

Neubergthal Mennonite Street Village: A Photographic Essay

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The word “*Darp*” may have little meaning to many Mennonites. But for those with roots in the migration from Russia to southern Manitoba in the mid-1870s, it has a plethora of meanings. Low German for “village,” the *Darp* is an entity both still alive and long lost. For some it is “birthplace,” “hometown,” “womb of origin and formation,” or “place of departure,” while for others it denotes remnants existing only in a museum setting, in childhood memories of stories told, and in reminders etched on the southern Manitoba landscape.

The unique villages the Mennonite immigrants superimposed onto the newly-surveyed grid of the homestead system in the 1870s and 1880s were an effort to recreate order, and the familiar “home” on the seemingly boundless prairie both east and west of the Red River. In the inevitable disorientation that came with leaving the old world and seeking a place in the new, the village created spaces linking residents to each other while connecting them with generations past. The meticulously ordered pattern of single village street, housebarns, orchards, fences, yards, surrounding fields and shelter belts encompassed the settlers’ collective experience and world view. It eclipsed cultural and environmental influences, such as the merging of language and architectural styles from Holland, Germany, Prussia and Russia and a view of the world shaped by generations of separation, migration and readjustment. The origins of the villages are expressed in the unique set of skills that were honed for survival in harsh environments, where getting along, sharing

and working together were more practical imperative than esoteric ideal. Evoked in the village structures are such Biblical imagery as “beating swords into ploughshares” involving the rejection of violence and the sanctification of the land and agricultural life, being a “faithful remnant” within a larger society, rejecting conformity to the “world,” and looking for God’s “deliverance” from persecution, all of which relate to the tendency towards and comfort with a certain degree of isolation. Also evoked is the imagery of being God’s children, a “brotherhood” working within structures that enable a fairer, egalitarian (rather than a largely hierarchical) social and class structure. Such a mind set is expressed visually in the practical, austere, defensive architecture and the tightly bound, uniformly-ordered village pattern. It is echoed in the highly self-sufficient and interconnected society within the village. And it is illustrated by the prominence and centrality of the church and school, reflecting religious life as integral to the functioning of the village.

The single straight-line formations of the Mennonite street villages, with their double rows of dots for homes, show up clearly on modern topographical maps, though an urban traveler can race completely unaware through one of the eighteen or so villages that still exist on the old “West Reserve.” Some efforts have been made by individuals and by organizations to bring attention to and preserve the Mennonite villages. In the early 1980s the Manitoba government came close to designating an entire village. More recently, a similar effort by the federal government under the National Historic Sites programme, succeeded. In 1989 the Historical Sites and Monuments Board of Canada declared the little known village of Neuberghthal, Manitoba to be of national historic significance, as an excellent example of a typical Mennonite Street Village on the prairies, and a component in a larger effort to recognize the importance of prairie settlement in Canada. Located just southeast of the present town of Altona, the village was founded in 1876 (according to oral tradition) by a group of interconnected families from the Bergthal colony in South Russia.¹ Neuberghthal retains a single street orientation, traditional architecture, and lush vegetation, which were key features that recommended it for the commemoration.

In the federal recognition of Neuberghthal as an historic site, “national” meanings of the *Darp* are emphasized. For instance, much notice is given the fact that the Mennonite newcomers were the first of many large group migrations to the western prairies in the wake of treaties Canada negotiated with the aboriginal inhabitants, and of the legislated plan for a nation spanning “from sea to sea.” While permanent agricultural settlement of the open plains was widely considered impossible, Mennonites with their unique street village adaptation to that particular environment, their strong work ethic and practical, frugal, self-sufficient ways demonstrated to the Canadian government and to the subsequent flood of immigrants, that settlement far away from rivers and forests could indeed succeed. While for many Mennonites the significance of the *Darp* is its expression of group history and cultural identity, to those concerned with the national story, the *Darp*’s value was — and still is — its contribution to the settlement of Western Canada and the building of the nation.

Most of the street villages in southern Manitoba disappeared by the turn of the 20th century. A myriad of suggested explanations have in common the notion that the villages simply lost relevance in the changing realities of the modern world. Yet some villages, like Neubergthal, have survived. And that they do suggests that aspects of this form of community continue to have very important functions and meanings for people – for instance, self sufficiency, simplicity, separation, connectedness and remembrance.

Now dealing with the attention increasingly focused on their village of some thirty-eight households, the villagers of Neubergthal are rethinking and articulating their personal experience and memories of the *Darp*. The oral tradition in the village is strong, as the majority of residents are descended directly from the Neubergthal's founding families. Also strong is the tradition of preserving and reusing buildings and material objects rather than tearing down or discarding them. This tendency, derived as much from frugality and pragmatism as from nostalgia or historical consciousness, has had much to do with the continuity of Neubergthal village to this day, and provides the key for its preservation in the future.

