



Wennogesprach

Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario

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Benjamin Eby:

Pioneer Ontario Bishop-Teacher-Writer
by David Luthy

[We are pleased to reprint David Luthy's article on Benjamin Eby, originally published in *Family Life* (June, 1989). Luthy is the curator of the Heritage Historical Library located near Aylmer, Ontario. — editor]

To the average American a horse and buggy, black hats, and bonnets signify only one thing — the Amish. There are, however, several thousand plainly-dressed families using buggy transportation who are not Amish. They are Old Order Mennonites who live primarily in Pennsylvania, Ontario, Virginia, and Indiana with recently-established daughter settlements in Kentucky, Missouri, New York, Ohio, and Wisconsin. They are the descendants of conservative-minded members who separated from the more liberal Mennonites between 1872 and 1900 over such issues as stylish dress, Sunday Schools, English language, evangelistic meetings, higher education, and lax discipline.¹

While in the United States anyone wearing plain garb is generally referred to as "Amish," such is not the case in Canada. An Amishman in Ontario is more apt to be called a "Mennonite". This is because the Mennonites settled in Ontario two decades before the Amish and today greatly outnumber them. In picturesque Waterloo County, where Mennonites located as early as 1800, the Old Order Mennonites are a highly visible group living close to the twin cities of Kitchener-Waterloo. In 1989 — exactly one hundred years after their ancestors parted ways with the liberal Mennonites — their rural community has grown to include nearly 700 families worshipping in nine meetinghouses: Conestoga, Elmira, Linwood, Martins, North Woolwich, Olivet, Peel, Weaverland, and Winterbourne.² The settlement has spread from the original cluster of families in Waterloo Township across the adjoining townships, spilling over into neighboring Perth County. Also, a daughter settlement only thirty-five miles away near Mt. Forest has more than 100 families worshipping in three meetinghouses: Cedar View, Farewell, and Spring Creek.³ Situated throughout the roll-

ing countryside are the group's thirty-two parochial schools.⁴

Having lived in Waterloo County for nearly 200 years, the Mennonites have a long and eventful history. Perhaps no segment of it is more interesting than its early years under the talented leadership of Benjamin Eby — pioneer bishop, teacher, writer, and publisher.

Paying A Large Mortgage

Benjamin Eby was born on May 2, 1785 the sixth son and eleventh child of deacon Christian and Catherine (Bricker) Eby of Hammer Creek, Warwick Township, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Commenting on Benjamin's early life, one historian states:

Benjamin spent his boyhood days on the farm and in his father's cooper shop making barrels for the mills. He received a fair common school education, and during the long winter evenings he continued his studies. He had free access to his father's books, as well as to his brother John's library. He was not very strong and it used to be the common saying among the neighbors: "Aus 'em Bennie gebts ka Bauer, er muss Schulmeister werre." — "Bennie will never make a farmer, he must become a school teacher."⁵

In 1804 at the age of nineteen, Benjamin was baptized at the Conestoga Mennonite Meetinghouse by Bishop Christian Burkholder. During that same year there was much talk among his relatives and neighbors about the new settlement which was taking root in Waterloo Township, Waterloo County, Ontario. Several factors motivated the Mennonites to move there: 1) economic opportunity: land in Ontario cost a fraction of the price of farms in Lancaster County; 2) block settlement: large tracts of land were available for Mennonite communities to develop; 3) religious freedom: the nonresistant Mennonites were still smarting from their experiences during the Revolutionary War (1775-1783); 4) political stability: Canada was yet ruled by the King of England while the American democracy was in its infancy.⁶

Among the early Mennonite migrants to Ontario was Sam Bricker, an unmarried cousin of Benjamin Eby. He purchased 189 acres on November 4, 1801 and stayed that winter to clear some land and build a cabin. The following spring he returned to Lancaster County where he was married. He and his bride, along with other settlers, migrated that spring of 1802 to Waterloo County. During the next two years problems arose about a large mortgage on the Mennonites' land.⁷ Since the settlers were not financially able to pay the mortgage, they decided to appeal to their brethren in Pennsylvania for aid.

Sam Bricker was one of the men chosen to return to Pennsylvania to try and raise 10,000 British pounds so that a clear title could be obtained for 60,000 acres of land. In Lancaster County a meeting was held at the home of John Eby, Benjamin's brother. The meeting has been described as follows:

Sam presented his case, but everyone was fearful of making an investment in such a doubtful case. At this point John got up and said they were looking at the matter in the wrong way. If they were seeking to enrich themselves, this project would probably be the wrong one. However, they should look at this situation as a duty to help their brothers and sisters in distress. In addition, perhaps the Lord would bless them for it in a way they did not expect. This speech changed the course of events, and the participants made arrangements for another meeting to discuss how to meet this need.⁸

When the second meeting was held, an organization known as the "German Company" was formed with young Benjamin Eby as secretary and his father one of the principal shareholders.⁹ The large sum of money for payment of the mortgage was placed in an oak keg which Sam Bricker transported to Canada on a light rig. A clear title for the 60,000 acres — known as the "German Company Tract" — was granted the Mennonite settlers on June 29, 1805.¹⁰ The huge tract was divided into only 160 lots of which 128 contained 448 acres each and 32 had 83 acres each.¹¹

