

Historian



Essex-Kent Mennonite Historical Association

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(Hours are 9:00 a.m. until 12 noon, Monday to Friday, holidays excluded)

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Edited by Luise Taves

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The Heritage Center Receives a Visit by 48 Public School Students

This past spring Walt Koop received a call from Rani Madjumder, a teacher of Grade 6 at Queen Elizabeth Public School. She said her students were studying the Canadian cultural mosaic and that her class was a diverse group itself, 23 different nationalities. She was excited to discover that the Mennonite Historical Center was so close at hand. Could her Grade 6 class have a tour our Center? Certainly Walt said, wanting very much to accommodate them. So how many students might there be? Forty eight was the answer. Wow! What could we do with them? What would they be interested in? Our volunteers really



stepped up to the challenge and planned 4 activity centers. Walt entertained one group in the boardroom illustrating Mennonite in our area. Astrid Koop managed another group at the very popular snack table in the front room. Upstairs Jake Lehn had the students' attention with his stories and miniature homestead buildings.

Meanwhile Erna Warkentin set up a frame in the auditorium to illustrate our

Mennonite quilting tradition. She explained how for many years circles of women had gathered to create handmade quilts for displaced and/or otherwise struggling families. The students were quite taken in by that

idea. Many remarked about how the colours and patterns came together in such a unique design. Some even tried their hand at stitching. Erna later completed the quilt with the idea of giving it to the students. When that time arrived Walt and Shelley Enns took the quilt to Rani Madjunder's class. Rana said they would display it for a while but then wanted to donate it to a needy family.



It was remarkable how interested and well-mannered the class was. Any apprehension about hosting 48 Grade 6 students had been quite misplaced. They were exceptional in their manners and the respect they showed for each other. Twenty four different nationalities, in a class of forty eight. Imagine! Is that not a message for the adult world?

The following is a continuation of the booklet “*Letters to my Grandchildren by Jacob P. Driedger*”

February 19, 1980

Dear grandchildren,

The year 1922 had another surprise for all of us. The red regime, now firmly established, was contemplating his first draft of young men into the army. All those born in 1901 were to appear in their respective centres for registration and inspection regarding their health and fitness for service. Six young man of our village, 21 years old, were involved. I was one of them. After being examined by several doctors and after answering many questions, some regarding our citizenship or should I say financial status, I was accepted but not into active duty bearing arms but into one of the army's mini supply stores, provisions of secondary parts to the army. The reason for this was my father's large land holdings. The son of such a man could not be trusted with arms. I was glad and thankful for the

decision. It relieved me of my scruples toward bearing arms. One more of us six was not considered safe for active duty, the other four were soon assigned to different army units and sent away. Our group was held back; apparently the authorities did not know exactly what to do with us. We were placed into old army barracks, first in our regional center and then in the provincial capital of Alexandrowsk (now Zaporoshje). They kept us busy exercising, marching and and the like. For a month they sent us into the bush to make firewood. We went by riverboat down the mighty Dniepr River. This was my first and only chance to have a ride on this grand and legendary river. The few weeks we lived alongside this river were quite an experience. We lived in shacks dug into the ground with low straw roofs. We lived like rats or other animals. It was shortly before Christmas. The supplies we had

were soon used up and we sent a delegation back to bring us more. When they didn't return we all went back to Alexandrowsk. It was just a few days before Christmas so they let us go home to celebrate.

Love Grandpa

May 26, 1980

Dear Grandchildren,,

After our short furlough before Christmas we had to go back to Alexandrowsk. Here we received the necessary papers and were sent to our destination by train. The army unit to which we were assigned had its headquarters in the city of Nicolajew, a Black Sea port. It took almost a week to get there and we had all kinds of experiences on the way. When we started out it was night time. We rode on a cattle train and it was full of people hunting for food. The famine was not over and these people were called beggars - they went from place to place with their bags collecting food wherever they could find it, even stealing. There was no light in our car. We sat in complete darkness. All of a sudden I noticed our train rolled slower and slower until it stopped. We thought we must be at a station and opened the door to look out. But no station was to be seen. We were in the middle of nowhere. Looking to the front we saw there was no locomotive. Then we realized it had unhooked and had continued on. After a long time the conductor noticed and came back to hook up again. This gives you an idea of how chaotic it was in postwar Russia. Well, we continued on our journey and finally arrived at our provincial capital, the city of Ekaterinoslaw. Here we were told we had to change trains to travel on to Nicolajew, and that next train would be leaving in three days. So we had to sit around for three days in the train station. It was Christmas Eve and the outlook for a happy and Merry Christmas a rather dreary one. Nevertheless, there was nothing we could do about it.

