

Performing Ethnicity in a Pluralistic Society: The 1974 Manitoba Mennonite Centennial

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On Sunday, July 28, 1974, a crowd of nearly seven thousand gathered at the Winnipeg Arena to celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the settlement in Manitoba of Mennonites from Russia. The day's events included a morning worship service, noon-time historical lectures and skits, and an afternoon program of speeches and addresses by the premier, lieutenant governor, and Mennonite community leaders, interspersed with scripture reading, prayer, and performances by the Southern Manitoba Centennial Male Choir.¹ The rally was a focal point of a calendar of commemorative activities that spanned two years and which included touring theatrical productions, musical performances, the unveiling of plaques and monuments, historical reenactments, book projects, and various community festivals and celebrations. The Manitoba Mennonite Centennial, as these elaborate proceedings were known, is an example of how Manitoba Mennonites engaged specific elements of collective memory to legitimate a conception of ethno-religious group identity that would be a resource for social cohesion and confirm their value within a pluralistic society. This was a vision of collective identity that fit within and was partly constructed by the framework of state-sponsored cultural pluralism and official multiculturalism. It was

largely intelligible in secular terms, and would confer advantage to Mennonites as they acculturated to the societal mainstream.

This paper, based on a wider study of the evolving Mennonite identity in Canada in the second half of the twentieth century, focuses on aspects of the Manitoba Mennonite Centennial and the ways its organizers sought to provide an answer to recurrent questions about who Mennonites were as a people during a period marked by transition. The Centennial reflected the history of a once relatively separatist group that was rapidly becoming urbanized, atomized, and influenced by mass culture. By the early 1970s, concern about the persistence of a distinctive and vital religious and cultural identity was a common theme in the Mennonite press and in scholarly work by Mennonite academics, and was evident as a motivation for Mennonite institution-building. Mennonite sociologist Paul Peachey, responding in 1968 to similar developments in the United States, described the situation as an identity crisis, asserting that as a result of “the run-away pace of change in American life, the cultural and psychic substance of Mennonite solidarity is rapidly dissolving.”² Although this concept of crisis, in a precise sociological or psychological sense, is not entirely unproblematic, it would gain currency in academic analysis of Mennonites throughout North America.³ The festivities of the Manitoba Mennonite Centennial can be interpreted as an effort to respond to the uncertainties of Mennonite collective identity by asserting a primarily “cultural” rather than a religious self-understanding, which could foster a sense of belonging and affirm a sense of distinctiveness. Through a combination of activities that spoke to historical origins and contemporary accomplishments, the Centennial positioned Manitoba Mennonites as a modern ethnic collectivity on a par with others within Canada’s framework of liberal pluralism.

The study of the relation of group identity and commemorative activity through the Mennonite Centennial necessarily introduces the concept of collective memory, a subject of considerable interest in the humanities and social sciences in the past three decades. Despite the abundance of literature produced on the topic, some of the key concepts of memory studies have eluded consensus of definition, including the basic meaning of “collective memory” itself. Aleida Assmann argues that the term has been employed too broadly to be of analytic use, suggesting instead the more precise categories of “social memory” (shared by a group of people approximately the same age, and consisting of collected personal experiences and witnessed events), “political memory” (transgenerational and transmitted through external symbols and

representations by an array of institutions, as well as through occasions of collective participation, and informing political action), and “cultural memory” (a form of memory that includes mechanisms, such as libraries and museums, for “storing” memories that are “neither actively remembered nor totally forgotten”).⁴

The form of memory fostered by the Mennonite Centennial, referring to events in the more distant past, and not revealing a well-defined political purpose nor emphasizing memory storage practices particularly, fits none of these categories exactly, but falls somewhere between the categories of “political” and “cultural” memory. I therefore use the general term “collective memory,” acknowledging its limitations. It bears stating that this concept of memory is always possessed and exercised by individuals sharing some common frame of reference and sense of the past; it has no independent, transcendent existence.⁵ Following Maurice Halbwachs, the French sociologist whose early-twentieth-century work is a chief inspiration to contemporary memory studies, this conception of collective memory emphasizes the interpenetration of lived, personal experience and of the collective past.⁶ History writing, by contrast, is a matter of interpretation, “the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer.”⁷ Collective memory is also always “a view from within a group,” in contrast to history, which for Halbwachs, aspires to universality of interpretation.⁸ Collective memory will therefore frequently be shaped by present-day concerns. Historical studies of collective or public memory and commemoration – what has been described as the combination of memory plus veneration⁹ – often emphasize how this kind of memory reinforces existing power structures and hegemonic ideologies.

