

**FOOTPRINTS OF THE MISSIONARY:  
THE ROAD OF GENERAL CONFERENCE MENNONITES IN OKLAHOMA**

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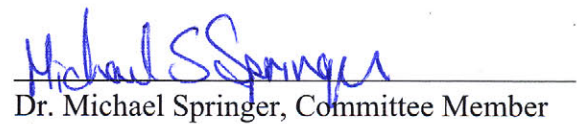
## THESIS APPROVAL

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This thesis is dedicated to my family for encouraging me in the completion of this history:

Lonnie & Marlena Buller

Randy Buller

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and my late grandfather Gene Buller

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## **ABSTRACT**

General Conference Mennonites in the United States are prevalent in the states of Pennsylvania on the east coast, and in Kansas on the central plains. The state of Oklahoma too has its share of the denomination as well. These congregations, though not as numerous as in other states, made their mark in the Sooner State. The Mennonite voice in Oklahoma reflected their efforts to provide for those in need as well as to further the faith through missions work. From their arrival to America, to the missions started by Samuel S. Haury and Heinrich Richert Voth, these Mennonites remained steadfast to their faith and continue to reside a strong presence in the state. This thesis displays how important and contributory the General Conference Mennonites are in the state of Oklahoma. By equating the theological adherence to mission work and how it manifested overtime, this history evaluates the extent to which the denomination engaged to help the needy, and in so doing, these Mennonites cemented their place in the state. Their arrival to America and Oklahoma, their work with Indian tribes, church planting, relief efforts, and continuation are expressed in the work.

## INTRODUCTION

Mennonites in Oklahoma vary in terms of their theology. The two main sects of the denomination include the Mennonite Brethren's and the Mennonite Church USA, formally the General Conference Mennonites. These two denominations share a founding, but differ on many issues, including their response to social issues and peace and justice. The Mennonite Brethren sect shares the mainstream protestant evangelical belief system in terms of strict biblical literalism on social issues, and little reservation to taking up arms. However, the traditionally known General Conference Mennonites have stringently adhered to nonviolent resolutions, while being split on social issues, normally based on the state in which the churches reside. In the bible belt of America General Conference Churches retain similar biblical interpretation as that of the Mennonite Brethren denomination, while in coastal areas a more modernized interpretation is intact. For the purposes of this thesis, doctrinal comparisons between these two Mennonite sects are not the focus. Rather, this is a history of the General Conference Mennonites and their arrival, growth, and sustained presence in the state of Oklahoma.

The Mennonite Church USA formed in 2002, is a collection of twenty-one region conferences, one of which is the Western District Conference (WDC). Prior to this membership the WDC retained regional membership in the General Conference Mennonite Church which included congregations spanning Canada and the United States from 1860 to 2002. Despite population and longevity in comparison to neighboring states, the members of this denomination in Oklahoma have rich traditions and fellowships, and over time developed major contributions to the General Conference. The

Mennonites established their influence through their mission oriented focus passed down from their Anabaptist heritage. The passion for missions originated in Europe when the denomination first formed in the 1500s. The Mennonites gained new converts in each location where they established a church. Missions work, interchangeable with the word “outreach” as both accomplish similar tasks, varies in the denomination from direct participation in evangelism to indirect financial support for those abroad. The concept of the “mission” has taken the form of assisting those nearby following natural disasters to engaging in hours of work to build and sell items to fund similar assignments overseas. Despite the variation in mission projects that the Oklahoma Mennonites have participated in, their servanthood and dedication to seeing the missions succeed remained constant for the last century and a half.

The life of Norman “Shorty” Unruh best symbolizes the variance of mission’s involvement of an Oklahoma General Conference Mennonite. Unruh was born on a farm in Meno, Oklahoma, named after the denomination’s founder Menno Simons. After a short time Norman’s father, Albert accepted the call to minister at the New Hopedale Mennonite Church in Meno in 1940, and later to a tenured term of service at the Grace Mennonite Church in Enid from 1948 to 1962. In that time, Shorty and Albert traveled to perform at various churches as part of a father-son quartet, along with Richard Froese and his father. Shorty attended high school in Meno at Oklahoma Bible Academy (OBA), founded by the General Conference as a mission school, and over the course of the next thirty years served Grace Mennonite as a deacon and later as an assistant pastor. He also became a member of the OBA school board for an extended period of time and served the Oklahoma Mennonite Convention faithfully as a camp counselor for several summers.

To say the name Shorty Unruh in a General Conference setting in Oklahoma immediately evokes a chorus of recollections, stories, and pride through association with Unruh and with each other. These members share a history of denominational lore, an almost fraternal association that uniquely binds them together in ethnic background and religious practice. Mennonites differ from other religious groups in Oklahoma because there is not a Mennonite church in every community, as opposed to the figurative assumption that a Southern Baptist church is located on each corner in every town in the state. Despite this, the General Conference has developed an identity in the “Sooner State” that sets them apart from all others. This denomination celebrates German heritage, emphasizes Anabaptists theological beliefs, and engages actively in outreach projects. The beginning of the conference in the state was itself a mission’s assignment.

The General Conference of Mennonites spread to Oklahoma prior to statehood when the leadership deployed missionaries to begin work among the tribes. Since the subsequent beginning of churches that followed these missions, the denomination continued a rich tradition of missions work and cohesion among its churches. Raised in this fellowship I can confirm that association within our regional conference affiliation prided several laymen within my church. The pride of membership in the denomination rested on sustaining ties to the Western District Conference. Only with family did I come to appreciate the unique storied past of our intertwined faith and German heritage. On a personal level, my family and I maintained little involvement with the conference, but for others the history of Mennonites in Oklahoma directly reflects the WDC.

Beyond the conference connection lays the unique title of being an Oklahoma Mennonite. The General Conference only created fifteen to twenty churches in over a



century's time in the entire state, and some of those have closed their doors or have disassociated themselves from the WDC. In addition, the linkages between these individuals set them apart from larger Christian groups in the state. The Oklahoma General Conference Mennonites created a state convention to intentionally fellowship with one another. Sharing an ethnicity, a conference, and a yearly gathering, these religious people have persevered and are now affiliated with the Mennonite Church USA. This thesis examines this faithful group: how they arrived, how they started missions and organized churches in the state, how they outreach through nationally recognized denominational projects, and how they began their most notable contribution to the Mennonite Church and world missions, the starting of the Oklahoma Relief Sale in 1978.

Two influential works on Mennonite Heritage in Oklahoma precede this thesis. The first published in 1981, *Prairie People: A History of the Western District Conference* by David A. Haury, traces the development of the conference and churches in several states in the central plains. The second published in 1988, *Growing Faith: General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma* edited by Wilma McKee, is a collection of essays ranging several topics related to the history of the Mennonite Church in Oklahoma. Both works are unique in scope and substantiated well with research, yet are broad in coverage rather than narrow topics. In addition, what is common knowledge among members of this denomination is wielded into these histories. For example, Haury explains that Heinrich Richert Voth and Samuel S. Haury served in mission's capacities in Oklahoma without a full evaluation of their influence within the mission, their productivity, and their contribution to church planting. McKee notes that specific churches participated actively in the annual relief sale, yet no history exists on when, how, and why the sale

began in this state, nor discussion of its profits and its legacy. Further, McKee mentioned the state meat canning project, but still provides no explanation of the event, its purpose, or the history of its beginning and ongoing success. What these works mention briefly in their writing, which presumes prior knowledge by the reader, this thesis seeks to explore in much depth. Readers who know little or nothing about Mennonites will have a clear picture of the denomination in Oklahoma upon reading this thesis.

In chapter one of this work, the diversified views of the denominations migration to America and the central plains is retraced through evaluation of histories on the subject. By chronologically investigating the writer's conclusions for why Mennonites relocated from Europe to the New World, this chapter provides a base for understanding Mennonite migration. Chapter one provides the first historiographical compilation on the subject of Mennonite migration, specifically those who made Oklahoma and surrounding states their new home. Chapter two describes the early efforts of the denomination to establish itself in the state through missions by tracing a thorough history of two of the most important early leaders Samuel S. Haury and Henrich Richert Voth. This chapter includes the work of these missionaries with the Indian tribes at the Canton and Darlington Missions, and church planting through participation in itinerant ministry. Within Mennonite histories the two men are cited in some aspects, but never combined in presenting their individual stories and contributions to laying the foundation of General Conference Mennonites within the state of Oklahoma.

Chapter three introduces four ways that Oklahoma Mennonites participate in national organizations affiliated with the denomination to benefit world missions: the Oklahoma Mennonite Convention, the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Meat

Canning Project, the Mennonite Disaster Service, and Mennonite Mutual Aid. Finally, chapter four traces a thorough history of the MCC Relief Sale and its long term effects in placing Oklahoma Mennonites in the national spotlight through their unified efforts to raise funds for foreign missions. Further, continuing the emphasis on outreach, chapter four concludes with a short history of Russell and Virgie Mueller's work among tribes in Canada, illustrating the importance of funding individual missionaries in their endeavors abroad.

Rather than retracing the steps taken to establish the General Conference, this thesis seeks to illuminate the work of Oklahoma Mennonites through missions and faith-sponsored activities to develop the identity of the denomination within the state. This work illustrates how the Mennonites used their religious beliefs to shape their activities and provide help for those in need.

## CHAPTER 1: THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS

### HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE MENNONITE MIGRATION TO AMERICA AND OKLAHOMA

“As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him...’Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit’....Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.” Acts 9:3; 17; 31 (New International Version)

Saul’s dramatic encounter on the road to Damascus encouraged a surge of growth for the New Testament Church. Similarly the European Mennonites, a denomination founded on the principles of Anabaptism and conscientious objection, were blinded by a vision to farm and worship peacefully increased the denominations population in America from 1850 to 1920. The reasons for their relocation are varied, as are the locations to which they built their new homes. For those who migrated to the central plains, the primary objective was to attain fertile ground, but retaining the freedom to practice their brand of Christianity sustained equal importance. Once they settled and started their formal worship services, these individuals engaged in missions work to grow the denomination in the state of Oklahoma.

The story of the Nightigals’, the Bullers’, and the Pauls’ provide a profile that thousands of the denomination’s faithful emulated in their search for a new home on the Great Plains. Born March 4, 1814, in Waldheim, South Russia, Benjamin Nachtigal grew and married Elizabeth Richert. In 1875, Benjamin and Elizabeth, along with their ten children, left Waldheim and arrived at Antwerp where they boarded the *S.S. Kenilworth*, later arriving in New York on July 17, 1876. From there they moved to Groveland in McPherson, Kansas, where many friends and relatives had previously settled. Later the

family relocated to Fairview, Oklahoma, to work their new farm. Benjamin died May 2, 1897, and Elizabeth died August 9, 1926.<sup>1</sup>

In 1876, the Jacob Buller family had a similar experience. Jacob left Landskron in South Russia, and settled his family in Henderson, Nebraska. They came over on the *S.S. Vaderland* of the Red Star Line which was a Belgium steamer, departing from Antwerp. They traveled with 165 families, a total of 541 Mennonite passengers. Jacob, his wife Katherine, and four children ranging from ages one to nine arrived in Philadelphia on July 28, 1876. The new arrivals on the ship dispersed to settle in Kansas, Minnesota, Dakota, and Nebraska.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the story of the Heinrich Pauls family further illustrates Mennonites settling in the central United States. Heinrich was born in 1822 in Prangenau, South Russia, and in 1845 he married Elizabeth Dueck, who was born in Reinland, Prussia. They lived in Prangenau in the early years of their married life. On June 16, 1878, the couple and their thirteen children left Bremen, Germany, and boarded the ship *Strassburg* and arrived at New York City on July 2, 1878. They came to America under the promise of freedom of speech, religion, and press, and for better soil. Land was cheap, so the family settled on the Buhler Plains, South of Inman, Kansas. As farmers they worked all day long, with their crowning achievement being the completion of an 80 foot deep well after years of digging.<sup>3</sup> These three examples illustrate the motivation of the European Mennonite populace in the late 1800s to migrate to America, with reasons for relocation including gaining land and religious freedom.

Historians like Douglas Hale and David Haury produced works over the years that trace the history of Mennonite relocation to the Great Plains. Scholarship over this sect

provides a consensus view that religious persecution spurred the Mennonites to seek a new home in the United States. These historians also concluded that, beyond persecution, these Anabaptists sought to separate from Europe. Others depicted the migration as a radical attempt to evade suffering in a world that contradicts Simons' theology. Once free from this pressure the new settlers assisted fellow brethren to escape to the newfound tolerant homeland. Regardless of their motives, the Mennonites, a denomination founded in Europe, has spread its presence in the New World from east to west. The historiography of their relocation spans a broad range of expertise, from those raised with Mennonite background, to those who have familiarized themselves with the denomination to produce scholarly histories.

Before describing the historiography, an overview of the beginnings of the church is in order. The Mennonites first formed under the leadership of Dutch reformist Menno Simons (1496-1561) in 1530s Reformation Europe. Like so many other protestant reformers such as Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, Simons developed a doctrine of faith that challenged the dominant Catholicism of Europe. He championed a solemn interpretation of the scriptures, a theology that recognized the link between persecution and holiness in the name of faith.<sup>4</sup> Menno emphasized the responsibility of the believer to lay down their lives for the cross, similar to the teachings of Evangelical Anabaptism spreading throughout the Netherlands at this time. The tenants of the belief system hold high regard for each religious sacrament of the scriptures, with special emphasis on baptism and foot washing. One of the central elements of the faith refined overtime is the stringent devotion to missions work. Using the life Jesus Christ as the example, the Mennonites developed a view of missions that started with the Christ's ascending call of

the Great Commission to make disciples in the world. Like other Christian movements the Mennonites emulated the actions of Christ to heal the suffering by translating Christian service into a form of missions work.<sup>5</sup> Christian servanthood over time elevated to the center of the Mennonite faith, as once in America this belief evolved into several projects that would benefit people internationally.

The desire to mission to people in various locations resembles how the faith spread in Europe following its founding. As with other denominational movements, the adherents experienced much martyrdom for their beliefs. The concentration of Simons' followers came from his homeland in the Netherlands. When the counter-Reformation started in this region, the Mennonites soon spread to parts of Poland and Switzerland, but predominantly in what would become West Prussia, specifically in the colonies near the Vistula. Here they found tolerance for their beliefs and established a missions field to grow their communities in the mid 1540s.<sup>6</sup> Eventually an exodus from Prussia occurred in 1772 when the rulers issued discriminatory laws against the denomination. Russia, under Catherine the Great, recruited the Mennonites to reap benefits from their farming practices.<sup>7</sup>

The denomination experienced schisms as it grew. The dichotomy between the disciples of Jacob Ammann, from whose leadership the Amish sect emerged, and those of Simons in Switzerland illustrate such a division. Shunning a wayward member was the point of contention, which Ammann's sect desired to practice while others deemed it as a negative reflection on the church. Simons himself was an advocate of the practice, and Dutch Mennonites split between 1566-67 over the issue.<sup>8</sup> Shunning is not one of the major principles that set Mennonite theology apart from others.

Two premises of Menno Simons' doctrinal statements embody the forefront of the belief system. The first element is the act of pacifism in its fullest nature. Ranging from issues involving war and military service to church discipline, Simons relied on biblical scripture to substantiate the Mennonite theology. He wrote, "Even as God for Jesus' sake, forgives all of our sins; so must we also forgive our neighbor all his transgressions in Christ, which he has committed against us. And we should not under any circumstances indulge in hatred or vengeance against him, although he should never reform."<sup>9</sup> The second principle developed in his interpretation is baptism, denoted as "Believer's Baptism." This doctrine reserved baptism for adults who fully understood the commitment that they were making, opposed to infant baptism which imposed the ceremony unknowingly on the child as practiced by the Catholic Church, the Calvinists, and Lutherans.<sup>10</sup> Simons and his followers stressed the importance of recognizing one's choice to be baptized as it symbolized committing one's life to Christ, an affirmation that an infant could not make. Over time, baptism in the Mennonite church has changed to include pouring and sprinkling methods in addition to full immersion.

Further, the Mennonites, as with most protestant movements, is rooted in deep desire to bring new converts into the faith. Upon arrival into the United States, Mennonites began their missions work to welcome new believers into the fellowship. This proactive resolve manifested greater relevance as Mennonite churches started engaging in missions to assist those in need. Fundamental to basic Christian theology of "love thy neighbor," once established the denomination fully focused on providing for the needy. This help further epitomized through the Mennonites seclusion from the rest of the world. Existing in small enclaves the denomination associated among themselves.



Maintaining cohesive religious communities the followers engaged in the opportunity to assist one another. This mission oriented determination would come to define the Mennonites who later settled in the state of Oklahoma.

Historians differ on the reasons that the denomination left their European homeland for America. The consensus view identifies three viable reasons for the relocation of the Mennonites. First, as with any other religious group or nationality natural immigration, the desire of individuals seeking a new start in life, brought these people to America. Those Mennonites who fall into this category account for the first arrivals in Pennsylvania in the late 1600s and early 1700s. The second reason is the escape from government authority pressuring the Mennonites into military participation, accounting for those arriving prior to the First World War. Often ideological differences with the European governments also caused Mennonites to flee Russia to avoid association with the spread of communism. The third reason was the desire to create a new denominational identity separate from Europe. The motive of seeking a unique individuality helps explain how Oklahoma Mennonites became a distinct branch of the faith. The followers who made the “Sooner State” their new home wanted to build their own churches and communities in an area where Mennonite influence did not already reside. The following research conveys these similarities and differences in tracing the movement of the Mennonites to America and eventually to the Great Plains.