Under the microscope of Parks Canada's researchers and planners, the village has yielded some special treasures. One, which is featured here, is a large collection of photographic negatives from the turn of the century to the 1930s. The approximately 460 images of early life in Neubergthal – some on film, most on large (approximately 5" x 7") glass plates — were captured by Peter Gerhard Hamm (1883-1965), known by locals as “the village photographer.” For Mr. Hamm, whose father Gerhard was one of the village founders in the 1870s, photography was both hobby and livelihood. He carried it on between his main occupation -- first as the village school teacher then as a farmer.

The photo negative collection was recently recovered from its long undisturbed storage in the barn of the photographer's son, Jake Hamm, who is in the process of retiring from the family property in Neubergthal. Beneath the dust, black mold, and rodent-eaten envelopes emerge images of family portraits, weddings, funerals and family reunions — some shadowy, others crystal clear. There are also glimpses of the less formal events: the leisure activities, the seasonal tasks, the unposed work and play of daily village life. The striking backdrop is the unique street village settlement pattern itself, with its housebarns, whitewashed fences, tailored gardens and towering trees.²

Perhaps surprising are the rare views of housebarn interiors, the ornamental “gingerbread” on the verandahs, the elaborate fashions, and the depth of people's characters captured by the camera. The playfulness of the “Bromm Topp” photo is in vivid contrast to the stark grief and bewilderment of the home funeral shots. The interior portraits of the photographer's young twin boys and the group shots of the village school children are a reflection of P.G. Hamm's personal and family life. Neighbours are also shown; for example the “girls of Sommerfeld” (the street village one and a half miles away), and friends and relatives in Altona, Gretna and other surrounding towns and villages. Also interesting are the many views of the village street itself – flooded with puddles and rutted with carriage wheels in the spring,

scattered with meandering Sunday afternoon walkers in the summer, and lined with bare cottonwoods in the late fall.

The collection shows the *Darpp* in all its glory as well as its mud. The P.G. Hamm collection is informing the commemoration of Neuberghthal by providing information useful in the restoration and preservation of the village's historical resources. And it is reviving memories among the present residents of Neuberghthal. In the following photo essay some of the recollections accompany a selection of the photo images.* While these and other photographs reflect the Mennonite villages in days past, they can also help preserve and bring new meanings to the street villages on the Canadian prairies.

* I wish to extend my appreciation to the many people of Neuberghthal and area who contributed their knowledge and reflections to this study, and to Ray Hamm, Lyle Dick and Peter Priess who conducted interviews of them over the course of the Neuberghthal National Historic Site research. The recollections recorded here are not necessarily verbatim.

PHOTOGRAPHS

Photo 1



Heinrich Klippenstein family with one of the first cars in the village, Neubergthal, ca. 1914. P.G. Hamm Coll., 26:1.

The people who originally founded Neubergthal tried to make everything absolutely uniform. The houses and their attached barns were in a straight line with their entrances facing south towards the yard driveway. Every yard was to be half a mile deep and about 240 feet wide. Each housebarn was to be an equal distance from the main street, around 80 feet, and lined up perpendicular to it. The story we used to hear is that the layout of the houses was so uniform that if everybody opened their doors at the same time, you'd be able to see clear through the village! (Ray Hamm, Neubergthal)

Photo 2

Village street of Neubergthal. P.G. Hamm Coll., 30:12.

On both sides of the village street were rows of high trees with fences in front. People used to sit on these fences and visit with whoever was passing by. I remember as a young girl, my mother not liking me sitting out there with my friends. Maybe we looked lazy. Or maybe people would think we were looking for company from the boys. She used to call me in when she saw me there. (Norma Giesbrecht, Altona)

Photo 3



Trees on the Jacob S. Friesen property and lining the village road, Neubergthal, ca. 1910s. P.G. Hamm Coll., 19:3.

When people first came to this area there was nothing but grass rolling and rippling like water in the wind. The first thing people did was plant a straight row of trees in front of their yard, along the village street. It had to line up exactly with the neighbours' trees. The land was so very fertile. They say that the first tree in Neubergthal was a pole stuck in the ground in order to tie up a calf! (Ted Friesen, Altona)

Photo 4

The photographer, P.G. Hamm, with his family posed in front of his photo backdrop, ca. 1920. P.G. Hamm Coll., 27:4.

Dad did a lot of photographs for other people from the early 1900s till into the 1930s. There weren't too many people who could afford to get their portraits done then. That backdrop was Dad's trademark. He ordered it from Germany, same as the camera. We had the backdrop up for sale at our yard auction in 1997. It was bought by someone in the village and now they're talking about setting up that backdrop at the Neubergthal homecoming in July, 2000. People will be able to have their pictures taken in front of it again for old times sake. (Jake Hamm, Neubergthal)

Photo 5



Two of the photographer's sons (standing and left sitting) with neighbour boy at home, ca. 1914. P.G. Hamm Coll., 34:1.