Planning the Centennial

Mennonites came to Manitoba in a series of migrations from Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union. The first, and the subject of the Centennial, occurred after a series of reforms initiated by Tsar Nicholas in the late 1860s threatened their privileges, prompting the Mennonites to consider emigration to North America. Following a delegation sent to explore possible settlement locations in 1873, the first group of Mennonite emigrants went to Manitoba in 1874. Between 1874 and 1880, about one third of the 45,000 Mennonites in Russia emigrated to North America, approximately 7,000 going to Manitoba. This number consisted of some of the most conservative Mennonite church groups. In Manitoba they set-

tled in two blocks set aside by the government, where they resumed their existence in locations relatively separated from the surrounding society. This first group, eventually referred to as *Kanadier*, differed significantly from those who came in the second major wave of Mennonite immigration that followed in the 1920s, driven by concerns about their future security in the Soviet Union. This group, eventually referred to as the *Russlaender*, tended to be more educated and more liberal-minded, religiously and culturally. A third wave of migrants followed the Second World War and, having lived under Soviet rule and then German occupation, they were distinctive in their own way.

The organization of the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society (MMHS) in 1958 was crucially important in providing leadership in initiatives designed to increase popular knowledge and interest in Mennonite history. MMHS was established when a small, previously existing historical committee was given a new mandate to serve the entire province. At its founding, MMHS declared as its priorities the establishment of an "inter-Mennonite museum," the encouragement and publication of Mennonite historical research, and the organization of a celebration of the centennial of the coming of the Mennonites from Russia to Manitoba.¹⁰ Paul J. Schaefer, principal of the Mennonite Collegiate Institute, presented a proposal at one of the Society's earliest meetings that outlined his vision for the centennial, which strongly resembled the celebrations that took place 1974.¹¹ The historical society's central objective was to foster awareness of Mennonite history and culture. Gerhard Ens, one of the society's founding members, recalls that "there was a feeling by the 1950s and 1960s that Mennonite youth was not being educated in their history."¹² The Centennial, as a massive, public event that all would be invited to celebrate, was seen as an opportunity by MMHS to get Mennonites "interested in their past."¹³ Both of the historical society's first major projects – the Mennonite Village Museum, which opened in Steinbach in 1967, and the Manitoba Mennonite Centennial – cultivated collective memory of a relatively recent past, focusing primarily on the experience of pioneer and early twentieth-century life in Manitoba, rather than on more distant periods in Mennonite and Anabaptist history. This was perhaps in keeping with the expectations of a locally organized historical society, but it also had implications for the types of historical narratives that would inform Mennonite group identity.

Historically minded Mennonite leaders had previously organized small celebrations of the fiftieth, sixtieth, and seventy-fifth anniversaries of Mennonites coming to Manitoba, in 1924, 1934,

and 1949 respectively. The most notable byproduct of these was the publication of a few books.¹⁴ Celebrations had also been held in the United States to commemorate the parallel settlement of Mennonites from Russia in the American Midwest.¹⁵ The vision for the 1974 Manitoba Mennonite Centennial was considerably more elaborate than these previous celebrations. Beyond the symbolic importance of a hundred-year anniversary, the Centennial celebrations were shaped by the context in which they were produced. Factors external to the Mennonite community informed the forms of expression that were chosen and the range of meanings that would be conveyed. One factor that contributed to the “symbolic repertoire” available to Centennial planners and participants was the example of recent large-scale public anniversary celebrations that modeled how commemorative events might promote unity, community ideals, and active engagement.¹⁶ A spate of such celebrations occurred as Canada and its institutions reached the hundred-year anniversaries of their founding, the largest and most relevant being Canada’s centennial in 1967 and Manitoba’s centennial in 1970.

The vision and intended meaning for the Centennial are significantly revealed through the records of its primary organizers. Planning began in earnest in November of 1971, four months after the MMHS appointed a committee of four men for the purpose: P. J. B. Reimer, Gerhard Ens, Ted Friesen, and Gerhard Lohrenz, with Lohrenz serving as chair. At this fall meeting the Centennial Committee was enlarged to include some thirty members representing all of the province’s Mennonite church groups.¹⁷ The Committee began its work by establishing a set of goals and objectives that would inform their planning. The first stated objective was religious in nature: to offer “praise and thanks to God” and to emphasize important spiritual themes of the past “decades and centuries.” Significantly, this was followed by the political goal that the Centennial should provide “an expression of gratitude to the governments of Canada.” Subsequent objectives reveal a preoccupation with social and cultural concerns of group identity, heritage preservation, and the nurture of a connection between historical identity and future survival. The Committee determined that the Centennial should “familiarize all of us, but the younger generation in particular, with our spiritual heritage *and particularly with our history of the past century.*” It hoped that the Centennial would “express and ... foster a sense of unity among the various groups of Mennonites in Canada,” and it desired that the Centennial would “help us in finding a sense of identity and particularly a sense of direction for the future. The 1974 Centennial

should not only remind us from where we come, but also, what our particular mission is to be and to point out new frontiers for tomorrow." Finally, it would provide a "home-coming" opportunity for the descendants of Mennonites who had left Manitoba for other provinces.¹⁸