In John Unruh’s work, *In the Name of Christ: A History of the Mennonite Central Committee and Its Service 1920-1951* (1952), the author provides an extensive tracing of Mennonite origins. Unruh observed that, aside from the founding of the original Mennonite settlement in Germantown, Pennsylvania in 1683, between 1817 and 1860 a

total of 15,000 Mennonites arrived in America. The combination of religious persecution and the desire to expand the denomination into the United States accounted for these new arrivals. The accepting society of America allowed the denomination the ability to easily incorporate their religious devotion into society. These Mennonites settled and established churches between 1860 and 1920, when they assisted in forming the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in 1920. The participation of Oklahoma Mennonites in this nationwide denominational organization is covered in much depth in chapters three and four. At the time of its founding the MCC served to help thousands of other Mennonites escape the Red Terror of Russia and make the United States their permanent home. Unruh concluded that persecution encouraged the original Mennonite settlers to inhabit America. Further, the desire to assist other afflicted brethren escape hostile regions of Europe encouraged new arrivals to continue the movement into the New World. These individuals gained the prosperity they sought in America. In 1920, or earlier, the author notes that in addition to the United States, settlements in Mexico and Paraguay became safe havens for the 15,000 as well.<sup>11</sup>

Central to identifying the migratory habits of the denomination in Europe that continued in America, J.C. Wenger's *The Mennonite Church in America: Sometimes Called Old Mennonites* (1966) traced movement of Mennonites on both continents. Including extensive details beyond the establishment of Germantown, Wenger included the colonization efforts of the denomination throughout the Alps of Europe during the 1700s. The author noted this movement as a precursor to the slow westward migration that would end in America. Unlike Unruh, Wenger traced the movement of Dutch Mennonites into the United States. The author identified the specific location of where

ethnic European Mennonites settled. The Mennonites and the Amish from Switzerland and the Palatinate resided mostly in Pennsylvania, while those from the Netherlands settled in the central plains. Between 1873 and 1884 most of the 18,000 Dutch Mennonites from Russia settled in the prairie states of Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Manitoba, Canada. Between 1815 and 1880, Swiss Amish from Alsace, Bavaria, and Hesse migrated into Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Ontario, Canada. Wenger agrees with Unruh that the greatest influx of Mennonites from Russia took place from 1922 to 1930 following World War I to escape Russian communism and settle on the central plains, including Oklahoma.<sup>12</sup>

The history of Russian Mennonites coming to the United States continued in Cornelius J. Dyck's work, *An Introduction to Mennonite History: A Popular History of the Anabaptists and the Mennonites* (1967). This book provides a rationale for why Mennonites moved from original settlement in Canada into the central United States and offers an introduction to developing the denomination's identity as a motive for relocation. The author retained similar themes of both Unruh and Wenger, but took the broader time frame of 1873 to 1950 to conclude that 46,000 Russian Mennonites settled in North America, 36,000 of which made Canada their new home. Canada appeared to be more tolerant of religious ideas than that of America, where each state passed its own legislation on the issue. Despite this, the remaining 10,000 Mennonites chose the easier terrain of America over the rough winter months and isolation of Canada. This acceptable farming climate encouraged the denomination's members to fulfill their dream to farm.

Dyck also emphasized the ease that the Mennonites experienced in settling in America. The broader theme of denominational organization as a primary motivation for

Mennonites moving to America is also emphasized in his interpretation. Dyck concluded that those Mennonites who chose to settle in America were the beginning of the General Conference Mennonite sect, the Mennonite Brethren Church, and the Evangelical Mennonite Church. In addition to creating an official denomination, some of these immigrants also incorporated themselves into smaller units of organization. The Board of Guardians developed to assist in assimilating to American culture, and the body issued reports on the conditions of the climate and terrain, which helped sway families in the direction of settlement that they chose.<sup>13</sup>

Many Mennonite historians cite the peaceful resistance of the denomination from mandatory military service as the primary reason for their relocation. Expressing this perspective in 1973, Cornelius Krahn published the article, "A Centennial Chronology Part Two: Continuing an Account of Events Relating to the Mennonite Migration from Russia a Century Ago." Krahn contended that the introduction of universal military service in Prussia in 1861 credited migration to Russia. The article tracks the attempts made by the Mennonites to avoid this requirement. Leaders petitioned the Prussian government and when that proved unsuccessful, many Mennonites fled the country. Unlike other authors who trace the immediate movement of the group into the United States, Krahn explained that Mennonites fled to locations all over the globe in hopes of finding military exemption. Some found solace in Palestine, Australia, and Asia. Those who chose America as their permanent dwelling received word of its suitable situation from brethren already living in the country. The report included the success of the wheat and milling industries in the prairie states. Such favorable conditions helped draw many

into the central plains, especially the positive report of good farm land, which later brought several members of the denomination into Oklahoma Territory.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the promise of booming society in the Great Plains the conditions were not always ideal. An article by John F. Schmidt in 1973 titled, “Three Years After Date...” tracked poverty stricken Russian Mennonites who moved into Kansas. Schmidt debunked the argument that these individuals acquired wealth in Europe which afforded them the opportunity to head to America where they later experienced recidivism to poorer conditions. Rather, through the generosity of the helping brothers and sisters in America, specifically the Board of Guardians in Illinois, they made the trip. Upon settlement these farmers experienced several levels of adversity to make their newly acquired land turn a profit.<sup>15</sup> These conditions best exemplify the story of those who came directly to Kansas and Oklahoma, where efforts to produce successful farms took time to develop.

As Mennonites arrived in the United States they dispersed to separate locations, and from these settlements came different variations of the denomination. As mentioned, prior to arrival some portions of the sect experienced theological conflicts. Divisionism in Europe between Mennonite sects centers in J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder’s work, *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later: A Profile of Five Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Denominations* (1975) described the divisions within Mennonite groups in Europe. As the result of the schism between the Amish and the Mennonites in Switzerland, portions of both sects left Europe. The authors noted that divisions also occurred between Russian Mennonites before coming to America, and from these schisms came the variation of Mennonites that settled in America and Canada. Kauffman and Harder

credited doctrinal differences in the usage of shunning for the Mennonites who migrated to South America, Africa, and Asia.

In the context of their overall work, the authors clarified migration as a necessary step in helping each sect of the denomination develop their own identity. The Anabaptist groups retained their own doctrine and left Europe in hopes of finding a new homeland to freely practice their brand of the faith without fear of contesting their brethren. Those factions who made America their home learned to coexist peacefully by inhabiting different regions of the United States through forming conference allegiances with likeminded followers, reflecting remnants of Dyck's argument. Although these denominations vary in name and doctrine, their origins were Mennonite. Many of these variations of the denomination are present in Oklahoma beyond just the assembly that would form the General Conference.<sup>16</sup>

In J.C. Wenger's, *How Mennonites Came to Be* (1977), the author includes a detailed analysis of how the Mennonite faith first formed by tracing the influence of previous religious figures, such as writings dating back to the time of Augustine. This history suggests two motives for migration, the first of which is the value of missions. Wenger concluded that for 130 years, Mennonites left Europe to seek out new converts all over the world, including Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the United States. Each location that received these missionaries developed a strong Mennonite influence still active today. The mission focus of Oklahoma Mennonites years later would suggest that this argument is very sound and accurate. The second reason for migration was the attempt to avoid the growing hostilities in Europe leading up to World War I. The noncombatant nature of the Mennonites encouraged persecution of the sect for their

refusal to engage in war time activities. A massive movement into the United States in search of good farm land and freedom from assault soon followed. The authors discussed thus far are in agreement on this point, that the preceding years to World War I saw the greatest movement of Mennonites to the United States and elsewhere.<sup>17</sup>

As the issues that brought the Mennonites to America are similar, so is the idea that they settled elsewhere before making Oklahoma their permanent home. Douglas Hale, in *The Germans from Russia in Oklahoma* (1980), contributed a perspective for Mennonite migration to the “Sooner State.” Unlike previous works whose thesis suggested predominantly religious persecution as the motivation for relocation, Hale centered land acquisition on the forefront of the movement. Though Hale’s viewpoint valued Mennonites dissatisfaction with Russian rule, the author equally noted that Germans who moved to Russia were quite prosperous and satisfied. This point directly contradicts the findings in Schmidt’s work which deems these individuals as poverty-stricken. According to Hale, the lack of land in Russia and the abundance advertized in America in the Homestead Act of 1862 attracted these German Mennonites in Russia to pursue life in the United States. Hale explained that these Mennonites settled first in Kansas and Nebraska before moving southward into Oklahoma. Hale noted the “three F’s,” to characterize and distinguish the Mennonites from other settlers in the state: faith, farming, and family, and their dedication caused members of the denomination to flourish in the central plains.<sup>18</sup>

Following a long span of missions work with Indian tribes (chapter two), the Oklahoma Mennonites established churches affiliated regionally with the Western District Conference (WDC). David A. Haury wrote a leading work on the history of the

WDC, titled, *Prairie People: A History of the Western District Conference* (1981). Prior to the extensive tracking of conference history Haury considers reasons that German Mennonites in Russia migrated to America. Reminding readers of the struggle Mennonites faced with harsh military laws passed in the mid-1800s bent on including all able-bodied men in armed services, Haury presents two ideas not previously credited for the migratory habits of the faith's practitioners. First, preserving German language and culture motivated relocation as well as protecting the Mennonite doctrine. Russian rule challenged the preservation of the faith's theology. In an effort to continue the link between being German and being a practicing Mennonite, the followers in Russia had to escape to sustain this cultural identity. The second reason that Haury offered is that Mennonite Germans in Russia simply sought to remove themselves from the influences of the world. Early tenants of the faith emphasized separation from the worldly in light of sustaining its spiritual path. America with its stable farming climate, especially in states like Dakota and Nebraska, served as the primary location for followers to accomplish these two objectives. Mennonites distanced themselves from outside influences to maintain their peaceful religious state, free of worldliness. They worked their land for their livelihood while fellowshiping only with likeminded brethren.<sup>19</sup>

The Mennonites who made Oklahoma their home did so only with the desire to inhabit new land. In a work titled *Land, Piety, Peoplehood: The Establishment of Mennonite Communities in America 1683-1790* (1985), author Richard K. MacMaster takes this position, concluding that the denomination's migration to the United States is just part of the natural progression of immigration the country experienced after colonization. MacMaster does include elements in his writing that agree with other



historians on the subject. Like Kauffman and Harder, the author alluded to the divisionism of the sects prior to leaving Europe to illustrate the variation in the motives of arriving Mennonites. Using the founding of Germantown as a major focus of his work, MacMaster, nonetheless concluded that this community was only one example among many where Simons' followers established a permanent residence. The author explained that the natural flow of immigration into the United States continued into the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's. Further, MacMaster mentioned the Quaker Mennonite denomination in relationship to migration. Close doctrinal ties established a lasting relationship between the Society of Friends and the Mennonites. This connection also caused both denominations to migrate to similar areas. In addition, the two beliefs shared mission's work, such as the Darlington Mission in El Reno, Oklahoma, where Quakers started the work that the Mennonites later continued.<sup>20</sup>

The Oklahoma General Conference Mennonites have rich traditions in fellowship with one another, but more so in their shared denominational theology. Theron F. Schlabach's work connects theology directly to migration. In *Peace, Faith, Nation: Mennonites and Amish in Nineteenth-Century America* (1988), Schlabach examines the time period from the mid to late 1700s to the late 1800s. In context to his overall work, Schlabach noted that in the new land the followers found the ability to live freely within the tenants of their doctrine. As mentioned in previous histories, the new comers escaped forced military participation in Europe. Once in America, the Mennonites embodied the doctrine of pacifism to its fullest. Though slow in attaining full assimilation in the new land, such as abandonment of their European languages in favor of English (remnants of

Haury's argument), the new arrivals began to actively associate with their neighbors. The Amish who settled in Ohio traded frequently bread for venison with nearby Indians.

Taking the necessity to live freely in their doctrine a step further, Schlabach also described what can be interpreted as Mennonite activism throughout their residence in the United States. In the years following the Civil War some Mennonite ministers preached openly against movements to abolish slavery. Claiming that the scriptural reference on breaking the yoke of slavery only applied to sin, these ministers contended against the newfound freedom of previous slaves. Though not preaching that the denomination participate in the bondage of slaves, some of the ministers advocated that the slaves resume their obligation to serve their former masters. Further, Schlabach's work provided other examples of how followers have passively expressed their opinions overtime, regarding national and worldwide events, without actively engaging in violence. Following his opening chapter the author clearly substantiates freedom of practicing ones religion as the primary motivation for the relocation. Inhabiting America was a search for the freedom to be a pacifist, which the Mennonites found upon arriving.<sup>21</sup>

David Haury traced Mennonite settlement into Oklahoma in *Growing Faith: General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma* (1988), edited by Wilma McKee. This book indicates that land ownership alone influenced the massive movement of 14,000 Mennonites into Kansas first during the 1880s and 1890s. Being people of agricultural background, Kansas served as the ideal location because of the rich soil and tolerable climate. In the mid-1890s land in Kansas was beginning to be occupied with more frequency. The continued influx of Mennonites resulted in a scarcity of land. As a result the members looked elsewhere for places to farm. In 1892, five Mennonites participated

in the first Oklahoma land run and established Mennonite settlements that continued for several years. Due to the influx of followers from Eastern Europe, Mennonite colonies would disperse by the mid nineteen-teens. A colonization committee within the denomination assisted the incoming faithful in finding, purchasing, and settling on land in Oklahoma territory. This work is a compiled collection of essays by several Oklahoma Mennonite historians. Haury's chapter emphasizes the newly arrived Anabaptists joining the General Conference. This introductory chapter serves to open the window to mission, church, and school planting, recanting doctrinal statements, and establishing the organizational structures of the conference. If not for the search for good productive land within the „Sooner State” the presence of General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma may not have happened.<sup>22</sup>

Arrival and dispersal into the Great Plains did not happen quickly, according to the opening chapter in Calvin Redekop's work, *Mennonite Society* (1989). The author has a unique perspective that analyzes the migration in two ways. First, Redekop established the movement of the European religious sect by describing Mennonite concentrations scattered throughout the country over a 210 year timeframe. The historian illustrated that between 1659 and the 1720s Mennonites from the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Electoral Palatinate constituted the largest majority of immigrants that came to the continent. This group ranged in settlement from Pennsylvania and other Mid-Western locales all the way to central California. Movement was gradual over time rather than continued from first landing. In 1859 the Russian Mennonites accounted for a majority of those that scattered across Canada, through the central plains, and even into northern Mexico.

Second, Redekop's analysis equates motivation, separation, and assimilation into five principles in understanding any immigrant group. First, the group must have a recognizable status of special privilege prior to relocation (the Mennonites presumably fitting this category in Europe). Second, upon arrival, the migrants are unfamiliar with the culture of the newly inhabited country. Third, cultural and social differences appear (recognized within the migrating group). Fourth, the immigrants segregate (which splits up into different sects once points two and three are in place). Finally, once settled, the attempt by the host country to assimilate the new arrivals can start the process all over again. Redekop's theory seems only a possibility, with no real historical accounting for this process taking place among the Mennonites. The author only mildly assumed that religious persecution was the precursor to this process, and totally ignored the major migration in the late 1800s. The overall purpose of the book is to describe the arrival of the Mennonites and their presence in the United States.<sup>23</sup>

As with any immigrant group that travelled to America, the building of a home and caring for one's family was an individual project. Many of the historians discussed thus far articulate that theological unity motivated the Mennonites to move to the United States. James C. Juhnke suggested that denominational development took a backseat in their drive to America. In *Vision, Doctrine, War: Mennonite Identity and Organization in America 1890-1930* (1989), the author considers the position of the individual rather than the group as a whole. Juhnke concluded that settlement in the United States inspired the family unit to seek a better life in the late nineteenth century. The author argues that families finding and building a new home to better their situation motivated these individuals to move long before the desire to spread the denomination.

Further, Juhnke noted that the desire to settle influenced relocation, also outweighing the desire to establish the faith. Young children, especially in Amish communities, socialized with their own kind, while other Mennonite sects were not as successful in keeping a tight hold on their children within their communities. As a result these children associated with the outside world more than their parents originally planned. Once influenced by outside culture, and the formal church finally organizing, the Mennonites assimilated to American customs. Juhnke recounted the story of Dr. Joseph S. Taylor, the first Mennonite to receive his doctorate in the United States in pedagogy. In 1893 Taylor concluded that the Mennonite church was adapting well to the norms of their new civilization. Envisioning churches with progressive features such as organs and carpeting (many already in the works) Taylor did not reject the assimilation process, but rather remarked of the denomination's success in achieving integration to American culture.<sup>24</sup>

In the broader context of Juhnke's entire work, the purpose to fit Mennonites into the melting pot of America appears to be the goal. Drawing on the themes of individual settlement before denomination, and assimilation within and outside of the church, in summary Juhnke contended that the move to the United States was an attempt to conduct business as usual, just in a different setting. Unlike previously discussed works, Juhnke yielded no major idealist justification for the move. Instead the author concluded that working the fields, establishing churches, working with Indian tribes, and fitting into the realms of societal norms are exactly what the Mennonites did. Overall the work serves to explain the presence of the Mennonites and describe their doctrine and function in the

face of America's changing society and worldwide events. In many ways, Juhnke's work tells the story of a minority group between 1890 and 1930.

