

Field of Broken Dreams: Mennonite Settlement in Seminole, West Texas

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Introduction

In 1976 economic conditions in the State of Chihuahua, Mexico, were deteriorating. Real estate agents in West Texas had become aware that Old Colony Mennonites in Mexico were eagerly looking to provide the rapidly increasing landless population with farm land. They were searching for tracts of land which would meet specific criteria. The size should be adequate to settle all those who wanted to migrate; initial figures mention at least 300 families.¹ The lands should be in a block and sufficiently isolated to encourage separation from the "world."

On January 7, 1977, an agreement was finalized for the purchase of 6,500 acres of land known locally as Seven-O-Ranch in West Texas, some 17 miles to the south-west of the rural service and market center of Seminole.

Another smaller group of Mennonites, also from Mexico, who had left the Old Colony Church in Mexico and affiliated with the General Conference Mennonite Church of North America² bought a smaller parcel of land just east of Seminole. The land was bought by three individuals from that group rather than as a church venture, on December 30, 1976. It was the intention to

subdivide part of this land for rural settlement by the migrating Mennonites.

Plans for resettlement progressed at a rapid pace as enthusiasm increased in both Mennonite camps and in the recipient community. March 3, 1977, under the leadership of Bishop Henry Reimer from Ontario, the Old Colony community outlined plans for the development of a dairy operation, a cheese factory, facilities for repair of machinery, food processing facilities, manufacturing of furniture, construction of village school and church, and the establishment of individual farms on land to be purchased from the church. By June, 1977, 125 families had arrived, the majority of them from Mexico.

The efforts of the Old Colony to colonize in West Texas soon ran into serious problems. It became evident that investigation of the title-deed to the Seven-O-Ranch had been inadequate. Awareness of the physical limitations of soil and climate for dry-land farming was only superficial, and they had mistakenly relied on their real estate agents to advise them on matters of immigration and on the requirements to achieve permanent residential status instead of consulting directly with officials of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).

April 3, 1979, the Seven-O-Ranch was sold by public auction—a foreclosure sale, because the Mennonites could not meet the second payment of their mortgage agreement (due on February 15, 1979). This ended the efforts, the frustrations and struggles of almost two years to establish a Mennonite village farming community in West Texas. It ended the hopes of many Mennonite families to acquire land where they could continue in their vocation of farming, and where they could raise and educate their children in their chosen way of life.

The story of the Mennonites of Seminole is an intriguing and sad story of heavy and foreboding clouds with few silver linings. While the public media, including the local, national and international press and television³ focused on it, little follow-up research has been done and published in Mennonite journals or periodicals. The story seemingly has vanished, even from the Mennonite media, as rapidly as it appeared upon the front pages and the television screen in the latter 1970s. Yet it is another chapter in Mennonite history of the landless, their search for farm land, and their search for isolation.

The main emphasis in this paper will be on the events of the initial years of migration to West Texas, the loss of their farm land, the determination to obtain permanent residential status, and their relocation, mainly because of economic factors, to the outskirts of Seminole in the hope of finding employment. This brief analysis of events surrounding the Mennonite story at Seminole is only one phase of an interesting and continuing saga of how the conservative Old Colony Mennonites adjust to the outward forces of assimilation and integration as they influence their life style.

To understand the decisions and actions of the conservative Mexican Mennonites it is essential to outline briefly their past migration patterns, their particularly strong desire for social separation, and the underlying religious and denominational persuasion.

Mennonites Move to Mexico

After considering several alternative locations the three conservative groups, namely the Old Colony, the Sommerfelder and the Kleine Gemeinde, chose the northern highlands of Mexico. Harry Leonard Sawatzky reports that prior to World War II about 7000 Mennonites established four main colonies in Mexico commencing in 1922.² After the war another 600 Mennonites from Canada migrated to Mexico, mostly of the Kleine Gemeinde. In terms of the Old Colony group the numbers moving were just under half of the total then resident in Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

In Mexico the Mennonites developed their self-contained, largely self-sufficient, insular socio-religious system. Civic and educational functions were closely supervised by the religious authorities. The church exercised ultimate control by means of excommunication which included "social ostracism with its attendant economic disadvantages."⁵

It was hoped that here they would finally find relief from an encroaching oppressive and evil world in their unremittable search for a way of life which would reflect their ideal of a biblical Christian life style.

However, this was not to be; flaws in the utopian fabric appeared soon after their move to Mexico. First, the Mennonites were increasingly harassed by the Mexicans. Theft, misdemeanors and even felony were not unheard of.⁶ Secondly, because of a record high population increase, approaching 4 percent per year, the Mennonites had to continue their search for land as the landless class increased in numbers⁷ and poverty became a factor. Here they ran into competition with the Mexicans who were also searching for land. The latter looked upon the Mennonites as aliens and intruders. Thirdly, it was economically advantageous to move to the United States where the per capita income was tenfold greater than in Mexico; the declining value of the peso was also affecting the Mennonites economically.⁸

Fourthly, there were some who wanted to get away from the "yoke" of the strict rules of the Mennonite churches, particularly the Old Colony. And, lastly, there existed increasing criticism and resistance on the part of Mexicans to the Mennonite settlement arrangements under the Privilegium with President Alvaro Obregon. The Mennonite leaders themselves feared the trend towards church organized out-migrations suggesting to the Mexican government that they collectively no longer lay great weight on the maintenance of the Privilegium.⁹ The Mennonites were finding it increasingly difficult to locate and acquire suitable parcels of land in Mexico.