The vision and goals for the Centennial were further elaborated in a series of papers written by key committee members. Chair Gerhard Lohrenz cited scripture to emphasize the importance of understanding "the story of our people," and made several concrete suggestions for Centennial events, including special historical presentations to church congregations, a mass rally on the grounds of the Mennonite Village Museum, and the erection of "an impressive and suitable monument on some conspicuous place such as the Legislative Grounds" in Winnipeg, "to remind ourselves and our fellow citizens of the presence of our people in this province and also of the service rendered by them."¹⁹ Henry J. Gerbrandt, a minister in the Bergthaler Mennonite Church, assessed the religious divisions among the Mennonite people, and suggested that in order to celebrate in unity, acts of reconciliation between Mennonite church groups might be necessary. He also urged the Centennial Committee to recognize the different interests that might exist between churches in Winnipeg and in rural southern Manitoba.²⁰ Evangelical Mennonite Church minister P. J. B. Reimer also addressed the topic of unity, advising the committee to ensure that Mennonites of the two major migrations would be represented at a mass rally in 1973 that would commemorate the centennial of the visit of the Russian Mennonite advance delegation, and the fiftieth anniversary of the second wave of migration that began in 1923.²¹ Gerhard Ens, principal at the Mennonite Collegiate Institute, took a broad sociological perspective, and suggested that the Centennial might be an opportunity for Mennonites to consider "new frontiers" for Mennonites in areas of economics (labour-management relations, agriculture, and ecology), human relations (welfare, and politics and government), and in the fine arts, and suggested essay and short story contests to address these themes.²² Many of the specific suggestions for Centennial events and projects described in these papers would be implemented, and the idea that Manitoba Mennonites comprised a people that shared a common history was an implicit theme.

There were a number of issues that the Centennial Committee did not take on. The issue of reconciliation between church groups as well as Ens's "new frontiers" agenda fell by the wayside. Another issue that might have stimulated debate was the question of how to address the relationship of Mennonites to the Indigenous peo-

ples on whose land the Mennonites' ancestors had settled. In the minutes and reports of the Centennial Committee this matter would be raised repeatedly by Henry H. Epp, a minister and church conference administrator. Epp would suggest a variety of ways to involve Indigenous people in the celebrations, including roles in a proposed film about the migration and settlement experience, "Christian singers singing in native tongues" at the planned hymn sings, and mobile historical displays with art and "history of Indians woven into [the] design."²³ There is no indication of the response of Epp's fellow committee members but evidently these ideas gained little traction, despite a growing consciousness among Mennonites about their historic and contemporary relationship with Indigenous people.²⁴

The Centennial Committee did, however, organize numerous events making for a busy Centennial calendar, and it played a crucial coordinating function for many other, more localized events. Eventually the Committee consisted of two dozen men and one woman, representing Manitoba's four Mennonite church conferences and six other Mennonite church groups. The most common occupation of members of this "heritage elite" was minister or church worker; educators were also well represented.²⁵ Mennonites representing descendants or participants in both major waves of migration – the Kanadier and the Russlaender – were included on the Committee. Of the members of the core Steering Committee and the chairs of the various subcommittees, eight were of Kanadier descent and three were Russlaender.²⁶ Although their numbers were smaller, according to minutes and correspondence the three Russlaender chairs – Gerhard Lohrenz, Gerhard Ens, and Henry H. Epp – were the most active committee leaders. By most indications, the Russlaender exercised a disproportionate influence over the planning of activities celebrating the anniversary of Kanadier settlement. Committee and subcommittee chairs were also almost exclusively members of Conference in Mennonites in Canada (popularly known General Conference) churches. Members of other church groups did make important contributions, but there was a distinct lack of strong voices representing the perspective of the large and institutionally advanced Mennonite Brethren church, or the most conservative churches. The near absence of women from the Committee reflected the patriarchy of contemporary Mennonite institutions, and was likely a factor affecting the characteristics of the public Centennial celebrations.

The program of activities and projects coordinated by the MMHS Centennial Committee was extensive, and its variety of forms and emphases reflected the multiple goals of the Committee.

Some events and publications took an instructional approach, fostering collective memory by rehearsing details about the Mennonite migration and settlement, while others addressed this history through a more romantic lens, relating familial stories, memorializing hardships, and lauding the achievements of settler ancestors. There was historically themed art on the page and on stage. Not all activities were historically commemorative; the Centennial produced several works of art (mainly writing and music) that demonstrated Mennonites' growing competence and sophistication in their respective fields. There was also religious worship, through prayer, sermons, and services of hymn singing.

The focus of much Centennial planning was the year 1974, the one hundredth anniversary of Mennonite settlement, but activities officially began in 1973. The first public event of the Centennial introduced the theme of Mennonites as pioneers in a sometimes-hostile land, with an educational tour commemorating the 1873 visit to Manitoba of the delegation from Russia of ten Mennonites and two Hutterites. Lawrence Klippenstein, a pastor in the Conference of Mennonites in Canada and teacher with graduate training in history, organized a one-day "delegate safari" that attracted nearly two hundred people. The day began with a gathering at Winnipeg's historic Upper Fort Garry Gate, where Manitoba's premier, Edward Schreyer, delivered remarks to acknowledge the occasion, giving official confirmation of the importance of the Mennonites to the province's early history. The tour then proceeded to the Museum of Man and Nature; the Lower Fort Garry historic site; a former Hudson's Bay Company store in the town of Ste. Anne, where the 1873 delegates had spent a night; and the Mennonite Village Museum in Steinbach.²⁷ Photocopied booklets provided for participants included a one-page history of the delegate visit and maps. The Mennonite-owned Radio Southern Manitoba, CFAM, covered the event and broadcast an hour-long summary of its highlights.²⁸ Other activities during 1973 served to raise awareness of the Centennial. Churches were encouraged to host speakers on topics related to Mennonite history, and a musical drama called "These People Mine," written the previous year by American Mennonite Merle Good, was presented under the auspices of MMHS in Winkler, Altona, Steinbach, and Winnipeg.²⁹ Articles in the Mennonite press kept readers apprised of Centennial activities as they occurred, and provided publicity for future events.