When Mennonites settled into Oklahoma, the desire to retain their faith in a new place was central to their identity. Author Paul Toews champions this point, but takes it a step further. Adding an element of desperation to retain their previous European image, Toews suggested that the attempt to continue the religious order started abroad motivated the Mennonites to migrate. In *Mennonites in American Society 1930-1970: Modernity and the Persistence of Religious Community* (1996) the author noted that some sects of the faith were the only remaining tenants of their orders in Europe. Among these are some Amish divisions, whose followers eagerly sought relocation to sustain their very existence. For these groups, unlike Juhnke's assimilation perspective, they sought total seclusion from the outside world. In eagerly searching to establish quiet enclaves for their practice, they chose the United States as the ideal ground to experiment freedom from the outside world, which they believed threatened the continuation of their belief system. Toews agreed with Juhnke that other Mennonite sects, who associated closely with each other in Europe, found it easier to assimilate to the influences of their newly found homeland, and did so welcomingly. Toews work overall serves to describe further how Mennonites adapted to America from the Great Depression to the Vietnam War. Inferences of separation, evangelism, and refined peace theology define Mennonite change over time according to Toews.<sup>25</sup>

Once in Oklahoma, the Mennonites sustained their presence in certain communities, where still today their existence is prevalent. In *Faith's Harvest: Mennonite Identity in Northwest Oklahoma* (1999), Sharon Hartin Iorio does not provide

any original research that suggests any new understanding in the motivation for migration from Europe, but the work does prove important in tracing Mennonite settlement in Northern Oklahoma. Citing all secondary works, aside from oral interviews with distant relatives of those who migrated, Iorio agrees with Haury and cites other historians like Marvin Kroeker that the overcrowding of Kansas brought several Mennonites into Oklahoma. The author noted that participation in the Land Run of 1893 encouraged the relocation. Iorio's work is concentrated on northwestern Oklahoma, and after establishing the desire to attain 160 acres of good working farmland, the author traced the history of Mennonites in communities where they settled. Among these were: Meno, Deer Creek, Goltry, Orienta, Fairview, Lahoma, Jet, Lucien, Manchester, Kremlin, Medford, North Enid, Newkirk, and Ringwood. The overall work establishes the denominations presence in the northern part of the state. In addition, the book provided a broad overview of the assimilation process (like Juhnke) of Mennonites in the region.<sup>26</sup>

The ancestors of those Mennonite immigrants who settled in the Great Plains often remark that their relatives came from different European countries. Among the most prevalent, as seen in the works mentioned thus far, include Germany and Russia, but in September 2003 Mark Jantzen published the article that noted the arrival of Mennonites from a different country. In, "'Whoever Will Not Defend His Homeland Should Leave It!' German Conscription and Prussian Mennonite Emigration to the Great Plains, 1860-1890," published in the fall edition of *Mennonite Life*, using the widely accepted historical belief that the Mennonites were searching for military exemption, the author focused on the Prussian Mennonites and their search for escape. Jantzen concluded that through much effort these Mennonites found loopholes in government

policy and in some cases made very narrow escapes to America. The author said that disagreement over which part of the Great Plains to settle caused divisions among these Mennonites, and helped cause the denomination's wide dispersal. Portions of the group settled in areas ranging from the northeast United States all the way to California and from Canada to Oklahoma. Further, the author related how relieved the new arrivals were in their new home. Some Mennonites did attempt to speak with President Ulysses S. Grant in the late 1860s for exemption from military service in America as well. No major treaties resulted, but the denomination was satisfied with narrow promises when combined with the freedom from European hostility.<sup>27</sup>

Farm land and missions work brought the Mennonites into Oklahoma. In 2006, Marvin Kroeker wrote a book that emphasizes these two reasons. Kroeker, a well-known Mennonite historian within the denomination, has produced several histories on the Mennonite Brethren sect and its participation in missions work. The story of this group is similar to that of the General Conference Mennonites. In, "Natives and Settlers: The Mennonite Invasion of Indian Territory," published in the summer edition of *Mennonite Life*, Kroeker traced the arrival of Mennonites into Oklahoma by way of the Land Run. According to the article, the followers responded to the opening of the territory to free land. Once on the land opportunities to establish missions work with Indians became the motivation for migration into Oklahoma. The desire to affiliate the new churches with the General Conference was sought in the new territory. Kroeker's article deals more with settlement and assimilation in Oklahoma rather than exploring early migratory habits of the Mennonites, though a brief introduction deals with those issues. The work is geared to expand the Mennonite presence in Oklahoma after their existence in Kansas was already



assumed to be intact. The general theme is that opportunity was available to the Mennonites in Oklahoma again in two ways: Indian missions and church planting.<sup>28</sup>

In identifying a consensus view for why Mennonites vacated their native homeland in Europe for America one must only read the histories of those who made the journey, such as the Nachtigals, the Bullers, and the Pauls. The secondary works on the subject agree with one another in many ways. In light of this, one facet of truth remains irrefutable, that whether motivated by the desire to claim land or the widely accepted view to live free from persecution, religious devotedness was an underlying goal upon arrival. Though few abandoned their faith in favor of the denomination, the majority of newly arrived Mennonites retained their doctrinal linkages in the United States. Here, the new immigrants found a place to blend their religious devotion with their desire to farm their acquired land.

The published works cited here form a consensus about why the Mennonites flocked to the central plains and ultimately into Indian Territory (modern day Oklahoma). The fundamental story of their arrival remains constant: Mennonites settled in the United States much earlier than the Oklahoma Land Run, with the first permanent settlement established in Germantown, Pennsylvania, in 1683. The large dispersion of the followers of Menno Simons, in the middle to late nineteenth century directly influenced Kansas and the Indian Territory.<sup>29</sup> Changing laws in Eastern European countries like Russia and Prussia contributed to the denomination's migration to America. The primary reasons for the Mennonites relocation included new challenges to their exemption from military service. In addition, they fervently desired to sustain their religious piety by separating themselves from the spiritually threatening social institutions of the material world.<sup>30</sup>

The Mennonites occupied Kansas before Oklahoma. The state of Kansas with its rich soil, attractive farming climate, and the nearby Santa Fe Railroad emerged as the central haven for the newly arriving Protestants, numbering as high as 14,000.<sup>31</sup> The 1870s and the 1880s brought a vast amount of Mennonite newcomers who immediately founded churches upon arrival. The new congregations became part of the already formed General Conference of Mennonite Churches established in Kansas in 1860.<sup>32</sup> These new arrivals formed a new branch of the denomination separate from the Mennonite Brethren and modern day Amish and Holderman factions of the Anabaptist faith already present in America.<sup>33</sup> Once Indian Territory was opened up to settlers, Mennonites began the process of occupying the newly available land, establishing a permanent General Conference presence through missions work and church planting within the future state of Oklahoma.

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## End Notes

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2. The Jacob Buller Family History, 1839-1979, compiled by Katherine (Katie) Buller, edited by Eva Marie Clark, 2. Retained from family records at the home of Lonnie and Marlena Buller, Enid, Oklahoma.
3. The Story of Heinrich and Elizabeth Pauls, compiled by Charles T. Friesen, November 1967, Hutchinson, Kansas, 6-8. Retained from family records at the home of Lonnie and Marlena Buller, Enid, Oklahoma.
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15. John F. Schmidt, "Three Years After Date..." *Mennonite Life*, June, 1973.

16. J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder, *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later: A Profile of Five Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Denominations* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1975), 20.

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20. Richard K. MacMaster, *Land, Piety, Peoplehood: The Establishment of Mennonite Communities in America 1683-1790* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1985), 29-30, 35, 39.

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21. Theron F. Schlabach, *Peace, Faith, Nation: Mennonites and Amish in Nineteenth-Century America* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1988), 26, 34.
22. David S. Haury, "Hard the Road to Oklahoma," in *Growing Faith: General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma*, edited by Wilma McKee (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1988), 1, 3, 6, 8-9.
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33. The Holderman religious sect coincides with the Mennonites in theology but resembles the Amish in their culture.

## **CHAPTER 2: THE ROAD TO NINEVEH**

### **GENERAL CONFERENCE MENNONITES BEGIN MISSIONS WORK IN OKLAHOMA**

“Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: „Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you’... „But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.” Jonah 3:1-2; 8-9 (New International Version)

Missionaries in all denominations receive similar motivation as that of Jonah to disperse into an area needing to hear about Christianity. Once settled into that mission, these individuals, like Jonah, preach their message of repentance and salvation. The work done by early Mennonite leaders in Oklahoma engaged their servanthood to Indian tribes, starting fellowships that led to organized forms of worship. In the mid 1890’s, upon receiving the Mennonite missionary Heinrich Voth into their ranks, the Hopi tribe of Arizona concluded that the mission was damned in the eyes of God when lightning struck the church building begun under Voth’s leadership. Later Voth acquired and sold Hopi artifacts to a museum, which further demonized him among the tribe. Following his return to Oklahoma, many Mennonite churches would see their birth with the help of Voth in the early 1900s. The influences of the missionary, who was then an itinerant minister, planted many congregations within the new state of Oklahoma. Assisting newly arriving Mennonites in forming these houses of worship, the churches continued to grow over the century, helping to establish the presence of General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma.

In present-day Oklahoma, remnants of the General Conference Mennonite Church are dispersed throughout the state. The individuals of these congregations are the product

of the denomination's migratory search for good farm land and freedom to practice the faith during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's. Between 1880 and 1891, Samuel S. Haury and Heinrich Richert (H.R.) Voth were among the most influential early leaders of the Mennonite faith in Oklahoma. The two missionaries headed the Darlington and Cantonment missions established to work with the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes. Haury and Voth shared a common fascination for Indian culture and recognized fully that to Christianize the Indians they needed to learn the language. Though they possessed a passionate interest in the traditions and lifestyles of the Indians, the missionaries used this curiosity as a means to bridge the differences between themselves and the tribes.

By observing the Indian cultures Haury and Voth created a bond with the Indians. Once trusted, they retained the steadfast belief that Indians must abandon from their tribal lifestyles, including their language that ironically the missionaries so earnestly sought learn. Like the national sentiment toward natives at the time, the two men denounced Indian culture as heathen and savage in favor of a more civilized lifestyle that only conversion to Christianity could sustain. Despite the contradictions of Haury and Voth's studious approach in working with the tribes, the Indian missions did not impede their fervent goal of spreading the General Conference into Indian Territory. Once Mennonite settlers started moving into present-day Oklahoma, preaching to and pasturing with like-minded white brothers and sisters took precedence over the desire to work with the tribes. Through mission work and church planting, Haury and Voth permanently cemented the presence of Mennonites in Oklahoma that is still active today.

Before the denomination could settle into Indian Territory, the tribes had to make it here first. The Mennonite migration to America echoed a pattern of movement



throughout the United States already modeled by some Indian tribes. Like the denomination, the Cheyenne and Arapaho have a long history of peaceful demeanor and habitual migration. The tribes retained a quality of social, political, and judicial organization uncharacteristic of other Plains tribes.<sup>1</sup> The Cheyenne first displayed their willingness to negotiate peacefully with the government as early as 1825 when they signed a treaty recognizing the supremacy of American leadership.<sup>2</sup> Shortly after the establishment of this agreement, the Cheyenne allied with the Arapaho, and the two tribes cooperated peacefully with white settlers in southeastern Colorado until the Civil War.<sup>3</sup> The disruption caused by the Civil War interrupted the calmed relationship between the residents of Colorado and the tribes.<sup>4</sup> White intruders on Indian land instigated unprovoked acts of aggression against the tribes who responded with equal hostility. The violence reached its pinnacle on November 29, 1864, when Colonel John M. Chivington led 700 troops to attack the Sand Creek village, killing many Indians.<sup>5</sup>

As the Mennonites would do later in Oklahoma, many religious groups emerged to defend the Cheyenne and Arapaho in response to these severe attacks. Specifically, the Society of Friends (Quakers) joined influential Cheyenne peace chief Black Kettle in urging the United States to seek a non-violent resolution with the tribes.<sup>6</sup> In 1867, the federal government signed the Medicine Lodge Treaty, assigning the Cheyenne and Arapaho to a new reservation in Indian Territory.<sup>7</sup> Now in modern day Oklahoma, the tribes once again became the victims of familiar acts of aggression by the local whites. The reprisal by the Cheyenne and Arapaho encouraged the War Department to suppress the Indian uprisings.<sup>8</sup> George Armstrong Custer led the war party that attacked Black Kettle's village near the Washita River in Indian Territory. Custer embodied a firm belief

that the plains tribes were savages and incapable of civilization, a view that encouraged him to lead this operation.<sup>9</sup>

The attack on the tribes directly preceded their settlement in a mission run by the Mennonites. On the cold morning of November 27, 1868, the Seventh Cavalry fell on Black Kettle's camp, which took the brunt of the assault.<sup>10</sup> This attack would cement Custer's fame as he and his men killed Black Kettle and his wife. In addition, several other Cheyenne men, women, and children lay dead, 800 ponies destroyed, and fifty-three individuals taken prisoner.<sup>11</sup> In Custer's official report to General Sheridan, the total numbered 103 dead warriors.<sup>12</sup> Later, in 1868, James S. Morrison of the Interior Department, and resident at the Darlington Agency, repudiated Custer's claim, remarking that, "there were not over twenty bucks killed; the rest, about forty, were women and children."<sup>13</sup> The attack evoked a series of Cheyenne retaliations that went on for the next several years. Mrs. B.K. Bird, a young Cheyenne girl of only thirteen, was among those escorted to the Darlington Agency to be held under military discipline following the attack.<sup>14</sup> Many of the tribe would find a home here over the course of the next decade.

Darlington, near El Reno, and named after the Quaker Agent Brinton Darlington, was the site of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Indian Agency started in 1870.<sup>15</sup> Prior to the Land Run, some Mennonites came to Indian Territory to establish the denomination's first mission and the Darlington mission seemed appealing to the denomination. In 1876, the Board of Mennonite Missions nominated Samuel S. Haury to be their first Mennonite missionary to the Arapahos.<sup>16</sup> While among them, Haury spent several months studying the condition of the Cheyenne tribe, and ministering to them as well.<sup>17</sup> During this time, Haury determined that Darlington was the ideal place for the mission to be established.<sup>18</sup>

On May 18, 1880, he and his wife Susie left Halstead, Kansas, to begin their new work near El Reno.<sup>19</sup> Due to the four-year delay in returning to the mission, upon arrival the Haurys discovered a Quaker missionary already working there. After deliberation with the Quaker Indian agent, and receiving permission from Washington on May 31, 1880, the Haurys began their work at the Darlington mission.<sup>20</sup>

Taking control of this mission marked a monumental point for the General Conference, venturing into a new territory and working with plains Indians. Mennonites previously traded with peaceful Indians in the Midwest, but now worked directly with tribes on matters of spirituality in addition to helping sustain daily needs. Taking a different approach from that of Custer, Haury believed that the tribes were capable of becoming civilized, which greatly contributed to his desire to Christianize them.<sup>21</sup> The missionary saw the Indians in desperate need of salvation, especially during his first visit where he witnessed them engaging in what he concluded as heathen rituals, such as the Sun Dance.<sup>22</sup> Interpreting native ceremonies continued to be a focal point among the Mennonites in Indian Territory, as missionaries observed the tribal tradition to demonize heathenism and introduce Christian salvation.

Before Christian theology could be extended to the Indians, the missionaries needed to connect with the tribes. Learning appeared to be the best method to introduce cohesion, with both the Indians and missionaries gaining knowledge of new things. Educating Arapaho children became the primary goal of the Haurys. Being summertime, they settled for starting Sunday Schools for children in English and regular Sunday evening services for adults with the help of an interpreter.<sup>23</sup> The missionaries soon understood their limitations in successfully running the mission without learning the

Arapaho language. After his first six months in the field, Haury reported to the Mennonite Mission Board other problems that they were facing. The government was intruding on their efforts to teach their views and opinions of Christianity to the Arapaho children. Without a building to hold their newly formed Sunday school classes in, the Haurys had to teach the students in their home, but under government supervision they were no longer permitted to do so. Haury firmly believed that the less the government was involved in the mission the better, motivating him to get to work on the new mission building.<sup>24</sup>

Though the early days of the mission seemed very grim, adherence to the call to bring lost souls to the Lord motivated the Mennonites to continue the work. The accumulation of building materials for the school further reminded the missionaries of the ample opportunities the future would bring. Christian Krehbiel, present with the Haurys in Darlington, recalled that due to the lack of white settlers available to help construct the new building, “Haury’s first task, besides visiting in the camps, was to become foreman, work-planner and instructor for the Indians in this heavy, hard work.”<sup>25</sup> The construction of the mission school building, big enough to house the Haurys and twenty-five students completed in August 1881. Interest in the school quickly followed when seven boys from ages ten to fifteen enrolled in the fall, and that number soon increased.<sup>26</sup> By 1882, the two boarding schools on the Cheyenne-Arapaho reservation and the Mennonite mission school accounted for 227 total students.<sup>27</sup>

These early Mennonite settlers in Oklahoma retained an idealist mentality to justify their presence. Haury reported to agent John Miles of the Darlington reservation that the school would serve to, “Teach the children...the English language, and...instruct

the boys in farming and the girls in housekeeping and common needlework. But one of our main objects...will be the teaching of Biblical and Christian knowledge and the inculcation of Christian principles.”<sup>28</sup> Haury held steadfast to these principles to civilize and Christianize the Indians. Seeing industrial training as essential to the Indian’s progress, the missionary remarked that he would not neglect providing the tribes such pivotal knowledge.<sup>29</sup> As a vital part of the Western District Conference, the mission provided new opportunities to both church members and the Indians on the reservation. One program at Darlington was designed to prepare future teachers and workers for reservation work sent some Indian youth to Kansas to learn while working on Mennonite farms concurrently.<sup>30</sup>

The denomination’s first foray into the mission’s field appeared successful with the completion of the building and the high number of enrollments. This absence of adversity would not last long. In early 1882, the Haurys and the Darlington mission faced their first major challenge. On February 19, a fire broke out on the south end of the grounds that spread and destroyed the two and half story school and dormitory.<sup>31</sup> The fire not only destroyed the mission but also caused four fatalities, including three Indian students and the infant child of the Haurys.<sup>32</sup> One of the victims was actually the youngest daughter of James S. Morrison, the agency employee who earlier refuted the claims made by Custer regarding the number of casualties in the Washita battle.<sup>33</sup> The disaster demoralized the conference as well. The hard earned efforts in 1881 by the denomination to accrue \$4,000.00 for the original construction seemed void when the fire destroyed the grounds.<sup>34</sup> The total cost of the calamity equaled nearly \$5,000.00, as winter supplies, clothing, and several books within the mission perished in the disaster.<sup>35</sup>

