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A brief history of the Mennonites in Nebraska

Paul Kuhlmann
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A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MENNONITES IN NEBRASKA

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Faculty of the Department of History and Government
Municipal University of Omaha

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Paul Kuhlmann
June 1953
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The preparation of this thesis has revealed a dearth of historic material concerning many Mennonite congregations. Where this is the case, the writer has depended considerably upon the recollections of surviving pioneers in the several churches. An extended questionnaire was sent to the pastor of each congregation and this was followed in many instances by further correspondence. In addition, the writer personally visited every congregation mentioned with the exception of the church in Culbertson, took pictures of the various church buildings, and interviewed pastors and early settlers. A word of appreciation is due them for their time and their willing cooperation.

A visit to the Mennonite Historical Library of Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas, yielded considerable information not otherwise obtainable. A special word of appreciation for their valuable counsel is due Dr. Cornelius Krahn, director of the Historical Library, and Mr. John F. Schmidt, assistant director.

Finally, to Dr. Frederick W. Adrian of the Municipal University of Omaha the writer owes a debt of gratitude for his inspiration, guidance, and suggestions in the preparation of this thesis.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Mennonites who settled in Nebraska originated in the Anabaptist movement of the Reformation period and took their name from the noted Dutch leader, Menno Simons. Being persecuted for their faith, they moved from country to country until many found a haven in the United States. Of these a considerable number came to the prairies, some by way of the East, while others came directly from Germany and Russia. Essentially the Mennonites were not a racial group but a religious association of men of like or similar faith. Today only five of some nineteen branches of the Mennonite church are represented in Nebraska. The story of their beginnings, the account of their coming, the growth of their settlements, the nature of their religious and social life, and the contributions which they have made to the development of this state make a thrilling chapter in the history of Nebraska.

The history of the Mennonite church began in the Reformation period. During that time the religious groups of central Europe were divided into what might today be called conservative and liberal groups. The Roman Catholics might be considered the conservative Right; the Lutherans, discarding many of the fundamental doctrines of the Catholic Church yet retaining much of its ceremonialism and ritual, could be called the Right
Center; the Reformed party, more liberal than the Lutherans but still retaining some of the central features of the old church in the union of church and state, might qualify as the Left Center; while the Anabaptists, without any hierarchy and with the New Testament as their sole basis of faith and practice, were clearly the extreme Left of the day.¹

The Anabaptists were dissenters; they preferred to call themselves simply "Brethren." They repudiated infant baptism, practiced baptism only upon confession of faith, and in Germany were known as "Wiedertaufer," re-baptizers. They regarded Christ as the sole Head of the Church. They adhered to the Bible, read it much in their homes, and endeavored to live in strict accord with its teachings. They took literally the command to love their enemies and put into practice the doctrine of non-resistance. They aimed, in short, to reproduce the primitive, apostolic form of church life.

The Anabaptists were severely persecuted almost from the beginning, first by the Roman Catholic Church, and later by Lutherans and Calvinists alike.² Religious tolerance for any dissenting sect was virtually unknown in the sixteenth century. Since the Mennonites refused to bear arms and to hold public office, they also became an embarrassment to civil authorities. As a result "they were hunted like wild beasts, burned at the


stake, drowned in rivers, or starved in prison.\textsuperscript{1} "The first known martyr is Felix Mantz, drowned at Zurich, January 5, 1527."\textsuperscript{2} Scores of others were doomed to a similar fate. "The only charge against the Anabaptists was that they were determined to serve God according to the dictates of their conscience."\textsuperscript{3}

Under persecution the movement spread rapidly across the Swiss border into South Germany and down the Rhine until it reached the Netherlands. The imperial Diet of Speier in 1529, however, outlawed the Anabaptists throughout the empire. It was during this time that Menno Simons appears on the scene. He was converted from Catholicism in 1536 and was ordained to the ministry in 1537. He travelled very extensively in all parts of the Netherlands and northern Germany and was able so effectively to organize the widely scattered members of the Anabaptist faith, that they ultimately came to be called by his name. While there had also been very radical groups of Anabaptists, one group in 1534 even barricading themselves in the city of Muenster, these did not represent the main stream of the Anabaptist movement. Menno Simons was able to overcome any such radical tendencies among his followers and to lead them to become a peace-loving people.\textsuperscript{4}

From these early beginnings subsequent history divides the

\textsuperscript{1} J. S. Hartzler and Daniel Kauffman, Mennonite Church History, (Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Mennonite Book and Tract Society, 1905), p. 70.

\textsuperscript{2} Lohrenz, op. cit., p. 11.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., p. 11.

\textsuperscript{4} Smith, op. cit., p. 81.
Mennonites into three main streams in so far as their settlement of Nebraska is concerned. In other words, Mennonites who came to Nebraska came from three areas: (a) Switzerland and southwestern Germany via our Eastern states, (b) Prussia, and (c) Russia. To gain a proper perspective, we shall need to follow each of these main streams briefly.

A. Early Settlement of the Eastern States

The first contact of the Mennonites with the New World was one of influence rather than by specific personalities. About 1560 a group of Mennonites were driven by persecution to England where they gradually lost their Mennonite identity and became known as Brownists. One of their leaders, John Smyth, because of some differences, left England in 1608 and returned to Holland. Since he, however, no longer saw eye to eye with the Dutch Mennonites on questions of form of baptism and non-resistance, he returned to England in 1611 and established his own following, a group which soon came to be known as Baptists. Both Mennonites and Baptists added to the vigor of the Separatist movements in England, and contributed towards the migration of a group of Congregationalists to America in 1620, since known as the Pilgrim Fathers.

The earliest known contingent of Mennonites actually to reach America was a small settlement on Delaware Bay about the

---

year 1562, coming from the Netherlands. The colony of twenty-five persons was led by Cornelisz Plockhoy. They got along well with the Indians, but were destroyed by an English squadron in 1664. Next a visit was made to this country by a certain Jacob Telner about the year 1681, from Crefeld, Germany, and this trip prepared the way for the coming of permanent settlers.¹

The first permanent settlement of Mennonites in America was made in Germantown, Pennsylvania, on October 6, 1683. Thirteen families accepted the offer of William Penn to make America their home. Arriving in Pennsylvania, they were assigned fourteen "divisions" of land, and they drew lots for the sites of their individual homes. At once they began to erect huts, dig cellars, and clear the land. Within a year, Germantown was a thriving little metropolis in a Quaker colony.²

The first extension of the Germantown settlement came in 1702 when a number of families moved farther north, up the Skippack River. Others followed, coming directly from Europe.³

When the news of William Penn's offer of land for settlers reached those still being persecuted in Switzerland and the Palatinate, many of them began to turn their attention to the United States. As a result, between the years 1709 and 1735 over five hundred families moved to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

¹ Ibid., p. 125.
³ Ibid., p. 15.
These received considerable help from fellow Mennonites in Holland and from the Society of Friends in England.¹

About this same time another group of Mennonites, known as the Amish, began their migration. Because of a controversy over the ban with other Mennonite groups while still in Switzerland, they were influenced in 1693 by Jacob Ammon to establish their own separate church organization.² "They were noted for plainness of dress, simplicity in life, rigid honesty in business, economy, soberness, and hospitality.³ The first members of this group are known to have been in America by 1718.⁵ They settled in Berks County, Pennsylvania, and soon multiplied until they overflowed into a number of neighboring counties. During the Revolutionary War their faith was severely tried, and a number were thrown into prison because of refusal to serve in the armed forces. The planned execution of several was stayed only because of the intercession of leaders from other churches.⁶

After this early wave of migration, which lasted until


² The ban was a disciplinary measure whereby all members of the church were forbidden to have any social or business dealings with an excommunicated member. See Smith, The Story of the Mennonites, p. 115.


⁵ Weaver, op. cit., p. 18.

⁶ Hartzler and Kauffman, op. cit., p. 139.
1735, no new settlements were established in America by direct immigration for nearly one hundred years. Subsequent settlements in western Pennsylvania, Maryland, Ohio, and Virginia as well as Canada until about 1820 all came from the older settlements in eastern Pennsylvania.¹

The new wave of migration, from 1819 to 1830, consisted chiefly of Swiss Mennonites, some coming directly from Switzerland, others coming by way of the Palatinate. Settlements were made in Wayne, Putnam, and Allen Counties, Ohio, and around Berne, Indiana.² Smaller settlements were also made by German Mennonites in Woolford and Tazewell Counties, Illinois, and a little later in Lee County, Iowa.³

About the year 1830 the Amish also resumed their westward migration. After having been content to remain within the borders of Pennsylvania for approximately a hundred years, they began to settle certain areas in New York, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. The group that settled in Illinois is of special interest since from them ultimately came a majority of the Amish who began settlements in Seward, Fillmore, Cuming, and Holt Counties, in Nebraska.⁴

3. Migration to Prussia

Another group which settled in Nebraska came by way of
Prussia. As early as the middle of the sixteenth century
Mennonite refugees from Holland made their way across northern
Germany to the delta of the Vistula River at the invitation of
Polish noblemen who recognized these settlers for their economic
worth in building dikes and draining swamps. Areas settled were
in the locality of the cities of Danzig, Elbing, Tiegenhof, and
Marienburg. Because of their industriousness, they were at first
well received, but soon they became the target of envy by their
fellow-citizens and persecutions again broke out.¹

When in the year 1701 Frederick I was crowned King in
Prussia, the Mennonites were granted special favors which they
continued to enjoy for many years. As time went by, however,
attempts were made to recruit young men from among the Mennonites,²
to assess their lands for the support of the Prussian army,³ and
to levy a payment of special taxes on all male inhabitants from
the ages of twenty to forty-five.⁴

Fortunately for the Mennonites of Prussia, Empress
Catherine II had in 1786 issued a general appeal for immigrants to
develop the steppes of southern Russia and the Ukraine. As a

² Ibid., p. 11.
³ Ibid., p. 16.
⁴ Ibid., p. 17.
result approximately six thousand persons, or about one-half of the
Prussian Mennonites, left the fertile deltas of the Vistula to
begin life over again in a totally foreign country. The remaining
six thousand were primarily those who were better established or
who were a little more liberal in their convictions on the
military question. These either did not care to leave their
established homes, or found it difficult to obtain the necessary
passports and visas.¹

The Revolution of 1848 brought about changes which again
made the lot of the Mennonites more difficult. As one example, a
new constitution was adopted which reduced the powers of the king
to grant special favors and entrusted it in part to an even less
tolerant legislature. A new wave of migration to Russia now
resulted (1853-1860).²

The final blow came with the founding of the North German
Confederation in 1867. Bismark in that year was able to push
through Parliament a new universal military service law which
provided no exemptions. A committee from the Mennonites was able
to interview a number of ministers, but they were not able to see
Bismark. The crown prince told them that if they could not get
further exemptions from military service, they might consider
emigrating to Russia, but he warned that there they might
experience a repetition of their present experience.³

A number of delegates were as a result sent to Russia to

² Ibid., p. 292.
³ Ibid., p. 293.
explore the possibilities. These returned with the report that in Russia too exemption was only a matter of time.\(^1\) America now seemed to be the only place where they could go, but it was generally considered to be a land for the adventurer or a hiding place for criminals and fugitives from justice. When, however, in 1873 the news was received that the Russian Mennonites were planning to investigate moving to the United States, the Prussian churches decided to send a delegate along from their group.\(^2\)

C. A Century in Russia

Those who emigrated from Prussia upon the invitation of Catherine II founded the two main colonies of Chortiza and Holotschna in southern Russia as well as a number of lesser colonies. Here the Mennonites were allowed to continue their independent existence for many years. The only direct contact which the colonists had with the Russian government at St. Petersburg was through a commission headed most of the time by a sympathetic German stationed in Odessa, and these relations as a rule were good.\(^3\) The colonists continued in the use of the German language, conducted their own German schools, and worshipped according to the dictates of their conscience.\(^4\)

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\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Smith, \textit{Russian Mennonites}, p. 37.

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 22.
The growing spirit of militarism of the times and particularly the unification of the German Empire in 1871, however, caused the Czar to reach a decision to put an end to the highly privileged status of his German colonists. He would not only abolish all military exemptions but also would order complete government control of schools and the abolition of the use of the German language. The Germans were to be made full-fledged Russians.

The threatened loss of these privileges caused the colonists to send a number of delegations to the Czar in an attempt to gain certain concessions, but the only effect was a stricter enforcement of conscription. The Czar demanded that the colonists either comply or else leave the country within ten years.

Emigration now seemed inevitable to those who placed religious convictions above material gain. As a result about one-third of the colonists began looking around for some land of refuge. Most of these, like their brethren in Germany and the Netherlands, found a haven in the New World, particularly in Canada and the United States, and some ultimately came to Nebraska.

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1 Ibid., p. 114.  
2 Ibid., p. 147.  
CHAPTER II

NEBRASKA, A LAND OF PROMISE

As already indicated above, the Mennonites of Nebraska came in three main streams: from the eastern states, from Russia, and from Prussia. In this chapter an attempt will be made to trace the movement of these groups until they reach Nebraska.

A. The Westward Movement of the American Mennonites

Those groups who came to Nebraska from states farther east, such as Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa have often been referred to as American Mennonites in distinction from those who came directly from Europe. These groups included primarily the Swiss and German Mennonites who first settled in Pennsylvania and the Amish Mennonites who followed or came about the same time. They were a part of the general westward movement of population in the latter half of the nineteenth century, pioneers who came in search of cheap lands, and new opportunities. They traveled on foot, by wagon, or in trains and brought with them most of what was needed, although towns of considerable size, such as Omaha and Lincoln, were in existence and provided opportunities for purchasing additional supplies.
As far as any record is preserved, it was these Mennonites from the East who made the first permanent Mennonite settlement in Nebraska. On April 3, 1873, three families settled in Seward County near the present town of Milford. As the population of the little settlement grew, some of its inhabitants moved to other counties as far west as Chappell. Others from the East from time to time joined those already settled. A more detailed survey of these groups, however, will be reserved for the next chapter while for the present the movement of the Russian Mennonites will be considered.

B. The Coming of the Russian Mennonites

During the summer of 1872 four young men from southern Russia set out on a trip of adventure to the United States. They were Bernhard Warkentin, Philip Wiebe, Peter Dyck, and Jacob Boehr. The favorable report of these men when they returned to Russia stimulated the emigration idea. The result was that a "Committee of Twelve" was chosen to "spy out the land" even as the Israelites spied out Canaan.

The Molotschna Colony selected Jacob Buller and. Leonhard Suderman. The congregations near Ostrog, in Volhynia and in Poland chose Tobias Unruh. The Swiss group in Volhynia selected Andreas Schrag. These together with Wilhelm Ewert, who represented the Prussian Mennonites, sailed as a group and arrived in

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1 Smith, Russian Mennonites, p. 50.
2 Ibid., p. 51.
New York the latter part of May, 1873. A second group composed of Heinrich Wiebe, Jacob Peters, and Cornelius Duhr of the Bergthal colony, South Russia, landed in Montreal, Canada. The third group representing the Kleine Gemeinde, a small Mennonite denomination of South Russia, consisting of Cornelius Teves and David Klassen, and the Hutterite group represented by Paul and Lawrence Tschetter arrived in New York in May. While the three groups traveled across the Atlantic independently, they agreed to meet in St. Paul, Minnesota, in order to view the frontier. Actually they met in Fargo, Dakota, on June 9, 1873.

The group first of all inspected lower Manitoba where several delegates were well impressed. By June 21, however, the Molotschna group was quite convinced that land farther south would be more inviting. They proceeded down the Red River by boat and arrived again in Fargo on July 6. After a week in Minnesota, the delegation left for Nebraska. "They arrived in Omaha on July 18, and took the Union Pacific west to Columbus, and from there south to what was called the Burlington and Missouri."  

They were met by the Nebraska Land Commissioner and by a representative of the Burlington and Missouri Railroad, and traveled west as far as Kearney, being shown railroad land near Lowell. The region was somewhat hilly and sandy, somewhat like the soil in Russia. Farmers in the area lived in sod houses.

2 Smith, Russian Mennonites, p. 52.
3 Ibid., p. 59
4 Ibid., p. 64.
The grass was short and the crops were not too good that summer. None were too well impressed. Near Hastings the country looked better. At Red Cloud they saw their first buffalo and some antelope. From there they returned to Lincoln, a town of some 7,000 inhabitants, the capital of the state. They were shown through the city and were favorably impressed. In his diary Leonhard Sudermann mentioned the twelve churches, the university, the insane asylum, the swimming pool, and the salt-water artesian well.¹ As Lincoln was to be the terminus of the inspection tour, the group broke up and by various means returned to Russia.² The excursion had been financed by the interested railroad companies and cost the travelers nothing at the time.³

While waiting for return ocean transportation in New York, several delegates took advantage of a few leisure days to visit President Grant. They were received on July 27 in a most cordial manner. During the interview they presented a request to be granted exemption from military service and were given the assurance that their petition would be considered.⁴ On September 5, 1873, a reply was sent to them in Russia by Secretary of State Hamilton Fish, informing them that citizenship

¹ Sudermann, op. cit., p. 62-65.
² Smith, Russian Mennonites, p. 64.
³ Peter Jansen, Memoirs of Peter Jansen, (Beatrice, Nebraska: Published by the author, 1921), p. 38.
obligations and jury service are under the jurisdiction of the several states, and that the President could not exempt them from the laws of the states. Then the letter added:

The President of the United States of America cannot make you any promise in connection with your request for entire exemption from military service for fifty years . . . . But we are sure—and it will prove true—that the United States of America will not be entangled in any great war for the coming fifty years that would make it necessary to molest you.

The prediction turned out to be very true indeed.

As the groups returned to Russia, they had won many friends to their cause from among the Mennonites already in America. These made further efforts to secure favorable legislation and to acquire, if possible, a large compact tract of land in which these groups might settle in colonies. Through their efforts a petition was submitted to the United States Senate on January 12, 1874, through Senator Cameron of Pennsylvania in which the Mennonites first recounted their experiences in Russia, then described their customary pattern of life, and finally stated their request. This latter portion reads as follows:

In behalf, therefore of our brethren, numbering between forty and fifty thousand, we would respectfully ask:

1. That if we select portions of railroad lands in different places suitable to our different wants as cattle raisers, agriculturists, etc., we be allowed to take up and secure the sections of government lands lying adjacent thereto, either by purchase or under the homestead laws, and preserve the same until the year 1881.

2. If we find unoccupied bodies of land belonging to the government suited to our purposes that we be

1 Young, loc. cit., p. 522.
allowed the same privileges of taking up and securing a sufficient quantity of land protected from interference of outside parties.  