Gathering Mennonites

A flurry of activity linked to the many Centennial Committee projects also emanated from a variety of other commemorative efforts by individual churches, towns, and extended families. Several events drew large crowds, demonstrating the level of interest of the Mennonite community at large. The first of these mass events was a pair of "hymn sing" concerts held at Winnipeg's Centennial Concert Hall in February. Originally a single concert had been planned, but such was the interest that a second night was added, both filling the hall to its 2300-seat capacity. Organized by the Ladies' Auxiliary of Mennonite Central Committee Manitoba, Radio Southern Manitoba, and the Centennial Committee, the concerts highlighted Mennonites' faith heritage through their signature art form. Premier Schreyer again gave the event the imprimatur of government recognition with an address at the first concert that "commended Mennonites for their contributions to the Canadian mosaic."³⁰ These hymn sings were inherently religious, and they celebrated an historical tradition of Mennonite music dating back more than a hundred years, but they also functioned to affirm choral singing as a distinctive Mennonite cultural practice.³¹

Another concert of religious music was presented at the Concert Hall in Winnipeg near the end of the year. Its program of works by Schumann, Mendelssohn, Schubert, Haydn, Brahms, and Handel reflected Mennonites' contemporary musical sophistication, and stood in contrast to the more familiar church music sung at the earlier concerts. At least one observer found this not in keeping with the tastes and ideals of the original Mennonite settlers. Harold Jantz, editor of the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, wrote: "A much more fitting tribute to those first arrivals from the Russian steppes would have been a program which might have included at least a selection of the hymns which have nourished the Mennonite tree"³² This concern does not appear to have been widely shared, but it illustrates the range of expectations that existed about how the Centennial should be celebrated. Jantz might have been more approving of the concert that was originally scheduled, the premiere of a piano concerto by Manitoba composer Victor Davies based on favourite Mennonite hymns, commissioned by the family of Winnipeg Mennonite medical doctor B. B. Fast.³³ Due to delays and complications the concerto did not premiere until October 1975, but the project spoke to Mennonite ambitions of cultural distinction, and was promoted by Mennonite conductor and broadcaster Ben Horch as an undertaking unparalleled among

other “minority” groups, and one of the “most important serious musical events” for Manitoba as a whole.³⁴

Other mass spectacles included the production of a folk opera called “The Bridge,” composed by music professor Esther Wiebe and with a text by writer Diana Brandt at the request of the Centennial Committee. The opera tells the story of one man’s calling to abandon the farm to become a minister, the problems arising later when a non-Mennonite seeks to join the church, of worldly influences enticing young people, and of the resolution that comes through the movement of Spirit of God.³⁵ Opera production was a new artistic realm for Manitoba Mennonites, and the work might have revealed this inexperience; as one reviewer wrote, it would be “dishonest to claim that *The Bridge* is a great piece of art.”³⁶ However, it attracted the support of audiences totaling 3250 people in its five Manitoba performances, before touring Ontario and B.C., doing four performances in each province.³⁷ The production was a major undertaking, initiated at the behest of Centennial organizers who evidently believed it worthwhile. A Kansas Mennonite group also toured the province during the summer of 1974 presenting their Centennial play “*Tomorrow Has Roots*.”

By far the largest of the mass events was the “Centennial Day” at the Winnipeg Arena on July 28. Estimates put the combined audience of the services in morning and afternoon at nearly 7000. It was a day of ceremony, and heavy with speeches, including greetings from government officials, sermons, and addresses emphasizing the historic achievements of the Mennonite settlers. Choral singing broke up the morning and afternoon program. Theology professor David Schroeder delivered a sermon comparing the Mennonite experience to the people of Israel wandering in the desert, while minister Henry Gerbrandt, speaking in German, traced early Anabaptist heritage and the more recent past. Gerbrandt’s remarks included the observation that Mennonites occupied land that had belonged to Indigenous people and said that Mennonites “ought to feel a responsibility to assist them in their present-day struggle for their rights.” Premier Schreyer flattered the audience, telling them the country “has benefitted from the Mennonite immigration,” and that “the immigrants of 100 years ago and their children have helped in a very direct and visible way to build a free society here in Canada and in Manitoba.”³⁸ The summer day spent inside the arena might have lacked festive spirit, but audiences could not have avoided taking home the idea that they belonged to a group of some historical importance.