The persistent idealism of maintaining Mennonite work in Indian Territory prevailed as the Haurys faithfully pressed on to rebuild the mission. The combined donations of the conference churches and a grant from the federal government for \$5,000.00 revitalized the mission effort.<sup>36</sup> As construction began the work of the mission continued. A nearby barn served as the dormitory, a tent was pitched to serve as the temporary school, and the Haury family, who once lived in the now destroyed mission building, resided in a wash house.<sup>37</sup> Haury, noted for his insistence and positive demeanor to get on with the work, epitomized the belief that, “no obstacle nor inconvenience is allowed to interfere with their labors.”<sup>38</sup> In a letter written to the agency reflecting on the fire, Haury further articulated his belief that God provided them the original mission and would restore to them a new building to further endeavor their work with the Arapaho.<sup>39</sup> In response to the fire, the conference did its part to bring help and comfort to Darlington. Members of the Mennonite Missions Board sent two men to become teachers at the mission, one of which being H.R. Voth.<sup>40</sup>

Coming to the mission near El Reno, Voth was unaware that he would maintain a tenured influence in the future state of Oklahoma. Darlington was the first stop for Voth in a fifty plus year effort to establish General Conference Mennonites in the state. Prior to arrival at Darlington, Voth resided as a member of the Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church in Kansas, established by a group of Russian Mennonites who immigrated to America in 1874. Voth received catechetical instruction in Mennonite theology at the church which helped him determine his calling as a missionary.<sup>41</sup> Fluent in English, which he learned in Russia, Voth served as a teacher in Kansas to prepare him for the mission field. At age twenty-seven, his first assignment was to serve as a teacher under superintendent Haury

at the Darlington mission, and his arrival corresponded with a unique opportunity for the Mennonites in Oklahoma.<sup>42</sup> The denomination started a second mission at the abandoned Fort Cantonment, near present day Canton, Oklahoma. The abandoned fort consisted mostly of blockhouses and barracks, including two stone houses, a hospital, and a bakery.<sup>43</sup> The conference intended to use Cantonment temporarily in its current capacity while construction began for a new mission house and farm where male Indian students would learn agriculture while attending school. Voth was sent to Cantonment in 1882 to see that the buildings remained unharmed.<sup>44</sup> The Haurys, reacting to a conference directive, accepted the responsibility to provide leadership to the new mission.<sup>45</sup>

Success was not as immediate at Cantonment as in Darlington, but the Mennonite presence did further the gospel with the help of several people. While Voth was in Cantonment, he oversaw the beginning of evening schools to reach out to the tribes. In February 1883, though attendance was low the number of Cheyenne and Arapaho participants quickly grew.<sup>46</sup> Voth noted that though success was limited, due mainly to the language barrier, those he instructed were learning to read well. He confidently believed that the second mission school would reap great benefits, and that, “just by such evening schools a great deal can be done toward bringing into direct contact with education that class of young Indians who will not attend government or mission schools, who will consequently grow up in almost total ignorance.”<sup>47</sup>

In spring of 1883, the Haurys became fulltime superintendents of the Cantonment mission and school. Fourteen staff members assisted the missionaries, including cooks, seamstresses, and assistant teachers who came from several Mennonite communities to be part of the new venture. In addition to their obligations to running the mission, the

Haurys took responsibility for the spiritual well being of 200 Cheyenne and Arapaho families that relocated with them.<sup>48</sup> Three hundred additional families also went to Cantonment under the supervision of other agencies.<sup>49</sup>

Now with Cantonment up and running the Mennonites extended their presence from central Indian Territory to the northwest. As a result of their move to Canton, the Haurys left Darlington in the hands of Voth, who became the new superintendent.<sup>50</sup> A lack of command on the native language rendered him limited success in this leadership capacity. Immediately he sought to remedy his unfamiliarity with native culture. Voth was a known student who epitomized the essential requisite of a Mennonite missionary to connect with the tribe. In his time as superintendent the missionary learned to speak the Arapaho language, which helped him learn from the tribe and collect several of their tales. At the same time Voth corresponded with the conference in German, commonly spoken among Kansas Mennonites during this period.<sup>51</sup>

Voth, like the Haurys, did not deviate from the purpose that the Mennonite church sent them to Indian Territory to accomplish, which was to bring the Indians to Christ. Despite his personal fascination with the cultural and religious traditions of the tribes, Voth steadfastly advocated that the survival and progress of the Indians rested on willful abandonment of their heritage to civilize. Voth repudiated the tribe's ritualistic traditions in favor of Christianity, and required all school children to speak English only.<sup>52</sup> The members of the tribes were hard-pressed in accepting the "white man's religion" and were negatively labeled by other Arapahos if they did refuse their traditions. In spite of this fear, Maggie Leonard, a seventeen-year-old half-blood Arapaho Indian girl, became the first convert to Christianity in Darlington on June 6, 1888. Those who witnessed



Leonard's baptism greatly celebrated the event, and word of the blessed occasion spread throughout the conference. This landmark of the Mennonite's mission work in Indian Territory encouraged the future deployment of missionaries and the tithes supporting further efforts.<sup>53</sup>

The Mennonites in Canton fared equally well early in the mission's existence. Upon arrival the Haurys realized that the buildings were in need of additional attention, but despite this, they were able to make arrangements for fifty to sixty-five children for the coming school year. The field and garden adjacent to the mission yielded plentiful crops for the workers. These early successes and the idealism of spreading Christianity encouraged a bright future of mission work for the Haurys.<sup>54</sup> One problematic situation did arise early, as Arapaho Chief Little Raven moved to Cantonment and claimed the entire property as his own. Haury met the chief and provided proof that the mission belonged to the Mennonites. In response, Little Raven withdrew his claims, but pitched his tents in the yard and used the fort bakery as shelter for his horses.<sup>55</sup> The event represented the cultural elements that the Mennonites had to overcome, but did not suppress the goal of getting the mission up and running.

Daily operation of Cantonment reflected several elements of the disciplined life of a Mennonite at this time. Every measure of organization assured stability in the work of the mission. Indian children wore uniforms and learned English and other elementary subjects. The children participated in chores to learn responsibility. Following class's boys chopped wood and worked the fields while girls tended the mission house, serving in the kitchen and doing laundry. Haury retained the capacity as superintendent of the mission, principal of the school, and assistant agent of the Darlington mission.<sup>56</sup> Things

appeared to be running smoothly, with Samuel viewed as a highly valued administrator, father, and interpreter among the tribes. In the conference, Haury's esteemed role was unequaled by anyone, except for the successful work of Voth in El Reno. Cantonment, by all recognizable measures, was deemed a success until Haury formally and unexpectedly resigned from the post in 1886.<sup>57</sup>

Prior to voluntarily ceding his position, an investigation by agent G.D. Williams confirmed a circulating rumor regarding Samuel Haury's sexual activity among school girls at Cantonment.<sup>58</sup> One former pregnant student claimed that Haury was the father of her child. Voth quickly refuted the accusation by publicizing his knowledge of the girl's involvement in several promiscuous relationships. He issued a written reprimand against a male student who originally claimed that the child was his, but later denied it.<sup>59</sup> Haury returned to Kansas following his resignation and later rejoined the Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church.<sup>60</sup> The situation propelled H.R. Voth to the forefront of Mennonite progression in Indian Territory. He became the principal of the mission, and J.J. Kliewer, a teacher who joined Haury at Cantonment in 1884, became superintendent of the school.<sup>61</sup> In addition, Voth was also the superintendent of the Halstead Boarding School in Kansas, established by the Mennonites in 1884.<sup>62</sup>

The situation hindered the Mennonite's mission work. Though Haury's involvement with the Indian girl was never proven, the innuendo caused the tribes to be wary of the Cantonment mission. Tribal chiefs declared that they no longer wanted men like Haury among them. Agent Williams noted that the Cheyennes especially looked for, "every excuse for withholding their children," from the school.<sup>63</sup> The government's enactment of the Dawes Act in 1887 equally hindered mission work. This legislation and

the subsequent agreement with the Jerome commission (1891) ended the reservation system and provided 160 acres to each tribal member, leaving the remainder of unclaimed land to white settlers.<sup>64</sup> As the Cheyenne and Arapaho populations dispersed, corrupt former agents filled their pockets with money appropriated to the tribes for acquiring their land. Many tribal members lost land by this means.<sup>65</sup> Voth knew that the Indians were being unfairly dealt with by observing their lack of proper land and farming implements to care for themselves. He concluded that the government should supply these things to the tribes.<sup>66</sup> Allotment, which spread the tribal members out geographically, deterred Voth's ability to hold weekly services with the Arapaho population.<sup>67</sup>

Native mission work started to dissipate at this time, but the number of new Mennonites to Indian Territory grew. In spite of finding Kansas to be the ideal location for their new dwelling, like the Haurys years earlier, many young Mennonites decided to follow in the norm of their European heritage of mobility and moved southward. In Europe the avoidance of religious persecution justified such movement, but in the United States the acquisition of new land motivated the migration.<sup>68</sup> Many of these young Anabaptists, including a large number of Polish Mennonites, participated in the opening of the Cherokee Outlet in the Land Run of 1893.<sup>69</sup> The German, Russian, and Polish Mennonites concentrated in western Oklahoma, where enclaves of wheat farmers established themselves from the Fairview and Okeene area in northwestern Oklahoma to the Cordell area in west-central Oklahoma. Many new settlers also made their way to El Reno, becoming the site of the first Oklahoma Mennonite Church near Darlington, started in 1891 under Voth's leadership.<sup>70</sup> Voth organized the Mennoville Church with twenty-

seven charter members, many of which were long-time workers at the Darlington mission.<sup>71</sup> The church was the first Mennonite Church in Oklahoma to join as faithful members of the Western District Conference, who, like several Mennonite churches, sent representatives to nearly every session until the church closed their doors in 1952.<sup>72</sup>

As Voth helped these new Mennonite arrivals get settled in Oklahoma, he continued his mission work with the depleting Indian tribes. Due to the lessening tribal population Voth regularly witnessed the Arapaho funeral rites. Between 1870 and 1890, the tribe's population fell from 2,964 to 1,920.<sup>73</sup> By the early 1890s, the grim view of the tribe's future enhanced the leadership's religious devotion in hoping for better days. In 1891, Voth's greatest mission opportunity emerged when he met with Arapaho tribal chief Sitting Bull while witnessing the Ghost Dance.<sup>74</sup> Sitting Bull was very responsive to Christianity as dimensions of his traditional Arapaho faith complemented it. The beliefs represented by both men shared one strong commonality; they both stressed the long awaited return of a messiah. Sitting Bull believed that the savior would emerge following the Ghost Dance. Voth hoped that these shared religious attributes would allow him the opportunity to introduce the tribe to Christ, but, when the messiah failed to appear during the Ghost Dance ritual, Sitting Bull's following and credibility began to wane.<sup>75</sup> Voth gave up the opportunity to continue his work with Sitting Bull and the Arapaho when the chief's interest in conversing with the missionaries diminished following the ritual. H.R. left the Darlington mission in 1891 on a leave of absence to visit his old home in Russia.<sup>76</sup>

Before his major work in church establishment in Oklahoma began, Voth took on a challenge by the Mennonite Board of Missions to start work among the Hopi tribe in

Arizona. Upon returning from Russia, he accepted the call to mission to the Hopi's in July 1893.<sup>77</sup> While among the tribe, Voth undertook the same routine as he did when working among the Cheyenne and Arapaho in Oklahoma. He spent much time learning the language and began a mission school. The resistance that Voth would eventually meet from the Hopis was not expressed previously by the tribes in Indian Territory.<sup>78</sup> As work began, Voth held steadfast to the goal of Christianizing the "heathen" and, like his observations of the Ghost Dance in Oklahoma, he carefully and thoroughly examined the rituals of the Hopi, documenting what he saw. Among these he witnessed included marriage and funeral rites.<sup>79</sup> The Hopis responded negatively to Voth's writings because he publicized their secret religious ceremonies. The tribe was further dismayed because Voth led archeological digs on the reservation, collecting many artifacts for himself.<sup>80</sup> In 1901, Voth's wife Martha died in childbirth, and for the sake of his family he left Arizona.<sup>81</sup> After leaving the mission, Voth gave his excavated artifacts to the Field Museum in Chicago for a complete Hopi collection, further increasing the divide between him and the tribe.<sup>82</sup>

While Voth worked with the Hopi in Arizona, the Mennonite General Conference engaged church planting projects to nurture new congregations in Indian Territory. Among these included the establishment of the Arapaho Indian Mission Church by John A. Funk on October 28, 1897.<sup>83</sup> In 1892, a group of five Mennonite men from Halstead, Kansas, arrived in Oklahoma to take part in the land run and made claims near Geary, Oklahoma. Jacob S. Krehbiel, serving as superintendent of the Darlington Mission School following Voth's leave, relocated with his wife near Geary to begin mission work among the Indians. By winter 1884, regular Sunday afternoon services with the natives

commenced. On August 15, 1897, the church formally organized, with twenty-two white settlers, many of whom participated in the land run, and three Indians.<sup>84</sup> Originally the church was named the Salem Mennonite Church but was renamed to the First Mennonite Church of Geary once the congregation moved into town.<sup>85</sup> The excitement of this new church plant encouraged Voth to serve as an itinerant minister for the Western District Conference a few years after his return from Arizona, beginning in 1905.<sup>86</sup>

Free now from involvement in Indian missions, Voth now committed to spreading the General Conference into Oklahoma. The time between 1900 and 1920 provided Voth ample opportunities to get involved in educational and social reforms as well as church planting. One of Voth's early responsibilities as a traveling minister was to serve in leadership capacities in congregations lacking spiritual guidance. In 1905, Voth dedicated the Bethanian Church in Woods County.<sup>87</sup> Later that year at the Convention of Mennonite Churches held in Deer Creek, Voth spoke to his fellow ministers about how the conference might assist the deaconess cause. A resolution was passed to urge ministers to explore involvement as co-workers in the ministry as the opportunity presented itself.<sup>88</sup> The deaconess movement was very popular among the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century. Young unmarried women and widows tended to the poor and sick and visited prisoners. This ministry revitalized in the Mennonite Church and in 1908 the Bethel Deaconess Home and Hospital Society formed a branch at Bethel College known as the Bethel Hospital. In 1911, the Deaconess Beatrice Mennonite Hospital was constructed in Beatrice, Nebraska.<sup>89</sup> An update was provided at every conference meeting as the denomination provided funding to the hospitals on a yearly basis.<sup>90</sup> The training program for nursing at Bethel College closed in 1974.<sup>91</sup>

Itinerate ministers provided revival messages when possible. The first opportunity opened to Voth as revival speaker was a group of settlers near Orienta, Oklahoma. Christian Ramseier, another itinerant minister, visited several Mennonite congregations in Oklahoma in the late 1800s, including Deer Creek and Mennoville. After assessing these groups, Ramseier determined that much work was needed to get the Mennonite churches organized and moving. His leadership led him to Orienta to help form the Saron Mennonite Church in 1897.<sup>92</sup> By 1898, the conference ordained Ramseier as the first elder and pastor of the church.<sup>93</sup> After almost a decade of ministry in Orienta, Ramseier yielded to his passion to provide similar services to other Mennonite Churches, and he and his family moved to Alabama in 1905.<sup>94</sup> The church was starting to take shape, and construction on their first building started in 1905.<sup>95</sup> The dedication of the church occurred on May 27, 1906, celebrated with evangelistic meeting featuring Voth as the guest speaker. The congregation received six new members as a result of Voth's presence at the dedication services.<sup>96</sup>

The successes of H.R. Voth in church planting inspired his influence in the next two decades. Shortly after leaving Saron, at the direction of the Western District Home Mission Committee, Voth attended a series of meetings with families in the Oklahoma Panhandle. As a result the Turpin Mennonite Church was dedicated on June 30, 1907. The year 1908 proved to be vital for the WDC church planting project in Oklahoma. Voth helped organize the Kidron Church in Dewey County with twenty charter members, the Menno Church in Nowata County, baptized people at the Eden Church in northeast Oklahoma, and made frequent visits to the Greenfield Church and the Bethlehem Church near Hooker, Oklahoma.<sup>97</sup> Voth also took an active role as head minister of a few

churches between 1915 and into the early 1920s, specifically serving in a pastoral leadership capacity at the Ebenezer Church in Kiowa County. The church, with its rich history of German speakers, formed near Gotebo in 1903, and by 1930 the Ebenezer Church provided sermons in both English and German.<sup>98</sup>

After Oklahoma became a state in 1907, the WDC finally took root. Churches continue to spring up as well as other vital efforts of the conference. In 1911, the New Hopedale Mennonite Church in Meno, Oklahoma, started the Meno Preparatory School. Coursework in Bible studies and German were available primarily to seventh and eighth grade students. Over time, the students requested more course offerings. In May 1917, the Oklahoma Mennonite Convention put forth a committee, of which Voth was a member, to organize an academy that would offer courses in the fall.<sup>99</sup> An old church building no longer used by the New Hopedale congregation housed the school then named the Oklahoma Preparatory School.<sup>100</sup> The school formally organized into Oklahoma Bible Academy in 1918, and by 1920, Albert Claassen, a former missionary to Cantonment, became the lead teacher of the school.<sup>101</sup> By 1924, the school had a principal named J.B. Epp, two instructors, and an enrollment of forty-eight students and the prospect for more coming in once wheat sowing finished.<sup>102</sup> Oklahoma Bible Academy by 1971 had an enrollment of 82, and in the early 1980s the school moved from Meno to Enid, and currently has an enrollment of over 200.<sup>103</sup>

Beyond church planting in Oklahoma, Voth extended his influence to preserve Mennonite theology among the faithful in the state. Doctrinally Voth held stringently to the Mennonites nonresistance beliefs and church discipline. At the 1913 Oklahoma Mennonite Convention he stressed the need to share these core doctrines of the



Anabaptist faith with children.<sup>104</sup> Emphasizing pacifism was essential to Voth. In the outbreak of World War One, the Western District Conference created a committee called the Freedom from Military Service Committee or Exemption Committee. Among their duties included strengthening the nonresistant faith of Mennonite men being drafted and making frequent trips to Washington to petition exceptions from military service. The committee provided visitation to men in the military and those who were in detention camps, such as Camp Travis, where Voth's son was being harassed for his military resistance.<sup>105</sup> In 1918, Voth and P.H. Richert travelled to Fort Leavenworth to hold a special preaching worship service for about 125 Mennonite men who had been imprisoned for their resistance to participate in the war.<sup>106</sup>

Voth did lay down some roots while spreading the faith in Oklahoma. In 1914, he began his extended work as pastor of the Goltry Church. Voth took an integral interest in the church, as he wrote to the conference in 1920 claiming that the congregation had become spiritually cold. Under his watch the church grew from twenty-two original members to 101 by January 1, 1922.<sup>107</sup> Voth continued to serve Goltry until a new minister could be found in April 1923.<sup>108</sup> The Goltry church displayed their resourcefulness learned under Voth's leadership later during the Great Depression by renting fields and using the profits to pay their new minister.<sup>109</sup> In 1922, he participated in a committee to define the responsibilities and ordination of all ministers in the Western District Conference.<sup>110</sup> The organization held strong to their commitment to provide pastoral leadership through the itinerant preaching format to congregation's lacking ministers.<sup>111</sup> In 1923, Voth renewed his participation in the itinerant ministry and visited several churches in Oklahoma.<sup>112</sup> Among his duties on these trips included providing

preaching, catechetical instruction in Mennonite theology, and baptism, as he did for a group of Anabaptists in Alva in 1923.<sup>113</sup>

Following their desire to leave their European homeland, Mennonites found their way to the central United States, and eventually into Oklahoma. The efforts of Haury and Voth spread the WDC into the state. By helping newly arrived Anabaptists get settled in Indian Territory, through mission work and church planting, Haury and Voth permanently cemented the presence of General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma that is still active today. The Mennonites in Oklahoma have been a contributing ethnic and religious group since their arrival into Indian Territory in the late 1870s. The most prevalent contribution of the denomination to the state and the Great Plains is the induction of Russian Winter Wheat, richly and profitably cultivated by Mennonites upon arrival. The harvest of wheat has become the leading crop of Oklahoma.<sup>114</sup>

Among the many memorable Mennonites who have served in leadership capacities in working with Indians or establishing churches, Samuel S. Haury and H.R. Voth, stand out among the rest. The conference perception of Haury as a great leader sustained during much of his work with the tribes. No one doubted his fervent passion in serving the Lord for the Mennonites. His dedication in being a leader among the Cheyenne and Arapaho showed itself in full strength through his willing uprooted move to Indian Territory and later in his relocation to Cantonment. Haury and his wife Susie are remembered in Mennonite circles for being the first missionaries of the General Conference. Though his work with the mission ended in accusation and resignation, Haury retained his credibility among his fellow churchmen upon returning to Kansas.

