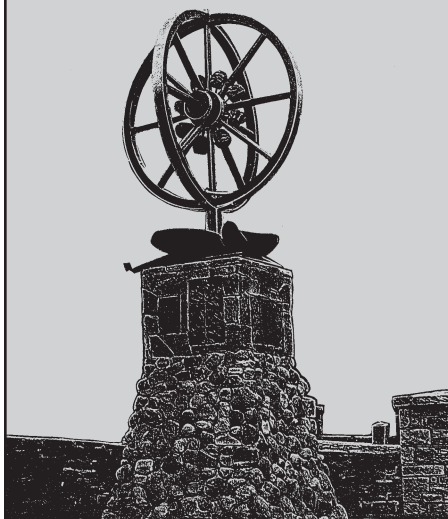


Ontario Mennonite History

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Montreal River plaque commemorates Conscientious Objectors

By Barb Draper

On Sept. 28, 2024, more than 50 people gathered around a new plaque to permanently mark the location of the Montreal River Alternative Service Camp 120 kms north of Sault Ste. Marie, Ont. Although the long bus trip was difficult for older bodies, several people commented that being there was worth it. It was an emotional moment as people had the opportunity to recognize their fathers' response to the call for military service and the significance of the camp in their lives. "It was holy ground," remarked one participant.

Two days earlier, at Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, Ont., a much larger crowd attended the official unveiling, led by the Ontario Heritage Trust. The plaque was a project of the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario (MHSO) in cooperation with the Ontario Heritage Trust. The Twilight Resort, located on the property where the camp had been, also cooperated with the project as the owners were willing to have the plaque on their property, and they prepared the pole for installation. Paul Martin of Elmira transported the plaque from Waterloo, Ont. to Montreal River and fastened it securely to the pole.

During the unveiling ceremony, Sam Steiner presented some of the history of the camp. Although an earlier law in Upper Canada specifically granted exemption from military service to Mennonites, by World War I things had changed, and it was no longer clear how to claim conscientious objector (CO) status. Most young Mennonite men were informally allowed to stay home on the farm "on leave" from military service.

When World War II broke out in 1939, Mennonite leaders in Canada wanted to be better prepared and worked to negotiate some kind of alternative service in the event that their young men would again be conscripted. They



*The plaque stands near the remains of the last building from the 1940s.
(Photos by Roy and Barb Draper)*

organized the Conference of Historic Peace Churches (CHPC) that included all kinds of Mennonites, Amish, Brethren in Christ and Quakers. After significant negotiation, an arrangement was worked out for civilian labour that would not be in a military camp. Montreal River was the first such work camp and it became a model for more than 50 camps across Canada.

The location of this first camp was at the end of the road, north of Sault Ste. Marie, so that the COs could work at extending the Trans-Canada Highway. The first group of young men arrived at this former lumber camp on July 16, 1941. There were several other groups who came over the next two years. The groups often overlapped so that there would be a large number of men there at one time.

In March 1942, a new government directive declared that all soldiers and conscientious objectors must serve for the duration of the war. As a result, the civilian work done by COs changed. Many smaller camps opened to do work that seemed more productive, including forest protection in B.C. When supervision of the COs was moved to the Department of Labour, there was a shift away from a camp-based approach so that many subsequent young Mennonites worked in agriculture where their labour

MONTREAL RIVER ALTERNATIVE SERVICE WORK CAMP

When Canada introduced wartime conscription in 1940, many young men — largely of Mennonite and other historic peace churches — sought alternatives to military service based on religious conviction and conscience. In response, the Canadian government set up the non-military, alternative service work camps for conscientious objectors. On July 16, 1941, the first group of men, most from Southern Ontario, arrived at Ontario's first camp, the Montreal River Alternative Service Work Camp, to serve four-month terms. Their work focused on extending the Trans-Canada Highway northwards. Remote camp life was uncharted territory for these men and a profound dislocation from their lives. In March 1942, the Canadian government issued an order-in-council requiring conscientious objectors to serve for the duration of the war instead. The men found this change deeply disappointing yet continued to serve as required. In spring 1942, many of the present occupants were transferred to British Columbia camps for general labour and forest protection. The Montreal River camp closed in May 1943, having served as a model for over 50 camps across Canada. For many, these work camps became symbols of resistance to war and a belief in pacifism. The work of these conscientious objectors greatly contributed to Canada's essential services during the war years.

Ontario Heritage Trust, an agency of the Government of Ontario

was deemed essential. The Montreal River camp closed in May 1943.

Plaque installation

At the plaque installation, Darrell Frey outlined some of the emotions experienced by the young Mennonites who served at Montreal River. Darrell's book, *Called to be a Soldier: Experiences of COs at Alternative Service Camps during WWII* (2014) was also available for those interested in learning more.

Uncertainty was a predominant emotion for COs at Montreal River. These young farm boys, not much more than 20 years old, had refused to go to war and they were unsure about what they would be facing, how they would be treated and whether their peace position would be respected. After all, the Conference of Historic Peace Churches had arranged for them to travel in a separate train car to avoid any potential conflict.

Of course there was uncertainty worldwide as the war dragged on. No one knew how long anyone who was drafted into the army would need to serve. COs did not know how long they would need to be at the camp. Although they assumed they would be there for four or five months because that was the length of military training, they didn't know the date of their release until a few days before it happened.

Marie Burkholder and two of her sisters were on the trip to Montreal River to honour their father's memory. Marie brought with her a stack of her father's letters, written to his family while he was at camp and read some of them aloud to her sisters on the bus. Darrell, who was sitting nearby, asked her to read one section to the entire group during the installation.

On April 7, 1942, Leonard Burkholder wrote home that they had had shocking news and they were now "retained for the duration." The short letter was full of uncertainty, including who would do the work on the Burkholder farm. "I don't know how it will be for you," he wrote, "but there is nothing I can do to escape."

The following day, he wrote home again, describing how the men reacted to the news that they were not going home after all. "We did our evening's work in high spirits. Everyone was getting cleaned up and some had their suits on," he wrote. But uncertainty set in and "The new foreman told the boys they may as well take their suits off." He concluded by saying, "The night we expected to be the last is when we got the news. The religious director is not here to help us out."

As well as uncertainty, the men who went to Montreal River also had a sense of adventure. They were going to

new places and having new experiences. Many had never been far from home and now they were travelling by train to Sudbury and on to Sault Ste. Marie. They met many new people. Of course, those who were homebodies struggled to get accustomed to new situations.