Writing and Marking Ethnicity

The Centennial also produced a significant amount of writing. In addition to special articles published in every Mennonite newspaper and magazine, over two dozen books of various description were published, including family and community histories, cook-books, histories, short stories, and novels.³⁹ Two books were especially prominent: *Harvest*, an anthology of stories, poetry, and essays in English and Low German, and *Manitoba Mennonite Memories*, a collection of short historical sketches and recollections.⁴⁰ *Harvest* was the product of a special subcommittee of MMHS, supported in part by a grant from the Minister of State for Multiculturalism.⁴¹ It was the more polished of the two books in terms of the quality of its writing, and was more a showcase of the state of Mennonite literature than a collection focused on historical memory. As literary scholar Robert Zacharias notes, its contents reveal the tension between religious identity and a conception of ethnic peoplehood expressed largely in secular terms, betraying the instability of Mennonite identity.⁴²

Manitoba Mennonite Memories is more valuable as an artifact of collective memory. As University of Winnipeg English professor Al Reimer observed, it was “a deliberately unpretentious, low-keyed book that is more interested in the ‘kitchen middens’ of Mennonite history than in the grand sweep of historical events.”⁴³ Certain archetypal stories emerge from this collection. The first is the narrative of migration from Russia, told with only slight variations by multiple authors. This narrative also appeared repeatedly in the special Centennial features that were carried by Canadian (and American) Mennonite periodicals. The main features of this story are a restricted existence in Russia, hard passage by sea, temporary accommodation in an immigrant shed or with family that had arrived earlier, a rough winter, and establishment of a working farm. The second was the prairie pioneer experience, marked by hardship and privation, but usually overcome in the end. The book also included thirty pages of short histories of successful Mennonite businesses, in addition to accounts of accomplishment in education and church work. This was capped by a variety of short articles about Mennonite folk culture, including home medicine, traditional pastimes, and details about traditional building practices.

The theme of pioneering was also featured prominently in public exhibitions and other non-literary texts. There were pioneer fashion shows at town festivals, and reenactments of pioneer-era farming at the Mennonite Village Museum. Description of the

rough “semelin” sod houses that were the first home of many of the earliest settlers was a familiar trope in published memoirs and histories, and was depicted visually in Otto Klassen’s *Prairie Pioneers* documentary film.⁴⁴ Narratives and representations of pioneer toil were grounded in Mennonites’ historical experience, but they also belonged to a recognizable genre of prairie pioneer stories that linked the particular Mennonite experience to the more generalized European settlement narrative.

The association of Mennonite collective memory with more universal settlement narratives also allowed the Mennonite Centennial to be appropriated by others, as occurred in at least one instance, to the displeasure of Centennial planners. Member of Parliament Jake Epp, a Mennonite from Steinbach, had been asked by the Centennial Committee, to which he belonged, to help convince the Post Office to issue a commemorative stamp. The application was successful, and a stamp was issued on August 28, 1974, part of the Post Office’s multicultural series.⁴⁵ A pamphlet published by the Post Office acknowledged the centenary of the arrival of the Mennonites and provided a concise history of their sixteenth-century origins, struggles, and migrations, which brought them to the Canadian prairies. The stamp featured a group of men and women in sturdy pioneer garb, the men wearing hats and the women dressed in shawls, superimposed over a barren, flat prairie landscape with a single sod hut and a few animals, on an orange background. The scene depicted represented the Mennonite settlement narrative, but it was sufficiently generic that it could stand as a symbol for any early European settler group, as its neutral title “Prairie Settlers” indicated. Mennonite leaders, who had expected that their anniversary would be specifically recognized, were so offended that an unveiling ceremony planned for the Mennonite town of Steinbach was relocated at the last minute to the Winnipeg General Post Office.⁴⁶ Four elderly descendants of early settler families were included in the ceremony, representing migration from England, Quebec, Ontario, and Ukraine, but there were no Mennonites.⁴⁷ This might not have come as a surprise to Epp, who earlier had explained:

Throughout my discussions with postal authorities, the central question was whether this event was only of limited interest to a small ethnic group in Manitoba, or whether this event had a wider significance. I have pointed out that not only will this be of interest to all Canadian Mennonites, but that the coming of the Mennonites to Canada in 1874 was a tangible expression of the government’s decision of that day to open the vast prairies by people from all parts of Europe, not only those who were of English or French background. Evidence of this fact is

seen in the multi-cultural mosaic which is evident in Canada today, and especially so in Western Canada.⁴⁸

It served the purposes of the federal authorities, but as a vehicle for collective memory a stamp that eschewed ethnic particularities had relatively little value for Mennonites.