This sustained recognition as a man of God is largely credited to the efforts of his friend and colleague H.R. Voth.

In Oklahoma, Voth was influential in running the Indian missions, both in Darlington and later Cantonment. Nationally, Voth is remembered for his work as an ethnologist, in his constant pursuit to interpret native ceremonies and acquire artifacts. His activity among the Hopi specifically rendered him national acclaim among the religious and historical communities. His methods in acquiring, handling, and removing treasured Hopi artifacts from the tribe and giving them to the Chicago museum leaves him negatively perceived among the tribe.<sup>115</sup> Later in life he helped establish many churches that are still around today. The formation of these churches increased the size of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Western District Conference by at least nine churches assisted by Voth in getting starting.

Samuel S. Haury and Heinrich Richert Voth were missionaries in every sense of the word. They gave themselves entirely to the work of God in their various ventures that yielded positive fruit for Mennonite ministries. The two men held steadfast to denominational idealism to bring new converts to the faith and strengthen old ones. Both Haury and Voth knew early in life that their responsibility was to further the kingdom of God on earth. Voth's calling articulated in his diary best sums up his fervency to serve the Lord, a passion shared by Haury, "It had cost me dear to crucify the 'merchant' in me, and more struggle and prayer to come to the positive conviction: The Lord of the missions field is calling you to his work and you must follow!"<sup>116</sup> Heeding this call, these two men cemented the presence of General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma. In so doing, Haury and Voth fully embodied the Mennonite requisite to mission in the name of

the Lord. The congregations that grew from Voth's ministry embodied the same passion. Formally organized into churches, the members needed to find new ways to fellowship and work together to maintain statewide cohesion, and engage actively in new mission projects. Several national Mennonite organizations would provide such outlets.

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## **CHAPTER 3: THE ROAD FROM EGYPT**

### **OKLAHOMA GENERAL CONFERENCE MENNONITES FORM THEIR IDENTITY AND TAKE CARE OF THEIR OWN**

“Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the desert. By day the pillar of cloud did not cease to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take. You gave your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and you gave them water for their thirst. Nehemiah 9:19-20. (New International Version)

The story of how the Oklahoma Mennonites utilized missions to assist those in need echoes this biblical excerpt of the Israelites leaving Egypt. God provided for his people as they journeyed out of bondage into freedom, providing for them in the desert. For years the Oklahoma Mennonites participated in denominational organizations and missions projects that allowed them to help those who were desperately in need. Fully embodying the desire to serve those around them, these Anabaptists took advantage of poor conditions within Oklahoma and neighboring states, as well as the poverty stricken areas of the world to provide mission help through nationally recognized denominational organizations. The following two examples best exemplify how one of the associations that these Anabaptists joined brought the Mennonites together for the purpose of outreach. On Sunday, August 10, 1924, the deadliest tornado in Colorado’s history struck near the township of Thurman. The storm claimed ten lives, nine of them children, when it ripped through the Henry Kuhns ranch during a harvest celebration of Mennonite families. Though taking place nearly twenty-five years before the Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) formed, this was the type of opportunity that workers within the faith hurried to assist.

In addition to volunteer efforts to clean up following natural disasters, Oklahoma Mennonites participated in other outreach projects as well. In 1969, in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a teacher lectured to his students on the many different kinds of fruit. He called a young girl up to the board to draw a picture of a banana. Using yellow chalk mixed with black chalk the student drew a brown banana, to which the teacher remarked that banana's are yellow, and not brown. The young African American girl assured him that she never saw a yellow banana in her life, since the ripe bananas sold in the white markets, and those not purchased arrived discolored in the Hill District. The same process accounted for other produce and the stale bread sold in African American neighborhoods. The Mennonites who headed to Pittsburgh for a mission's project received this story in a letter before departure to inform them to refrain from eating any of the food while working in the predominantly African American neighborhood.<sup>1</sup> These two examples illustrate that despite the challenges that materialized in areas hard hit with disaster or social injustice, Oklahoma Mennonites in their mission work with the MDS actively mobilized to help those in need.

As General Conference Mennonites settled in Oklahoma in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and established churches, new mission organizations affiliated with the denomination spread into the state. Among them include the Oklahoma Mennonite Convention (OMC), the yearly Meat Canning Project (sponsored by the Mennonite Central Committee [MCC]), the Mennonite Disaster Service, and Mennonite Mutual Aid. Through participation in these organizations, the General Conference Oklahoma Mennonites demonstrated the vitality of their denomination in the Sooner



state, as well as the necessity to continue the rich Anabaptist tradition to help those in need.<sup>2</sup>

The earlier work of Voth in church planting organized an interconnected system of growing congregations. At the end of his service in the early 1920s, Voth had established nine new congregations in the northern and central parts of the state. General Conference congregations in Deer Creek, Goltry, Meno, Orienta, and several others saw increased membership as a result of the church planting efforts by the regional Western District Conference (WDC). Some of these congregations developed in communities where a growing Mennonite Brethren church also resided. Since the two denominations belonged to separate affiliations, the General Conference churches, being dispersed through the state, desired to fellowship with one another on a regular basis.

The congregations founded the Oklahoma Mennonite Convention which first convened on September 12, 1899, at Shelly, Oklahoma. The meeting sought to establish ways for General Conference Mennonite congregations to build cohesiveness with one another, and to participate in missions work. The initial conference decided on yearly meetings to worship with one another, and to collaborate between the churches. Through this open forum delegates could discuss issues unique to the state and the surrounding region. The original five points of the convention, as agreed upon by attendees included:

1. The local conference should be only for upbuilding and have no business or occupational functions.
2. Through pulpit exchanges, the monotony in each congregation would be broken and both preachers and members would enjoy more blessings.
3. The members as well as the preachers should visit one another.
4. Prolonged meetings should be held, especially suitable for each situation, and intended to bring about conversion and awakening of indifferent souls.

5. Itinerant preaching should care for the isolated brothers and sisters. The itinerant preacher should be able and willing to serve in the English language where necessary.<sup>3</sup>

Itinerant ministry played a large role in the convention's founding, but over the years the meeting expanded its ideas to include special emphasis on denominational history, and strengthening the faith within Oklahoma.

The OMC developed to encompass congregations who were part of the General Conference of Mennonites, and later the WDC, excluding Amish, Holdermann, and Mennonite Brethren congregations who fellowshipped with their own brethren. The convention provided supportive cohesion and collaborative efforts in statewide projects in which Oklahoma churches could participate, in addition to the larger programs of the General Conference.<sup>4</sup> Further, the OMC united in promoting these undertakings, and provided monetary support and manpower in addition to individual church contributions. One such outreach project is the Commission on Home Ministries (CHM) of the General Conference. Like the MCC, this project provided for the needy and participated in a variety of ministries nation-wide, such as work with Indian Churches and building projects.<sup>5</sup> The CHM also raised funds for evangelism, church planting, Spanish ministries, poverty relief, radio and television outreach, and peace and social concerns.<sup>6</sup> The convention strove to both mandate its own initiatives and support those of the General Conference.

Still a young and geographically dispersed denomination in the state, the OMC created a denominational culture that exemplifies the uniqueness of General Conference Mennonites. Being a subcategory of the WDC, the Oklahoma Convention successfully found ways to strengthen its own identity free from its host conference, especially in

theology and politics. Oklahoma Mennonites developed more conservative viewpoints than those of Kansas and other WDC states, specifically in response to nonresistance. Though these Anabaptists in the Sooner State remained conscientious objectors, many recognized military service in times of international crises as an observation of Biblical scripture. The New Testament book of Romans with its gospel to submit to governmental authority substantiated such adherence. Further, General Conference Oklahoma Mennonites, by way of the convention, became more evangelical in their faith in terms of outreach. Within their fellowships with one another, these Christians reduced their stress on issues such as nonconformity, nonresistance, and often Anabaptist heritage found more prevalently in other Mennonite circles. Despite less attention on such topics, Oklahoma Mennonites remained steadfast and rooted in Mennonite theology on other issues such as baptism, and they stressed ethnic pride. However, through the OMC these individuals developed their own unique identity while still retaining inclusion within the broader Western District Conference.<sup>7</sup>

Mission work was foremost an integral focus of the Oklahoma convention, as opportunities manifested in different ways. Through the outreach of itinerant preaching, the emergence of more Mennonite Churches developed under the watchful eye of the OMC. As more congregations formed they gained inclusion into the convention. With several churches participating, the locale of the meeting changed every year from one congregation to the next. The OMC relied on the efforts of the host church to furnish meals and find housing for attendees.<sup>8</sup> Worship was a major factor of the gathering, and the musical abilities of different churches served to enhance the experience. To leader the yearly convention the attendees elected a president, normally a pastor of one of the

churches. For example Wilfred Ulrich, pastor of Grace Mennonite in Enid from 1975-89, served as president back-to-back terms in 1979-80.<sup>9</sup> Further, other members and clergy were called upon to serve as secretaries and treasurers to oversee minutes and the dispersing of raised funds. Donna Froese, a long time member of Grace became the first female to serve in the capacity of secretary to the board of directors and the convention for five consecutive years.<sup>10</sup> Among the crowning achievements of the OMC, aside from celebrating doctrinal linkage, include the establishment of Oklahoma Bible Academy in Meno, Oklahoma in 1911 (later moved to Enid). Through the prayerful and financial commitment of the convention to oversee the mission to provide Christian education, the school continued to grow in number of enrollment. The influence of the OMC remained intact as the yearly gathering elected two individuals to serve on the school board annually. In addition, the development of the Oklahoma Mennonite Retreats yield evidence of the convention's mission oriented goals. Planning and supporting retreats was a yearly initiative of the OMC, which, since the formation of the yearly meeting, highly valued youth to further the denomination in the state.<sup>11</sup> The youth were seen as the future of the faith, and the importance in helping them become learned in Mennonite doctrine was a key issue to early convention leaders.<sup>12</sup> Over time, the development of youth retreats became the primary focus of the convention.

The adults took the first steps in planting the Mennonite seed in Oklahoma when churches officially started, but through retreats the youth grew into the leaders the convention ministers prayed would carry on the work. The OMC planned retreats for people of all ages as early as 1909 in addition to those sponsored by the WDC. Both the regional conference and the convention planned outings for a variety of age groups and

genders in different locations, for instance the yearly women's retreat held at Camp Mennonscah in Kansas. Women from churches all over the WDC, from several states, congregated to worship and fellowship here.<sup>13</sup> The convention most commonly offered topical retreats for spiritual growth for adults. Such themed gatherings categorized for young married adults and college and career.<sup>14</sup> The official organization of the retreats by age group was intermediate, young people, and adults (high school and above). The primary retreat grounds centralized in Hydro, near Clinton.<sup>15</sup> In 1954, the General Conference voted and passed a measure to purchase available Methodist buildings in the town and convert them to Camp Hydro, which would become the permanent location for junior high and high school retreats.<sup>16</sup> Though Hydro was the official retreat grounds of the conference, retreats continued to be held in other parts of the state as well, including Roman Nose State Park, near Watonga.

Hydro, with its quiet country atmosphere and its nearness to the General Conference churches scattered throughout northern and western Oklahoma, was the ideal location for the retreat ground. The participants of the convention took special interest in the mission since its founding. The Bethel Mennonite Church in Hydro served as the primary caretaker of the retreat, but the donations and volunteer work of the surrounding churches oversaw the repairs of the facilities.<sup>17</sup> No onsite employee ever resided at the camp, but rather volunteers served in every leadership position.<sup>18</sup> Operating the retreat with volunteer directors, cooks, counselors, speakers, and leaders was never strenuous due to the overwhelming support that the convention retained in sponsoring the yearly camp for the youth of the denomination. These responsibilities, much like the presidency of the OMC, required election and acceptance by different members of the various

churches. The convention voted to keep the camp in Hydro in 1963, at which time a retreat committee formed to oversee its continuation indefinitely. In September of 1978, the OMC organized a parent committee known as the Oklahoma Youth Activities Committee (OKYAC) to help sponsor the yearly festivities.<sup>19</sup> The retreats continue in Hydro and still rely on charitable donations by the congregations for its basic needs, like food for campers, upkeep of the dormitories, and the paying of annual bills.<sup>20</sup> Though not as large as the Southern Baptist Falls Creek camp, Hydro has served great numbers of youth from several communities and participating churches throughout Oklahoma and surrounding states. Its founding and continuation can be deemed a successful mission of the convention.

The OMC did not rest on the success of Hydro as its primary achievement. In keeping with the spirit of church planting established by Voth, the organization extended its purpose of growing the General Conference Church in Oklahoma. The point of itinerant ministers, which the OMC utilized until the mid-1930s, was to provide a variety of leadership to the congregations and attract prospective members to the newly planted churches. In recognizing the large mission field, and in keeping with the mission's goals of the faith, in 1957, the convention sought the planting of a new congregation in Oklahoma City.<sup>21</sup> This urban plant was a unique undertaking in light of the country settings in which churches such as Saron Mennonite in Orienta and New Hopedale Mennonite in Meno had formed and still currently reside. The desire to establish yet another congregation within Oklahoma City came to light thirty years later in 1987, when a new mission church was established, supported also by the joined efforts of the

surrounding congregations.<sup>22</sup> This church plant continues in the present, as does the yearly meeting which sponsored its founding.

The convention traditionally met on both Saturday and Sunday, but later modified to conduct all of its business in one Saturday session. This change decreased the participation of many churches because each church gathered to worship together on Sundays in place of their own services. Since Saturday became the only day of the fellowship the number of attendees declined. In addition, Oklahoma General Conference Churches withdrawing membership from the WDC due to a variety of issues also decreased the size of the OMC. As mentioned, the Oklahoma Mennonites have taken a more conservative approach to its theology and social issues. For example, Saron Mennonite Church in Orienta left the conference in the early 1990s in response to the WDC's acceptance of female ministers. In the early twenty-first century, the New Hopedale Mennonite Church in Meno withdrew as well, a significant loss for the convention because Oklahoma Bible Academy resided in the community until the early 1980s. That congregation detached from the WDC because a conference minister recommended a change in the denomination's position on membership of homosexuals. In reaction to this issue in 2003, the Oklahoma General Conference congregations joined in a united effort to seek change within the WDC. Using the convention as the united front, the remaining churches successfully removed the advocating conference minister on the issue of homosexuality, and supplanted several committees within the WDC with new leadership from the state of Oklahoma. Despite the challenges, the OMC celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 1999, at the Bethel Mennonite Church, in Hydro, and still meets yearly as has been the tradition.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to the organized yearly meetings that helped bring the denomination together in the state, Oklahoma Mennonites have equally found cohesion through mission work in other ways over the years. After the founding of the convention the General Conference members began working directly with the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) on the yearly meat canning project in the late 1940s. The MCC developed as an international organization to assist in providing food and goods to needy people all over the world, and meat canning was one such contribution. State-wide Mennonites had not engaged in the meat canning project as other states had been doing, and the feeling of not participating in such a worthy cause depressed the young state's Mennonites. The event marks a major contribution by the state's Anabaptist population. Like other major denominational projects, the Meat Canning Project crossed denominational boundaries to include Mennonite Brethren, Amish, and Holdermann sects of the faith as well. The churches who have actively participated in the meat canning project in northern Oklahoma include:

- Grace Mennonite Church, Enid, OK.
- Family Faith Fellowship Enid, OK.
- Antelope Valley Brethren Church, Billings, OK.
- McWilly Church of the Brethren, Aline, OK.
- Big Creek Church of the Brethren, Cushing, OK.
- Okeene Mennonite Brethren Church, Okeene, OK.
- Deer Creek Mennonite Church, Deer Creek, OK.
- New Hopedale Mennonite Church, Meno, OK.
- Mennonite Brethren Church, Fairview, OK.
- Saron Mennonite Church, Orienta, OK.
- Church of God in Christ Mennonite, Fairview, OK.
- Zoar Mennonite Church, Goltry, OK.
- Pleasant View Church, Goltry, OK.<sup>24</sup>

The first Oklahoma Meat Canning started in the fall of 1947. A committee formed in Meno to oversee the donation and purchase of animals.



