

A black and white photograph of a snowy forest scene. In the background, a wooden cabin is visible through the trees. The ground is covered in snow, and the trees are bare, suggesting a winter setting. The overall tone is historical and serene.

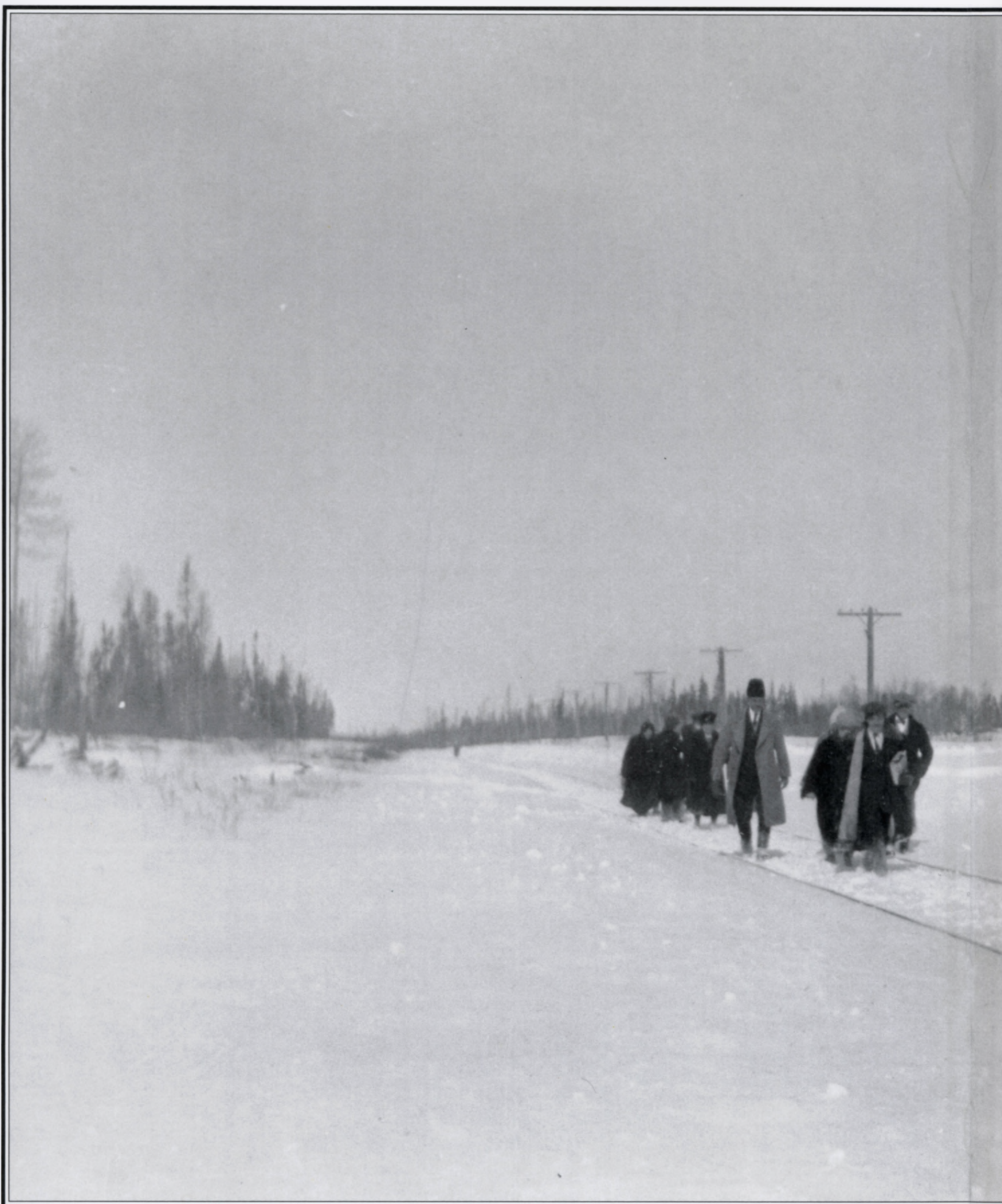
# **Memories of Reesor**

**The Mennonite Settlement  
in Northern Ontario  
1925 - 1948**

Hedy Lepp Dennis

**ESSEX-KENT MENNONITE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION**







# Memories of Reesor

The Reesor Family in Northern Ontario

1923 - 1948





# **Memories of Reesor**

*- The Mennonite Settlement in Northern Ontario -*

**1925 - 1948**

Hedy Lepp Dennis



**VOLUME FOUR**

**ESSEX-KENT MENNONITE HISTORICAL SERIES**

The Essex-Kent Mennonite Historical Association

Leamington, Ontario

2001



## **Dedication**

**This book is dedicated to the memory of the courageous pioneers who founded the settlement of Reesor; may their achievements not be forgotten.**

**And may this book testify to God's presence, love, and concern for the immigrants who were in dire need of a new home, a new beginning, and renewed hope!**

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## **Cover photographs**

Front cover: A beautiful winter day in the Reesor settlement.

Inside front cover: A group of Reesorites walk along the train tracks to a worship service.

Inside back cover: A Reesor funeral procession.



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25	A. LOEWEN	H. BERGEN		J. DYCK	W. REIMER	H. WIELER	2E
1W	P. DICK E. SCHMIDT J. SCHMIDT	G. THUS C. KLASSEN	J. FRIESEN	P. RATZLAFF	J. HEINRICH	D. TJART	1W
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17E			A. WIEBE J. WILLMS J. FRIESEN H. LEPP	E. LINSMAVER	G. JANZEN		17E
16W			G. SIEMENS D. DYCK F. JANZEN	P. JANZEN	J. SCHMIDT J. JANZEN		16W
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15E			S. REDLICH	J. LOEWEN	D. JANZEN		15E
14W			D. KOEHN J. STOLL	P. REIMER P. DYCK	H. WIEBE J. TOEWS		14W
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13W					J. SCHMIDT H. KLASSEN		13W
13E			S. SCHOTANUS	ROAD			13E
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3E		A. WARKENTIN G. KLASSEN T. STRICKARUK		F. JANZEN	N. REIMER A. BERGEN	A. DUECK N. HAMM	3E
2W		G. KLASSEN		D. UNRAU D. JANZEN	E. SCHROEDER	J. SIEMENS A. MARTENS A. LEPP	2W

This map shows the location of homesteads, churches, schools, etc. in the Reesor Settlement



# Foreword

**I**t has been a delight to be part of Essex-Kent Mennonite Historical Association's Publications Committee whose task it was to ready this fine piece of work for print. We extend thanks to Harold Thiessen who prepared the photos for our hard copy, and to Herman Lepp and John Wiens for their enthusiasm and valuable assistance!

We commend Hedy Lepp Dennis for taking the opportunity to tell the Reesor story at a time when the original settlers have all died. In Hedy's words: "It is a story that needs to be told before the last of the sons and daughters of these pioneers are laid to rest".

The people of Reesor appear to have had a keen sense of history which may have prompted them to record and document many of their activities in photos--an amazing feat when one considers their daily struggle for survival. Today a good number of former Reesorites live in the Essex-Kent area; they are our friends and neighbours, and we see and feel the strong bond of friendship that unites them.

It is evident that they were a skilled and gifted people. For instance, Susan Friesen Pankratz's mother traded her hand knit mitts and socks for necessities at the Trudel store, and H.P. Lepp was not only pastor and farmer, but inventor, poet, and artist, as well! And they were a people of privilege: who of us could even dream of sharing a meal of *Borscht* with Cree guests, having a black bear for a pet, or travelling to church on skis?

The Reesor story abounds in heroes and heroines such as *Tante Ebba*, who could read, knit, and drink coffee--all at the same time, or Bachelor Wiens who grew the best rhubarb in the settlement, and teenagers John Wiens and Rudy Lepp who shot a moose before breakfast on a Sunday morning!

It is with great pleasure that the EKMHA accepts this book as the fourth volume in their series.

Astrid Koop, on behalf of the Publications Committee:  
Gisela Schartner  
Mary Thiessen  
Harold Thiessen

# Acknowledgements

**Recognition and gratitude is extended to:**

John Enns †  
Thomas Reesor †  
*Ältester* Jacob H. Janzen †

Much information was gleaned from John Enns's 1973 book on the Reesor Settlement which supplied necessary data and facts used to compile this manuscript. The Thomas Reesor and *Ältester* Jacob H. Janzen writings contributed many interesting details to this project.

**Heartfelt thanks go to the following contributors:**

Bartel (Kroecker) Martha, Niagara-On-The-Lake, Ontario  
Berg Albert, St. Catharines, Ontario  
Boldt (Martens) Vera, late of St. Catharines, Ontario  
Dechamp (Parise) Dora, late of Mattice, Ontario  
Dennis (Lepp) Hedy, London, Ontario  
Dyck (Toews) Erna, Leamington, Ontario  
Enns Bob, Toronto, Ontario  
Epp Helen, Vineland, Ontario  
Friesen Jake, Virgil, Ontario  
Funk (Redekop) Helen, St. Catharines, Ontario  
Isaak Nicholai, late of Leamington, Ontario  
Janzen Bill, Kakpuskasing, Ontario  
Janzen George, Fonthill, Ontario  
Klassen (Berg) Anna, Leamington, Ontario  
Klassen Charles, Kitchener, Ontario  
Klassen Henry, late of Kingsville, Ontario  
Kopp (Lepp) Alice, St. Catharines, Ontario  
Lepp (Unger) Gertrude, late of Harrow, Ontario  
Lepp Henry, Harrow, Ontario  
Lepp Herman P., late of Harrow, Ontario  
Lepp Herman Jr., Harrow, Ontario  
Lepp Rudy, London, Ontario  
Lepp Victor, Caistor Centre, Ontario  
Loewen John, Port Rowan, Ontario  
Martens Henry, Cartwright, Manitoba  
Martens (Enns) Louise, Winnipeg, Manitoba



Mathies Abe, Leamington, Ontario  
 Mazi (Bergen) Hilda, Dunnville, Ontario  
 Misner (Loewen) Bertha, Port Dover, Ontario  
 Pankratz (Friesen) Susan, Port Rowan, Ontario  
 Penner Henry, St. Catharines, Ontario  
 Rempel (Lepp) Irene, Harrow, Ontario  
 Richardson (Stoll) Mary, Maple Ridge, British Columbia  
 Sainio (Roetscher) Margitta, Thunder Bay, Ontario  
 Sawatzky (Bergen) Margaret, St. Catharines, Ontario  
 Schmidt Ernie, Guelph, Ontario  
 Swartz (Bergen) Hertha, Southgate, Michigan  
 Tiessen (Isaak) Edith, Kingsville, Ontario  
 Tjart David, Edmonton, Alberta  
 Toews Cornelius, late of Leamington, Ontario  
 Warkentin (Lepp) Betty, Virgil, Ontario  
 Wiebe (Tjart) Mary, Walsingham, Ontario  
 Wiens Abram T., late of St. Catharines, Ontario  
 Wiens Jacob T., late of Leamington, Ontario  
 Wiens John, Leamington, Ontario  
 Wiens Mary, St. Catharines, Ontario  
 Wiens Rudy, Leamington, Ontario  
 Wiens Walter, Leamington, Ontario

#### **Metric Conversions**

1 mile = 1.6 kilometres  
 1 pound = .45 kilograms  
 1 acre = .40 hectare  
 1 yard = .91 metres  
 1 foot = .30 metres

#### **Dear Reader:**

Please note that after the first printing of Memories of Reesor, readers informed us of some errors and omissions in the book. Corrections were made on the following: pages 3, 7, 8, 17, 19, 24, 30, 35, 37, 42, 44, 73, 84, 107, 111, 114, 121, 125, 127, 150, 159, 164, 165.

The Publications Committee of the EKMHA regrets these errors.

Astrid Koop



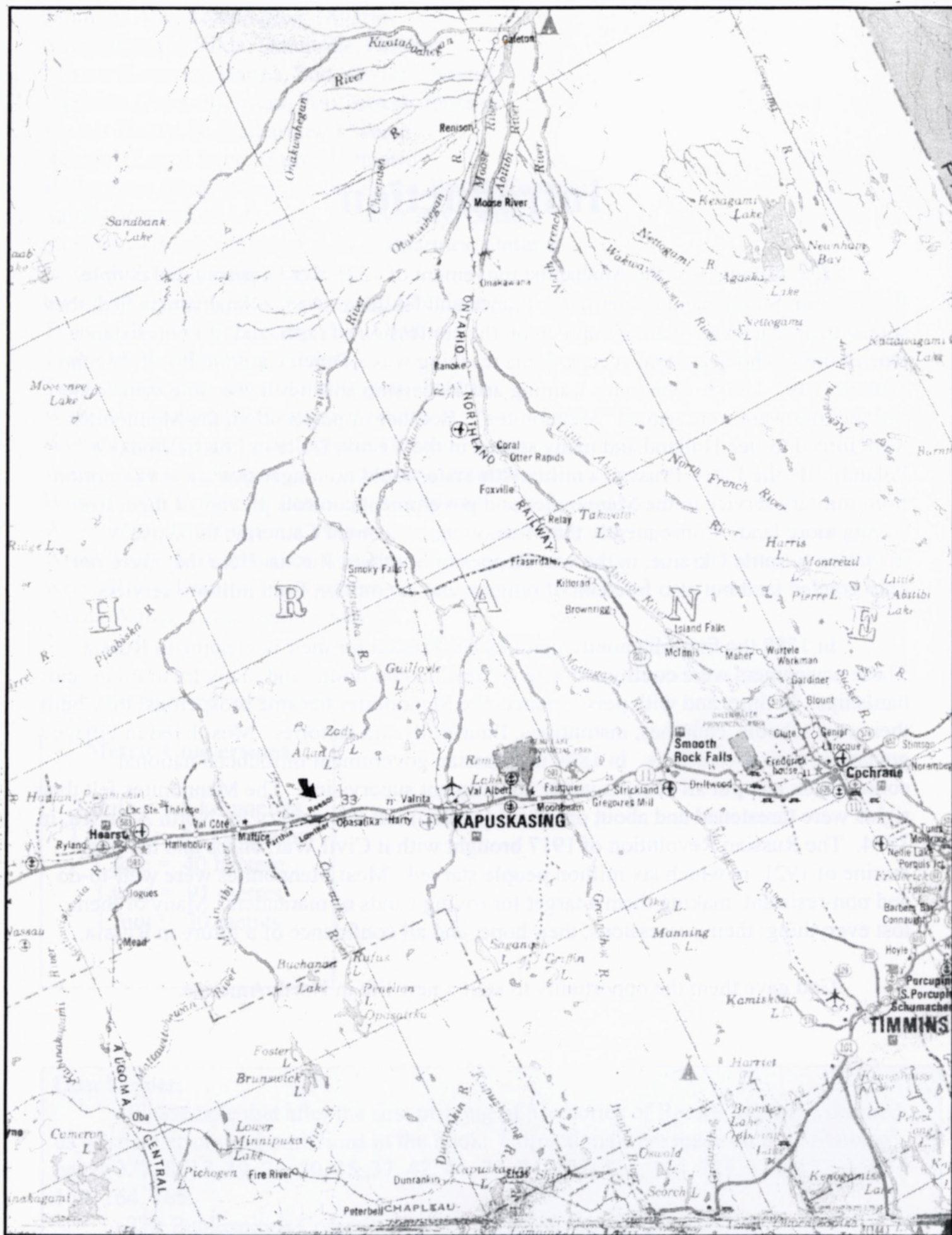
# Introduction

The followers of the Anabaptist movement of 1525 were a persecuted people, fleeing from Switzerland to Germany, France and Holland. As the Anabaptists fled, they spread their teachings of adult baptism on the confession of faith, and of nonresistance. One of those who heard and accepted this teaching was a Dutch Catholic Priest, Menno Simons (1497-1561). Due to his training and leadership abilities he became their leader, and the followers were named "Mennonites". Because of persecution, the Mennonites were forced to flee Holland and many settled in the Vistula Delta in Prussia (today's Poland). By the 1780s Prussia, a militaristic state, could no longer guarantee exemption from military service to the Mennonites and government controls prevented them from buying more land. Consequently the Mennonites welcomed Catherine the Great's invitation to settle Ukraine, in the vast steppes of Southern Russia. Here they were not only granted land but also freedom of religion and exemption from military service.