Among the small group of individuals who comprised the Centennial Committee there appears to have been a general consensus about the symbols, values, and memories that would be selected and emphasized, and the meaning that should be conveyed. In some instances, however, conflicting understandings of group identity, values, and contemporary interests resulted in contention over how Mennonite collective memory should be articulated. Such a conflict came to a head with the question of the "Mennonite monument." The idea of erecting a monument to the Mennonite presence in Manitoba was one of the proposals advanced by Gerhard Lohrenz in 1972 when the vision for the Centennial was being developed.⁴⁹ In his vision paper, Lohrenz suggested "a column on a firm foundation and of Tyndak [*sic*] stone, about eight feet high, four feet wide and two and one half thick and showing besides a suitable inscription on the front side an open Bible, on one side a ploughman and on the other side a woman with a child."⁵⁰ Responsibility for the monument was given to the Special Projects Committee, headed by Henry H. Epp, who was given instructions to contact architects, artists, and contractors to devise a plan for the memorial. Epp assembled a group of architects – Rudy Friesen, Harold Funk, Gerald Loewen, and Sig Toews – and artist Alvin Pauls. For the monument's site, these men preferred the junction of the Rat and Red rivers, the initial landing point of the first Mennonite settlers, arguing that it had the most historic and cultural significance; they also envisioned a picnic and camping site that could be built around it. The legislature location, they felt, while prominent and establishing Mennonites as an element of "the Manitoba mosaic of people," did not have any particular connection to Mennonite history in the province.⁵¹ This opinion was eventually overruled by the committee men, namely Lohrenz, who wanted the legislative site because of its prominence and the public recognition it would confer.

Lohrenz had stated originally that he wanted a monument that would emphasize certain themes he felt were central to Mennonite identity: faith, farming, and family. He wrote:

It is felt that we should set an impressive and suitable monument on some conspicuous public place such as the Legislative grounds ... to

remind ourselves and our fellow citizens of the presence of our people in this province and also of the service rendered by them to this province. The monument should also clearly indicate that we are thankful to the Lord for his help and guidance....

The design he proposed was conventional. When the architects offered designs that were more abstract, he resisted, expressing concern that the design should meet “with the general approval of the ‘average man’ ... [and] not be too abstract or modernistic.”⁵² After the monument effort ultimately failed, due evidently to the inability to come to suitable agreements about its location or design, it was Lohrenz’s vision that was represented in a substitute plaque, installed February 18, 1975, in a hallway of the legislature.

Resistance to the idea of a monument on the legislative grounds came from the wider Mennonite community as well. Henry Gerbrandt, minister in the Bergthaler Mennonite Church, which consisted mainly of Kanadier Mennonites, reported to the Centennial Committee that he was getting “much reaction” about this matter in the spring of 1973, and that it was “far from positive.” Gerbrandt explained there was uneasiness about a permanent monument proclaiming comfortable relations between Mennonites and the state: “There may come a time where we as Anabaptist brethren and the political structures may part ways again.”⁵³ We see here remnants of attitudes toward the state that would have been familiar to 1870s settlers. Lohrenz took the view common among the more acculturated Russlaender group, which understood engagement with the state and politics as having productive value. His resentment over this issue was apparently still raw when he gave his remarks at the unveiling of the substitute plaque, lamenting: “Many of our good people were against any monument, most of them seemingly because this has not been done in the past; others found suitable Bible passages which seemed to them to discourage such activity.”⁵⁴

Conclusion

Aside from the monument controversy and an incident of interpersonal conflict over another project, there is little evidence of sustained or intense disputes in the Centennial celebrations. True, the fuller story of the Manitoba Centennial reveals the presence of dissenting voices as historical memory was structured to advance certain social purposes. Some critics perceived the emphasis on collective and individual achievements as materialistic, while oth-

ers considered the framing of Mennonites as an ethnic culture antithetical to their essential religious commitments. Still, these challenges did not contradict the objective of nurture and maintenance of a unified and confident Manitoba Mennonite community. The Centennial Committee had declared in its document of guiding principles that the Centennial should aim to foster unity among all Mennonites in the province. It is significant that the Centennial activities and the narratives emerging from them made very little mention of the differences that had divided them. Aside from imbalances inside the Centennial committee, it appears there were similar rates of participation from Manitoba Mennonites of all church and migration backgrounds.

The desire of Mennonites to identify as a single group reveals the elasticity of collective memory as a basis for belonging. Key events of the 1870s and 1880s, such as migration and pioneer settlement, were celebrated as if they belonged to all Manitoba Mennonites whose ancestors migrated from Russia, whether they were descendants of the 1870s migration or not. At public events, in print, and in Centennial Committee discussions, it was always made clear that all Mennonites could take part in the Centennial – just as every Canadian was meant to be included in the festivities of 1967. And when pioneering and migration stories were rehearsed, it was done as a story that belonged to all. If some chafed at this, they appear to have been a small minority. The narrative that was promoted was also sanitized and simplified: the fact that a large segment of descendants of the 1870s settlers emigrated to Mexico over educational policy in the 1920s was mainly ignored; old tensions that had developed in the encounter between the Russlaender, the 1920s immigrants from Russia, and the Kanadier, the descendants of the original 1870s settlers, were barely mentioned; and inter-church squabbles and prejudices were equally absent. MMHS members involved with the Centennial were not ignorant of these realities, but these were details that were not central to their vision of a shared heritage.