Nothing came of the petition at that time because of objections raised to its discussion by Senator Ferry of Connecticut, but a bill was introduced by the Committee on Public Lands and reported to the Senate on April 7, 1874. It provided for the setting aside for no longer than two years an area of not more than 500,000 acres of which not more than 100,000 acres was to go to any one Mennonite group, nor more than 160 acres was to go to any one person. The bill was debated for two weeks. In favor of, and frequently speaking for, the bill were Senator Cameron of Pennsylvania, who knew the Mennonites well; Senator Windom of Minnesota, who feared the liberal inducements offered by Canada would cause the loss of valuable accession to our population; and Senator Pratt of Indiana, who came to the sessions armed with a book which gave the history and articles of faith of the Mennonites. Primarily opposed were eastern Senators who traditionally voted against anything that might benefit the West. Perhaps the strongest speech in favor of the measure was made by Senator Tipton of Nebraska, who said:

So far as sustaining the government is concerned, have you any complaint? Who would not take tomorrow forty-five thousand Pennsylvania Quakers and locate them all over the western territory? Have you any law by which you could banish Pennsylvania Quakers? Have they not done their duty in sustaining this Government? What did they do when they could not go to war themselves

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according to their conscience? We did not all go ourselves; it will never be necessary that the whole people go to war; and, in God's name, have we not enough of the fighting element in America? Look to Arkansas today, where the people are never happy unless they are in a fight, (laughter) never doing well unless in a fight . . . . Our people are a peculiar people; and if there is any portion of the world that can send us a few advocates of peace, in God's name, let us bid them welcome. We want settlers of that kind.1

As the final day arrived, Senator Windom tried in vain either to secure a vote on the measure or to gain an extension of time by unanimous consent. It would be interesting to speculate what might have been the history of Nebraska had the measure been passed and had a portion of the state been set aside for the Russian colonists.2

While the debates were going on, the colonists in Russia were making preparations to cross the Atlantic. Several congregations decided to emigrate en masse. Everybody wanted to sell, but there were few to buy. Besides, passports and visas had to be obtained. But the first group finally left Russia on April 10, 1874, and arrived in New York on May 20, settling after some indecision near Yankton, Dakota Territory, on May 27.3 Other groups followed. By July 8, over six hundred had arrived in New York while on July 20, 370 arrived and on July 30, 290 more landed.4 It has been estimated that during 1874, about 1,200

2 Smith, Russian Mennonites, p. 89.
3 Ibid., p. 97.
4 Smith, Story of the Mennonites, p. 642.
families arrived, and an equal number came the following year. Smaller bands continued to come until 1880. Of the total of 16,000, about 8,000 went to Canada, while 10,000 came to the United States.¹

Of the immigrants of 1874, approximately eighty families came to Nebraska.² These settled chiefly in two localities: in Jefferson County, and in the two-county area of Hamilton and York.

The first contingent to reach Nebraska from Russia was a group from the Kleine Gemeinde who arrived in New York and were on their way to Manitoba. Through A. E. Touzalin of the Burlington and Missouri Railroad, and through Cornelius Jansen and his son Peter, Mennonites who were located at Mount Pleasant, Iowa, this group was induced to purchase railroad lands in south-eastern Nebraska.³ About twenty-seven families ultimately bought 20,000 acres between Fairbury and Beatrice. The town established was named "Russian Lane" until in 1867 the Rock Island Railroad built a line through the town and renamed it "Jansen" in honor of its founder.⁴

A little later in the fall of the same year (1874), a second group of Mennonites, about thirty-five families, settled near Sutton in York and Hamilton counties. These were from along the Molotschna River. Together with others, who later found their

¹ Ibid., p. 64.² Ibid.³ Jansen, Memoirs of Peter Jansen, p. 41.⁴ Smith, Russian Mennonites, p. 172.
way to Kansas and the Dakota Territory, they were for a time sheltered by temporary quarters erected on the site of the present fair grounds in Lincoln. The height of the immigration wave was reached in September when hundreds were housed in the quarters provided.¹

Isaac Peters, one of the early settlers of the Henderson area, well summed up the preferences of the land seekers when he said, "Those who like a warm climate can choose Kansas; those who like it cold can go to Minnesota; while those desiring moderate climate will come to Nebraska."² To these Russian Mennonites Nebraska was indeed a "land of promise."

C. The Arrival of the Prussian Mennonites

When the churches in Prussia heard that the Russian Mennonites were sending a delegation to America, they sent Wilhelm Ewert, their representative, as a member of the "Committee of Twelve." Ewert returned to Hamburg on September 5, 1873, and spent some time giving detailed reports in the several congregations. No immediate action resulted.³

Instead, Aaron Claassen and Peter Toews of the Heubuden Church, West Prussia, were delegated to make an additional trip of investigation. They visited settlements only recently established in Kansas, Minnesota, and Nebraska, and returned to Germany in November, 1875. Their report also favored a migration to America.

¹ Ibid., p. 193. ² Ibid., p. 175. ³ Andreas, loc. cit., p. 21
and they urged their people to make Nebraska their future home.  

The Neubuden Church had about seven hundred members, but only a few seemed impressed with the report, or were inclined to leave their homes, particularly since the German government had only recently made some concessions in the form of non-combatant service. Nevertheless, about thirty families decided to dispose of their property and to face the hazards of an unknown land.

Of another Mennonite church in Prussia, the Elbing-Ellewald congregation, in spite of much pleading, only the immediate family and a few friends were willing to join Elder Johann Andreas in the proposed venture.

In all 116 individuals from the two churches left Germany on June 15, 1876. They were greeted in New York by Peter Jansen, who accompanied them to his home community, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, where they arrived amid a heavy rainstorm in July 3. Here they met Mr. Jansen's father, Cornelius Jansen, who had formerly been a German consul to South Russia in the town of Berdyansk, but who had been exiled for encouraging the Mennonites to migrate to America.

The urgent problem that faced these immigrants was to find a new home. Representatives from the Santa Fe Railroad took certain delegates to view extensive lands in south central Kansas, while representatives from the Burlington and Missouri Railroad showed others lands available in Nebraska. After

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1 Ibid., p. 22.  
2 Ibid., p. 21.  
3 Ibid.  
4 Jansen, Memoirs, p. 46.
considerable deliberation about one-half of the group purchased lands in Butler and Harvey Counties, Kansas, while the other half followed Aaron Claassen and Peter Jansen's advice and settled in Gage County, Nebraska, near Beatrice.¹

With the Mennonites from the eastern states going to Seward County, the Russian Mennonites to Jefferson, York and Hamilton Counties, and the Prussian Mennonites to Gage County, the three main streams of migration had now made initial settlements in Nebraska. In the following chapter detailed consideration will be given these and other Mennonite communities.

¹ Ibid., p. 47.
CHAPTER III

GENERAL CONFERENCE Mennonite Churches

A study of the individual settlements and their subsequent growth and development might be approached from a number of viewpoints. It could be approached from the chronological point of view, in which case a beginning would be made with Milford in the year 1673; it might be considered from the geographical standpoint, in which case the movement, in general, would be from the eastern portion of the state towards the west; or again, it could be studied according to the land of origin of each group as has been done to this point in the preceding pages.

In the following chapters, however, for the sake of presenting a somewhat coherent picture of the growth and diffusion of those congregations which share a common faith, the approach is along the lines of denominational allegiance.

The denominational approach may be justified by the fact that an individual is not a Mennonite because of race or occupation. He is a Mennonite rather because he belongs to a certain religious organization, and as such he is a convert to a faith to which he gives zealous allegiance. As such his allegiance may cross national, racial, and social barriers.

While denominational loyalty is perhaps not quite as strong as it once was, a discussion of the history of a Mennonite
community must, nevertheless, include considerable information concerning its church life, its leaders, its house of worship, and its spiritual aspirations.

Because of differences in European background, in doctrinal convictions, and in culture patterns, the Mennonites have through the years fallen victim to many schisms. The 1952 Mennonite Yearbook and Directory listed nineteen branches of Mennonites with total memberships in the United States of 150,673. Of these nineteen groups, however, only five are today represented in Nebraska. Of the total membership, only about 2.5 per cent live in this state. The five branches together with the number of congregations in each, and their total memberships are given below. To these must be added one independent church in Omaha affiliated with none of the regular denominations. They are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Congregations</th>
<th>Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Conference Mennonite Church</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1,723</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Old&quot; Mennonite Church</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1,409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mennonite Brethren Church</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelical Menn. Brethren Church</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Missionary Church</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Mennonite Church (Omaha)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3,905</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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2 The figures given are those obtained from questionnaires sent to each Mennonite church in Nebraska by the writer.

3 Strictly speaking this is not a denominational group; rather it is a fellowship of Mennonites from various groups serving the interim needs of students and faculty of the Grace Bible Institute. The group has no official membership as individuals maintain memberships in their home churches.
As the table above indicates, the largest body of Mennonites in Nebraska is the General Conference Mennonite Church with a total of six churches and a membership of 1,723. Most of the members have come either from Russia or Prussia, though some have come from the eastern states in smaller numbers. Of the six churches, two are primarily of Russian origin, the churches in Henderson and in Madrid; two are of Prussian origin, the two churches of Beatrice; and two have drawn chiefly from eastern states, the churches of Aurora and Wisner. (See map, page 110.)

The General Conference Mennonite Churches, in many ways, may be numbered among the more aggressive and progressive, and certainly among the more prosperous of Mennonite communities.

Bethesda Mennonite Church, Henderson

By far the greater majority of Mennonites of the Henderson community have descended from the Russian Mennonites who migrated to America in the years following 1874. They came, it will be recalled, as a result of the investigations of the "Committee of Twelve."

A group of some 116 families left Hochstadt, South Russia, on July 22; of these thirty-five families arrived in the York and Hamilton County area on October 14, 1874. 1 After extensive preparations and a long journey by train, the group reached Hamburg on July 29. Embarking at that port on Sunday, August 16, they made the crossing to New York in eighteen days,

1 Smith, Russian Mennonites, pp. 99, 100.
arriving there on September 2. It was a rather eventful trip as
a fire broke out during the night of August 22 nearly bringing
disaster to the ship; five days later a fireman fell overboard
for some undetermined reason, never to be recovered. In two
days the group was ready to leave New York, traveling by train
and arriving in Lincoln, Nebraska, at 11 a.m., September 8.  

The group was first housed in the large immigrant house
then under construction on the present fair grounds in Lincoln.
Provision for the group was undertaken by the Burlington and
Missouri Railroad Company, which through its land agents made
every effort to sell its lands to the immigrants. After five or
six weeks a large portion of the group purchased lands in Kansas
and South Dakota, while thirty-five families, consisting of 207
individuals, decided to acquire several sections of land in
western York and eastern Hamilton Counties. Cost of the land was
$3.50 per acre cash or $6 on easy payments.  

While in Lincoln every effort was made to acquire the
necessary equipment with which to begin farming. For example,
several advertisements were carried in the Daily State Journal for
"horses, work oxen, and milch cows."

The purchase of land presented some problems. Since
every other section had already been occupied by homesteaders, the

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1 J. J. Friesen, "Historical Sketch of the Bethesda
Church," an unpublished manuscript read at the cornerstone-laying
ceremony of the Bethesda Church addition, April 24, 1931.

2 Ibid.

3 Daily State Journal, September 23, 1874.
acquiring of contiguous land areas was a real difficulty. Many of the homesteaders had returned east for the winter, and those who remained were regarded with some suspicion. Care was therefore taken that all lands should be interconnected so that one might go from one farm to another without encroaching upon "foreign" soil.¹

As soon as the area of settlement had been determined, a "rough stone immigrant house" was constructed by the Burlington and Missouri Railroad Company, one mile east of the present site of Henderson.² Those young men who had purchased horses, harness, wagons, cows, stoves, and chairs in Lincoln now started on the sixty mile journey overland to their new homes, driving their cattle before them. The rest of the immigrants took the train from Lincoln to Sutton and arrived at the immigrant house on October 14, 1874. These were met at the Sutton railway station by the wagons of those who had preceded them.³

Several problems at once presented themselves. The first and perhaps the most pressing problem was the construction of homes for the individual families. These were built of sod, with walls two and a half feet thick and with a superstructure of poles covered with long basin grass. In nearly all of the early homes the house and the barn were connected and under one roof.

² Ibid. The building is also reported as being constructed of lumber, 24 by 80 feet in size, in the Yearbook of the General Conference of the Mennonite Church of North America, 1936.
³ Friesen, loc. cit.
Progress was relatively rapid, and all of the families, who so desired, were able to get into their new homes before the winter set in. A few chose to remain until spring in the homes of absent homesteaders.¹

A second problem was that of water. Only one well had been dug near the immigrant house. It was ninety feet deep. Water was drawn by letting down a bucket by rope and then winding it up by a windlass. To draw sufficient water for the use of both man and animals was an all-day undertaking. After homes had been built on several sections of land, the problem was even more acute so that several families made arrangements to get their supply from neighboring homesteaders. The problem was not solved until the following spring when the Burlington and Missouri Railroad Company sent a man with team and wagon and a well-boring rig to drill a well on the yard of each family to which land had been sold.²

The third problem was the threat of prairie fires. As soon as a homesite was selected, an area some distance from the house and completely surrounding the house was plowed. As more and more of the sod was broken for agricultural purposes, the danger of fire was greatly reduced. As a result of these precautions, no serious losses from such fires were experienced.³

Leaders of the first group to arrive were Benjamin

¹ Ibid. ² Ibid. ³ Statement by J. J. Friese, personal interview, January, 1953.
Ratzlaff and Heinrich Epp. The former was well along in years and died on October 30, 1874, a few weeks after arrival at the immigrant house. The group was joined the next year by several other families, the leaders of which were Isaac Peters and Gerhard Epp. It was apparently under the leadership of Elder Isaac Peters during 1875 that the group first attained some semblance of organization, for it was on May 16 of that year that the first baptismal service was conducted.¹

During the years following, a large number of ministers were ordained and elders chosen. The list between 1875 and 1900 includes Cornelius Wall, Johann Kliewer, Peter J. Friesen, Cornelius Regier, Jacob Friesen, Peter Pankratz, Dietrich Peters, and H. H. Epp. The necessity for frequent ordinations arose in part as a result of a number of schisms among the membership. As early as 1877 fifteen members with a Mennonite Brethren denomination background organized separately.² In 1882 another group led by Isaac Peters, Heinrich Epp, and Cornelius Wall separated themselves and organized a new group, the Ebenezer Church.³

Very early in the history of the Henderson settlement, efforts were made to provide education for the young people. The first Sunday school met in District 31 of section 8, Henderson township. It had four teachers and sixty pupils. In 1893 a

¹ *Bethesda Church Year Book, 1952*, p. 9.
³ Now known as the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren denomination.
separate Sunday School was organized in the Bethesda Church with sessions on Sunday afternoon. The first secondary school was built, and it began operation in 1903-1904. (See illustration, page 31) The first teachers were Christian Hege and J. J. Friesen. This school continued in uninterrupted operation until 1943 during which time the following teachers taught one or more years: F. G. Pankratz, J. S. Regier, C. Hege, H. D. Epp, Albert Dahike, A. W. Friesen, Johann Siemens, G. J. Toews, J. R. Barkman, Cornelius Wall, Ted Schmidt, John R. Dueck, and A. H. Schultz. The school was financed by the local churches of Henderson as well as by a small tuition fee, but it could not maintain itself against the better facilities of the local high school. An effort to revive the school as a Bible school was made in August, 1951. The plan was to offer to eighth grade graduates a one-year course of instruction in Bible, church history, and related subjects. The attempt lasted but one year, for the school was not resumed in the fall of 1952 for lack of students.

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1 Bethesda Church Year Book, 1952, p. 10.
2 J. J. Friesen, "History and Development of Education in Henderson," unpublished manuscript in his possession.
3 Bethesda Church Year Book, 1952, p. 11.
4 Ibid., p. 19.
The need for a house of worship was felt early in the history of the community. For a number of years homes were used as meeting places, particularly the house and barn of Johann Epp. The increase in size of the settlement, however, soon made meetings in homes too crowded. As a result the first church building was erected during the summer of 1860 at a site three-fourths of a mile west and two miles north of Henderson. It served until larger quarters became necessary in 1906.¹

The new church was built in the town of Henderson. On July 31, 1906, the corner stone was laid, and on December 16 it was dedicated.² As the church continued to grow, still more room was needed. Consequently, on March 16, 1931, work was begun to enlarge the church and to build a basement under it. The cornerstone for the addition was laid on the first of May, but on August 28, 1931, just as the carpentry work had been finished and the painters had been at work one day, the building was suddenly destroyed by fire.³ The group at once planned a new structure and by September 24 of the same year laid the cornerstone for the third church, one which seated about 1,200 people. It was dedicated March 6, 1932, and is the building as it stands today.⁴ Nothing it seems could dampen the ardor or shake the determination of these hearty settlers. (See illustration, page 31.)

Progress in other areas also were made. In the year 1875 a post office was established in a sod house under the direction

¹ Ibid., p. 9. ² Ibid., p. 11. ³ Ibid., p. 13. ⁴ Ibid.
of a non-Mennonite postmaster, George Gibbs, and mail delivery
was made twice a week.¹

Other new and untried solutions had to be found to meet
the unique situations of life on the prairie. As one example, the
method of heating the home by use of the grass-burner may be
cited. It consisted of an enclosed firebox and had a chimney as
a vent. The furnace was built of brick or stone and varied in
size. The average was about five feet long, six feet high and
two and a half feet wide. If bricks were used, about six hundred
were sufficient. As nature freely and generously furnished the
prairie grass, fuel was inexpensive.² Contrary to what might
appear to be the case, it was not necessary constantly to be
feeding in the grass. Ten to twelve pounds were pitched in during
a twenty minute period, heating up the stone or bricks, which
retained the heat and kept the room warm for several hours.³
This was repeated two or three times a day. The occasional
firing sufficed both for cooking and for bodily comfort. Many a
pioneer, in other areas of Nebraska, who did not have the good
fortune of homesteading lands with timber, adopted the Mennonite
grass-burner.⁴

¹ Statement by J. J. Friesen, personal interview, January,
1953. Also documented by a photograph showing the post office, in
the possession of J. J. Friesen.

² J. D. Butler, "The Mennonite Stove," Mennonite Life,
October, 1949, p. 16.

³ Daily State Journal, December 1, 1874.

⁴ Butler, loc. cit. p. 16.
In later years another need became the "mother of invention." The years of depression and drouth during the thirties caused farmers to seek new ways of eeking out an existence from the soil. In 1939 John J. Thieszen, Daniel Thieszen, and Abe Thieszen struck upon the idea of digging a well forty inches in diameter. At a depth of eighty-four feet they struck water, but they continued to a depth of 150 feet. A twenty-two inch casing was lowered into the hole, and the remaining area was filled with sand and gravel. With an old eight inch horizontal turbine pump they pumped, first for hours then for days at 800 gallons per minute, but they found no limit to the water supply. During the first season over three hundred farmers came to view a demonstration on irrigation sponsored by the state agricultural department on John Thieszen's farm. Soon other wells were drilled. In recent years two Mennonite firms have been kept busy drilling wells for farmers. The present cost is above $3,000 per well, but crop failures have become a thing of the past, and the original investment is soon amply repaid. Irrigated fields regularly yield sixty to seventy bushels of corn per acre. A record ten acre test plot supervised by the county one year showed a yield of 128.2 bushels of corn per acre. Unofficially John Thieszen reported a yield of 143 bushels in a similar test on his land. The result has been that farmers, who left Henderson during the years of drouth, are in recent years returning, and Henderson once more is a progressive, thriving,
booming community.\(^1\)

As the town of Henderson itself was laid out in 1887, plans were made early in 1937 for some commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of that event. The Mennonite churches were invited to cooperate with the civic activities planned. It was not long until an idea, first suggested by J. J. Friesen, gained favor, namely, to erect a marker in commemoration of the founding of the community. As a result a suitable boulder of prehistoric formation was found north of Fairbury. The stone was trucked to the site of the first immigrant house, one mile east of Henderson, and a suitable bronze plaque attached to it. The inscription reads as follows: (See illustration, page 31.)

\begin{quote}
IMMIGRANT HOUSE
ON THIS SITE GAVE FIRST SHELTER TO Mennonites
OCTOBER 11, 1874
MEMORIAL TO ALL PIONEERS
DEDICATED AUG. 19, 1937
\end{quote}

On the evening of the dedication of the marker and of the celebrations which followed, a pageant "The Coming of Our Fathers in 1874" was presented. A cast of over fifty persons performed on an outdoor stage to an audience of four to five thousand.\(^2\)

In 1949 a seventy-fifth anniversary was observed with considerably less pomp and pageantry.

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\(^1\) J. J. Friesen, "Remaking a Community," \textit{Mennonite Life}, October, 1950, pp. 10-12.