The Mennonites Move to West Texas

There were several reasons why west central Texas was particularly appealing to the Mexican Old Colony Mennonites. It was relatively open country occupied by large ranches with mainly dry land farming; irrigation

was practiced where the soil was suitable and water available. Land prices were within reach. No doubt the Mennonites felt that there would be ample opportunity for expansion of the land-base to look after future needs. The area was also remote from major urban centers; it offered the isolation that the migrants were searching for, yet the required services for farming and for the general population (such as hospitals) were within reach. In their mind it afforded opportunity to transplant their village settlement type similar to that in Mexico and Manitoba. There would be freedom to practice their particular religious life style in an agricultural setting which included the all-important part of educating their off-spring in their independent schools.

Because many of the Mexican Mennonites were Canadian citizens, migration to Canada would have been a simpler matter. However, land prices were higher and large blocks of agricultural land in isolated areas were not readily available.¹⁰

The West Texas Plains

The Mennonite choice of settlement in West Texas bordered on the boundary between Gaines and Andrew Counties with Seminole serving as the main service centre (See map.) In terms of geology, the most important and relevant feature for farming is the presence of the Ogallala formation which contains water-saturated beds of sand and gravel, the water-bearing stratum, which supplies the water for irrigation. Currently, water is removed from this aquifer at a faster rate than it is replenished.¹¹

This area of West Texas has a warm temperate continental climate. Its main characteristics are wide ranges in temperature and precipitation with rapid changes. Rainfall can vary by as much as 200 to 300 percent from one year to the next. The long term average rainfall is 15.8 inches; the growing season is 210 days. Dryland farming is considerably risky for cash crop production because of a lack of adequate precipitation; high temperatures and high winds cause moisture to evaporate rapidly. Except for range-land there is a decreasing dependence on rainfall for crop production.

The economy of the area is largely dependent upon agriculture. The dominant crops are cotton, peanuts and pecan nuts, and grasses for grazing. Oil production is also an important activity. Crop production, mainly under pivotal irrigation, has increased ever since the late 1940s.

Land Selection, Purchase and Migration

First contact with real estate agents was made in the spring of 1976 by a John D. Reimer, a member of the Old Colony Church in Mexico, who through his sister in the United

States had made contact with several real estate agents. When the search for land in Oklahoma was fruitless, attention was drawn to West Texas through

realtor Seth Woltz of Seminole. The Mennonites enquired about migration rights, freedom to run their own schools, exemption from military service and from the national social security system.¹² What the response was is not known; however, they were shown a copy of the American Constitution.

In the fall of 1976 Seth Woltz had located land that met the Mennonites' requirements; he apparently also assured them that they would be able to obtain the necessary immigration papers if they bought the land. Apparently reference was made to the introduction of a private members bill or the use of labour certification.¹³

With excitement and support growing, Bishop Henry Dyck of the Old Colony Church in Mexico was approached. His condition of leadership was first to meet with "high level officials of the United States Government to discuss the immigration question and concerns of religious freedom" and, second, he "wanted to have all assurances in writing from the appropriate authorities." He withdrew from the venture when the condition was not met.¹⁴

In mid-November, 1977, the Ontario Old Colony bishop, Henry Reimer accepted leadership regarding migration of the Old Colony from both Mexico and Ontario. The Old Colony Church in Ontario had been established mainly from Mennonite immigrants from Mexico. Reimer soon became convinced that the question of immigration rights would be solved by the real estate agents after their purchase and move to Texas. In his opinion the priority decisions were to select the specific land sites and to negotiate the sales agreement. Apparently Bishop Reimer had accepted the message from Seth Woltz "we trust you, you trust us." The bishop used his position and persuasive powers when Mennonites questioned the word of the real estate agents.¹⁵ However, some of his fellow ministers in Ontario did not support Bishop Reimer. They were critical of his explanations, there was inadequate information on the plans, and there was too much haste. The proposal to migrate had reached the Ontario Old Colony by the middle of November, 1976; by January 7, 1977, the land had been purchased.¹⁶

Till the end of 1976 the two groups (the Old Colony and the 'Conference' group) were working together; they separated early in 1977 and each negotiated its own separate land purchases. The Old Colony group remained with Bishop Reimer in purchasing the Seven-O-Ranch, the 'Conference' group purchased 1172 acres adjoining the town of Seminole to the east for \$295,000. Three individuals purchased the land with the arrangements that they would subdivide and sell to other members of the group.¹⁷ The 'Conference' Mennonites were able to meet the conditions of the sale agreement. Much of the land had been subdivided into acreage lots and sold to Mennonites of both groups.

Border crossings by Mennonites from Mexico were mainly handled by real estate agents, in particular by Jim Perry. Here the immigrants were provided with visitor permits ranging from 60 to 90 days in length. In spite of arriving at the border with their personal belongings (including farm implements), they

were granted only visitor status. It was clear that the real estate agents played a key role in their crossing.¹⁸

This arrangement for crossing was used for the first three months of 1977. By April, crossing problems became more frequent, particularly in the absence of the real estate agents. Some of the immigrating Mennonites waited at the border for weeks, some gave up and returned to Mexico with their belongings. All had made deposits on the purchase of land in West Texas.

