

‘A mild form of deviancy’: Premarital Sex among early Manitoba Mennonites

Hans Werner, *University of Winnipeg*

Record number 310-1 of the *Reinländer Gemeindebuch*, a church register of early Mennonite immigrants from Russia, records the beginnings of a new household in the recently established village of Chortitz in Manitoba. Julius and Helena were married on July 1, 1877 in a ceremony likely held as part of the Sunday worship service in the church across from her parents' home. On their wedding day Julius was six months beyond his twentieth birthday and Helena two months shy of hers. Both were slightly younger than the average Mennonite couple entering their first marriage. Julius and Helena had both been baptized at Pentecost earlier that year and their record in the congregation's church register documents a pattern similar to that of other Mennonite families in Manitoba. It outlines aspects of their family life for the next twenty or so years before the family moved to the Hague settlement in the Northwest, later the Province of Saskatchewan. Julius and Helena produced fifteen children over a period of twenty-three years and all but three would reach adulthood. Closer examination of their church record reveals, however, that in the eyes of their community and church, Julius and Helena had sinned. The birth of their first

child, Elizabeth, less than seven months after their marriage, betrayed the fact that they had engaged in premarital sex.¹

In his introduction to a volume of essays examining the comparative history of illegitimate birth, Peter Laslett comments that “breaches of social rules,” such as sex before marriage in this case, “do not necessarily weaken those rules, and under certain circumstances can even serve to strengthen them.”² Mennonites who migrated to Manitoba in the 1870s certainly believed in and sought to reinforce the norm of restricting sexual activity to couples that had been married in a ceremony legitimized by the church and the community. Even breaches of the rule were an opportunity for the community to note its importance and to renew its validity.

The discussion that follows seeks to understand more clearly the nexus of religion, social and family relations, courtship, and sex before marriage. The norm among Mennonites was that sexual relations belonged exclusively within the bounds of a marriage relationship. This study will be limited to the particular case of sexual relations occurring before the first marriage. The clearest evidence that sex had occurred before marriage was of course the premature arrival of the first child. That was an embarrassment, to be sure, and in many individual cases may have been life-shaping. But for the period examined here I want to suggest that premarital sex among early Manitoba Mennonites was what historians Daniel Scott Smith and Michael Hindus term a “mild form of deviancy.” It could be termed “mild”, however, only if it was followed by the formation of a Mennonite household firmly set on a path contributing to village and church life.³ When it did not, or could not, result in marriage the consequences were more serious.

Two aspects of premarital sex among Manitoba Mennonites will be explored here. An analysis of the prevalence of premarital sex among the families of those who migrated to Manitoba’s West Reserve and would become Old Colony Mennonites, will be followed by a discussion of the community’s religious understandings of it, its attempts to limit it, and the social consequences of its becoming public knowledge when prenuptial conception resulted. Before embarking on this analysis, however, some background is needed on the subject of the population and church register that provides the main source for this study.

In the 1870s some Mennonites in Russia responded to the reforms of the Russian state that threatened their military exemption by seeking a new home on the Canadian prairies. Approximately one third of the estimated 45,000 Mennonites living in the Tsar’s empire left for North America in the 1870s, with about 7,000 of them choosing to make their home in two reserves set aside for them in Manitoba.⁴ When the first reserve (the East Reserve) in the area of the present-day city of

Steinbach in southeast Manitoba was full, another settlement began farther west on a second reserve in south-central Manitoba near the present-day communities of Altona and Winkler (the West Reserve).

In 1875, while waiting at the immigration sheds near Emerson, Manitoba before moving on to their designated lands, the settlers agreed that on the West Reserve they would constitute themselves as one congregation under the leadership of *Ältester* Johann Wiebe. Thus, the *Reinländer Mennoniten Gemeinde*, later more commonly known as the Old Colony Church, was born. The Old Colony Church was an organizational entity that arose in Manitoba and was dominated by settlers who had come from the Fuerstenland and Khortitza colonies in Russia; and while they maintained the basic outlook and practices of their Mennonite experience in Russia, under Johann Wiebe's leadership they responded conservatively to changes that inevitably came with their migration to the Canadian West. By 1880 immigrants from the Bergthal Colony in Russia, who had a less conservative orientation, began to migrate from the East Reserve to take up homesteads among their Old Colony predecessors. The Old Colony leadership responded to this influx by calling for a new registration of those who wished to maintain its more conservative orientation.

The Old Colony Mennonites of the West Reserve who chose to remain with their *Ältester* Johann Wiebe are the subjects of this study.⁵ In 1883 the group included 559 families, while in 1891, some ten years after the re-registration, the register's statistical summary counts 3948 souls, a number that includes the children of baptized adult members.⁶ The incursions of the state into education in the years leading up to and during the First World War would be the stimulus for the migration of most of the Old Colonists to Mexico in the 1920s.