\(^2\) Year Book of the General Conference of the Mennonite Church of North America, (Berne, Indiana: Mennonite Book Concern, 1938), pp. 17, 18.
In so far as life and activity in the community is concerned, it is still bound closely with church life and activity. Services are conducted each Sunday morning and evening. Preaching is in English as are also all Sunday school classes with the exception to two classes for old men and old women, which still use the German language. The church is active in supporting various mission, relief, and good-will projects, but it has reached out relatively little to bring non-Mennonites into its membership. Several missionaries have gone from the church into foreign countries as well as to home mission fields. The present pastor is Arnold Nickel. Of the Mennonite community, estimated at approximately 2,000, 966 were listed in 1952 as being members of the Bethesda Mennonite Church. This makes it the largest Mennonite congregation in Nebraska.

First Mennonite Church, Madrid

In 1924 a number of families, in all numbering thirty-one persons including children, moved from Henderson, Nebraska, to the Madrid area. In the group were representatives of the General Conference and the Bruderthal churches of Henderson. Others, including several of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church, joined

1 Ibid., p. 47.

2 Reply of Paul Dahlenburg to questionnaire sent out by the writer.

3 F. A. Regier, "A Historical Sketch of the Founding and Twenty-five Years of the First Mennonite Church of Madrid, Nebraska, December 5, 1927 - December 1, 1952." An unpublished manuscript in the possession of F. A. Regier.
the group in subsequent years. Leaders of these groups included C. D. Friesen, John H. Huebert, Pete Huebert, Albert Dalke, John F. C. Dick, and F. A. Regier.\(^1\) The first farms were purchased from a rancher, G. W. Holdridge, president of the Burlington Ranch.\(^2\) Most of the settlers took lands north and east of the town of Madrid, some settling down not far from the town of Paxton.

It was during a visit of Elder J. F. Epp from Henderson while the group was meeting on September 5, 1927, in the home of P. G. Jansen that a preliminary organization was effected. It was agreed to construct a church on a piece of land which F. A. Regier offered to donate, seven miles north of town. The church was to be twenty-eight feet by forty-eight feet. Since the number of charter members was only twenty-eight and these were of different Mennonite branches, the organization provided that if any one of the groups should ever seek to establish its own meeting house, some satisfactory arrangement would be worked out to buy out the interests of the withdrawing group. Because of differing convictions, the matter of baptism and communion was also left to each group to decide as it saw fit.\(^3\)

As plans for the building of the church were nearing completion, it was reported that the Methodist church in Madrid, a frame building seating about one hundred persons, was being offered for sale. (See illustration, page 21.) After some

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\(^1\) Reply of Paul Dahmenburg.
\(^2\) Ibid.
\(^3\) Ibid.
deliberation it was decided to purchase the church for $1,750 and to leave it in town. The deal was closed on January 16, 1928, and the minutes of the January 26, 1926, church business meeting reported that $1,050 had been collected for the initial payment. At this meeting also it was decided to draw up a constitution so that the church might be duly incorporated. All minutes and documents were in the German language. ¹

The first minister, Herbert Peters, was engaged on March 10, 1929, but he remained for less than a year. A crisis arose in the effort to find a successor with the result that members of the Bruderthal group decided to withdraw. They were paid their share of the interests in the church, and eventually most of them united with the Paxton Mennonite Brethren Church. John Bartel of Hillsboro, Kansas, was now called into the ministry, October 6, 1929. ²

In the years following, the name of the church was changed to "The First Mennonite Church of Madrid" (1930); it joined the Northern District in 1931; and it united with the General Conference Mennonite Church in 1933. ³ The years of depression and drouth made the financial position of the church very precarious. Aid, however, from several sources enabled the group to continue. ⁴ In later years the following ministers served the congregation: John Warkentin and Nick Jansen, 1934-37; J. F. Sawatsky, 1938-43; Alvin Fast, 1944; John Unruh, 1945-47;

¹ Ibid. ² Ibid.
³ Ibid. ⁴ Ibid.
J. P. Glanzer, 1918-50; and Paul Dahlenburg, 1951 to the present.\(^1\)

In the annual meeting of the church on December 26, 1933, it was decided to keep future minutes of the church in English, and to translate the Constitution into the English language.\(^2\) It was not until 1937, however, that German services were discontinued.\(^3\) From 1931* to 1937 two ministers were engaged in order that one might speak in the English on one Sunday and the other speak in German on the alternate Sunday.\(^4\)

The financing of the church originally was carried on by a system of dues. At the business meeting of December 26, 1928, it was decided to assess each member $2 a year. This was revised in December 18, 1929, to be $2 per member per year plus $.50 per eighty acres of land owned and $.50 per eighty acres of land rented. On November 21, 1939, assessments were discontinued and the freewill offering plan substituted.\(^5\)

An estimate by the present pastor of the church indicated that over 90 per cent of the members of this church were engaged in agricultural occupations. Perhaps less than 10 per cent were not originally of Mennonite parentage. While the church was once more prosperous than it is at present, particularly during the years just previous to the drought and depression, its rolls today indicate a baptized membership of thirty-five in a Mennonite

\(^1\) Regier, loc. cit.
\(^2\) Reply of Paul Dahlenburg.
\(^3\) Regier, loc. cit.
\(^4\) Ibid.
\(^5\) Ibid.
community of approximately fifty-five individuals.¹

First Mennonite Church, Beatrice

The first group of 116 settlers to arrive in the Beatrice area came, as indicated in the previous chapter, from the Heubuden and Elbing-Ellewald Churches of Prussia in 1376. Concerning this group Peter Jansen wrote as follows:

This was the beginning of the large and very prosperous colony of Prussian Mennonites in Gage County, Nebraska. These were probably the best immigrants that ever came to the West in a large body. Most of them were well-to-do; some had large fortunes; they were well-dressed and of good manners, quite contrary to the usual class of immigrants then coming to this country by the thousands.²

During the following year a second group of thirty-four families arrived. They also were from Prussia. Elder Gerhard Penner of the Heubuden Church was joined by a relatively small group of relatives and friends, and these arrived in Beatrice on June 19, 1377. Although already sick and feeble when he arrived, Elder Penner was instrumental in calling together the Mennonites of the community for a communion service and in organizing a Mennonite Church.³ This organizational meeting took place on November 12, 1377,¹ with ninety-eight members present.⁴ Elder

¹ Ibd.
² Jansen, Memoirs, p. 47.
³ Andreas, loc. cit., p. 22.
⁴ Anniversary Booklet, First Mennonite Church, Beatrice, 1876-1951, p. c.
⁵ Andreas, loc. cit.
Fenner passed away on February 20, 1878, again leaving the group without an elder.¹

In 1879 a third group of settlers numbering sixty-five families arrived. They too settled in the Beatrice area, filling in vacant lands available and expanding the limits of the colony in a north-westerly direction.²

The last sizeable group of immigrants to join those already in Beatrice was a group coming from Chiva, Siberia, in September 1881. They had fled to that country from southern Russia under the leadership of Klaas Epp to escape military service. Peter Jansen, who had helped many an earlier group get settled, also had a hand in securing passage for these. According to the Omaha World Herald, he had contracted to bring them over at an average cost of $1.2 per person.³ The leaders of this particular group were Johann Jantzen and Johannes K. Fenner. The latter was known primarily for his teaching career. In a short time he organized a school in his home, and through the years enjoyed the affectionate name of "Onkel Lehrer Penner."⁴

During the first few years the group held its Sunday worship services in private homes; later they assembled in the county courthouse with Heinrich Zimmerman and Andreas Penner in charge. For special occasions, the service of Elder Isaac Peters

¹ Anniversary Booklet, Beatrice, p. 5.
² Andreas, loc. cit., p. 22.
³ Omaha World Herald, May 6, 1881.
⁴ Andreas, loc. cit., p. 23.
of Henderson and of Elder Leonhard Suderman of Whitewater, Kansas, were secured.¹

The need of a church building, however, became increasingly apparent; a planning committee was therefore appointed on March 9, 1879.² As a result a frame building with a shingled roof, the main part of which was forty by sixty-eight feet and seating about three hundred persons, was erected during that summer at a location three and one-half miles northwest of Beatrice and at a cost of $3,200.³ Because of a defective flu, however, the church caught fire on December 21 of the same year and burned to the ground.⁴ Very little furniture was saved. In February of the following year it was decided to rebuild the church with a tin roof. It was dedicated on May 23, 1880.⁵ Because of the wide extent of the area settled and the difficulty of transportation by team and wagon, services continued to be held in more than one location. With the construction of a second meeting house in the town of Beatrice in 1902, the number of places were gradually reduced to two. The city church eventually became a separate organization, known as the Beatrice Mennonite Church.⁶

The next concern, after the construction of the first

¹ Ibd.
² Anniversary Booklet, Beatrice, p. 6.
³ Ibd. ⁴ Andreas, loc. cit., p. 22.
⁵ Anniversary Booklet, Beatrice, p. 7.
⁶ Andreas, loc. cit., p. 23.
meeting house, was the securing of leadership for the church. After Gerhard Penner died in 1878, the church on January 27, 1879, elected Gerhard Penner, Jr. and Peter Reimer to the ministry. On November 14, 1880, the former was ordained an elder of the church by visiting Elder Isaac Peters. The new elder served the church forty years until his death in 1921. Subsequent elders include Franz Albrecht, 1920-1940, and Walter H. Dyck, 1940-1946.

In the field of education too progress was being made. The elementary school, begun under the leadership of Johannes K. Penner in 1854, was gradually expanded from a one-room school in his own home to a full-fledged parochial school with some seventy pupils in attendance by 1897. In 1905 it came to be known as the Beatrice Preparatory School, offering some work beyond the eighth grade, while in 1921 it received the name Beatrice Bible Academy. As such two years of study in general education and Bible, the equivalent of one year's high school, were arranged. By 1950 attendance had decreased to the point where only a one-year course was offered. At present it has passed out of existence completely.

The use of the German language has persisted among the

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1 According to Mennonite tradition a minister may preach from the pulpit and visit his parishioners, but only an elder may perform any of the ceremonial rites of the church.

2 Andreas, loc. cit., p. 22.

3 Anniversary booklet, Beatrice, p. 12.

4 Reply of J. P. Reimer to questionnaire sent out by the writer.
Beatrice Mennonites in a greater measure than elsewhere in the state. It is still widely spoken in homes though in church its use is limited to the old men and old women's Sunday School classes.¹

As the community continued to grow, the house of worship after many years again became too small. The planning for a new church began as early as 1949, but actual construction was not undertaken until 1950 and 1951. On February 26, 1950, a ground breaking service was held on the site of the proposed entrance to the new church, several rods east of the old building. The cornerstone was laid on April 30, 1950, and in it were placed "a Bible, Mennonite Hymnary, Gesangbuch Mit Noten, Articles of Faith, list of members including unbaptised children, 1949-1950 Annual Report, Sunday morning bulletin, 1950 church directory, picture of the old church, church constitution, and a copy each of local papers."² The last service in the old church was conducted on February 4, 1951, after which service the group, in formal procession, entered the basement of the new church. Here services were conducted until the main auditorium would be finished. It required only a few more weeks, however, for on Easter Sunday, March 25, 1951, amid an impressive ceremony, the new church was formally opened and dedicated by all day services. As a result of the united effort put forward, the most modern and impressive Mennonite Church in Nebraska came into existence. (See illustration page 145.) It is a stone building having a sanctuary eighty-four

¹ Ibid. ² Anniversary Booklet, Beatrice, p.21.
feet long and thirty-six feet wide. The architecture is Gothic.¹

The Beatrice community has always been energetic and enterprising. While most of the members of the church are farmers, quite a number have taken to other gainful occupations. Among early business ventures may be mentioned the thriving lumber business of J. G. Wiebe, the dairy of 125 cows of Gerhard Penner, the Beatrice Cheese factory of Johannes Penner, his brick factory and his efforts to raise peanuts, grapes and sugar beets, and the silk worm industry of Abraham Thiessen.²

Since the community has been relatively prosperous, there has not been a great turn-over in membership. Some moved away in the earlier years to Paso Robles, California, and Aberdeen, Idaho.³ The group has not reached out very extensively to bring non-Mennonites into its ranks, and the present pastor estimates that not over three per cent of the membership was of non-Mennonite ancestry.⁴ The entire Mennonite community, including members of the Beatrice Mennonite Church, numbers about 750 individuals. The pastor since 1946 has been Jacob Friesen, at present on leave of absence to engage in relief work in Europe, while the interim pastor is A. W. Friesen, formerly of Henderson. The present membership of the group is 345.⁵

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¹ Ibid.


³ Andreas, loc. cit., p. 23.

⁴ Reply of C. P. Reimer to questionnaire.

⁵ Ibid.
Beatrice Mennonite Church

The building of the separate church on Seventh and Bell Streets in the city of Beatrice has already been mentioned above. Though that building was completed in 1902, the Mennonites of the community continued to consider themselves one congregation until 1926. In that year, as a result of a growing conviction that the particular needs of the city group could be better served if they were separately organized, the group, with the blessing of the country church, organized the Beatrice Mennonite Church. Present were seventy-five charter members.¹

During the first year H. T. Reimer and Jacob Wiebe alternated in conducting Sunday services, one speaking in English, the other in German. The first permanent pastor, engaged the following year, was M. M. Horsch, who served the group for thirteen years, 1927-1940. He was succeeded by Reynold Weinbrenner, 1940-43, H. Albert Claassen, 1943-47, Elbert Koonts, 1947-58, and Elmer R. Friesen, 1958 to the present.² The ministry has been salaried since 1927.³

The building in which the congregation meets is constructed of wood and seats approximately two hundred persons. (See illustration, page 45.) Three services are conducted each week, two on Sundays and a mid-week prayer service. The church

¹ Anniversary Booklet, First Mennonite Church, Beatrice, p. 8, 9.
² Andreas, loc. cit., p. 23.
³ Reply of Leo Miller to questionnaire sent out by the writer.
has not sent out any missionaries, though many of the young people have attended institutions of higher learning. The pastor estimates that fourteen of the membership are college graduates,¹ a proportion perhaps as high as that of any Mennonite group in Nebraska. The congregation has remained conservatively Mennonite, with more than 90 per cent of the present membership coming from an original Mennonite ancestry. The occupational trend has in recent years been away from rural to city life. About 55 per cent are still engaged in farming, 25 per cent in business, 10 per cent have entered upon some profession, while about 10 per cent are engaged in a variety of other occupations. The church is a member of the Western District of the General Conference Mennonite Church. Its present membership stands at 171, and there are fifty-six unbaptized children belonging to member families. Interim pastor, while the regular pastor Elmer R. Friesen is on leave of absence to continue his studies in the Mennonite Biblical Seminary of Chicago, is Leo L. Miller.²

Pleasant View Mennonite Church, Aurora

Some years after the great Russian migration into the York and Hamilton County area had spent its force, a group of Mennonites, who earlier had come from Germany and had lived in Central Illinois, moved to lands in Hamilton County just west of the Russian Mennonite settlement. They had no direct previous knowledge of either the Russian or Prussian Mennonites. Their

nearest town was Aurora. Prominent names among the early settlers include Christian Rediger, Joe Mower, Jacob Donner, Andrew Oesch, Christian Hochstetler, John Smucker, Dan Krabiel, John Schwartzentruber, John Ernst, George Ernst, Chris Gimpel, Jake Yordy, and Chris Gingerich. These came in 1886 and that year Christian Rediger organized them into a church. Shortly thereafter, a number of families moved in from Milford and these ultimately joined the group already organized.

In 1892 the members of the church felt the need for a church organization and took preliminary steps to form such a legal body. The official name adopted at the time was "The German Mennonite Church," but in subsequent years the name was changed to Pleasant View Mennonite Church. The congregation at once made plans for the construction of a church building. The site chosen was a one square acre plot donated by Jacob Donner from his eighty acre timber claim. On the same plot once had stood a sod building known as "Granger Hall," where early pioneers met to share their mutual problems. The church building, which seated about two hundred, was erected in 1893, and its location was three and one-half miles west and three miles south of Aurora. (See

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1 Reply of Herbert Roszhart to questionnaire sent out by the writer.

2 Fiftieth Anniversary, Pleasant View Mennonite Church Aurora, Nebraska, November, 1943.

3 Fiftieth Anniversary, Aurora.

4 Ibid.

5 Reply of Herbert Roszhart to questionnaire.
The Pleasant View Mennonite Church was one of the twelve charter churches of the Central Conference of Mennonites. When the latter body voted to join the General Conference Mennonite Church, the church in Aurora fell in line, producing the peculiar situation that while the Henderson church, though east of Aurora joined the northern district, the Aurora group though west, joined the eastern Central District, and to this day sends its delegates to conferences of that district. Thus in both loyalty and original descent it differs from other General Conference churches of the state.

Ministers who served the church between the years 1856 and 1893 include D. J. Augsburger, Peter Stuckey and Christian Rediger. Those who have served the congregation since 1893 include the following: Andres Oesch, 1893-1912; Jacob Donner, 1902-1907; Christian Rediger, 1908-1923; George Donner, 1910-1921; Eugene Augsburger, 1923-1939; Edwin Goossen, 1940-1942; Herbert Roszhart, 1943 to the present. The ministry has been salaried since 1923.

Services are conducted three times a week: Sunday forenoon, Sunday evening, and a Wednesday night prayer service. The use of the German language in the preaching services was discontinued about 1923. The group today is represented by one

1 Fiftieth Anniversary, Aurora.
2 Ibid.
3 Reply of Herbert Roszhart to questionnaire.
missionary working under the "Go Ye" Mission in the Ozarks.  

Members of this Mennonite community are predominantly farmers with only about 10 per cent engaged in business and perhaps another 10 per cent in other forms of livelihood. The pastor himself owns and operates a Christian Book Store in the heart of Aurora. Of the early settlers only Mrs. John Troyer remains alive today. The church has reached out considerably to bring into its membership non-Mennonites of the community. It is estimated that one-third of the membership was originally not of Mennonite descent. The Mennonite community today numbers approximately two hundred, while the present church membership stands at 172.  

Salem Mennonite Church, Wisner  

A final General Conference Mennonite Church which has no direct tie with either the Russian or Prussian Mennonites is the church at Wisner. The first Mennonite settler in the Wisner area was Jacob Risser, who came from Ohio in 1851 and purchased an extensive tract of land from earlier settlers southwest of the town of Wisner. Since farm labor was difficult to hire in the West, he induced young men from a number of Ohio and Iowa communities to work for him during the busy farming seasons. Some of these young men returned to their homes in the east during subsequent years, were married, and settled as neighbors to the Risser farm. Land could be purchased at prices ranging from $3.50 to $50 per acre. Those who made their residence  

1 Ibid.  
2 Ibid.
permanently in the Wisner area included Peter Boehr, Jacob Showalter, and Henry Leisy. All were of German descent.¹

As a few other families joined these early settlers, a church was organized in 1892, and the members at once set to work to build themselves a house of worship. The church was erected upon a small plot of land donated by Jacob Risser four and one-half miles south and two miles west of Wisner. It is a small frame building, seating approximately seventy-five persons. (See illustration, page 145.) Ministers who have served the congregation include Dan J. Erando, Sam Prieheim, Gerhard Toews, and J. D. Epp. Services until 1920 were in German. During the middle twenties a church attendance of seventy-five to one hundred was not uncommon, though the years of drouth caused many to move back to the east or on to the west coast. The present membership stands at eleven, and is essentially composed of three families. A Sunday School meets each Sunday, but church services are conducted only on special occasions.