Isolation and loneliness were also emotions experienced by the COs at Montreal River. The young men were far away from what they were used to. There may have been a couple hundred men at the camp at one time, but some of them felt far from their families and felt isolated in a place that was many hours away from the closest town.

Camp life was also monotonous. Some worked in the bush, cutting brush while others shovelled gravel. They did this work all day and then again the next day for two weeks or even six weeks. The food at camp was supplied by the government and was fairly monotonous. They were served beans at every meal.

These young men were used to hard farm labour and some of them felt a bit guilty that they had an easy life while at home their families struggled to keep up with the work. While the work at camp was physically tiring, they stopped at 5 p.m. and had recreation time after supper. Many of these men were used to working longer hours at home on the farm.

A few COs did not pass their physical examinations after they arrived at camp and eight were discharged. These young men didn't know how to feel about this situation and some expressed homesickness for the camp. Did this happen because the officials knew they were needed on the farms? Were they discharged to have more labour in agriculture?

One of the long-term effects of the Montreal River Alternative Service Camp was that the men who served there kept in touch with each other. They felt a strong sense of comradeship and after 5, 10 and 20 years held reunions. Darrell commented that the success of the New Hamburg Mennonite Relief Sale was partly due to the CO camp at Montreal River. In the 1960s, when Ward Shantz, the first chair of the relief sale board, needed to get Mennonites to work together for this project, he knew lots of people to call on. Mennonites and Amish of all kinds knew each other and trusted each other because of their Montreal River friendships.



The plaque was unveiled at Conrad Grebel University College on Sept. 26 with participation from Maurice Martin (left), John Ecker of Ontario Heritage Trust, Laureen Harder-Gissing and Sam Steiner.

Everyone who travelled to Montreal River received a photocopy of a hand-drawn map of where the various buildings had been located in the 1940s as well as a photocopied picture of the camp. Darrell pointed out some sites such as the swimming spot and a former dock. Someone asked for the specific location of the work site, but he answered that no one knows for sure. When the road was finally completed, it did not use the track these men worked on. From Montreal River Harbour, the road today swings away from the lake while the COs worked closer to the shore.

Darrell commented that when he was on site in 2013, there were still some wooden pieces on the rocks along the river where an old wooden bridge had been. Today almost nothing is left of the Montreal River Alternative Service Camp. All that remains of the last building are a few rotting logs. But the plaque has now become a permanent marker. To find the plaque, you need to take the laneway into the Twilight Resort. The plaque is near the shore on the south side of the property.

How the plaque came to be

At the unveiling on Sept. 26, Laureen Harder-Gissing, president of MHSO, described how the plaque came to be. In 2016, Fred W. Martin and his wife Wanda were vacationing in the area and stopped in to see the former Montreal River camp. At that time the remains of the old bunkhouse had no roof, but two walls were still standing. When he returned home, Fred suggested to the historical society that it would be good to have a permanent reminder erected.

The following year, Theatre of the Beat performed *Yellow Bellies*, a play that drew attention to the COs of World War II and interest in Montreal River broadened. As the archivist of the Mennonite Archives of Ontario, Laureen noticed that more photos of Montreal River were being given to the archives around that time. Meanwhile MHSO decided to apply to the Ontario Heritage

Trust for a permanent marker. It took several years for MHSO to fulfill all the requirements, and everything was slowed down by the pandemic.

Before his prayer at the close of the unveiling ceremony, Maurice Martin referred to an address given by Ernie Swalm, Bishop of the Brethren in Christ Church, who was heavily involved in the CHPC. Swalm commented that when the COs were challenged to live for peace, they met the challenge and left a good impression on the government. In his prayer, Maurice encouraged everyone to be people of faith and, like the COs, to “leave footprints in the sands of time.”

At the end of the unveiling ceremony, Fred Martin and his musical group led the song, “God Be With You Till we Meet Again,” a song that was often sung at Montreal River.

At the close of his talk at the installation of the plaque, Darrell encouraged everyone to reflect on the action taken by their fathers, uncles and grandfathers who stood for peace and practicing love. He challenged everyone to apply this example to their own lives.



More than 50 people made the two-day trip to Montreal River, Ont., to install a permanent marker of the alternative service camp there.

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A Russlaender family moves to Vineland

By David G. Neufeld

(On June 15, 2024, the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario organized a bus tour of the Niagara area to commemorate 100 years since the first Russlaender Mennonites arrived in Ontario.

On the bus ride to Niagara, David G. Neufeld told this story about his family's decision to move to Vineland.)

This is the story of the Gerhard and Maria Friesen Neufeld family, a “case study” of one Russlaender family who faced difficult situations in the 1920s. The trauma experienced by the Russlaender, and indeed all peoples in Ukraine or South Russia during this period was severe, and not dissimilar to that of other refugee groups before and since. War, famine and unrest contribute to mass migrations and refugee situations across the globe. It is far too easy to feel that the Russlaender experience of our ancestors was in some way special, heroic or singular. Of course, this does not negate personal experiences of family trauma.

This account is based on the daily diary kept by my great-grandfather, Johann Friesen, later added to by my grandfather, Gerhard Neufeld, and translated and embellished by my father, Peter F. Neufeld. Later portions are based on the stories and recollections of various family members, including my uncle Cornelius Neufeld, my uncle Bill Neufeld and cousins over the years.

In 1925, the Gerhard Neufeld family consisted of Gerhard and Maria Friesen Neufeld, Maria's father Johann Friesen (aged 73) and eight children. They lived in Paulsheim, in the Gnadenfeld Volost of the Molotschna Colony in Southern Ukraine. Johann Friesen had served on the Gnadenfeld Volost Regional Council in the areas of mutual aid, care for widows and fire insurance. Gerhard was a farmer and builder in Paulsheim and was doing relatively well. But things began to unravel with the coming of the First World War.

During World War I, Gerhard had served in the medical corps and was away from home for lengthy periods. Later during the civil war, their village had frequently been a battle front for both the Red and White armies and had been bombarded by artillery on several occasions. Gerhard and the oldest son, Johann, had frequently been conscripted to convey soldiers and war materiel throughout this conflict, and their home was frequently required to billet soldiers or become a command post for the White Army. They had also suffered through famine in subsequent years and experienced great difficulty in maintaining their farm. Apparently, Johann Friesen was also arrested and detained at some point in these years, although that period of time had been removed from his diary.

