(Trans)planting Manitoba's West Reserve: Mennonites, Myth, and Narratives of Place

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> Even the best planned utopias contain seeds of imperfection.
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> - Rhinehart Friesen[2]

> Our roots can be anywhere and we can survive, because if you think about it, we take our roots with us . . . I know because you can go back to where they are and they can be less real to you than they were three thousand, six thousand miles away. Don't worry about your roots so long as you worry about them. The essential thing is to have the feeling that they exist, that they are somewhere. They will take care of themselves, and they will take care of you too, though you may never know how it has happened. To think only of going back for them is to confess that the plant is dying.
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> - Gertrude Stein[3]

Introduction

A collection of personal writings by Maria Braun, from a village called Blumenort on Manitoba's West Reserve, details longstanding knowledge of the seeds commonly sown in her family's garden that came from her ancestors who emigrated from imperial Russia. Braun's writings also speak to the cultivation of local and indigenous fruit near their Manitoba homestead. Maria explains that on the right side of the driveway to her family's house was a small orchard with wild plum, chokecherry, crab apple trees, strawberries, raspberries, gooseberries, and rhubarb. "There was enough for all the jellies and pies that the family consumed," she wrote.[4] In front of the house was a large flower garden, which was her mother's "pride and joy," while the vegetable garden contained enough to feed their family.[5] As Maria further explains, "no vegetables were ever purchased from the [nearby] Gretna grocers. [Though] the grocers did supply the flour, sugar, salt, oatmeal, tea, and other dry goods, compared to today the grocery list was quite small. Mother never went to town and Dad only needed to bring home these bare necessities."[6] Maria implies that no vegetable seeds were ever purchased from the store, either. Rather, "the seeds for the vegetables and flowers had been originally brought to Canada by the immigrants from the Ukraine. With the vegetables and flowers, some plants were allowed to go to seed each year, and then exchanged by the village gardeners for the next year's planting."[7]

Maria's writings offer important reflections on everyday life from the perspective of a Mennonite woman in the mid-twentieth century on the West Reserve. Her childhood memories are rooted in a village upbringing where food, the ordered landscape, and the garden take centre stage. Maria's memories also provide a window into the complicated nature of European settlement on the Canadian prairies. Below the surface, her writings are a contested, yet nostalgic confluence of outside efforts to familiarize what was foreign, the realities of homesteading, the re-imagination of an ethnoreligious lifeway and the prairie landscape.

This paper considers discourses like Maria Braun's, which suggest that seeds accompanied Mennonite immigrants to southern Manitoba in the 1870s. I look at the prominent role seeds, their stories, and associated practices (such as gardening and seed saving) play in the persistence of language and thought surrounding the successful transplantation of Mennonites on the Canadian prairies. More intricately, this paper takes as its focus both the myths and material matter of Mennonite migration to the West Reserve. I suggest that seeds and their stories are aspects of Mennonite culture on the prairies that speak directly to efforts in rootedness, identity preservation, and negotiation with a complex colonial past. In so doing, I seek to offer a better understanding of the affective nature of landscape construction in one ethno-religious group, and to open up space to explore the complex ways the prairie was reimagined by European emigrants in the context of their nineteenth-century uprooting. I hope for this paper to raise questions about how the history of Mennonites sowing seeds on the prairie landscape continues, through the generations, to be worked out in the process of imagining a particular place. I propose that when material practices are put at the centre of our inquiry, we can begin to formulate a more nuanced understanding of the contested historical processes where unresolved questions of land apprehension, immigration, ethnic identity, landscape construction, and an evolving imagination about the rural Canadian landscape surface.

Settler Gardens and Colonial Spaces

My analysis is informed by the work of scholars, like Frances Kaye, who suggest that the Great Plains were significantly impacted – both environmentally and socially – "when a mass of people hit a geographical and cultural region that they felt entitled to reclaim from deficiency."[8] As historian Lyle Dick has pointed out more locally, the events surrounding Confederation in 1870 were pivotal to the future of horticulture in the Canadian prairie west. Not only were subsistence gardening traditions practiced among pre-confederation peoples[9] overshadowed by active efforts to beautify rural landscapes, but horticulture was promoted as a scientific, moral, and political tool for the betterment of Canadian society.[10] Between 1870 and 1930, the mass migration of Europeans to the prairies, along with the development of government programs, community farm organizations, agricultural colleges, and horticultural societies, endorsed an increase of vegetable, flower, and tree culture in Manitoba as ethically and aesthetically supplementary to the growing grain economy. These programs generated the "systematic promotion in support of sustained settlement by Euro-North Americans and Europeans."[11] It was into this setting that Mennonites were invited to settle the southern Manitoba prairie landscape.

Of course, efforts in seed transfer and plant propagation were not uncommon in the settlement of western Canada, or elsewhere in the colonial world. The effective cultivation of grain, fruits, and vegetables had hitherto been understood as a sign of success – cultural adaptation and sufficiency – among settlers of varied backgrounds and in diverse locales. For example, in her article on