What happened at the U.S. entry point is not clear; one supposition is that Bishop Reimer arranged for a stoppage or slow-down because there was not enough work for them at the ranch. Another supposition is that the customs officials no longer cooperated with Perry in "arranging" for the crossings.¹⁹

This was a critical turn of events in the migration venture because it signaled to those still hoping to migrate that serious trouble had developed and consequently they would hold back further payments on the purchase of the ranch.

The border crossing from Ontario into the United States was also problematic; some crossed the border on a visiting visa by "bending the truth" (as advised by Woltz), others withdrew from the venture. In the above mentioned fashion over 100 families from Mexico and 35 families from Canada crossed the borders.²⁰

The families that arrived at the ranch were housed in mobile homes. Some older homes were also moved into the village. The old ranch building served as school and church. Lots were drawn for land acreages and individuals bought their plots from the church. By April, 1977, such farm activity as planting saplings, laying irrigation pipes, plowing and seeding was undertaken; some worked day and night to get the crop in. However, the Old Colony settlers realized very little cash income from their field crops. They were too late to break and prepare a proper seed bed. Their main cash crop, cotton, was disappointing, particularly on unirrigated fields. Much of the crop was not treated with pesticide mainly because of the uncertainty of their stay in Texas. Because of the lack of adequate rainfall it is reported that two brothers lost between \$30,000 and \$35,000 from their cotton crops.²¹ Investments were made in farm machinery, livestock and farm buildings. It has also been noted that Mennonites grew productive gardens on their residential plots and some marketed their surplus produce at local stores.

Emerging Crises

The first crisis came suddenly and for many Mennonites unexpectedly when in July, 1977, 43 Mennonite families received their order to leave or face deportation. In late August, 1977, a form letter from INS was received by some Mennonites advising them they had till September 22 to secure immigration status. This created much anxiety and concern, not only amongst the Mennonites

but also in the larger community. Bob Clark, the mayor of Seminole, called a meeting where officials from INS explained the situation and outlined the possibilities of gaining residential status. This meeting helped decrease the apprehension.²²

Several extensions were granted and delays in proceedings provided a temporary reprieve from INS officials. However, the fact that some of the families had started trickling back to Mexico did not infuse this whole venture with the optimism required at this crucial time.

With pressure for deportation mounting, real estate agents, lawyers and concerned residents in the community commenced feverish "efforts which were neither well thought through nor carefully executed and by May 1979 they had brought little success."²³

Several ways were sought to solve the problem. One was for the aliens to invest a minimum of \$40,000; however, very few Mennonites could meet this minimum; the ranch, after all was a group or church purchase. Another attempt was to use the sixth preference classification which permitted immigration to the United States for individuals having special skills lacking in the region. This requires certification from the Department of Labour. Much effort and time was used in the attempt to apply this preference, but it too ran into serious problems. In the words of an immigration lawyer, Augustine, from El Paso:

I... detected on the part of some of the third parties (Woltz, Goodson, etc.) an almost total disregard of the law... I found many assertions of skills were totally false.²⁴

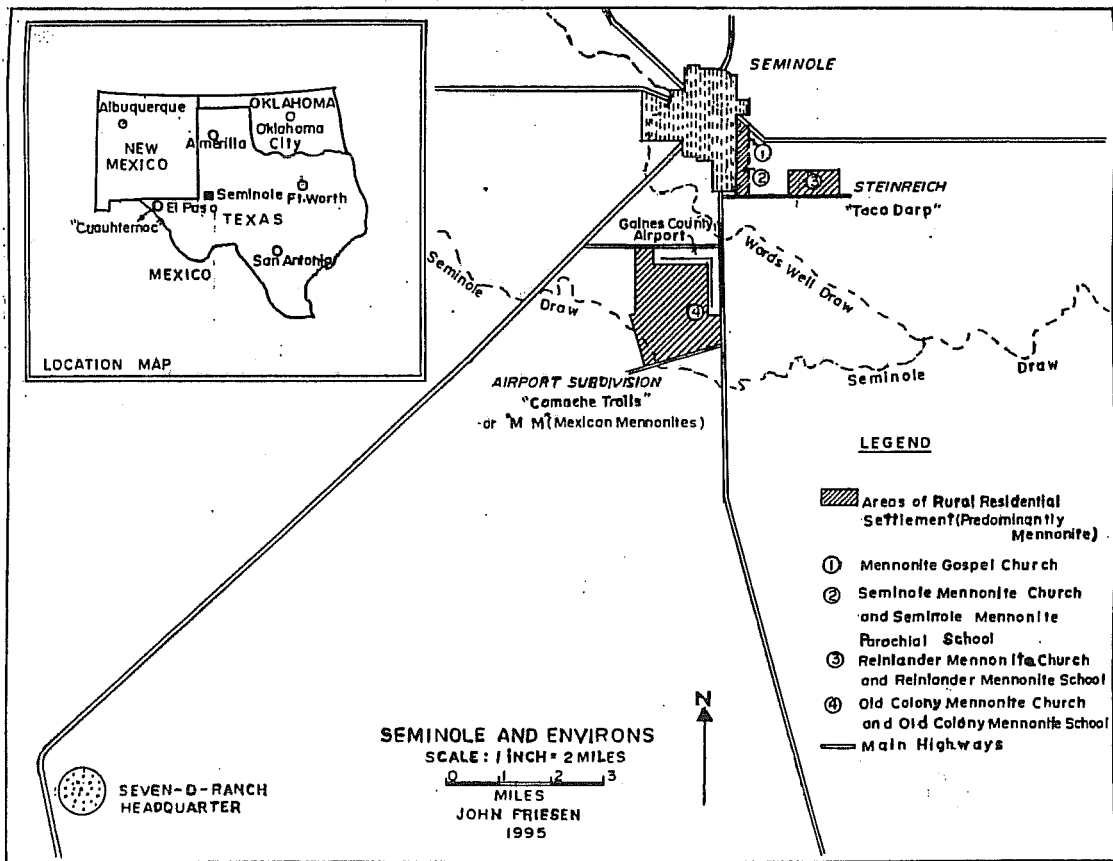
In the opinion of the attorney the violations were so serious that he withdrew his services.