Many years ago a regular German school was conducted each summer. The purpose was to keep alive the traditions and the heritage of the past. No English schools were attempted. Two members of the congregation today are college graduates. Present members of the congregation are all engaged in agriculture.²

¹ Statements of August Leisy, personal interview, December, 1952.
² Reply of August Leisy to questionnaire sent out by the writer.
The small congregations of Wisner, just described, and of Madrid are the only General Conference Mennonite churches which are not located in the southeastern quadrant of Nebraska. The Russian and Prussian Mennonites generally preferred to settle in the better farming areas of the southeast. These were joined in their choice of farm lands by settlers of another Mennonite group, those of the "Old" Mennonite denomination, with which the following chapter is concerned.
CHAPTER IV

"OLD" Mennonite Churches

There are nine "Old" Mennonite churches in Nebraska today: three in Milford and one each in Chappell, Shickley, Wood River, Broken Bow, Beemer, and Roseland. Of the nine churches only one, the Roseland Church, is not of Amish background. Of the remaining eight Amish churches, all are an outgrowth of the East Fairview Church in Milford except the church in Beemer, whose members came directly from other states. The Broken Bow congregation might be considered a granddaughter colony of Milford, its original group having moved there by way of the Shickley settlement.

Graphically, the relationship may be represented as follows:

- West Fairview (1873, organized 1905)
- Milford (1873, organized 1925)
- East Fairview (1873)
- Chappell (1886)
- Shickley (1890) - Broken Bow (1922)
- Wood River (1904)
- Beemer (1894)

Non-Amish - Roseland (1880)

The name which the denomination applies to itself is always simply "The Mennonite Church," though, to distinguish it from the many other Mennonite bodies, it has generally been referred to by the prefix "Old." In Nebraska the nine churches

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all belong to the Iowa-Nebraska Conference, a regional designation adopted in 1926 as a result of a merger between the Amish and other American Mennonites of the mid-western area. Strictly speaking, therefore, there are no longer any Amish Mennonites in Nebraska, and those who once bore that name not only have given up the distinction in name, but have also discontinued many of the unique customs which the Amish once held.

East Fairview Mennonite Church, Milford

The first group of Mennonites ever to enter the state of Nebraska to make it their home consisted of three families, who on April 3, 1873, settled a few miles west of the present town of Milford. They came from Walnut Creek, Ohio, and arrived a little over a year before the Russian Mennonites. A fourth family joined the group in 1874. Their forefathers migrated from Germany to Pennsylvania several generations before and later settled in Ohio. The news of cheap lands and of homesteads still available in reportedly good farming areas of Nebraska led them to move westward. The government had publicized the availability of these lands to the Ohio communities as early as 1872.

Others from Ohio, Illinois, and Iowa joined this first group in the years 1875 to 1878, some of them purchasing land "sight unseen." Among the leaders of these early migrations were F. F. Hershberger, Joseph Gascho, Jacob Stauffer, Joseph Schlegel, and

1 Reply of Ammon Miller to questionnaire sent out by the writer.
2 Ibid.
J. M. T. Miller, Joseph Rediger, and John Stauffer.¹

In 1875 the group organized the first Sunday School and in the same year the first communion service was observed. Eleven members were present. A more formal organization followed in 1873 with sixty charter members.² From that early beginning the community, including the two branch churches of West Fairview and Milford, has grown until today it includes over nine hundred Mennonites.³

The first house of worship was erected in 1878 at a cost of $1,368. In order to accommodate the increases in attendance, however, additional wings had to be added in 1883 and again in 1890. By 1906 even the additions were too small and the building was torn down and replaced with a larger frame structure costing over $3,600. This last building was forty-six feet wide and seventy feet long.⁴

After forty more years even this building was too small. As a result a new and still larger church building of brick was erected in 1949 by members of the congregation. (See illustration, page 57.) The building is located three miles west and one mile south of Milford and seats approximately six hundred persons. Four services are at present conducted each week: A Sunday School, a

¹ Ibid.
² Statements of L. O. Schlegel, personal interview, October, 1952.
³ Reply of Ammon Miller to questionnaire.
⁴ Ibid.
East Fairview Mennonite Church, Milford

West Fairview Mennonite Church, Beaver Crossing

Milford Amish Mennonite Church, Milford
morning preaching service, Sunday evening young people's meeting, and a mid-week prayer service.¹

Since the group had been accustomed to the American public school system while in the eastern states, no serious effort was ever made to establish elementary schools. In recent years, however, there has been considerable agitation for the opening of a high school or academy, and at present the prospects for such a school, with the support of other Nebraska churches, are good. Together with other congregations in the state the group now supports an academy in Iowa and the colleges in Hesston, Kansas, and Goshen, Indiana.²

The present ministers of the East Fairview Church are Ammon M. Miller and Oliver Roth. To this day the minister receives no remuneration for his services, but, like others of the congregation, he engages in farming for his own support and for the maintenance of his family. Until 1916 the German language was used in preaching services, but after that date English increasingly came into use.

The group has two missionaries in Colorado, one in Kansas, and very recently two in Japan.³

The community is predominantly agricultural, engaging both in farming and in the raising of livestock. The membership at present stands at 455.⁴

¹ Tbid. ² Tbid. ³ Tbid. ⁴ Tbid.
West Fairview Mennonite Church, Beaver Crossing

As the community of Mennonites around Milford grew and as available farm sites decreased, additional land was found to be available several miles farther west towards Beaver Crossing. Both new settlers and those of the second generation, who wished to start farming on their own, quickly acquired this land.

With the increased extent of the settlement it became ever more difficult for the whole group to assemble together in one house of worship. Both distance and the lack of space in the meeting place contributed towards a desire for a separate church building farther west. It was not easy, after working until late on Saturday, to remove the hayrack from the wagon chassis each week and to install a box in its place for the Sunday journey of the family. Consequently, in 1905, the group in the west banded itself together and organized the West Fairview Church. The venture had the complete blessing of the mother church. Members went to work during that year and, with the help of interested individuals of the East Fairview Church, constructed a frame building, which with a small gallery seated approximately four hundred persons. The location selected was one-half mile south and four miles east of Beaver Crossing, or seven miles west of Milford. (See illustration, page 57.)

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1 Statements of Ammon Miller, personal interview, January, 1953.

2 Reply of William R. Disher to questionnaire sent out by the writer.

3 Ibid.
The congregation prospered, and, until the years of drouth in the thirties, the building was often filled. During these years of hardship the membership declined, some returning east, while others went to the west coast. The church never regained its former vitality.

Ministers who served the church included Joe Whitaker, John Steckly, C. C. Steckly, Ephraim Martin, John Whitaker, Fred Gingerich, Ezra Roth, John R. Troyer, L. Burkey, and William R. Eicher, the present minister. As in the other churches of this branch of the Mennonites, the pastor is not salaried. Two services a week are regularly conducted. The German language is no longer used.

A large majority of the members of this church are farmers, and nearly all are of Mennonite stock. The present membership stands at 135.

Milford Amish Mennonite Church, Milford

As a result of differences, eighty-one members of the East Fairview Church withdrew their membership in July, 1925, and organized a new church in the town of Milford. It came to be known as the Milford Amish Mennonite Church. Though differences between the churches were shortly healed, the Milford group continued its independent existence, and did not officially drop the word "Amish" from its name even after the merger which formed the Iowa-Nebraska Conference.

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1 Ibid. 2 Ibid.
At once the new group went to work to erect its own house of worship. (See illustration, page 57.) It was a frame building with full basement, having a seating capacity of approximately 250. Ministers who have served the church include L. O. Schlegel, 1925 to the present; W. A. Eicher, 1928 to the present; and William Schlegel, 1925-1949.1

The congregation meets twice a week, Sunday mornings and Sunday evenings. Services never were conducted in the German language in this church. Together with the other "Old" Mennonite churches of the state, it is today actively sponsoring the movement to establish a denominational high school or academy in Milford, and a committee is at present at work on such plans. The group also supports the Old People's Home in Geneva and the general mission and relief programs of the church.

Most of the people of the community are engaged in agricultural pursuits even though the church is in town. An estimate as to the type of work engaged in by those who are heads of families gives the following break-down: farming, twenty; business, six; professional workers, two; all others, primarily common labor, ten. The present leadership of the group falls upon L. O. Schlegel, who is an ordained bishop. The present membership is 183.3

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1 Reply of L. O. Schlegel to questionnaire sent out by the writer.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
As the Milford community grew and farmland became scarce, nine families composed of fifty-three individuals set out in April, 1836, for western Nebraska, each homesteading 160 acres east of the present town of Chappell. Leaders of this group were Abraham Stutzman, Adam Stutzman, and Jake Stutzman. The land acquired was relatively level and productive, but it was subject to periodic crop failures since the only source of moisture is from the rather infrequent rain. Although all the early settlers were engaged in farming, increasingly members of the group moved to town to establish small businesses or to engage in manual labor there.

Immediately upon settling in the new community, an effort was made to foster the religious life of the group. Twelve charter members organized a local church, and services were held in an informal way. In May, 1890, Nicholas C. Roth was chosen minister. He moved his family to Chappell from Milford in 1892. Three other families travelled with him. The enlarged congregation now constructed a frame building, seating approximately fifty persons, four miles east and two and one-half miles north of Chappell. The church was used until 1917 when, because of crowded conditions, a new frame structure was erected. This building, seating about one hundred, is the present place of

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1 Reply of Mrs. Frank Stutzman to questionnaire sent out by the writer.
Some of the ministers who have served the church include N. C. Roth, 1890-1908; John Ernst, 1893-1922; S. C. Yoder, June, 1910-March, 1913; John Roth, May, 1915-1916; and Fred Gingerich, January, 1917 to the present.

The turn-over of membership in this church was greater than the average. Few families remained more than ten years before they moved on. Whenever drought or crop failure made life too difficult, they left; when prospects became brighter others moved in. At present only the descendants of Adam Stutzman and Ed Roth of the pioneer settlers remain.

While the community has never been very prosperous materially, it has produced some men with high reputation in the work of the church. Dr. S. C. Yoder, who was called into the ministry and ordained while serving the church in Chappell, rose to serve for seventeen years as president of Goshen College, in Goshen, Indiana. He also served many years as president and secretary of the Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, and as an ordained elder of the church. The present minister, Fred Gingerich, has since 1911 ably served as editor of the Missionary Challenge, the official publication of the Iowa-Nebraska Conference of the Mennonite Church.

Life in the Chappell community during the week resembles that of any other small community; some are engaged in agriculture, others in business, in the professions, and as laborers. It
is estimated that not more than six per cent of the present membership is originally of non-Mennonite background. On Sundays life follows the pattern of other "Old" Mennonite communities; there are three services: Sunday School, church service, and evening young people's meeting. In 1908 services in the German language were discontinued. The present membership including children numbers eighty-eight.¹

Salem Mennonite Church, Shickley

In 1890, nine families from the East Fairview congregation at Milford moved to Fillmore County, just east of the town of Shickley. The first one to arrive was Jake Bellar. Others, who followed soon afterward, included Daniel Miller, Joseph Kuhns, Joseph Stutzman, Abner Stutzman, Henry Saltzman, Emanuel Kuhns, Daniel Troyer, and Christian Bellar.² All of these had come to Milford from Ohio, except Jake Bellar who had come directly to Milford from Germany. These settlers purchased land from previous settlers as it became available. Between the years 1895 and 1904; numerous others joined the group. These were primarily from Milford, but a few came from Chappell in Deuel County, and from Colorado. As was commonly the case in the first years of uncertainty caused by drouth and grasshopper plagues, the community experienced a considerable turn-over; the general trend, however, has been one of growth until at present the community numbers

¹ Ibid.

² Leroy E. Kennel, The Shickley Salem Mennonite Church, (1948), a pamphlet published by the church, p. 7.
about 325 Mennonites.

The church was first organized during the latter part of 1891. The first meetings had been held at the Flory schoolhouse, three miles southeast of Shickley. These meetings were irregular, but were held about every two weeks. After the organization of the church the meeting place was transferred to the Hamilton Township Hall, one mile east of the present church building.1

The original church edifice was erected in 1901, on a site two and one-half miles east and two miles south of Shickley. Chris Eichelberger was the contractor, and members of the church did the work. The frame building was finished December 3, 1901, and dedicated the following day.2 It was a one room structure, thirty-two by forty-eight feet in size. Two additions were later made increasing the floor area by over one hundred square feet, and giving it a "T" design with a seating capacity of approximately five hundred. (See illustration, page 64.) The plot on which the church was built was made available by a Dunkard preacher, Jim Flory, on the basis of a ninety-nine-year lease, according to papers on file in the office of the county judge in the Fillmore County courthouse, Geneva, Nebraska.3

Ministers who are serving the church today are F. R. Kernel (bishop), Fred Reeb, and Lee Schlegel. The first minister was R. R. Hershberger, who came from Milford about 1891. Bishops who served before 1923 include Chris Bellar, and Peter Kernel, Sr.

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1 Ibid. p. 3.  
2 Ibid. p. 8.  
3 Ibid.
From that year to 1933, Shickley had no bishop and the oversight of the church was committed to Dan Lapp, a bishop of Roseland, and Joe E. Zimmerman, a bishop in Milford. Since 1933, P. R. Kennel, son of Peter Kennel, Sr., has served the church as bishop.\(^1\) Others who have been ministers in the church include Joseph Schrock, Jacob Swartzengruber, and Ben Schlegel.\(^2\)

As in other churches of the "Old" Mennonites, the ministers are not salaried. Two services are at present conducted each week, a Sunday morning and a Sunday evening service. The language used is English exclusively, the German having been discontinued about thirty years ago. No missionaries have been sent out from the church.\(^3\)

The community is fairly compact and has well maintained its identity. Perhaps not more than three per cent of the church membership is from a non-Mennonite ancestry. The occupation is predominantly agricultural with not more than 10 per cent engaged in business or other occupations. Wheat, oats, and corn are the main crops. There is some dairying and turkey raising. A few wells have been sunk for irrigation and these are used primarily for irrigating corn during the months of July and August. One member operates a produce business in Shickley.\(^4\)

The years of greatest difficulty were the drouth period

\(^1\) Ibid. pp. 10, 11.

\(^2\) Reply of Peter R. Kennel to questionnaire sent out by the writer.

\(^3\) Ibid.

from 1893 to 1898 and a second period of drought and general depression from 1932 to 1940. The years 1934-1935 are conceded to have been the most discouraging. In the summer of 1934 winds were strong and hot, and the following winter fuel became very scarce, so that by the next year food was sent in by truck from some of the Iowa churches. During this period also many moved away to such states as Pennsylvania, Iowa, and Illinois. The last decade, however, has seen an increase so that the present communicant membership is 261.

Wood River Mennonite Church, Wood River

A settlement in the fertile Platte valley between the towns of Cairo and Wood River was made in 1904, when D. D. Stutzman and Will Danner, both from Milford, made a trip west to look for cheaper land and more elbow room. Land was then selling for $1.00 to $2.50 per acre in the Milford area or about twice that in the new settlement. During the first two years eight families bought land and moved into the Wood River area. Among the more prominent names besides those mentioned above were J. E. Janzi, Joe Stauffer, Jacob Brenneman and Frule Riley. One family, Noah Stutzman, moved his family east from Chappell, Nebraska, thereby becoming one of the first to reverse the trend of westward migration. More than a dozen other families joined the group in Wood River during the following three or four years, buying up

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1 Ibid. p. 14.
2 Reply of Peter A. Kennel to questionnaire.
much of the choice land in the area.\footnote{1}

During the first two years services were held in various homes. The custom was that all guests remained for a united fellowship dinner and for an afternoon program of song. Late in the fall of 1905, a Sunday School was organized in a borrowed Society of Friends church, four miles east of the present church building. Gatherings continued in this church for the next three years. In the fall of 1908 a frame building was constructed at the present location of the church, five miles north and one west of Wood River, or eight miles south and one west of Cairo. (See illustration, page 64.) Dan Boshart served as head carpenter while most of the men of the congregation helped in one way or another to complete the building which seated approximately two hundred persons. The church was dedicated on February 11, 1909. The dedicatory sermon was preached by Levi Miller from Missouri.\footnote{2}

Until 1912 the congregation was served by Joseph Schlegel; after that until 1916, Peter Kennel, Sr. of Schickley had the oversight. In 1916 Joe E. Zimmerman became the first resident bishop. The years of highest church attendance were between 1916 and 1920. During the years of depression in the twenties, of drought, and of swarms of grasshoppers, a number of families left the community. Some moved to Oregon, others to Pennsylvania, Minnesota, and Iowa. Between 1920 and 1941 the church was without a minister. Since that time Alvin Gascho has served the congreg-

\footnote{1}{Reply of Alvin Gascho to questionnaire sent out by the writer.}
\footnote{2}{Ibid.}
The only surviving member of the original settlers is Mrs. Mary Jantzi of Wood River.\textsuperscript{1}

Nearly all the members of the group are farmers, and a majority have turned to the use of pump irrigation. Corn is the principal crop, and yields of 2,000 to 10,000 bushels per farm are not uncommon with irrigation.\textsuperscript{2}

In so far as schools are concerned, the Wood River church has been satisfied to allow its young people to attend the public schools. No attempts have been made to establish parochial schools. According to the pastor there is as yet no college graduate among the church membership.\textsuperscript{3}

The group has been content to live in fair isolation from the rest of the community. For example, the minister estimates that not more than two per cent of the present membership is of non-Mennonite origin.\textsuperscript{4} As in other communities, religious life centers around three services on Sunday: Sunday School, morning preaching service, and an evening meeting. The congregation also holds weekly prayer meetings in the homes of members. No services are today conducted in German, though that language was once widely used. The church has sent out no missionaries. Its present membership is eighty-eight, while the entire Mennonite

\textsuperscript{1} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{2} Statements of Alvin Gascho, personal interview, November, 1952.
\textsuperscript{3} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{4} Reply of Alvin Gascho to questionnaire.
community, including children, numbers about 135. The minister is not salaried.¹

Broken View Mennonite Church, Broken Bow

As land became scarce and increasingly expensive in Fillmore County, several families who lived near Shickley decided to look farther west for less expensive lands. A group of fifteen persons, including children, in 1922 purchased land held by an Omaha trust company, north of Broken Bow. The land consisted of some of the more level and productive areas in the sand hills region of Nebraska. One of the leaders was John Stutzman.² Within a few years others from the Wood River congregation, the Milford area and Montana joined the group. Leaders of these subsequent groups included Levi Schrock and Ivan Hostettler. The latter was ordained deacon on July 31, 1931. While the earlier groups settled five to six miles northeast of Broken Bow and there built a church, late comers settled about twenty miles farther northwest, in an area about six to ten miles north of Merna.³

Even though the settlement was made as late as the twenties, the area was at that time still quite undeveloped. Few farms were established in the area, and those there were poor and

¹ Ibid.
² Reply of Royden Schweitzer to questionnaire sent out by the writer.
³ Ibid.
mostly engaged in grazing. Sod houses were not an uncommon sight.¹ The only surviving settler of the first group is Alvin W. Eichelberger.²

At first services on Sundays were held in various homes, but in 1926 an organization was effected with twelve charter members. For many years visiting ministers served the congregation. On July 31, 1949, Royien Schweitzer was ordained minister and Alvin Eichelberger, deacon. The settlement has since those earliest beginnings grown to a size where the Mennonite community including children now numbers sixty-nine.³

In 1937 the group built its present church house. (See illustration, page 73.) It is a small frame building thirty-two by twenty-four feet, seating about eighty persons. The church is located about six miles northeast of Broken Bow. Three services are at present conducted each week: Sunday School, a preaching service, and a Sunday evening meeting. The minister is not salaried, but works on the farm as do the other 90 per cent of the congregation. Services were never conducted in any other than the English language.⁴

Members of this congregation are not opposed to holding some types of public office, nor do they subscribe to any great extent to the conservative customs still found in some of the

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¹ Today, along State Highway 180, three miles north of Merna, there still stands a small one-story sod house built by C. E. Cole before 1900, and another two-story one built shortly after 1900 stands about the same distance south of Merna.