A Log Meetinghouse

In May 1806, Benjamin Eby celebrated his 21st birthday and was still single. That same month he traveled with a group of settlers to Ontario where some of his Eby cousins had already located. They took him on a tour of the German Company Tract, and he chose a farm site across the property line from his cousin Joseph Eby. Since Benjamin was frail and not physically able to clear his own land, he hired Samuel Smith to begin clearing several acres and to build a log cabin. In November, Benjamin returned to Pennsylvania where three months later on February 25, 1807 he married Mary Brubacher. That spring they moved to Ontario in company with Joseph and Barbara Schneider (Benjamin's sister), cousins Daniel, David, and Samuel Eby, Peter and Daniel Erb, and Abraham Weber. They safely arrived at their destination on June 21st but not without some tense moments which the following account describes:

The company had four wagons and fourteen horses. They were so heavily loaded that the people, including the women, had to walk most of the way. One of Ben's horses took sick and delayed them several days. In order to pass the time the men and boys began to pitch horseshoes. Peter Erb was accidentally hit on the head. For a while they feared for his life. They were able to secure the services of a doctor who dressed the wound, and they were able to continue. Another matter which caused a great deal of concern was the large amount of money they carried... and they felt that on more than one occasion they barely escaped from being robbed.¹²

Less than three years later, Benjamin Eby was ordained a preacher on November 27, 1809. The Waterloo Township settlement, which was rapidly growing, was without a resident bishop until October 1812 when Benjamin Eby became the first Mennonite bishop in Waterloo County.

A village known as Eby's Town or Ebytown sprang up on "Indian" Sam Eby's land adjacent to Benjamin Eby's farm. A school is said to have been established there in 1808 "in a little log house situated near Indian Sam Eby's residence."¹³ By 1832 the village was part of the town named Berlin which grew into a large city. In 1917 because of anti-German sentiment during World War I, Berlin was renamed Kitchener.

Joseph Eby, who owned land also adjacent to Benjamin Eby's farm, donated half an acre in 1810 as grounds for a new log schoolhouse which was built the following year. Several years later a frame annex was added to it with the school classes held there and the main structure used for church services.¹⁴ Up until that time the Mennonite families had met in private homes for worship services. But the settlement was increasing in population, and some of the members — including Benjamin Eby — felt a meetinghouse should be built. There was sufficient land near the meetinghouse for a cemetery, for deeds dated 1816 show that Joseph Eby sold an additional acre to the "Menonist Society" for ten dollars, and Benjamin Eby donated three-fourths of an acre.

Uniquely Marked Hymnals

Inside their log meetinghouse — known in German as "Eby's Versammlungs Haus" — the pioneer settlers sang from the *Unpartheyisches Gesang-Buch* which had first been published in 1804 in their native Lancaster County. (It had replaced the *Ausbund* which Mennonites, as well as Amish, had used for several centuries). Three copies of the *Unpartheyisches Gesang-Buch* which were actually used in the log meetinghouse are yet in existence, two from the third printing of 1820 and one from the fourth printing of 1829.¹⁵ The congregation's name is not merely written in common penmanship inside the front cover. Instead, it is printed in large, black Fraktur lettering on the leather front cover of each book. The inscription states:



("This songbook belongs in Eby's Meetingshouse") and appears within the black outline of an octagon measuring approximately 3 3/4 x 4 1/4 inches.

At first glance one might think that the octagon and the Fraktur lettering were done with a stencil. However, when the three volumes are compared, it is obvious that each was marked by hand since the style of lettering differs as does the size of the octagon. And one of the volumes, being in excellent condition, shows the thin lines which were pressed into the leather so the person printing the letters could keep them straight and uniform in size. No other Mennonite or Amish hymnals have been discovered which had their ownership marked in such a unique manner.

Benjamin Eby himself owned an 1820 printing of the *Unpartheyisches Gesangbuch* and pasted his personal bookplate inside the front cover. It states: "Das Eigenthum von Benjamin Eby, No. 8" ("The property of Benjamin Eby, No. 8"). What the "No. 8" signifies is not readily apparent. Perhaps he owned a number of copies of the hymnal which he loaned to the congregation, or maybe all the books in



his personal library were numbered. Following is a copy of his bookplate but reduced from its actual size of 3 x 4 1/4 inches. It belongs to the Waterloo Historical Society and is in the local history collection in the Kitchener Public Library.

A frame building — also known as Eby's Meetinghouse — replaced the log structure in 1834. Two years later the former hymnal was replaced by a newly compiled songbook, *Die Gemeinschaftliche Liedersammlung*, which is still used by Old Order Mennonites of Waterloo County. It was first printed in 1836 by H.W. Peterson of Berlin (later Kitchener). No compiler's name appears in it, but a Mennonite collector of hymnals has stated:

This was the first hymnbook published by the Mennonites of Canada and was probably compiled by bishop Benjamin Eby. The compiler took approximately two-thirds of the hymns from *Ein Unpartheyisches Gesangbuch* (1804) and most of the rest from the 1803 *Zions Harfe*. A Preface included in the first editions was omitted in later printings. The first edition contained 255 hymns and two indexes. In 1838 the main body was revised and enlarged by two hymns. It also had an *Anhang* of two hymns added to the main body.¹⁶

The hymnal's third edition in 1841 and the fourth in 1849 were both printed by Benjamin's son Heinrich Eby (1820-1855) who died at the young age of thirty-five. Besides publishing a weekly newspaper, *Deutsche Canadier*, he printed many German volumes, including some authored by his father. One of the 1849 hymnals printed by Heinrich which at one time belonged to the frame Eby Meetinghouse is in the archives at Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo, Ontario. It bears the Eby congregation's ownership bookplate pasted inside the front cover:¹⁷



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Benjamin Eby, Jr.'s Marriage Certificate

I hereby certify that on the 19th of March in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and thirty-nine, Benjamin Eby, Jr. of Waterloo Township in the district of Gore and Elizabeth Cressman of Waterloo Township in the district of Gore in the Province of Upper Canada were married by me Benjamin Eby, Preacher of the Mennonite Church in Upper Canada, in the presence of Abraham Cressman (bride's father) and Isaac Eby (groom's brother) which aforesaid marriage after being publicly announced three times was sealed by Benjamin Eby, Preacher.

