17 percent of Saskatchewan Mennonites.

Could this confrontation have been handled differently? Here I am most interested in basic attitudes, in underlying feelings. Let us turn back to Armour Mackay. He wrote in the article I referred to earlier that he had observed a mind in Manitoba, bred in Ontario, that was closed, stiff, intolerant, resistant to examining new ideas, and unwilling to compromise. I would add that there was in this mind a fear of the new highly varied society that had been emerging since the 1870s as a consequence of continued immigration to the Prairies, particularly from Eastern Europe. Armour Mackay, wisely, says that not all the Manitobans stemming from Ontario had the difficult qualities he described. Of course, some Mennonites had similar characteristics -- many folks do. There was rigidity on both sides, and as a result an incredible thing happened. Almost one quarter of Manitoba Mennonites left Canada. The Manitoba government of the day did not sufficiently take into account what it was doing to the culture of a minority group through its school regulations. (We should not forget that the new school regulations of 1916 applied to all minority groups in Manitoba.) Sadly, that sort of consideration and respect has only become part of our value system since the 1950s. Value systems were different in the 1910s and 1920s. There was no general outrage in this province of 610,000 people as thousands of Mennonites departed. Much compromise and understanding would have been required from government authorities who held power, and that wisdom just wasn't there.

The recently introduced, and very widely thrown around, term "ethnic cleansing" has been used to describe what transpired when almost 8,000 Canadian Mennonites left Canada in the 1920s. It is inappropriate, because it is not a precise usage. The entire issue of the Mennonite migration is complex. The thinking of the provincial officials, and both the motives and procedures of the provincial cabinet and bureaucracy have to be carefully studied before we know what lay behind their actions and inactions in that period. Clearly the whole background of provincial policy needs thorough investigation: perhaps some cabinet documents and personal correspondence are left that record the views of the government and the beliefs of its members as they were expressed and held at the time.

There is no question that this was a period when the mind-set of Canada was assimilationist. Yet at the same time there was also considerable appreciation of Mennonites and other non-British groups by members of the larger society. For instance, A. G. Bradley, one of the finest observers to write on Canada at the turn of nineteenth century wrote in 1903:

The Mennonites have been in the North-West more than a quarter of a century, and are only now beginning to give way in some sort to modern influences. Even if it takes another two generations to make Canadians of them, what matters it? In the meantime they are far better pioneers than a great many of those English-speaking emigrants that Canada is not unnaturally striving mainly to attract will eventually prove.²⁰

And more particularly, there are some comments from an official government report of 1926, *Unused Lands of Manitoba*, requested by John Bracken, Premier of Manitoba from 1922 to 1943, that reveal the thinking of the time:

In the segregated communities [i.e. solid block settlements] the process of Canadianization is considerably slower. . . . The Canadianization of these new settlers is a matter which must be considered, and in doing so it must not be forgotten that each of these nationalities has some contribution to make to our civilization. The process of Canadianization must not be one of repression, but a real assimilation in which their contribution shall not be left out. . . . In order to understand the problem of Canadianizing the non-Anglo-Saxon, and to appreciate the contribution each type may make to our national life, it is necessary to study the history, customs, ideals and standards of living of each class. Only by so doing can the leaders of our national life lay plans for the complete assimilation of the many elements of our cosmopolitan population, and to encourage immigration from these countries whose people can make the best contributions to our national life.²¹

There is a special note on Mennonites:

Let it not be imagined for one moment that the Mennonites have made no contribution to our development. Their methods may not always be the most up-to-date, but in the early days they showed the possibility of wheat growing and general farming; they demonstrated that a good living was obtainable and that money could be made farming on the plains. Long before the Manitoba Rural Credits Act was dreamed of Mennonites borrowed from their brethren at three and three and a half per cent when banks and loan companies would take only select risks at eight per cent. The Manitoba Settlers' Annual Purchase Act, popularly known as the Winkler Cow Scheme, was acknowledged by its originator to be an idea borrowed from the Mennonites.²²

And comments on settlers of French origin follow:

Settlers of this type are apt to segregate and maintain their language, customs, and religious ideals. The language question has been worn threadbare by arguments, and it would seem the true solution of the problem of assimilating the French type lies in sympathetic and intelligent co-operation rather than in opposition or even in compromise.²³

You can see that the problem of relationships amongst ethnic groups is raised in both Bradley and in the official government document. Yet despite many tolerant expressive words, the larger society, as indicated in the sentiments expressed in *Unused Lands of Manitoba*, still did not appreciate that equality amongst ethnic groups is a fundamental and essential characteristic of a truly multicultural society. The underlying idea of assimilation was still dominant. On occasion, indeed all too

often, such assimilationist ideas are evident in our society today, as a reading of the daily press reveals. Nowadays, Mennonites to a considerable extent are part of the larger Canadian society, and are not immune to such thinking.