² Reply of Royien Schweitzer to questionnaire.

³ Ibid. ⁴ Ibid.
more compact and isolated communities. For example, one can even find a late model maroon colored automobile in the possession of one of the leaders of the church. For schools the public elementary grades seem to meet the needs. There are no college graduates in the group, and no private schools have been attempted by the congregation.

The group today confines its activities almost exclusively to its own denomination. Only five members have been added to the communicant membership from non-Mennonite sources since 1926, and no missionaries have been sent out, although the group does participate in supporting the general projects of the Iowa-Nebraska Conference. The communicant membership today is forty-two.  

Plum Creek Mennonite Church, Beemer

A group of four Amish Mennonite families in 1894 moved from Lund, Kansas, to an area between Beemer and Lyons, Nebraska. They were joined the next year by three other families from Hopedale, Illinois, and in 1896 by two more families from Lund, Kansas, and one from Milford, Nebraska. Other small groups joined these in later years coming primarily from Minnesota and Oklahoma. At first they rented farms from previous settlers, but gradually they purchased their own lands.  

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1 Ibid.
2 Reply of Samuel Oswald to questionnaire sent out by the writer.
While the community was settled in 1891, it was not until the next year that fourteen charter members organized the Plum Creek Mennonite Church. Meetings were at first conducted in homes. The first minister was Jacob D. Birky who was chosen by lot in 1895, while the first Sunday School superintendent was Jacob O. Oswald.\footnote{\textit{idem.}}

By 1907 the group had grown to the extent that it became advisable to construct a house of worship. On a plot of ground purchased from Daniel Z. Birky, the first frame building was erected by the united efforts of the members of the church. (See illustration, page 73.) It was enlarged twice, in 1915, and again in 1923, when the seating capacity was increased to approximately 225 persons. The church is located two and one-half miles north, and two miles east of Beemer.

Ministers who have served the church are, Jacob D. Birky, 1895-1921; Joseph H. Birky, 1896-1927; Peter Oswald, 1903-1934; Joseph Schantz, 1904-1934; Joseph Crieser, 1903-1911; Peter C. Oswald, 1925 to the present; and Samuel Oswald, 1915 to the present.\footnote{\textit{idem.}} After the death of Jacob D. Birky, J. E. Zimmerman of Milford supervised the work of the church (1921-1946). Samuel Oswald was ordained bishop in 1949. The ministers of the church receive no compensation for their services. Four services are conducted in the church each week: a Sunday forenoon worship service, Sunday School, another service in the evening, and a mid-week service on Thursday nights. All meetings have been
conducted in the English language since 1918. Use of the German was entirely discontinued after 1920.¹

The community has remained predominantly agricultural with approximately 90 per cent of the membership engaged in farming. The pastor estimates that not over 5 per cent of the membership are of non-Mennonite ancestry. No missionaries have been sent out from this church, but the group helps support the Home for the Aged, in Geneva, Nebraska. The merging of the Amish with the American Mennonites to form the present "Old" Mennonite denomination brought this group into the Iowa-Nebraska Conference of the "Old" Mennonite Church. The present pastor is Samuel Oswald and today the membership is 138, in a Mennonite community which numbers approximately 170.²

Various ones have moved away from the area from time to time to seek cheaper lands and better opportunities elsewhere. Among these are Jacob D. Birky, the first minister, who in 1921 moved his entire family of both single and married sons and daughters back to Indiana.³ Several families went to other states. Today the group, nevertheless, appears to be vigorous and, judging by the appearance of the farms, reasonably prosperous.

Roseland Mennonite Church, Roseland

The one exception to the general pattern of "Old"

ⁱ Ibid. ⁲ Ibid. ⁳ Statements of Samuel Oswald, personal interview, December, 1952.
Mennonite churches originating from among the Amish is the Roseland Church. The original settlers of this community were American Mennonites from Illinois and Pennsylvania, not associated with the Amish groups. To these were added several families who came directly from Germany.¹

The group on March 20, 1880, formed a church organization with twenty-nine charter members. Albrecht Shiffler became the first minister and served in this capacity for many years. The church, a frame building built in 1880, seated about three hundred and was located midway between the towns of Roseland and Ayr. (See illustration, page 73.) In connection with the church grounds was a cemetery. Before 1930 the group was very prosperous, and many moved to the community, so that it once ranked as one of the larger congregations in Nebraska.² In recent years, however, the membership has dwindled. Today they have no resident minister, and the present membership of the group has dropped to forty-five.³

From the foregoing pages it is evident that the "Old" Mennonites were really the first Mennonite settlers in Nebraska, and even today they have the largest number of organized congregations, although in membership they are in recent years falling behind the churches of the General Conference. They have

¹ Statements of Chris Hargelroad, personal interview, November, 1952.
² Ibid.
³ Missionary Challenge, March, 1939, p. 3.
nevertheless remained the most conservative of the several Mennonite bodies in Nebraska and have retained many of the customs which have been handed down for generations.

A more progressive group in Nebraska is the Mennonite Brethren denomination, and churches of this branch will now be considered.
CHAPTER V

MENNONITE BRETHREN CHURCHES

There are three active Mennonite Brethren churches in Nebraska today: Henderson, Paxton and Culbertson. The first had its origin in the immigration of the Russian Mennonites, the second is an outgrowth of the Jansen and Henderson Mennonite Brethren communities, and the last has a history independent of Mennonite associations until it sought admittance to the fellowship of the church in 1910.

In addition to these there were at one time a number of other Mennonite Brethren congregations now no longer in existence. The church once established in Jansen will be briefly discussed in connection with the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church of that town. Shortly after the founding of the Henderson churches, a group went to Boone County, near Albion, but this settlement soon died out. Two other groups, those in Eldorado and Sutton, both of Lutheran background, carried on their work for many years, and eventually united with the Henderson Mennonite Brethren Church. These last two are briefly described in the pages following. The communicant membership of the Mennonite Brethren Church ranks third in size among the Mennonite bodies in Nebraska.
Of the group of thirty-five families which came from Russia in the fall of 1874 to settle in the York and Hamilton County areas, about twenty individuals belonged to what in Russia had been known as the Mennonite Brethren Church. These shared the early trials of the General Conference group, but soon held separate services in their own homes. Among the early leaders was Henry Nickel, who for want of a minister, served as the leader of the group, even baptizing some converts upon the confession of faith.¹

The following year these were joined by others, among them Peter Regier, who, together with Cornelius Neufeldt and Gerhard Toews, in 1877 organized the thirty members to form the Henderson Mennonite Brethren Church. Peter Regier was elected to serve as minister the following year. Services at first were very simple, and no Sunday School was held as it was feared that discussions in church might be "conducive for argumentation and debate."² After a few years, however, a Sunday School was begun in the afternoon while the regular church service continued to be held in the forenoon. Business meetings were frequent and lengthy, and the decisions reached were often rather unusual. For example, at one of the meetings it was agreed that the books of

¹ Marion, Mary, and H. P. Kliwer, History of the Henderson Mennonite Brethren Church, 1952, p. 4.
² Ibid.
the church secretary should be purchased with funds of the Armenkasse, the treasury for the poor. At another time it was agreed that offerings taken in a home should remain in the custody of the family serving as host, rather than to be taken along by a treasurer.  

As the group grew through additions from Russia and as new members were received as a result of revival campaigns, the need of a church building became evident. Consequently, in 1830 it was voted to construct a modest edifice three miles north of Henderson. Since money was scarce, donations for the project ranged from $1 to $25, but each "brother of the Church" was asked to donate one day labor during a three week period in which the church was to be built. It was a low, one-story building constructed of sun-dried bricks of which over 9,000 were pledged. The plot of ground was a little over three acres in area, donated by Peter Regier, the church leader at the time. In this structure "the men occupied the north side of the building and the women the south side. Two small anterooms on the east side served as cloakrooms for the men and women respectively." The building was ready for use by Christmas, 1830. Fuel to heat the church consisted of wood and cobs. "Certain brethren offered to chop the wood. Every household was to furnish two sacks of cobs a year."  

During these early years an effort was made to provide  

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1 Ibid.  
2 Ibid. p. 7.  
3 Ibid.
some education for the children. A Vereinschule was organized on December 27, 1880. The reason for organizing this federation was to provide funds to pay for the education of those children whose parents could not afford it. Jakob Heinrichs was one of the first teachers, since he had previously taught in Russia. He received small donations from the parents of the children, and held classes in the church building. The school died out after a few years, but another attempt was made in 1887 when a separate building was constructed. All classes were conducted in the German language and Bible study received major emphasis.¹

By 1887 the congregation had outgrown its house of worship and was erecting its second building. Lumber was purchased in the amount of $2,000, with which a building of wood forty by eighty feet was built. The tradition of "men occupying one side, women the other" was continued. The building was completed in 1883. Of particular interest, as far as this church is concerned, was the construction of stalls adjoining the church. Each stall was sixteen feet long and eight feet wide, large enough to accommodate a team of horses, which needed to be housed for the all-day services. These stalls were connected, one such building extending for a distance of 240 feet. In later years cars were parked in these stalls during services.²

Religious interest ran high in the church, and a number of effective revival campaigns were conducted. Fourth of July

¹ Ibid. p. 8.
² Ibid. p. 9
was always featured as a children's rally day. Such special services were usually conducted outdoors under the trees. Fews were carried out of the church and special platforms were built for preaching and for the use of the choir. A band provided music of a religious nature during intermissions.¹

By 1926 the church building again proved inadequate; further, there was the prospect that in 1927 the Henderson church might entertain the general conference of all the Mennonite Brethren churches in America. Sufficient incentive was thereby provided for the erection of a new building in the northwest part of the town of Henderson. The building was constructed of wood during the summer of 1926 and dedicated that fall. It seated over eight hundred persons and cost about $25,000. (See illustration, page 63.) A parsonage across the street was purchased in 1927.²

Ministers who served the church since 1900 included Gerhardt Wiens, John S. Regier, Johann Abrahams, H. B. Kliwer, David Hooge, B. B. Fadenrecht, H. E. Wiens, and Art Flaming.³

Through the years the church has been intensely mission minded, reaching out to neighboring communities in its Christian Endeavor programs as well as in sending out missionaries to China, India, and Africa.⁴

¹ Ibid. p. 13. ² Ibid. p. 16. ³ Ibid. ⁴ Reply of Arthur Flaming to questionnaire sent out by the writer.
A number of members of the church have attained some degree of prominence in local circles. Several have served as mayor of Henderson, and one as County Commissioner. The church celebrated its 75th anniversary on October 5, 1952. Its present membership stands at 271, and H. E. Wiens is serving as interim pastor since the resignation of Art Flaming.

Mennonite Brethren Church, Paxton

In 1915 twelve families from Jansen moved to a rich farming area southwest of Paxton, purchasing lands from previous settlers. Leaders of the group were Nick Thiessen, H. C. Flaming, and Andrew Flaming. In the years following others arrived from both Jansen and Henderson. Among their leaders were C. E. Harder, Henry Kornelson, Harold Janzen, and Abraham Schellenberg.

In 1922 sixty charter members organized the Paxton Mennonite Brethren Church. That same year they built a small frame church building, which stood approximately twelve miles southwest of Paxton. This church was replaced by a new and larger one five years later, seating about 180 persons. (See illustration, page 83.) Recent ministers of the church include C. B. Willems, 1947-1949; Henry Hooge, 1949-1952, and Laverne

\[1\] Ibid.

\[2\] Statements of H. E. Wiens, personal interview, January, 1953.

\[3\] Reply of Laverne Loewens and C. E. Harder to questionnaire sent out by the writer.

\[4\] Schmitt, loc. cit., p. 87.
Loewens, 1952 to the present.¹

The group has been active in its religious life and in supporting missionary activities in other lands. Seven missionaries have been sent out by the church, and they are serving in Africa and India. Three services are regularly conducted each week: Sunday School, a worship service, and a mid-week prayer meeting and choir practice.² It is estimated that at least 90 per cent of the membership is engaged in farming. The present membership is seventy.³

Culbertson Mennonite Brethren Church, Culbertson

A small group of settlers came to Nebraska shortly before 1900 from southern Germany, from a section of Bavaria known as Swabia, and these settled west of McCook in Hitchcock County.⁴ Not finding any other group with which they could fellowship, they sent representatives to the central district of the Mennonite Brethren Church in session in Henderson, and asked to be received into membership. Adam Ross was sent to visit the interested individuals and eventually he organized them into a congregation which in 1910 united with the Mennonite Brethren Church. While not originally of Mennonite stock, they adopted that faith and have faithfully maintained their affiliation to the present.⁵

¹ Reply of Laverne Loewens and C. E. Harder to questionnaire.

² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
⁴ Statements of H. E. Wiens, Secretary of the Central District of the Mennonite Brethren Church, Henderson; personal interview, January, 1953.
Shortly after the organization of the church a house of worship was built in the town of Culbertson. It was a frame building and seated approximately one hundred people. Ministers who served the church included Raymond Laird, Laverne Loewens, A. A. Loewens, Robert Seibels, David Hooge, and Eli Cook. At present there is no resident minister. Services are conducted only on Sunday morning and consist of a Sunday School and a worship service. During the years when it had the largest membership, the congregation boasted sixty to seventy-five members, but the number has dwindled to a low of twenty at the present time.¹

Churches No Longer in Existence

One community which went out of existence as a separate church group was that of the Mennonite Brethren congregation around Eldorado in Clay County. Originally these people were Lutheran. They came to Nebraska from South Germany via Russia. They did not share the religious convictions of the Mennonites concerning military training, but after arrival, largely through the efforts of John Deinas, they requested the privilege of organizing themselves as a Mennonite Brethren congregation. As a result in 1896 a frame meeting house seating about 150 was constructed in the town of Eldorado. Supervision of the work for nearly the entire duration of the existence of the church was delegated to the Mennonite Brethren Church of Henderson. At its

¹ ibid.
peak the community numbered about seventy-five members, and for many years it had a capable choir of twenty-five voices. Eli Cook was the last minister to serve the congregation. In 1950 the group disbanded, the building was sold to the Assembly of God Church, and nearly all the members joined the Mennonite Brethren Church in Henderson. Although a majority of the group still live in the area of Eldorado, the church as such has passed out of existence because of its close proximity to a larger and more active congregation.¹

A second group no longer in existence is the church in Sutton. About 1900, a few years after the settling of the Eldorado area, another group of Lutherans settled about ten miles southeast of Eldorado in the area of Sutton, also in Clay County. The same minister, John Deinas, also was instrumental in unifying these into a Mennonite Brethren congregation. It remained a small group, never numbering much in excess of thirty individuals. They constructed their own house of worship, however, and maintained the building until about 1930 when the group disbanded. Most of the members transferred their membership to the Henderson Mennonite Brethren Church. Since transportation to church was no longer a problem in the automobile age, the majority favored the union with the larger church. Most of the group were farmers, having settled on cheap lands during pioneer days.²

¹ Statements of H. E. Wiens, Henderson, personal interview, January, 1953.
² Ibid.
Since the two congregations just described both united with the Henderson church, the latter congregation was strengthened and became the largest Mennonite Brethren congregation in Nebraska. Together with the churches in Paxton and Culbertson the Mennonite Brethren churches have always carried on an active program of evangelization, both at home and abroad. In many ways their vigor, their fervor, and their progressiveness are akin to those of another small group of Mennonites, the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, which will be considered in the following chapter.
CHAPTER VI

EVANGELICAL MENNONITE BRETHREN CHURCHES

The Evangelical Mennonite Brethren denomination was an outgrowth of an independent movement which developed very early in the history of the Henderson community. Members there as well as those of the same faith who lived in Minnesota, were for many years called Bruderthalers, while somewhat later they were for a time known by the name Defenseless Mennonites of North America. There are two Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Churches in Nebraska today: Jansen and Henderson. Their total membership is 177.

Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, Jansen

The first group of Mennonites to come from Russia and settle in Nebraska arrived in America in July, 1874. While their families remained temporarily in the East, a vanguard of seven men, accompanied by Peter Jansen, arrived in Beatrice on August 3 and at once sought to find land suitable for home sites. They were successful in obtaining land from the Burlington and Missouri Railroad, land which was not within the usual twenty mile limit of the railway right-of-way, but which the Federal government allowed the railroad to choose in lieu of sections along the right-of-way which homesteaders had already solidly settled. It thus happened that the group was able to acquire a compact tract
of nearly 20,000 acres at an average price of $3.75 per acre, payable in six annual installments at six per cent interest.\(^1\)

With this task completed, the remainder of the group of twenty-seven families, 120 individuals, arrived in Beatrice on August 25.\(^2\) Practically all were from the Kleine Gemeinde, a small independent branch of conservative Mennonites in Russia. To all of these Peter Jansen showed himself very helpful.

While Peter Jansen was not himself of these Russian Mennonites,\(^3\) his father had instructed him to purchase two sections of land adjoining their new settlement. The purpose was to use the rolling lands for sheep grazing as well as for farming. Jansen thus became closely associated with the new community. His fame, in helping other groups of settlers, spread, and his interest in politics ultimately led him to hold many prominent positions. As early as 1880 he was elected a justice of the peace,\(^4\) while fifteen years later he was appointed chairman of the Jefferson County delegation to the Judicial Convention.\(^5\) In 1896 he served as delegate at large to the Republican National Convention in St. Louis, which nominated President McKinley, and was the Nebraska member on the Committee on Platform.\(^6\) His

\(^1\) Peter Jansen, Memoirs, op. cit., p. 41.
\(^2\) Beatrice Express, September 10, 1891.
\(^3\) Peter Jansen's parental home was in Prussia, though the family had lived for a time in Berdyansk, South Russia.
\(^4\) Jansen, op. cit., p. 55
\(^5\) Ibid. p. 56.
\(^6\) Ibid. p. 57.
friends nominated him for the State Legislature in 1893, and the
pure food law which bears his name was one of his contributions.\footnote{Ibid. p. 59.}
In 1899, President McKinley sent his name to the Senate for
confirmation as one of the United States Commissioners to the
Paris Exposition, which he attended in 1900.\footnote{Ibid.}
Finally, he was
elected to the Nebraska State Senate in the fall of 1910, in
which capacity he served with "little chance for constructive
legislation," in a body that had a Democratic majority.\footnote{Ibid. p. 60.}
When in
1886 the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railroad surveyed a
line from St. Joseph through Beatrice, and Fairbury, and to the
West, a town was established in the heart of the Mennonite
settlement and named "Jansen" in his honor.\footnote{Ibid. p. 52.}
The original villages, however, were established on the
South Russian pattern. The settlers laid out their homes in rows
on either side of a road and formed compact villages which have
names similar to those used in the old country. Trees lined the
main thoroughfares and flower gardens beautified the area between
the streets and the dwellings.\footnote{Cornelius Krahn, "From Russia to Nebraska," Mennonite Life, July, 1951, p. 18.}
In time members of other Mennonite groups moved to Jansen
in considerable numbers. In 1879 Isaac Peters, founder of the
Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church in Henderson, visited these
newer arrivals and organized them into an Evangelical Mennonite
Brethren Church. The Krimmer Mennonite Brethren organized a
congregation in 1880, and very soon thereafter the Mennonite Brethren also organized a group. The very conservative group of original settlers, the Kleine Gemeinde, fearing lest they lose some of their old traditions, now sought refuge from the worldliness creeping into the community. They first went to Montana and returned, then later they moved to Colorado but again returned. Finally, they resettled permanently in Meade County, Kansas.1

The welfare of those remaining varied with the times. Since there was considerable difference of opinion among the three primary groups left, a genuine cooperation was not always easy. For a time the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren and the Mennonite Brethren met together in worship services. A difference of opinion over the dismissal of an elder in 1918, however, caused the Mennonite Brethren group to withdraw. This group nearly died out by 1921, but when the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Church itself also nearly passed from existence, the Mennonite Brethren took up the work again and continued until about 1945 when the church was sold and torn down. Since that time only the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren have been active in the community.2

The Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church at Jansen has had the longest continuous history. Its minister for about forty years was B. O. Kroeker. He was followed by D. A. Friesen, J. W. Fast, H. H. Ratzlaff, Henry Wiens, Ferdinand Tieszen, and

1 Ibid. p. 19.

2 Statements of Abraham Scheellenberg of Madrid, Nebraska, who lived in Jansen from 1899 to 1925, personal interview, August, 1952.
the present minister, Elmer I. Reimer. The frame church building seating about two hundred persons was built in 1929 and is located on the northeastern edge of the town of Jansen. (See illustration, page 83.) Five services a week are regularly held. The use of the German language in some of the Sunday School classes was discontinued only about a year ago. The church has been very active in sending out missionaries, five serving away from home at the present time.¹

Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church, Henderson

Henderson has three Mennonite churches within its incorporated limits. Besides the General Conference Church and the Mennonite Brethren Church, there is also a very active Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church. It also grew out of the original settlement of thirty-five families who in 1871 moved to the York and Hamilton County areas.² For many years this church was known as the Ebenezer Church.³

It was in 1862 when the group, meeting in homes, had attained a membership of some twenty-eight families, that they separated themselves from the other bodies to organize a church of their own. Primarily instrumental in creating this new body

¹ Reply of Elmer I. Reimer to questionnaire sent out by the writer.