Occurred, March 19, 1839

Witnesses: Abraham Cressman
Isaac Eby

Ich bezeuge hiermit, daß am *zehnjehnten Tag März*,
im Jahr unsers Herrn, Ein Tausend Acht Hundert und *neun und zwanzig*,
Benjamin Eby, jun. aus dem Township *Waterloo*, im Distrikt
Gore, und *Elizabeth Cressman* aus dem Township *Waterloo*,
im Distrikt *Gore*, beide von der Provinz Ober Canada, verheiratet wurden durch
mich Benjamin Eby, Prediger der Mennoniten Gemeinde in Ober Canada—in der Gegenwart von
Abraham Cressman, und Isaac Eby.
Welch' besagte Heirath, nach einer dreymaligen öffentlichen Bekanntmachung geschlossen wurde von
Geschehen den *19ten März 1839.* *Benjamin Eby*

Zeugen:

Lehrer.

Abraham Cressman
Isaac Eby

Marriage Certificates

One of the duties of a Mennonite bishop in the 1800s was to unite couples in marriage. Benjamin Eby, however, could not legally perform marriages during his first nineteen years as a bishop. That exclusive right in Upper Canada was given to the Anglican, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist clergy (and to justices of the peace). None of the many "non-establishment" religious groups were allowed to officiate at weddings. The Methodists, being strong in number and politically active, attempted to remedy the situation, introducing marriage bills in the legislature twelve times between 1802 and 1829.¹⁸ Finally in 1831 they were successful and royal assent was given to a bill allowing marriages to be solemnized by "any Clergyman or Minister of any Church, Society, Congregation, or Religious Community of Persons professing to be members of the Church of Scotland, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, Independents, Methodists, Mennonites, Tunkers, or Moravians . . ."¹⁹

The earliest so-far-discovered signature of Benjamin Eby appears on a Mennonite marriage certificate dated 1835 which post-dates the afore-mentioned law of 1831. The handwritten certificate is in English and states:²⁰

This may certify that Jacob Martin of Waterloo and Esther Bauman of Woolwich were published three several Sundays by Banns, and were Married on the 14th day of April 1835.

Witness hereto Benjamin Eby
Minister
Mennonist Society

Henry Bauman [bride's father]
David Martin [groom's father]
John Weber [preacher at Martins]

While the 1835 document is handwritten in English, Benjamin Eby soon had certificates printed in German and only filled in the specific information by pen. Two such forms dated 1839 and 1844 and bearing his German signature have been preserved.²¹ Even though he was a bishop, he did not use that title (in English or its German equivalent) on any of the three marriage certificates. In fact, each has a different title: "Minister" appears on the 1835 document, "Lehrer" on the 1839, and "Prediger" on the 1844.

Eby's Publishing Efforts

Until 1842 schools in Upper Canada (Ontario today) were organized and supervised by the local settlers, and classes were held only during the winter months. At an unknown date, Benjamin Eby began teaching school and is said to have taught "many winters in succession."²² It was in his role as a teacher, as well as in his leadership as bishop, that he felt the need to compile and publish books.