Proceeding onward from how the Mennonite and non-Mennonite minds met in institutional situations, let us turn next to cultural expressions of the Mennonite community.

Creating a Culture Area and the Literary World of Mennonites

Few local regions are widely known in Canada. To indicate what I mean by a local region, the province of Alberta, for example, has two such regions that all here will recognize because they are so well known across the entire country, the foothills and the Peace River Country. Both have very distinctive regional cultures, and descriptions by authors of those areas have been very important in helping to create those regions in our imaginations. But what about the Mennonite communities? How well are they known in the country?

The Mennonite Reserves were well known in Canada in the 1870s and 1880s. Interest in the Reserves was widespread, because they represented successful endeavours in settling the Great Plains, lands recognized as difficult and essentially unknown to potential agriculturalists at the time of the Mennonites arrival. Then interest in the Reserves as a local region faded away in Canada as the urban system of the West developed, and the wheat staple of that great larger region - the Prairies - became the economic engine of Canadian development and caught the Canadian imagination.

Certainly the Red River Valley is well known on occasion in Canada, and the Valley is in part Mennonite country, that is, the Mennonite culture area. (I use Mennonite country because the word reserve is little used today.) The Red River Valley sometimes returns to Canadian public consciousness through catastrophes such as the great Manitoba Floods of 1950 and 1997. But those are episodic events, and represent only fleeting regional recognitions.

During the 1960s to the 1990s, however, there was a firmer, a more lasting, return of the Mennonite country to Canadian public consciousness through writing. In 1990, Professor Robert Kroetsch chaired and participated in a panel discussion on Mennonite writing at a conference in Waterloo, Ontario. In what was the closing session of the conference he said:

Another genre that I noticed as I listened was landscape itself. It seems to me that southern Manitoba might at this point be the most inscribed landscape in Canada. I remember touring in the dales of England and being oppressed after about two days. Every rock had been sat upon by a Wordsworth or a Dorothy at least. And all of this heavy inscription. And I now feel I could spend days touring southern Manitoba with a sense that everything had been inscribed, as I say, written down. I like that, that in Canada finally we have a landscape that is a literary text and

that might be the greatest accomplishment of the Mennonite writer so far as that vast text that is southern Manitoba is concerned.²⁴

I want to refer to two aspects of that writing in connection with the Mennonite communities.

First, the preservation of documents and the writing of histories are absolutely essential. What has been accomplished in this regard in the Mennonite communities is highly impressive. It is, of course, not unique because all groups in Canada are doing the same thing these days. People are inherently interested in their own community's background. The Mennonite historical societies are compiling much valuable data on family matters, and collecting church records, personal diaries, and business records, copying government documents, and the like. And now we are getting more and more village histories and biographies. Family origins and experiences are being revealed through this work. As you will have noticed, and I am very grateful for this, much of my talk tonight is based on this new and rapidly growing material.

Second, culture areas are brought to life through creative artists. Novelists, poets, artists, and musicians are creating a more widely recognized perception of the Mennonite country. Their work is particularly important because though regions are based on the reality out there, that is, the chaos that is the surface of the earth, regions actually only exist in the mind. Writers, and I will stick with them in my discussion tonight, need outlets for their work. Therefore, in the process of inventing the modern conception of the Mennonite country newspapers and journals have been and remain very important -- publications such as the *Steinbach Post*, *Carillon News*, *Altona Echo*, *Canadian Mennonite*, *Mennonite Mirror*, *Preservings*, and *Rhubarb*.

It is astonishing, as Kroetsch says, how much good creative writing is coming from the Manitoba Mennonite communities. The best writing comes out of the local and regional experience of the individual, and out of familiarity with geographical, historical, and other creative works. Out of this background talented writers bring to life and delineate the Mennonite culture region. I want to draw your attention to three kinds of writing, poetry, humour, and novels.

Poets give us the most concentrated and incisive ideas. Their thoughts spring out of deeply personal experiences, and cut to the heart of personal relationships; often those are of growing up and reflect rebellion against a restrictive environment. Poets are more historical in their reflections than novelists. They must be brave because they are exposing their angst; and their work is very often explosive and unsettling. Amongst important poets who tell us about the Mennonite communities through their own experiences are Di Brandt, Pat Friesen, and Audrey Poetker.