The Manitoba Mennonite Centennial promoted a form of group identity that celebrated Mennonite ethnocultural distinctiveness as well as their contributions to the wider society. The Centennial facilitated the perpetuation of what sociologist Herbert Gans termed “symbolic ethnicity,” a type of ethnic identification that was easily performed but not all-consuming. It was portable – it could be donned (sometimes literally) when convenient; it had little social cost, and often various benefits.⁵⁵ The story of pioneer settlement offered a sense of unity and partnership in a Canadian national narrative, while also situating Mennonites as one ethnic

group among many. The Centennial celebrated ethnic culture rather than a primarily religious identity. Faith was part of the Centennial as well, as evidenced by prayer and hymn singing at public rallies, thanksgiving services held in churches, and plaques that spoke of God's blessing. But the festivities were replete with cultural references that had nothing to do with confession or creed. As the fuller account of the Manitoba Mennonite Centennial indicates, some Mennonite leaders found this troubling, but most apparently did not. The Centennial in the end was as much, if not more, about how Mennonites saw themselves in the present than about an historical account about their past.

Notes

- ¹ Program, Mennonite Centennial Day, 28 July 1974, Mennonite Historical Archives, Winnipeg (hereafter MHA), 4872.49.
- ² Paul Peachey, "Identity Crisis Among American Mennonites," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 42: 4 (1968), 243.
- ³ See, e.g., Rodney J. Sawatsky, "History and Ideology: American Mennonite Identity Definition through History" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1977); Calvin Redekop, "The Mennonite Identity Crisis," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 2 (1984): 87-103; Calvin Wall Redekop and Samuel J. Steiner, eds., *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: University Press of America, 1988). For a brief critique of the applicability of the concept of crisis, see Hans-Jürgen Goertz, "The Confessional Heritage in its New Mold, What is Mennonite Self-Understanding Today," in Redekop and Steiner, 3-6.
- ⁴ Aleida Assmann, "Memory, Individual and Collective," in *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, ed. Robert E. Goodin and Charles Tilly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 210-224.
- ⁵ Susan A. Crane, "Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory," *American Historical Review* 102:5 (1997): 1372-1385.
- ⁶ Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 43; Crane, 1377.
- ⁷ Pierre Nora, "Between History and Memory: *Les lieux de mémoire*," *Representations* (Spring 1989). Quoted in Alan Gordon, *Making Public Past: The Contested Terrain of Montréal's Public Memories, 1891-1930* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 6.
- ⁸ Cubitt, 44, 161.
- ⁹ Allan Megill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 30.
- ¹⁰ Gerhard Ens to Members of the Centennial Committee, 15 June 1972, MHA, 996.1.
- ¹¹ Leona Dyck, "Mennonite centenary commemoration starts," *Red River Valley Echo*, 11 April 1973, 8.

- ¹² Gerhard J. Ens interview with Gerhard Ens, 2002, copy in the author's possession.
- ¹³ Ens interview.
- ¹⁴ Lawrence Klippenstein, "The Origins of the Mennonite Heritage Village," *Mennonite Historian* 39:1 (2013):11; James Urry, "Memory: Monuments and the Marking of Pasts," *Conrad Grebel Review* 25: 1 (2007), 39-40.
- ¹⁵ *Mennonite Life*, July 1948.
- ¹⁶ In her comparative analysis of national commemoration in Australia and the United States, Lyn Spillman employs three useful "lenses" of cultural analysis, highlighting the available symbolic repertoire, the process of cultural production, and the discursive field of that establishes meaningful "limits of discussion." *Nation and commemoration: Creating national identities in the United States and Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 7-10.
- ¹⁷ Gerhard Lohrenz, Chairman's Report, Centennial Committee, 1 November 1975, MHA, 1721.2.
- ¹⁸ Gerhard Ens to Centennial Committee, 15 June 1972, MHA, 996.1; Minutes, Centennial Committee, 16 November 1971, MHA, 1727.1 (Centennial Committee minutes. – 1971-1976). Emphasis added.
- ¹⁹ Gerhard Lohrenz, untitled report, MHA, 997.1.
- ²⁰ Henry J. Gerbrandt, "Toward Fostering a Sense of Unity Among our People," MHA, 997.1.
- ²¹ P. J. B. Reimer, "To express and to foster a sense of unity ...," MHA, 997.1.
- ²² Gerhard Ens, "New Frontiers for Mennonites of 1974," MHA, 997.1.
- ²³ E.g., "Centennial Committee suggestions by Henry H. Epp," 5 May 1972, MHA, 1727.3.
- ²⁴ Mennonite-Indigenous relations were the subject of a small number of articles published in the early 1970s. See Leo Driedger, "Louis Riel and the Mennonite Invasion," *The Canadian Mennonite*, 28 August 1970, 6; Driedger, "Native Rebellion and Mennonite Invasion: An Examination of Two Canadian River Valleys," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 46:3 (July 1972): 290-300; and Lawrence Klippenstein, "Manitoba Metis and Mennonite Immigrants: First Contacts," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 48:4 (October 1974): 476-88.
- ²⁵ Alan Gordon employs the term "heritage elite" in *Making Public Pasts*, 49.
- ²⁶ This tally is based on names printed on the 1974 Centennial Calendar of Events. Kanadier members were Ted Friesen, Frank Brown, J. J. Reimer, Elmer Hildebrand, P. J. B. Reimer, Henry J. Gerbrandt, Henry Dueck, and Larry Kehler. The Russlaender members were Gerhard Lohrenz and Gerhard Ens, born in Russia, and Henry H. Epp, born in Canada to parents of immigrants. MHA, 1121.2.
- ²⁷ Lawrence Klippenstein, "Safari recalls 100 years at Museum of Man and Nature," *The Canadian Mennonite*, 23 July 1973, 3.
- ²⁸ MHA archival description.
- ²⁹ Executive Secretary Report #1, 30 July 1973, MHA, 997.2
- ³⁰ Peter Klassen, "Centennial hymn sign draws thousands," *The Canadian Mennonite*, 4 March 1974, 1.
- ³¹ Wesley Berg, *From Russia With Music: A Study of the Mennonite Choral Singing Tradition in Canada* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1985).