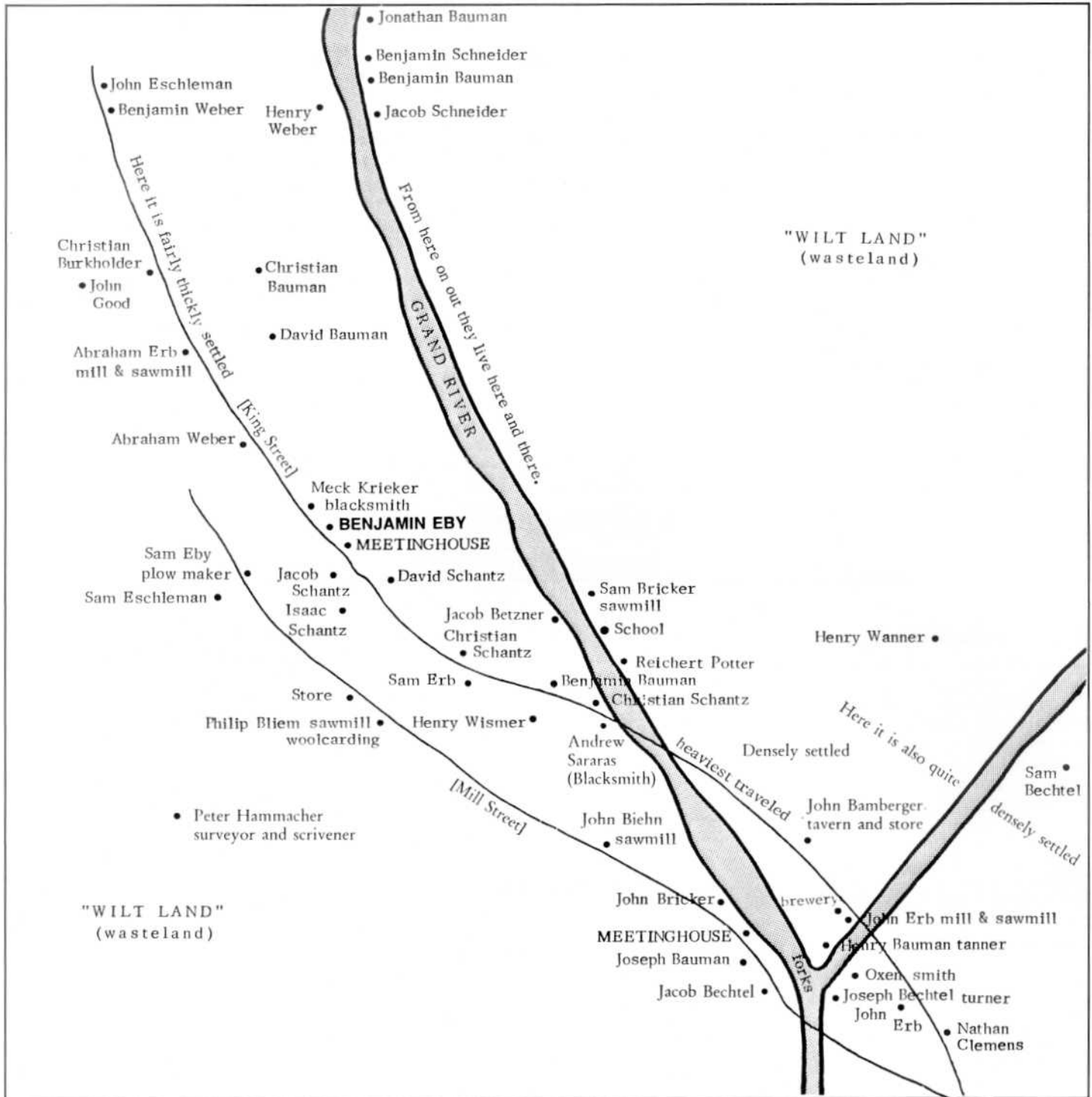
The first book with which Benjamin Eby was involved does not bear his name. In 1824 the Waterloo County Mennonites published a reprinting of the 1778 Elbing (Prussian Mennonite) catechism entitled *Katechismus . . . für die Kinder zum Gebrauch in den Schulen*. It contains a preface which most likely was written by Benjamin Eby and was printed for them in their native Lancaster County by Joseph Bauman of Ephrata.

As a teacher each winter, Benjamin saw the need for a German elementary speller. His *Fibel zu den ersten Lese-Übungen* containing thirty-one pages was printed by H.W. Peterson of nearby Berlin who announced its publication in the January 6, 1838 issue of his newspaper, *Canada Museum*.²³ A second printing was made at Berlin in 1843 by Benjamin's

son, Heinrich Eby. Benjamin's second German textbook, *Neues Buchstabil und Lesebuch*, containing 144 pages was issued from H.W. Peterson's press in 1839 followed by reprints in 1842 and 1847 by Heinrich Eby. Then the Mennonite publisher, John F. Funk, of Elkhart, Indiana published it six times: 1869, 1871, 1882, 1896, 1907 and 1909. It became the standard German primer in many Mennonite and Amish homes.

Also in 1839, Benjamin Eby wrote a four-page "Nach-Erinnerung" (Concluding Remarks") on pages 332-336 of the first Canadian edition of Gerhard Roosen's *Christliches Gemüths Gespräch*. His remarks were included in the next edition printed at Elkhart, Indiana in 1868 and again in the editions of 1873 (Elkhart), 1891 (Berlin, Ontario), 1902 (Elkhart), 1930 (Scottdale, Pa.), and 1972 (Scottdale) and in all English editions: 1857, 1870, 1878, 1892 (Lancaster, Pa.), 1959 (no location), and 1974 (Ephrata, Pa.).

Then in 1841, Benjamin's small format (3¼ x 5¼ inches) historical volume of 240 pages was printed by his son Heinrich. It bears the lengthy title of *Kurzgefaßte Kirchen Geschichte und Glaubenslehre der Taufgesinnten Christen oder Mennoniten*. Besides containing many excerpts from Menno Simons' writings, the Dortrecht "Confession of Faith," and other materials, it has several pages of Benjamin's account of the Mennonite and Amish migration to Canada. The volume was reprinted seven times in German: 1853 (Lancaster), 1868, 1879, 1901 (Elkhart), 1919 (Kitchener), 1936 (Scottdale), and 1967 (without date).²⁴ An English translation was published about 1941 by Daniel Bauman (1877-1949) of Floradale, Ontario. Unfortunately he did not include the true printing date on the title page (continued on page 12)



WATERLOO TOWNSHIP IN 1818

This is a modern transcription of the earliest known map of Waterloo Township, showing the people residing there in 1818. The actual map, which was made by hand with German script, is in the Muddy Creek Farm Library. Most of the German names have been translated here into their most common English form. Two Kitchener street names have been added in parentheses. Note that two meetinghouses existed in the Mennonite community at this early date.