The venture of obtaining labour certificates through the establishing of Seminole Mennonite Enterprises with resources pooled by Seminole residents also came to naught. The intent was to establish a manufacturing plant which would employ Mennonites with the required skills.²⁵

The overall assessment of INS was that the successful application of the 6th preference category in Seminole, a rural agricultural center with limited industrial development, "appeared very dim."²⁶

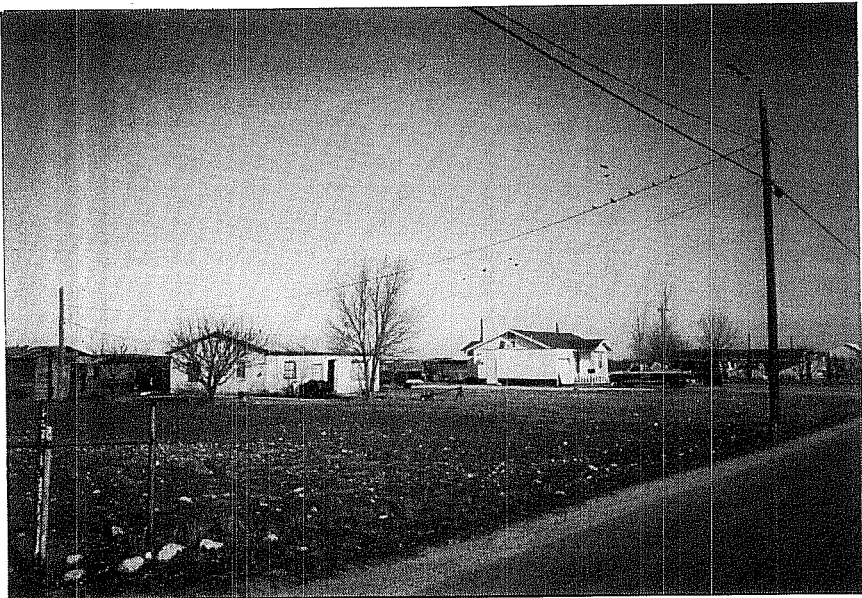
The failure of all these attempts to gain residential status increased the frustration and deepened the concerns of the Old Colony Mennonites. Their faith in the leadership of Bishop Reimer was falling rapidly. By late June 1977 not a few were of the opinion that they had been misled and dealt with untruthfully. Rumors of drink and misconduct did further damage to the confidence level of the Old Colony migrants in their leader. They were in desperate need of leadership to resolve the crises facing the group, to deal with federal government agencies regarding migration, to build confidence in those who had located in West Texas and in those still planning to move there.

Another major issue facing the Old Colony Mennonites on the ranch was the discovery that the title to two-thirds of the land did not include ownership rights to the ground water. It appears that at the beginning the Mennonite





The Seminole Mennonite Church which houses both the church and the Seminole Mennonite Parochial School (teaching K to 11). Photo: J.F.



Steinreich, on the outskirts of Seminole, showing modest bungalows. There is little emphasis on landscaping and tree planting. Photo: J.F.

farmers had intended to do dryland farming. They made plans to sell the irrigation equipment but were persuaded by the former owners not to dispose of it. This, however, created a problem with their method of land allocation, the drawing of lots on relatively small parcels of land. The pivotal irrigation system was basically designed for field size of 160 acres. It was decided that those who were interested in irrigation farming would purchase the larger parcels together with the irrigation systems. The majority would purchase the more traditional smaller fields for dryland farming. They did not realize at the time that they did not have the option to irrigate.²⁷ When the rains failed to come in 1977 well drillers were hired to place irrigation wells on their dry fields. This was soon observed by Phillips Petroleum Company who promptly advised the Mennonites that access rights to the groundwater for irrigation or stock watering was not covered by their deed to the land.

In dismay and disappointment they consulted with Woltz and Shepherd who encouraged them to continue drilling; however, the Mennonites did no further drilling.