In 1788 the first Mennonite families left Prussia for their new home in Russia. These newcomers were confronted with unfamiliar conditions and many frustrations and hardships. In time, and with perseverance, the Mennonites became prosperous: they built their own schools, churches, institutions, flour-mills and factories. Most lived in villages, governing their own affairs. In 1870 the Russian government introduced national conscription and put all schools under government supervision. The Mennonites felt their rights were threatened and about one-third (18,000) left the country for North America, in 1874. The Russian Revolution of 1917 brought with it Civil War, chaos and the great famine of 1921, in which six million people starved. Most Mennonites were well-to-do and non-resistant, making them a target for roving bands of marauders. Many of them lost everything: their possessions, their hope, and all confidence of a future in Russia.

God gave them the opportunity to start a new life in North America.





*An arrow indicates the location of Reesor, between Hearst and Kapuskasing*



# Memories of Reesor

- *The Mennonite Settlement in Northern Ontario –  
1925 - 1948*

## 1. The birth of a settlement



*Reesor's snow-covered Spruce trees*



**E**migration into Canada by the Mennonites from Russia was made possible by the Liberal government--headed by Mackenzie King--in 1922. David Toews of Rosthern, Saskatchewan, chair of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, had been influential in persuading the Canadian Pacific Railway to transport thousands of these German speaking Mennonites on a unique credit arrangement.

Stripped of their wealth and independence, more than 20,000 Mennonites left their former homeland during 1923-1930. The Russian Government made emigration for these people increasingly more difficult, and finally closed the border in 1930. Thus the settlement in Reesor was, in a sense, the result of the Bolshevick Revolution in Russia.

The first immigrants arrived in Rosthern, Saskatchewan in July of 1923. Others soon followed, some arriving in Manitoba and Ontario. These new immigrants were eventually distributed among the homes and farms of their brethren in Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. This great number of refugees taxed the ability of the Canadian Mennonite communities to absorb them. In Ontario about 1000 of these homeless immigrants were billeted in homes in the Waterloo and Markham area during the winter of 1924. Employment was hard to find, and not knowing the language didn't help the situation. The average farmer could not afford to employ more than one farm-hand on a yearly basis, so most of the immigrant families were split up. The young adults were sent to different farms and met their families only at church on Sunday mornings. A number of the men did manage to find employment as farm laborers, and the women as housemaids, and there were a few factory jobs available. Some of these new immigrants experienced resentment from the established Canadian citizens who feared that their jobs were threatened.

Establishing a new life in Canada was not an easy task. Jacob T. Wiens wrote that the new immigrants preferred their independence but found that the prices of the farms were prohibitive, also that their first obligation was to pay off the *Reiseschuld* (travel debt).

**Henry Klassen** points out that the refugees were looking for what they had lost in Ukraine: their own villages, churches, schools, and self-government.

**Ältester (Bishop) Jacob H. Janzen:** "I looked at all settling possibilities from a certain subjective standpoint. Before me is the question: where can we settle in groups, organize our congregations, and establish our schools according to our traditions and under God's leadership?"

As doors seemed to close in the West, due to economic conditions, attention was drawn to the potentialities of homesteading in Northern Ontario. Here the government was making land available in the "Great Clay Belt". This was a large district situated on the Hudson Bay slope, north of the Height of Land. The Clay Belt stretches from within



the Quebec border, west to beyond Hearst and south to Timmins. This Clay Belt is characterized by flat, stone free clay areas, with black spruce bogs.

Most of the homesteads in the Cochrane district that lay within a short distance of the railway lines, had already been occupied by this time. However, there was a stretch between Opasatika and Mattice, where no roads existed, which was still open for settlement.



*Young spruce trees in winter*

The government was prepared to make almost any concession in order to establish a settlement there. It was willing to assign an area for a settlement by Mennonites and promised not to allow anyone else to take up land there for several years so that the Mennonites could establish a viable community. So the attention of these refugees was drawn to mile 103, along the Canadian National Railway Line, between Kapuskasing and Hearst.

#### **The first Scouting Trip – January, 1925**

Mr. Biette, a representative of the Lands Settlement Branch of the CNR, offered free tickets to any delegates interested in pursuing these possibilities. So in January 1925, **Jacob Toews, Heinrich Neufeld, Gerhard Siemens, and Mr. Biette** went north and inspected the proposed area. They could not make a proper appraisal or evaluation because of the heavy snow cover. However, the dense stands of spruce trees that they saw convinced them that there would be an immediate source of income, should they decide to settle here.

The Boreal Forest region of Northern Ontario represents approximately 80 % of the Canadian forest areas. It is a section of coniferous trees that is situated between the



treeless sub-arctic region to the north and the mixture of hardwood and coniferous forests to the south. The most common Boreal forest trees are the black spruce, jack pine, white spruce, balsam fir, tamarack and some trembling aspen, poplars and white birch. The black and white spruce trees were the two main species.

A survey had been done in 1912 but the lot lines were barely noticeable at places, as they were overgrown by brush. It was virgin forest, untouched and untrodden, a wilderness that had been entered by hunters and trappers only, and of course by Native Canadians, this being the ancestral land of the Cree.

Thomas Reesor, a prominent Mennonite Minister from Pickering, Ontario, whose forebears had cleared land in "Old Ontario", had great faith in the possibilities these wooded homesteads offered. He was instrumental in making the contacts and helped with all the necessary arrangements, becoming the English tongue for the *Russländer* (people from Russia).

### **The second Scouting Trip – May, 1925**

A second scouting trip took place in May of the same year. **Jacob Toews, Peter Warkentin and David Mathies**, accompanied by **Thomas Reesor**, and land agents **Biette and Dutch**, returned to the northern region. They were touched by the beauty of the northern spring, especially as the mosquitoes and black flies had not yet made their presence known. This excursion resulted in a published call for interested settlers to organize a Mennonite colony in "New Ontario". The desire to establish a permanent home was the key factor in luring the Mennonites to Reesor.

The prospect of having to cut trees, pull stumps and clear land discouraged some prospective settlers. It was something they had never attempted before. Many had been affluent businessmen, mill-owners, and masters of their own estates. Here all they could see was a land covered with the very trees they would have to fell to get an income until they could farm the land. But *Ältester* J. H. Janzen from Waterloo endorsed this project. He felt that with only an axe and a saw, a man could be on his own land and establish his own home. This opportunity was a gift from God not to be taken lightly.

Henry Klassen tells us that the desire to retain their identity, customs and beliefs were very strong among the Russian Mennonites, so strong that they were willing to start a new community under these tough physical and economic circumstances.



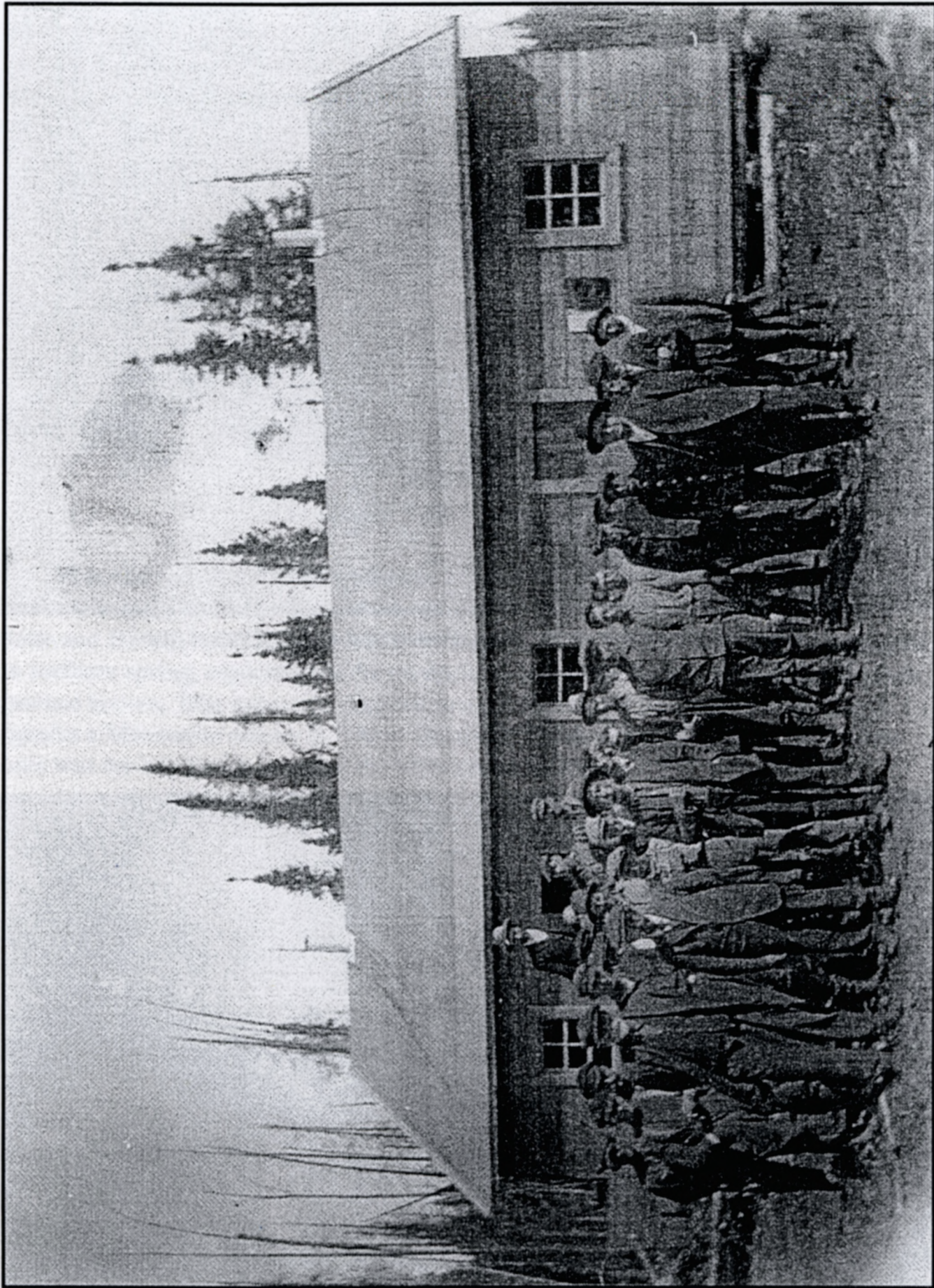


*The woodcutter's tools: hook, measuring rod, saw, and axe*



*A typical Reesor winter scene*





*Men socialize at Immigrantenhaus (immigrant house) after a Schultebott (village council) meeting. Thomas Reesor can be seen at front right with hands behind his back*



## 2. Following a dream



*Abram T. and Liese Wiens's first Reesor home--later became Trudel property*

The possibilities of a common dream of owning and cultivating their own land as their forefathers had done before them was made real when Thomas Reesor, who was on the Board of Colonization, arranged the logistics to make it happen. On June 15, 1925 a group prepared to take a chance in this new venture left Toronto with free passage arranged by Biette and headed north.

### **Reesor's first settlers arrive – June 15, 1925**

The first settlers were **Peter Warkentin, David Mathies, Jacob Heinrichs, Johann Epp, Cornelius Penner, Peter Friesen, Johann Kroeker, Jacob Rempel, and Jacob Toews** with son **Cornelius Toews**. These ten courageous pioneers, accompanied by Biette, and Thomas Reesor as interpreter, were dropped off at mile 103 at 11 p.m. in the vast, virgin forest of Northern Ontario.

They had a small tent with them that could accommodate only two people; the rest had to sleep under the trees. The women and several children continued on to Mattice.



Thus began a story that was spawned by the Russian Revolution, from whence these Mennonite settlers had come. It is the story of "Reesor." Seventy-five years later only a few faded snapshots and some failing memories remain. However, it is a story that needs to be told before the last of the sons and daughters of those pioneer settlers are laid to rest.

**Cornelius Toews** recalls his early experiences: "On June 15, 1925, as a fifteen year old, I saw Reesor for the first time. I can remember quite well when the train stopped at mile 103. It was pitch black that night and to make things worse, a heavy rain was falling, and for the thousands of mosquitoes we had arrived just at the right time. We did not know where to spend the night. We started walking along the railway tracks for 1/4 mile, then bedded down on the ground. Given a chance, we all would have turned around and left. The next morning the sun came up gloriously. The men went into the forest to select their homesteads."