In the relative calm of March 1926, Gerhard Neufeld writes that they are planning to emigrate. He also notes that there is “emigration fever” and a great many are in a similar frame of mind. The second oldest son, also Gerhard but called “Griesch,” had married Helene Rempel and emigrated to Canada four months earlier and was living in Elmira, Ontario. Gerhard Neufeld Sr. writes in early 1926 of many trips to Gnadenfeld, Melitopol and many other locations for medical checks, and the constant payment of *schmiergeld* or bribes, for passports, visas and travel documents. The oldest son, Johann, is initially denied a passport, as he is 25 and of military age.



The Neufeld family in Russia. Back Row: Mariechen, Willi, Cornelius, Johann. Front row: Johann Friesen, Gerhard, Susana (on lap), Maria, Peter, Katie.

This photo was used for passports and was the last photo taken before Gerhard Neufeld's death.

They were able to sell the farm in June to “the widow Penner” and held an auction sale in late June. During the night of July 16, 1926, the home was targeted by a bandit group, who attempted to break in and steal whatever they could, likely hoping to find the money from the auction sale. In the aborted attempt, Gerhard was shot and killed, and son Wilhelm was beaten. My father, Peter, was eight years old at the time and could recall his experience of that night well.

Despite this tragedy, the family decided to continue with plans to emigrate as all preparations had been made and the farm and belongings were all sold. This was an extremely difficult decision for the family. In addition to the loss of their father, Gerhard, Maria had lost an infant son mere weeks before.

They left Paulsheim on August 31, with a large group and travelled to Moscow, leaving son Johann behind to work on his travel documents. He would ultimately be successful, as he had a slight disability. As a child, one of his legs was damaged in a farm accident, leaving him with a pronounced limp. This rendered him unfit for military service.

There are many accounts of this emigration experience, so I will not go into great detail. They arrived in Riga, Latvia, on September 15, and then on to the Atlantic Park Hostel, a quarantine station, by September 18. Here it was deemed that Johann Friesen was too elderly to proceed and needed sponsorship so that he would not become a burden on the state in Canada.

Many immigrants were detained in England due to trachoma, an eye infection. Mother, Maria Friesen Neufeld, had been crying almost constantly, and it was deemed that her red eyes meant that she had trachoma and would be detained.



On the boat to Canada, the Empress of Scotland. Peter Neufeld is in the front row, seated, second from left. Susana is in the second row, 8th from left. Katie is 3rd row with checkered shirt and kerchief. Mariechen is in the back row, approximately 4 to the right of Katie. Willi is in the back row, about 4 to the right of Mariechen. Cornelius may be just barely visible to the left of the man with the hat and large moustache.

This decision was not conveyed to the family until the very last moment on the docks where a list of passengers cleared to board the ship was read and Maria and Johann Friesen's names were not on the list.

One may imagine that moment. Cornelius, age 21, was suddenly forced into the role of being in charge of his younger siblings on the trip. Maria was forced to stay with her father in England, while the six children, between the ages of 4 and 21, proceeded to Canada. (They sailed aboard the Empress of Scotland. Also on board was Prime Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, returning from the first Imperial Conference of the Colonies in 1926.)

After eight days at sea, the children, Cornelius 21, William 19, Marie 18, Kaethe 12, Peter 8 and Susana 4 arrived at Quebec City, and then travelled two days by train to Waterloo, arriving on October 1. They were met there by older brother Griesch, who had borrowed a car to take them to "his place" in Elmira. We do not know where this home was, or what the living conditions were. My father, Peter, did recall that they shared space with another family and that it was crowded. Along the way, they had two flat tires as the car was so overloaded.

At this point in time, parts of the family were located in Elmira, England and Russia, spread across three continents. This sounds so similar to the experience of refugees in the modern era, who struggle to reunite families after dislocation and migration. Our family was so fortunate to have been able to reunite in the succeeding months. By mid-December, older brother Johann had arrived, and on December 23 Maria and Grandfather Johann Friesen arrived. Johann Friesen had been sponsored by Noah Beringer, a businessman and owner of a sawmill in Elmira.

Eventually the family moved into their own accommodation. We know from addresses on envelopes, that they received mail at a small white house at 7 Centre Street, Elmira. My father, Peter recalled that the family occasionally worshipped at St. Paul's Lutheran Church which was just around the corner. His mother Maria so loved the services there, as the German language and style of service was familiar and similar to what she remembered from Russia.

In the spring of 1927, the majority of the Neufeld family decided to move to Vineland. At the same time, Griesch and Helene Neufeld decided to try their luck on Pelee Island. Why did so many Russlaender choose to move to Vineland, or Essex County or even Reesor in northern Ontario? There are various possible reasons that led the Russlaender immigrants to leave the Waterloo area.

Many needed to find wage labour quickly to support themselves and to pay the *Reiseschuld* or travel debt to the CPR. Working in industry in Kitchener was one option but those who preferred to work in agriculture looked to other areas. Working as farm hands in Waterloo County could not provide the necessary funds. They also looked to areas where families could remain together as much as possible. Essex County and Pelee Island offered lots of paid manual labour in the tobacco industry, doing piece work or share cropping.

The First Mennonite Church in Vineland had hosted and billeted some Russlaender and this made the area familiar for some. Wage labour and piece work could be found for the whole family on Mennonite-owned fruit and vegetable farms and greenhouses, or in canneries in the Vineland area.

Neufeld decision to go to Vineland

On Sunday, February 26, 1927, my Uncle Cornelius (then aged 21) wrote this letter enquiring of Johann Wichert of opportunities in Vineland and the viability of moving the family there. The Wicherts and Fransens were related to the Neufelds through Johann Friesen's wife, Maria Schroeder, and the families had been quite close while in Russia. Although Johann Wichert is referred to as "uncle," he is technically a bit more distantly related.

"Lieber Onkel Johann,

First of all, let me wish you the best of health. Since it is soon springtime, I'd like to learn what you are likely doing there in Vineland. We, the whole family, were planning to go to Pelee Island. But things have changed so that we are not going there now. For now, we are staying in Elmira, if we can find work on farms. It's just too expensive to change our living arrangements.