Much love, Opa Driedger

July 21, 1980

Dear Grandchildren

Finally after three long days and nights of waiting our train ride arrived and now we were on our way to our destination, the city of Nicolajew, named after Tzar Nicholas I. There was no receiving party

and so we picked up our few belongings and went searching for the 15th Division staff office. When we finally found it we reported to our arrival and asked for further directions. To our dismay we found that they had not expected us and, not only that, they didn't even know what to do with us. We were Mennonites and couldn't be trusted with arms. So they put us up in an empty house to await further orders. We were there for about a week and, while out on the street, we met a group of Mennonite boys (quite by accident) who were already installed on a horse breeding farm about 10 miles away. They were in town on an errand. Were we ever glad to see them and could they possibly use more help on that place? Oh yes, they said, the whole project was still in the stage of being set up as new so we asked for permission to join the new outfit. Permission was granted and they were glad to get rid of us. By the way, this horse breeding farm was a Russian army project. Russia had lost so many horses during the war and in the aftermath that there was a great need. So we went with the boys with great anticipation. As it turned out the place was a large estate belonging to a Russian aristocrat. The family either had to leave in a great hurry or perhaps were killed when the communists took over. Regardless, the place now belonged to the people and, as the saying goes; it wasn't clear as to who the people really were. A large expanse of building came into view as we drew near. I had to stay here for almost 1 1/2 years. More of this in the next letter. Much love to you all.

From Grandpa Driedger

September 1, 1980

Dear Grandchildren

There were large barns on the farm with many horses and cattle, and there were dwellings for the many hired hands the estate would have needed. Most of the buildings were of mud brick and then white washed inside and out. Only the owner's house was built of red brick. It looked quite fashionable compared to the rest. This was the house the new leader chose for himself. He was, as we learned later, a representative of the army. He was a young married man and wore the title of "War Commissioner". His duty was to look after

law and order. He knew very little about horse breeding and farming. His name was Aleksej Bessubow. For the actual horse breeding program the army had chosen an elderly Cossack. They were known for their horsemanship and he himself had been in the Tsarist army. The new regime needed his expertise in this field; otherwise he was not to be trusted either. He was watched very closely by the Red authorities and the slightest misstep would have meant death for him, as had happened to so many of his comrades. He carried himself very erect and we could see an army officer in his movements. Living on this narrow path must've been very hard for him. The third man in power was the old foreman of the previous owner. He knew every building and field and was the only one really at home on that estate. He was assigned to a small house for himself and his family. He was the man to ask about a question on anything and he knew the answers. His wife and daughter were assigned to cook for all of us. We were shown to a mud hut like all the others. We unloaded our gear and moved in. Iron bedsteads awaited us, a rough table and a small shelf. That was all we had. The windows were small and the ceiling very low. It was not at all inviting. I will tell you more about this place next time around.

Love grandpa

November 14, 1980

Dear Grandchildren:

We were a bit disappointed that first evening but, on the other hand, glad to escape the regular army life with its daily marches, exercises and discipline. Here we were freer. Next day we were assigned our tasks. We each received four horses to take care of. That included watering, feeding, bedding, cleaning and brushing, cleaning the stables and exercising them. Their water was in a nearby, deep well and had to be hauled up in a big wooden pail, and then poured into a long trough. Pulling the water up was hard especially in the winter when everything was frozen stiff. Among my four horses was a beautiful brown mare, very lively and good to ride. I used her to herd the horses to and from the water trough. This I liked very much. There were other occasions when I could ride her to my heart's content. Always

bareback of course. In time I got so used to it that my seat didn't hurt anymore. I liked and loved my horses. To take care of them was a pleasure. Early in the morning our foreman would come to wake us up. First one up was Cornelius Unruh, a tall, fine fellow and a good trustworthy man. The last one to crawl from under his blankets was Jake Jansen, a lazy guy who tried to get away with as little work as possible. All different characters from different worlds and now we were destined to live and work together. In those days I made up a poem that depicted life in that faraway place. It could be sung to a popular Russian tune and the boys were not long finding out about it. They started singing it which made me uneasy. I was afraid it would fall on ears that were not supposed to hear it. Our meals are frugal. We got a weekly allowance of black rye bread. It was heavy. Then for breakfast one of the boys would go to the kitchen and bring a pail of so-called tea with milk. We would stand, since we had no chairs, with each one dipping into the pail with his tin cup, and then drink the concoction with his black bread. No butter, no jam, none of the fancy things that adorn our tables today. For dinner – it was borscht of course, but with very little meat, but sometimes fish. More next time around.

Grandpa

January 12, 1981

Dear Grandchildren

Many other stories could be told about that life. One day our commissioner brought a notice from the army office. It said the administration had decided to organize a large get-together. Speakers had been invited and preparations made for a weekend party. The new Soviet Government wanted to acquaint its citizens, and the army in particular, with its new program, its new laws and its humane intentions – a big piece of propaganda. Each army unit could send a delegate to these meetings - and I was elected, a German from among all these Russians. The next morning I got ready, got my papers and was taken to town. I reported to the proper authorities, got a place to stay, got my meal tickets for the army restaurant and the reading material for the coming meetings. I was being treated like an honoured guest. I was quite

impressed. The meetings were held in a large auditorium. The speakers were all well trained for their jobs and overflowing with ideas of the new socialist state and of the benefits this would bring to the lucky citizens. Paradise was about to come down on this earth; that is on Soviet Russia, the rest of the world would still be in the bondage of capitalism.. And it was the duty of the Red Army to stand on guard for the precious achievements of the working people. And so it went day after day, the same note, in the same rut. I had a little booklet and made notes of what I heard, knowing quite well I would have to report on this. At noon we stopped for lunch (about the best time of the day). We ate from regular dishes, forks and knives and the food was good. In the evening we had theatre, with live casts - and they were good performances. I had a very good time, except for the speeches. Well everything comes to an end so one day I found myself at the old farm again, and everything seemed like a good dream.

Well, good night to you. Love Grandpa.

February 17, 1981

Dear Grandchildren

One more story about an incident that happened on that horse breeding farm. It was in late spring of 1923 when I was given the job of herdsman. The horses had to be put on pasture for the summer and, as there were no fences of any kind, someone had to watch them so they wouldn't wander into the grain fields nearby. One man was to watch them in the daytime and another at night. I chose the nights. Why, because flies didn't bother the horses and what's more, Ukrainian summer nights are very, very beautiful, not a wisp of air and everything is so very still you could hear the horses nibble on the grass. The heavens are just studded with stars, all those different formations and groups. I knew many of them and could tell them by watching their movements cross the sky. I've never seen the sky so full of stars here in Canada. Not in this part anyway. So before sundown I would saddle up my horse (the bay mare I told you about in the previous letter) and picked up my long whip (about 12 feet long with a 1 ½ foot handle). Once on the horse I could sure handle that whip. It would crack like a pistol shot

but my horse was accustomed to it and wouldn't even wink an ear. But the other horses knew what it meant and would usually stay in line. So after they were watered I would drive them through the gate and out to the pasture. The luscious grass soon got their attention and the herd grazed peacefully until about midnight when one after another they laid down to sleep. I got sleepy too so I tied the whip to the bridle and lay down with the whip secured to my wrist. This gave my mare about a 15 foot radius to graze. Everything was peaceful and quiet. I let my thoughts wander to that far away home of mine. What would they all be doing now? My heart longed for them. The incident that was about to happen I must tell you next time. Love to all of you, Grandpa.