**Cornelius Toews** continues: "I was left all alone in the small tent to watch our belongings. I must confess that I was afraid that a bear or wolf or even an Indian might come. It was very late when the men returned to camp. One week later my father's cousin, Abram, and Liese Wiens, and son Rudy came to Reesor. Mr. Berringer had asked my father if he could guarantee accommodation for the Wiens family. 'Yes', my father replied, 'that I can. I live under one tree and they can live under the next one'. The director had laughed and said that my father's guarantee was good enough!"

The black flies and mosquitoes made their presence known by the millions, which made it very uncomfortable. Mr. Biette had supplied them with cheesecloth--but that was useless as the black flies crawled into the tiniest opening, every bite drawing blood. The settlers discovered an old, abandoned, roofless shanty, left by a trapper. Since there was no other accommodation, Mr. Biette brought a large tarpaulin from Cochrane, which was stretched over the roofless cabin. This made an excellent shelter and was large enough for two fires, which were necessary to keep the bugs out.

The prospective settlers immediately commenced looking for suitable homesteads. With wet feet and their faces badly bitten by black flies, the new pioneers returned to camp very discouraged. How primeval and alien this land must have appeared to these people from the treeless steppes of the Ukraine. How difficult to decide which parcel of *Urwald* (virgin forest) to claim as their own! Before them lay a pathless wilderness of soggy muskeg and endless stands of untouched virgin forest. The lines that the survey crews had blazed in 1912 ran along the full lots of 150 acres.

Mr. Biette brought in the Crown Land Agent from Hearst who helped them select and sign up for their homesteads. On the basis of quality and quantity of the trees, and their proximity to the railway, the settlers, one by one, chose their homesteads. These 150



acre lots were divided into two east and west sections. This meant that each settler got one 75 acre lot. This was to bring them closer together and it required fewer roads. The cost was 50 cents an acre and could be registered for \$10. with the balance to be paid in three annual installments. To acquire a deed, 15 acres had to be cleared and put under cultivation. According to Canadian law, every male over 18 years of age could claim a homestead. So families with adult sons could end up with two, three or more homesteads and could cut pulpwood accordingly, giving them an advantage over families with small children.

**Erna Toews Dyck** wrote that she was fourteen when her father took her and Cornelius up north. She was put in the care of the Warkentin family, who went on to Mattice. Here they found shelter in a small cabin owned by Olaf Christianson. After a week her father came for her and they walked back to the makeshift abode. Thus she became the first female settler in Reesor. There was no floor in the house so moss was gathered to serve as mattresses on the ground.



*L to R: At the Lepp home are Gerhard Martens, Mr. Hasenecker, Rev. Lepp holding Rudy*

**Erna Toews Dyck** remembers: When the houses were finally built, after about three months of arduous labour, preparations were made to have the rest of the families come up from Southern Ontario. They lit a lantern and made their way to the railway tracks. As the train's headlights appeared in the distance they swung the signaling lantern. Two short whistle blasts indicated that the engineer intended to stop. Their excitement reached a climax when the train ground to a halt, but how disappointing when no one arrived! The next evening they went back again but there was only a single whistle blow and the train passed them by. There was no disappointment on the third evening. The train stopped and there was a joyous reunion.





*The train was the settler's link  
with the outside world*

As word spread about the availability of cheap homesteads in Ontario's uninhabited north, settlers arrived from the south and the west, penniless and debt-ridden.

**Albert Berg:** "Our family arrived in Canada in 1923 and lived on farms in Manitoba and Saskatchewan for the first few years. Continued poor crops and low grain prices discouraged us to the point that we looked for other ways to make a living. About this time there appeared an article in the Mennonite newspapers, namely *Der Bote* and *Die Mennonitische Rundschau*, about a pioneer settlement in the forests of Northern Ontario.

Some Mennonites had already settled there, and were encouraging more of their people to take up residence in this untouched wilderness. This led my family to move to the place called Reesor."

The first homesteads were taken up in the Townships of Eilber and Barker. In 1927 additional lots were set aside in the Township of McGowan. The first settlers came from Southern Ontario, although the majority came from Western Canada, while some came directly from Russia.

By October 1928 there were 22 homesteads taken up in Barker Township, 25 in Eilber and 19 in the McGowan Township, with a population of 227 persons. There were 35 acres under cultivation.



### 3. Log houses



*Herman P. Lepp takes a moment to pose for this photo during the construction of the Lepp's Reesor home*

After selecting their homesteads, the settler's first obligation was to construct living quarters. According to Government regulations these had to be a minimum size of 16 ft. by 20 ft. This was no easy task for the inexperienced settlers. Tortured by hordes of mosquitoes and black flies, they proceeded to build their log houses. First an area had to be cleared in the dense forest. Trees had to be felled and cut into specific lengths and then carried to the building site. Their only tools were a hammer, an axe and a Swedish buck saw.

**John Wiens** tells us that after a homestead had been chosen and claimed, a building site would be selected, on an area of higher ground, tall white spruce, poplar or birch stands being preferred. The popular dense black spruce stands identified the low areas. Consideration also had to be given to access to future roads and neighbours. The site of the initial structure would usually be laid out parallel to the survey lines or future roads. The substructure was placed directly on the bare ground, with bark often still remaining on the logs. (Buildings constructed in later years would have a substructure of peeled logs, treated with creosote). Since the principal building materials were logs, the source was not a problem, trees were plentiful and selection was good. The thickness of a typical 24 ft. log was generally from 8 inches at the butt to 5 inches or so at the crown end. As each log was put into place, it would be notched at each corner of the structure to



receive the next set of logs. The notches were open to the top (this practice our people changed in later years, as they learned the proper way from the Finlanders, namely, that the notches were to be open to the bottom). Gable ends were also horizontal logs, held together with 8 inch spikes. To tie the gable structure together specially selected logs would be placed for purline and ridge, to which thinner poles were attached in a corduroy style for the roof. Tarpaper was used over a thin layer of sphagnum moss to cover the roof. When available, roughly sawn boards were used for the roof deck.

After the walls were erected, doors and window openings were cut in. The windows often had no frames, the glass pane was simply puttied against rough wooden two-by-fours. Some of the early houses had corduroy pole floors. Lumber was used when available and affordable. The cracks between the logs were chinked with sphagnum moss or a mixture of clay and moss. Rough building paper was often used on the log walls to brighten up the dark interiors, which then could be covered with designed wallpaper.

**George Janzen** tells us that his father built a one room house on their 75 acre parcel of land. He also built two bed frames from logs, a table, a short bench and a chair to furnish their chalet.

There was another building on every homestead, to be mentioned discreetly, and it was the small but very necessary outhouse. Of the many that were constructed no two were exactly alike. There were no blueprints, every man was his own architect, designer and builder. Most were two or three holers, varying in size, to accommodate the entire family. The Eaton's catalogue was always visible, but the shiny pages were pretty useless unless first prepared by crumpling. There was no plumbing involved but there was always a problem in winter known as a "pyramid build-up." This was when the contents of the outhouse would freeze and build up.

**George Janzen** writes : "I recall my Father going into this structure during the winter months, with a wooden pole to push over the pyramid that had sprung up directly under the hole." Bachelor Wiens was the only settler known not to have an outhouse--but he was recognized throughout the settlement for his superb rhubarb.

The houses were heated with wood burning stoves, usually "Elmira" cooking stoves or "Quebec" heaters. Stoves constructed from oil barrels were also used. The attempt to keep their homes warm caused the settlers more grief than any other hazard. When heating a house with wood there was always a great fire risk. Creosote buildup could cause a roaring chimney fire, and if not immediately controlled, the chances of a house fire were extremely great. These early houses had no proper chimneys, only stove pipes protruding through sheets of metal flashing in the ceiling and roof. Several houses were lost due to the primitive conditions of these stove-pipe chimneys. Some of these fires resulted in human casualties.



One of the first house fires was the home of Abram Reimer in 1927. Then on Feb. 13, 1930, the home of the Wilhelm Rempel family, a larger, two-story house at Mile 103 (C.N.R track), was also destroyed by fire. The tragic fire of blacksmith Henry Bergen's home, took the life of their little daughter, along with their belongings. Erma Oppershauser, who boarded with the Bergens at the time, lost all her possessions in this fire, as well. Another tragic fire was when Isaac Janzen, sleeping alone in the one-time home of his family, failed to escape the flames of the burning house. Perhaps the most tragic incident occurred when a lesser known French family, the Perraults, lost four of their children. Other house fires occurred at the homes of the Nick Redekops, the Lindsmayers, the Celeste Balesdents, the John Stolls, and the Wolfgang Roetschers. There may have been other house fires of which few details were known.

**Mary Stoll Richardson** remembers that when she was 3 1/2 years old their house caught fire from a potbelly stove. Her mother was in the barn and she was alone with her one-year old brother. She had screamed and her mother came running in. She wrapped them in quilts and carried them into the barn. John Loewen had come to help but they lost everything. Her family had then moved in with two bachelors and her mother had cooked and cleaned for them in payment for their stay there. It took a year for their father to build them a new house.

Since fires posed a constant threat, the settlers organized a Mutual Aid Society. Thereby each settler paid \$ 5. every time a house was lost by fire, and they also gave several days of volunteer labour to help rebuild the dwellings. By the late thirties some of the stove pipe chimneys had been replaced by better chimneys.



*The tiny living quarters of the Herman P. Lepp home*

Some immigrants arrived in the Reesor settlement only days after setting foot on Canadian soil. The settlers opened their small log homes to newcomers, sharing their



close quarters with them. There was a great need to lodge new arrivals. Thomas Reesor managed to convince the Government to assist in this project. With a grant of \$500. the settlers erected a 20 ft. by 32 ft. *Immigrantenhaus* (immigrant's house) where several families could stay while their homes were being constructed. This temporary shelter was a great help and much appreciated by the new settlers.

Thomas Reesor also arranged for the loan of a sawmill. It had been used after the great fire in the Haileybury district several years before. A 454 horsepower steam engine from the Swastika mining district was shipped to Reesor free of charge, as well. This sawmill was available for use to all settlers. They built a 70 ft. long shed to house the sawmill and engine.

Thomas Reesor was a great help and encouragement to the struggling young settlement, which turned to him for all their needs, especially since the English language was foreign to them. In appreciation for this, the new settlement was named "REESOR" in his honour. His response to this had been; "I would like to say, my only desire was to help these unfortunate people, who lost their all. If I have been instrumental in helping establish their homes, I consider myself repaid for the time I spent on their behalf."

After three or four years the lots were no longer reserved for Mennonites only. Settlers from various origins took up homesteads in the area. In the late 20s a group of Finnish immigrants arrived and they too, were looking for a closed community. They had to go further north to find good spruce stands. Here they took up approximately 45 homesteads and formed their own school system.

The Finnish people were well-experienced in building log houses and cutting pulpwood, and were willing to share their expertise with the struggling Mennonite pioneers. If it had not been for this, the settlers at Reesor would have had an even tougher time getting established. Due to language differences, the Mennonites and Finns didn't socialize on a regular basis.



*This settler was only able to complete an 8 ft. x 16 ft. section of his cabin before winter closed in. The family lived this way until it's completion in summer (1927)*





*A homestead scene*



*A meeting at the Immigrantenhaus. Thomas Reesor can be seen at right front*





*The Epp's first home. L to R: Jacob Heinrichs, Mrs. Epp with Annie, Helen and Mr. Epp*

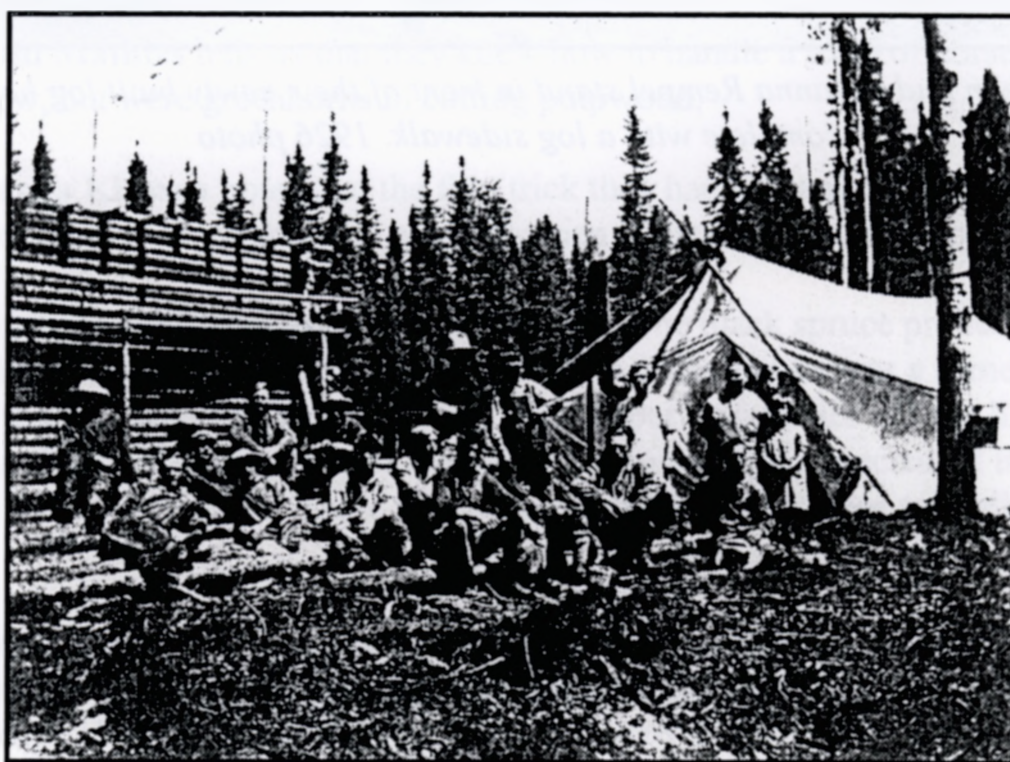


*A typical homestead: The Henry Kroeker place includes a barn*





*The Wiens home: Anna with sons John and Walter*



*Settlers living in a tent while constructing their homes*





*Wilhelm and Susanna Rempel stand in front of their newly built log house  
complete with a log sidewalk. 1926 photo*



## 4. Cutting and hauling pulpwood



*This settler, carrying an 8 ft. log, has his legs wrapped in burlap to keep warm*

**T**hese early Mennonite settlers had two main sources of income: cutting pulpwood and road construction. Cutting pulpwood was their main winter employment. Felling and cutting trees was an unfamiliar task to them.

**David Mathies** tells us that they knew how to handle a team of horses and a walking plow, but were greenhorns in cutting pulpwood.