What was the incidence of premarital sex among early Manitoba Old Colony Mennonites? It is of course impossible to obtain direct evidence for something so private. The church record kept by West Reserve Mennonites does, however, provide a window into patterns of sexuality on the eve of marriage. I am indebted to Manitoba Mennonite genealogists who have transcribed the church register begun in 1880 and to the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society for publishing the data in accessible and extensively cross-referenced forms.⁷ These records document marriages and the children born to families beginning in 1812 in Russia, the year of marriage for the first couple that would eventually migrate to Manitoba. The register's record of marriages ends in 1903, with some births recorded up to the 1930s. For the purposes of this study a dataset was created from these records that included only first marriages and couples who had children. Using the marriage and birth dates the incidence of prenuptial conception was calculated and correlated with other demographic variables. For the

purposes of this analysis, a first-born child with a birth date within eight months of its parents' marriage date is deemed to have been prenuptially conceived.

The rates of prenuptial conception are of course lower than the incidence of premarital sex – not all occurrences of coitus involving unmarried partners resulted in pregnancy. It would appear, however, that fecundability among Mennonites during this period was relatively high and the chances of engaging in sex without being “caught” by the woman conceiving were therefore not very good. For example, of the entire record of first marriages contracted between 1812 and 1903, where the couples conceived and produced offspring after their marriage date, almost twenty-four (23.6) percent of the couples conceived within a month, and by the third month just over one-half (53.1 percent) had conceived. Factors such as the frequency of coitus, the health and nutritional status of the partners, the use of contraception and the incidence of abortion influence the gap between the rate of discoverable prenuptial conception and the incidence of premarital sex more generally. Sources that might inform us about these factors are generally not available to the historian. However, there is no reason to believe that these factors changed significantly over the period examined here, meaning that changes in rates of prenuptial conception over time offer an indirect but reasonably accurate indication of “the direction of the trend” for premarital sex, as one longitudinal study of prenuptial conception in the United States notes.⁸

The incidence of prenuptial conception indicates that in comparison to most other societies, the conservative Old Colony Mennonites of Manitoba were quite successful in restraining young couples from engaging in sex before their marriage day. Scholars studying premarital sex practices in Europe and the United States point to rising rates of illegitimacy and prenuptial conception from the mid-eighteenth to the mid nineteenth century, when they again fell. Rates of prenuptial conception among Mennonites in Manitoba, which were of the order of six percent (See Table 1), are similar to those in the United States at the same time and much lower than the rates in many North European societies. One report, for instance concludes that one-third of the brides in a Swedish parish in the 19th century were pregnant on the day of their marriage.⁹

Most remarkable in a comparison between patterns of Mennonites in Manitoba and other Western societies is the almost non-existence of illegitimacy, defined here as prenuptial conception where the couple did not marry. Among the 1174 marriages examined, there are only eleven instances in the record where premarital sexual partners did not marry after having conceived, and five of the eleven are instances where the woman subsequently married a man who was not the

biological father, but who adopted her potentially illegitimate first child.

Table 1. Rates of Prenuptial Conception

	West Reserve Mennonites		United States White Population		
	Before migration (1812-1874)	After migration (1875 -1903)	1900-1909 ¹⁰	1841-1880 ¹¹	1881-1910
Prenuptial conceptions as a percentage of first marriages	5.6%	6.6%	7.4%	9.6%	15.1%

As in many areas of social organization, Old Colony Mennonites looked to scripture for direction in regulating sexual relations. In his journals Peter Elias, a lay Old Colony church member from the West Reserve at the turn of the century, reflects at length on various church practices and controversies. He also provides insight into how the Old Colony Church viewed premarital sex. Elias quotes Mosaic Law and the writings of Menno Simons as the basis for the Old Colony church’s view of how the community should respond to premarital sex.¹² Elias, as did Simons before him, looks to Deuteronomy 22:22 and Exodus 22: 16 for direction in shaping the church’s response. In the Exodus passage the law states that where a man “seduces a virgin who is not pledged to be married and sleeps with her,” he is to “pay the bride-price, and she shall be his wife.”¹³ By the time Menno Simons wrote in the 16th century the dishonour caused by premarital sex had shifted away from the father in Mosaic Law to the woman, but continued to place the blame for premarital sex squarely on men. In Simon’s words, if a woman was “deflowered, then they should take them to wife and never forsake them.” He suggests that following the practice of requiring marriage in cases of premarital sex would give pause for young men to “ponder these things” and “many a girl would be spared shame.” To do less, according to Simons, is to make the “poor sister” a prostitute.¹⁴ Elias’s reliance on Menno’s writings some 300 years later illustrates the consistency in Mennonite belief that the only appropriate response to premarital sex was for the couple to marry.