April 3 1981

Dear Grandchildren,

Among that herd of horses was a heavysset sorrel that did not want to stay within the fold and had her eyes on the nearby grain field. I had trouble with her before. When I opened my dreamy eyes I saw her wandering toward that grain field. I jumped on to my horse ("this time you're going to get it, Sweetie") and went after her at full gallop, long whip at the ready. She saw me coming and started to run but was no match for my bay mount. I was soon upon her and let her have it, right and left across her rump. She squealed and saw that she couldn't get away. She kicked up her hind legs once, then twice and when I got too close she got me hard on my right leg. I felt a sharp pain shoot up my leg. I let off, stopped my horse and dismounted to examine my leg. There was blood in two places and I could not stand up on that leg. Fortunately we were close to home so I crawled on all fours to the house, woke up one of the fellows, told him what had happened and sent him out to care for the herd. I lay down on my bed. It was close to morning when the commissioner came to see what the matter was. We had no doctor there so they washed out the wound and applied a bandage. Since we had no sterilization blood poisoning set in and in a few days my leg began to swell dangerously. At this time it was decided to take me to the hospital in Nicolajew. I will never forget that trip to town in a

wagon without springs on a bed of straw. Every unevenness on that road I felt over my whole body. We finally got to the hospital where I was given a bath and put on the operating table. The wound was infested so they cut some of it out. At least I was in

professional hands. In about two weeks I was ready to return home. I still wear the scars of that experience on my leg.

Much love to all of you, Grandpa

Curtis Driedger **Biography of the Professional Life of a Musician**

By Barbara Martens

Curtis Driedger was born in Leamington in 1953 to parents Margaret (nee Willms) and Jakob N. Driedger. He grew up with his younger siblings, Norbert and Paula. He was very interested in music from an early age, making up songs in German before realizing that most people around him were speaking English. He sang with enthusiasm until



reaching school, when it became suddenly evident that boys (at least the manly ones) didn't sing. To make matters worse, he was enrolled in piano lessons at age seven, an instrument that, again, in his opinion, was plainly only for girls.

Despite completing the eighth grade in piano, his longing was for the guitar. This was not only due to the Beatles, but also here in his own community, to the Vultures (Art Froese, Harvey Konrad, Edgar Warkentin). This led to the acquisition of his first acoustic guitar, a Christmas present when he was

twelve. His first electric guitar followed at age fourteen.

In Grade 9 at UMEI (graduate of Class of 1971) he formed Band #1, called "Slippery When Wet". The band members were Rudy Dyck, Bill Driedger, Robert Wiens and Larry Cornies. Their repertoire consisted of songs heard on CJSP and CKLW, and they played by ear. By Grade 11, the interest shifted to more acoustic music, which is when he picked up a tenor banjo. A mandolin was to follow, and by Grade 13, the fiddle. Meanwhile he had gone back to playing the piano, but very differently -- all by ear, playing rock'n'roll and blues.

Grade 13 was actually kind of a fallow year, but the following year he attended Canadian Mennonite Bible College, where, as well as singing in top notch choirs and taking voice lessons (to no apparent avail, he says), he teamed up with other young Winnipeggers in playing all kinds of folk music, on campus and off. Taking a year off to work and travel resulted again in a bit of a fallow time. In the fall of '74 he moved to Peterborough, ostensibly to attend Trent University but mainly to really get immersed in a freeform musical lifestyle, with all that it entailed. A band did result from this sojourn, called "Back Porch Delivery", which was bluegrass and jugband and ragtime. An album was recorded (not released until 2001). He remained in Peterborough until the spring of '76, when he joined a newly formed touring showband, based in Guelph, that went by the name "Bandit". Playing primarily six nighters all across Ontario as well as Quebec and the Maritimes, he lasted two and a half years. Thoroughly burned out, and now with a

Toronto address, he became a landscape labourer which suited him very well.