**Charles Klassen** notes that the first trick they had to learn was how to sharpen the Swedish saw blades. A person who could sharpen a bucksaw could sharpen any saw

Not all the trees were usable for pulpwood. The black spruce produced the highest quality of paper and was most desired. The white spruce was a somewhat taller and bigger tree and received second rating. The Paper Companies did not like the balsam fir and permitted only 5 % of the pulpwood to be of this species. It had a very sticky bark and a lot of resin. There were also birch and poplar trees and tall dead tamarack.

**Rudy Lepp** writes: "Amidst all these hardships nature had bestowed a great blessing upon the settlers, though many may not have fully realized it. It was years earlier, perhaps 10 years or so, when an event occurred that was to be a tremendous boon to these pioneer settlers, making these difficult times more bearable. This event was the destruction of the tamarack forest, likely caused by the Larch Sawfly. The tamarack had



been rather abundant in the area due to very favourable soil conditions. This forest was completely wiped out--not a single live tamarack tree remained when the settlers first arrived. Now tamarack wood is somewhat hard, heavy and oily and is considered decay resistant even in water. Eventually these dead trees lost their limbs so that when the settlers arrived only the tamarack boles (lower part of the tree trunks) remained standing; these proved to be an excellent source of firewood. So having dry wood available even in winter certainly eased the burden of survival in those early years. To most of us the word 'tamarack' meant a dead tree."



*Young Ben Bergen helping Dad Abe pile logs for Spruce Falls*

**John Enns** explains the process of cutting pulpwood. A tree was felled by notching it first with an axe on the side to which it was to fall, then sawing through from the opposite side. The branches of the fallen trees were removed with an axe. The pulpwood was then cut to the required length until the pole diameter was less than 3 inches. In the early years the tree trunks were cut into 8 ft. lengths which was reduced to 4 ft. in the late 1920s. The pulpwood was then cut to the required length until the taper was less than 3 inches.

When cutting pulpwood a settler would work on a strip of forest approximately 60 ft. wide with the wood stacks piled along a centre roadway where the stumps had been cut ground level to allow a sleigh to pass over when removing the wood. The pulpwood would typically be piled into neat piles to a height of 4 ft. so that every 8 ft. would constitute a cord (128 cu. ft.). An official scaler would come and measure the



wood piles and the settlers could receive \$ 2. per cord in advance and the rest when the wood was shipped. Pulpwood could net up to \$4.50 per cord.



*Johnny and Walter Wiens*

In the early years the Spruce Falls Pulp and Paper Company would accept all contracts, but during the depression, in the 1930s, quotas were levied. The quota for a family man was 100 cords, while a single person could cut only 50 cords a year. The Spruce Falls Pulp and Paper Company, owned by the Kimberly Clark Company supplied newsprint to the New York Times as well as other daily newspapers.

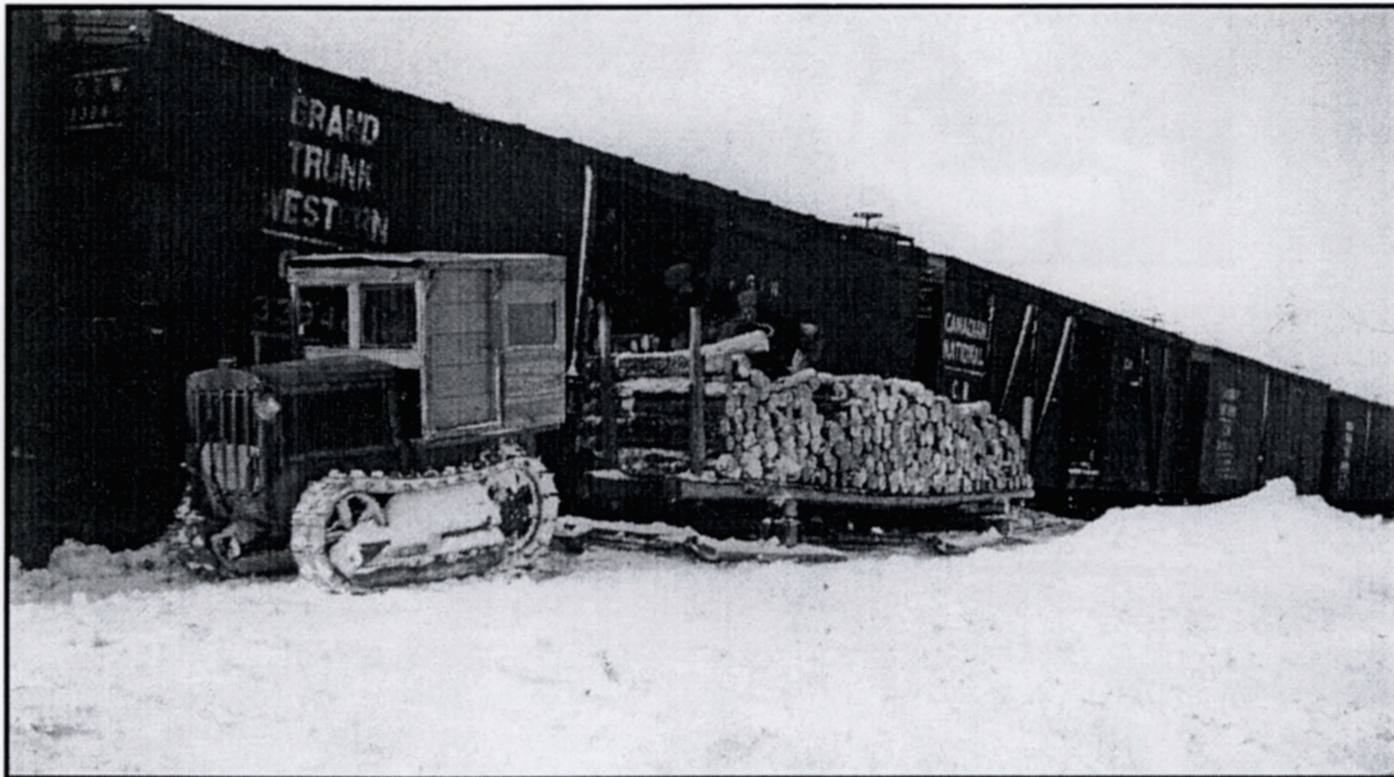
The wood had to be hauled out before the spring break-up when the roads turned into wet bogs. Hauling the pulpwood was expensive. The longer the distance the wood had to be hauled, the greater the expense to the homesteaders. So it became imperative that a siding be built at mile 103. In 1926 Thomas Reesor arranged for a \$1,000. loan needed for this project. It was paid for by levying a charge of \$1. for every car load of pulpwood that left the siding. Initially the siding held 7 cars but was extended to hold 15 cars in 1929. A second siding was constructed by the Hawklake Company at mile 101 in 1927. These sidings were also very beneficial in getting other freight and supplies in.

Not all the people who came to Reesor stayed for any length of time. Some homesteads changed hands four or five times before all the wood was cut. Some of the lots, due to swampy conditions, were never cleared or put under cultivation. Several young men would come north for the winter to help the settlers cut pulpwood. They would then go south again for the summer to work as farm labourers. Some repeated this year after year and were soon referred to as "Migrant Birds in Reverse."

Some of the settlers became discouraged because there were not enough horses available to haul their pulpwood to the siding and so they packed up and left. A loan from the government was the only way out of this very serious situation. Thomas Reesor spent



a great deal of time travelling and making contacts with various officials before finally acquiring the necessary loan. A loan of \$1000. was granted to these needy immigrants. Twelve settlers had to put up their homesteads and cut wood as security for the two year loan. Two teams of horses, sleighs and harnesses were purchased and the hauling of pulpwood began in earnest. The first year these two teams of horses hauled over 1,000 cords of wood each, which equaled 265 car loads. In later years several Cletrac and Caterpillar clawes (tractors) were available; they were much more efficient than the horses in getting the wood out.



*Janzen's tractor at the siding*

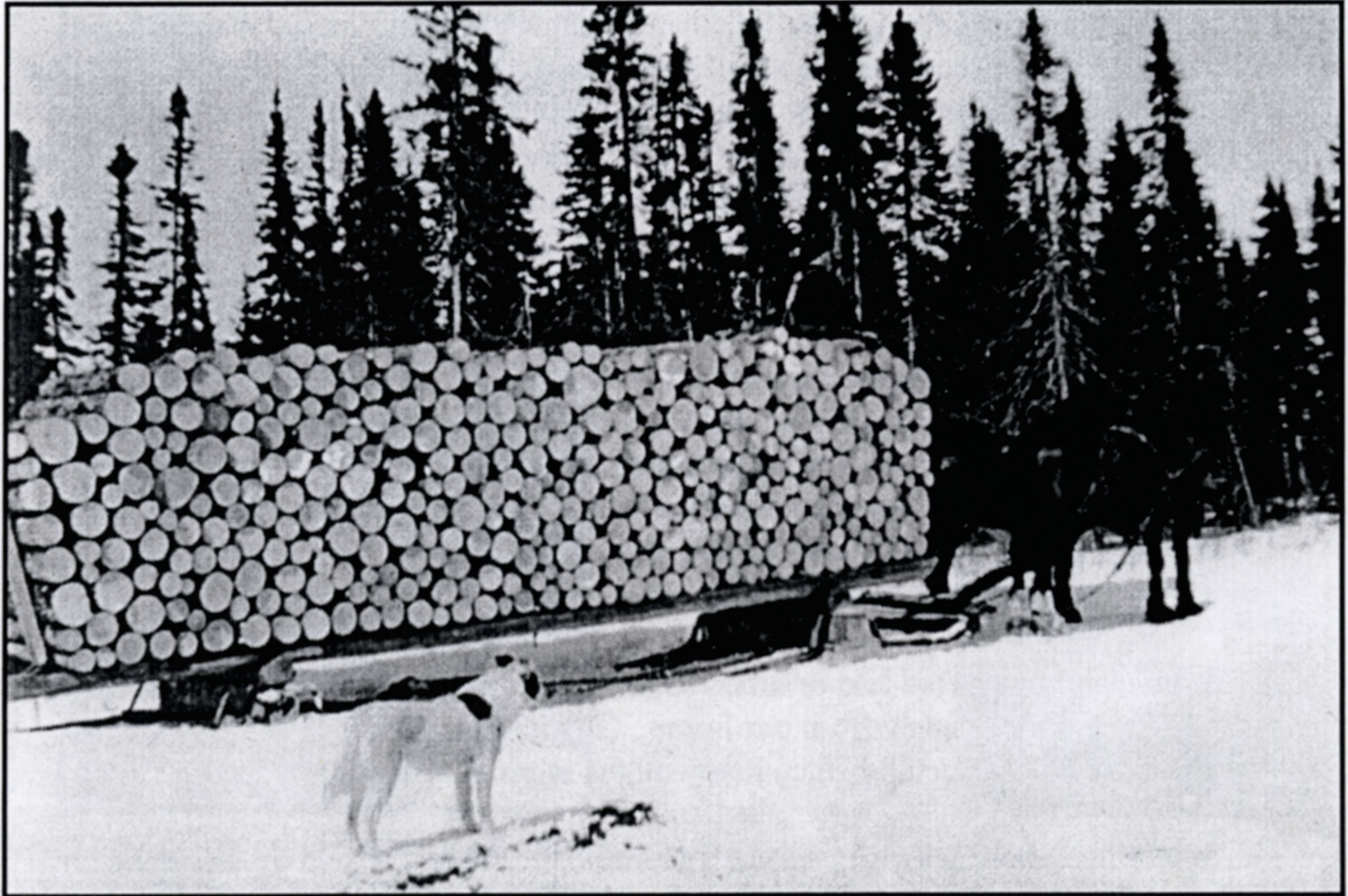
Beginning in late September, the settlers would work nine to ten hours a day cutting their pulpwood.

**Jacob Wiens** wrote that the first winter he did not cut a lot of wood. Coming from a different life style in the Ukraine, he would often have to stop and catch his breath. His heart would be pounding, sometimes making him wonder whether he would survive. It is surprising what one can get used to if one has no other choice.

The winters were usually crisp, white and beautiful. There were no pesky insects to bite you, but there was another risk of being bitten, namely by the cold. This was known as "frost bites". These bites would often go unnoticed but if not attended to, could have severe consequences, with blisters and open sores. Not only the exposed areas were vulnerable but often hands and feet also suffered from frost bites. It was hard to dress



warm enough to face the elements when one lacked the proper clothing. The feet would get cold in rubber boots no matter how many pair of homemade socks or wrap-around rags one would wear. Moccasins were warmer, but very slippery and not stable enough for forest work. The legs were often wrapped with burlap for protection from the elements.



*A load of pulpwood*

**Nicholai Isaak** tells about his contract with the Spruce Falls Company as a scaler to measure the cut wood in the forest. There was a lot of walking involved and his daily trips were from 10 to 20 miles. The next year he got three dogs and a sled. One winter he and the dogs travelled a total of over 2,000 miles through the bush.

**Bertha Loewen Misner** recalls that when they were old enough to ski they would accompany their father into the bush on Saturdays. This gave their mother a much needed break. Here they played in the woods, pried "pine-pitch" from the trees and chewed it. She claims that it made excellent chewing gum. At lunch time they would go into a little cabin and their father would cook them homemade sausages.

In spring, after the trees were cut and the pulpwood was hauled out, the slash or waste branches had to be burned. This was done on a yearly basis, to prevent huge forest fires from developing. Permission had to be granted by the Fire Marshal or Ranger before a fire could be started. Such permits were issued only when the fire hazards were



low. The smoke from these fires was a spectacular sight and could be seen from miles away, billowing over the treetops.

**Susan Friesen Pankratz:** "I vividly remember when I was five years old and a big forest fire broke out and spread rapidly from tree top to tree top. As it approached our neighbourhood, we, along with the other neighbours, had to leave. Young John Heinrichs helped carry some of the small children to safety by putting them in his large pack sack. This way he could carry as many as three small children while leaving his hands free to help others as we escaped the fire. One of those he carried to safety in this way was my younger sister Helen. My brother Jake and I followed closely behind our mother who carried the baby and other items."

"We were all very frightened as we followed an old logging road across country toward the railroad which would lead us to Rempels'. As we went along, we met Dad who warned us to change direction since the wind was blowing the fire in our direction. I recall that as we hurried along my rubber boots were rubbing my feet raw and soon my feet were not only sore but wet with blood. From that point on, I remember nothing more of the fire or our journey to safety.

In the meantime, Dad had returned to our house and managed to plough around it, in order to keep the fire away from our home. Only God knows how our house was spared from the fire, especially since many others were destroyed."