The discoveries that only one-third of the land had water rights and that irrigation was crucial to the production of regional cash crops had a further severe negative impact on the confidence of the Old Colony settlers in their leader. It also seriously affected the internal cohesiveness of the villagers. There were those who farmed with irrigation and those who had to depend upon the vagaries of the weather. It represented a substantial difference in productivity as well as economic return.

Another major crisis was the loss of Seven-O-Ranch itself. Inability to meet the conditions of the agreement of sale were due mainly to the previous crises which blocked about two-thirds of the Old Colony Mennonites from migrating to the ranch and caused some Mennonite migrants to return to Mexico upon the threat of deportation. The down-payment of \$425,000 toward a total of \$1,700,000 for 6400 acres (plus some farm machinery) was raised from contributions by families planning to migrate. The rate of interest was 8.5 percent over a period of 10 years with the annual payments of \$225,000 coming due on February 15 of each year. The first annual payment in 1978 was raised by the migrants to the ranch from prospective migrants in Ontario and Mexico, and from the proceeds of the sale of farm equipment on the ranch.²⁸

The financial crisis started in 1978 when the area suffered its second annual drought. Consequently, income from the cash crops did not materialize in support of the second annual payment due in February, 1979. Monies collected from prospective settlers and general contributions were also down. Families in Mexico who had planned to emigrate did not contribute their share of the payment which was estimated between \$50,000 and \$70,000.²⁹ Too many were aware of the problems the immigrants were experiencing.³⁰

The leaders soon realized that they would have to look at alternative ways if the ranch was to be saved. Three alternatives were considered:³¹

1. Internal re-financing. This included the scheme whereby those Mennonites who had made the initial payment but not the first annual payment would lose their land. This land was then to be resold to new prospective immigrants. These new settlers would still have to deal with the border crossing problem.
2. Government financing. Government and private financial sources were investigated by a Lubuck attorney, Bo Brown, for refinancing, but these efforts failed mainly because the purchasers were aliens. Many government financial assistance programs applied only to citizens.
3. Sale of the Ranch. As a last resort the leadership hoped that by selling the property they might at least recover some of the investment. An appraisal was made which concluded that the land was worth just under one million dollars. The Mennonites were still indebted by \$1,100,000; they had purchased the ranch for \$1,700,000. It has been estimated they paid 22 percent in excess of "the going price."³²

All attempts to save the ranch failed. Foreclosure took place in the spring of 1979, the final step being the auction of the ranch on April 3, 1979. It was bought by its original owner for a total of \$1,151,000.

About fifty to sixty Old Colony families now had to move off the ranch. Some moved back to Mexico. Many young families, however, having sold what property they owned in Mexico, did not view moving in with their parents as a viable option. They had also become aware of the many economic opportunities existing in United States in contrast to those in Mexico. Many moved to the outskirts of Seminole and found work in town in service industries and in construction; some established their own business enterprises. Some families scattered throughout the region and took any jobs available such as laborers on the farms or ranches.

The 'Conference' group, on the other hand, did not experience the internal problems associated with growing crops under two vastly different methods of crop production, nor the trauma of losing their land and the devastating experience of losing their source of livelihood. They did experience the delays and uncertainty surrounding permanent residential status. Some of them also returned to Mexico during this time.

Obtaining Permanent Residential Status

Efforts to obtain permanent residential status moved ahead on several fronts. Many government officials and others favored the administrative approach which was based on labour skills not readily available in the region. It included a cumbersome and slow bureaucratic process; some 68 Mennonites did obtain residential status using this approach.³³ However, it was soon realized that many Mennonites would not qualify under this approach; skill in

farming was, unfortunately, not a category covered under this option.

In the meantime politicians in Washington were under increasing pressure from influential citizens from West Texas and the general public throughout United States to take overt action. So, despite the danger of creating a backlash from the Hispanic ethnics by giving preferential treatment to a group of alien Mennonites in West Texas, Senator Bentsen (D-Texas) with support from Representative George Mahon (D-Texas) introduced a private member's bill in the Senate.³⁴ Bentsen answered his critics by stating that the Mennonites in West Texas had been misled, that they had "no evil intent" nor had they wilfully broken the law and that this bill would not be precedent-setting.

The introduction of this bill gave all the Mennonites named in the bill temporary reprieve from deportation. This meant that they could now plan their lives without the threat of forceful deportation at any time.

Questions soon arose as to who would provide the necessary documentation needed to move the bill forward through the maze in the federal government in Washington. Who would provide the necessary linkages between the Mennonites at Seminole and the supporting constituents all across the country and connect them to the process required to move the bill through the subcommittees, the Senate, the House of Representatives and final approval by the President?

Representative George Mahon had in 1976 contacted MCC regarding a sizable group wishing to migrate into the United States.³⁶ In addition there were increasing requests from the Mennonites of Seminole for MCC involvement, particularly after Bishop Henry Reimer withdrew as leader of the Seminole Old Colony. (His followers lost confidence in Reimer and he became reclusive.) Not only did the Mennonites want MCC involvement in regard to the immigration problem but also in regard to the land question.³⁷ February 12, 1979, MCC sent Peter Dyck to Seminole to get a proper reading of local Mennonite support for its involvement and an evaluation of the situation. He recommended "MCC accept the invitation and challenge to help... and we (MCC) give all possible help to Senator Bentsen in the preparation and implementation of a private Bill...."³⁸

Peter Dyck's positive report and the increasing political pressure coincided with MCC's resolution of its internal *modus operandi*. MCC selected Bill Janzen to prepare the necessary background documentation to be attached to the Bill.³⁹ The MCC office in Washington D.C. under the leadership of Dalton Franz was to provide assistance to the various government agencies and offices as required to ensure that the legislation remain on track and to provide the vital contact and linkage between Washington and MCC Akron, MCC Canada, Seminole and the supporting constituents.