Much humour and wild comedy is being produced by Mennonites. These creative works convey deep cultural undertones, based on the human qualities of the region, emerging out of life in Low German, the background of long established church customs, and the myriad tensions and comic possibilities rising out of rural/urban and restrictive/more open contrasting ways. Of special note is the fact that

the Mennonite humorous novels cut decisively across many social strata. Books or essays by Arnold Dyck, Paul Hiebert, Jack Thiessen, Miriam Toews, and Armin Wiebe preserve something very important: the essence of Low German culture, close to soil, family, and kin.

More conventional narrative novels and short stories present either the full context of the Manitoba culture area, or of the places where the Mennonites came from in Russia. They provide virtually an anthropological portrayal: life in the *darpa*, the landscape, folkways, neighbouring, the importance or non-importance of the church, family tensions, associations with non-Mennonite cultures, a modern life of movement - almost a highway culture, and insight into social situations, including class distinctions. You can readily think of the books and essays by David Bergen, Delbert Plett, Al Reimer, and Armin Wiebe.

Many cultural changes have taken place in the Mennonite communities of southern Manitoba, including the arrival of new Mennonite immigrants from Russia (Russländer) in the 1920s even as others left for Latin America. Another important change, characteristic of North American society generally, is that people move readily and are constantly in motion. Today in the old Mennonite culture area of southern Manitoba there are well established communities, very complete institutionally, and complex enough socially to be interesting in themselves, although the young often do not think so. But there is much movement within the communities and to distant parts, to Winnipeg and beyond. Thus there are two contrasting Mennonite societies in Manitoba, a long-established culture area where Mennonite culture and institutions are still very apparent, and a remarkably different one of the city. This dichotomy, this tension between the local and the distant, delineates today's Manitoba Mennonite world. This dichotomous existence, too, is very much the world of artists, and is reflected in their work. Mennonite artists, convey in their work what is important to them in their community. And if they get it right, it speaks to the members of that community. The best artists let us see ourselves, and deepen our understanding of the Mennonite culture area. This may hurt. If the writing is first class, and gives an insight into human life in general, the work will have a universal resonance and be of interest to other communities. And that is what Robert Kroetsch means when he says that a new landscape - or culture area in my geographical terms - is being inscribed within Canada.

Conclusion

Very few material things in the world last. You well might say that the Pyramids and Stonehenge have. Perhaps. But it is spiritual ideas, good research, and literary works that truly last.

In Canada it is quite amazing for a regional cultural group concentrated in a relatively small area, such as the Mennonite communities, to retain its identity within an identifiable territory. There is great staying power in the Mennonite cultural group within its culture area. Why? For one thing, many Mennonites remain in

the area their forebears settled, despite the modern tendency to move to cities, because opportunities have been created to make a living. This cultural concentration gives the region a firm identity. Thus the long term success of the 1870s search for land in North America - and a reserve - is demonstrated by the Mennonite culture area of today. Certainly there have been great changes, but the Mennonite communities in a living way - a folk way - are still amazingly distinctive. There is a second powerful reason for this strong persisting distinctiveness. As I have just argued, Mennonites know themselves through their creative artists. And this recognition increasingly extends well beyond the Mennonite communities.

So, in some ways through writing history and literature we have come back to where we were in the 1870s and '80s, being well known in the land, despite being "die Stillen im Lande." Now the task will be to get people to visit the Mennonite culture area - the actual landscape - described in the burgeoning Mennonite creative literature. I myself have had very little opportunity to travel the side roads or visit the *darpa* for some time. Yet it is important to do so. It is on the side roads and in the *darpa* where we get a personal sense of what Mennonites created in the early years on the land.

In the June, 1999, issue of *Preservings* I read how in 1912 a young man, Abraham Wiebe, later an honoured scientist, walked from Bergfeld to Steinbach along the ridge road to look for a job -- **twelve** miles, barefoot.²⁵ I don't suggest you do that. But do stop your cars, get out, and follow the paths, not the sidewalks: the paths speak the language of the *darpa* and of the landscape of the *struckfoarma*.

In concluding, I want to express my particular appreciation to the non-academics who are working on local histories, gathering documents, and writing biographies. That represents great personal dedication, and personal fulfillment as well. University persons such as myself are expected to do research (as well as teach) as part of our pay package. It is true that many university people have a special research interest in Mennonite studies because of their Mennonite background. But it is those persons who volunteer their free time who are truly at the heart of recovering the history of Mennonite settlement. All power to you.²⁶

Notes

¹ Patrick Friesen, "backbone beat," *St. Mary at Main*, (Winnipeg, 1998), 37.

² David Bergen, *See the Child*, (Toronto, 1996), 16.