The purpose of meat canning was to provide for the needs of hungry individuals all over the world. This Mennonites undertook that worthy project because of their historical use of pasture land to raise cattle for subsistence purposes as well as profit. In keeping with this tradition, the denomination developed this mission project to combine their farming talents with a good cause. Further, the time consuming effort reflected the theological mission to serve others, just as Christ provided help to those he had encountered during his ministry. Rather than just providing monetary assistance which allowed for indirect participation, the Mennonites used the opportunity to physically engage in a project that would literally feed people around the world.

The meat canning process followed a standard format throughout the years: upon arrival, the volunteers slaughters the animals and hung the meat in a building to be chilled and cured. Volunteers from all Mennonite churches gathered to trim the meat from the bone, run it through the grinder, and cook it until tender. They packed the meat into metal cans and a machine fastened the lids. The meat was then stacked in a stem kettle and cooked for three hours, and cooled. After the washing and drying of the cans, they glued the labels which contained the date, product, and where the meat event took place. They place one can from each batch in an incubator to see if it swelled or bulged, and if so, they checked for spoiling. If cleared, they packed the cans in a 24 package box, and shipped them to the MCC warehouse in North Newton, Kansas.<sup>25</sup> The MCC in Akron, Pennsylvania, provided the mobile canner for the meat to be processed for the first event in Oklahoma. This illustrated the national participation of the Mennonites in this project.

Since its beginning, the event organized on both the state and church levels. A committee formed that included members from all the different churches.<sup>26</sup> Through the

congregational canning committee money accrued over the year to purchase meat.<sup>27</sup> Normally the church treasurer collected this funding and oversaw its safeguarding to the state committee prior to the event.<sup>28</sup> Within Oklahoma the canner moved between Hydro, Fairview, and Pryor, Oklahoma, over the course of the year. In the 1950s, the event took place at individual farms.<sup>29</sup> In 1955, the Oklahoma churches requested that the MCC provide the canner for two days so that the goal to package 2,500-3,000 of meat could be achieved in the 1956 edition of the project.<sup>30</sup>

In preparation for the first event, the Oklahoma delegation had to drive to Kansas to retrieve the cans that could not be shipped at that time.<sup>31</sup> The canner arrived on Monday, January 30, 1956, and began use on Tuesday.<sup>32</sup> Several Mennonite Churches participated in the first meat canning project which lasted from January 30 to February 1, 1956. The canning took place at the North Mennonite Brethren Church in Enid, Oklahoma. A total of \$1,100.00 accumulated for the project, as well as two and a half head of beef. For the benefit of the attendees, the hearts, livers, and tongues sold to the highest bidder, income which too went to the project. (See Appendix A and B for documentation of attending volunteers listed by church, and a spreadsheet of monetary expenses and contributions.)<sup>33</sup> Over time, as the churches received word of its worthy cause, the event grew in size. In 1963 the committee purchased seventeen head of cattle and they canned 10,000 pounds of beef that year.<sup>34</sup>

The appeal of the mission to feed the hungry, just as Christ had fed the 5,000 encouraged much participation by Oklahoma Mennonites. The MCC widely distributed the meat canned at the yearly event all over the world. For example, in the 1979, the churches accumulated 9,000 pounds of beef in Fairview.<sup>35</sup> Later in the year, this beef,

added to meat from other canning projects in the United States, helped account for the shipping of 1000 carts of beef chunks, 50 cartons of pork chunks, and 800 bags of wheat sent to Zaire for the relief of refugees in that country.<sup>36</sup> In modern times, beef from this project also dispersed to the people of New Orleans following the destruction of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. In 2010, the people of Haiti received several pounds of meat following the earthquake in the country that year.<sup>37</sup>

Meat canning has altered some overtime. Though circulating in the three locations mentioned, northwest Oklahoma Mennonites designated the Cedar Christian School near Fairview as the permanent place for the annual canning. A woman who lived nearby donated money and a building specifically for this yearly project. Further, meat is no longer butchered on site. For the last twenty years the committee purchased meat already separated from the bone from a slaughterhouse in Liberal, Kansas. On average the yearly total of 16,000 pounds of meat is canned. To assure that the event maintained sanitary conditions, the convention brought in two USDA inspectors to observe the process, and four men travelled with the canner to perform the actual processing function. In 2009, the volunteers prepared 13,774 pounds of beef at a cost of \$17,079.76, at \$1.24 per pound; this accounted for 5,051 cans of beef and 1,712 cans of broth used to help feed the needy worldwide.

Aside from providing the beef chunks, the meat canning committee also donated the broth to benefit missions as well. Nearby homeless shelters benefitted the most: “Our Daily Bread,” the Catholic soup kitchen, and the Salvation Army in Enid received broth from the project.<sup>38</sup> Meat canning also took different forms, as some states canned turkey and pork as well.<sup>39</sup> Further, the outreach of the mission crossed denominational

boundaries in the state. In 1998, Emmanuel Baptist Church in Enid shipped a container of goods to a mission church in Belarus of the former USSR. Upon request to the Mennonites to include meat, the MCC donated hundreds of pounds to the non-Mennonite mission cause.<sup>40</sup> This serves as one example of how the General Conference established its influence with other Christian denominations around them, by assisting in their missions as well. People all over the world benefit from meat canning, and Oklahoma Mennonites volunteered much time, effort, and money to contribute to its success since the 1950s.

The yearly convention and the meat canning project are two very important events that have formally planted Mennonite influence in the state. These two ventures provided the Mennonites ample opportunities to engage in missions work. When Oklahoma Mennonites started participating actively with the aforementioned Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) their outreach transformed to new ways of helping those in need. The MDS established many years ago as an inter-Mennonite effort that included Brethren in Christ and Amish congregations. The United States was split into four MDS regions: Region I including the east coast and New England, Region II the Midwest to Louisiana, the central plains account for Region III, and the west coast encompasses Region IV.<sup>41</sup> The MDS devoted their time to serving people in areas where disaster struck: floods, ice storms, hurricanes, and tornados tended to be the most common disasters to which the MDS responded. However, the organization also assisted in other natural disasters, such as the 2005 Tsunami in the Philippines and the 2010 earthquake's in Haiti and Chile.<sup>42</sup> In broad terms the MDS formed to rehabilitate injured individuals and reconstruct destroyed structures.<sup>43</sup> The Kansas MDS constitution defined its purpose to investigate disasters,

and coordinate through MDS to assist victims “in the name of Christ,” a mission shared by Mennonite churches across America.<sup>44</sup>

The resourcefulness of the Mennonites to look after one another fully established in the denomination centuries earlier. As part of their identity in the early church to separate from the world, as well as stress their ethnic heritage in the face of disaster, these individuals sought help from their home country, Germany. In 1925 the great Tri-State tornado, deemed the most destructive and deadly tornado in American history to which the Fajita scale is measured, started in the afternoon hours on March 18 in eastern Missouri, spanned southern Illinois and finally dissipated in western Indiana after three hours. German communities in these states were practicing voluntary separation or experiencing full ostracism by neighboring communities in light of the First World War. They solicited the German government for assistance following the massive devastation of the tornado.<sup>45</sup> Twenty-seven years later the Mennonites realized that their cohesive desire to come to each other’s aid could equally benefit anyone suffering in the aftermath of severe weather and war induced poverty.

Oklahoma Mennonites started participating in the MDS shortly after it formed in Goshen, Indiana, in April of 1952 at the Lay Evangelism Conference. A young adult Sunday school class in 1950 desired to assist people in need which prompted the founding of the disaster service. The goals of the organization to respond to national crises emerged with this class, as well as to promote Christian ideals, corporate groups, initiate principles of peace and service, and provide equipment and provisions to help.<sup>46</sup> Originally called the Mennonite Service Organization (MSO), the group’s first response to a disaster occurred in 1951, when heavy rains produced massive floods that ripped

through Kansas. Among the cities who called upon the MSO for assistance include Wichita, Great Bend, Marion, Florence, Topeka, and Kansas City, Kansas. Volunteer efforts of a 120 people in the early weeks of the project arrived to fill sandbags, patrol dikes, provide food for other workers, and assist in clean up and construction efforts.<sup>47</sup>

In 1954, the MCC agreed to sponsor the MDS.<sup>48</sup> They created a registry in each region to provide fast assistance for relief projects when requests were made.<sup>49</sup> The early hurdles of the MDS included:

1. To organize or not to organize.
2. To relate to the Red Cross or not to.
3. To relate to Civil Defense Organizations.
4. How to relate to MCC Akron.
5. How to organize to serve in disaster areas where we have few or no Mennonites.<sup>50</sup>

Despite these challenges, the MDS established itself to work side by side with other assisting groups.

From its founding the organization deployed manpower to areas hard hit by disaster. The appeal of the mission project spread to each state where Mennonites quickly embraced its purpose. When a disaster struck, the MDS deployed to work with the local government, Red Cross, and Army efforts to relieve pain.<sup>51</sup> Not limited to a single sex, age group, or ethnicity, men, woman, and children all participated in relief efforts.<sup>52</sup> Enthusiasm for the relief effort caused Oklahoma Mennonites to regularly convene a youth squad to travel wherever disaster hit in the United States.<sup>53</sup> In the early years, Mennonites distinguished themselves at the work sites by wearing an armband illustrating their affiliation with the disaster service.<sup>54</sup> Upon receiving word of destruction, the MDS dispatched with three specific directives: first any relief or service organizations already present at the site would not be replaced by the Mennonites, second

after investigating the situation, the disaster service helped coordinate all the local organizations into a unified effort, and three the MDS would not accept money for its volunteered efforts.<sup>55</sup>

The disaster service provided the Oklahoma Mennonites many opportunities to provide assistance over the years. The following major events spanning the last half of the twentieth century best illustrated the extent of their involvement. In 1955, in response to the destruction of a tornado, the MDS produced a large gathering to help rebuild the home of Mr. and Mrs. Ray Evans in Kansas, welcomed with much appreciation by the couple.<sup>56</sup> On June 10, 1959, a tornado went through El Dorado, Kansas. Dozens of MDS volunteers arrived two hours later and began immediately to comb through the debris in search for injured or dead individuals.<sup>57</sup> On April 14, 1969, Hurricane Camille devastated many states along the Gulf Coast. The disaster service organized a massive clean-up effort for several weeks following the storm.<sup>58</sup> In 1976, Oklahoma Mennonites assisted neighboring Colorado brethren to evacuate and restore homes following the Big Thompson Flood.<sup>59</sup> The mission of the MDS often relied on the coordinated efforts by a host Mennonite church if a disaster struck a community nearby. For example, in 1978, members of the local Grace Mennonite Church in Enid welcomed the assistance of MDS workers after a flood hit the community that year.<sup>60</sup> In 1979, a tornado affected northern Oklahoma, and Mennonites mobilized at the New Hopedale Mennonite Church in Meno to assist rebuilding nearby destroyed farms.<sup>61</sup>

In 1979 the MDS undertook a larger project. In response to the nuclear threats posed during the Cold War, the disaster service took precautionary action and formed an evacuation plan for Mennonites on the east coast in the unlikely case that an atomic

attack occurred.<sup>62</sup> Work with the organization equally provided the denomination with the opportunity to build dialogue with other ethnic groups in addition to restoring property. The year 2001 saw Oklahoma Mennonites engaged in a large effort to clean-up after of a flood in Apache, Oklahoma. The goals of this mission included sensitivity and awareness among the denomination with the Indians in the area by appreciating their history, and engaging in work projects with them.<sup>63</sup>

Remembering how Christ took compassion on those in need, Oklahoma Mennonites embraced participation in the disaster service over the years. To encourage involvement the MDS held regional meetings for all interested parties throughout the state. To further encourage enthusiasm, the organization sponsored these meetings with themes like, “Let’s Get Involved,” featured in 1977.<sup>64</sup> Each individual church elected an MDS representative to keep the congregation informed of its activities. The charitable donations of the members funded transportation of Mennonites to the work sites. In addition, the offering taken during the Friday night worship service of the Oklahoma Mennonite Relief Sale was earmarked specifically for the MDS and other projects initiated by the sale executive board.<sup>65</sup> Some projects of the MDS have taken as long as five to ten years to officially complete. Following the F-5 May 3, 1999 tornado that went through Moore, Oklahoma, the disaster service engaged in massive projects to repair or rebuild entire houses. Following the 2002 ice storm that affected northern Oklahoma, the MDS undertook the elongated responsibility to cut and trim trees for the elderly who could not afford to have it done professionally.<sup>66</sup>

The MDS continues as an ongoing effort of the Mennonite church to assist people in dire need. The organization has opened the door for Oklahoma Mennonites to



fellowship with one another and with those in surrounding states. Furthermore, the influence of these Anabaptists has been cemented in the state through the MDS, as other denominations in Oklahoma both call on and join them in these clean-up efforts. The disaster service is a form of mission work that modern day Mennonites inherited from the long tradition of outreach to the needy laid by their ancestors before them.

A final way that Mennonites in Oklahoma provided for those in need is through enrollment in the Mennonite Mutual Aid (MMA) insurance carrier. Not limited to Mennonites alone, the MMA operates as an independent insurance provider like other companies. Though many non-Mennonites are covered by this option, historically the Mennonites have reflected the highest number of enrollments. In comparison to other private insurance providers, the cost of MMA equaled that of its competitors. The significance lies only in its support and affiliation with the Mennonite church. Offerings were forwarded to the insurance carrier by each church for assistance in covering the cost. Due to the number of enrolled Mennonites, each church, as with the elected MDS representative, elected an MMA contact person to serve the congregation and any others in the surrounding area with their plans.<sup>67</sup>

Mennonites have used the MMA as a mission to help provide medical service to those not financially stable enough to purchase any sort of coverage, especially the elderly. The MMA originally planted their home office in Goshen, Indiana, which continues to this day. In facilitating as the liaison between Goshen and the customers, the contact person traveled from congregation to congregation to help individuals understand their benefits.<sup>68</sup> Among the major advantages that the MMA has traditionally offered to its constituents included enrollment free from the burden of pre-existing conditions.<sup>69</sup> The

insurance carrier started providing this guarantee in 1979, which at that time was not common among private insurance options. The most monumental change that MMA provided to its customers was the Medical Expense Sharing Plan, introduced in 1978. This option allowed those covered by mutual aid to share expenses with private backers, greatly decreasing the cost of an individual's services in the event of surgery or regular hospital visits.<sup>70</sup> The denomination has used MMA as the major provider of individual church insurance in many cases, offering plans for the equipment utilized for building and grounds upkeep. Aside from being an insurance carrier, the MMA exists as a uniquely Mennonite operation that has provided Oklahoma Mennonites the opportunity to provide yet another service to people in their communities.

General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma developed strong ties among themselves over the last sixty years using the convention, the Meat Canning Project, Mennonite Disaster Service, and Mennonite Mutual Aid as opportunities to grow together. These four missions have provided influence and inclusion in the Mennonite denomination for the young state of Oklahoma. As with other states who have developed lasting traditions that envelope Mennonite influence going back years and years, Oklahoma Mennonites continued to use the denomination's organizations to outreach to their communities and surrounding states. Though effective in reaching others, the time for a greater and larger unified effort on the part of Oklahoma Mennonites came in 1978. This year would bring the Mennonite churches together to provide the people of Oklahoma highly valued products and world missions much needed monetary assistance.

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## CHAPTER 4: THE ROAD TO JERICHO

### OKLAHOMA GENERAL CONFERENCE MENNONITES ANSWER A CALL TO SUPPORT FOREIGN MISSIONS

“As Jesus and his disciples were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him. Two blind men were sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was going by, they shouted, „Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!’ ...Jesus stopped and called them. „What do you want me to do for you?’ he asked.” Matthew 20: 29-30; 32 (New International Version)

Historically, providing for the needs of desperate people all over the world has been a necessary requisite of Christian missionaries, especially among the Mennonites. As Christ was walking along two men called for his help, to which Jesus immediately offered his assistance. Modeling the passion of Christ, in 1978, Oklahoma Mennonites engaged in a new mission to continue their storied past of outreach to help those in need. In the process they established a tradition that cemented their contribution to the denomination on a national and international level. The Oklahoma Mennonite Relief Sale encompassed the most concentrated and unified effort of the denomination to provide for missions. Holding steadfast to their call to serve those in need in the name of the Lord the Mennonites used the event to raise money for projects all over the world. Receiving only spiritual gratification for their work, these individuals carved and crafted items steadily over the year to be sold for the good of those in need. The denomination willingly volunteered their time to the success of the sale, and did so in a cohesive manner that included Mennonite churches all over the state.

When the dust settled after the first Annual Oklahoma Mennonite Relief Sale in November of 1978, Elda Martin of the organizing committee remarked, “We Mennonites in Oklahoma had never done anything together. The unity, spirit, and friendships made were things that money will never buy.”<sup>1</sup> The success of the Oklahoma Mennonite Relief

Sale fulfilled the denomination's mandate to support foreign missions. For decades these Anabaptists observed other states sponsor a yearly Relief Sale to gross large monetary sums earmarked for overseas missions. Soon they conformed to this platform and started their own annual tradition through cooperation with each other for the benefit of foreign outreach. A year later in 1979, with missions being the continued focus of the Oklahoma Mennonites, these individuals found themselves participating in one unified effort to support the missionary couple Russell and Virgie Mueller in building their new home among the native tribes of Lac La Biche, Canada.

