

## SWISS MENNONITE CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION BANQUET

Thursday, September 17, 2009, 6:00 p.m. at Eden Mennonite Church, Moundridge KS

Norman Hofer, historian/farmer from Freeman SD area, used a power point presentation to share information about the Hutterers and Hutterites and connections with the Swiss, and shared his own story.

Just about four years ago Norman, a Hutterite, discovered that he had personal connections to the Swiss through a Maria Schrag who years before had moved with her family to a Hutterite village in Wischenko, Russia. After her husband died in 1817, she decided to rejoin her own Swiss clan and she moved back to Volhynia with her new name of Waldner, thus the beginning of the Waldner (later changed to Waltner) name in the Swiss genealogy.

The book that changed Norman's life and got him very interested in history was Banished for Faith written in 1968 by Emil Waltner, father of Willard Waltner now living at Bethel Kidron in North Newton. The first half is about Hutterites and the last half about Swiss Mennonites. Reading the book, he realized that this was his own history.

You are a Hutter if you are from West Freeman. The only place in the world where you have three ethnic groups in close proximity: Hutterers, Swiss Germans and Low Germans. All come from a different part of Europe. They have their own last names. All three lived 100 years in Russia. Each has their own dialect. All three immigrated to U.S. and Canada. In Kansas are Low Germans and Swiss. In Manitoba are Low Germans and Hutterers. In Freeman area are all three.

Less than 20 years after the last ones arrived in America, all came together in South Dakota to form a Mennonite college to educate their young people; that institution came to be Freeman Academy and then Freeman Junior College.

Over the years Swiss and Hutterites have had their differences. The only time all came together was at church because all spoke High German in church services. All went to church Sunday evenings. Swiss were considered most liberal. Hutterers most conservative. Low Germans somewhere in between.

In high school, Norman remembers that things were allowed in East Freeman (Swiss area) that were considered taboo in West Freeman. Young people sometimes did the same things like going to the movies but struggled with those decisions when they did what was not approved by their elders. When ladies started wearing sleeveless blouses and other similar changes caused problems in the more conservative churches.

The North (Salem Zion) and South (Salem) churches are well known for their excellent music but the Hutterers didn't sing or have instruments in church. Norman remembered the Messiah in 1914 with orchestra and large choir. Hutterers weren't allowed piano until about 1939 or 1946. So these differences caused friction between groups.

Hutterers and Swiss have the same history. Books that tell the story are the Chronicles (history of the Hutterites), Prairie People by Rod Janzen, Princes Potentates and Plain People by Swiss Reuben Goertz, An Introduction to the Russian Mennonites by Wally Kroeker, Hutterite Society by John A. Hostetler, and Paul Tschetter by Rod Janzen.

Norman belongs to the Hutterthal Church, today very much Mennonite. He is a Hutter, not a Hutterite. Hutterites would live in a colony. Hutterers live on individual farms in West Freeman. When they came to America, they had to decide if they were going to live in colonies (450 chose that) or take advantage of the U. S. Homestead Act and live on individual farms (800 chose that).

Currently there are three distinct groups of Hutterites:

- 1) Dariusleut (most conservative) Wolf Creek Colony 10 miles west of Freeman,
- 2) Schmeidleut (most liberal), living in Bon Homme Colony, 17 miles west of Yankton, South Dakota).
- 3) Lehrerleut Hutterites at Old Elm Spring Colony, 20 miles northwest of Freeman. Hutterites are found in Montana, Alberta, Saskatchewan.

Norman and Darlene recently traveled to visit 19 colonies over a distance of 2700 miles. They saw wheat harvest in Canada (hardly ever see wheat harvest in Freeman), beautiful gardens, dairy farms, people working there and children working. A grandmother there told the story about the Hutterite's struggles in WWI to her grandchildren and they were so interested. One young lady was playing "Tennessee Waltz" at the piano but her grandmother said once she is baptized she would not be playing the piano. The people were interested in Norman's history too.

Three churches are in South Dakota:

- 1) Hutterdorf, 2 miles west of Freeman
- 2) Hutterthal, 4 miles northwest of Freeman
- 3) neu Hutterthal, 11 miles northwest of Freeman.

Today they are referred to as Hutterers or Prairieleut. In 1942 these three Hutter churches joined the General Conference Mennonite Church.

West of Freeman is the flat land where many immigrants settled along the James River. East of Salem is Salem Zion Mennonite Church (North Church), and Salem Mennonite (South Church).

The Hutterers started in Moravia, group of Anabaptists, about 35 people. As persecuted Anabaptists they fled the religious leaders. As they were fleeing, someone took a coat and laid on the ground and said, "from now on, no one will be rich and no one poor among us." And that was the beginning of the Colony system. Now 30-40,000. Some names of these were Walter, Wall, Tschetter, Gross, Wipf, Stahl. Buildings are still standing in the area where they had lived preserved by wealthy people in the area. Eventually they again were persecuted for their pacifist beliefs and left. No Hutterites are in Moravia now. Hutterites were banished to Transylvania.

Now the story goes to Carinthia, Austria. They lived in a beautiful narrow valley. Names were Hofer, Glanzer, Waldner, Miller, Wurz, Kleinsasser. In 1735 Leaders wanted Austria to be pure Catholic. The people had become Lutheran. They had to either go back to being Catholic or be banished. Hofers arrested. Glanzers arrested. Banished because they wouldn't attend the Catholic Church. They had trials but did not recant. Lutherans accepted Hutterite ways. They fled over the mountains to get away from Maria Theresa. She sent priests to take the children away from the Hutterites, these considered heretics.

Now they were in Romania 2 ½ years. Then war. Turkey from south, Russia from north. They were at the mercy of Russian general. A military general escorted them to his friend's large estate in Wischenko where they lived 1770-1802. Raditschewa 1802-1942, Molotschna 1842-1879. No communal living at this time, 40 years. In Wischenko they set up their crafts. They were locksmiths, made pottery. Very plain buildings. Economically depressed. Nearby was a beautiful castle where Katherine the Great would visit.

At Wischenko they sent missionaries out to encourage others to join them there. They went back to Romania and other locations. Very possible that they communicated with the Swiss Mennonites in Volhynia because that was only 350 miles away from Wischenko.

Several Swiss families went to the Hutterite Colony in Wischenka, Russia Included was Johann Schrag and Elizabeth Albrecht with their three daughters, Maria, Anna, and Katherine. All three married Hutterite men.

Daughter Anna married Jerg Waldner. Maria married Johann Wipf and when he died she married Kleinsasser.

Their daughter Katherine married Andreas Waldner. When her husband died in 1817. she and her six children returned to her Swiss Volhynian family. They carried the Waldner name which was later changed to Waltner. How did she survive there in Poland with six children?

In 1819 the Hutter communal system was disbanded in Russia for about 40 years.

Some young people feel the Swiss is an elitist group. Some think this is just a clan. Some say you are snobbish. Norman said, "I am convinced that everyone needs to be a part of a clan, a group. When people find their roots, when they find out they belong to a certain group, they have much joy. Know your story, where you come from. Know your stories. Tell them to your children and grandchildren. It will do more for your young people than you can imagine. Make the story alive."

--Notes by Kathy Goering