Sometimes, during the dry summer months, the settlers would be threatened by uncontrolled forest fires. Like a heavy fog the thick smoke filled the air and eyes and throats became irritated and sore. Occasionally, above the dense smoke clouds, one could hear the sound of a small, single engine airplane, which belonged to the Department of Lands and Forest. The plane was used to patrol the northern forest during the fire hazard seasons. Winds would send flaming cones shooting through the air, in advance of the fire. An uncontrolled forest fire not only threatened, but also cost some settlers their homes. The Lepp children remember their mother carrying their meager belongings to the ditch and placing them at the water's edge when fire had threatened their home. Due to a change in wind direction their home was spared. But not all the immigrants were that fortunate.





*Henry and Elizabeth Kroeker with baby Elfrieda  
cutting and peeling pulpwood in summer*



*cutting down trees – 1927*



*It took four teams of horses to clear the township roads after a snow storm*





*Nicholai Isaak with his dog team*



*View from boxcar roof: Immigrantenhaus, store, and station*





*Loading 8 ft. logs onto a boxcar at the newly constructed siding*



*A scene of winter employment*





*Loading 8 ft. logs onto a boxcar at the newly constructed siding*



*A scene of winter employment*





*The Spruce Falls Pulp and Paper Company*

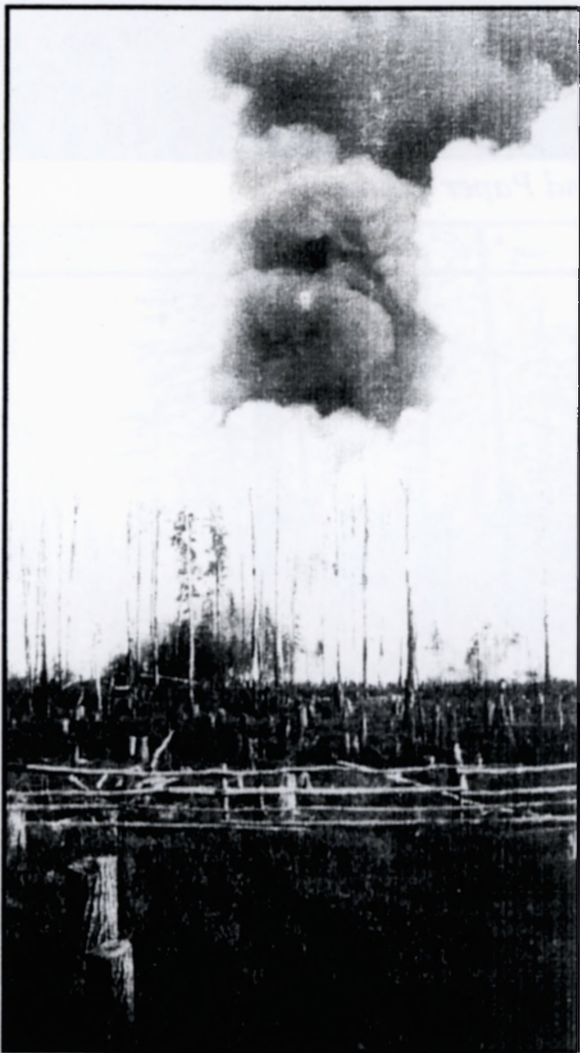


*A settler with sleigh and team of horses*





*Typical strip road leading through piles of 4 foot pulpwood*



*Smoke billowing from a slash fire*



*Abe Bergen with young Rudy Lepp, hauling out pulpwood for the H. P. Lepp family*



## 5. Transportation



*A forest path--February, 1931*

**W**hen the first settlers arrived in 1925, the railway was their only means of transportation.

**Vera Martens Boldt** wrote: "The railway was our link with the outside world."

The "local" train travelled daily between Hearst and Cochrane. It was known as a "flag train" because it could be flagged down, or stopped at any settlement or flag station. It provided passenger service and made stops for mail and parcel pick up or deliveries. This passenger train went through Reesor twice a day, going eastward to Kapuskasing at 9 a.m. and westwards to Hearst in the evening.



**George Janzen** observed: "The clocks in the settlement were set by the whistle of the locomotive as it rumbled along the tracks. This amazing train was never late or early, it was always the clocks that were either too fast or too slow!"

The Ferguson Highway, now Highway 11, extended from Kapuskasing west to the village of Opasatika and from Hearst east up to Mattice. This left a gap of 19 miles to the exact location of the new Mennonite settlement. The Mennonite pioneers lived in virtual isolation with little contact with the outside world. It was easy to visualize their discouragement at having no roads.

**Charles Klassen** remembers that all the goods had to be transported on their backs, even building material like boards, windows, and roofing paper weighing about 60 pounds per roll.

**Nicholai Isaak** describes some of the dilemmas the early settlers faced. Gerhard Martens had helped him move a heavy cast-iron stove. They had pushed a pole through the openings of the stove and then carried it 1.5 miles into the bush.

The nearest village was Mattice which had a population of about 300 people. It was situated on the Missinabi River, a tributary of the Moose River, which flows into James Bay at Moose Factory. It had a Hudson Bay Company Trading Post where Cree Indians and other trappers came with their furs. The natives usually arrived in early May and stayed in Mattice throughout the insect season.



*The Abram Bergens with horse and cutter*



**Jacob Wiens** wrote : "The seven mile walk to Mattice was no easy walk, as the railway ties were just not spaced right for walking: they were placed too close together to step on every tie and too far apart to step on every other one." The space between the ties could also be quite soft in the spring. The railway tracks were always open for walking even in winter, as they were plowed regularly, sometimes even more than once a day, if necessary. Since some of the settlers lived several miles from the railway, a trip to Mattice and back could mean walking a total distance of over 18 miles along the tracks and through narrow bush trails.

In summer the forest paths often led through wet muskeg areas. Logs were then laid corduroy fashion to serve as a make shift bridge. During the winter only a narrow footpath led through the dense forest. For the settlers the transportation of supplies was a very strenuous and difficult task. Out of necessity and coupled with some backwoods imagination the one-runner sleigh was born. Herman Lepp designed and constructed this very original piece of equipment which was quickly adopted throughout the settlement. The frame and handles were made of tamarack poles and it had a transverse push-bar. This sleigh was pushed, rather than pulled, like a wheelbarrow or a baby carriage, along the narrow footpaths of Reesor. The transporting of larger objects or bags of flour became a lot easier with the use of this Reesor-inspired sleigh. It also was a great way to bundle up the kids to keep them warm during a winter excursion.



*Little Rudy Lepp rides in the one-runner sleigh invented by his father, 1928*

**Rudy Lepp** writes: "One Sunday evening I was a passenger in the one-runner sleigh my Dad had built; we were homeward bound from the Enns's residence, along the narrow trail. Snuggled inside this sleigh were the twins and I. Dad was pushing the sleigh and Mother followed behind. About half way home I noticed a strange feeling in my right foot. I moved it and suddenly I knew what it was: somebody had put oats in my shoe! I began to complain and finally my Mother explained that my foot had fallen asleep. I knew that she must be pulling my leg, because why would one foot decide to sleep while I and the other foot were still awake? Would this foot perhaps stay awake tonight



when I and the other foot slept? When we got home, to my amazement no oats could be found. (Perhaps it could be said that I began to feel my oats at a very early age!)”

The one-runner sleighs were a common sight for many years, until the advent of roads made them obsolete. A replica of the one-runner sleigh can be found in the Kapuskasing Museum today.

The winter footpaths would be packed down and in the spring this compressed snow was slow to melt. This created a raised ridge or rail-like path, which was slippery and made the trails very hard to negotiate. The settlers needed to adjust to every obstacle that came along.

In later years, the Finlanders introduced the settlers to cross-country skiing which soon became the main means of getting around in the winter. Skiing was as natural as walking to the growing children of this northern settlement. Specially selected birch trees were used for ski construction. The first step in the construction was to split and cure the birch wood. The tips would be placed in boiling water and then put in a frame to be bent into the desired shape. The toe straps were adjusted to fit the size of the owner's boots. Snowshoes were not as popular, in fact they were quite rare.



*L to R: Henry Enns, Louise Penner, Erma Oppershauser, and George Bergen on skis*

The spring of 1926 brought good news to the settlers because many of the township roads and the unfinished stretch of the Ferguson Road were slated for



construction. Road construction meant employment opportunities for the impoverished settlers. There was no shortage of willing workers as roadwork offered them at least a small amount of cash for the bare necessities. Their need to pay off debts, acquire livestock, and feed their families were top priorities. The settler's basic needs may often have surpassed their ability to earn a living in this alien region.



*L to R: George Enns, H.P. Lepp, Abram Reimer, and Nicholai Isaak are constructing a road in knee-deep, muddy water*

It took four major operations to construct the roads: clearing, stumping, ditch digging and claying. During the first year the work consisted mainly of clearing a 66 ft right-of-way through the forest along the lot survey lines. It was hard work to clear the area of all the trees and brush because all the work was done by hand. The cut trees were put in piles and burned.

Since the roots took 4 to 5 years to rot, they had to be pulled out. They then had to be removed individually with a special heavy root hook attached to the end of a chain and pulled out by horses. Pulling these roots and heavy stumps was hard on the horses and the equipment. The horses would sometimes step into the water-covered root holes and fall. A second team of horses would have to help rescue the fallen pair.



The road crew also used homemade winches to remove some of these stumps. In low-lying areas the men had to work in knee-deep muddy water. On top of all this the road crew had to deal with hordes of mosquitoes and black flies which made this task anything but pleasant. The men worked up to ten hours a day for thirty cents an hour.

The next step was digging the ditches for drainage on either side of the roads. All this work was done by hand. The foreman made sure the work was done meticulously and according to government regulations as to the depth and the width of the ditches. The soggy black soil was filled with a profusion of ancient roots that had not rotted because of the muskeg. Muskeg is a very acidic, spongy bed of moss ranging from 2 ft. thick to an almost bottomless depth and can be a real challenge in road building.



*Stubborn stumps needed to be dynamited*

In some cases, the larger poplar and white Spruce stumps were removed by dynamite. The roots of the Spruce trees are quite shallow, but rather long and had to be cut by an axe. It was impossible to make a clean cut with a spade because of the network of roots. The blow of the axe could send a spray of black muck into the worker's face.

Diversion or drainage ditches were dug in low lying areas where excess water could flood the ditches. These ditches could lead up to a quarter mile into the bush. For this arduous labour they were paid twenty-five cents a cubic yard. This process of road construction could be, and was, slow and arduous. The dirt from the ditches was thrown onto the roadway, which was later covered with eight to ten inches of clay. Heavy clay was used because there was no gravel available.

These clay-topped roads became very slippery and impassable during, and right after a rain. Wet clay would cling to shoes and wheels and with everything it came into contact. Sometimes mud would fill the space between the wheels and fender and all motion would cease. Thus, after a rain, the grassy area between the road and the ditches would become the walking path.

By the fall of 1930 the concession roads in Eilber and Barker Townships were clayed, totalling about 30 miles. The road between Eilber and McGowan Townships was



not started until 1931. Some of the settlers never benefited directly from these roads since they did not reach their homesteads, they had only logs laid side by side, corduroy fashion, over the wet swampy areas, to complete their foot paths.

The completion of the Ferguson Highway or Highway 11, as we know it now, finished a 600 mile stretch of road from Toronto to Hearst. The highway ended just west of Hearst. It was not until the war years that an effort was made to complete the highway to join Eastern and Western Canada by road.

**Abram T. Wiens** wrote that it was an exciting day when the first horse-drawn wagon came down the cleared stretch of highway from Mattice, driving between stumps and through holes until it finally arrived in Reesor. The completion of the highway between Hearst and Kapuskasing in 1930, gradually opened up a new world for these isolated settlers and brought tremendous change to the area. For instance, bicycles could now be seen negotiating the new concession roads.



*One of the first cars to come to Reesor:  
August of 1931*

**John Enns** tells us that the first car to appear in Reesor was a Chevrolet touring vintage of 1924-25. It was brought up from Leamington by four bachelors, even before the road was completed. They had spent the summer working in the fields of Essex County and had decided to go north for the wood-cutting season. Having received word that work had been done on the highway, they judged that it should be useable. Together they had bought a second-hand vehicle and had negotiated the tortuous Ferguson Highway. When they reached the Opasatika-Reesor stretch they found the road ditched but not yet clayed and not elevated to the Crow Creek bridge height. However, by using poles and logs they had managed to get the wheels onto the bridge platform and crossed it.

From there on to Mattice the road had already been clayed. They later sold their vehicle to Henry Bergen, who then became the first car owner in Reesor. People began making occasional trips to Southern Ontario, and visitors came to Reesor. At that time it was more than a two-day trip. For the winter the cars were put on blocks, as the highway hibernated under a three-foot blanket of snow. Not until about 1946 did the Department of Highways undertake plowing the highway for year round use.





*The local train came through twice daily*



*Road construction in Reesor--1929*



*Albert Berg:  
The C.N.R. at Reesor  
"We walked along  
these tracks for two  
miles each day on our  
way to and from  
school."  
1928 - 1929*





*A car set on blocks for the winter*



*Herman and Gertrude Lepp  
with baby in sleigh*



*Clearing a 66 ft.  
Right of way*





*Wolfgang Roetscher is  
transporting a  
cast iron stove on a  
one-runner sleigh*



*Clearing trees for the roadway: 1930*





*Start of a section of the Trans Canada Highway's Northern route*



*Building the Trans Canada Highway #11 in the 1930s*





*Road construction: there was no shortage of willing workers*



*Nicholai Isaak with the survey instrument he designed*





*Road in muskeg*



*An off-set or diversion ditch*



## Schneetreiben-- oder Die Schimmelreiter

Über Zäune und Gehöfte—  
Und entweichen in die Wälder  
Schimmelreiter stürmen, jagen  
Über tief verschneite Felder,

Schimmelreiter gallopierten,  
Preschen reihenweis vorüber  
Und man sieht nur weisse Fetzen,  
Wie ein Fahnenmeer darüber.

Schimmelreiter bäumen sich im Jagen,  
Überschlagen sich im Eilen;  
Fallen nieder in den Feldern;  
Reissen hoch sich ohne Weilen.

Und der Kampf ist nie beendet;  
Die Attacke dauert weiter:  
Über Dünenkäme preschen--  
--kampfgeordnet--Schimmelreiter.