The Senate passed the Bill on August 2, 1979, the House of Representatives passed it on October 2, 1980, and President Carter's signature seventeen days later turned the Bill into law.

What remained to be done was the processing of the permanent residence

visas of those Mennonites whose names appeared on the Bill; INS staff of the Dallas office was in charge.

Re-Settlement and Community Building

The Old Colony Mennonites had moved to West Texas with the intent of creating an isolated colony where the main economic activity was to be farming, similar to that of their forebears in Mexico, Canada, and Russia. However, when they lost their land in the spring of 1979 their dream of starting a Mennonite colony was shattered. Ironically, this occurred at about the same time that MCC was actively involved in steering the Bill through government in Washington.

Many of the Old Colony immigrants who did not find work as hired hands on farms and ranches bought residential plots on the outskirts just east or south of Seminole (see map). Here they moved on their mobile homes, or relocated frame houses, or built their own very modest homes. Some drifted right into town. A large number of them became laborers in town in order to earn income for family needs. A few with adequate financial resources bought farms in Gaines County and modestly re-entered their traditional occupation, expanding the farm as capital became available. After a very modest beginning some Mennonite farmers have developed into large commercial production operations using the most modern farming techniques (including irrigation) and management levels. The implement dealerships in Seminole have also prospered partly as a result of 40-50 Mennonite farmers.

Mennonites have successfully diversified and have established at least a dozen or more business ventures. An increasing number of Mennonites are entering the construction industry as builders and in the sub-trades. They work in centers as remote as El Paso, Amarillo, and Dallas as well as centers in New Mexico. A number of Mennonites are employed in the agriculture service industry and in the various services to property and people in Seminole.

There is an increasing need for teachers in the three Mennonite private schools, namely the Reinland School, the Seminole Mennonite Parochial School and the Old Colony School. They have all recently either moved into new premises or have expanded their schools because of growing enrollment. One Mennonite is teaching in the Seminole public school system where the number of Mennonite students is increasing annually.⁴⁰ All four churches,⁴¹ the Mennonite Gospel (EMMC), the Seminole Mennonite (Kleine Gemeinde), the Reinlander and the Old Colony have recently completed building programs; the first two are located in the built-up portion of Seminole, the latter two are located on the outskirts of the town. A number of Mennonite families are members in the German Church of God.

Comments Regarding Assimilation-Integration

Will the Mennonites of Seminole be able to maintain their Mennonite sub-culture which they and their forebears have protected through a number of migrations for many decades in Russia, then in Canada and more recently in Mexico? Seminole and area are not noted for having an heterogeneous population; its composition is dominated by the Anglo-Saxons with Hispanics being the second largest group. Will the Mennonites as a relatively small ethnic minority in a totally new environment survive the forces of the American melting pot? Or will the replenishment of cultural values now coming from Mexico via the current migration patterns continue in the future and off-set the forces of assimilation? Will the Mennonites of Seminole be able to reinforce their culture and ethnic distinctives by eventually developing their own social institutions and ethnic organizations?

The Seminole Mennonites are in the process of weakening or lifting some of their traditional cultural and ethnic stakes. The land or territorial stake, sacred for many generations in Mexico, Canada and in the Ukraine, has almost no anchor in the ground. And gone with it are the Mennonite villages on segregated land reserves, gone are the economic and political structures and the institutions of welfare. Education and religious institutions are in the process of change. Also gone is the unifying occupational structure of the Mennonite community they left behind.

Their traditional religion strongly linked with culture has been weakened and may be withering. It is in the process of being replaced in some church groups by the 'believers community'. Perhaps the change will not be in their fundamental beliefs and basic teachings of the Bible but rather in the basic application of this message in the daily life of the adherents. This could very well develop and become a growing branch sending down strong healthy roots. There is evidence of a weakening cultural stake. The English language is making strong in-roads over a relatively short period of time. Some of the younger generation are adopting the English with the Texas twang. American dress style and American folk-ways are being adopted.⁴² No longer do we find the church grounds filled with horse and buggy or wagon; the church parking lot is now filled with chrome-decked pick-up trucks on Sunday morning. The Mennonite culture has begun to blend with that of the host culture as the Mennonites increasingly adopt new forms of communications, as the 'American way-of-life enters their living room via television, video, radio and the press, and as they interface with American society at the work place, in common educational facilities and at the malls, the market place and recreational facilities.⁴³ There is an increase in the enrollment of Mennonite students in the Seminole Public schools.⁴⁴ On the part of the parents there is a growing interest in the education of their children with a rapidly decreasing attitude that home and farm education is adequate to meet their childrens' future needs.

The Seminole Mennonites are rapidly developing a more modern identity under the strong influence of a dominant social and cultural environment of the American way of life.