Creole elite James Douglas (1803-1877) in late nineteenth century British Columbia, Canadian historian Adele Perry, reminds us that "layered politics of home" were well represented by Douglas's garden on Vancouver Island. Perry's article highlights an interaction between Douglas and another traveller on a journey to France wherein Douglas shares a detailed description of the plants in his beloved garden, and is asked by his listener whether the garden is in England. Based on this encounter, Perry argues that Douglas's reckoning of home was neither a simple embrace of "metropolitan places and values" nor a "rejection of the periphery." Rather, for Douglas, a home and garden on Vancouver Island, built with a keen eye to British tradition, represented a "complicated articulation" of a "personal and political space of identification, loyalty, and affect,"[12] which challenged "knowledges rooted in the schism between the old and new worlds."[13] Similarly, in her book *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization*, Jill H. Casid argues that "the contested terrain of empire" is inextricable from practices of landscaping that emerged in eighteenth-century imperial locales.[14] By "paying attention to colonization on the scale of the intimate," gardening in colonial history becomes an "art of memory."[15] Not only through claims to land, but through plant breeding, seed transfer, and the aesthetic and imaginative practices of refashioning indigenous and appropriated terrain, landscaping operated as an "imperial mode that defined and transformed the 'heartlands' of nations," and was at the centre of determinations to control world markets in vegetable, sugar, and rare plant commodities.[16] Moreover, "landscaping was one of the primary means through which particular formations of family, gender, nation, and colonial empire were engendered and naturalized."[17] Simultaneous efforts to reproduce metropole settings through the transfer and adaptation of plants to colony sites, and to bring native plant species back to the imperial countryside, meant that landscaping demarcated and extended the boundaries of colonial imagination.[18]

As we will see below, stories, materials, and written evidence of seed transfer and propagation among Manitoba Mennonites together re-inscribe the common belief that prior to Mennonite arrival, the Canadian prairies were a vast, inhospitable wilderness. Yet, when we look more intently at the negotiations of homesickness, cultural identity, and homemaking, we see the persistence of these prairie Mennonite gardening stories, seeds, and landscapes as a layered and complex settler-colonial longing for genesis and rootedness. Scholars like Casid and Perry remind us that historians ought to take seriously the *experiences* of the settlers and the processes through which they imagined and inhabited space, while also keeping in mind that the materials arising out of these historical moments are illusions of picturesque completeness.[19] We ought to read these stories *not* for the facts of settlement, then, but rather for the experience of settlement: a reckoning with unfamiliar space. In so doing, we notice that the longing to plant gardens with seeds from an ancestral home represents an attempt at refashioning what was perceived to be an *ahistorical space* into a *settled place*. It is here that individual cultural imaginings of a historical beginning take root and an ephemeral landscape is transplanted to suit a particular imagination of home.

Early Rumours and Reports

Evidence of seed transfer is prevalent in a range of documents detailing the first major Mennonite migration to Manitoba during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Newspapers, government reports, and memoirs point to the introduction of specific grains, trees, vegetables, and fruits on the West Reserve by Mennonite immigrants, and comment on the success of Mennonite migration. The success of Mennonite migration was measured in two ways: on the one hand, the public's anxieties about the unconventional settlement structures and lifeways of an ethno-religious minority group on the prairies were addressed by government reports and newspaper columns documenting new agricultural development and plant propagation both in farming and in gardening. For the Mennonites, however, nostalgia and the politics of homemaking in a new and perilous environment, often alluded to in personal documents and oral histories, were made more bearable not only by sustaining an agricultural way of life, but through the recreation of beloved and familiar garden spaces.

One of the first documents promoting Mennonite horticultural adaptation on the prairies came from Jacob Y. Shantz (1822-1909), an Ontario Swiss Mennonite entrepreneur and promoter of immigration to western Canada. Shantz was employed as an intermediary between the Canadian government and the Mennonites from Russia who were thinking of immigrating to Manitoba in the late nineteenth century. In 1872, Shantz travelled to southern Manitoba to assess the land's adequacy for Mennonite settlement. A year later, Shantz accompanied a group of Russian Mennonite delegates to Manitoba to further assist in determining the suitability of the land for the imminent mass migration. His writings were widely dispersed, appearing in government reports and newspapers both before and after the Mennonite settlement in Manitoba.[20]

Given his unique position as both a Mennonite and an immigration agent, Shantz's reports and observations were influential among Mennonite delegates from Russia and settlers and Canadian government officials alike. Besides Shantz's central concern over the suitability of Manitoba soil for grain farming is an ongoing focus on the planting and cultivation of fruit trees throughout the Red River Valley. Observing that Manitoba's climate, while ranging greatly in temperature between seasons, was "less subject to killing frosts than might at first be supposed to be the case on account of its high latitude,"[21] Shantz encouraged the immediate sowing of apple seeds and the development of fruit culture upon settlement in Manitoba. In light of his reinforcement it is of little wonder why many Mennonites transported seeds of all sorts to Manitoba in efforts to grow familiar varieties of fruit. Referencing an 1873 publication by the Department of Agriculture, for example, Shantz's *Narrative of a Journey to Manitoba*, expresses the following concern:

> The culture of fruit, especially apples, has been entirely neglected in Manitoba hitherto; in fact there has never been a practical test made to really know whether fruit trees will flourish or not. This is owing, probably, to there being such an abundance of wild fruit, and also to the difficulty of getting young trees for planting. The natives are entirely unacquainted with the culture of fruit trees, as they have been bred and born without seeing any such under cultivation. When we find so great an abundance of wild fruit in the forests, I cannot but believe that many kinds of apples would do well in Manitoba, particularly along the edge of the timber lands . . . I would advise all settlers, once established, to plant apple seeds; the expense would be only trifling and trees grown from seed will always be better adapted to the climate.[22]

In an October 1879 update on the progress of Mennonite settlement, published in the *Manitoba Free Press*, Shantz notes that to his surprise, apples were found flourishing on the trees he sent to Mennonite villages just four years earlier. "In one instance I found an apple which had ripened on a tree which had been only one year transplanted. This will prove that apples can be raised here," he wrote. "I have also been treated with excellent ripe watermelons during last week, the Mennonites having large quantities of them yet."[23] In a transcript of an oral report on Mennonite immigration and farming successes given in Ottawa on 8 April 1886, Shantz also comments on the successful grain-growing operations among West

Reserve Mennonites. When asked what the reason for their success might be, Shantz suggests that the Mennonites "have different kinds of wheat among them . . . a particular kind of wheat they used – what they call 'Russian wheat,' which they brought from Russia . . . "[24] As an immigration agent and mediator between the first wave of Mennonite immigrants and the Canadian government, Shantz's reports offer a window into some of the primary concerns among newcomers and government officials about settlement on the Canadian prairies. At the same time, these highlighted suggestions and observations imply an overarching concern with the ability to swiftly transform the prairie landscape into a more European place, complete with orchards and grain fields. The fact that many Mennonites arrived in Manitoba equipped with seeds and a honed agricultural lifestyle, which would help to make this vision of transformation a reality, secured their place in the Canadian imagination.