There were, of course, other reasons why the regulation of sex before marriage was necessary for Mennonite society, as it was for most European agrarian societies. Mennonite life in Russia and later on the West Reserve centred on the family unit, which was also the basic building block of the other important social networks of village and church. Family was the site where, as Royden Loewen suggests, “men

and women were brought together in the common pursuit of household production.”¹⁵ Unregulated sex could not be tolerated because it disrupted the social networks that held together agrarian Mennonite life. Or, as Peter Laslett writes, “the appearance of children for whom no male, permanently allied to the mother, can be held responsible, has to be prevented in order to safeguard the future of society as a society.”¹⁶ To allow sex before legitimate marriage potentially compromised the care of children and could lead to the creation of households that would be unsustainable production units in the village. Mennonites in Russia had responded to high levels of early parental death by developing the *Waisenamt*, a system of orphan care that included methods of protecting the economic viability of orphaned children. Since premarital sex was religiously proscribed, there were to be no children born out of wedlock and no similar system of ordering their economic place in the community existed. Hence, their presence would strain the order of Mennonite family life, inheritance and social reproduction.

What were the consequences of having had sexual relations before one’s marriage date? Mennonite forms of church discipline involved three important elements: confession, evidence of contrition, and reconciliation. Minor issues were often dealt with by ministers alone, but more difficult matters were taken up by a group of elected ministers who met as a Ministerial Committee, in a court-like proceeding usually held on Thursdays. These meetings were called primarily to deal with the transgressions of members and perpetrators and accusers appeared to be heard and disciplined. Depending on the seriousness of the offence, or in cases where the persons denied the accusation or refused to repent, matters were brought before the entire Brotherhood for action. The Brotherhood was comprised of all the baptized male members of the congregation and was the ultimate authority for questions of discipline in the community. The ban was the method of punishment for more serious offences. This implied a separation from the community in the sense that other members were not to have personal and social contact with the fallen person until they had requested and been granted reinstatement.¹⁷ This pattern had been the norm in Russia and was reproduced in Canada by the Old Colony of the West Reserve and remains the pattern in Old Colony communities today.

Premarital sex was a transgression of what were viewed as both biblical and community rules and was regularly dealt with by the Ministerial and the Brotherhood. There was, however, a level of the sin’s seriousness that required increased level of Ministerial attention and a heavier hand of discipline, including the ban. Having sex with someone not considered an eligible marriage partner, such as with a non-Mennonite, or with someone from the same household, even if not a blood relation, merited the full weight of the ban. For most cases

where marriage had already occurred, or was possible and anticipated, the matter was dealt with quickly and had few social repercussions.

The most extensive source that illuminates how Mennonites dealt with such social and religious transgressions in Russia are the diaries of Jacob Epp, a minister in Russia during the time of emigration. While Epp would not join the emigration to Manitoba, his window on Mennonite practices in Russia suggest how Mennonite religious sensibilities approached situations where there was evidence of premarital sex. Epp notes, for instance, in his diary entry of September 10, 1872 that he had preached a sermon in the Khortitsa church after which the *Ältester* had raised a number of disciplinary matters. He matter-of-factly reports “two young married couples who had given birth before their time (and hence had slept together before marriage) contritely asked for forgiveness and were allowed to go in peace.”¹⁸ In Russia and in Manitoba this seems to have been the pattern for the normative case of prenuptial conception. Pregnancy had betrayed the couple’s sin and they were compelled to account for their breach of community and religious rules and had to repent, but since marriage had occurred, or was imminent, the social repercussions were minimal.

The shame for premarital sex was, however, borne by the woman. Although it is difficult to uncover the details of Manitoba Mennonite practice during the period under study, the later practice in Mexico and throughout the Old Colony diaspora was that the woman had to wear the head covering required of married women if she was pregnant or had given birth at the time of her wedding. Certainly it became a mark of shame if, in contrast to other young women, she had to wear the same covering as a married woman at her baptism, marriage, or both. Old Colony women customarily wore black dresses for both baptism and marriage ceremonies and it was general practice to wear a head covering at all times while attending church. A woman who was no longer “pure” because she was pregnant or had borne a child before her marriage, had to wear the customary shawl or bonnet that she would wear throughout her married life at her wedding or baptism if her “sin” was known at the time. While the church’s sanction of the woman was usually restricted to this one-time highlighting of the breach of the rule against premarital sex, the shame associated with pregnancy before marriage could often be much more severe within families. In extreme cases the couple would not be welcome at family events and celebrations for some time.¹⁹