Eby's Publishing Efforts (continued from page 11)

but merely used the 1901 date from the German edition he had translated. A portion of Benjamin Eby's *Kirchen Geschichte* was translated into English and printed in 1935 under the title *Confession of Faith of the Mennonites, Also A Translation of Church Regula-* Page 12

tions published by Benjamin Eby . . . It was revised in 1940 with a printing made in that year and in 1948, (1966), and (1978).²⁵

When Benjamin Eby died on June 28, 1853 at the age of sixty-eight, his long-time friend and printer of his earliest writings, H.W. Peterson, reported his funeral in the *Guelph Advertiser*, stating: "He was sincerely pious, hum-

ble, exemplary, practical and nonsectarian, and eminently successful in his day and generation."²⁶ And today — nearly a century and a half later — his accomplishments as a bishop, teacher, writer, and publisher are still highly regarded as part of Waterloo County's richest pioneer heritage.

(continued on page 13)

The Mennonite Settlement in the Port Rowan area

by Catharina Thiessen

(This talk was presented at the annual meeting of the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario, June 10, 1989 at the Port Rowan Mennonite Brethren Church — ed.)

Township of Norfolk

I was not sure how to define "Port Rowan Area", so in order to be fair to the various groups and the interrelationships under the Mennonite umbrella, I've treated it as the Township of Norfolk.

This location is on the north shore of Lake Erie in the Long Point area, extending northward to Courtland, westward to include the former Houghton Township and eastward to include St. Williams.

The town of Port Rowan, the largest "metropolis" in this area with a population of under one thousand, is a fishing village which comes alive with tourists in the summer.

The surrounding clay belt was once mainly general farming land, but since the 1950s has become a cash crop region producing corn,

soybeans, tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers and some fruit. To the north, east and west, on the sandy loam soil tobacco farming and reforestation has taken place.

Tourist attractions include the St. Williams Reforestry Farm with its spacious park for family and church picnics, Long Point Beach with its many cottages and Provincial Park, Houghton Sand Hills, a natural phenomena featuring family camping, the Backus Conservation Area, and the Deer Creek Conservation Area.

The First Mennonite Settler in the area

According to the 1973 edition of *Historical Highlights of Norfolk County* by Bruce Pearce, Dr. John Troyer is listed as Norfolk's first settler. He was a Pennsylvania German Mennonite, son of Michael Troyer from Switzerland. John was born in Pennsylvania in 1753 and settled in the Port Rowan area (then still Indian country) in the 1780's before the United Empire Loyalists arrived.

He planted the first vegetable garden and fruit trees in the area. In typical Mennonite fashion Dr. Troyer is reputed to have been the possessor of a kind and generous disposition who gave food, shelter and a helping hand to later settlers. He was a crack shot and used his numerous guns skillfully to replenish the larder, since wild game and birds were plentiful. He also trapped to add to his store of meat and furs.

Even though he was not a United Empire Loyalist, the government of Upper Canada gave him title to his land along with exemption from military service because of his religion.

Of his 4 sons and 5 daughters, a son, Michael was a highly respected citizen of the community and a prominent deacon in the Port Rowan Baptist Church.

The Troyer family name has died out, but some beams of the Troyer house were used in the building of John Aker's house, still in possession of that family. Photographs and prized historical items may be seen in Simcoe's Eva Brook Donly Museum.

Eby's Publishing Efforts
(continued from page 12)



