

Mennonite Settlement in Southwest Manitoba

Post 1923

THE VERY FIRST GROUP OF MENNONITES TO arrive in Manitoba came from eastern Europe during the summer of 1874 and settled on reserves east and west of the Red River. However, the Mennonites that settled in southwestern Manitoba – around Whitewater Lake particularly – did not arrive until 50 years later, and under a different set of circumstances.

Mennonites are a pacifist group of Christians who follow a biblically-based doctrine. They had settled in southern Russia and the Ukraine as farmers. Before World War One, the Mennonite colonies were quite well-to-do with beautiful homes and gardens, plentiful orchards and rich land upon which they produced good crops. After the war the revolution came, then famine and finally a communist government took over Russia which began to both tax the Mennonites very heavily and harass them.

After the Labour Party of Canada persuaded the federal government to open the door to the Mennonites in 1923, a group of the refugees were eager to find new lives on the Canadian prairies. The Canadian government, though, had a bit more on its mind than being kind to Mennonite people going through hard times. A president and associate professor at the University of Waterloo, Frank H. Epp later wrote:

“The real purpose was to fill the Canadian prairies with a united Canadian society, which would prove the possibility of prosperous settlement there, and, simultaneously, domesticate the lands in the face of Indian and Métis rebellion and discourage any American incursion.”

Between 1923 and 1929, over 20,000 Mennonites managed to immigrate, and though more wanted to come, the Canadian government closed the door in 1930. The CPR offered the Mennonites transport via rail across the country to the prairies which they later paid back. These Mennonites arrived totally penniless, with nothing but the clothes on their backs and Bibles in their hands. Though they had no money to speak of, they managed to secure tens of thousands of acres of

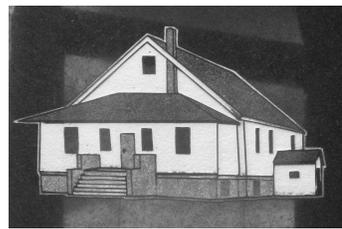
land including essential start-up goods without making so much as a down payment. Instead, they promised half of their gross annual income until the purchase price and interest were covered. The Mennonites had a reputation for honesty and being good farmers, thus the landowners in the area thought them trustworthy.

The German-speaking Mennonites were adjusting quite well to their new lives until the depression hit. With the onset of drought, rust and grasshoppers, farming became a very slow method of earning money. Mortgage obligations couldn't be paid, and Mennonite immigrants either lost their farms through foreclosure or lived in debt for years, sometimes decades.

Many rural schools at this time were struggling to stay open due to a lack of students. The sudden influx of Mennonite children to the area repopulated the desks of many small schools, especially those of Petersburg and Strathallen where Mennonite children easily made up the majority. One morning in the winter of 1925, a sleigh full of Mennonite children pulled up to Petersburg School in the town of Whitewater, not one of them knowing a word of English. There was absolutely no money to buy books. One time Jake Harms borrowed 15 cents to buy a text book and it took a long time for the loan to be repaid. (Jake Harms later became an influential, well-loved and long-serving pastor of the Whitewater Mennonite Church).

In their new communities, the Mennonites took pains to preserve their own culture and religious heritage. Church was the hub of the Mennonite community, and the newcomers

to Whitewater set about establishing a church with enthusiasm. At first, services were held in people's homes, but the rooms were often too small. At the end of 1925 they moved into an abandoned church in Whitewater and operated without an ordained pastor until 1927 when Gerhard G. Neufeld was ordained. In this way the Whitewater Mennonite congregation was born, independent from and unaffiliated with any other existing Mennonite congregation at the time.



The first Whitewater Mennonite Church.



The Whitewater Mennonite Cemetery, near the village of Whitewater.

References:

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Photos: Teyana Neufeld, TM-SPHA.