On the other hand, there are indications that little assimilation has taken place in the area of political, social and civil institutions; there are few or no instances of inter-marriage, there is evidence of prejudice on the part of Texans, and few if any Mennonites have entered places of civic influence or local politics. Still, the extensive boundary maintenance and controlled systemic linkages with outsiders under which many of the Seminole Mennonites grew up in Mexico have largely disappeared.

There is a serious lack of knowledge of their past and a lack of pride in their heritage which is important and perhaps essential to provide a sense of purpose and direction as an ethnic group. Without this the will and desire to perpetuate their tradition and culture rapidly diminishes.

On the other hand it is quite evident that many close kinship relationships are strongly maintained which affects the amount of "non-ethnic neighboring."

Many Mennonites of Seminole are not actively involved in social services and voluntary organizations that do not connect with their churches or private schools. There appears to be only minimal involvement at this time with the organized social activity of the larger community.

There is no doubt that many of the ethnic and cultural forces are weakening and maybe taking second place to religious forces as a dynamic in the Mennonite community. While there are only a few signs of Mennonites entering the social institutions of the host society, yet it is anticipated that the degree to which they would be accepted would match the welcome the Mennonites received when they first settled in the Seminole area. There is evidence that many Mennonites are willing to embrace cultural changes while still holding on to their religious beliefs. And as such the Mennonites of Seminole will increasingly be faced with the challenge of transition from a territorial and cultural identity to one of predominantly religious and ideological.

Notes

¹The long term intent was to attract 40,000 Mennonites to West Texas over a ten year period and to buy an additional 15,000 acres of land. This would be the biggest economic boom to the area since the discovery of oil. *Newsweek* June 6, 1977.

²This smaller reform group has been referred to in Mexico and also initially in Seminole as the 'Conference' group. In Seminole it lost its 'Conference' identity when the Evangelical Mennonite Mission church (EMMC) began exercising leadership over this group and as members from other churches joined the group. See William Janzen, "Stranded Mennonite Immigrants at Seminole, Texas and Boley, Oklahoma: A Report for the Congressional Efforts to Resolve the Problem" (Akron, Pennsylvania, MCC, June 6, 1979), p. 2. See also Gary S. Elbow and Simone Gordon, "Mennonite Colonization Efforts at Seminole, Texas, 1977-1979." *West Texas Historical Association Yearbook*, 1981. Volume 57.

³Public media converged on Seminole from across United States, Canada, and Western Europe as the story of the Mennonite migration problems unfolded. Both CTV and CBC television corporations provided coverage as well as Canadian daily and weekly papers. The mayor of Seminole received 199 letters from 29 States and many more telephone calls. *The Washington Post*

wrote to Mayor Clark as follows: "The Mennonite story touched off one of the greatest reader reactions in years: telephone calls, telegrams, and letters all over the place..."

⁴Harry Leonard Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 97.

⁵Hildegard M. Martens, "Mennonites from Mexico: Their Immigration and Settlement in Canada" (Manuscript), Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, 1975.

⁶See Sawatzky, pp. 202, 206, 324, and 330; and Elbow, p. 61; *El Paso Times* July 4, 1978 and *New York Times* March 6, 1979.

⁷Twenty percent of the families in the seven colonies in Mexico were non-farmers (anwohners); 35 percent were living on a land area of less than 80 acres. See L. H. Sawatzky, pp. 245-246. For some individual villages the landless was in the neighborhood of 40 percent. Calvin Wall Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites: Dilemmas of Ethnic Minority Life* (Baltimore: John's Hopkins Press, 1969), p. 22.

⁸Letter from D. Franz to Wm. Janzen, October 1, 1977, and MCC Akron News Service Release, April 1, 1977. Mennonite Heritage Centre, MCC (Can.) Collection, Vol. 2566, File OS-52.

⁹Sawatzky, pp. 134-136.

¹⁰The Manitoba Government, responding to the plight of the Mennonites in Seminole when deportation seemed imminent, extended an invitation to them to settle in Manitoba's Interlake area. A search for suitable land was initiated by a multi-disciplinary committee but the Mexican Mennonites did not show interest in relocating to Manitoba. Letter dated October 3, 1977 from Premier Ed Schreyer to Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. Mennonite Heritage Centre, MCC (Can.) Collection, Vol. 2566, File OS-52.

¹¹*Soil Survey of Gaines County, Texas* by W. H. Dittmore, Jr. USDA Soil Conservation Service, Washington DC. The report claims that there is little or no recharge taking place.

¹²William Janzen, "Stranded Mennonite Immigrants at Seminole, Texas and Boley, Oklahoma: A Report for the Congressional Efforts to Resolve the Problem". MCC Akron, PA. June 1979, p. 3. MCC Canada, Ottawa Office, Canada.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁷Gary S. Elbow and Simone Gordon; "Mennonite Colonization Efforts at Seminole, Texas, 1977-1979," *West Texas Historical Association Year Book*. 1981, Volume 57, p. 65.

¹⁸Janzen, p. 15.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 16.

²⁰Elbow, p. 65.

²¹Jake Nikkel and Albert Gaeddert, Report to Western District Conference Home Missions Committee, North Newton Kansas, September, 1977, Mennonite Heritage Centre, MCC (Can.) Collection, Vol. 2566, File OS-52.