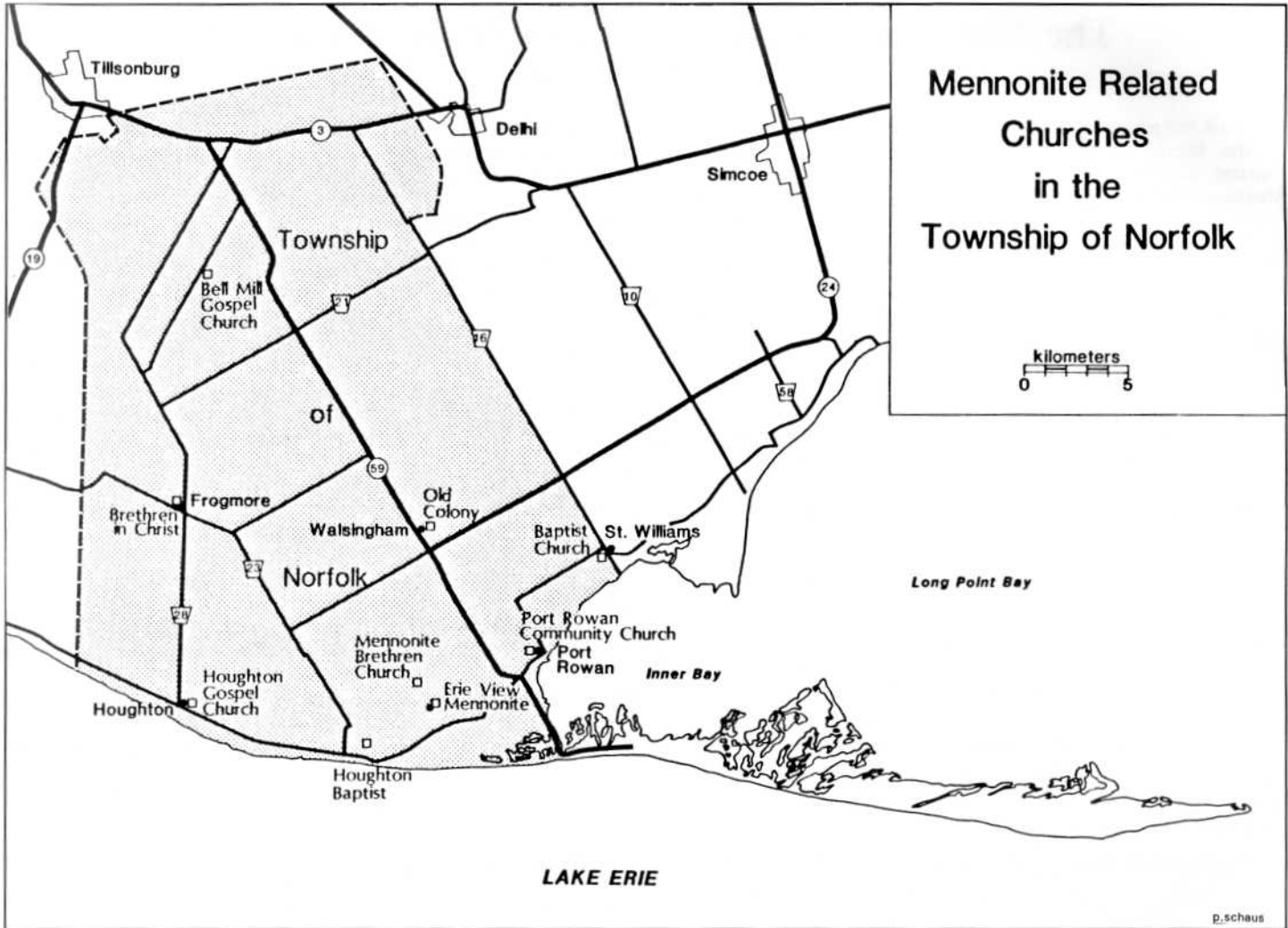
Shown here is the title page of Benjamin Eby's popular A-B-C book from which many Amish and Mennonite children learned to read German. This first edition is in the Mennonite Historical Library at Goshen, Indiana.

Footnotes:

1. The actual dates for the Old Order Mennonite divisions in various states are Indiana (1872), Michigan (1886), Ontario (1889), Pennsylvania (1893), and Virginia (1900).
2. Not included here are two other horse-and-buggy Mennonite groups, the David Martin people who have at least three meetinghouses in Waterloo County and the Orthodox group located at Gorie, Ontario.
3. For a listing of the families in Waterloo County and at Mt. Forest, see *Families of the Old Order Mennonite Church in Ontario*, published in 1988 by Edwin W. Weber, Box 15, Heidelberg, Ontario, 222 pages.
4. "1988-1989" School Directory," *Blackboard Bulletin*, Nov., 1988, Pp. 17-18.
5. Eby, Ezra E., *A Biographical History of Waterloo Township*, 1895 and 1896, reprinted and expanded by Eldon Weber, 1971, p. 136.
6. Bergey, Lorna L., "Early Mennonite Migrations From Pennsylvania And Subsequent Settlements in Canada," *Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage*, April 1986, Pp. 9-10.
7. For a detailed account of the mortgage problem, see E. Reginald Good's *Frontier Community To Urban Congregation: First Mennonite Church Kitchener 1813-1988*, Pp. 16-21.
8. Roth, Lorraine, "The Years of Benjamin Eby, Pioneer Mennonite Leader in Ontario, Canada," *Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage*, April 1986, p. 21.
9. Same as footnote No. 8.
10. Same as footnote No. 7, pg. 20.
11. Same as footnote No. 5, p. N-18.
12. Same as footnote No. 8, Pp. 21-22.
13. Same as footnote No. 7, pg. 29.
14. Traditionally the date for the construction of Eby's Meetinghouse has been given as 1813. However recent research brings that date into question. (See E. Reginald Good's book, pages 29-35). The meetinghouse definitely existed as a separate entity by 1818, for a map drawn by hand that year includes it.

15. Two of the copies (1820 and 1829) are in the Heritage Historical Library, Aylmer, Ontario and the third (1820) is in the archives at Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario.
16. Ressler, Martin E., *An Annotated Bibliography of Mennonite Hymnals and Songbooks, 1742-1988*, p. 23.
17. This hymnal bearing the bookplate is in the archives at Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario.
18. Epp, Frank H., *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920*, 1974, pg. 96.
19. I, William IV, c.1 (1829).
20. The 1835 marriage certificate is in Heritage Historical Library. Jacob Martin (1811-1889) whose name appears on the certificate played an important role in the formation of the Old Order Mennonites, being the author of the controversial booklet *Ein Schifflein gegen den Wind gerichtet*, 1883.
21. The 1839 and 1844 marriage certificates are in the archives of Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario.
22. Burkholder, L.J., *A Brief History of the Mennonites in Ontario*, 1935, p. 75.
23. Good, E. Reginald, *Frontier Community To Urban Congregation*, 1988, p. 55.
24. The Old Order Mennonites at Elmira, Ontario had a printing made in the fall of 1967 at Erdmans Printing Co., Grand Rapids, MI (1018 copies). Bound in black cloth this edition is a photoreprint of the 1936 Scottdale edition but minus any date on the title page.
25. Hoover, Amos B., *The Jonas Martin Era*, 1982, Entry No. 108, p. 1002.
26. Same as footnote No. 8, pg. 37.