Perhaps you can tell us about what it is like there in Vineland. Do you have work opportunities there in the spring? Or are you still out of work? Are the work opportunities only in the orchards? We older boys were thinking of going to the West to follow the harvest. Would you be interested in going west for the harvest? The problem is, we do not know where Mama, Grosspapa and the smaller children would be able to stay. We could stay here and have work opportunities on local farms, but it's hardly enough to pay accommodation and have food money.

But we know everything is in God's hands and we trust in him completely. He has so far helped and advised and will continue to guide us.

Please write back as soon as possible as to whether there is any point in coming to Vineland. Grosspapa and Mama would like to come there, so we would like to investigate and question everything again. Perhaps it is not as costly to live there as in the city, and winter is soon over.

It was pretty nice weather here this past week. But today is terrible snow. Willi and I worked already from January 12 for daily wages on local farms. We began at \$1 a day. But in February we got 25 cents a day more. Mostly working in the bush. It's not much, but it's more than nothing, so this way we keep our heads above water. Hans worked for the month of February for \$25 on a different farm. Mariechen worked for \$4 a week doing housework.

On Sundays, Willi and I are always at home. But we didn't make it today because of the snowstorm until later.

Hey how about Nicolai, has he found work? (Nicolai Fransen, also a relative). And is Jacob Kutz still there? Greet him for me. Does he have work there?

Last Saturday evening and Sunday morning we had Church services. Preacher Friesen (Jacob P. Friesen of MB Church?) from Kitchener visited us. You immediately find you need more room when you host Russian devotions at home. I think next Sunday, in Kitchener, they will present the Declaration of David in the service. I expect you'll have heard it all from Uncle Heinrich Wichert.

Well, I'm thinking of closing this letter for now. Gerhard is working until halfway through March in the rubber factory and then he and Helene are going to Pelee Island. Mama and Grosspapa and the family all send their heartfelt greetings.

Yours in love,
Cornelius Neufeld

Johann Weichert's reply must have been favourable because ultimately the Neufelds decided to move to Vineland that spring. Johann Wichert had found work in the Fretz greenhouses. Johann Wichert, Nikolai Fransen and Cornelius Neufeld would all go on to be ordained and serve their respective churches in ministry.

The Neufeld family learned of an opportunity to work on the farm of Alfred and Alda Culp High, who had large landholdings in Vineland. They could all live together and there would be work for everyone. Marie would work as cook and in childcare in the High home and the others could variously work in the fields and orchards, either at High's or elsewhere. There would also be a home for them to rent. It is unclear if the Highs owned this home at the time.

Their first rented home still stands at 4027, Twenty-Third Street in Vineland, across from the Mennonite Home for the Aged. They lived in this house for approximately two years and then a further year-and-a-half in another rented home on the lakeshore. They worked for the Highs for approximately four years from 1927 to 1931.

The Highs were members of The First Mennonite Church. The oldest son, Norman H. High, would eventually go on to earn a PhD in rural sociology and agricultural economics. He became the first Dean of Arts at the University of Waterloo and served on the Board of Directors at Conrad Grebel College. My brother Bob who attended Conrad Grebel in the late 1960s visited with him and he recalled the Neufeld family, and in particular Marie, very fondly.

Unlike many, the Neufeld family had managed to get money out of Russia from the land and auction sale. Apparently, some funds were converted into British pounds and then transferred to the "Mennonite Offices" for safe keeping, although we



The first home in Vineland at 4027 23rd Street. Marie Friesen Neufeld (left), Johann Friesen, Reverend Jacob H. Janzen and his wife (standing) Elizabeth Reimer Neufeld (no relation).



The first home for the Neufelds in Vineland, 4027 23rd Street. On the porch are Johann and Cornelius.

have little information about how this all transpired or was accomplished. Before leaving, Cornelius found he had to pay a bribe (*schmiergeld*) on top of the CPR ticket price to secure their tickets. As the time to leave approached, they discovered that emigrants were only allowed to leave with 200 Rubles per passport. As the Neufelds had more, they loaned the remaining money to other families who used it to pay for travel documents and visas. This money was paid back, often years later, and some recipients have come forward in later years to tell the next generation how grateful their families had been for this assistance.

In later years, Uncle Bill confided to my brother, Tom, that he had also smuggled out a sum of money in gold coinage, sewn into the lining of his coat during the trip out of Russia. This was to be used as further *schmiergeld*, as needed, along the way to bribe whatever officials they encountered. Having and smuggling funds was rare, and dangerous, and the Neufelds were able to pay their passage to Canada without any CPR debt (*Reiseschuld*). But having some funds cost them dearly in the attempted robbery and killing of their father, Gerhard before leaving Russia.

Johann Friesen passed away in September of 1931 at age 79, and in the same year, the family purchased the farm near Campden, above the escarpment. Johann Friesen had closely managed the family finances and had vetoed several possible farm purchases earlier. Maria Neufeld lived on the farm at Campden until 1954 and passed away at age 75. The Neufeld farm was often the site of church youth activities, Sunday School picnics and other events in the early years of the Vineland United Mennonite Church.

Saengerfest: Centenary Mennonite Song Festival

On Sunday, August 25, 2024, a *Saengerfest* (song festival) was held at St. Matthew's Lutheran Church in Kitchener to commemorate the 100 years since the Russlaender came to Ontario. Sponsored by the Ontario Mennonite Historical Society and the Institute of Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies at Conrad Grebel University College, the program included old familiar hymns led by Mark Diller Harder and an ensemble of Menno Singers Choir volunteers.

The *Saengerfest*—song festival—was a popular tradition of Mennonites in Prussia, Russia, and Ukraine, and one they brought with them to Canada. Such festivals included multiple choirs and large participant audiences. *Saengerfeste* were also common in the large German community in Kitchener-Waterloo from the mid-19th to the early-20th century. *Saengerfeste* reinforced cultural and religious identities and built bonds of community.

By Henry Paetkau

During the Saengerfest program on Aug. 25, Henry Paetkau, who did extensive research on the Russlaender migration for his MA thesis and his PhD Dissertation, described some of the experiences of the Mennonites who came to Ontario in the 1920s.

Leaving and Loss

Departures and emigration precipitated by loss, hopelessness and despair are filled with deep and mixed emotion. How does one count the losses? When are losses sufficiently great to warrant the risks and uncertainty of moving to an unknown country and future? Who and what will be left behind?

Life and livelihood as experienced and expected in the Mennonite colonies and settlements had been shattered by wartime invasion and occupation, civil war, banditry, famine and disease, as it had for many others.