²²*Ibid.*

²³Janzen, p. 16.

²⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 19 & 20.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁶Letter from Franz to Snyder, MCC Akron, February 22, 1979. Archives of the Mennonite Church, Goshen, MCC Collection, IX-6-3.

²⁷Janzen, p. 32. The USDA Soil Conservation Service with an extension office in Seminole had information in their Soil Survey reports on long term soil productivity with and without irrigation. These reports were available free of charge to the farmers of the area. Yet *Newsweek* quotes Peter Bergen, one of the leaders of the Old Colony as saying, "We didn't understand what that (farming without irrigation) would mean in West Texas (*Newsweek*, April 23, 1979).

²⁸Elbow, p. 66.

²⁹*The Houston Chronicle*, February 28, 1978.

³⁰It has been estimated that two hundred farmers pooled their savings for the initial down payment, for the first annual down payment only 40 farmers remained to pool, for the second annual payment only 7 families remained to put their money into the venture (*Dallas Morning News*, Sunday, April, 1979).

³¹Janzen, p. 33.

³²*Newsweek*, April 13, 1979.

³³*Seminole Sentinel*, October 23, 1977.

³⁴There was a real concern of some politicians, government officials as well as MCC staff that such a private bill would create a heated debate in Congress lead by members representing districts with many Hispanic aliens. Also MCC had recently launched a program whereby it would assist alien Mexicans to achieve residential status.

³⁵The Commissioner of INS, L. J. Castello, in a letter to J. Eilberg, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship and International Law, stated that "we will grant additional extension for what ever period is necessary so long as the group is actively pursuing and has reasonable expectation of obtaining permanent residence". Mennonite Heritage Centre, MCC (Can.) Collection, Vol. 2566, File Os-52.

³⁶Mahon had received a phone call from a Dietrich Reimer in Mexico informing him that Mennonites were planning to move to the United States.

³⁷MCC had some concerns about getting involved in the Seminole situation. MCC, while recognizing the need, did not want to appear as a "self-appointed" agency and also they did not want to appear to be only interested in "the blond-haired blue-eyed Mexicans but also Mexicans with black hair". (Phone call between J. M. Klassen (MCC, Canada) and Wm. Snyder (MCC, Akron) October 11, 1977.) Mennonite Heritage Centre, MCC (Can.) Collection, Vol. 2566, File OS-52. On the other hand MCC eagerly wanted to get involved to "re-establish good relationship with them" (i.e. the Old Colony Church) Letter from Gaeddert to Snyder, July 10, 1978. Mennonite Heritage Centre, MCC (Can.) Collection, Vol. 3065, File OS-128.

³⁸Peter Dyck, *Seminole Trip Report*, MCC. February 13-20, 1979. Archives of the Mennonite Church, Goshen, Indiana, MCC Collection, XI-6-3. ³⁹This 35-page document provided the necessary background information for the Senate and House Judiciary Committee's consideration of the bill.

³⁹This 35-page document provided the necessary background information for the Senate and House Judiciary Committee's consideration of the bill.

⁴⁰Interview with Janice Buxton, Director of Education, Seminole Independent School District, March 6, 1995.

⁴¹Over time efforts to provide some sort of church leadership on the part of both groups but particularly the Old Colony, after the loss of their bishop, brought individuals and those representing Mennonite church groups from Canada and the United States to Seminole. One group from Manitoba, the Morweena Church became heavily involved in the provision of leadership and financial and other assistance to the group which is now known as the Seminole Mennonite Church (Kleine Gemeinde). One church conference which became involved during the leaderless years was the Evangelical Mennonite Mission (EMMC) which became particularly active in the 'Confer-

ence' group. This group had by this time become a diverse group represented by fifteen families including four from the 'Conference' group, three with connections with the EMMC, one belonging to the Church of God, the balance were Old Colony. It appears that the General Conference Mission Board in United States were not able to insert leadership during this time of unrest and fluidity. This diverse group, at this critical time asked and received leadership assistance from the EMMC. The Old Colony group received intermittent assistance from the Old Colony Church in Manitoba. The Rheinlander Church is a recent splinter group of the more conservative from the Old Colony Church. It should be noted that, under the circumstances, church affiliation was quite volatile and fluid during those unsettled and restless years—one should not expect stability. See Peter J. Dyck, "Seminole Trip Report," pp. 16-18, Mennonite Central Committee, 1979. Archives of the Mennonite Church, XI-6-3, Goshen, Indiana.

⁴²Dress among the men has dramatically changed to jeans, cowboy boots, and Texan hat. They have readily accepted the shiny chrome-endecked pick-up truck. Dress among the women has changed less dramatically. However, there are increasing numbers of young women and teenagers who cannot be readily identified on the streets or in the stores. Many homes are furnished with most, if not all, of the modern household conveniences and entertainment facilities.

⁴³Jacob P. Siemens, "Mennonites: Who Are They?" *Seminole Sentinel*, May 14, 1989, p. 11.

⁴⁴Doug Harriman, principal of a Seminole elementary school said, "They're like sponges...Two years ago, five of the top ten fifth grade scorers on the California Achievement Test (math portion) were Mennonites," *Lubbock-Avalanche Journal*, May, 1990.