A second set of observations came from outside visitors. Lord and Lady Dufferin noted Mennonite settlement success in August of 1877 when paying a visit to several Mennonite villages on Manitoba's East Reserve. In her travelogue, Lady Dufferin (1843-1936) notes that the Mennonites are "most desirable immigrants." She comments on the "prosperous-looking villages," the tidy homes with "flowers in the windows," the "nice gardens," "great corn [wheat]-fields [sic]," and the excellent "specimens of their farm produce." The wheat, she further notes, was "grown from Russian seed."[25] Both Shantz and Dufferin commend Mennonites for bringing with them the seeds and the agricultural skills with which to grow successful crops and gardens.

In 1883, less than ten years after Mennonites settled on the West Reserve, general manager of the Manitoba & North-Western Railway, William Henry Barneby (1843-1914), visited the Mennonite village of Rosenfeld. While travelling, he recorded his thoughts and observations. These writings detail the nostalgic splendour of Mennonite yards and gardens, as well as the transfer of their Russian village structure to the Manitoba landscape.[26]

> The form of the village is generally a broad prairie street dividing two lines of houses, each with a very large and beautifully-cultivated garden attached, stocked with every description of what we should call old-fashioned [sic] flowers, and an abundance of vegetables. The homesteads are very picturesque, being as nearly as possible, exact copies of the inhabitants' old Russian homes . . .[27]

Barneby also lists over forty varieties of flowers, vegetables, and trees present on Mennonite farmyards in Rosenfeld, among which were cottonwood trees, rhubarb, watermelons, portulaca, roses, hollyhocks, peas, potatoes, beans, and onions. Some gardens are even noted to contain plum and dwarf mulberry trees, he exclaimed, while others included "wild hops, Scotch kale, very fine cabbages, and a few apple-trees [sic] . . ."[28] Especially apt, however, are Barneby's observations that many such plants, including "the sunflower seed came direct from Russia."[29] Barnaby's writings fixate on Mennonite efforts in transforming Manitoba's prairie into what he observed to be a hospitable and recognizable landscape.

Discussions of seed transfer and Mennonite adaptation to the prairies are also present even in semi-fictional or creative accounts of Mennonite migration to Manitoba during the 1870s. These works, ostensibly based on collective memory, further denote the central role of seeds in the place-making traditions of Mennonite immigrants. Where such accounts differ from government reports and newspaper columns documenting the success of Mennonite settlement, however, is in their emphasis on the relationship between seed saving and transfer, as well as the poignancy of uprooting and settlement. Rhinehart Friesen's stories about the tribulations experienced by one family who settled unsuccessfully on the East Reserve in 1874, and subsequently relocated to the West Reserve to begin the homesteading process again, is one such example. While this collection of stories is based on the oral accounts of the author's mother and grandmother, they are ornamented with Friesen's own interpretations of the events discussed, as well as primary source research on Mennonite settlement in Manitoba. The first chapter, "Exodus," is modeled on the travel diary of Franz Harder, who, according to the S. S. Peruvian No. 47 passenger list, was on the same ship as Friesen's grandparents,[30] and, according to the author, was a good friend of the Friesen family. While the Harder diary itself does not offer such detail,[31] Friesen's interpretation of the diary combined with his familial memory, provides a fearful yet nostalgic account of the seeds that were packaged and carried over by one family immigrating to Canada. The fictionalized conversation between Jacob Friesen and his wife Margaretha is presented as follows:

> 'Is there no end to this, Jacob? Day after day, train after train. Herded from one train to another like cattle on the way to market. I'd give anything just to be able to shoo the children out of the door to play by

> themselves for a while.' 'Try to be patient, Greta,' said Jacob calmingly. 'I agree it's unpleasant living on a crowded train. Just keep thinking about the new home we'll soon build for you.' 'A big brick one like we left behind in Friedrichsthal? With a flower garden in front and a fruit orchard in the back? I've packed some stones of peaches and apricots and mulberry seeds for silkworms . . .' Jacob interrupted her. 'They say it's much colder where we're going. I hope we'll be able to grow the things that we need to keep ourselves alive, but I have my doubts about fruits and silkworms.'[32]

Altona area resident Shaun Friesen, a great-grandson of Jacob and Margaretha Friesen, affirms that the couple brought peach pits and mulberry seeds with them to Canada. Though it is unclear whether Shaun's recollection of this detail is dependent on the above fictional account or on family stories, the Friesen family's emigration tale offers a fascinating account of the emotion attached to their botanical imports and their efforts in the reconstruction of familiar landscapes.