³ Fidler, (1817 map), "A Plan of the Route pursued by the Halfbreeds and other servants of the North West Company on the 19th June 1816 according to the information of Antoine Decharme who drove one of their two Carts on that occasion, and referred to in the affidavit of Peter Fidler of the 4th of August 1817 - signed P. Fidler", in John Warkentin and Richard I. Ruggles, editors, *Manitoba Historical Atlas*, (Winnipeg: 1970), 186

⁴ Peter Fidler, (1802 map), "Ki oo cus's Map of Area from the Red Deer River South to the Missouri River. 1802", in Richard I. Ruggles, *A Country so Interesting: The Hudson's Bay*

Company and Two Centuries of Mapping, 1670 - 1870, (Montreal: 1991), 144

⁵ Sandford Fleming, "Map of the Country to be Traversed by the Canadian Pacific Railway to Accompany Progress Report on the Exploratory Surveys 1877", in *Report on Surveys and Preliminary Operation on the Canadian Pacific Railway up to January 1877 by Sandford Fleming, Engineer-In-Chief*, (Ottawa: 1877).

⁶ Province of Manitoba, *Manitoba's Diamond Jubilee*, (Winnipeg, 1930), 80.

⁷ John Dyck, "Erdman Penner", *Historical Sketches of the East Reserve 1874 -1910, Villages, Biographies, Institutions*, John Dyck ed., (Steinbach, Manitoba: 1994), 287 - 294

⁸ Arnold Dyck, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, *Koop enn Bua opp Reise*, Al Reimer ed. (Winnipeg, 1986), 81 - 82.

⁹ Peter D. Zacharias, *Reinland: An Experience in Community*, (Altona, Manitoba, 1976), 34.

¹⁰ Zacharias, 35.

¹¹ David Stoesz, *Journal of, Historical Sketches of the East Reserve 1874 -1910, Villages, Biographies, Institutions*, John Dyck ed. (Steinbach, Manitoba: 1994), 417, 419.

¹² Royden Loewen, *Blumenort: A Mennonite Community in Transition 1874 - 1983*, (Steinbach, Manitoba: 1984), 46.

¹³ Zacharias, 196.

¹⁴ Loewen, 93.

¹⁵ Heinrich Friesen, *Journals of, Historical Sketches of the East Reserve 1874 -1910, Villages, Biographies, Institutions*, John Dyck ed., (Steinbach, Manitoba: 1994), 465 - 596, 525.

¹⁶ Zacharias, 83.

¹⁷ Shelley Bruce, *Neuberghthal National Historic Site: Fence Study* (Winnipeg: Parks Canada, 1998) Frieda E. Klippenstein, *Neuberghthal National Historic Site: A Cultural Landscape History* (Winnipeg: Parks Canada, 1997). Peter J. Priess, *Neuberghthal National Historic Site: The Cultural Resources of Neuberghthal National Historic Site An Archaeological Perspective*, (Winnipeg: Parks Canada, 1998).

¹⁸ Armour Mackay, "Can Canada Assimilate the Ontario Mind", *Saturday Night*, June 28, 1941.

¹⁹ Adolf Ens, *Subjects or Citizens: The Mennonite Experience in Canada 1870 - 1925* (Ottawa: 1994).

²⁰ A.G. Bradley, *Canada in the Twentieth Century* (Westminster: 1903), 297

²¹ R.W. Murchie, and H. C. Grant *Unused Lands of Manitoba* (Winnipeg: 1926), 53-4.

²² Murchie and Grant, *Unused Lands*, 56.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Robert Kroetsch, Comments in closing panel discussion, *Acts of Concealment: Mennonite Writing In Canada*, Hildi Tiessen and Peter Hinchcliffe editors, (Waterloo, Ontario: 1992), 224.

²⁵ Roy H. Vogt, "The Light from Bergfeld: Abraham H. Wiebe", *Preservings*, No. 14, June, 1999, 91 - 92.

²⁶ Other works consulted for this paper include the following: David Bergen, *A Year of Lesser* (Toronto, 1996); Di Brandt, *Questions i asked my mother* (Winnipeg, 1987); *Agnes in the Sky*, (Winnipeg, 1990) Shelly Bruce, *Neuberghthal National Historic Site: Fence Study*, (Parks Canada, Winnipeg, 1998); Leo Driedger, "Native Rebellion and Mennonite Invasion: A Focus on Two Canadian River Valleys, *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 46 (1972), 290 - 300; Dora Dueck, "Whose Land", in Lawrence Klippenstein and Julius G. Toews, editors, *Mennonite Memories: Settling in Western Canada*, (Winnipeg, 1977), 45 - 49; Paul Hiebert, *Sarah Binks*, (Toronto, 1947); Susan Hiebert, "Indians, Metis and Mennonites", in Klippenstein and Toews,

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