P.G. Hamm was not typical in some ways. He was the first — or one of the first — from the village to study at MCI in Gretna. Back then interest in higher education was seen with some suspicion. The Low German saying translates to something like, "The more you learn, the crazier you get!" The implication is that too much schooling leads to impractical or irrelevant ideas. (Ray Hamm, Neubergthal)

Photo 6

School children around flag pole, ca. 1912. P.G. Hamm Coll., 5:6.

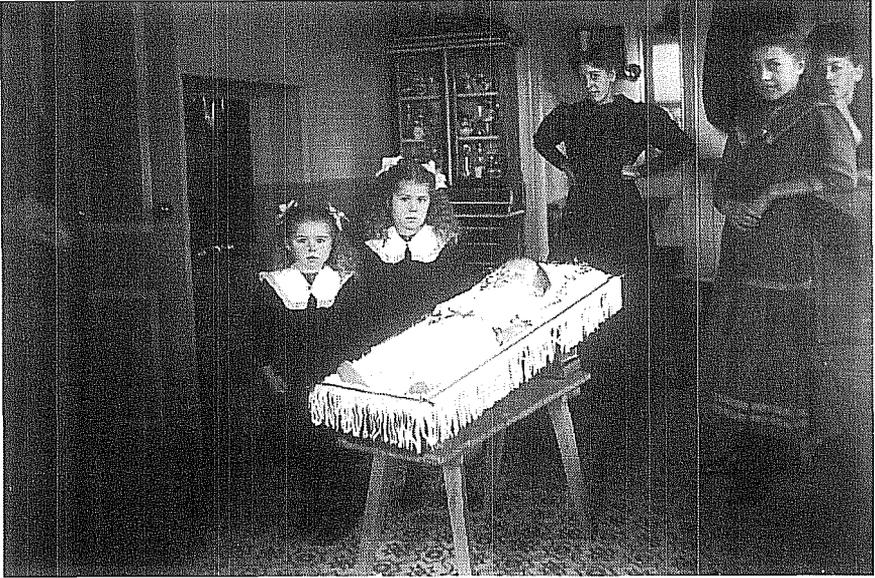
Dad was village photographer between working as a school teacher. But that was when it became law that there had to be English and the outside curriculum in the classroom. Well, most teachers in the villages didn't even know English. It was very hard to be the teacher then, because people didn't like this new law and they could even blame the teacher." (Eva Hamm, Neubergthal)

Photo 7



Interior portrait of the photographer's parents-in-law, Mr and Mrs Funk. P.G. Hamm Coll., 19:2.

When he quit as school teacher, Dad stayed on for many, many years as elected member of the school board, so he was still very involved. For his main livelihood he went into farming, although he wasn't really that much of a farmer. It was a fortunate thing his wife [Gertrude Funk] could give him some help in that department. (Jake Hamm, Neubergthal)

Photo 8

Interior child funeral, Neuberghal. P.G. Hamm Coll., 46:4.

There was a man in the village [P.G. Hamm] who had beautiful handwriting. People would come to him to write announcements and invitations to weddings or funerals. He would write the message in beautiful calligraphy on paper – black-edged for funerals – and it would be passed from house to house until everyone had received the news. (Jake Krueger, Neuberghal)

Photo 9



"The girls of Sommerfeld." P.G. Hamm Coll., 13:2.

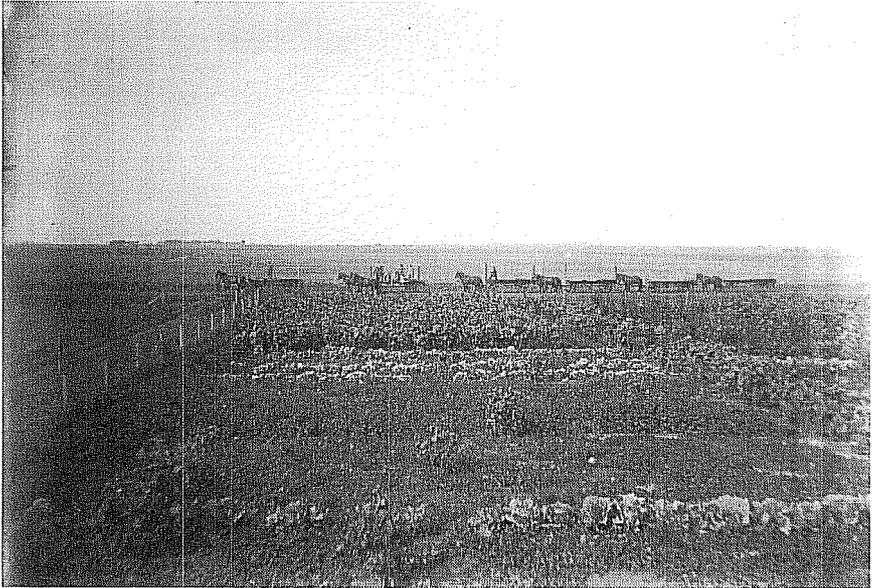
There was a not-so-friendly competition between the young men of Neubergthal and the young men of the neighbouring village of Sommerfeld. What was the actual source of the tensions? It's hard for people to remember. But it was mostly about the young women, it seems. (Ray Hamm, Neubergthal)