² Reply of Frank G. Thomas to questionnaire sent out by the writer.

was Isaac Peters.\(^1\) Other leaders who supported him and took an active part in the growth and development of the new church were Heinrich Epp, Cornelius Wall, and Bernard Ratzlaff.

Since this group was an outgrowth of the main body of Russian settlers, they too purchased lands from the Burlington and Missouri Railroad. Practically all were engaged thereafter in agricultural occupations.\(^2\)

The first church building was erected one mile south of Henderson in 1882. It was a frame building seating approximately 125 persons. This original building was moved to town about 1925 and remodelled in 1949 to give it a seating capacity of 250. (See illustration, page 83.) Ministers who have served the church besides the founder are Cornelius Wall, John P. Epp, K. P. Epp, H. H. Dick, J. R. Barkman, J. R. Dueck, Abe H. Schultz, Henry C. Quiring, and Frank G. Thomas, the present minister.\(^3\) On several occasions members left this church to join the Bethesda Church, while others, particularly after a series of revival campaigns, left the Bethesda Church, to join the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church. Such an interchange of membership, as was common between this group and the General Conference church, was practically unknown with the Mennonite Brethren Church of Henderson.

Services in the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church are

\(^{1}\) Krahn, "From Russia to Meade," loc. cit. p. 12.

\(^{2}\) Reply of Frank G. Thomas to questionnaire.

\(^{3}\) Ibid.
at present held five times a week: a Sunday morning worship service, a young people's meeting on Sunday evening followed by an evangelistic service, a mid-week prayer meeting, and a weekly choir practice. For many years Sunday services were held in the afternoon so that the evenings might be devoted to family and social gatherings in the homes of the members. No services are any longer conducted in the German language.

The church has taken an active interest in missionary projects, being represented at present by five missionaries: one in Japan, three with the Back to the Bible Broadcast in Lincoln, and one in Georgia working among the Negroes. It is estimated that not over 10 per cent of the present membership is originally of non-Mennonite stock. Members of this group are increasingly entering the professions, though the pastor in 1953 estimated that three-fourths were still engaged in farming. The membership at that time numbered 104.

The two churches of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren denomination above described have a history which dates back to the very earliest years of the settlement of Nebraska by the Mennonites, and the membership is predominantly of Mennonite ancestry. A group of a somewhat different nature, drawing heavily for membership upon a non-Mennonite background, will be considered in the next chapter.

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1 Ibid.  
2 Ibid.
CHAPTER VI

UNITED MISSIONARY CHURCHES

In 1943 those churches of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ denomination north and west of the Ohio River changed their name to the United Missionary Church. They continued to consider themselves Mennonites, and their association with churches in Pennsylvania and other eastern states, who retain the designation Mennonite Brethren in Christ, remains unchanged.

Churches of this group differ noticeably from the general Mennonite pattern. Congregations have seldom been started through mass migration. They have not isolated themselves from those about them, or sought to perpetuate any traditional customs, and they have been very aggressive in winning others within the community to their cause. Relatively few names on their church rolls bear a resemblance to the traditional Mennonite names. The denomination has locked upon Nebraska as a great mission field, and it has drawn men and women from all walks of life without regard to race or nationality. The group contributes to the general missionary activities of the United Missionary Church and of the eastern Mennonite Brethren in Christ group, and supports as its higher educational institution Bethel College, of Mishawaka, Indiana.

At present there are seven United Missionary churches
in Nebraska. In the order of their organization they are:
Bloomington, Weeping Water, Milford, Franklin, Lewellen,
Dorchester, and Lincoln.

United Missionary Church, Bloomington

A few years prior to 1890 a number of ministers and
evangelists of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ denomination came
to Nebraska from Iowa to hold meetings in churches desiring a
series of special services. One such itinerant missionary in
1890 conducted services in Luke's school house just south of the
town of Bloomington. As a result of his ministry, a number of
converts were won. These were organized in the fall of 1890 as a
Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church.¹ In the years following
Jacob Hygema ministered to these people, first in Luke's school
house, some years later at the Metke school house, and finally in
a borrowed Methodist Episcopal church in Bloomington.²

Relations with the Methodist Episcopal Church were cordial
from the very beginning. While services were still held in Luke's
school house, a visiting Mennonite minister, C. W. Atkinson, wrote:
"We arrived at Bloomington on the evening of April 11th, and were
conducted to Bro. and Sis. Etherton's of the M. E. church where we
were joined in a prayer meeting led by Bro. Joe Persell ....

¹ Statements of Kenneth Baker, personal interview,
November, 1952.

² Reply of Kenneth Baker to questionnaire sent out by
the writer.
The following Sunday I preached at the Luke school house at 11 a.m. 1

The group in Bloomington was not formed by Mennonites who settled in the area. The ministers worked among the people already settled and brought them into the fellowship of the church. It is estimated that those of Mennonite ancestry have never exceeded 10 per cent of the membership of the church. The proportion today is estimated at only 5 per cent. 2

The work prospered greatly in the twenties so that by 1925 the congregation, led by the pastor, who was himself a carpenter by trade, built its own church. (See illustration, page 99.) It is a frame building, stuccoed on the outside and has a seating capacity of approximately 150. The church is within the limits of the town of Bloomington. Four services, all in English, are regularly conducted each week. 3

The group has been progressive in agriculture, in customs, and in adopting modern ways of life. There are no dress restrictions nor inhibitions in so far as the use of modern conveniences around the home or on the farm are concerned. 4

Only a very few of the charter members survive. The oldest is Miss Lura Yocum of Franklin (born 1871), who joined the Bloomington church in June, 1896, having been converted during

1 Gospel Banner, May 13, 1897, p. 12. The official organ of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church.

2 Reply of Kenneth Baker.

3 Ibid.

4 Statements of Kenneth Baker, personal interview.
services held at Luke's school house in 1895.¹

The first minister of the group was Homer Pontias, while others who followed include E. D. Young, T. J. Overholz, J. A. Berry, S. S. Storky, Darrel Ensz, and the present minister, Kenneth Baker. These ministers have been remunerated by freewill offerings rather than by a fixed salary. The present membership stands at forty-six.²

United Missionary Church, Weeping Water

The United Missionary Church at Weeping Water originated in 1896 through a series of meetings conducted by a Mennonite evangelist, Ben Rich. Some weeks earlier camp meetings had been conducted in Weeping Water by representatives of a holiness organization from Tabor, Iowa. While the services had been highly successful in drawing a substantial membership, there were a number of families of various faiths who were too conservative to fall in line with the new movement. About that time twelve Mennonite families from Elkhart, Indiana, moved to Cass County and settled on farms adjoining the town of Weeping Water. Ben Rich visited this group in 1896, and together with the conservative families who refused to join the holiness movement, organized a church. It was known by the name Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church. The group met in homes for some time, but for special

¹ Statements of Mrs. Lura Yocum, personal interview, November, 1952.

² Reply of Kenneth Baker.
gatherings they used the public buildings in the town. ¹

In 1900 the local Baptist church split and ultimately disbanded. Its property was offered for sale and was acquired by the Mennonite group in 1901. (See illustration, page 99.) The original building just south of the railroad tracks still stands today. It is a frame building, seating approximately 150 persons.²

By virtue of its central location in the tri-state area of Kansas, Iowa, and Nebraska, Weeping Water came to be considered the conference grounds for the regional Mennonite Brethren in Christ church. With the improvement in means of transportation, and as a result of the growth in membership of the groups in the area, the church building became too small when such united services were held. A two block area in the southern part of the town was, consequently, acquired in 1933, and during the same year a frame tabernacle seating between 400 and 500 persons was constructed. The following year a dining hall was added, and nearly every year thereafter one or more small cabins were constructed. Today more than twenty-five cabins are available, nearly all of which were financed and built by members of the local and surrounding churches.³

¹ Statements of Mrs. Minnie Lane, age 75, who joined the church in 1904, personal interview, November, 1952.

² Reply of Sherman Mills to questionnaire sent out by the writer.

³ Statements of Sherman Mills, personal interview, November, 1952.
Ministers who served the congregation in previous years include M. W. Rich, J. S. K. Wipf, O. L. Traub, and C. A. Neill. Since 1951 Sherman Mills has been the pastor. There never has been a salaried ministry, and even today his support is only by freewill offerings.¹

In line with the general evangelistic and missionary zeal of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church, the church in Weeping Water has reached out and drawn into its membership many who were not originally of Mennonite stock. Perhaps not more than 10 percent of the present membership is of Mennonite descent.²

Today five services are conducted each week: Sunday School, church service, young people's meeting, evangelistic evening service, and a mid-week prayer meeting. The language used has always been exclusively English. The congregation has sent out and supports one missionary family of three members in Johannesburg, South Africa. It is estimated that today only about one-sixth of the membership is engaged in farming. Others are in business or have entered other professional work. The membership now stands at fifty-six.³

United Missionary Church, Milford

In 1894 four families of the Defenseless Mennonite Church in the East moved to Milford and organized a church which soon became affiliated with the Mennonite Brethren in Christ

¹ Reply of Sherman Mills.
² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
denomination. Others followed in subsequent years until a sizeable colony was established in the midst of an area predominantly settled by Amish Mennonites. Leaders of these subsequent groups were Don Stahley, Dan Miller, Henry Plank, Frank Walker, Elmor Mycor, and Joel Stahley.

Early ministers and leaders of the church included Homer J. Pontious, Jacob Hygema, C. B. Henderson, N. W. Rich, T. D. Walker and C. I. Scott. The settlers acquired some of their land from the Burlington and Missouri Railroad and the rest from previous pioneers. About one-half of the members today are engaged in farming, though the average was once much higher.

Shortly after their arrival in the Milford area these settlers built a church west of Milford and held services there for many years. After 1930 they worshiped in a brick church formerly used by the Congregationalists, and in 1938 the present frame building was constructed in Milford. (See illustration, page 99.)

The minister conducts four services weekly. The church has salaried its minister for some fifteen years. The present pastor is Charles F. Gray and the present membership is forty-one.¹

United Missionary Church, Franklin

The United Missionary Church in Franklin was essentially a branch of the church in Bloomington, begun as an accommodation.

¹ Reply of Charles F. Gray to questionnaire sent out by the writer.
to those who lived near Franklin. In 1914 the group, as a result of a series of religious services conducted by a visiting Mennonite minister, decided to organize a separate church in Franklin. For about a year meetings were held in a public hall, but in the fall of 1915 a Methodist church on the west edge of town was offered for sale. Though it had been built in 1870, it was still in good repair. The newly organized church, then known as the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church, purchased the building and dedicated it on November 11, 1915. Warner Jet served as its first pastor. A portion of the time, the Franklin church had its own minister; at other times it shared the minister with Bloomington. Subsequent ministers were F. J. Overholz, Alvin Zook, Pastor Hess, J. S. Sorensen, J. E. Starky, and the present minister, again shared with Bloomington, Kenneth Baker.

The building purchased from the Methodists was a frame building of modest dimensions seating approximately 120 persons. (See illustration, page 99.) There are five services conducted each week: Sunday School, morning preaching service, young people's meeting, an evening service, and a mid-week prayer meeting. The services have always been in English. As in Bloomington, at least 75 per cent of the members are engaged in

1 Reply of Kenneth Baker to questionnaire sent out by the writer.

2 Franklin Sentinel, November, 1915.

3 Warner Jet and a number of followers moved to Oklahoma when the Cherokee Strip was opened, and the town of Jet, Oklahoma, was named in his honor.

4 Reply of Kenneth Baker.
agriculture, and only a very small percentage have Mennonite ancestry. The present membership stands at thirty-five.¹

Brenneman Memorial Church, Lewellen

In 1908 three families homesteaded land in Garden County, a few miles north of the town of Lewellen. They were the families of F. W. Drown, George Jenewein, and Joe Brenneman, who numbered about ten persons including children. These were of German ancestry and moved to Western Nebraska from Indiana by way of Watertown, South Dakota. For a time after their arrival religious services were held in the homes, but later the use of a school house, located a mile north of the present site of the church, was secured. Several other families joined the group in 1928, and in that year a church was organized with seven charter members.²

In 1929 the need was felt for a permanent house of worship. A building was subsequently constructed of cement blocks, tile, and stucco by the members of the group. (See illustration, page 107.) Today the congregation meets on the main floor for its services, while the basement is the home of the minister. Seating capacity is about one hundred, and the building is located eight miles north of the town of Lewellen. Besides the church itself there is a barn and a windmill on the church property.³

¹ Ibid.
² Reply of John F. Tschetter to questionnaire sent out by the writer.
³ Ibid.
Ministers who previously served the church include A. W. Zook, Thomas Sorensen, Miss Orpha Pector, Clayton Severn, and Martin Christensen. The present pastor is John P. Tschetter, who assumed his responsibilities on January 3, 1948. Support of the pastor is by freewill offerings. The community has never attempted to build its own schools. Two missionaries represent the church in the land of Nigeria, Africa. Like other churches of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ denomination, the membership is more non-Mennonite in ancestry than Mennonite. In fact, the present pastor believes that the only member with Mennonite background was Joe Brenneman himself, and in his honor the church is still named today. All present members of the congregation, with the exception of one business man, are engaged in farming. The present membership stands at thirty-three.¹

United Missionary Church, Dorchester

Since 1931 Raymond Butterfield has been minister of a small congregation in Dorchester. The work there was also begun as a missionary project, and today enjoys a following of about a dozen families. Within the last six months the group has purchased a building formerly used as a store and is now in the process of remodelling it for use as an auditorium and as Sunday School classrooms.² (See illustration, page 107.) The present

¹ Ibid.

For over six years Charles Gray, the district superintendent of the Nebraska United Missionary Churches, had his headquarters in Lincoln. When he moved to Milford in August, 1952, a new district superintendent, James T. Hoskins, was appointed. At that time it was decided to begin a mission in Lincoln, and Walter L. Stump, a recent graduate of Bethel College, Mishawaka, Indiana, was called to assume the responsibility of the new venture.\(^1\)

Lincoln already had a small nucleus of members of the United Missionary Church. In 1938 two families moved to Lincoln from Weeping Water, and in 1945 two other families came from Elkhart, Indiana. Several other families joined the group so that it was recently organized as a church with approximately twelve charter members.\(^2\)

At present the group is engaged in the construction of a modern church building. (See illustration, page 107.) It is to be of colonial style with a high steeple. The material used is brick veneer. It is to seat about three hundred persons. The cost is estimated at above $50,000 even with the donated labor of its

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1 Reply of Raymond Butterfield to questionnaire sent out by the writer.

2 Reply of Walter L. Stump to questionnaire sent out by the writer.

3 Ibid.
members. The denomination is financing the construction of the church in line with its usual policy of building and owning all church property. The present minister of the group is Walter L. Stump, while the membership stands at twelve.¹

The six churches of the United Missionary Church just described bear a close resemblance in name to another group which meets in Omaha, Nebraska, but which has no official connection with any of the above churches or with any other Mennonite group in America. It is known as the United Mennonite Church and will be considered in the following chapter.

¹ Ibid.
The United Mennonite Church of Omaha came into existence as a direct result of the influx of Mennonites to Omaha following the establishing of Grace Bible Institute in 1913. At the time there was no regularly organized Mennonite church in the city, although the United Missionary Church, described in the last chapter, maintained a small mission in South Omaha. The mission did not hold a strong appeal to the faculty and students, however, and was discontinued shortly after the opening of the school.

For nearly three years the faculty and students of the Grace Bible Institute attended churches of various non-Mennonite denominations in Omaha. The desire for a regular meeting place, however, was voiced by those with families and by others who preferred to have their own church. Consequently, on May 21, 1916, an organizational meeting was convened with J. J. Esau, field representative of the Grace Bible Institute, as chairman, and a church was organized.

At the very first meeting several important and unique policies were adopted. In the first place, it was agreed that there should be no regular membership in the church but that it should rather be a fellowship open to all who cared to attend. In part, this decision was occasioned by the desire of most
students to leave their membership in their home churches while attending school. Faculty members also hesitated to withdraw their memberships by letter from their home churches and denominations. Such a step would have been considered tantamount to withdrawing from further connections with the denomination.

In the second place, it was agreed not to make an issue of denominational differences. For example, personal preference in each case was to determine the form of baptism. Communion services, twice a year, were to be conducted with ministers of various Mennonite denominations in charge. Speakers for Sunday morning services were to be drawn largely from the faculty of the school.

The first church committee elected consisted of John Schrag, chairman, and A. C. Siebert and Ernest Baerger, members. These directed the work for two years. At the May 16, 1946, business meeting a call was extended to J. J. Esau to serve as part-time minister of the church. He accepted, and served the church for three years. Under his leadership the Sunday School organization was expanded, young people's meetings were begun, and a church library was established.

As Grace Bible Institute again desired to have the full-time services of J. J. Esau as field representative, it was decided at the May 20, 1951, meeting to extend a call to Dan Toavs of Lynden Washington, to serve as full-time pastor. He accepted the call and is the present minister. Under his leadership the work has continued to prosper and grow.

Attendance at Sunday morning services has varied from
one hundred to three hundred. While approximately 450 Mennonites have been drawn to Omaha through the establishment of Grace Bible Institute, not nearly all are able to attend each Sunday. Many students regularly serve in other churches. In turn, individuals of other churches occasionally attend the United Mennonite Church.

The church is not officially connected with Grace Bible Institute and it owns no property; however, it rents the auditorium of the Grace Bible Institute. (See illustration, page 107.) A unique situation also exists in that the church is not affiliated with any branch of the Mennonites. Since individuals of a number of Mennonite groups attend, no effort has been made to destroy the harmony which exists by an attempt to establish an official connection with some group. It seems that those who attend prefer to remain loyal each to his own denomination.¹

The story of this unusual organization completes the study of the twenty-eight individual Mennonite congregations and churches in Nebraska. The religious activities of the Mennonites do not, however, tell the whole story. The Mennonites have also been active in founding and operating a number of institutions, all of which have contributed to the physical and spiritual well-being of the citizens of the state. A brief history of these institutions is given in the chapter immediately following.