The number of casualties in the crumbling empire were staggering. Among Mennonites alone, estimates suggest that no less than 2,200 perished during the post-war years as a result of civil war, famine, and epidemics.ⁱ

Jacob Fast, who was among the first group to arrive in Waterloo in 1924, recalled his experience as an eighteen and nineteen-year-old at the time:

When the Germans had gone...Makhno [and other gangs] came along...[D]ozens of people were killed... Fourteen times the government changed in our village. The Reds would come in and chase the Whites out...They'd be away for a while and then come back again... [They] would come in and take all the grain, whatever they could lay [their] hands on... They swept all of our granaries. There wasn't anything left... not even seed grain for the next spring... That was in 1919...

Then a great drought happened...hardly anything grew. Hardly any grain was harvested that year. Then in 1921 it was the same thing. The grain that was seeded died on account of the drought. And big sandstorms...blew all of the [topsoil] off...the grain had nothing to germinate in...it was too dry. We had a big starvation coming...This went on until...the Red government allowed MCC to...bring food into Russia... And of course, that helped and that really saved us from starvation... We were saved through the MCC.ⁱⁱ

Annie Dick Konrad chronicled her family's experience and despair:

From 1919 to 1924 we lived in the village of Neukirk in the Molotschna colony... Grandfather and Grandmother had rented a house...which they shared with our family, my aunt Tina's family and my aunt Agatha. To pay for the rent, father did menial tasks for the villagers [and] bartered goods and services for extra food. To supplement our fuel, my cousin and I gathered cow dung from the streets.

There was a complete crop failure in 1921 due to a drought and a great famine was felt all over the country... [T]he Red and White Armies alternated in occupying our village and we had to billet them... The soldiers brought many diseases, especially typhoid fever. Many people died. Grandfather died in January 1922. He found an eternal home with God, but what would happen to us?ⁱⁱⁱ

Dietrich Neufeld, a teacher in Chortiza, confided to his diary: We Mennonites are aliens in this land. If we didn't realize that fact before the war, we have had it forced upon us during and after the War... We want to leave. The magic word "emigration" travels like a buran [winter wind] from place to place... It is the one idea that keeps us going, our one hope.^{iv}

In 1919, leaders in the Molotschna Colony appointed a *Studienkommission* (Study Commission) to investigate possibilities for mass resettlement. After touring the United States and Canada in 1920, the delegation recommended full-scale emigration to Canada, the only country to offer any hope for acceptance, pending the reversal of restrictions imposed in 1919 barring the admission of Doukhobors, Hutterites and Mennonites.

It would take several more years and the election of a Liberal government led by Mackenzie King for these restrictions to be lifted, for negotiations with the Canadian Pacific Railway for transport on credit to be finalized, for the required medical inspections to be put in place, for the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization to arrange for the settlement a large influx of mostly destitute coreligionists, and for the Mennonite constituency to offer support sufficient to host and accommodate them.



By 1923, those arrangements were finally in place and emigration began. Almost 2,800 were transported to the prairie provinces that year, all on credit. Another 5,000 came the following year, some of them routed to Ontario. By 1930, more than 20,000 had arrived. For all of them, the pain of leaving and loss was deep and heart rending.

Jacob Bartels remembers that experience:

Many came to see us off. A last handshake—tears were shed. For the majority the parting had something of the finality of death in it... The last embrace over, the emigrants boarded the cattle cars. When the signal to depart was given, the crowd remaining burst into song, voices choking with emotion, tears streaming. Even as the train rolled into the night, many an “*Auf Wiedersehen*” was clearly audible in the distance.^v

Mariechen Braun was also among those who left in June 1924. She recalls:

[It] was a hot day. At sunset, the embarkation being completed, our train began to move slowly out of Lichtenau. Those who remained behind began to sing Zinzendorf’s hymn, “Jesus, still lead on.” Tears flowed freely. It was not easy for us to take leave of our homeland... I shall probably never forget that moment fraught with emotion, when we cut ties with the country we had loved, and had considered our home.^{vi}

Poet Anna Rempel, using the pen name Ruth Sturm, described the pain and trauma of departure in a poem called “*Auf der Station zu Lichtenau*.” This translation is by Hannah Gardiner and Jakob-Michael Stephan while Artists-in Residence at Brubacher House Museum.

At the Station in Lichtenau 13 July, 1924

The train is ready to depart
People come from near and far.
Some on foot, others on wagon,
Suckling babes on their bodies dangling.
The air full of dust, the heavens grey
At Lichtenau Station today.

The wind is whistling, hissing, singing.
In her mother’s arms, the child is screaming.
They now wait for the samovar to heat
For there’s no doubt that they must eat.
Everyone is so bland and dull
At the station in Lichtenau.

The crowd in reels waves to and fro
All their hearts are sunken low.
Here some sing a farewell song,
They won’t meet again; they know this is so-long
The man looks stern, the woman’s tears fall
At the station in Lichtenau.

Then they rush to the church to share
A short hour’s time spent there.
Lamentation amid the tears
United in prayer amidst their fears

Each one thinks: I trust in God.
Be it in Canada or in Lichtenau!

The Steam Horse whistles, [ready] to move.
Their final composure, they fully lose.
They groan, they sob, while squeezing hands.
“Live full, live full in the faraway land!”
One last look at their homeland now
From the station in Lichtenau!

For the first time now, the train bell sounds.
They pull the short railings off the ground
And setting rails before the doors
Someone says, “Hand little Lorchen to me once more!”
All the men, whether young or grey,
Are crying in Lichtenau today.

For the last time, the train bell resounds.
The train jolts and starts, then sings the crowd:
“Oh Jesus mine, thou lead the way!”
Alone are left the ones who stay.
They wave as tears stream down their face
Lichtenau will soon be an abandoned place.

Arrival and New Beginnings

Those leaving Lichtenau in June 1924 arrived in Quebec City the evening of July 17. “The following day,” Jacob Bartels recalls, “we disembarked and set foot on Canadian soil... [T]he immigrants were divided into two groups, 300 were destined for the Canadian Prairies, and 900 for Ontario [several hundred more than expected] ... [Most] were headed for Waterloo, where their co-religionists of Swiss origin had made extensive preparations to receive them.”^{vii}

A small number were let off in Toronto, to be hosted by the Markham Mennonite community, a few routed to Vineland Station where their hosts were waiting.