He was fortunate in that his employer, Neil Turnbull, was a huge music fan and was very encouraging of his musical efforts, as well as teaching him plantsmanship and gardening. Turnbull was a true mentor and patron in every sense of the word. In '79 Driedger formed what he considered his best band ever, the CeeDees, a rock and roll band which performed his original songs. This lasted for ten years.

At this time his music creating led to involvement in theatre and dance productions, which has carried over to the present. He also played for left wing political functions.

In 1989, with his wife Barbara, he moved back to the Peterborough area, to a rural property where they set out to create their utopia. He got back into music slowly hooking up with various musicians in the area. Particularly big at that time was Celtic music which connected him back to the earlier interests of old time music in general.

After moving into town in '98, he started giving violin lessons, then branched out to other instruments, all via word of mouth. In 2003 he formed the Mandolin Society of Peterborough, which is (at present) an eighteen piece orchestra. Also around this time he began to develop a repertoire suitable for performing in retirement homes, of which there are quite a number in their area. This has proven rewarding on a number of levels, not the least of which is the opportunity to explore more old music. In 2011, at someone's suggestion, he started a choir which has become the Peterborough Zippity Doo Dah Community Soul Chorus, which this past season had eighty members. Driedger claims that to him this is an absolutely astounding development. Perhaps it is due to the big change from who he had

been in disco's heyday. According to a June 2016 article in Peterborough This Week, by Bill Hodgins, titled *From Church Music to Disco to Mandolins*, he brings the joy of music to others. He describes Driedger this way: "It was a different era....he found himself sitting at the keyboard with an Afro and monkey suit. It was a good education." Fellow musician and friend John Hoffman describes Driedger as "music teacher, band leader, artistic director, who isn't afraid to thumb his nose at convention. He's kind of quirky....and unconventional guy, but he's got all these followers and friends through his music. When he performs now, all he has to do is send out an email and they flock to see him play. He inspires incredible loyalty." When one reads the next quote, it's evident that Driedger has a gracious spirit. To continue to quote Hoffman: "He has provided a lot of really interesting and unconventional music over the years, but the thing that really impresses me right now as he has gotten older is the way he creates opportunities for non-professional people...the lay musicians. In the Mandolin Society, he takes everybody. You don't have to audition. He makes a space for people and creates arrangements for them. He puts people in situations where they can perform and feel good about it. There are a lot of people who never thought they would perform except around a campfire maybe, and he offers something that makes people happy. It's good for their lives and for their mental health and it's good for the community."

Driedger's other passion is gardening. His green thumb is evident in their impressive garden of flowers and vegetables. He enjoys rejuvenating an old garden. He continues to garden professionally as well, and between that and "my puny life in music" he says he can't imagine a better existence.

Note: Curtis Driedger performed Saturday, Sept 10th at the Leamington Bank Theatre. His concert was entitled "*Puny Life in Music*"

Who Remembers This House?

It was situated on Rd. 34 (old Hwy#3). The farm was owned by Dr. Froese and various Mennonite families sharecropped there and lived in this house. In mid-October (2016) the house was dismantled and a log cabin structure was uncovered as the main part of the house. There is now an interesting story unfolding in regard to this house. Watch the next historian for it.

Over the years a number of families lived and worked here. **If you have some stories about that time please contact the Heritage Centre.**



Correction needs to be made in the story 'Summers of Tobacco Harvest' appearing in the spring edition. The family name referred to as Funk should have been spelled Founk. We apologize for that error

If you have not already done so here is another chance to renew your 2016 membership in the Historical Society, at the amazing low price of \$10.00 per person! Make your cheque payable to EKMHA and send it to:

**Irene Thiessen
70 Theresa Trail
Leamington, N8H 5M9**

MEMBERSHIP and CONTRIBUTION FORM

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Membership Fee (\$10 per person) \$_____ Contribution to Heritage Centre \$_____

*Please make cheques payable to Essex- Kent Mennonite Historical Association
Mail to Irene Thiessen, 70 Theresa Trail, Leamington, ON N8H 5M9*

*A membership card will be mailed to you. Tax receipts will be issued for contributions only.
Memberships are valid from May 1st to April 30th of the following year.*