An exception to the general practice of a one-time confession and subsequent forgiveness of the sin of having engaged in premarital sex was made when a man was being considered for ministerial office. A candidate for the ministry was required to have an unblemished moral record, and known, or admitted, transgressions, including having had

sex before marriage, disqualified the candidate. Peter Elias goes on at length about what he considers to be an abandonment of this principle among Manitoba Old Colony leadership after the death of Johann Wiebe in 1906.²⁰ An example of such a case occurs in Jacob Epp's diary entry for September 30, 1852 where he notes that "because of a moral failing (he having slept prematurely with his wife), Heinrich Penner had declined to accept the office of minister."²¹

Given that marriage was the solution to prenuptial pregnancy, it became a more serious problem if marriage was not desirable because of personal objections or was unacceptable to the community. Jacob Epp's diaries offer instructive examples. On October 7, 1865 Epp records the process of discipline in the case of Martin Penner, who had "committed fornication" with his stepsister which had resulted in pregnancy. Here marriage was not contemplated and the young woman's guardians were instructed to hire her out to another colony. Epp offers no further insight into what the familial status of the mother and child was to be, or what discipline was meted out to Martin Penner.²²

In the only instance that I have come across, the minister Jacob Epp helped to negotiate child support in the case where a young man refused to marry the woman with whom he had fathered a child. Epp notes in his diary that the young man Jacob Bärgeen "refused to have anything to do with Katharina or the child." The couple were both placed under the ban; however, the father of the young man appeared after the church service to cast doubt upon the woman's integrity, claiming that "the time of Katharina's pregnancy proved that she must also have committed fornication with others." Epp can only comment that "the Lord knows what is concealed," but seems to discount this claim in his further dealings with the case. Over the next two or three weeks it appears that the fathers of the young couple discussed some resolution of the situation and asked Epp to "help them reach a settlement in regard to the costs of raising the child born out of wedlock." Epp countered by suggesting standard practice, namely that "the best solution would be for the two to marry," but the father of young Bärgeen maintained that "his son was set against such a marriage." Epp then insisted that before the two could be re-admitted into the church, a financial settlement must be negotiated. They "finally agreed on 60 R., half by Michaelmus and the rest by May 1, 1871." The "two men shook hands and parted in peace."²³

The situation was quite different for those who had sex with someone outside the Mennonite community. If marriage was the only acceptable outcome when sex occurred before marriage and both partners were Mennonites, it was not an option if one of the partners was from outside the community. Jacob Epp records that A. Peters was "accused of having committed fornication with a Russian woman;"

he admitted his guilt and was placed under the ban but there was no suggestion that they get married. In the case of a Mennonite woman who was suspected of having had sexual relations with a Prussian and suffering a miscarriage, Epp counselled her that "God could not approve of a mixed marriage." However, in the face of her insistence that she had not had sex with the Prussian, and when "she continued to declare her great love for him, and how he could not live without her," Epp relented and "she was allowed to go in peace." Epp offers no further insight into her status, but one assumes that she was lost to the community.²⁴ In the Old Colony Church record there are only four or five instances where a non-Mennonite entered the community through marriage following pre-nuptial conception. One of the records is also one of the few that clearly indicates that the couple was placed under the ban before being accepted into the church and community. Klaas Thiessen at age twenty-seven married Elisabeth Oksna, a non-Mennonite who was nineteen, on the same day that they were both baptized. At the time their son Gerhard was already almost six months old and the record indicates they had both been placed under the ban.²⁵

A web of social and cultural practices worked in concert to avoid the necessity of discipline by seeking to prevent premarital sex among Mennonite young people. For the most part external social control was the responsibility of the family and the community. Parents were to be vigilant in not allowing situations to arise where young people would be tempted. In the case of the sexual relations between stepson and daughter cited above, Epp notes that he admonished the parents and "impressed upon them their responsibility for what had occurred, which they acknowledged."²⁶ Calvin Wall Redekop's Old Colony male informant in Mexico, commenting on how young people got to know each other, notes that "the parents will not allow you to take her out in a buggy."²⁷

While parents were held most accountable for their children's chastity, other community members were also involved in maintaining vigilance. In Epp's account of the case of Heinrich Siemens and Agatha Görzen, it was "Mrs. Joh. Schellenberg, Mrs. Gerh. Görzen, and the Gerh. Redekopps" who had accused them of fornication when their "behaviour had aroused suspicion."²⁸ The spatial arrangements of the village and home served to enhance the watchfulness of the community over fellow villagers and their children. In the villages of Manitoba's West Reserve, homes were symmetrically aligned along the village street with each home's windows corresponding to similar arrangements in the neighbouring houses. As Roland Sawatzky notes, "the similarity of the orientations of most of the early houses in street villages made the interior placement of people, things, and activities known to all community members at a glance." Spaces had their desig-

nated public and private purposes and the uniformity of architectural design made it easier to raise suspicion when spaces were being used for seemingly inappropriate purposes.²⁹