Special thanks to Reginald Good, Amos B. Hoover, Isaac R. Horst, and Lorraine Roth for their comments on the first draft of this article; and to Sam Steiner, Joseph Springer, and Susan J. Hoffman for making copies of Eby materials available for publication here.



Brethren In Christ Beginnings

In the March edition of *Mennonite Historian*, published in Winnipeg, Lorna Bergey and Lorraine Roth write on "Swiss Elements of the Mennonite Mosaic in Ontario." The majority of Pennsylvania German Mennonites are descendants of persecuted Anabaptists from Switzerland and South Germany. Following the upheaval of the American Revolutionary War, many Mennonite and Brethren in Christ families were attracted to large tracts of favourably priced land located in Upper

Canada. That this territory was under British rule was a further incentive to move. It has been suggested that the guarantee of religious freedom which Mennonites experienced under British rule in Pennsylvania was interwoven with the desire for political stability, and may have prompted these 2000 or so Pennsylvania German Mennonites to leave for Canada.

In the 1978 book, *The Story of Houghton Mission: Fruit from Woods and Sands*, by Sider and Vannatter we learn that through the Vannatters, born in Pennsylvania of a Dutch father, the Brethren in Christ came to the

Houghton area. In the late 1920s and early 1930s tent revivals were held by the Brethren in Christ Home Mission Board and a church became established at Frogmore. Later in the 1940s a congregation began at Houghton Centre and in the 1950s another began at Walsingham Centre. By the 1970s these merged as one at Frogmore with the name Houghton Brethren in Christ Church. A new structure was built, which has since been expanded. It is a flourishing congregation, presently led by pastor John Sider. It attracts some of the Mennonite immigrants from Mexico, who wish to worship in the English language.

The Houghton Centre building was sold to the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Church in the 1960s. This began with one family of Mennonites from Mexico and now has a membership of 80 with an average attendance of 110. This active church with pastor Harms includes Sunday school and youth work. Sometimes a choir or musical group serves in song. In Sunday services they use both German and English on a half and half basis.

The Brethren in Christ's Walsingham Centre building was sold to a group of Old Colony Mennonites from Mexico in the 1970s. Services are primarily in German. They have a Sunday School and sometimes German school on Saturdays. It is led by pastor Peter Driedger. Many cars can be seen around the church on a Sunday morning.



Houghton Brethren in Christ Church.
(Menno Van photo)



*Port Rowan Mennonite Brethren Church.
(Menno Van photo)*

Mennonites from Russia and the Hoover connection

I first met Vernice Hoover at our Heritage Day celebrations here in 1984. Who are the Hoovers? On a 1978 plate commemorating the "Hoover Heritage Association" we read, "In 1791 Jacob Hoover, a Pennsylvania Mennonite of German Swiss descent, acquired 2500 acres of land on both sides of Stoney Creek, thereby becoming the first settler in Rainham and Walpole Townships. Jacob and his wife Barbara Summers, their children and families settled here in 1793. The Hoovers had followed the Loyalists to Upper Canada after the conclusion of the American War of Independence in 1783. They were noted in a local history as "amongst the most respected and substantial yeomen of Haldimand County."

In an interview with Vernice Hoover at our 60th church anniversary in 1987, he was asked the question, "What motivated you to take in these immigrants from Russia in the 1920s." He replied, "The Mennonites always had a good neighbour policy. You see, the Mennonite Conference of Ontario was a body that notified their different churches of the needs of the Mennonite people in Russia, how they were persecuted and how they were destitute. Their lands were stolen or taken away from them, and they were tortured so to speak and were in desperate need. The Conference organized very well and asked each church to take in so many, and another so many, etc. and also to find work and places for the Russian Mennonites to live. As it happened, my father, Erwin Hoover, had this big brick house. In 1925, a number of the Russian Mennonites were delegated to come to our area and were placed here as they came from Quebec off the boats. Most of them came and stayed in this house. Different neighbours gave them work to get them started."

Erwin Hoover was a kind of speculator and gas well driller. He traded gas for a 200 acre farm in Port Rowan. It was a beautiful dairy farm and he needed someone to operate it. So it was in March 1926 that the Reimer family

agreed to manage this farm on condition that another family would come to this areas as well. These were the Petkers from the same village in Russia. Soon other families arrived from Selkirk, the Kitchener area and even directly from Russia. Fortunately farms were readily available.

The new immigrants were well received and helped by the resident Canadians — with clothes, furniture and work in sawmills, in building the Long Point causeway, etc.

The church background of these new settlers was both United Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren. This was no hindrance as they fellowshiped together in homes. Early in 1927 the Messiah Church on the S.E. corner of the Hoover farm was rented for \$2.50 a month, and joint fellowship continued.

The desire of the Mennonite Brethren members to organize themselves was realized in October 1927 with 11 charter members. They met in homes to discuss their own business, have communion and accept new members by baptism or transfer. This group was led by pastor Dietrich Doerksen who passed away early in 1928. A committee of three carried on until Peter Reimer, a graduate of Winkler Bible School in Manitoba, was ordained and led the group. In 1934 Jacob Penner, who had first settled in Manitoba, moved here and became the leader for the next 22 years.

The leader of the joint group was Jacob Epp who then moved to Leamington. As early as 1931 separation of the Mennonite Brethren United Mennonite groups was discussed. This materialized in 1940. The Messiah Church was purchased by the M.B.s and the Baptist Church at Erie View became available to the U.M.s.