Sources like the above, as well as collective community memory and material culture, combine to indicate that the Mennonite emigrants from Russian in the 1870s had been told that the southern Manitoba landscape was, in the east, "covered with marshes, here and there alternatively [sic] interspersed by high prairie land, wherein the gravel having been burned, grow very tall weeds,"[33] and in the west, " . . . undulating prairie intersected by the bed of the River aux Marais, which contain[ed] in some places ponds of water," though timber was scarce.[34] In summary, the area was perceived as a "vast, [largely] treeless plain of grass and sloughs stretching west to the Pembina Hills along the International Boundary . . . black soil, aspen parkland,"[35] and Mennonites prepared accordingly by bringing with them staple garden seeds from imperial Russia. Mennonite delegates sent to Manitoba to inspect the suitability of the land in 1873, while confirming the fertility of the soil in many areas, also cautioned the hopeful settlers about the difficulties they would encounter upon arrival.[36] According to one delegate,

> the mosquitos were so bad that one could hardly defend himself . . . at some places the land is good, but railroad facilities are poor . . . The lumber for building purposes must be shipped by way of the Red River from Minnesota . . . Grasshoppers are very plentiful . . . [and] the people are lazy farmers of mixed Indian blood . . . The half-breed Indians live on this land and it belongs to them.[37]

These difficulties were realized once Mennonites arrived on the West Reserve in 1875. With the expanse of unbroken prairie, an insufficient amount of wood for building, heating, and cooking, and no towns or stores for supplies within walking distance, the challenges of life in southern Manitoba were significant. After the arrival of the Mennonites, however, this seemingly immeasurable rural landscape was quickly reconstructed into something more familiar to the European Protestant settlers. Parcels of assigned grassland throughout the West Reserve became arable cropland peppered with single-street villages throughout which well-sheltered farmyards, sizeable kitchen gardens, flower gardens, and orchards were established, due in part to the preparedness of the Mennonites by way of seed transfer and their efforts in reconstructing the indigenous environment.

A number of Mennonite scholars, including historical geographer John Warkentin, sociologist E. K. Francis, and historian Frank H. Epp, have termed this particular migration and settlement a "transplantation," or have emphasized the almost uncanny reproduction of Russian Mennonite architecture, village life, and culture on the late nineteenth century Canadian prairies.[38] At the same time, others, like historian Royden Loewen, have disputed the use of this term for its negation of the particularities of cultural change, adaptation, or even the transnational connections that ensued as a result of the migration.[39] A closer look at the methods and motives of landscape construction and gardening on the West Reserve, alongside the stories that survive and idealize or mythologize the efforts of its Mennonite pioneering generation, indicate that the idea of transplantation is foundational to this community's contemporary and historical reckoning of ethno-religious identity and the cultivated prairie land. As Canadian historian Frances Swyripa notes in her study of ethno-religious identity and prairie landscapes, this reckoning often occurs by way of a quest for roots, or an attempt to tie one's life story to a place where they imagine their ancestors belonged.[40]

Saved Seeds as Historical Artefacts

Equally important to written documents about seeds in a historical exploration of Mennonite landscapes on the West Reserve is an analysis of seeds themselves, as artefacts from and within these constructed places. By studying seeds, we not only cultivate a better awareness of the complex ways that these items shape both history and our narratives about history, but we make room for a deeper understanding of how artefacts can be read like historical texts for cultural truths, signs, symbols, poetics, and myths.[41] Texts (like newspapers, diaries, and governmental reports), oral accounts, and seeds (as well as trees, flowers, and weeds) together divulge the historical and, to borrow a phrase from archaeologist Roland Sawatzky, the "materiality of daily life."[42] Even when found to be factually inaccurate or embellished with fiction, as Natalie Zemon Davis and others have demonstrated, these sources are nonetheless saturated with practicality and socio-cultural clarification, offering glimpses into a society's view of itself.[43] Where seeds as material culture differ from other primary sources, however, is in their inability to convey direct meaning. Nonetheless, their lasting physical presence and preservation among Mennonites in southern Manitoba stands to be reckoned with, alongside their accompanying stories.

Field research has offered ample opportunity to consider and observe a great variety of seeds. As additions to my own seed collection, I have been given gifts of watermelon and honeydew seeds, as well as cucumber seeds said by community members to be descendants of those brought from Russia in the 1870s. These seeds, as Roland Sawatzky suggests of artefacts found in museum collections, seem to have been "rescued [from obscurity] by sentimentality."[44] Given their continued presence and preservation in the Mennonite museums, and the homes, garden sheds, and keepsake boxes of West Reserve residents, these seeds are indicative of key values about Manitoba Mennonite landscapes and the role of nostalgia in the imagination, construction, and intergenerational maintenance of a particular place.

As part of a collection of kitchen herbs, teas, and seeds at the Mennonite Heritage Village (MHV) in Steinbach, Manitoba, there is small jar of round, pale yellow, pea-sized beans. With blue ink in basic print on a piece of masking tape, the jar is labelled "*Oma* Anna Penner's beans, Steinau Russia, 1926." Apart from the collection notes, which state the beans were donated to the Museum's artefact collection in 2006 and were originally brought to Canada by Peter and Anna Penner (née Klassen), we know very little about the story of these beans. According to her descendants, who donated the beans to the Museum, Anna is said to have grown the beans each year, following her arrival in Manitoba, always setting some aside for seed over the course of her lifetime on a farm near Oak Lake. Anna later passed some of the seeds on to her daughter Elizabeth Kathler, who then passed some along to her son, William. At the time of donation, it was noted that the beans continue to be grown on a farm near Rosa, a small town in southeastern Manitoba, near the Red River.[45]