Although the age of marriage and household formation has often been shown to be related to economic opportunity, the age of marriage seems also to have worked to lower the period of risk of unregulated sex and acted like a form of social control. Mennonites in Manitoba's West Reserve got married at a young age compared to many of their 19th century counterparts in other societies. Age of marriage for men was most commonly 27 or 28 while that for women was 25 or 26 for many European societies in the 19th century.³⁰ Mennonites would marry at much younger ages, both in Russia before migration and in Canada thereafter. The age at marriage of West Reserve couples married in Russia before they emigrated was 23 for men and 21 for women. The age of marriage for women who married in Canada fell steadily during the study period. By the turn of the century Old Colony young women were embarking on their first marriage at an average age of 19.5.³¹

Table 2. Age at Marriage

	Men	Women
Old Colony couples married in Russia	22.9	21.3
1875-1879	22.9	21.2
1880-1884	22.7	20.0
1885-1889	23.2	20.3
1890-1894	23.1	19.9
1895-1899	23.1	19.8
1900-1903	22.5	19.5

Relatively early marriage was complemented by courtship practises that helped to reduce the rate of premarital sex. Formal courtship among Mennonites in Russia was very brief. Jacob Epp's account of his daughter Katharina's courtship offers an example. On Monday, February 24th the suitor's father and another man came to ask if young Johann Bärigen could come courting. He was given permission to come on Thursday, which he did. After this visit, Epp reports that his daughter had granted permission for the young man to come again. By Saturday, his daughter had changed her mind and asked her father to send him a letter of refusal. The persistent young man tried to visit again later that day, "but the answer was still 'no'." On March 14th Epp reports that "young Johann Bärigen arrived unexpectedly in the evening" and after a conversation with his daughter they had "agreed to become engaged." Three days later the engagement was celebrated with the neighbours and family and on March 22nd, just over a week

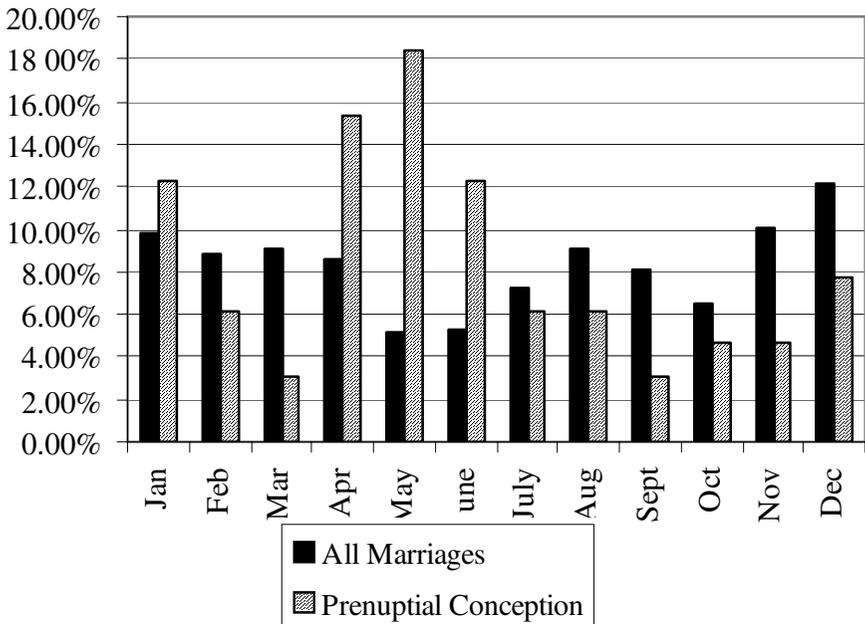
after having consented, and just over three weeks after the issue was first raised by the suitor's father, the young couple was married in a Sunday afternoon service "in the Novovitebsk church before a large congregation."³² Formal courtship continued to be of short duration both in Manitoba and in Mexico after 1920. Walter Schmiedehaus, an early chronicler of Old Colony life in Mexico reports that formal courtship in Mexico often lasted only two weeks.³³ Clearly, formal courtship was not a suitable context for premarital sex, especially not of the form that one could uncover using the incidence of prenuptial conception as a guide. The period of formal courtship took place under the watchful eyes of family with very little time for even a private conversation. Premarital sex took place outside the confines of formal courtship rituals and in that sense was governed more by opportunity than rational decision.