The Kitchener-Waterloo *Daily Record* reported on this large and unusual arrival of newcomers on July 19, 1924:

With smiling countenances and endeavouring to hide the undeniable marks of privation, persecution, hunger and suffering, 875 Russian Mennonite immigrants of German descent arrived in Waterloo on Saturday afternoon bringing all their worldly effects that they were able to save from the despoiling hand of the Soviet with them.

“Practically every Mennonite in the county was in Waterloo,” the report continued, “and their rigs and autos were crammed to capacity with humans, while baggage was tied on in every conceivable place.”

“Not all of them are going to be permanent residents of Ontario,” the *Record* assured its readers, “but they are being cared for here only until next year, when they will go out to the larger Mennonite colony at Rosthern, Saskatchewan.”^{viii}

Alice Neufeld, 17 years old at the time, remembers walking up Erb Street to the Waterloo Mennonite Church, now known as Erb Street Mennonite Church:

[T]he sidewalks [were] lined on both sides with staring and inquisitive townspeople. We were carrying a large hatbox, held by a leather belt. But as things happen, and

sometimes at the most inopportune times, the leather belt broke, and spilt the contents of the box onto the thoroughfare. I was so embarrassed; I wished I could have disappeared into thin air.

It didn't take long for the surrounding people to come to our aid, and help us in our predicament, and to realize we were quite a normal group of people. Under the term "Russian" some had conjured up in their minds quite indescribable impressions of us.^{ix}

Annie Dick Konrad, then four years old, recalls:

[S]ince there were more immigrants than expected, not all families knew where they would find shelter. We were one such family... [W]e sat in one of the horse-and-buggy stalls and watched one family after another follow their hosts to their buggy or car... I snuggled close to my father and wondered, "Will there be no place for us?"

We had seen an elderly man walking by a number of times and eyeing us. We wondered, "Will he take us along?" But no, he disappeared. Later he came back...and asked, "You are still waiting? Have you no place to go?" Father said, "No." Then he said, "You come with me."

When we got to the...farm we waited in the car while [he] told his wife that he had brought an extra family along. Then he invited us inside and his wife greeted us with open arms. We stayed [here] for six months until we moved on to Manitoba and never once did we feel that we had overstayed our welcome. We were loved, sheltered, fed and clothed. Our prayers were answered. We had found a home.^x

Sarah Harder was twenty years old when her family arrived in August 1924. By then, finding hosts and homes for these newcomers had become even more challenging. "As there were eleven members in our family, we were left to the very last to find homes," she recalls. "Of course, it was impossible for all of us to go to one Place. We found shelter in eight different places."^{xi}

Twenty-four year old Jacob Fast was among those whose first home was in Vineland:

We arrived at the station...and saw all the orchards...The people that we were assigned to [Christian Fretz, a local Mennonite farmer] picked us up [in] a truck and took us to our [new] home. It was a brand new building built especially for us...[T]hey put...18 people in this house, three families...two in the bedroom upstairs, one in the living room downstairs.

There was another bed [squeezed] under the stairway... My brother-in-law and I were sleeping there. The stairway was without backboards so that [as] anybody would walk up, dirt and everything would land on our bed. So finally we just took some cloth and nailed it on there so that [the dirt] wouldn't fall into our faces. My brother-in-law and I slept under the stairs!"^{xii}

Fast also recalls the first time worshipping with their hosts [at The Moyer Meeting House, now The First Mennonite Church]:



Russlaender immigrants walk up Erb Street from the railway to Erb Street Mennonite Church in 1924. (Mennonite Archives of Ontario photo)

We arrived on Saturday afternoon. [They were] good Mennonites [and] thought we had to go to church [the next day]. So they loaded us onto a truck and we trucked down to the church...When the minister was finished...he asked us to sing a song, in German of course. We sang, "Nun danket alle Gott." And boy, you should have seen the people there! The whole church was crying for us. It was overwhelming.^{xiii}

By the end of 1924, more than 1,300 Russlaender had arrived in Ontario. The following winter, about half of these followed their original intention and joined friends and relatives on the prairies. Some soon returned to Ontario, however, when farming and other employment opportunities proved more favourable here. By the end of 1927, more than 1,700 Russlaender had found their new Canadian home in Ontario.

Many lived and worked in the cities and towns of Kitchener, Waterloo, Guelph, Hespeler, Elmira, New Dundee and New Hamburg. Others settled in the Niagara Peninsula, where seasonal work on farms and in factories in Vineland and Virgil was available and small parcels of farmland more affordable.

A third major area of settlement was Essex County to the southwest. Thirty-one families moved here in the spring of 1925 and more followed that summer, settling in and around Kingsville, Leamington, Wheatley, Coatsworth, Harrow and on Pelee Island. Work was plentiful, whether on farms for wages, as sharecroppers, or in the brickyards. Canning factories and tobacco processing plants also provided seasonal employment.

Some preferred the opportunity of making a new home in Northern Ontario where homesteads were inexpensive and communal settlement seemed practical and possible. Reesor, as the settlement came to be known, attracted many who had become disillusioned in western Canada.

While that experiment was short lived, the scattered and destitute Russlaender sought each other out wherever and whenever they found a home. They gathered regularly for worship and fellowship, organized Sunday Schools and established choirs, all in an effort to recover and reestablish their identity as a people of faith in this new homeland.

In May 1925, members of the *Bruedergemeinde* (MBs) and *Allianzgemeinde* (Alliance) agreed to unite as the "Molotschna Mennoniten-Brueder-Gemeinde," though it soon lost its Old World identity and became known as the "Kitchener

Mennonite Brethren Church.” *Kirchliche* adherents first gathered in June 1925 to form the “*Mennoniten Fluechtlings Gemeinde in Ontario*” (Mennonite Refugee Church) and began meeting in Waterloo. Within a year, the congregation was renamed “*Vereinigte Mennonitengemeinde*” (United Mennonite Church), reflecting an early intention and attempt to unite the various groups into one body.

Economic circumstances made it difficult for many to find permanence and prosperity throughout the twenties and thirties. Despite those challenges, life here was still much better than the one they had left behind. The experience of one young couple summarizes that sentiment.