*H. P. Lepp*  
*Feb. 14, 1937*

## The Snowstorm-- or Phantom Riders

Phantom riders ranting, raging,  
Over fields of driven snow,  
Over hedges, over fences,  
Yielding into distant woodlands.

Phantom riders, galloping go.  
Albino forms in sheets of snow,  
Hoary columns of greyish fragments,  
Create a scene of hurling pennants.

Phantoms rampant in their flight,  
Rearing, raging, in endless fight,  
Race across the frozen land,  
Unchecked and totally out of hand.

The attack is rendered endless,  
In combat stand, yon white horses,  
Fearless, wild, and unrelenting--  
--dauntless--Phantom Riders.

*English translation*  
*Hedy Lepp Dennis*



*In this poem, Rev. H. P. Lepp describes a typical Reesor snowstorm*



## 6. Education



*David and Mrs. Heidebrecht in their primitive dwelling*

### The Eilber School

**E**ducation was very important to the settlers, and as a result, building a school became a priority for the community. In accordance with provincial regulations, the new school district--S.S.# 3-- was established. The Government granted financial assistance of \$500. toward the construction of the building and supplies. In 1926, even before some settlers had completed their homes, they started erecting a log structure on a two acre lot to serve as a school. This school building was later covered with wood shingles. First



visualizing where the newcomers might take up homesteads, they chose a site in Eilber Township, about one mile north of the railroad.



*The Eilber School--Reesor's first*

They had difficulty finding a teacher who could meet the standards set by the Canadian Government, and who, at the same time, had their religious and ethnic background. Finally they were able to secure the services of David Heidebrecht, who had completed a crash course at Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Manitoba. To accommodate the settlers, special permission was granted by the Department of Education allowing him to teach in Ontario.

**David Heidebrecht's** (1926-1930) experiences follow : " It was about mid-September in 1926 when my wife and I arrived in the backwoods of Northern Ontario. We made an inspection tour of the school, only to find that it was far from ready. It was obvious that the prospect for an early school opening was not too promising, nor could I detect any indications that provisions had been made for the housing of a teacher. It soon came to light that there was a vacant log house available and this became our home. I asked them to improvise something to serve as seats and desks, to enable me to commence teaching in our living quarters. Hefty tree trunks were cut into bench and desk-high lengths. A few worm-eaten poplar boards were nailed over the wooden blocks and a type of furniture was created, which accommodated the sixteen pupils. Four to six readers were the full instructional equipment I had to work with. Yet I was able to open the school on September 20."



**David Heidebrecht** continues: "I got my first inspector's visit on Sept. 25. When he walked in and had taken in the scene, a broad smile flashed across his face. And after introducing himself, he said, 'I had come here to discuss what we could do until the completion of the school house, and here I find that instruction is well under way. I am very pleasantly surprised and fully convinced that you are not in need of any advice from me!'"

By Christmas the school building was completed and the children were able to have their Christmas program there. The pupils now had proper school desks, blackboards, and more textbooks to work with. There were two blackboards on the west wall and one on the north wall. The south wall consisted of a row of windows. In the centre back was a wood stove, and in the back corner a pail with water from the creek, as there was no well yet. Nails in the back wall served as coat hangers. Over the years a small library was added. In 1930 a teacherage was built on the school yard. This was the first frame house in the new settlement.



*The Eilber School and teacherage*

Some children had to walk over three miles to get to school, which was especially difficult in winter, when the days were short and the weather unpredictable. If the path led through the forest there was some protection from the wind, but walking along the



railway tracks or open areas was a brutal experience. In winter the children had to leave home in the dark and then return after dark. Some would carry a lantern to help them find their way. Frozen cheeks and ear lobes were a common occurrence, and even frozen hands and feet resulted.

**Charles Klassen** informs us that school started at 8:30 a.m. with religious instruction for half an hour; then the regular curriculum was taught till 4 o'clock. After that the students had half an hour of German literature. Charles then had a three and a half mile walk home, two miles of which were along the open railway tracks. This meant he seldom got home before 6 p.m., just in time for supper and homework and little else, as they had to be up again by 6:30 the next morning.

**Nicholai Isaak** writes about his daughter: "Hildegard had a three and a half mile walk to school, so she stayed at the teacher Heidebrecht's home during the winter months."



*Eilber School interior with teacher Nick Martens*

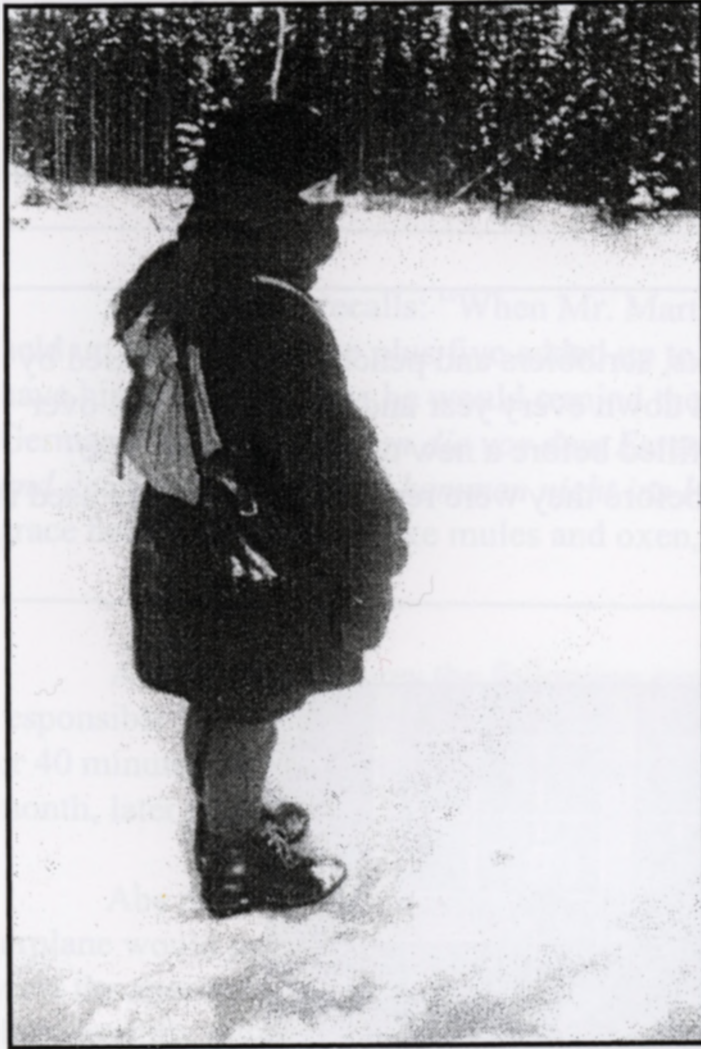
**Bill Janzen** remembers staying at his Grandfather's house, about one and a half miles from school, because from his home it would have been over a three mile walk. For the weekend, one of his uncles would walk him home, two miles along the railway and one mile along the bush trail. On Sundays his father would walk him back to his grandparent's home. The children did not have the warm clothes available today. They wore rubber boots with burlap bags wrapped over their home-knit socks.

**Anna Berg Klassen** tells of her experience: "We had a three and one half mile walk to school and in the winter it was bitterly cold. A few times, when we were on our way home the freight train would stop at mile 103. These kind people would take us into



the caboose of the train and take us home to mile 101. Can you imagine what that meant to us kids?"

One cold day there was a knock at the door. When the teacher opened the door there stood a scraggly man. He requested permission to warm up beside the stove. Permission was granted in spite of his rough appearance and the presence of young school children. Perhaps the children learned a lesson in acceptance and hospitality that day, not to be learned from books.



*Six-year-old Rudy Lepp is ready for school*

The Watkins salesman would also stop in at school with his dog team on his way through. Each child would receive a stick of chewing gum which was a special treat and something they would never buy at the store! He would often spend the night in one of the homes in the community.

When walking to school on crisp, cold mornings one could hear the branches snap like rifle shots and the snow would crunch under foot. The snow would shimmer like a million diamonds when the sun's rays played on its surface. The snowdrifts would transform the countryside into a brilliant fairy land. Long icicles, hanging from the roof's edge would touch the ground. Smoke could be seen spiraling up into the cold, frosty air.

Once skis were introduced and available, the time it took to get to school and back was shortened, but even then the frost touched the exposed cheeks, noses and ear lobes. No ski poles were used--they seemed unnecessary and tended to be cold on the hands. All belongings, books, lunches etc. were carried on the backs in home-made knapsacks. When pulpwood was to be hauled they would open the roads using four teams of horses to break the path, sometimes using a homemade plow, where otherwise there was only a ski trail through the bush.



The Department of Education had rules regarding school attendance, which included: "great distances, bad roads, and weather conditions are common hindrances. However, these in no way are legitimate grounds for absence."

**David Heidebrecht** remembers: "In spite of all these difficulties I have never had better school attendance than in this pioneer school in Reesor." He left Reesor in 1930 to complete his Normal School studies in Manitoba. He had been a devoted and dedicated teacher who conducted himself in an exemplary manner both professionally and in his private life.

**Albert Berg** agrees: "Not only did he teach us to read and write, but by example he taught us respect, consideration for others, kindness and diligence. It was my privilege, along with my wife and daughter Susan, to visit the Heidebrechts in their home in British Columbia forty years later."

All the school supplies, such as books, scribblers and pencils were purchased by the School Board. The readers were handed down every year and reused over and over again. The scribblers had to be completely filled before a new one was issued. The pencils had to be worn down to two inches before they were replaced. Slates were used in the lower grades and for arithmetic.



*Eilber students in 1928*

*(L to R) Row 1: Herbert Berg, Albert Berg, Bernhard Bergen*

*Row 2: Frieda Toews, Tina Heinrichs, Alice Toews, Hildegard Fast, Olga Toews*

*Row 3: Susie Klassen, Tina Bergen, Justina Bergen, Henry Penner, John Toews,  
George Janzen*

*Row 4: Charles Klassen, John Penner, John Heinrichs, David Janzen, Henry Schmidt*



After David Heidebrecht left in 1930, the Board hired Nick Martens to become his successor. Martens had attended Normal School in Stratford and taught one year in Cochrane before coming to Reesor. He served here for seven years, before leaving for a position in rural Kapuskasing.

Mr. Martens had encouraged several young people to prepare for their high school entrance examination, through private home study. He set up work outlines for them and made up term tests. At least three young men availed themselves of this opportunity and passed their provincial entrance exams successfully. (John Enns, who later succeeded Erma Oppershauser as teacher at the 101 school, was one of them).

It so happened that Nick Martens had cut off half of the index finger on his left hand while trying to butcher a chicken.

**John Wiens** recalls: "When Mr. Martens taught arithmetic to the first-graders and held up his fingers, five plus five added up to 9 ½! Before leaving for his teacherage to have his lunch each day, he would remind the children to say their grace using this little German rhyme: *Menschen die vor dem Essen das Beten tun vergessen, sind dem Eseln und den Oxen gleich, und kommen nicht ins Himmelreich.* (People who forget to say grace before they eat are like mules and oxen, and will not enter heaven)."

**Abe Mathies** shares the following experiences: "In grades seven and eight I was responsible for heating the one room schoolhouse at S.S.#3. This meant leaving home 30 or 40 minutes earlier to start the fire. For this I was paid the generous amount of \$1.50 a month, later raised to \$2. per month."

Abe does not mention the other benefits this job offered. On rare occasions an airplane would pass overhead and every pupil in the classroom had an urge to run out and view the spectacle, but only Abe could leave the class room, view the performance, and then dutifully return with a few pieces of firewood.

**Abe Mathies** continues: "One morning the thermometer showed -48F. When it was this cold there was usually no wind, and only the occasional snapping tree branches broke the silence. So it was this one morning, when, as usual, everyone came to school. There were a few frost bitten cheeks and noses, which were vigorously rubbed with snow. The skis did not slide too well on really cold days; it was somewhat like skiing on sand."

The log school building was hard to heat. On extremely cold days, temperatures only a few feet from the wood stove would remain below freezing all day. The ceiling was about 12 ft. high and all the heat went up. The pupils were allowed to go and warm



up around the stove providing they brought their readers with them. Visiting was not allowed. Writing by pen on these cold days was almost impossible because the ink would crystallize before it could dry on the paper. The ink containers were collected every evening and taken to the teacherage to keep them from freezing. The pail used for washing and drinking water was also emptied daily, to keep the water from freezing, since the fire in the stove went out for the night.



*Teacher Henry and Mrs. Tiessen*

Henry Thiessen replaced Nick Martens in 1937 and taught till 1944. It was during his time that grades nine and ten were also taught. It was also during this time that our frozen lunches, in honey or lard pails, were collected and put in a wooden box and carried to the teacherage where Mrs. Thiessen had a boiler of hot water ready to warm them.



## The Barker and McGowan School



*The Barker and McGowan School at mile 101*

In 1927 a block of homesteads became available in McGowan Township; these were soon taken up by settlers. It became evident that the distance to the existing Eilber school was too great for a young child to walk. In 1932 then, a new school section was established and the tarpaper-covered former bunkhouse of the Hawk Lake Company was converted into a temporary school at the 101 siding. Erma Opperthausen of Hanover, Ontario, became the first teacher there. But some pupils still had a three mile walk and because they were rather scantily dressed, sometimes they arrived at school cold and numb.

Erma Opperthausen was concerned about the clothing problem and tried to help. Anna Berg Klassen tells us that because they were very poor, all their winter coats were either shabby or not warm enough. So Erma Opperthausen wrote a letter to her hometown of Hanover, and asked for coats for all the girls who needed one. They were all warmly clad that winter.

**Dora Parise Deschamps** remembers how on a very cold morning when they were getting ready to go to school some of them did not have a winter coat. Her mother would not let her go to school in a light sweater. A boarder at their house had offered his warm sweater; it was white with black stripes. She did not like it but had to wear it. When she got to school there was a worker from the siding who had come into the school to warm himself by the stove. When he saw her in the striped sweater he had asked how long she had been in jail. She was very upset and never wanted to wear that sweater again!



**Bill Janzen** tells of his experience. "I went to school an hour earlier to light the two large wood stoves so it would warm up before school started. Sometimes it was so cold that the school just wouldn't warm up and the kids had to keep their coats on. For this I received \$10. at the end of the school year. During the summer my brother Jake and I cut fire wood for the next season and received another \$10.. With this money we bought a 'Glider' bicycle!"

**John Loewen** writes: "I still remember my first day at school in Reesor, at mile 101. I was six years old and did not know one word of English, as we only spoke High German at home. In the summer it was a three mile walk on a dirt road, the 'long way'. In winter we went on skis, a three quarter mile short cut trail through the bush and frozen muskeg."