The pattern of conception by time of year lends weight to the sense that opportunity played a prominent role in the incidence of premarital sex among Mennonites. For couples that conceived after, or at least close to the time of their marriage, conception followed the patterns and rhythms of the agricultural year. Conceptions were highest during the late fall and winter months and were the lowest during the busy spring and fall fieldwork seasons. By contrast, the highest periods of premarital sex, as judged by the conception dates of prenuptially conceived children, were in April, May and June. These months coincided with the periods of the seasons where being outside and away from the gaze of family and neighbours was most easily achieved, suggesting that most premarital sex took place in the fields, in the outbuildings of the village homesteads or on surreptitious buggy rides to out-of-the way places.

These patterns of conception may also suggest the context in which premarital sex occurred. Given the pattern of courtship outlined earlier, Old Colony Mennonite prenuptial conception seems not to have been of the type where the time period between marriage initiation and the actual ceremony was too long. It does not appear that premarital sex occurred when couples were already committed to each other and began a sexual relationship too early. There is also no evidence to suggest that premarital sex in this case was of the "fertility testing" type where evidence of fertility was a prerequisite to marriage. Both of these have been advanced as explanations for prenuptial conception in some studies. Given the courtship traditions of Old Colony Mennonites, the other two categories discussed in the scholarly literature may be more applicable to this case. These are the "shotgun wedding" type, where marriage was not specifically or necessarily intended but was forced upon the couple by social and religious practices when pregnancy resulted, or the "entrapment" type where one or the other

partner, usually the woman, ensured pregnancy to induce the other to marry³⁴ While it is not possible to ascertain the prevalence of either, evidence from a case of alleged rape that went to trial in Manitoba in 1894 involving Mennonites suggests that promise of marriage may have been used more often to gain consent for sex than one might suspect. In the 1894 case the parties accused each other of having used a promise of marriage to induce the other to engage in sex³⁵

Figure 1. Month of Conception



The rates of prenuptial conception for various time periods also suggest the importance of social control in the regulation of premarital sex. In the case examined here, there appears to be a “migration effect” on the level of premarital sex. Mennonites began settling the West Reserve in 1875 and families arrived in large numbers for the next two years. Not surprisingly, the number of marriages in 1875 was low, but the postponement of marriage and the upsetting of well-established patterns of social control seem to have loosened the ability of the community to “watch over” their young people. The rates of prenuptial conception as shown in Table 2 were two percent higher for first marriages in the ten years after arriving in Canada than comparable rates for couples who were already married when they migrated to the West Reserve. Families had new neighbours, church leaders had come from slightly different traditions, and the energy of

the family was diverted to the problems of breaking the land, building a home, and organizing religious and civic life. The availability of land made household formation attractive and may well have increased the intensity of courting activity.

As shown in Table 3, in years of particularly high rates of prenuptial conception the rate was almost double the average before migration.

Table 3. Periods of particularly high levels of prenuptial conception in Manitoba

Born out of wedlock		Prenuptial Conceptions		Total First Marriages		Prenuptial Conception Rate	
Number	Percent of Total	Number	Percent of Total	Number	Percent of Total		
1877-1881		14	31.0	130	17.1	10.8%	
1889-1890		6	13.3	61	8.0	9.8%	
1895-1898	3	60.0	9	20.0	112	14.7	10.7%
Total (all years)	5	100	45	100	760	100	6.6%

These high rates of prenuptial conception coincided with the years of migration and initial settlement. The 1877-1881 period saw particularly high levels of prenuptial conception, accounting for almost a third (31 percent) of the totals for all the marriages in Manitoba. The arrival of the Bergthaler from the East Reserve seems to have extended the period of uncertainty about reproducing social and religious practices. The Bergthalers' presence was an important element in the call for a new registration of members in 1880 that gave rise to the church register that is used as evidence for this study.

Premarital sex and the lessened social control that allowed it seem to have stabilized after 1881, when the incidence of prenuptial conception declined to earlier levels and then fell to the lowest level for the period examined. With the exception of 1889-1890, when the rate spiked, the years between 1882 and 1894 seem to have been the "golden years" of conservative Mennonite life on the West Reserve, if one were to judge by the rates of prenuptial conception. In this decade there were only 16 cases of prenuptial conception in almost 400 marriages (4 percent), a rate that was lower than that of the parents and grandparents of the marrying couples before their migration from Russia.