Also present at MHV are numerous acorns from trees believed to be descendants of a supposedly 800-year-old oak tree in Chortitza, Ukraine (formerly New Russia), which was settled by Mennonites in 1789. One such descendant of this tree has been planted at MHV, another is present in Winkler, on the former West Reserve. The original Chortitza oak, which is said to have been forty feet high and thirty feet in diameter, served as a central landmark and meeting place for the people who lived in its vicinity.[46] A now classic photograph of Mennonite children sitting in the oak's impressive and wide-reaching branches stands in as a reminder of the tree's centrality in Mennonite heritage in imperial Russia. Nonetheless, the tree, which died over twenty years ago, has descendants alive and well in many Mennonite communities in North America. The plaque that stands in front of the Winkler descendant reads that the Chortitza oak was a symbol of the Mennonites' home on the steppes. Similarly, the sapling in Winkler represents the efforts of Mennonites in the successful settlement of Manitoba, the planting of "sheltering trees, gardens and thriving farms . . . in . . . the West Reserve." The sapling was planted "in a [sic] humble recognition of our history and our roots." The tradition of seed saving and transfer, and the planting of the Chortitza oak tree's descendants, offers a present day example of the ways Mennonites construct landscapes that are instilled with corporate memory, nostalgia, and Mennonite folklore. Such corporate memory represents an emotional and psychological effort to claim rootedness and history in a particular place.

Jake Rempel of Halbstadt, Manitoba is a keen community historian with numerous tales to share. At a Seedy Saturday meeting in February 2013, Jake was offering any interested parties small bags of *Cershownki*[47] melon seeds, along with heritage stories. The melon in question is a small and delicate member of the cucurbit family; it produces a fruit with a thin skin and light-green flesh. According to Jake, the *Cershownki* cannot be planted in the vicinity of other melons due to the likelihood of cross-pollination; however, they can be seeded as soon as the soil can be worked in spring, and will stay on the vine up until the first frost in autumn, which make them a desirable and relatively maintenance-free variety. Though not widely known among gardeners in the West Reserve, two other participants did relay memories of this melon variety; one gardener also shared some of her family's heritage seeds with me. Jake's understanding is that Mennonite immigrants brought the *Cershownki* melon to Manitoba from imperial Russia in the 1870s. He thinks it was his great-great-grandparents, Jacob Kehler and Katharina Penner, who arrived in Canada in 1874, and brought this particular variety, "our variety," according to Jake. The seeds from Jake family's *Cershownki* melons have supposedly been passed down from mother to daughter through the generations. Today, Jake's family members continue to grow these heritage melons and save the seed for their gardens in future years.

As can be noted, the careful preservation, labeling, and storage of these seeds by West Reserve gardeners highlight the enduring tradition of seed saving among Mennonites in Manitoba. Seed saving was not only a viable option for rural Manitobans prior to the establishment of greenhouses and nurseries, but for Mennonite gardeners, it sustained the regrowth of vegetable and fruit varieties familiar in their ethno-religious customs in cooking and food preservation. For contemporary Mennonite gardeners, the seeds are a material manifestation of a time-honoured tradition and a lifeway that hones a collective ethno-religious identity and sharpens a sense of fixed history as a people in a particular place.

The Social Life of Seeds

Oral history lends another perspective to the place of seeds, particularly when considering the social and cultural history of West Reserve Mennonites, or the imaginative and emotional underpinning of a distinct ethno-religious lifeway. For example, Sara Krueger, who grew up on a farmyard near Altona, Manitoba, was the only girl in a large family, and was thus typically responsible for helping her mother with seeding and tending the garden, chores she disliked a great deal. Now in her eighties, Sara recalls the day she protested assisting her mother in the garden by saying, "You won't have to irrigate the garden, because I'll do it with my tears." While Sara's memories of working in the garden as a child do not hinge on specific knowledge of heritage seeds or plants, her reflections point to another important aspect of seeds in Mennonite history: the gathering of family and community members around the seeds themselves. Sara also recalled just how much her mother loved to eat sunflower seeds (almost as much as her father loved to smoke tobacco). "There was a time when both of them vowed to give up these vices. I think Father lasted longer in his commitment than Mother." The sunflower seeds were dried and roasted for visitors on Sundays, especially in winter. They were often enjoyed around the table during a game of cards.[48]

The memories Sara shared about sunflower seeds are supported by the collective memory of West Reserve community members. Seeds from sunflowers (and pumpkins) were routinely dried, roasted, and eaten by Manitoba Mennonites: a social tradition that harks back to the customs taken up by Mennonites in Russia during the winter months. On the Canadian prairies from January to March, when the winter season with its darkness, wind, and cold kept everyone from many outdoor chores, Mennonite men, women, and children gathered in each other's homes to visit, sing, discuss politics, play games, spin and knit. Freshly roasted sunflower seeds, or *Knacksot* in Low German – literally 'crack seeds' – were shared at such gatherings. Many recall that the shells were often spit directly onto the floor, for the seed shells left behind a desirable, shiny, and protective coating of oil on the wood after being swept up.[49]

The Mennonite social tradition of eating sunflower seeds has been widely documented. Norma Jost Voth's collection of Mennonite recipes and folkways from Russia and North America details memories of winter visiting in Canada and with it, the consumption of seeds. One man reminisces about the prairie winter with simultaneous fondness and unease: "In January winter set in with a vengeance. Coping with the cold on the prairies was a challenge. A prairie house on a hill may be a subject for art or poetry in summer, but in January it made life a battle for survival. Without storm windows and insulation, the winter wind seemed to blow through with scarcely a pause."[50] And yet, as Voth via her informant elaborates, "when the drifted roads cleared and the sun shone . . . neighbors and relatives used weekday afternoons to call on each other. They talked about the old country, the farm, the church and sometimes even the relatives. Usually guests stayed for supper. In spite of the cold and boredom, winter provided its own beauty and calm."[51]

Anna von Kampen Funk recalls it was winter evenings when the women did their visiting, spinning, and knitting while eating sunflower and pumpkin seeds.[52] In an interview with researcher Tracy Ruta Fuchs, former Neubergthal resident Norma Giesbrecht shared that when she was a little girl,