- ³² Peter Letkemann, *The Ben Horch Story* (Winnipeg: Old Oak Publishing, 2007), 412-13; Harold Jantz, "Hymnsings and Materialism," *MB Herald*, 27 December 1974, 7.
- ³³ File "Correspondence - 1974," MHA, 993.3; Victor Davies, "A Non-Mennonite Writes a Mennonite Piano Concerto," in *Sound in the Land: Essays on Mennonites and Music*, ed. Maureen Epp and Carol Ann Weaver (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2005), 95-99.
- ³⁴ Letter, Ben Horch to Gerhard Lohrenz, 23 January 1974, MHA, 993.3.
- ³⁵ Esther Wiebe and Diana Brandt, *The Bridge* (Winnipeg: Canadian Mennonite Bible College, 1973).
- ³⁶ Al Reimer, "Music surpasses drama in centennial folk opera," *Mennonite Reporter*, 25 November 1974.
- ³⁷ Final Report on Manitoba Mennonite Centennial Committee Production *The Bridge*, 3 September 1974, MHA, 997.4; Gerhard Lohrenz, Chairman's Report, MHA, 1727.1.
- ³⁸ David Schroeder, "The commitment of thanksgiving: Thoughts on a centennial celebration," *Mennonite Reporter*, 25 November 1974, 4-5; "Centennial Day in Manitoba: looking also to the future," *Mennonite Reporter*, 5 August 1974, 1.
- ³⁹ Lawrence Klippenstein, "Centennial Mennonite Publications, 1974," *Mennonite Mirror*, February 1975, 18-20.
- ⁴⁰ William De Fehr, et. al., eds., *Harvest: Anthology of Mennonite Writing in Canada, 1874-1974* (Altona: Mennonite Historical Society of Manitoba, 1974); Julius G. Toews and Lawrence Klippenstein, eds., *Manitoba Mennonite Memories: A Century Past but Not Forgotten* (Altona and Steinbach: Manitoba Mennonite Centennial Committee, 1974).
- ⁴¹ Letter, John Munro to Gerhard Lohrenz, MHA, 996.1.
- ⁴² Robert Zacharias, *Rewriting the Break Event: Mennonites and Migration in Canadian Literature* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2013), 39.
- ⁴³ Al Reimer, "It's a long time between centennials," *Mennonite Reporter*, 25 November 1974, 34.
- ⁴⁴ *Prairie Pioneers: The Mennonites of Manitoba (1874-1974)*, DVD, directed by Otto Klassen (Winnipeg: Otto Klassen Productions, [1976] 2008).
- ⁴⁵ "Prairie Settlers," Canada Post brochure, MHA, 993.8.
- ⁴⁶ R. E. Florida, "Issue to mark immigrant impact," *Brandon Sun*, 24 August 1974, 13.
- ⁴⁷ *Winnipeg Free Press*, 29 August 1974.
- ⁴⁸ "A Stamp To Honor Mennonite Immigration?" *Mennonite Mirror* (January-February 1974), 48.
- ⁴⁹ Minutes, MMCC, 10 June 1972, MHA, 996.16.
- ⁵⁰ Lohrenz, untitled report, MHA, 997.1.
- ⁵¹ Conference summary, 5 December 1972, MHA, 268.1.
- ⁵² Minutes, 16 February 1973, MHA, 996.16.
- ⁵³ Letter, H. J. Gerbrandt to Centennial Committee, 25 April 1973, MHA, 267.1.
- ⁵⁴ Centennial Committee Reports, MHA, 1727.1. It seems all involved with the initial monument project were dissatisfied. These minutes indicate that sub-committee chair, Henry H. Epp, was unhappy that Lohrenz had disbanded the group responsible, while architect Rudy Friesen aired his disappoint-

ment in a 1975 magazine article. R. P. Friesen, "The Missing Mennonite Monument," *Mennonite Mirror*, March 1975, 15.

- ⁵⁵ Herbert J. Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America," in *Making Sense of America: Sociological Analyses and Essays* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 193-220.