During the 1882-1894 period, when rates of prenuptial conception were low, the conservative orientation of the Old Colony church faced

many challenges. New religious movements came to the reserve in the form of evangelists from the United States. Their activities among West Reserve Mennonites led to the organization of the Mennonite Brethren Church near Winkler in 1889, and the Bergthaler Church became an organized separate congregation in the same decade. The railway came to the West Reserve in 1882 and by the later 1890s the Old Colony religious leadership was struggling to keep its members away from the lures of the railway towns of Winkler, Altona and Gretna.

The Old Colony Church responded to these pressures by retreating inward and increasing the level of external social control that it exerted upon its members. During this time the church had a stable and powerful religious authority in the person of its *Ältester* Johann Wiebe, then in his fifties, but the only response that seemed to be available to church leaders was excommunication. Between 1880 and 1883 the Old Colony Church struggled with religious innovations and in the church register some members were labelled "*Hoffnungsfelder*," a term that came to describe its members who were attracted to the religious innovations that had begun in the village of Hoffnungsfeld. Other members were banned because of the attractions of various modern innovations such as bicycles, adorned buggies and new fashions. More serious for the long-term viability of the community were excommunications due to moving out of the village and sending children to the "English" schools.³⁶

While the rise in prenuptial conception during migration appears to have been related to the loosening of external social controls, the reaction of the Old Colony to the modernization pressures of the mid-1880s was to dramatically tighten external social conformity. While it is difficult to identify direct evidence, the dramatic drop in prenuptial conception during the same time seems to indicate that social control also increased the watchfulness displayed by parents and the community over the sexual lives of their young people.

It is more difficult to relate the rise in prenuptial conception that occurred in the 1895-1898 period to religious or community developments. By the 1890s Old Colony Mennonites from the West Reserve were on the move again. The migration to the Northwest territories began during this time and may have disturbed the patterns of external social control, but external social control was seemingly not sufficient to prevent premarital sex. During the 1890s there seems to have been a decline in the internal controls that helped to keep premarital sex in check. Although marriage was still the norm if a woman became pregnant, in the years after 1894 there was also an increase in the number of cases where that did not occur. Four of the six instances of illegitimacy in the record occur during this period. Peter Elias's memoirs leave one with the impression that the decline of internal

control had occurred even among candidates for the ministry. He also reports instances of sexual indiscretions by ministers, and not surprisingly among the young people.³⁷ Newspaper reports of the 1894 rape case mentioned earlier claimed that there had been numerous other instances of non-consensual sex that had been dealt with by the *Ältesters*, but the frequency of their occurrence had made it necessary for the law to step in.³⁸

As one study puts it, “sexual expression is a basic human drive and its control a ubiquitous feature of every society.”³⁹ Mennonites who migrated to Manitoba from Russia were quite successful in maintaining the control of sexuality in ways that allowed their religious sensibilities and community needs to be met. Further work comparing other Mennonite or Christian groups may temper that assessment, but using the rate of prenuptial conception as an indicator premarital sex was “a mild form of deviancy” in Old Colony life. The years between physical sexual maturity in the mid teens and the acceptable age to begin a new household were particularly challenging for the control needed and desired by the community, and a complex web of social and religious sensibilities influenced the levels of premarital sex and its consequences. For most cases premarital sex led to marriage, and if it had resulted in pregnancy it was an embarrassment. When it led to a functioning household in the community the social consequences were short-lived. In that sense also premarital sex was a mild violation of the social rules that regulated sexual relations among Old Colony Mennonites.

Notes

- ¹ John Dyck and William Harms, eds. *Reinländer (Old Colony) Gemeindebuch, 1880-1903*, 2nd revised edition, (Winnipeg, Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2006), 322 and John Dyck and William Harms, eds. *1880 Village Census of the Mennonite West Reserve*, (Winnipeg, Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1998), 76 and 325.
- ² Peter Laslett, “Introduction,” in Peter Laslett, Karla Oosterveen, and Richard M. Smith, eds., *Bastardy and its Comparative History*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 3.
- ³ Daniel Scott Smith and Michael S. Hindus, “Premarital Pregnancy in America, 1640-1971: An Overview and Interpretation,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 5(4) (1975): 553.
- ⁴ *1880 Village Census*, 3.
- ⁵ Peter D. Zacharias, “Ältester Johann Wiebe (1837-1905)” in Adolf Ens, Jacob E. Peters and Otto Hamm, eds., *Church, Family and Village: Essays on Mennonite Life on the West Reserve*, (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2001), 53-66.
- ⁶ *Reinlaender Gemeinde Buch*, 428.
- ⁷ *Reinländer Gemeindebuch* and *1880 Village Census*.
- ⁸ Smith and Hindus, “Premarital Pregnancy in America, 1640-1971”: 538-539.