Photo 10

*Neuberghthal villagers at work at autumn hog butchering
bee. P.G. Hamm Coll., 24:4.*

I remember how — sometimes fifteen times an autumn — my wife and I would go out in the morning to help other people with the hog slaughtering. There was an average of 4 pigs per farm that were butchered... day after day, sometimes even when it was 20 below zero. October was usually the starting time. You needed cold weather to store the hams. Hams were salted the evening of butcher to cure them, then they were hung up and they stayed there till spring time. Five months of curing in the winter — that's where the sweet flavour of the meat came from. (Henry Hamm, Neuberghthal)

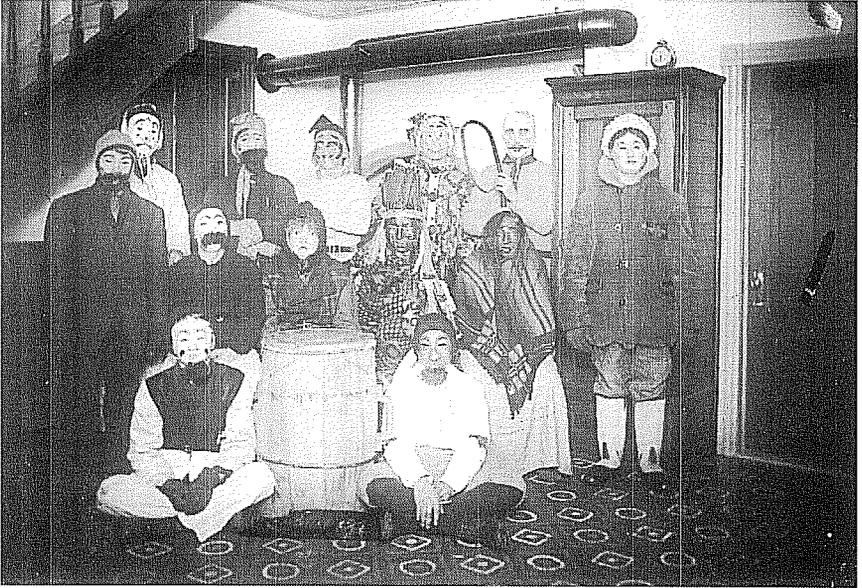
Photo 11



Front garden on P.G. Hamm's yard when the northern end of Neubergthal village was still wide open space. The horse-drawn wagons are on the village street. P.G. Hamm Coll., 2:2.

In the early years, the land between the village road and the housebarn was used as the garden; vegetable at first. As the cottonwoods lining the main street grew, the vegetable gardens were so much in shade that they were moved to sunny spots at the back of the barn, very often into the pasture, where they were enclosed to keep them safe from livestock. (Jake Krueger, Altona)

Photo 12



Masked young men at New Year's Eve "Bromm Topp" tradition. A group of young men would make the rounds every New Year's Eve looking for cake, cookies and perhaps some homemade wine, announcing their arrival with the Bromm Topp, an instrument made of a barrel and strung horse hair. P.G. Hamm Coll., 27:5.

'Wir kommen hier an, ohne Spott, ohne Schan'. Einen schoenen Guten Abend bieten wir euch an. Einen schoenen Guten Abend, eine froehlich Zeit, weil wir uns haben den Brumtopf bereit ...!'

I remember that because those young people with the "Bromm Topp" used to practice their songs in our barn. (Neta Lepcky, Niverville)

Notes

¹ Neubergthal was founded by several children of the Johann and Margaretha Klippenstein family who arrived in Canada on the S.S. Sarmatian on July 6 1875. One of the Klippenstein wives, Mrs. Helena (Peter) Hamm, married into the family as a widow with five sons from her previous marriage. Through intermarriage of the Hamm sons with Klippenstein daughters, and the continuity of those families in Neubergthal, Hamm and Klippenstein descendants have always made up a good proportion of the village population.

² Prints of some of the negatives exist in the Jake Hamm family album, a collection of some 280 photo prints, most taken by P.G. Hamm.