¹ Details of this account are gleaned from minutes of church meetings as well as personal associations with the work.
CHAPTER IX

MENNONITE INSTITUTIONS IN NEBRASKA

Since most branches of the Mennonites follow the congregational form of government, there are few institutions sponsored by the denominations as such. Generally each local church, or a group of cooperating local churches, must plan, establish, and finance any undertaking. Then also, much is left to personal initiative, so that it is not uncommon for an individual or a group of individuals to seek to promote some project of value in the community.

In Nebraska there are a number of such endeavors. There are two hospitals, an old people's home, a children's home, a radio broadcasting organization, and an educational institution. The hospital in Beatrice is sponsored by the two Mennonite churches; the hospital in Henderson is a community project, but since the community is largely Mennonite and the board is almost entirely Mennonite, it too may be classed as a Mennonite enterprise. The old people's home in Geneva is a project of the Nebraska churches of the "Old" Mennonite denomination and it comes closest to being a denominational undertaking. The children's home in Henderson is a personal undertaking of a Mennonite minister, and it receives the support not only of the community but also of various non-Mennonite denominations both in Nebraska.
and outstate. The radio broadcasting association in Lincoln is again a personal undertaking by a Mennonite minister. It enjoys the financial support of a world-wide listening audience, and seeks to minister to the spiritual needs of men and women of all denominations. Finally, the educational institution in Omaha is promoted by men of several branches of the Mennonites, supported largely by individual Mennonites on a nation-wide basis, and has a student body that is three-fourths Mennonite, though it is officially sponsored by no denominational group of Mennonites.

Given below is a table showing the location and date of organization of each of the above mentioned institutions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date Founded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mennonite Deaconess Home and Hospital</td>
<td>Beatrice</td>
<td>1911</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henderson Community Hospital</td>
<td>Henderson</td>
<td>March, 1930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace Children's Home</td>
<td>Henderson</td>
<td>1936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunset Home for the Aged</td>
<td>Geneva</td>
<td>July, 1950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back to the Bible Broadcast</td>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>1943</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace Bible Institute</td>
<td>Omaha</td>
<td>1943</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mennonite Deaconess Home and Hospital

A jubilee celebration on January 27, 1905, by members of the Beatrice Mennonite community, commemorating twenty-five years of service of Gerhard Penner, led to a desire to give some concrete expression to the "spirit of thanksgiving and praise" evident that day. The result was the appointment of a hospital board to study the possibilities and eventually to make concrete recommendations for the establishment of a community hospital.

The board appointed consisted of the following: Gerhard Penner, chairman, J. Henry Penner, secretary, Herman Wiebe, treasurer,
A city block, northeast of the center of town, was donated for the project by Peter Jansen, who lived in a palatial home across the street from the proposed hospital grounds. Cost of construction was to be born by subscription among members of the church. Some help was received from the Western District Conference and from the Henderson community. Building operations were started in September, 1910. The hospital, costing about $25,000, was built of brick and accommodated thirty beds, although in times of necessity more than forty patients have been admitted. (See illustration, page 117.) It was equipped with the most modern operating and delivery rooms and had X-ray and laboratory facilities. On July 16, 1911, the building was completed, dedicated, and committed to a small group of deaconesses (nurses) for supervision and operation. The first superintendent was Marie Wedel who had received her training in the Evangelical Hospital in St. Louis. She was followed in that position by Katie Penner and later by Elisa Hirshler.

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1 Anniversary Booklet, Beatrice, 1876-1951, p. 16.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Statements of Sister Elizabeth Wiebe, the only surviving original nurse; personal interview, January, 1953.
5 Anniversary Booklet, Beatrice, op. cit., p. 16.
6 Statement of Sister Elizabeth Wiebe.
The hospital renders a variety of services. While the hospital is not an old people's home, it is not uncommon for some helpless, aged individual to spend his last days at the hospital. The hospital also trains nurse's aids. For the accommodations of the deaconesses and student nurses, a large frame Deaconess Home was built adjoining the hospital. (See illustration, page 117.) The home is a two-story building with five private bedrooms downstairs and eight double bedrooms upstairs. On the lower floor also will be found a chapel to accommodate small gatherings. The grounds are beautifully landscaped and maintained.

Seven deaconesses assisted by trained nurses and domestic help were carrying on the work in 1951. They were Sisters Elizabeth Wiebe, Alice Epp, Sarah Rempel, Emilie Penner, Marie Penner, Lizzie Graber, and Lena Heer. Since January, 1953, the operation and support of the project has been assumed jointly by the two Mennonite churches in the community. The present superintendent is Miss Elizabeth Frey and the business administrator is Edward F. Zehr. In the past year (1952) the hospital has served over one thousand patients.

The Mennonite Deaconess Hospital is the oldest institution in Nebraska, and, as a hospital, even today serves more people than another one recently established in the community of Henderson.

1 Anniversary Booklet, Beatrice, op. cit., p. 16.
2 Statements of Sister Elizabeth Wiebe.
Henderson Community Hospital

For years the Henderson community had to struggle with weather and worn roads to seek medical aid. The nearest doctors were in Hampton, twelve miles northwest, or in York, eighteen miles northeast. It was in 1946 that the community, spearheaded by the Henderson Commercial Club, began to think seriously of taking steps to bring a doctor to the town.\(^1\) Having contacted many physicians, they had become familiar with the answer, "If you'll build a hospital, I'll come."\(^2\) A planning committee conducted a "feeler drive" in the Henderson area in 1947 and collected $23,000 towards a proposed hospital.\(^3\) A young doctor, Wendell D. Hamlin, promised to move to Henderson upon completion of his internship in Lincoln.\(^4\) A superintendent was found in Ruth Adrian, R.N., from Hutchinson, Kansas.

With the project now a distinct possibility, the hospital planning committee was reorganized into a hospital board. Officers of the board were Daniel Thieszen, chairman, H. D. Epp, secretary, and Herman Goertzen, treasurer. Other members were J. D. Epp, Dr. E. R. Hisner, J. J. Hubert, George F. Epp, William F. Siebert, and George F. Penner.\(^5\)

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2. Dakota County Star, Dakota City, Nebraska, June, 1950.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
association could be gained by a $50 donation. The board now sponsored a second "drive" which brought $15,000. In all six money raising campaigns resulted in a total of $101,000 in contributions. Approximately $40,000 additional was needed for equipment. Of this amount about one-half was raised in a subsequent campaign, while 53 per cent was subsidized by the Federal government as permitted under an act of Congress. Donations ranged from one dollar up. One person gave three thousand dollars while another dozen gave one thousand dollars each. The solicitors had been carefully instructed not to use high-pressure methods, but of five hundred families contacted during one of the drives, there was scarcely a single home that did not contribute something.

Work on the hospital was begun on August 10, 1918, as one hundred men with picks and shovels and twenty-five tractors excavated the basement in four hours. In November, 1948, the foundation was poured, and the work of construction continued through 1949. The building was finally dedicated on July 2, 1950, at a religious service in which ministers from each of the three Mennonite churches of Henderson took part. The first patient was admitted seven days later.

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1 Dakota County Star, June, 1950.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
6 Statements of Ruth Adrian, R.H., personal interview, January, 1953.
The hospital was constructed of brick in the form of a "T", and consisted of eight rooms with thirteen beds, three of which were in private rooms. (See illustration, page 117.) The building was equipped with a completely modern operating room and a delivery room, as well as a comfortable waiting room. Patients' rooms are each painted with a different color scheme and have venetian blinds in modern windows. In every respect the plant is modern and well equipped.

During the past two and one-half years the hospital has proved itself a real asset to the community. One editor expressed it as follows: "Henderson wanted a place for the sick of their community. They wanted a doctor to care for them. And now they have both."¹

Besides taking care of the sick, Henderson also has the facilities for looking after the needs of unfortunate children in another institution somewhat older than the hospital—the Grace Children's Home.

Grace Children's Home

The Grace Children's Home was established in Henderson on August 11, 1936, by a group of men and women under the leadership of a Mennonite minister, John R. Barkman. It was incorporated as a licensed child-caring institution under the laws of the State of Nebraska in 1930.²

¹ Dakota County Star, June, 1950.
² "The Story of How We Live at Grace Children's Home," no date. This is a small folder published by the Grace Children's Home, Henderson, Nebraska.
Its purpose is to provide a home for boys and girls who for various reasons need to be sheltered and helped in an institution. Most of the children are young when received and they remain from a few months to many years. The goal ultimately is to find a Christian home which will adopt them and provide for them the care and love which they deserve. ¹

The first building of the Home on the southwest corner of town, had five rooms. Shortly thereafter an adjoining building providing five more rooms was acquired. In 1945 the Home moved to its present location on the south edge of town. The administration building was built that year, and today there are a total of six residential buildings. ² (See illustration, page 117.)

With the exception of the founder and director, the personnel of the home changed considerably during the years. J. R. Barkman, who supervised the work since its inception, except for two years while he was superintendent of the Oklahoma Bible Academy in Mcale, Oklahoma, 1940-1942, shouldered the main burden of the growth and development of the work. From 1936 to 1938 Katherine Fenner and Gertrude Fenner looked after the welfare of the children. Since that time, hired help has been used. Marie Warkentin was with the work twelve years. Others who worked seven or more years include Lillian Schroeder, Anna Klaassen, Anna Fast, Myrna Gage, and Miss Becker. ³

¹ Statements of John R. Barkman, personal interview, December, 1952.
² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
The Home though directed and staffed by Mennonites does not derive its support from Mennonites exclusively. In fact, its purpose is to serve the needs of the community and of the state without distinction of race or creed. By far the majority of the several hundred children, who through the years have found a temporary haven in the Home, have come from non-Mennonite homes.\(^1\)

The Home is well staffed by qualified workers. At least half of the workers have a college education. The superintendent claims that it has a larger staff proportionately than similar homes in the state.\(^2\) The cause, no doubt, may be found in the fact that the children are cared for in small groups of six children to a "family." In this way each group has its "mother," and receives the individual love and care so necessary to a balanced development of personality.\(^3\)

The Home seeks to supply its own needs in so far as labor and food products are concerned. It owns fourteen acres of land adjoining the buildings where feed is raised for the ten milk cows and for the steers which supply the meat. All the cream and butter are locally produced. The labor is supplied by the children of the Home. Each group of children, each "family," is assigned a regular portion of work, and each thereby contributes to the operation and support of the Home.\(^4\)

\(^1\) *How We Live at Grace Children's Home*, Henderson, Nebraska, *Grace Children's Home*, 1952, p. 23.

\(^2\) Statements of J. R. Barkman.

\(^3\) *How We Live*, op. cit. pp. 4, 5.

\(^4\) Statements of J. R. Barkman.
In April, 1952, a new venture was launched in connection with the Home, an Old People's Home. The building so occupied has room for fourteen guests, though by the end of 1952 only seven had been admitted. There are three nurses, each on eight hour duty, providing day and night service to the inmates. The Old People's Home enjoys considerable support from the community since a number of the local aged are quite helpless and need constant care in an institution. The work carried on among these old people of Henderson is in many respects similar to that of the "Old" Mennonites in Geneva.

Sunset Home for the Aged

Sunset Home for the Aged is an institution owned and operated by the Nebraska Mennonite Mission and Benevolent Board, Inc., a non-profit corporation under the laws of the State of Nebraska sponsored by the "Old" Mennonite churches of the state. Its object is "to provide a comfortable home for the aged who are unable to care for themselves." The Home is located five and one-half miles southwest of Geneva or about six and one-half miles north of the Shickley Salem Mennonite Church.

The Fillmore County Home, as it was previously called, was purchased by the Nebraska churches at public auction on April 6, 1919, for the sum of $25,900. Nine hundred dollars were donated by two banks and one individual, leaving the churches

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1 Ibid.

2 Constitution and By-laws of the Sunset Home for the Aged, Nebraska Mennonite Mission and Benevolent Board. (No date)
obligated for the remaining $25,000. Previous to this sale the county had operated the home at a considerable loss as a result of the small number of inmates who took advantage of the services offered.

The main building had been constructed in 1943 after a previous one burned to the ground. It was made of brick, had a full basement and measured seventy feet. (See illustration, page 126.) It would accommodate eleven old people besides providing living quarters for a nurse. North of the main building there was a two-room house which provided living quarters for the superintendent and matron. Other buildings included two chickenhouses, a double garage, a barn, a pit silo, and about six smaller buildings and sheds. The Home was located on a farm of 160 acres of which thirty acres were pasture.

On April 19 a board was formed at a meeting of ministers and representatives of the Nebraska churches. On the following day, Articles of Incorporation were drawn up and signed. The first board of directors consisted of John P. Troyer, chairman, Lee Schlegel, treasurer, Ammon Miller, secretary, Ernest Kauffman, soliciting agent, and John Schweitzer, fifth member. Plans were laid to open the institution by March, 1949. Abraham Troyer and his wife were engaged to serve as superintendent and matron.

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2 Ibid., March, 1949.
3 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
respectively, and an appeal was sent out for donations to total from $2,000 to $2,500 in order to equip the home for suitable operation.¹

Finally, "On Thursday, March 9, A. L. Troyer as superintendent and Mrs. A. L. Troyer as cook moved into the Home. On March 14, we accepted our first guest, Ernest Schneider. On March 20, Mabel Gingerich of Ayr, Nebraska, came to be practical nurse."² Before the end of March two others entered the home as inmates, and within a few months the home was filled. Officially, the Home was dedicated in a Sunday afternoon service on May 28, 1950.³

At present nine old people occupy the Home. Mr. and Mrs. Sam Shantz have served as superintendent and matron respectively since April, 1951, while Mabel Gingerich has served continuously as nurse. The present board of directors consists of Joe Kennel, Wes Stutzman, and William Kremer. The home is open to those of any race or creed, and to date a total of fourteen have availed themselves of its services.⁴

Back to the Bible Broadcast

An institution of an entirely different character is the Back to the Bible Broadcast, which originates a large chain of radio broadcasts from Lincoln, Nebraska. Its founder and

¹ Ibid., March, 1950.  
² Ibid., May, 1950.  
³ Ibid.  
⁴ Statements of Sam Shantz and Mabel Gingerich, personal interview, September, 1952.
director is Theodore H. Epp, who was born in a General Conference Mennonite mission field among the Hopi Indians in Arizona of Mennonite parents.\(^1\) In 1939 he began broadcasting from Lincoln on a small scale, the next year he transferred to Grand Island, and finally he was invited back to Lincoln by Nebraska's most powerful station, K.F.A.F.\(^2\) While the broadcast itself has no official connection with any Mennonite group, it employs many Mennonite men and women, and its director and his wife maintain a connection with the General Conference Mennonite Church.

In a well equipped modern studio a group of approximately 125 persons work together to originate the broadcasts, to reply to hundreds of daily letters, to publish several monthly periodicals and Bible study courses,\(^3\) and regularly to support more than a hundred missionaries in foreign countries. It is said that the Back to the Bible Broadcast is the largest religious radio broadcast in the world, sending out the Gospel six days a week and by tape releasing more than six hundred broadcasts each week. As special missionary projects it raised $10,000 for building a mission headquarters in Africa, and another $13,000 for equipping a radio station on the same continent. On one occasion it raised $20,000 within two weeks to pay the

\(^{1}\) Ernest E. Lott, Sowing the Seed, (Lincoln, Nebraska: Back to the Bible Broadcast, no date), p. h.

\(^{2}\) Ibid., pp. 7-9.

\(^{3}\) The periodicals are the Young Ambassador and the Good News Broadcaster which have a combined monthly circulation of 125,000. Approximately 125,000 Bible study courses have been sent to enrollees.
transportation of a special group of missionaries to Africa. ¹

After being crowded out repeatedly in quarters which were too small, the organization in 1952 acquired a building with some 46,000 square feet of office space in the heart of the business district of Lincoln. ² (See illustration, page 126.) It contains a studio, print shop, mailing rooms, several rooms of files, a large stenographic and secretarial department, a prayer room, a lunch room, as well as offices for the director and his associates.³ In the words of the director, the phenomenal growth and development of the work has been the result of "adventuring by faith."⁴

In its outreach to bring hope and comfort to the heathen in other continents and to many in this country, the Back to the Bible Broadcast closely resembles in scope the aim and purpose of a final institution in Nebraska—Grace Bible Institute. The partial similarity in name indicates a similarity of purpose. A brief survey of the history of the latter institution follows.

Grace Bible Institute

On July 1, 1943, ten Mennonite ministers, who in their correspondence had shown interest in the establishment of a Bible school, met in Omaha to consider the possibility of setting up

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¹ Lott, op. cit., p. 13.
³ Lott, op. cit., p. 31.
⁴ Epp, op. cit., p. 72.
such an institution. While a number of Mennonite colleges were in existence, there was no school which adequately prepared the young men and women for full-time Christian service at home and abroad. It was felt that a school with a strong Bible major would draw many students of the denominations to its classrooms and provide a type of training which until that time could only be acquired in non-Mennonite Bible schools.

Soon after arriving in Omaha it was discovered that the Presbytery Theological Seminary had decided to close its doors, and its facilities were offered to the group for one year for the cost of maintaining the insurance of the building. The offer of the Seminary board at once appealed to the group and the central location of Omaha became a strong incentive for locating the school in that city.

Present at the first meeting were J. R. Barkman, Henderson, Nebraska; H. D. Burkholder, Quakertown, Pennsylvania; Albert Ewert, Lustre, Montana; August Ewert, Mountain Lake, Minnesota; P. A. Kliwer, Albany, Oregon; Paul Kuhlmann, Jeno, Oklahoma; Solomon Mouttel, Inola, Oklahoma; Albert Schultz, Butterfield, Minnesota; C. H. Suckau, D.D., Berne, Indiana; J. A. Tieszen, Marion, South Dakota. Much preliminary planning was done at this meeting and it was agreed to meet again a month later.

During the second meeting which assembled on July 5, a lease for the Seminary building was signed, a beginning was made toward engaging a faculty, and a doctrinal statement and a

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1 C. H. Suckau, A Miracle of God's Grace, (Omaha, Nebraska: Grace Bible Institute, 19—), pp. 13-16.
 constitution were adopted. The date for the opening of school was set as September 3, 1963, and a program was drawn up for the solicitation of students. Since the lease for the Seminary was only for one year, the group also at that meeting began to make plans for the purchase of a building which would meet the needs of the new institution. The most promising prospect was "Stuntz Hall," formerly "Brownell Hall," but, as the group had no funds available for the purchase of so large a building, it was decided to postpone action until the September meeting.

On September 3 the ministers who had assembled pooled their resources and were able to pay one thousand dollars down on an offer of $23,000 for "Stuntz Hall." Since the offer was accepted by the owners, an intensive advertising and solicitation program was launched in an attempt to raise the remaining $21,000 by February 1, 1964. The deadline was met, and on February 3, 1964, the purchase was consummated. The price included all furniture and fixtures. On March 25 of the same year, the student body and faculty united in moving from the Seminary to the new location on South Tenth Street. (See illustration, page 126.)

On the opening day of school, September 3, 1963, eighteen students registered with a faculty of five members. The faculty consisted of Paul Kuhlmann, acting president, John R. Dick, Dean of Men, Hoscolla Toave, Dean of Women, and Mr. and Mrs. C. H. George, faculty members. On January 1, 1964, C. H. Suckau, D.D.,

\[\text{1 Ibid. pp. 21, 22.} \quad \text{2 Ibid., p. 22-23.} \quad \text{3 Ibid., pp. 28, 29.} \quad \text{4 Paul Kuhlmann, "Opening of Grace Bible Institute," Grace Tidings, October, 1963, pp. 1, 2.} \]
pastor of the largest Mennonite church in America at Berne, Indiana, joined the group as the first president. The student body grew to twenty-three by the close of the fall registration, and to forty at the beginning of the second semester. The following year ninety-three registered while the enrollment climbed to 168 students by the fall of 1955. In 1956 the total was 278, in 1957 it rose to 312, and, finally it climbed to an all-time peak of 331 in 1958. The enrollment for the school year 1952-53 stands at 306, and the faculty has increased to twenty members. The school today boasts a well-trained faculty, a majority of whom hold graduate degrees. The president of the school since 1951 has been Harold D. Burkholder.