Erma Opperthausen taught in Reesor for four years and was succeeded by John Enns in 1936.

**Mary Stoll Richardson** writes: "I was seven years old and didn't speak any English when I started school. Because we lived far from school, I boarded at the Isaaks'. They taught me English. Mr. Enns was a great teacher and very patient with me. The following year, in 1938, a new school, which was more centrally located was built, and I was able to walk there from my home."

The new school was erected on a two acre lot donated by Nick Redekop, to replace the old building at mile 101. It was larger and had separate cloakrooms for boys and girls.



*L to R: Nick Redekop, Nick Janzen, Dave Redekop, Henry Lepp,  
Herman Klassen, Jake Janzen, George Janzen*



In 1942 John Enns was drafted for Alternative Service and had to leave. For several months the school had no teacher. Henry Tiessen, who had become teacher at the Eilber school in 1937, was asked to divide his time between the two schools. Mrs. Tiessen looked after the Eilber School children on the two days a week that he taught at the McGowan School. Total enrollment in the two schools was about seventy students.

In the early years the children were not the only ones who attended school. Adults who wanted to master the English language were given the opportunity to attend evening classes. The teachers had also made themselves available to help the settlers with writing and translating letters and documents. They also assisted them with their Eaton's mail orders and became the English tongue and pen for the settlers



*First day of school. L to R - Mary Anne Janzen Boschman, Alice Lepp Kopp ,  
John Loewen, Henry Wiebe and Peter Stoll*





*Helmut, John, and Bertha Loewen on their way to school*



*Scene from Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs play at end of term, McGowan School  
L to R: Betty Lepp, Bill Friesen, Mary Stoll, John Janzen, Anna Janzen, Peter Friesen,  
Tillie Friesen, Martin Friesen*



## Experiences remembered



*Redekop homestead with Helen and Mary. 1937 – 1938*

**Mary Tjart Wiebe** remembers: "Every afternoon from 1 to 1:30 p.m. we had singing with Henry Tiessen. He would copy the songs on the north black board, notes and all, and we would sing in four-part harmony."

One summer, after H. Tiessens had left for southern Ontario, the pupils were invited to sing in Hearst.

**David Tjart** writes that this was a novel experience: "Riding in the back of a big truck, with all the rest of the kids and singing in the "Amateur Hour" in Hearst and seeing the astonishment of the Master of Ceremonies when he heard these back-wood kids singing in four-part harmony and then eating store bought cookies afterwards--it was absolutely unforgettable!"

**Herman Lepp Jr.** remembers how at noon the teacher would say, "Time is up". We would then put our books and papers into our desks and rise to say grace. One of the boys had trouble getting all his loose papers to stay in his desk. They kept falling out. So with his big boot he tried frantically to pack them in but his foot got stuck in the desk. Here we were all solemnly standing ready for the noon prayers, while this student was desperately trying to free his foot. It was hard to keep a sober face. (This "unlikely" student eventually became an instructor at the University of Manitoba!).

Herman relates another experience: During the relaxed afternoon when one could go to the library shelf for books to read, he and Gert Martens, who sat across the



aisle from him would play imaginary cars. They would each turn a screw into the wood floor near their feet for an accelerator, and then two more screws beside it for a clutch and brake. These screws were taken from their desks where there were "too many". Every day they looked forward to their car playing. These cars became more and more sophisticated as a starter button and a light switch were added to the dashboard--the top part of the desk. Suddenly one day their car playing came to a crashing end. One of the desks collapsed completely, with paper and books strewn all over the floor. The teacher looked so puzzled, how could a desk just collapse? They knew. They had taken out too many screws!



*John Enns, centre, with his pupils in front of the new school building in 1938*

Erma Operthauser had introduced the pupils to "Mothers Day", something quite unfamiliar to the settlers. She had planned a program with the children, for the parents to attend. The girls were dressed in crepe-paper costumes to represent different flowers. It was an interesting and unique performance.





*The Mother's Day program*

During recess there were many interesting things to do. In spring there were various games to play like tag, hide-and-seek, anti-over, prisoner's base, baseball, skipping rope, and others.



*McGowan School interior*



**Mary Wiens** writes: "What girl hasn't picked dandelions and made garlands or plucked the petals off daisies while reciting 'he loves me, he loves me not' or the German version, *Er liebt mich von Herzen, über alle Massen, klein wenig, und garnicht* (He loves me with all his heart, above all else, a little bit, and not at all). Daisies also made great fried eggs when playing house.



*Sledding on the school's big hill*

The Eilber school stood on a "BIG" hill and that created perfect winter fun during recess time. The incline was always crowded with skis and sleds, gliding down the slope. The girls didn't have a toboggan, so they put a pole through the straps of two pair of skis and they had their sleigh. The teacher would sometimes come out and join them, adding to the fun.

Most of the former students who have gone back many years later to view that wonderful hill, were struck with the reality that our big hill was but a slight rise beside a small creek. What childhood memories can do!

In winter the boys would close in the ends of the bridge with snow walls, creating a large igloo. Some of the boys would set up their rabbit snares and these would have to be checked during recess. The girls would create snow angels by lying on the snowdrifts, moving their arms up and down, making impressions of angel wings. Caves were dug into the snow banks and of course, there were always snow-ball fights, in fun.

**Mary Wiens:** "It is interesting, on thinking back, what entertainment we kids could invent without structured hockey, TV, radio and many other 'musts' of to-day."

The loveliest and most exciting time of the year was Christmas, particularly for the children. The setting was just right in Reesor: crisp white snow, sleighs and horses, the intriguing smell of wax candles and spruce needles. The school concerts were festive and involved the entire community. Every pupil had to learn a poem or *Weihnachtswunsch* (Christmas wish) to recite at home to their parents, which was a Mennonite tradition. Both religious and secular dramas, poems and songs were presented in both languages."



**Vera Martens Boldt** writes: "My memories of the Christmas concerts are very precious to me and one of the most exciting events of the year. Parts were assigned and plays were practiced and carols learned. The excitement mounted steadily as regular classes were abandoned for practice. A stage was built, and a tree brought in from the bush and decorated and a pail of water placed beside it in case of fire."

The closing Christmas song at the Eilber school was always, "Up on the housetop reindeer pause, out jumps good old Santa Claus; down through the chimney with lots of toys, all for the little ones, Christmas joys." As the children sang, their eyes were glued to the door, for this was the cue for Santa to arrive. Every pupil received a bag of goodies which included nuts, hard candy, an apple and orange. These were very special for they were the only apple and orange most children would get all year. Every preschooler present would also receive a brown paper bag of goodies. The pupils would also receive a gift of mittens, books, toothbrushes etc. These gifts were sent in from Paris: "WOW" all the way from France! These young pupils did not know that there was a Paris in Southern Ontario. In January the older pupils would write a thank you note to the I.O.D.E. in Paris. Not every letter was mailed; the teacher chose which ones would qualify or were acceptable.

**George Janzen**, from the McGowan school has his story to tell: "Santa Claus would ask us if we had been good girls and boys, to which we all responded in one voice, 'yes'. Then he asked if we believed in Santa. The older children replied, 'no', the younger ones said, 'yes'. Santa noticed that I had not answered, so he repeated the question. Wishing to be one of the big boys, I answered with a loud, clear voice 'NO'. He then informed me that he would have to put me in his bag and take me to the North Pole so I could meet the elves. He struggled with me, but I put up a good defense. Then someone called out, 'I see uncle Isaak's boots'. That startled him and I got away. The crowd roared, clapped and obviously enjoyed this demonstration!"

**Irene Lepp Rempel**: "The most memorable Christmas Eve for me was when Mr. Martens prepared his pulp sleigh so that he was able to pick up all the people in our area for the Christmas Eve program at our school. I so vividly recall the trip home--a sky full of twinkling stars, the cold, crisp air, and all the people singing Christmas carols. It was wonderful. The sleigh stopped at every house, as one by one the families arrived back home. There was such a display of warmth and caring in the Christmas greetings that rang out into the cold air as each family left the sleigh. This was very special to me."

**Vera Martens Boldt** wrote: "Then all too soon it was over and we piled into sleighs and amid shouts of 'Merry Christmas' and *Fröhliche Weihnacht!*, we headed home. The dark spruce trees on either side of the trail, and the moon glistening on the crunchy white snow made an enchanting woodland and the jingling harnesses of the horses provided the musical accompaniment."



**Rudy Lepp:** "When you have so little even these insignificant things are greatly appreciated and become so meaningful that their memories last a lifetime."

When we were back at school after Christmas, we asked the teacher if the next day was a holiday. The teacher seemed a little confused and asked what holiday it would be, and was told that tomorrow was the "Holy Three Kings" (*Heilige Drei Könige*) day. He smiled and informed them that in English it was called "Epiphany" and that it was not a holiday. But the students had tried! At the end of June there was a closing program.

**Anna Berg Klassen** writes: "Our parents and neighbours were invited to see our school work and hear our songs and recitations especially prepared for the program."

**Rudy Lepp** remembers how in 1934 the closing program of the two schools was combined and held on a Sunday afternoon. The location was near the Enns residence, where the tennis court and bowling alley were. Various competitions were held and he remembers a few of them. There was a slow bicycle race where the person who travelled the slowest without touching the ground was the winner. There were at least two other competitions. One was for the boys to thread a needle and the winner was Ben Bergen. The next event was for the girls to drive five nails into a board with a hammer. This was unfamiliar to them and they were awkward even holding the hammer and would repeatedly miss the nail. There was one exception: one of the Parise girls had all five nails in while others were still struggling with their first nail."





*Teacher Henry Tiessen and students at the Eilber School's closing program*



*The 1936 – 1937 student body at Barker and McGowan with teacher John Enns*





« Nevertheless »  
Ps. 73, 23

H. P. Lepp.

*This sample of Rev. H. P. Lepp's artistic ability is entitled Dennoch! (Nevertheless!)*



## 7. Clearing the Land



*Herman and Gertrude Lepp picking up black, charred log ends: 1929*

A Canadian National Railway report stated: "It is remarkable the progress some of the settlers have been able to make. Practically all the land was covered with timber and it was necessary to clear off the trees and remove the stumps before the land could be brought under cultivation and crops raised. Settling under these conditions calls for pioneering qualities of a very high nature because there is a great deal of hard work involved in clearing the bush and the progress is slow."



Albert Berg recalls that the plan for the future was to clear the land where the wood had been cut and start farming it. This should then provide a living for the settlers when the income from the wood was gone.



*The unpleasant ground-preparing process*

Clearing the land could be a messy and unpleasant job. The cut trees were put into piles and burned. The initial fire would consume the brush and small branches, leaving the larger, blackened and charred log ends. These remnants had to be picked up and thrown into piles for future burning. A settler clearing his land would soon be as black as the wood he was removing, besides dealing with the millions of mosquitoes and blackflies. In those days citronella and the messy pine-tar were the only available fly repellents. The clearing process proved to be frustrating as well as back-breaking. Unless horses were used, which most settlers could not afford, it could take all summer for them to clear an acre or two of land, depending on the root situation.

The settlers could get advice from a Government Experimental Farm as to which crops could be grown successfully in this northern region. This farm was located at Kapuskasing, about thirty-three miles away. Kapuskasing at that time was a thriving company town with several fine stores and hotels. Like most northern towns, the buildings and sidewalks were all constructed of lumber. The sidewalks were raised because of the winter snowfall. There was a small park in the centre of town and the streets ran out from it like spokes from the hub of a wheel. The Kapuskasing River flowed through the town and tumbled over the dam on its northward journey to James Bay.





*A visit to the Experimental Farm in Kapuskasing*

The experimental farm bordered the south-west corner of the town of Kapuskasing and consisted of 650 acres. This farm had been the site of an Internment Camp during WWI, 1914-1918. The land had been cleared and stumped by German prisoners of war. The settlers were invited to this farm on several occasions for demonstrations and a picnic. The superintendent recommended seeding down the new land and pasturing it while the roots rotted. They were also experimenting with various grains, root crops, and a variety of trees. One very interesting and unusual tree was the Bayleaf Willow, which, like the Mennonites, had come from Russia.

**Jacob Wiens** wrote: "The officials and staff visited and made it a point to get acquainted with us on different occasions. They advised us about various local farming practices and procedures. There certainly was a lot we needed to learn!"

As the grass grew in the temporary pasture, cows could be seen grazing between the charred remnants of stumps. After the stumps were four or five years old the settlers started to clear their land into much needed hay fields, essential for their livestock, which had to be fed in the barns for eight months of the year. Because of the short growing season, oats and barley were also harvested as hay. In later years, Cornelius Rempel had a stationary threshing machine and did custom threshing, moving the machine with a team of horses. Reesor's virgin soil was very acidic and it took several years before it was neutralized and became productive.

Horses were a necessity for working the land. When horses were unavailable, capstan-like homemade winches were used to remove the stumps. Some settlers never



owned a horse and were dependent on others to do that work for them. The price for a horse ranged from \$300. to \$350., and if the feed had to be bought it would add to the cost. In later years tractors were available which simplified the process.

**Rudy Lepp** writes in his memoirs: "In 1934, I had to stay home from school for three consecutive days to assist with the fall plowing. I was the jockey sitting on a tall, skinny, old horse, with only an empty jute-bag between me and the horse's spine, which was similar to sitting on a 2 by 4 board, on edge. Dad was handling the plow. The stumps had finally been removed but the land had never been plowed. Hidden beneath the surface, somewhat like land mines, were big roots. Every time the plow struck a root, which was rather often, the horse would jolt and I would end up on its neck or head or even sail right over the horses head and land ten feet in front of the horse. This happened rather often and sometimes I would cry, after all, I was only seven years old! Dad would set me back on the horse again and we would continue. I learned about force, motion, velocity, inertia, momentum, and gravity, all in one day!"



*A settler clearing his land*





*Jacob Tjart is ploughing on the Jacob Wiens homestead*



*A settler using a homemade winch*





*A settler clearing the land with a caterpillar tractor*



*Abram T. Wiens sitting on a stump pile with son Rudy*



## 8. Hardship



*Even cows and horses learned to share in Reesor*

The saying goes, “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” Many hardships confronted the settlers but they retained a positive attitude. Most families were large, and poverty was acute but they learned to master even the toughest situations. Their motto may have been: “Thankfulness depends on what is in the heart, not what is in your hands.”