> there was always sunflowers planted in the garden . . . [because] at that time it wasn't a field crop. [We had] huge sunflowers . . . and they were . . . big sheaves and they were dried . . . knocked out, dried, and they

> were roasted and then they ate them. Oh yeah, we used to harvest quite a bit of them. [These] huge sunflowers, like, they would get this big and they would hang down . . . part of winter preparation was sunflower seeds.[53]

Boosting the narrative of the unique relationship between Mennonites and sunflower seeds, George Neufeld spoke with Ruta Fuchs about growing up outside of a Mennonite community in Gardenton, Manitoba, and about his parents' garden. "We always had all the regular vegetables," he explained. "We had quite a lot of watermelons. And one thing that we had that nobody around there had was sunflowers. We had enough sunflower seeds to fill a big bag. Quite unusual. People would come to our place on Sunday to crack sunflower seeds. That was different."[54]

In another interview about gardening with a group of East Reserve Mennonite women, Ruta Fuchs's questions led to fuller consideration of the social matrix interwoven with sunflower seeds. These, along with the above-noted recollections, speak to the central place of seeds in the collective memory and the cultural imagination of Manitoba Mennonites. Audrey Toews professed that sunflower seeds were indeed introduced by Mennonites from Russia to Manitoba. Liz Toews, Bettie Hiebert, and Chris Peters spoke of their memories of sunflowers in their families' gardens. "We usually had some sunflowers in the garden," said Liz Toews. "Like, we had a few rows of corn, we would have a few rows of sunflowers." Bettie Hiebert recalled that her family would dry sunflower seeds and eat them in winter: "we would sit and eat sunflower seeds. You wouldn't put [the shells] in a container, you would spit them on the floor and the floor would become all shiny from it." When asked whether consuming sunflower seeds was more commonly a tradition among men, the women affirmed that while they and their mothers and grandmothers certainly ate them, they rarely sat visiting "with idle hands." Women were "always knitting, or crocheting, or something like that. I'm not saying we didn't eat sunflower seeds. I remember [eating them] even as a kid." These women's reflections indicate that they, more often than not, ate the seeds while tending to other tasks, particularly in the winter when there were mending and other household tasks to tackle, as opposed to the men, who seem to have eaten sunflower seeds whilst sitting and visiting.[55]

Seed Savers and Nostalgia

Among contemporary West Reserve residents, seed stories evoke a milieu of emotion, as discovered in oral history interviews over the course of the last several years. For example, in preparation for a visit with me, Mary Loewen in Silberfeld had arranged her most prized possessions on the dining room table: among them was a small box containing watermelon, cucumber, muskmelon, dill, and carrot seeds that belonged to her mother. The variety of watermelon, winter winter queen, is of special significance to Mary – she has fond memories of her mother growing the melons, their sweet taste, and their prominence in her childhood summer cuisine. Mary believes these seeds originated in Russia, and were carried over by her grandmother. Accordingly she takes special care to preserve them in her collection of keepsakes.

Further, family lore holds that West Reserve resident Anne Zacharias' prized *tiedje Gurkje,*[56] or 'early cucumbers,' are grown from the seeds which were brought to Manitoba from imperial Russia by her grandmother, saved and passed between generations of the family's gardeners. Like her mother and grandmother, Anne has always loved working in the garden and on the farm. The affection for traditions of gardening and farm work in Anne's life was further confirmed by her stories of drying seeds on every conceivable surface in their family's home each autumn and early winter. The care and time she took to "make the seeds," as her husband Bill named the process, ensured a sound effort towards a successful garden the following year. Bill's stories about Anne driving the combine, baling hay, and happily singing the hymn "I walk in the garden," while she planted and hoed further validated the centrality of land tenure as Anne's vocation. Bill and Anne together recalled the many seasons they grew prolific crops of winter queen watermelons. One year the couple had ripe watermelons that lasted until the celebration of their November anniversary. "For Mennonites," Bill explained, "watermelons are life!"

Anne believes that gardening and farming were tasks that brought her "very close to God." As Bill elaborated on her behalf, "Gardening is a part of life. There is no question about it. A garden you must have. We sow the seeds on the farm [and] in the garden, and then we say: Now, Lord, I've done my part; we put our trust in you." Planting and saving seeds resonate in Bill and Anne's telling of their life story. Though Anne's work in the garden and her efforts in seed saving have ended since she suffered a stroke, Bill has ensured, at the very least, that the *tiedje Gurkje* are replanted in the garden each year and that seeds are saved again for the year to come – an embodied sign of his care for Anne, his faith, and their joint family history.[57]

In researcher Tracy Ruta Fuchs's interviews with East and West Reserve Mennonites, many recalled stories from parents or grandparents about seeds and plants that were brought to Canada from Russia. For example, Helen Peters remembers that when her grandparents immigrated to Canada in the 1870s, they "brought *all* their seeds." Norma Giesbrecht suggested that she read of requests made by mail from those who were already in Manitoba asking those still coming to bring vegetable and flower seeds with them. "Yeah. 'Cause there was nothing here, eh? There was nothing here… so a lot of that stuff must have come over from Russia."[58]

Stories about seed saving connect interviewees like Norma to their family and community histories, despite a misinterpretation of the Manitoba landscape prior to Mennonite settlement. Norma herself is now an active participant in the tradition of seed saving. Outside Norma's childhood home in Neubergthal are beds of impressive "heritage zinnias" which she claims are descendants of those grown in the gardens of some of the village's first settlers. Each autumn, she removes and dries the flower heads and seedpods so as to ensure their regrowth the following summer.[59]