In the first few years a number of buildings were purchased, and, during the summer of 1949, the basement portion of a large gymnasium-chapel was completed. The net worth of the school in 1953 was over $300,000.

The curriculum of the school consists of the usual basic general educational courses common to liberal arts colleges upon which broad foundation is added a Bible major. Minors are offered in Christian Education, Missions, Music, Theology, and Psychology and Philosophy. The four-year program leads to the Bachelor of

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1 Grace Tidings, November, 1953, p. 2.
2 Catalog of Grace Bible Institute, 1951-53, (Omaha, Nebraska, 1951, p. 7).
5 Ibid., p. 8. 6 Ibid., p. 38.
Arts degree. Graduation requirements include the completion of 126 semester hours with an equal number of grade points. The school is accredited by the Accrediting Association of Bible Institutes and Bible Colleges (Collegiate Level) and in January, 1953, was recognized by the University of Nebraska as a four-year institution, class B. In February 1953 it was received into membership in the Nebraska Association of Colleges and Universities.

Since the purpose of the school is to train lay workers, church leaders, directors of Christian education, and foreign missionaries, emphasis is placed upon practical training as well as classroom instruction. The school maintains an employment department closely supervising and guiding all contacts of students with their employers. It also maintains a Christian service department through which students are given assignments in churches, Sunday Schools, jails, hospitals, and missions, for experience in various types of religious and social work. Records show that 50 per cent of the alumni members are today engaged in home and foreign church and missionary service under a variety of organizations.

While the school is Mennonite in perspective, it has no direct connection with any of the Mennonite denominations in Nebraska or elsewhere. Its present student body comes from twenty states and three foreign countries and from about

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1 Catalog of Grace Bible Institute, 1953-'54, (Omaha, Nebraska, 1953), p. 15.

2 Catalog of Grace Bible Institute, 1951-'53, p. 9.
twenty-five different denominations, both Mennonite and non-Mennonite.\textsuperscript{1} Operating costs of the school are met by a tuition fee of five dollars per credit and through the freewill gifts and offerings of interested individuals.\textsuperscript{2} The school will complete its tenth year of operation in June, 1953. It is at present the only Mennonite educational institution of either elementary, secondary, or collegiate level operating in Nebraska, and is one of seven higher educational institutions sponsored by Mennonites in the United States.\textsuperscript{3}

The six Mennonite institutions described above are typical of the community interests of individuals and of the various churches. They cover to some degree the greatest needs represented in any locality. Services are rendered to the young and the old, those who are ill, and those who are striving for wisdom and learning. The Mennonites have grasped at every opportunity, it seems, to provide worthwhile services for themselves and for others of their community.

\textsuperscript{1} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 65. \textsuperscript{2} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 21, 72.

\textsuperscript{3} Other four-year institutions are Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas, Eastern Mennonite School, Harrisonburg, Virginia, Tabor College, Hillsboro, Kansas, Bluffton College, Bluffton, Ohio, Pacific Bible Institute, Fresno, California
The story of the settlement of Nebraska by the Mennonites began almost eighty years ago. It was in 1873 that the Committee of Twelve first visited the state on a tour of exploration. It was that same year that the first three families made the first permanent settlement of Mennonites near Milford. From that small beginning Mennonites from the eastern states came in increasing numbers and they were joined by other groups from Russia and Prussia in the following years.

As the number of immigrants increased, the pressure upon the available land area became so great that some moved farther west and settled localities in the central and western portions of the state. Since nearly all were engaged in agricultural occupations, their welfare and the prosperity of their farms depended much upon favorable climatic conditions. Years of drought caused large numbers to leave the state, while years of plenty attracted others back to Nebraska.

Wherever settlements were made concern for the religious welfare of the people was noticeable. Churches were built in many instances almost as soon as homes had been provided. Ministers were called and ordained and regular services scheduled. Customs brought from Europe were usually nurtured, and, by early training,
an effort was made to perpetuate them. The German language was widely used in the early years though at present only two congregations still have a Sunday School class for the older folks in that language.

It remains in conclusion to trace a few of the trends and characteristics of these early settlers in order to summarize the growth of the Mennonite population in Nebraska, the areas in which they have settled, the nature of their church organizations, the sincerity of their faith and practice, and finally some of the basic traits of their social life.

Population Trends

While Nebraska has slightly less than one per cent of the population of the nation, within its boundaries will be found 2.55 per cent of the Mennonites living in the United States.\(^1\) The Mennonite population of Nebraska is approximately 0.3 per cent of the total population of the state. This percentage is almost equivalent to that in Pennsylvania and Indiana and is exceeded only by the 0.75 per cent of Kansas.\(^2\) Census reports since 1906 include a denominational report of the Mennonites

\(^1\) The 1950 census figures as listed in the World Almanac, 1953, give the national total as 150,697,361 and the Nebraska population as 1,225,510, p. 369.

\(^2\) According to the latest information obtainable, 1936 Bureau of the Census reports of religious bodies, states, which have more Mennonites than Nebraska are in order: Pennsylvania, Kansas, Ohio, Indiana, Oklahoma, and Iowa.

\(^3\) Figures are based on the totals given in Religious Census, 1936, op. cit., chapter on Mennonite bodies.
and indicate that, as a whole, the settlements have prospered and
increased. The total of all Mennonites in Nebraska has more than
tripled since 1906. The general trend has been upward, both in
membership, and in the number of churches.

There are numerous signs of a renewed vitality in Mennonite
settlements in recent years. A few examples are the construction
of a beautiful modern church edifice in Beatrice, the new Henderson
Community Hospital, the recent Sunset Home for the Aged, the
agitation among the "Old" Mennonites to establish an academy in
Milford, and the construction of a new church in Lincoln by the
United Missionary church.

There is also noticeable a general upward trend of Mennonite
population within the state. The table on the following page
summarizes the census reports of 1906, 1916, 1926, and 1936 as to
the number of churches and the membership.\(^1\) To these are added
the figures of churches and membership of 1952 as determined by
the questionnaire submitted to the various churches by the writer.
The table shows the total denominational membership of each branch
of Mennonites in the nation according to the 1953 World Almanac
and finally, the percentage of each group as found in Nebraska are
given. The totals for each column summarize the overall picture
under the several headings. With the exception of a decline
between the years 1916 to 1926, which include the years immediately
following World War I, the trend has generally been upward.

## Comparison of Denominations in Nebraska, 1906 - 1952

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denominations in Nebr.</th>
<th>Churches in Nebraska</th>
<th>Membership in Nebraska</th>
<th>National Membership</th>
<th>Per cent in Nebr.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1916</td>
<td>1926</td>
<td>1936</td>
<td>1952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Conference¹</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Old&quot; Menn. Church</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hennonite Brethren</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evang. Menn. Brethren</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Missionary²</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Mennon. Church</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ Includes one Central Conference Church in 1926 and 1936 (Aurora).

² Listed by the Census Bureau as the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church previous to and including 1936.

³ This total includes all nineteen Mennonite denominations in the United States.
Areas of Settlement

Since the Mennonites are predominantly agricultural, their settlements were generally in the areas of the better farm land. There is a noticeable concentration of churches in south-eastern Nebraska in the belt of more abundant rainfall and more productive soil. With the exception of the Broken Bow settlement which lies along a rather fertile valley, the churches completely avoid the sand hills area of central and northern Nebraska. A small concentration surrounds the northeastern corner of Colorado. The map appended indicates the areas of settlement. Where more than one church is found in an area a figure indicates the number.

Not only have the Mennonites carefully chosen their lands, but have diligently worked the soil and in various ways brought about a degree of prosperity. Dorothy Thompson, after visiting a Mennonite community recently observed, "Wherever they have settled, the land has bloomed and comely settlements have sprung up. Always they have created substantial, stable, moderate prosperity."¹

Church Government

All of the Mennonite denominations theoretically subscribe to a congregational form of government though there is some deviation in practice. Each local church has the right to

DISTRIBUTION OF RURAL SETTLEMENTS IN NEBRASKA

Areas of settlement are circled in red. Figures indicate number of churches in areas which have more than one church.
determine its course in any line of action. Ministers are usually chosen by the local congregation. All of the churches, except the United Mennonite Church of Omaha, are members of some conference through which they seek fellowship with other groups, and the common projects of which they support. In the General Conference, the Mennonite Brethren, and the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren churches each group is completely autonomous. The United Missionary Church most nearly approximates a semi-episcopal form of government since it employs a district superintendent to oversee and advise the work of the various congregations and an executive committee to appoint all ministers for a term of one year. It also, as a conference, owns all church property. The "Old" Mennonites have bishops whose duty it is to supervise the smaller churches and who perform the religious rites of the church.

Faith and Practice

In doctrine and theology there is relatively little difference between the several groups. All are basically Biblical and may be classed as conservative evangelical Protestant bodies. All groups accept the doctrine of the personal return of Christ, but they are sharply divided as to the time and mode of His coming. Members of the Mennonite Brethren, the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren and the United Missionary churches are nearly all pre-millennial; those of the General Conference are divided; while nearly all of the "Old" Mennonites are a-millennial. In such matters as the Trinity, the virgin birth and deity of Christ,
the Atonement, the origin of sin, salvation by faith in Christ, and immortality there is nearly universal agreement.

The differences in the outward expression of their faith are perhaps more evident. While all believe in adult baptism upon the confession of faith, they differ as to the mode or form to be followed. Several churches, and this does not always follow denominational lines, practice foot-washing in connection with the communion service. All are officially opposed to drinking and smoking even with moderation. By some, church discipline is more rigidly enforced than by others, the strictest perhaps being the "Old" Mennonite Church which occasionally practices excommunication and places the unrepentant under the ban. Practically all oppose the oath, and, rather than to swear, will write in the words, "I affirm," on legal documents.

Considerable difference of opinion is evident among individuals within the several groups on the question of military service. Perhaps a majority, particularly of the older generation, are still opposed to any type of military service. Among the younger generation the conviction is no longer quite so universal. There are many who, contrary to the official position of the church, are willing to settle for non-combatant service as a compromise.

Of interest in this connection is a recent public statement issued by representatives of a number of "Old" Mennonite churches concerning the loyalty oaths. It reads in part:

We, the ministerial body of the Mennonite Church in Nebraska assembled in Broken Bow, Nebr., Dec. 6, 1951, do hereby declare ourselves to be conscientiously opposed to some of the features of the loyalty oath ... This oath directly violates two of the tenets of our
faith which we have stood for over four centuries; first, in that it involves the swearing of an oath, which we consider contrary to the teachings of Christ, and secondly, in that the promise to defend the constitution violates our conscientious objection to participation in warfare.¹

The article goes on to assure the state and county officials of the desire to loyally support and obey the government and to have no part in any subversive activities which might advocate the overthrow of our government.

A difference also is noticeable in the customs of each church. The "Old" Mennonites, for example, do not use musical instruments in their churches, and the women wear small white prayer caps during worship. They choose a minister for life usually by lot from the congregation. They pay him no salary but expect his services gratis in return for the honor accorded him. In clothing, emphasis is upon plainness of dress and the refusal to use bodily adornment, for they say, "bodily ornamentation really is a sin before God, and it has serious effects on the spiritual life of people who indulge in it."²

While the group is quite conservative, it does allow women to vote in church business meetings, but in practice they rarely avail themselves of the opportunity.

Other Mennonite bodies of Nebraska have few dress or other restrictions, and as a whole their members are hardly distinguishable from other citizens of the community. So far as the writer has been able to determine, there are at present no

¹ Missionary Challenge, December, 1931, p. 22.
Mennonites living within Nebraska who wear long beards for conscientious reasons, or who wear "hooks and eyes" in place of buttons.

Social Life

As a rule Mennonites have opposed drinking, smoking, attendance at motion pictures and theaters, and dancing. Considerable smoking was customary among some of the early settlers but it usually was not considered to be in good taste to do so. In recent years the church has become stricter in frowning upon the use of tobacco. Dancing and movie attendance is still considered by a majority of churches to be detrimental to the spiritual welfare of the members, as is also the use of television.

Perhaps as a result of their deliberate policy of isolation from outside influences and of a strict moral code within the group, divorce and illegitimacy are comparatively rare. In such matters church discipline is severe. The feeling varies in matters of intermarriage with others. Some still limit marriage to those within the denomination, while others have few restrictions. In the matter of intermarriage with those of other denominations the "Old" Mennonite Church have remained the most conservative, while the United Missionary Church is the most liberal. No doubt the cause lies in the fact that the former are more exclusive, having but little association with those outside the church, while the latter reach out continually in an effort to bring in others into their fellowship.
Great emphasis is placed upon the cultivation of goodwill among relatives and friends by all groups. Sundays are traditionally days for visiting. "Second holidays," particularly the day after Christmas, Easter or Pentecost, are convenient arrangements to foster this social life. No doubt family ties are strengthened by these group gatherings. However, the impact of modern standards of living are making great inroads upon all the traditional customs of the Mennonites.

In conclusion it may be said that a tour through a typical Mennonite settlement in Nebraska today would hardly leave the visitor impressed by any unusual or uncommon sights. Gone are the horse and buggy days and on the whole the wearing of any peculiar dress in public appearance. The farms are equipped with modern tractors and implements, and buildings and homes are fully modern.

The Mennonites in Nebraska today give every evidence of being a progressive group of hard working people, desirous of being a credit to the state which welcomed them when they were forced, for conscience sake, to leave their homes in Europe. The consciousness of the favors received is evidenced by frequent prayers that God would bless the land which has received them. Nebraska, in turn, owes them a debt of gratitude for their contribution to the material welfare and spiritual well-being of the state.
APPENDIX

Sample of questionnaire sent to Mennonite Churches in Nebraska

SURVEY OF MENNONITE COMMUNITIES

Please answer questionnaire as accurately as possible. If insufficient space is provided, please do not hesitate to use reverse of sheet or separate paper. In larger communities a brief reply will at least provide some basis for further investigation. Some replies will of necessity need to be estimated. In the interest of historical accuracy, however, it will be appreciated if all such estimates are indicated by starting with an asterisk.

I. Identification

1. Official name of church or group _________________________

2. Address ______________________________________________________

3. Denominational affiliation ________________________________

4. District of denomination (if any) ________________

5. Present pastor's name and address ________________________

   ____________________________________________________________

6. Has your group ever held another name or been affiliated with another denomination? ________________________________

II. History of Settlement

1. Date when community was first settled by Mennonites

   ____________________

2. Size of the original founding group (including children)

   ____________________

3. From where did the first settlers come? ________________

4. What was their original nationality? ____________________

5. Why did they settle in your community? ____________________

   ____________________________________________________________
6. Name some of the leaders

7. How and from whom was first land acquired?

8. From where and when did subsequent migrations (if any) come?

9. Did they settle near first group?

10. Name some of these subsequent leaders

III. Church Organization

1. When was church first organized?

2. How many charter members?

3. What is the present baptized membership?

4. Size of present Mennonite community (including children)

5. Names of previous ministers with dates in office

6. Since when has the minister been salaried?

IV. Church Property

1. Do you now own your own church building?

2. When built or acquired?

3. How acquired?

4. Type of building

5. Seating capacity

6. Location of church building from nearest town

(If the present is not your original building, please answer above questions on the reverse side for each of the previous buildings.)
V. Education

1. Have any attempts been made to establish your own schools? ____________

2. If so, briefly state when, size, growth, success, etc.,
   ___________________________________________________________________

3. How many college graduates do you estimate are today in your congregation? ______

VI. Activities

1. How many services are ordinarily conducted per week ______

2. Indicate what services ____________________________________________

3. Are any still conducted in German? ____ If not, when discontinued? _______

4. Have any missionaries been sent out from your church ____
   How many? __________________________

5. Where are they serving? __________________________________________

6. Have any members held public offices? ____________________________

7. Have any members distinguished themselves by a special type of success? __________
   ______________________________________________

8. Has the Mennonite community sponsored any public services (hospital, relief, orphanage, etc.)? _________________

9. Have there been any outstanding business ventures? ______
   ___________________________________________________________________

VII. General Information

1. What percentage of the present membership do you estimate is not originally of Mennonite background? ________

2. What percentage of the present membership do you estimate
are employed in agriculture ____, business ____,
professions ____, other _________________

3. Can you refer me to anything in print about the history
of your community? ____________________________

_____________________________________________

4. Names of any surviving original settlers from whom
additional information might be obtained. ____________

_____________________________________________

5. Please summarize any special events of historic impor-
tance. _______________________________________

_____________________________________________

_____________________________________________

_____________________________________________

Information supplied by ________________

If you desire a summarization of this survey please
check here ______.

Please return to: Paul Kuhlmann
1515 South Tenth Street
Omaha 8, Nebraska
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Replies to Questionnaires

Kenneth Baker, Franklin and Bloomington, December, 1952. Minister of the United Missionary Church.

Raymond Butterfield, Dorchester, March, 1953. Minister of the United Missionary Church.


William R. Eicher, Milford, August, 1952. Minister of the "Old" Mennonite Church.


Alvin Gascho, Wood River, November, 1952. Minister of the "Old" Mennonite Church.

Charles Gray, Milford, March, 1953. Minister of the United Missionary Church.

C. E. Harder, Paxton, March, 1953. Pioneer settler; member of the Mennonite Brethren Church.

Peter R. Kennel, Shickley, August, 1952. Minister of the "Old" Mennonite Church.


Laverne Loewens, Paxton, March, 1953. Minister of the Mennonite Brethren Church.

Ammon Miller, Milford, January, 1953. Minister of the "Old" Mennonite Church.

Leo Miller, Beatrice, March, 1953. Interim minister of the Beatrice Mennonite Church.


Samuel Oswald, Beemer, March, 1953. Minister of the "Old" Mennonite Church.

Elmer I. Reimer, Jansen, October, 1952. Former minister of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church.


Herbert Roszhart, Aurora, August, 1952. Minister of the Central (General) Conference Mennonite Church.


Royden Schweitzer, Broken Bow, December, 1952. Minister of the "Old" Mennonite Church.


Mrs. Frank Stutzman, Chappell, August, 1952. Pioneer settler; Member of the "Old" Mennonite Church.
Frank G. Thomas, Henderson, August, 1952. Minister of the Evangelical Mennonite Church.

John P. Tschetter, Lewellen, September 1952. Minister of the United Missionary Church.


Personal Interviews

Ruth Adrian, R. N., January, 1953. Superintendent and head nurse of the Henderson Community Hospital.

Kenneth Baker, November, 1952. Minister of the United Missionary Church, Franklin.


Alvin Gascho, November, 1952. Minister of the "Old" Mennonite Church, Wood River.


Mrs. Minnie Lane, November, 1952. Pioneer settler, Franklin.

Ammon Miller, January, 1953. Minister of the "Old" Mennonite Church, Milford.

Sherman Hills, November, 1952. Minister of the United Missionary Church, Weeping Water.

Samuel Oswald, December, 1952. Bishop of the "Old" Mennonite Church, Beemer.

Abraham Schellenberg, August, 1952. Pioneer settler of Jansen area, now living in Madrid; member of the Mennonite Brethren Church.

L. O. Schlegel, October, 1952. Bishop of the "Old" Mennonite Church, Milford.

Sam Shantz, September, 1952. Superintendent of the Sunset Home for the Aged.

Dan Toavs, Omaha, January, 1953. Minister of the United Mennonite Church.

Sister Elizabeth Wiebe, January, 1953. Nurse in the Mennonite Deaconess Hospital, Beatrice.