Mission's work has always been a key element in the Mennonite faith. The believer's looked for every opportunity available to engage in such important projects. Organizations on a national and international level within the Mennonite Church brought such opportunities to local congregations. The most historically pertinent need-oriented establishment in the denomination, connecting all variations of Mennonite Anabaptists, is the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). The organization formed to supply funding and manpower to areas in need. Encompassing a broad spectrum of mission's involvement the MCC calls upon all of the Mennonite sects in the world to unite in their effort to accomplish its mandates. The influence of the central committee over time brought the Oklahoma General Conference Mennonites supportive inclusion in the denomination's national identity. Such cohesion encouraged members of the church to adhere to the fundamental doctrine of furthering the faith through support of mission work. The induction of the yearly Oklahoma Mennonite Relief Sale and the support of Russell and Virgie Mueller among the tribes of Canada cemented the contributions of General Conference Oklahoma Mennonites to the denomination's national mission's

identity. Further, the participation by these individuals displays the continued value that Oklahoma Mennonites placed on missions work.<sup>2</sup>

Aforementioned in chapter three, Mennonite Oklahoman's fellowshiped with one another through several assistance efforts within the state and each of these organizations sponsored tiered projects on the national level. The Mennonite Central Committee continued since its founding as the largest network of help based projects. Mennonites in Oklahoma worked first with the MCC in the annual meat canning project, but the organization hosted larger and more lucrative events. The central committee first formed through a united effort of Mennonite conferences in the Midwest in 1920 for the purpose of providing for the needs of hungry, ill, and imprisoned individuals globally. In keeping with the denomination's intent to be pacifistic in its theology in a world of hate and harm, the MCC developed to give aid to areas most affected by tragedy, war, and pestilence.<sup>3</sup> In Oklahoma, the Herold Mennonite Church, located in Bessie, near Cordell, first served as a stepping stone in the formation of the central committee. In the summer of 1920, the Studien-Kommission assembled in Russia by local Mennonites. Its purpose was to relay the stories of oppression that the brethren faced by roaming bandits during the absence of organized government in the Bolshevik Revolution.<sup>4</sup> Upon receiving word about the negative plight of their friends and relatives in Russia, the Herold Church collected 280 pounds of clothing to be sent for their relief, a monumental event in the early years of the MCC's formation.<sup>5</sup> Shortly thereafter, a formal meeting of all Mennonite relief committees congregated in Elkhart, Indiana, and there the central committee was born.<sup>6</sup> Later in 1920, the organization assisted in helping 20,000

Anabaptists escape Russia to Canada, and over the next two decades they further assisted nearly 50,000 Mennonites find new homes in Paraguay, Uruguay, Brazil, and Canada.<sup>7</sup>

The MCC exists as a unified attempt to relieve world suffering by all participating and cooperative Mennonite sects, retaining a unique inclusive effort that ignores denominational differences for the good of the whole.<sup>8</sup> Since its founding the central committee rallied behind the message of Matthew 25:35-36, “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” People impoverished by wartime activities have profited the most from the MCC’s generosity. In its ninety year history, MCC projects centered on major areas of concentration, mostly coinciding with the worldwide wars over the last century.

In the first twenty-five years of existence, the organization focused on Russian famine relief from 1920 to 1925, Paraguay colonization between 1930 and 1933, and relief for war sufferers from 1939 to 1945.<sup>9</sup> In the next twenty-five years, the MCC undertook two major projects following World War II. The first included the continuation of Mennonite run relief programs in eight European countries, including the maintenance of a children’s home.<sup>10</sup> The second was a massive movement to relocate Mennonite European refugees from their homeland to Paraguay beginning on February 1, 1947, totaling 5,499.<sup>11</sup> In the years following the Vietnam War, the central committee focused its attention to assist 4,000 Southeast Asian refugees (known as “boat people”) relocate to Canada, assisted refugees escape fighting in Nicaragua, and in 1980 the organization was responsible for the maintenance of two camps housing 20,000 Honduran refugees.<sup>12</sup> In

further illustrating the broad need oriented goals of the MCC beyond war related activities are two events occurring in 1978. The Food and Agriculture Organization issued a report identifying twenty countries on the brink of food shortage. The central committee organized a responsive nation-wide program among the Mennonite churches to provide funding to purchase provisions for Ethiopia, India, and Chad, among others of the twenty countries listed. That same year, due to the destruction of a cyclone in the Andhra Pradesh province of India, the MCC again called upon America's Mennonite churches to monetarily assist their denominational brethren in India during the rebuilding process.<sup>13</sup>

Encompassing the efforts of both General Conference and Mennonite Brethren sects of the denomination, as well as Amish and what is called the "Old Mennonite" faith, in 1946 the MCC evolved to include the dissemination of missionaries to foreign countries all around the world.<sup>14</sup> Among the goals of these missions included the commission to clothe the naked, heal the sick, and feed the poor, while using the opportunity to minister Anabaptist principles to these individuals as well.<sup>15</sup> In working with other Mennonite organizations, the central committee began accomplishing the denomination's principles through international radio in 1964 and the handing out of gospel tracts in foreign countries.<sup>16</sup> Individuals who were led into these ministries did so graciously, carrying into their mission the mandate of the MCC to provide for those in need. One such servant with this passion was Levi Keidel and his family, dispatched by the MCC in the late 1970s to serve as missionaries to Zaire. After a short time, the missionary successfully converted several to Christianity, with the youth constituting the majority of these converts.<sup>17</sup>



The MCC continues to exist as the Mennonites primary source to provide food and medical care to foreign missions, as well as observing domestic areas in need of advocacy and assistance. In 1980, central committee officials urged the United States government to honor their treaties with Native Americans, and to help further the recognition deserved of the tribes several MCC representatives traveled to Washington D.C. to help them trace their histories.<sup>18</sup> In the past the organization joined with other denominations in international projects, including the founding of colonies in Bolivia in 1979 with the assistance of Catholic and Methodist efforts.<sup>19</sup> Since its founding, Mennonite churches historically sacrificed much of their congregational income to support the MCC abroad.<sup>20</sup> To counter the problem of churches independently making such huge contributions to the central committee, the concept of the yearly relief sale was born.

The first MCC sale in America was held in California in 1921 but shortly discontinued.<sup>21</sup> Later, out of the chaotic wartimes of the early 1940s, the central committee developed a more proactive response to the needs of people directly affected by World War II. Mennonite Relief Sales soon reemerged all over the country. The purpose of the sales, under the sponsorship of the MCC, brought funding for foreign missions through donations from the Mennonite Churches within a given state by providing individually made goods. Varying from ethnic German foods to handcrafted items and quilts, these donations sold to the public.<sup>22</sup> All of the merchandise featured accumulated in one central location.<sup>23</sup> The event spread throughout the United States and Canada, totaling forty-five held yearly in both countries. The MCC invests the money raised for relief efforts in fifty countries.<sup>24</sup> Historically the most lucrative of sales has

been in Pennsylvania in the Northeast, and in the Great Plains the Kansas Mennonite Relief Sale always proved to be a major money maker for the MCC, grossing a total of \$433,388.00 in the 2009 edition of the Kansas sale.<sup>25</sup>

Before starting their annual mission to sell items for foreign aid, Oklahoma churches participated in accumulating products uniquely Mennonite for other MCC ventures. Many individuals created wood toys, brass and alabaster items, baskets, and shared recipes in cookbooks that were sold at the MCC Self-Help Shop in Weatherford, Oklahoma.<sup>26</sup> These self-help programs were created before the Oklahoma Sale for the purpose of providing daily needs for people around the world, ranging from small furniture items to clothing.<sup>27</sup> In addition, individual circles within churches engaged in these projects, including the sewing of quilts, rolling bandages from used sheets, and assembling supplies for school and medical kits. All of these projects, though important, did not produce large sums of money for foreign relief. Beginning an Oklahoma edition of the sale guaranteed more wide-spread support for missions work than these smaller efforts could financially gross.<sup>28</sup>

The Oklahoma Mennonite Relief Sale modeled the sale traditions established by other states over time. After years of watching Mennonite churches across America congregate within their state to sell their compiled work, Anabaptists in Oklahoma soon modeled their brethren in nearby states. The Kansas Mennonite Relief Sale was the initial example that Oklahoma would follow. Its close proximity and its proven success made it the standard that the Sooner State strove to emulate. Oklahoma's version of the Mennonite Relief Sale started in November 1978.<sup>29</sup> The Major County Fair Grounds in Fairview, Oklahoma served as the original location of the event. The community was an

ideal location, where the presence of Mennonites established themselves thoroughly in history.<sup>30</sup> Here resided the Fairview Mennonite Brethren Church, the largest house of worship in the community and the host church for the Mennonite Brethren sect. The Church of God in Christ Mennonite, home to a Holderman congregation, and Saron Mennonite Church in Orienta, Oklahoma, at the time serving as an active part of the General Conference, were also nearby. Additional nearby churches included New Hopedale Mennonite Church in Meno, West New Hopedale Mennonite Church in Ringwood, Zoar Mennonite Church in Goltry, Turpin Mennonite Church in Turpin, Medford Mennonite in Medford, and Grace Mennonite and Enid Mennonite Brethren in Enid, all within a short driving distance to Fairview. The efforts of these congregations, helped bring success to the initial sale in Fairview, where it remained for the next twenty years.<sup>31</sup>

In preparation for the first Oklahoma Mennonite Relief Sale, the churches called upon the Kansas Sale Committee to assist in organizing the event, since the Sunflower State sale already proved to be a success under the leadership of this committee.<sup>32</sup> Oklahoma churches organized commissions with a specified contact person to oversee the contributions of the church and its members.<sup>33</sup> The coordinator attended a meeting of all Mennonite Church MCC site coordinators. In each church an intention commitment card was distributed to the congregation to get a feel for the type of items that the people might donate. This documentation included the hours of work spent creating the item, and a short history of the entry and its usages.<sup>34</sup> Over time the annual preparation for the event became much more informal, but, for the purposes of organizing the original sale Mennonite leaders used this process to test the waters of commitment before exceeding

hope that the sale continued beyond its first year. Due to overwhelming responses, plans for the event continued. Oklahoma churches provided monetary assistance to the sale as they identified the new venture as a mission to which they could passionately contribute. Among the expenses included the rent of the Major County Fairgrounds.<sup>35</sup>

The sale coordinators decided to follow the same process for the event as that of Kansas and other surrounding states. The format organizes the sale with functions, the first being the selling of food to those who attend. Each church undertook the responsibility to cook and transfer the food item that they prepared to the event. These foods varied in assortment. As in other state relief sales, featured items included traditional German cuisine such as beirox, veranika, and pepper nuts, to more modern delicacies.<sup>36</sup> In addition to each individual church run food stand, congregations all over Oklahoma communally contributed to the largest food booths, for example a booth where pies and pastries were sold.<sup>37</sup> These food contributions reflected the effort of the church as a whole, solely bought, cooked and transferred by the members to Fairview at their expense.<sup>38</sup>

Mennonites considered it a privilege to participate in such a worthy event. The care and preparation of food items evoked much pride among the denomination knowing that the money raised for their items helped feed hungry people everywhere. This pride was equally sustained in the second function of the relief sale, the primary money maker for the event, the auction. Over time the event grew to include a silent auction as well featuring other hand crafted items not intended to be bid on during the actual sale. Later, a Country Fair was added featuring booth items such as books, clothing, and crafts. From the sale's beginning the most lucrative Mennonite items auctioned were home-crafted

furniture and hand crafted quilts, also equally profitable in sales nation-wide.<sup>39</sup> Crafting furniture by hand has been a long and prided tradition among Mennonite men. Chairs, benches, and large quilt boxes accounted for the primary items put forth in the sale. In addition, the first sale, and those following featured wood toys, bird houses, and other home furnishings. Attendees of the event whether associated with the Mennonite church or not, were present at the fairgrounds just to buy the hand crafted furniture by these Anabaptist men. The hours of effort and attention to meticulous detail drove up the bidding on these furnishings.

As prided as the men were for their items, Mennonite women equally rejoiced in their efforts to hand craft quilts. From the time of their arrival to America in the nineteenth century Anabaptist ladies cherished the art form of quilting, generationally passed down through the years.<sup>40</sup> Sales all over the country featured uniquely designed blankets assembled by groups within the church, and even individuals, over the span of a year. Mennonite churches developed women's circles to serve solely for the purpose of sewing items for the relief sale. At Grace Mennonite, the gathering, known as Women in Mission, formed years prior to the sale provided female members with a specified focus to craft items for state sales all across the country.<sup>41</sup> Using the weekly meeting to fellowship with one another women came together for the purpose of just sewing quilts for the MCC. Recruiting neighbors from other denominations, including Methodists and Catholics, the Grace Mennonite Ladies Quilting Circle organized a concentrated effort to produce four quilts yearly to be auctioned at the sale.<sup>42</sup> In addition to the circle, these women often sewed in their own spare time, their efforts being donated to the sale at the conclusion of their project. The auction features hundreds of quilts every year, all of

which sold by the close of the event.<sup>43</sup> To commemorate the first sale, forty-three churches provided one block to be pieced together in forming a “Friendship Quilt.” These blocks featured individual church logos and images.<sup>44</sup>

The largest building on the Major County Fairgrounds, the cattle sale barn, housed the sale. The host, Fairview Mennonite Brethren Church, prepared the facility.<sup>45</sup> The first Oklahoma Mennonite Relief Sale commenced on a rainy November 24, 1978.<sup>46</sup> As is the custom of the event, the festivities began Friday evening with the pre-sale open house. The serving of a large meal sponsored by one of the churches, and a musical performance opened the festivities.<sup>47</sup> Twice in the history the Oklahoma sale the Grace Mennonite Church quartet performed in the Friday evening service.<sup>48</sup> Over time, the transition from local church entertainment to choirs and other musical groups of nearby Christian universities provided the music at the Friday evening musicale. Two specific schools usually supplied the entertainment: Bethel College of Newton, Kansas, affiliated with the General Conference Mennonite Church, and Tabor College of Hillsboro, Kansas, affiliated with the Mennonite Brethren sect. Friday evening allowed bidders to view the featured items in preparation of Saturday’s auction and to partake in the variety of foods available. Saturdays began with the serving of breakfast, with the silent and vocal auctions beginning in mid-morning, lasting till all of the presented items auctioned.

The first Relief Sale appeared to be a complete success with a large outpouring of attendees. Bidders included people from the community and those surrounding Fairview. Members of the denomination from several states and Canada accounted for the largest number of those present. Within Mennonite circles, traveling to sales held in different months in other states has been a desired trip, and the first Oklahoma sale welcomed

Mennonites from all over the country. The following official statistical information and accumulated net profits further illustrate the items featured at the first sale:

Estimated attendance: 3,500-4,000		
Registered bidders: 533		
Total Receipts of Sales and Contributions: \$70,821.17		
<u>Where It All Came From:</u>		
Auction.....	\$37,529.20	
Contributions.....	6,566.42	
Food sales total.....	26,725.55	
<u>Breakdown of food sales:</u>		
Breakfast & dinner.....	\$4,552.00	
Concession (Pankrats).....	1,600.00	
New Year's Cookies.....	680.00	
Apple Butter.....	667.00	
Indian Bread.....	90.00	
Peanuts.....	1,187.00	
Meat & Cheese.....	4,220.00	
Homemade bread.....	880.00	
Pastries.....	1,800.00	
<u>Arts and Crafts:</u>		
Toyland.....	1,485.00	
Arts, crafts.....	2,865.00	
Pillows.....	510.00	
Grandmother's Nook.....	250.00	
Garden Center.....	260.00	
MCC Self Help.....	3,867.00	
Souvenir Mugs and Pens.....	1,600.00	
<u>Some Special Items:</u>		
Dollhouse....	\$840.00	Horses....\$875.00
Grandfather clocks....	\$1,600.00, \$1,500.00, \$1,100.00	
Other Auction Items....	\$13,204.50	
<u>Quilts and Afghans:</u>	<u>total</u>	<u>average per</u>
59 quilts	\$17,107.50	\$289.84
41 baby quilts	2,139.50	52.30
38 comforters	3,200.00	84.21
<u>25 afghans</u>	<u>1,877.00</u>	<u>75.00</u>
162	\$24,324.50	\$149.23
Oklahoma quilt sold for \$1,500.00		
3 others sold for over \$1,000.00 <sup>49</sup>		

The event grossed less than other regional sales due to its first attempt, but the amount encouraged the Oklahoma Mennonite Relief Sale to continue. The yearly tradition

became as much of an extravaganza to local Mennonites as sales in other states. In the second edition of the auction in 1979, Oklahoma Mennonites already began commemorating the yearly gathering with merchandise featuring the sale logo unique to the state, including tote bags specially made by Mennonite women in Bangladesh, as well as coffee mugs.<sup>50</sup>

The dedication of the surrounding churches to making the Oklahoma Mennonite Relief Sale a success continued on pace with similar results over the next twenty years. In 1998, recognizing the growing desire among the communities of Northwest Oklahoma to attend the auction, the MCC moved the event to the newly built Chisholm Trail Expo Pavilion (Enid Convention Center) at the Garfield Country Fairgrounds in North Enid.<sup>51</sup> Enid presented an ideal location; just forty miles east of Fairview, the Mennonites experienced a minimal adjustment in driving distance to attend the sale in its new location. In addition, the newly built facility provided better amenities and parking than the Major County sale barn.<sup>52</sup> Much effort went into the move. Grace Mennonite, now serving as the host General Conference Church, along with the Enid Mennonite Brethren Church, prepared for the event. The Mennonites pulled together to help the transition be as smooth as possible. They relied on each church, as well as the local Oklahoma Bible Academy (founded by the General Conference Church) to furnish the building with tables and seating. A major challenge arose in the move when the Enid fire marshal, despite the buildings large ventilation and entry ways, refused to allow the churches to cook on grills indoors. As a result, all of the cooking took place outside.<sup>53</sup>

Cooking outdoors caused quite a dilemma, as carrying food through the November weather posed a challenge not previously faced in Fairview. In the first year in



Enid tents and cattle trailers provided shelter for cooks. A year later, in a communal effort, the Oklahoma Mennonite Churches alleviated this problem by acquiring a thirteen foot by fifty foot home trailer. Corn Mennonite Church in Corn, Oklahoma, paid the necessary taxes, and Grace members Don Froese and Paul Jantz, longtime construction handymen, began a five year task to create a portable cooking facility. Froese spent most of his time rebuilding the trailer completely, as well as finding willing donors to contribute items for its purpose.