Storied Seeds

Though the ancestry of the plants and seeds discussed in interviews cannot be confirmed, the efforts of community members to preserve their storied transplantation are central to the memory of Mennonite migration and settlement in Manitoba. As another example of the way botanical culture on the West Reserve has been shaped by a particular story about a transplanted place, popular community memory holds that Mennonites brought a number of cottonwood trees with them from Russia to the newly established village of Neubergthal in the late 1870s. David Punter, senior scholar, plant pathologist, and botanist at the University of Manitoba, however, believes it is highly unlikely these trees are of European or Russian origin. Rather more likely is that the trees were harvested from alongside waterways nearby the reserve lands, or were cultivated, traded, or purchased upon arrival.[60] When asked to comment on the community memory, Punter said: "People have a strong attachment to the surroundings in which they were brought up, and plants and trees are an important part of our surroundings, perhaps even more so when there aren't many around . . . We remember with joy the things we scrounge from nature, and such memories and emotions may have been more prominent . . . in the years prior to World War II when the 'ethic of self-reliance' would have largely informed the thoughts and behaviours of people in relation to nature."[61]

The rise in popularity of Canadian mail order catalogues likely altered the seed saving and exchanging customs in many West Reserve Mennonite villages and towns. In the early 1880s, widely distributed sources such as Robert McNeil's *Practical Test on Gardening in Manitoba* or the Eaton's seed catalogue encouraged pioneer gardening as a central component of settling distinctly European landscapes on the prairies for the purposes of beautification, familiarity, and recreation. McNeil's guide states,

> We cannot too earnestly recommend the growing of flowers. In the push and hurry of the first years of a settler's life these ornaments of our homes are apt to be neglected; but it will not be found wasted time to give a little attention to these old friends. Their familiar faces smiling on us from day to day will cheer us and make us more contented with the new home and life which opens before us in a new country; while the care of them will provide a recreation after the toils of the day.[62]

As noted by several participants in Tracy Ruta Fuchs's oral history interviews, catalogues were indeed used in the early and mid-twentieth century to round out the supply of saved seeds in some households. Some of the women who claimed that their mothers or grandmothers never purchased seeds later discussed their families' common use of seed catalogues. For Mennonites, community memory determining the heritage of West Reserve seeds and plants works to preserve the cultural ethic of self-reliance, as well as root Mennonite identity in a particular history and place, despite alternative discourses which complicate these narratives of seed saving, heritage, and the transformation of the prairie landscape.

Conclusion

Many Mennonite community members hold historical writings, physical evidence, memories, and legends of seed transfer and intergenerational propagation in complex unison. Together, materials and stories reflect the efforts to make sense of their ancestors' group migration, to root them in a particular and historical ethno-religious tradition. And yet, Mennonite participation in a nationwide settler-colonial project of modernity is concealed in part by efforts to place their history of landscaping at the centre of the prairie's genesis. Shaun Friesen's insights about this complicated history hold that seeds contained meaning for the emigrants who carefully packaged them for the long journey, and continue to hold within them a distinct, historical sense of peoplehood. "Seeds contain life," he pondered, "seeds offered Mennonites a chance at a new yet familiar life in an unknown place within the trauma of their migration."[63] It is a multifaceted trauma, Shaun believes, that Mennonites have not yet overcome. Shaun's observations and the complexity of community stories divulged by these observations align with literature scholar Robert Pogue Harrison's own musings. In his book *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition* Harrison notes that human beings are not intended to look too closely at history's uproar. Rather than seeing inobservance as a shortcoming, he suggests "our reluctance to let history's realities petrify us underlies much of what makes human life bearable . . . If ever history were to become everything," he continues, "we would all succumb to madness." The garden, for Harrison and perhaps for the Mennonite settlers of the 1870s and their descendants, "whether real or imaginary . . . has provided sanctuary from the tumult of history." And yet gardens, however real or imaginary, "however self-enclosed their world may be, invariably take their stand in history, if only as counterforce to history's deleterious drives . . . It is because we are thrown into history," argues Harrison, "that we must cultivate our garden . . . History without gardens would be a wasteland. A garden severed from history would be superfluous."[64]

Notes

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[2] Rhinehart Friesen, *A Mennonite Odyssey* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1988), 14.

[3] Gertrude Stein, "A Conversation with Gertrude Stein," by John Hyde Preston in *Gertrude Stein Remembered*, ed. Linda Simon (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 157.

[4] Susan Empringham, ed., *A Village Saga: The Writings of Maria Klassen (Braun)* (Self-published, 2012), 51.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Frances W. Kaye, *Good Lands: A Meditation and History on the Great Plains* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2011), 5.

[9] At least five-hundred years before the arrival of Europeans, Indigenous people in the prairie region had extensive and intricate knowledge of the growing habits and availability of plants and berries, which were used for both food and medicine. Many First Nations groups also cultivated varieties of corn, beans, squash, and sunflowers. See Catherine Flynn and E. Leigh Syms, "Manitoba's First Farmers," *Manitoba History* 31 (1996): http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/31/firstfarmers.shtml. Accessed 30 January 2017. See also Alexander Ross, *The Red River Settlement: Its Rise, Progress, and Present State* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1856) for an account of European efforts to introduce plant varieties in the region prior to 1870.

[10] Lyle Dick, "The Greening of the West: Horticulture on the Canadian Prairies, 1870-1930," *Manitoba History* 31 (1996): http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/31/prairiehorticulture.shtml. Accessed 01 December 2016.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Adele Perry, "'Is Your Garden in England, Sir?' Nation, Empire, and Home in James Douglas' Archive," *History Workshop Journal* 70 (Fall 2010): 79.

[13] Ibid., 78.

[14] Jill H. Casid. *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xxi.

[15] Ibid., xiii.

[16] Ibid., xxi.