Having been dislocated several times, they packed their few belongings once more and, with a 20-month-old in tow, joined four other families sharing one large farmhouse, 25 people living under one roof! But they were safe and had work and food to eat, they recall, and that was more than enough to make it a new home.^{xiv}

Bishop Jacob H. Janzen, founding minister of the W-K United Mennonite Church who worked tirelessly to minister to the scattered Russlaender, expressed the prevailing sentiment

about their new homeland in a poem entitled, “O Canada,” penned in 1925, a year after he and his family had arrived in Waterloo.

O Canada
by Jacob H. Janzen

O Canada, thou ever more dost us possess,
In thee we found a home of warmth and tenderness,
Amidst your fields and greening forest glen.
We scarcely could believe it—yet ‘tis true
That in this land, so wonderfully new,
We wandering strangers could find home and hearth again.

Thou land and people who with hearts so generous
Unto thy shores and spaces didst so warmly welcome us,
We are indebted to thee now and evermore.
And thus, with thee united, we anew
Would seek our heavenly Father’s guidance true,
On our joint pilgrimage to heaven’s eternal shore.^{xv}

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- i Anne Dick Konrad, *Mennonite Brethren Church of Ontario in Historical Record*, ch. 4, pp. 35
 - ii Jacob Fast, “Russian Mennonite Immigrants of the 1920s Oral History Project Interview #11, part 1, pp. 4-7.
 - iii Annie Dick Konrad, “Finding Refuge Among Mennonites in Waterloo” *Mennogespreech*, Sept. 1992, p. 12
 - iv Dietrich Neufeld, *A Russian Dance of Death*, p. 63
 - v Anne Dick Konrad, p. 64, n. 16
 - vi Anne Dick Konrad, p. 64, n. 15
 - vii Anne Dick Konrad, p. 72/79
 - viii “Leading Event in Waterloo County for 1924,” *Daily Record*, Sept. 20, 1924, Section II, p. 1
 - ix Alice Neufeld, “Memories,” *Jubilee Issue of the Waterloo-Kitchener United Mennonite Church, 1924-1974*, p. 114
 - x Anne Dick Konrad “Finding Refuge,” *Mennogespreech*, Sept. 1992, p. 12
 - xi “Sarah Harder recalls events in the life of her parents’ family—Abram and Anna Harder,” by Sarah Harder, 1976, Mennonite Archives of Ontario (unpublished paper translated and edited by Arthur Harder).
 - xii Jacob and Agatha Fast, “Russian Mennonite Immigrants of the 1920s Oral History Project” Interview #11, p. 30
 - xiii Jacob Fast, Interview #11, *ibid*, p. 31
 - xiv Esther Patkau, *Prairie Treasures: The Story of the Patkau Family at Hanley, Saskatchewan, Canada, 1923-1956* (2000) pp. 32-39.
 - xv *Der Bote* (Special Edition), Nov. 15, 1995, No. 43, p. 25 (free translation by Gerhard Ens)
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Detweiler Summer Music Program

Summer music events at the Detweiler Meetinghouse in Roseville will start again in the spring. There are plans for the return of the Hymn Sing and some of last summer’s musicians, plus other local groups. All performers appreciate the sing-along audience and wonderful acoustics in the restored stone meetinghouse of 1855.

We plan to send out occasional notices by email regarding these musical events. If you would like to be on our email list or have questions, please email your request and full name to Ivan Emke at ruralnl@gmail.com.

Programs are also listed on our Facebook page and website at Detweilermeetinghouse.ca and possibly a future Instagram page.



Home Routes: Sharing music and community at the heart of Brubacher House

By Laura Enns, Brubacher House host

The kitchen party is now iconic in Canadian culture—although perhaps more strongly associated with Newfoundlanders than the Mennonites of Waterloo Region. Throughout human history, people have found warmth, inspiration, belonging, and sustenance through sharing songs, stories, dance, and food around the fire. This tradition has continued in many coastal communities, where people still open their kitchens and living rooms to friends and neighbours for lively, impromptu gatherings centred around music. Across time and place, the hearth is the beating heart of the home and community—the place of welcome and hospitality—and there is just something about the coziness of the kitchen that draws people together and nourishes the soul.

Last year at Brubacher House, an 1850s Mennonite house and museum at the University of Waterloo, we lit the fireplace in the old summer kitchen as we welcomed the community in for our Home Routes house concert series from October to May. This series was made possible through the support of the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario, Emmanuel United Church in Waterloo, and Winnipeg-based not-for-profit Home Routes/Chemin Chez Nous.

Once the site of food preparation during the warm summer months for a large, hardworking, farming family, the summer kitchen was once again filled with comfort food as friends and strangers arrived bearing warm soups, stews, and hummus platters to share. Musicians, who were billeted by volunteer hosts, joined in the fellowship potluck and lively conversation circle before eventually transitioning to the microphone, as the intimate room was quickly reconfigured as a concert space for these acclaimed local and international artists. But by that time, the barrier between “performer” and “audience” had already disappeared, and jokes and laughter flowed freely between the stage and the floor, as did the youngest audience members, who seemed to appear out of nowhere to take in this intriguing scene, before again disappearing to play ukuleles, tambourines and



Denmark-based musicians, Mirja Klippel and Alex Jønsson, performing at Brubacher House's inaugural Home Routes concert in October 2023. (Photo: Colin MacLeod)

tin whistles with the rambunctious band of budding musicians two floors above—where John E. Brubacher and Magdalena Musselman's 14 children once shared two bedrooms.

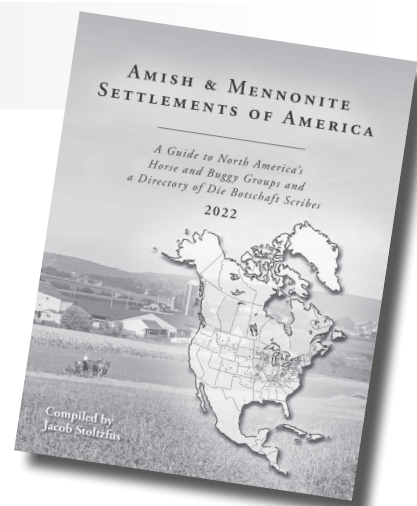
This is how culture gets passed on from generation to generation. At first glance, it does not bear much resemblance to the hymn singing that may have once filled the Brubachers' winter evenings, as the family gathered around a candle or coal oil lamp with only the fire to warm them. Electric guitars would have been inoperable in their home, which had no electricity when it was built. The casual convergence of diverse identities, and cultural and religious expressions would have been unimaginable. But the spirit is there—the joy of simple gifts, the sense of kinship and continuity in the intergenerational gathering, the generosity of hospitality, and at the heart of it all—the humble and intimate sharing of ourselves through story and song.