- ⁹ Ann-Sofie Kälveborn, "Illegitimacy and marriage in three Swedish parishes in the nineteenth century," in Laslett, *Bastardy*, 329-330. See also Richard F. Tomasson, "Premarital Sexual Permissiveness and Illegitimacy in the Nordic Countries," in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 18(2) (1976): 252-270.
- ¹⁰ Daniel Scott Smith, "The long cycle in American illegitimacy and prenuptial pregnancy," in Laslett, *Bastardy*, 486. The number quoted by Smith comes from a 1959 U.S. Bureau of the Census survey.
- ¹¹ The data in the last two columns is from analysis by Smith and Hindus, "Premarital Pregnancy in America, 1640-1971: 561.
- ¹² Peter Elias, unpublished Memoirs [1913], Mennonite Heritage Centre, vol. 1078.
- ¹³ Exodus 22:16
- ¹⁴ Menno Simons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons c. 1496-1561*, Leonard Veduin, trans., John Christian Wenger, ed., (Scottsdale, PA.: Herald Press, 1956), 378.
- ¹⁵ Royden Loewen, *Family, Church and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and the New Worlds, 1850-1930*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 32.
- ¹⁶ Laslett, "Introduction," 5.
- ¹⁷ Harvey L. Dyck, ed. and trans., "Introduction and Analysis," in *A Mennonite in Russia: The Diaries of Jacob D. Epp 1851-1880*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 22-23.
- ¹⁸ Dyck, *Epp Diaries*, 346.
- ¹⁹ The prevalence of this practice is inferred from anecdotal evidence of contemporary practice among Old Colony groups in Mexico and Alberta. There appears to be some local variation in the details of these practices. Even among more liberal Mennonite groups who eventually wore white at weddings, it was customary for brides to not wear pure white wedding dresses if they were pregnant on their wedding day. For a description of Old Colony practices regarding women's dress dating back to the 1940s in Mexico, see Walter Schmiedehaus, *Ein feste Burg is unser Gott: Der Wanderung eines christlichen Siedlervolkes* (Cauhtémoc, Chih., Mexico: author, 1948), 243. Calvin Wall Redekop's later study suggests the rigidity of acceptable dress had begun to break down. Calvin Wall Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites*. Neither source deals specifically with the question of baptism and wedding dress in the case of prenuptial conception.
- ²⁰ Elias Memoirs.
- ²¹ Dyck, *Epp Diaries*, 122.
- ²² Dyck, *Epp Diaries*, 203.
- ²³ Dyck, *Epp Diaries*, 322-324.
- ²⁴ Dyck, *Epp Diaries*, 300-301.
- ²⁵ *Reinländer Gemeindebuch*, 60.
- ²⁶ Dyck, *Epp Diaries*, 203.
- ²⁷ Redekop, 72.
- ²⁸ Dyck, *Epp Diaries*, 158.
- ²⁹ Roland Sawatzky, "The Control of Space in Mennonite Housebarns of Manitoba, 1874-1940", PhD. dissertation, Simon Fraser University, 2005, 138.
- ³⁰ Laslett, 21 and 55, Loewen 38,
- ³¹ This compares to similar findings among *Kleine Gemeinde* Mennonites in Russia where males averaged 23.1 and females 21.2 years at marriage. Loewen, 38. Based on Calvin Redekop's analysis the age of marriage among Old Colony Mennonites in Mexico seems to have crept back up for females. In the 1920-25 period the age at marriage averaged 21.7 for males and 20.6 for females.
- ³² Dyck, *Epp Diaries*, 283-285. A similar pattern is found among the *Kleine Gemeinde*, another conservative Mennonite group that came to Manitoba in the 1870s. See Royden Loewen's description of the courtship of Dietrich Friesen in Loewen, *Family Church and Market*, 35-36.
- ³³ Schmiedehaus, *Ein feste Burg*, 264.

- ³⁴ This typology is advanced by Laslett, "Introduction", 8.
- ³⁵ "The Queen versus Unrau, Klassen and Fehr, Archives Manitoba, ATG 007A, GR 180, M1319, File 1/856.
- ³⁶ Elias Memoirs and John Dyck, "Hoffnungsfeld: Community and Phenomenon," in Adolf Ens, Jacob E. Peters and Otto Hamm, eds., *Church, Family and Village: Essays on Mennonite Life on the West Reserve*, (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2001), 191-212.
- ³⁷ Elias Memoirs
- ³⁸ *Morden Monitor*, January 17, 1895.
- ³⁹ Daniel Scott Smith and Michael S. Hindus, "Premarital Pregnancy in America, 1640-1971: An Overview and Interpretation," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 5(4) (1975): 537.