The Erie View United Mennonite church has regular services, a choir, S.S. classes, youth work and ladies groups that sew many blankets for MCC. Their present pastor is Tom Warner. Services are in English with the exception of an adult Sunday School class held in German. The church building has been renovated and improved, but still has many of the original characteristics.

The M.B.'s which now owned the church at Messiah's Corners began repairs and renovations. Yet by the 1950s the facilities were no longer adequate as membership increased. In 1958 the Lord enabled them to erect and dedicate a new edifice on these same grounds. A parsonage was built in 1960 for their first salaried pastor family. In 1970 an educational wing and gymnasium were added. Complete renovations were undertaken in 1977, along with adding a spacious front foyer. They rejoiced at a mortgage-burning ceremony in 1980. Former "levied" giving had changed to freewill offerings.

In the early years a German school was held on Saturdays to retain the language. However by the early 1960s Sunday school was taught in English and they held dual language services. Now there is one German service the last Wednesday of each month for those who appreciate it.

Throughout the years an outreach factor has been evident. The first English services were held in 1938 with Rev. H.H. Janzen speaking, and community people were invited. Choirs and singing groups received invitations to serve other congregations. Many visitors come to hear the annual Christmas cantata. Vacation Bible School was held in the schools of the area in the 1940s. Mission Sunday schools were held at Port Royal and St. Williams Unger Public schools until our services were no longer in German. Crusades and hymn sings have been sponsored by our active ministerial. Monthly prayer services are held since the Sutura Revival Crusade in 1987. The youth clubs, Christian Service Brigade and Pioneer Girls bring in community participation. An annual Labour Day service is held for Mennonites from Mexico who are harvest help for the farmers since the 1950s. Cheer work at Christmas has also been done by various agencies. For several years now the Board of Education has sponsored English as the Second Language in the MB church, as well as in elementary and high schools for the Mennonites from Mexico.

A 1975 article by Frank C. Peters in the Simcoe Reformer was titled, "Mennonites no longer a purely rural group". Of over 100 families listed in the 1988 church directory about 30 are farmers, 20 are in industry and 20 are in business of their own or with others. In the early years elementary education was enough, but now after secondary school many go on to university. Over the 60 years around 30 teachers, and as many nurses have come



*Houghton Centre EMMC Church.
(Menno Van photo)*



Walsingham Old Colony Church near Port Rowan
(Menno Van photo)

from this congregation. From Nova Scotia to British Columbia one may meet those who once were members. Membership is still over 200.

In 1975 a number of members had located in Simcoe and Evergreen Heights Christian Fellowship came into being. They met in a public school for 10 years and have built their own edifice in 1985, with substantial help from this mother church and the Ontario Mennonite Brethren Conference. They have grown in membership with Sunday school, Bible studies, and have a choir.

Other exciting things have been happening in the 1980s. John and Helen Reimer, who for many years ministered to the senior residents at Simcoe's Norview on a bi-weekly basis, became involved with a Monday evening hymnsinging with Mennonites from Mexico. This prepared them to lead a congregation of Mennonites from Mexico which meets at the former Bell Mill Public School near Tillsonburg. They are known as Bell Mill Gospel Chapel, with a membership of 30 and

attendance around 100 at services. They have bilingual services, with a Sunday school, choir, youth work, midweek studies and ladies meeting.

In 1986 the former Port Rowan Baptist Church reorganized as the Port Rowan Community Church with Peter and Sadie Klassen and Jake and Lydia Reimer providing leadership. They have regular services, a growing Sunday school, Bible study groups and a choir. Summer vacationers help fill the church to capacity.

In 1987 Henry and Anne Teigrob returned to this area, having done independent mission work in Costa Rica and Belize among the natives, Spanish and Mexicans. Under the Mennonite Brethren Board of Church Extension in Ontario, they are also working with Mennonites from Mexico. After meetings in Walsingham Hall or Public School, they now meet in St. Williams Baptist Church with a German service, followed by an English service. Their work requires much home visitation.

According to the Ontario Board of Church Extension *Bulletin* of May 1988, Nick Dyck reports, "Another flourishing work is being pastored by Henry Van Trigt, M.B. member of Evergreen Heights, Simcoe, serving the independent church at Houghton. He refers to himself as pastor of the "Mennonite Baptist Church" at Houghton.

In conclusion one might say that more brings us together than separates us at Mennonites. Mennonite Central Committee with its relief factor to our people in Russia in the 1920's is a vital ministry under which a number of us have given months or years of voluntary service. Mennonite Disaster Service is at work where ever there's a need. Annual Peace Conferences are endorsed, for several from here were in B.C. Conscientious Objectors Camps during W.W. II Periodic Mennonite World Conferences add to our sense of belonging. Who can forget the 1986 Mennonite Bicentennial Celebrations in Kitchener Memorial Auditorium! Let us continue with annual Relief Sales and keep the Benefit Shops operating. The Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario along with such publications as *Mennonite Historian*, or *Mennogespräch*, won't let us forget our Godly heritage.

May we as Mennonites continue to serve God and our brothers and sisters in this beautiful, yet troubled world, "In the name of Christ".



Erie View United Mennonite Church.
(Menno Van photo)

I would like to become a member of the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario. I will be informed of all Society events, will be eligible to serve on the various committees of the Society, and will receive *Mennogespräch* as part of my membership.

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