NEW BOOK

Amish & Mennonite Settlements of America: A Guide to North America's Horse and Buggy Groups and a Directory of Die Botschaft Scribes.

Jacob Stoltzfus. Masthof Press, 2022, 443 pages.

This large book provides information about Amish and Old Order Mennonite groups across North America. The section for Ontario is only a small part, but it provides accurate information as of 2022. The Independent Old Order Mennonites (David Martin group) are acknowledged, but there is no specific information. *Die Botschaft* is an English-language newspaper, published in Millersburg, Pa., containing newsy letters from Amish and Old Order scribes from across North America.



Old Order Amish publisher dies

By Barb Draper

Ontario Anabaptists lost an important leader with the death of Joseph Stoll on October 19, 2023, in Aylmer. He was one of the founders of Pathway Publishers (1964), a very successful Old Order Amish publishing company that has been providing resources for Old Order Amish groups across North America. Through Pathway Publishers, Joe Stoll was able to articulate and strengthen the assumptions of Amish culture.

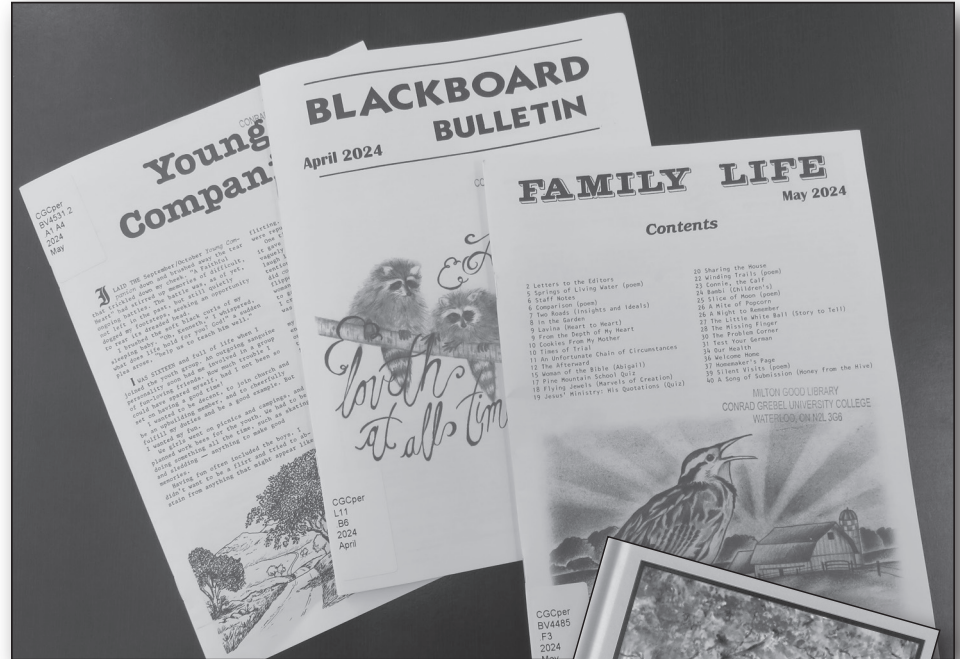
Joseph Stoll was born Dec. 1, 1935, in Daviess County, Indiana, the second child and oldest son of Peter and Anna (Wagler) Stoll. When he was young, the Stoll family moved to Michigan, and later to Ohio. In March 1953 the family moved to the fledgling Amish community in Aylmer, Ontario.

Joe was the first teacher for this new Amish community, using the Stoll family's summer kitchen as the first schoolhouse. A few years later, on April 4, 1957, he married Laura (Lichti) Gascho and moved to a 100-acre farm. He continued his teaching career until 1965.

His work in publishing first began with a teachers' circle letter in October 1957. It was called *Blackboard Bulletin*, had seven pages, was produced with a spirit duplicator and cost 60 cents a year or \$1.00 for two years. The goal was to provide informative and inspiring literature for Amish teachers in private schools.

Six years later, in the summer of 1963, Joseph Stoll and David Wagler were working in the field at harvest time, talking about the need for better reading material for Amish people. Out of this conversation came Pathway Publishers, formed in March 1964, under the leadership of these two farmers. *Blackboard Bulletin* became part of the venture, and the first book was a reprint of *The Man in Bearskin* by J. Keuning. Among the early books that sold well were Amish cookbooks. The late 1960s were busy years as they began publishing two new magazines: *Family Life* and *Young Companion*.

In 1967, David Luthy moved to the Aylmer area and joined the publishing enterprise to begin working on a series of readers suitable for Amish children. When purchasing the rights to old stories



proved too costly, the publishers bravely began to write stories themselves. Joe Stoll, his brother Elmo, and David Luthy wrote many stories that appear in these school textbooks. The books are widely used in Old Order Amish and Old Order Mennonite private schools.

Several Amish families moved to Honduras in the early 1970s, including Joe and Laura Stoll and their eight children. During this time, Joe continued to support Pathway Publishers, writing a regular column for *Family Life*. In 1977 the Stoll family sadly returned to Aylmer when the Amish community in Honduras failed to prosper. Joe wrote about this experience in his book, *Sunshine and Shadow: Our Seven Years in Honduras* (1997).

Joe, Laura and their 11 children started over, farming from scratch on land that had no buildings. They developed a prosperous operation growing produce and milking cows. In 1978 Joe took over as editor of *Young Companion* and in 1990 also became the coordinating editor of *Family Life*. Although he was a busy farmer, Joe rewrote some older books, putting them into modern English and wrote devotional material. The Shagbark Hickory series were three books about his childhood adventures. His two last books were *Our Familiar German Hymns* and *Amish and Old Order Mennonite Schools*,

a Concise History, both published in 2020.

Joe Stoll was a man of vision and energy who worked for the community. In 1989, at the age of 53, he was ordained to the Old Order Amish ministry. He was also a humble man who signed his magazine articles with only his initials. He lived to the age of 87 years and leaves to mourn his wife, five sons, six daughters, 89 grandchildren and 129 great-grandchildren as well as a foster son, three brothers, three sisters and many, many friends.

Much of the information for this article comes from "Staff Notes" written by Elizabeth Wengerd in Family Life, December 2023.