These two men display the servant mentality of the Mennonites. Froese and Jantz both grew up in the Mennonite church in Oklahoma, fully aware of the importance of mission work. Having spent several years volunteering their services at the sales, they shared a willing attitude to labor diligently in rebuilding the trailer for the success of the sale. Sacrificing countless hours of their private lives, these two men remained devoted in their task to transform a rundown portable building into a state of the art cooking center. The Mennonites encouraged devotion to projects such as these because of the monetary benefits that the food cooked in the facility could bring to world missions. Receiving no payment other than the appreciation of their like-minded friends, and the spiritual awareness of giving for the good of others, Froese and Jantz worked strenuously and relied on the help of anyone who shared their passion.

The renovation of the trailer truly displayed how important the success of the relief sale was to local Mennonites. The project equally encouraged cohesion among the member's to see the facility fully renovated. Several Mennonites in the state had a hand in its success. In the five year period, Froese installed all the necessary appliances. Marvin Voth donated a 100 gallon propane tank, and Brian Kroeker of the Enid

Mennonite Brethren Church and owner of BK Propane donated forty pounds of propane a year to be used specifically for the cooking purposes within the trailer. During the renovation, Wesley Kroeker, owner of the Golden Oaks Retirement Village in Enid and member of Grace, allowed the trailer to be parked in his establishment. Once completed, Rocky Unruh, a member of Grace, allowed it to be housed yearly behind his business, Unruh Automotive Shop. Later, the trailer permanently resided at the Verbia Unruh farm near Breckenridge, Oklahoma. Verbia Unruh is also a member of Grace Mennonite Church in Enid. Yearly Froese and Jantz moved the trailer fifteen miles to the Chisholm Trail Pavilion. Several of the major food items served at the sale are cooked in the facility, and the professional auctioneers hired for the event use it to power their computers and audio equipment.<sup>54</sup>

Moving the Oklahoma Mennonite Relief Sale proved to be the most lucrative decision that the sale committee made over the course of the auctions history. Some churches voiced discontent of its relocation after twenty years in Fairview, simply because of the tradition of holding it in a community where Mennonite influence was more prevalent than Enid. Despite this minimal opposition, beneficially, the relocation opened the sale to Northwest Oklahoma's largest community, helping the event to gross larger sums of money than all sales previously held in Fairview. In the last decade, with more widespread space and new money making incentives employed by the MCC, the sale continued to gross record high amounts that tended to change every year. Among the new found ventures put into action since the move of the sale included a booth named, "Ten Thousand Villages." This stand featured items accumulated from third world countries. Further, a new fund raising project by the MCC titled, "Penny Power,"

emerged. This ministry started within individual churches, as congregations donated pennies and other loose change earmarked to provide water to poor villages worldwide where the resource is scarce. The process to provide this water includes the building of sand dams, but primarily through the digging of wells. In an effort to acquire additional funding for this project, the Mennonites scattered large empty water jugs throughout the building during the relief sale. In 2009, the estimated goal for this project was \$500,000.00 nationally.<sup>55</sup>

The moving of the sale also guaranteed higher bidding of auctioned items. Enid bidders recognized the hours of effort put forth by the Mennonites in the products they purchased. These buyers retain these items as show pieces for their homes, and proudly share with onlookers the origin of the piece. The most recent of which in 2009 a green, burgundy, and gold quilt by Verna Regier of Grace Mennonite Church called “Harvest” pieced together over the course of the year grossed \$6,200.00, a record high for a quilt sold in Oklahoma.<sup>56</sup> Equally, the aforementioned Paul Jantz also of Grace in 2008 and 2009, using real John Deere tractors as models, hand built a model tractor towing plow discs, each made from scratch and cut out of tin. Logging over 200 hours of work, in 2008 Jantz’ tractor sold for \$750.00 and in 2009 for \$1,700.00.<sup>57</sup> The Oklahoma Mennonite Relief Sale has grossed over \$100,000.00 a year since relocating from Fairview to Enid, with the sale totaling \$124,650.00 in 2009.<sup>58</sup> As the yearly profits increased since moving the auction, so have the diversity of projects for which the MCC uses the collected money. The proceeds from the 2009 edition of the relief sale, coupled with money raised from others nationally, sent Mennonite engineers to test the structural stability of homes in Haiti following the earthquake of 2010 prior to families moving

back into their residence. Further, the money helped train individuals in poorer countries to drill their own water wells and teach them how to produce their own food.<sup>59</sup>

The irrefutable success of the Oklahoma Mennonite Relief Sale is a testament to the denomination's endurance to provide for missions. General Conference Mennonite Churches in Oklahoma, though many experience depleting numbers in weekly church attendance and yearly membership, commit to building, sewing, and cooking for the massive number of attendees whose purchases fund world missions. In addition to this statewide denominational effort, each church supports their own missionaries in the field. Russell and Virgie Mueller serve as examples of the Mennonites contributory nature to foreign missions on a smaller scale. The Muellers are products of the shared desire by Grace Mennonite and surrounding churches, even cross denominationally with the Christian and Missionary Alliance, to engage in the Great Commission to make disciples of Christ in the world.

Russell Mueller grew up as a part of Grace Mennonite Church in Enid. After marriage, he and wife Virgie heeded the call to engage in foreign outreach. In keeping with the Mennonite's focus to be proactive in supporting the mission field, the couple became the primary focus of Grace's mission contributions. In the late 1950s, taking up their first assignment in a small Indian village on the east side of James Bay, which borders the provinces of Quebec and Ontario, Canada, funding and supplies for a new home accounted for the Muellers first need. The church responded with charitable efforts to the missionaries request for help. Grace provided the Muellers with construction materials for their new home. Due to the location site of the residence, all supplies arrived by way of barge. The church donated household furnishings that Russell and

Virgie received along with other items during one of two supply deliveries containing food, clothes, and personal items.<sup>60</sup> Aside from the twice a year delivery of goods, the couple secluded themselves in the Indian village to perform their missions work.

Grace and surrounding churches remained an integral part of the Muellers mission efforts over the years. The donations of these Mennonite congregations foresaw the success of Russell and Virgie's outreach, which they reported monthly to supporting churches.<sup>61</sup> In addition to communal efforts for financial support of the mission, personal contributions occurred as well. Living in the wooded areas of frigid southeastern Canada posed many dilemmas to the couple, among them included the necessity for warm materials, items for personal hygiene, and encroaching fauna from the wilderness setting. In their generosity Don and Donna Froese, members of Grace and friends of the Muellers, met these needs. The Froeses provided clothing for the Muellers children, and purchased a high powered 303 British Infield Rifle for the couple as well, which Russell used to scare off animals, and hunt bear and other game.<sup>62</sup>

The Muellers' mission focus included the traditional purpose of sharing the gospel with the tribes they assisted, but also as teachers in the Indian school. Serving as educator's and spiritual leaders allowed them much opportunity to engage in conversation with the tribe and equally allowed supporting churches in Oklahoma to have a part in the mission beyond financial and material help. In 1970, Grace extended their contribution when four young people from the church went north and stayed with the Muellers to assist them in the summer Vacation Bible School program. Though missions work among young people is not compulsory in practicing the Mennonite faith as it is among other denominations, any opportunity to engage them in such is actively sought.

Supporting the Muellers' spiritual needs during events such as this provided the perfect opportunity for these young people. This trip would not be the last time that members of the church headed north to directly assist the Muellers.<sup>63</sup>

In 1979, submitting to their religious fervor to serve individuals through instruction, Russell and Virgie moved their mission field to Lac La Biche, Alberta, Canada, where Russell began a long-term teaching career at the Key Way Tin Bible Institute. In an effort to maximize support for the couple, Grace member Wesley Kroeker chartered two airplanes (one piloted by Ronnie Decker, also a member of Grace) to transfer twelve men from surrounding Mennonite churches to assist once again in building a new home for the couple. This mission involvement by Oklahoma churches proved to be the crowning achievement of the support for the Muellers because it allowed members to participate directly in the project in addition to the yearly funding by the churches. After a week of service, the volunteers completed the roof and siding, and prepared for the electrical work to begin. Russell and Virgie lived in this home for thirty years. In addition, Oklahoma Mennonites provided for the Bible Institute as well. After the building of the school gymnasium completed, the churches purchased a basketball score board from the Carrier Grade School in Carrier, Oklahoma. Melvin Schultz of Grace serviced and shipped the board to the Muellers for installation where its usage continued for the next several years, illustrating another example of the lengths that Oklahoma Mennonites went through to support a foreign mission.<sup>64</sup>

The work of Russell and Virgie Mueller serves as a primary example of what Mennonites desire in missions work. The Muellers illustrate one case among many other missionaries with equal experience in their commissions scattered throughout the world,

how important support of these missions is to Mennonite churches in Oklahoma. While at Lac La Biche, the Muellers faced several obstacles. As Voth years earlier was demonized by the Hopis, the Muellers Christian doctrine faced public challenge by influential tribal medicine men. As a result the tribe lost their trust in the missionary couple, but overtime the relationship resurfaced between the missionaries and the natives. Their story of perseverance in the face of these challenges is a testimony to the missionary calling, shared by other mission families like Tim and Suanne Sprunger, missionaries to Japan supported by various Mennonite churches in Oklahoma as well. Since retiring from the mission field in 1992, in an effort to continue their calling to Christian service, Russell and Virgie accepted an assistant pastorate to senior adults at the Spruce Grove Christian and Missionary Alliance Church in the Yellow Knife, Northwest Territory of Canada. The couple still retains strong bonds with the Mennonite churches of Oklahoma who supported them over the last fifty years.<sup>65</sup>

The combination of the Oklahoma Mennonite Relief Sale and the story of Russell and Virgie Mueller display how important supporting missions are to Oklahoma Mennonites. The denomination firmly established themselves in the mission field with the work of Samuel S. Haury and Henrich Richert Voth among Indian tribes in the late nineteenth century. The sale and the Muellers mark two twentieth century examples of how congregations retain an active voice in the mission's effort and participate as major contributors to the national General Conference Church. The induction of the yearly Oklahoma Mennonite Relief Sale and the support for Russell and Virgie Mueller's mission among the tribes of Canada cemented the contributory influence of General Conference Oklahoma Mennonites to the denomination's national mission's identity.

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### End Notes

1. "First-Ever Oklahoma Mennonite Sale Raises \$70,000 for MCC," *Mennonite Weekly Review*, November 30, 1978, 1.
2. The accumulation of primary sources over the MCC Sale and the Muellers come by way of personal association with the Grace Mennonite Church of Enid, Oklahoma. This congregation's proactive role in the work of the Muellers over the past four decades, as well as the church's integral participation in the Oklahoma Mennonite Relief Sale makes their available history very pertinent to this study. The church serves a primary purpose to the function of the yearly sale, as Grace Mennonite is the host General Conference church. The primary sources available at the church include detailed first hand reports, notes, and recollections of the members' participation in these missions. In addition, the formal reporting processes of the MCC further provide a primary source base, made available at the Bethel College Library and Archives in Newton, Kansas, where General Conference history is predominantly archived. Further, a collection of works equally substantiated by research through Bethel College provide a secondary source base in this chapter.
3. J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder, *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later: A Profile of Five Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Denominations* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1975), 136.
4. John D. Unruh, *In the Name of Christ: A History of the Mennonite Central Committee and Its Service 1920-1951* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1952), 13.



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5. Wilma McKee, "Churches Growing in Faith," in, *Growing Faith: General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma*, ed. Wilma McKee (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1988), 163; see also James C. Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War: Mennonite Identity and Organization in America 1890-1930* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1985), 249; see also Paul Toews, *Mennonites in American Society, 1930-1970: Modernity and the Persistence of Religious Community* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1996), 23.
  6. Report of the Joint Meeting of the Mennonite Relief Committees, Elkhart, Ind., July 27, 1920, in *From the Files of the MCC* ed. Cornelius J. Dyck (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1980), 14-15.
  7. J.C. Wenger, *The Mennonite Church in America: Sometimes Called Old Mennonites* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1966), 40-41.
  8. Calvin Redekop, *Mennonite Society* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 85.
  9. Twenty-Five Years: 1920-1945, Mennonite Central Committee Booklet, Akron, Pennsylvania, 1945, MCC Vertical File-Miscellaneous, Box 1, Folder 10, 5, Mennonite Library and Archives (Hereafter cited MLA), Bethel College Library, Newton, Kansas.
  10. 1948 Annual Report of Executive Secretary, Orie O. Miller, MCC Vertical File-Miscellaneous, Box 1, Folder 12, 2-3, MLA, Bethel College Library, Newton, Kansas.
  11. 50 Years Sharing, 1970 In the Name of Christ Booklet, 1970, MCC Vertical File-Miscellaneous, Box 1, Folder 10, 7, MLA, Bethel College Library, Newton, Kansas.
  12. Celebrate, Reflect, Recommit: 75 Years of Service, In the Name of Christ, 1995 Booklet, MCC Vertical File-Miscellaneous, Box 1, Folder 10, 15, MLA, Bethel College Library, Newton, Kansas; see also, Vietnamese Refugees, Bulletin to the Church

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## CONCLUSION

The General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma have cemented their place in the state and in the national denomination through missions. From the seed sown by those who first arrived in America and made their way Westward into the Central Plains, to the efforts of Voth and Haury working with Indian tribes and planting churches, to the participation in denominational programs, and finally the implementation of the annual MCC sale, Mennonites have firmly established themselves in the call to outreach. Their story has not been emphasized, and the faithful of the denomination retain great pride in their mission's achievements.

The widespread location of the denomination in the state, linked by ethnic history and theological standards, make the cohesion among these Christians all the more special. They adhere to their fervent desire to engage in servanthood for the benefit of others. They gather together to fellowship and worship once a year; they invest their efforts of ministry to bring the state of Oklahoma quality goods to cap a year of work for foreign aid; and they do these things through maintaining closeness regardless of geographic distance. This nearness is further enhanced through the denominations remembrance of the obstacles that their ancestors went through in Europe before settling in the United States. The epic achievements of missionaries like Voth and Haury to make General Conference Mennonites in Oklahoma a permanent denomination that evolved into what it is today further enhances the cohesive nature of the members of this denomination.

This thesis has introduced the General Conference sect in Oklahoma. Their story has been articulated, from arrival and church planting, to participation in denominational organizations and the beginning of the MCC sale. In only a little over a century of



residence in Oklahoma, these Anabaptists have developed a voice here that, though not as prevalently heard in this state as in others, still speaks of tradition, ethnic heritage, denominational influence, and missions.

North-Central Mennonite Churches, Oklahoma

INCOME:

Donations:

Bethel Mennonite, Enid . . . . .	\$ 51.00
City Mennonite Brethren, Enid. . . . .	65.00
Mennonite, Deer Creek. . . . .	200.00
Grace Mennonite, Enid. . . . .	232.50
Mennonite, Medford . . . . .	51.00
New Hope Dale Mennonite, Manso . . . . .	341.24
North Mennonite Brethren, Enid . . . . .	544.00
(plus 2 1/4 hives valued at \$250.00)	
West New Hope Dale Mennonite, Ringwood. . . . .	54.00
Zoar Mennonite, Galtby . . . . .	70.98

Income from the sale of:

Hearts, livers and hides of the butchered hives . . . . .	95.70
Canned broth (120 cans sold at 20¢ per can). . . . .	24.00

TOTAL INCOME (Cash) . . . . . \$1,729.36

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EXPENSES:

Purchase of 13 hives. . . . .	\$ 1,429.58
Rubber gloves (10 pair). . . . .	9.86
Cost of butchering 2 hives (Hayes Locker, Enid) . . . . .	6.00
Salt . . . . .	2.81
Canning costs (charged for 3378 cans at 7¢ per can). . . . .	236.46
(this should have been 3384 cans)	
Paper used for covering the floor in the church. . . . .	17.06
Food . . . . .	17.78

TOTAL EXPENSES. . . . . \$1,719.55

BALANCE ON HAND (sent to the M.C.C.). . . . . \$ 9.81

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THE APPROXIMATE DISTRIBUTION OF LABELS to each of the churches according to an approximate percentage worked out according to cash and beef contributions:

Bethel Mennonite, Enid . . . . .	80-90
City Mennonite Brethren, Enid. . . . .	110-120
Mennonite, Deer Creek. . . . .	340-350
Grace Mennonite, Enid. . . . .	400-420
Mennonite, Medford . . . . .	80-90
New Hope Dale Mennonite, Manso . . . . .	590-600
North Mennonite Brethren, Enid . . . . .	1380-1400
West New Hope Dale Mennonite, Ringwood. . . . .	90-200
Zoar Mennonite, Galtby . . . . .	120-130

CHURCH	PERSON IN CHARGE	WORKERS FOR:			BRING THIS NUMBER OF TUBS FOR EACH WORKING DAY?	EACH GROUP, BRING THESE ARTICLES ALSO:
		Monday 6:30 p.m.	Tuesday 8:00 a.m.	Wednesday 8:00 a.m.		
Beckel Mennonite Enid	Mrs. Ben H. Kooka	Monday 2	Tuesday 2	Wednesday 2	1	
City M. B. Enid	Rev. C. E. Fast	2	2	2	1	
Deer Creek Mennonite	Rev. Wm. Unruh	0	0	5	1	
Grace Mennonite Enid	Rev. Albert J. Unruh	6	4	4	5	diapers aprons knives hand saws
Medford Mennonite	Rev. Henry D. Penner	0	6	0	1	wiping cloths lunch for noon meal
New Hopedale Men. Men	Mr. H. H. Unruh	0	6	6	5	
North M. B. Enid	Mr. Gerhard Rempel	6	6	6	5	
West New Hopedale Mennonite, Ringwood	Rev. Edward Wiebe	0	5	0	1	
Zoar Mennonite Golby	Mr. Alvin Becker	0	0	6	1	

NOTE: If you cannot meet your obligations as given above, arrange to do so with another one of the cooperating churches.

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