[17] Ibid., xxii.

[18] Ibid., 49.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Jacob E. Peters, et al, eds., *The Outsiders' Gaze: Life and Labour on the Mennonite West Reserve, 1874-1922* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2015), 33.

[21] J. Y. Shantz, *Narrative of a Journey to Manitoba* (Ottawa: Dept. of Agriculture, 1873), 13.

[22] Ibid., 17-18.

[23] J. Y. Shantz, "Mennonite Progress," *Manitoba Free Press*, 8 November 1879.

[24] J. Y. Shantz, "The Mennonite Immigration – Mode of Settlement – Success of Settlers – Repayment of Loan," *Victoria Appendix* (no. 6 A) 1886: 49.

[25] Lady Dufferin, *My Canadian Journal, 1872-1878* (London: John Murray, 1891), 333.

[26] W. Henry Barneby, "Chapter 24," in *Life and Labour in the Far, Far, West: Being Notes of a Tour in the Western States, British Columbia, Manitoba and the Northwest Territory* (London, Paris & New York: Cassell & Company, 1884), in *The Outsiders' Gaze*, eds. Jacob E. Peters et al. (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2015), 75-84.

[27] Ibid., 79.

[28] Ibid., 81.

[29] Ibid., 80.

[30] "S. S. Peruvian No. 47 arrived in Quebec on July 27, 1874," accessed 8 February 2016, http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/canada/quebec/peruvian_47.html.

[31] Franz Harder's short travel diary was published in William Schroeder's *Bergthal Colony* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1974), 54-5.

[32] Friesen, *A Mennonite Odyssey*, 18-9.

[33] John H. Warkentin, "Appendix A: Land Surveyors' Descriptions – Township by Township," *The Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba* (Steinbach: Hanover Steinbach Historical Society, 2000), 317.

[34] Ibid., 319.

[35] P. J. Peters, *A Century of Horticulture in Manitoba, 1880-198*0 (Altona: Friesens Printers, 1988), 14.

[36] J. Y. Shantz, *Narrative of a Journey to Manitoba*.

[37] J. M. Hofer, ed., "The Diary of Paul Tschetter, 1873," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 5 (1931): 112-128, 198-219.

[38] John H. Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba*, 1; E. K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia* (Altona, D.W. Friesen & Sons, 1955), 50; Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920: the History of a Separate People* (Toronto: McMillian of Canada, 1974), 212.

[39] Royden Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 70-91.

[40] Frances Swyripa, *Storied Landscapes: Ethno-religious Identity and the Canadian Prairies* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2010), 244.

[41] Karen Harvey, ed., "Introduction" in *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 4.

[42] Roland Sawatzky, "Blumenhof Village and the Archaeology of Difference," in *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 34 (2016), 33.

[43] Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 3-5.

[44] Sawatzky, "Blumenhof Village," 35. Elizabeth Kathler, as cited in donor file, Mennonite Heritage Village (MHV), Acc. No. 2006.11.2.

[45] Kathler, as cited in donor file, MHV, Acc. No. 2006.11.2.

[46] Carol Sanders, "Oak Tree's Seeds Keep Mennonite History Alive," *Winnipeg Free Press*, 23 June 2006.

[47] The word *Cershownki* likely has roots in Russian, but has been adapted over time to suit the Low German language. The term is not widely known, and is not present in either Herman Rempel's *Kjenn Jie Noch Plautdietsch? A Mennonite Low German Dictionary* (Winnipeg: Mennonite Literary Society, 1984), or Jack Thiessen's more recent dictionary, *Mennonite Low German Dictionary, Mennonitisch-Plattdeutsches Wörterbuch* (Madison: Max Kade Institute for German American Studies, 2003). One speculation is that this specific melon is similar to the more commonly known crenshaw melon.

[48] Sara Krueger, personal interview, 11 May 2015.

[49] Norma Jost Voth, *Mennonite Foods & Folkways from South Russia*, Volume II (Intercourse: Good Books, 1991), 161.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid., 160-1.

[52] Ibid., 161.

[53] Norma Giesbrecht, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 21 October 2004, MHV, *Beauty and Sustenance* research files. Researcher Tracey Ruta Fuchs conducted these oral history interviews for *Beauty and Sustenance: A History of Mennonite Gardens and Orchards in Russia and Manitoba* (Steinbach, MHV: 2007).

[54] George Neufeld, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 2 November 2004, MHV, *Beauty and Sustenance* research files.

[55] Bettie Hiebert, Chris Peters, Audrey Toews, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 23 November 2004, MHV, *Beauty and Sustenance* research files.

[56] Where possible, I have deferred to Herman Rempel's *Kjenn Jie Noch Plautdietsch* for assistance with the spelling and grammatical formations of the Low German words discussed during oral history interviews with West Reserve residents. Herman Rempel's own roots on the West Reserve have made him attentive to the colloquialisms and pronunciations more common among West Reserve Low German speakers. Where Rempel's dictionary is lacking, Jack Thiessen's *Mennonite Low German Dictionary* and Hans Werner's expertise have been valuable resources.

[57] Bill and Anne Zacharias, personal interview, 29 April 2015.

[58] Norma Giesbrecht, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 21 October 2004, MHV, *Beauty and Sustenance* research files.

[59] Ibid.

[60] David Harms, email communication with the author, 29 January 2016; Martin Penner, email communication with author, 25 November 2015; David Punter, personal interview, 15 April 2015.

[61] David Punter, personal interview, 15 April 2015.

[62] Robert McNeil, *Practical Tests on Gardening for Manitoba* (Winnipeg: Wilson, 1884), 31.

[63] Shaun Friesen, personal interview, 10 February 2015.

[64] Robert Pogue Harrison, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), ix, x.