**Gertrude Unger Lepp** writes in her memoirs: “I had grown up in affluence and saw our family lose everything that our parents and grandparents had worked so hard to achieve. From the status of a mill-owner’s daughter, I stepped down to the humble existence of a struggling and poor pioneer’s wife in the vast, isolated forests of a new, foreign country. Yet I never looked back, I never yearned for our former life or riches. Here we were poor but free.”



**Herman P. Lepp**, many years later, in the tomato fields in Harrow, Southern Ontario, shared this Reesor experience: "We had been quite concerned and worried about the future. I had developed a double hernia as a result of the hard work and thus was laid up. There was no food in the house, not even enough for the next morning's breakfast and I couldn't work. Committing our plight to God in prayer, we had retired for the night. The next morning, according to habit, I went into the kitchen to light the fire even though the larder was bare. On the floor lay a letter. A neighbour had picked up our mail at the local store the previous night and had slipped the letter under the door. The letter contained some money and an offer to send me to Winnipeg for surgery. The Mission Board had heard of our plight and responded. We experienced the reality of Isaiah 58:9, 'Even before they finish praying to me I will answer their prayers'."

**Mary Tjart Wiebe** tells of their hardship: "Most people know that the Tjart family lost their mother at an early age, so our home-life was probably a bit different than most. Sometimes I wonder how Dad ever managed. He was always working and we more or less looked after ourselves. We made the meals as best we could. Baking bread was a real chore for us. In the evening, while we did the dishes, Dad played the accordion and we sang."

**Anna Berg Klassen** tells us that twice a year they would bring in their provisions, while the ground was frozen: in the fall their winter supplies, and in spring, their summer needs. These items would include 100 pound bags of flour and sugar. They all had to be carried in. Their family of ten used 25 100 pound bags of flour a year.

Hardship taught the settlers frugality, nothing was ever wasted; this was typical of their lifestyle. They had to improvise and "make do" with what they had on hand. It was always reuse, recycle, repair but very seldom replace. The legs and usable parts of old "combinations" or long johns, made nice warm undershirts for the small children. The suitable parts of worn-out dress pants sewed into lovely jumpers or skirts for the girls. The greasy, soapless dish water supplemented as food for the pigs. The discarded fat and meat remnants were used to make lye soap for laundry. Barley was roasted in the oven and then ground as a substitute for coffee, known as *Prips*. Egg shells were dried, crushed and fed back to the chickens. Chicken feathers were stuffed into pillows and mattresses, even moss or grass was used. Anna Berg Klassen recalls that there was a very fine grass that grew in low places, they called it water-grass. Every summer they had to cut enough of it to dry and fill all the mattresses needed for their household.

The clothing and shoes were handed down to the younger siblings. Mothers would often sit well into the night, by a dimly lit coal-oil lamp, mending items that were needed for the next day. Clothes were fashioned from hand-me-downs or flour and sugar bags. These were bleached by laying them on the snow. In the later years some flour bags were available in printed designs which made attractive dresses. Discarded clothes were



recycled and used as dust rags, dish cloths, floor rags or even cut into large squares for "foot-cloths" to improvise for socks. Knit items, when no longer useful, were unravelled and reused.

Shipments of used clothes arrived at the Reesor station from the Markham and Waterloo districts. These donations were then distributed to the needy Mennonite families. Often these items needed many alterations to make them fit the settler's requirements. The used clothes were always much appreciated.

**Dora Parise Deschamps** remembers that one sunny day her mother was doing the laundry while they were playing outside. She had come to the door and had asked them to keep an eye out in case someone came to the house. She had to take off her dress to wash it and had no replacement except her Sunday attire. She could not afford to buy a change of clothes. When they had ever asked for new clothes, the response was always that food was more important.

The Eaton's catalogue was a supply source only for those who could afford it. Those that could not afford the items, found other uses for the catalogue.



*Mother Wiens gives little Herta a bath while Mary, Rudy, and the goats, look on*



In winter, when some wells froze up, snow had to be carried in and melted. This was a great inconvenience for large families with small children where, needless to say, a lot of laundry needed to be done, and this along with other household chores. Doing the laundry with a wash tub and scrub board was a real chore in itself, as was the job of wringing out large items like sheets and pants, by hand.



*Time for a shower: Rudy, Henry, Irene, Hedy Lepp*

For these mothers it was impossible to get out. In winter the men, when cutting pulpwood, were gone from dawn to dusk, this left the women with the chores of not only looking after the family but also to tend the stove, bring in the firewood, baking, cooking, melting snow for water, and milking the cows. These responsibilities left the women in complete exhaustion, both mentally and physically.

### **Herta Bergen Schwartz**

wrote that the simplicity of life was very hard, but it made survivors out of everyone, even the children. She knew that for she is one of the children from that era.

### **Mr. Unrau**

wrote that the men all seemed quite content with the conditions, however the women folk complained to him about the hardship they had to endure.

### **John Enns**

wrote that before the highway opened in 1930, the settlers lived in virtual isolation. The men would occasionally have to take a business trip to Hearst or Kapuskasing while the women and children were stranded at home.

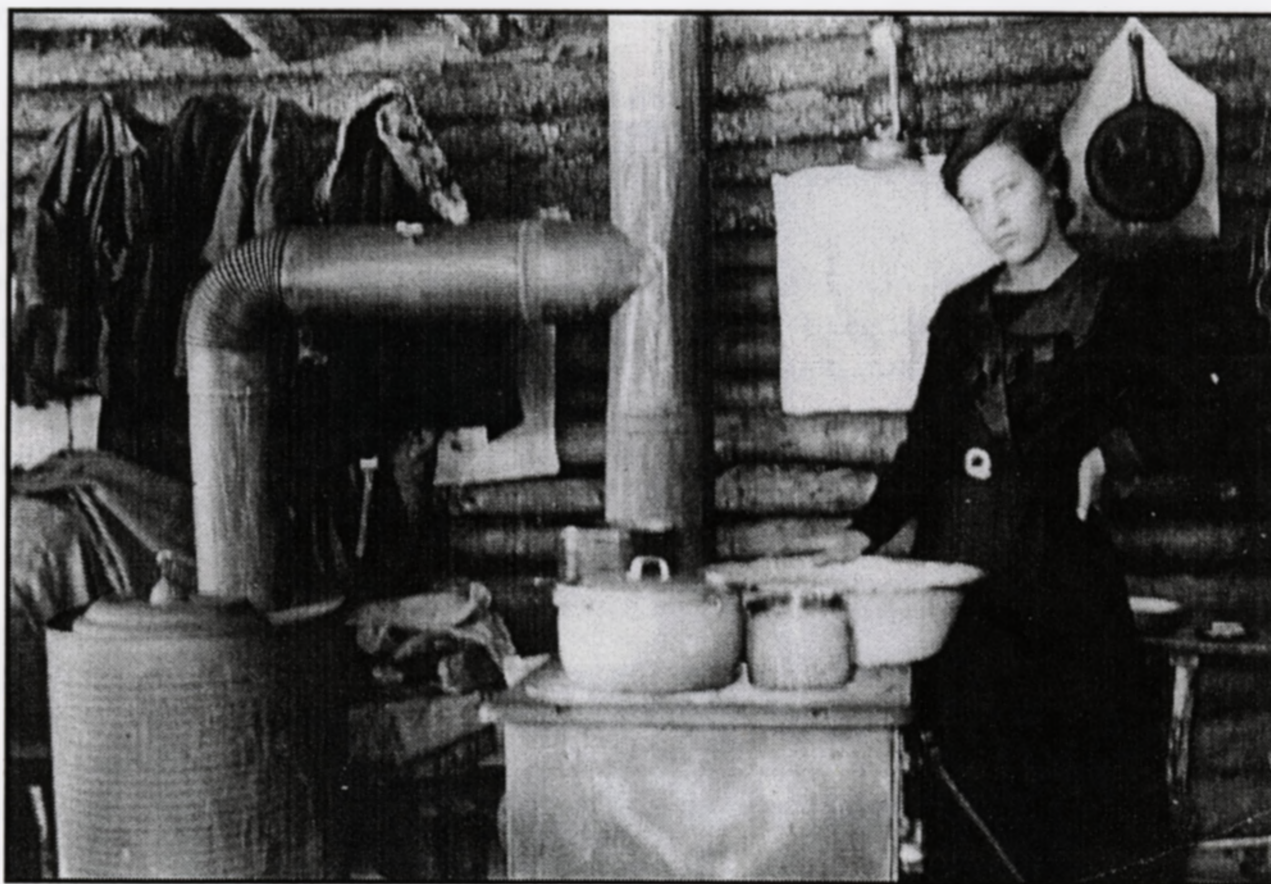
### **Anna Berg Klassen**

agrees that one of the really difficult hardships was that the women could not get out of the house. The winters were long and very cold. The women with older children were not as confined as those with youngsters.





*Jacob and Mathilda Friesen with their children: June, 1930*



*Louise Penner in the kitchen of their home*



**Rudy Lepp** shares his views: "To overlook the hardships and dwell only on the glories and achievements would be completely unrealistic. The achievements did not come without a price and at times the cost was high. Just who paid the highest price? It may well have been the mothers of large families with young children. Theirs was a hardship beyond all imagination. Much has been said and written concerning log house construction, road building, land clearing, cutting and hauling pulpwood, all glorious accomplishments of man and horse. Yet the unsung heroes were the women who kept the home fire burning, having babies, raising children, cleaning, cooking and mending, often from dawn until well beyond midnight. Theirs was a struggle that was largely untold and forgotten. To be able to put food on the table when the larder was empty required ingenuity, imagination and creativity. It is the perseverance of these unsung heroes that was heart and soul to survival in this forlorn wilderness. Most of these unsung heroes have now departed. Their story has never been told; only a few memories remain and soon they too, will be gone."

**Bill Janzen** agrees when he writes that the mothers in Reesor were the ones that kept the families together. They were hard workers, yet loving and compassionate. They raised the children while the men worked hard cutting wood and building roads. "Only a woman's touch could convert a log shack into a home."



*Only a woman's touch could convert a shack into a home*



The older children of large families also knew hardships as they were often taken out of school at an early age. Much was expected of these young persons as they were put to work in the bush, to help put food on the family tables.

**Jake Friesen** was one of the boys who needed to leave school at the age of fourteen. Jake tells us that he and his father had to extend the border of their homestead into crown land in order to feed their family.

**Susan Friesen Pankratz** remembers: "My mother, Mathilde Friesen, came to Canada in 1924 with her parents Wilhelm and Susanna Rempel; my father Jacob Friesen followed a few months later. They found a little place near the Epps where I was born. Later they built their own home.

Since Dad worked away from the house cutting wood, mother had to carry most of the responsibility of caring for the family and household by herself. She found the strength to carry on through frequent prayer to Jesus whom she asked for strength and guidance.

Mother was a strong, determined woman who would often approach difficult tasks with the words '*Du kannst*' (you can). She also taught us that we could do difficult things if we sought God's help and depended on it. To this day I can hear the echo of her voice saying '*Du kannst*'.

Mother was a hard worker and a resourceful person. She realized that men working outdoors needed mitts and socks. As a result, she began to knit socks and mitts. These she arranged with storekeeper Mr. Trudel in trade for food and supplies. My brother Jake and I--a 10 year old--often helped knit the cuffs for mitts before we left for school in the morning. During the day, mother would complete them, press, and prepare them for delivery to the store where they would be sold to the men in the community. When I was 13 years old I stayed home from school to help mother since Dad and brother Jake were in the lumber camps each week. One of my memories of this time is skiing to Trudel's store with the finished socks and mitts. This was a big help to our parents who had to struggle to look after the needs of our large family.

Mother also baked bread, sewed, and knitted for others to help support the family. We children: Jake, Susan, Helen, Bill, Martin, Peter, Tillie, and Jessie all helped by picking berries which were exchanged for needed supplies.

I have wonderful memories of my Aunt Jessie, mother's sister who married Peter Friesen (not a relative). Aunt Jessie (Augusta) was a remarkable woman who served our community in many ways, including being a midwife at the birth of many babies in the community. She also helped with things such as baking, knitting, sewing, and caring for



foster children. She continued to serve others until the time of her stroke which left her disabled."

Some families had to rely on relief for their survival. They felt the real impact of the "Depression." Some of these parents and even young adults tried to shut the Reesor experience out of their memories. This was a part of their life they would prefer to forget. The hardship and stress were just too great and fond memories were almost nonexistent.

**Bill Janzen** tells us that his memories weren't that pleasant but that time was a great healer and age also helped him to forget and forgive. The younger generation have somewhat fonder memories and eagerly go back to visit their former homesteads and reminisce about their childhood days. They did not experience the hardship of their parents.

**Rudy Lepp:** "I like to think that there was a positive side to growing up in the thirties. By accepting the difficult times, living efficiently, appreciating insignificant things, lowering one's expectations and embracing a simple lifestyle, there emerged a generation of survivors."



## 9. Food for the table



*A shipment of goats arrives at the railway station*

The main food staples in those early years were flour, sugar, potatoes, and lard. A meager meat supply, consisting of rabbit and partridge was also available. The rabbit diet could become rather mundane. It was very lean, and often mixed with pork fat and onions to make it more palatable. The grouse or partridge, as it was commonly known, was a more welcome source of meat.

Owning a cow was essential to the well-being of the settlers, especially for families with small children. Originally goats were bought but they did not really replace a cow. The Lepp family had to replace their goat with a cow after the twins were born. The government advanced money to purchase cows, which arrived by train. The settlers had to pay 25% of their value in cash and the balance in monthly installments of \$3. until paid. Before the hay fields were available, feeding one cow could cost a family somewhere between \$50. to \$100. per year.

Mary Tjart Wiebe, whose mother had died, remembers: "One experience that is still in my mind is when Dad and Jake were away hauling pulpwood and we were home alone. We had chores to do and ourselves to look after, besides going to school. This



particular morning we had slept in, so I went to the barn to help my sister Tina with the chores, leaving Agnes and David to make the breakfast. When we got into the barn there was a newborn calf. I went to get Bachelor Wiens and he put the cow and calf into a pen and told us that they would look after each other. We were so proud when Dad came home on Saturday, that we had managed to look after things all by ourselves. He had intended to stay home the next week. I guess the calf came early."



*The Jacob Wiens goat family*

Neighbours were always available when assistance was required. One such need was the sharing or exchange of milk when the family cow went dry. They would receive the necessary milk from a neighbour and then return the favour when needed.

Cottage cheese was a common food item as was butter and sour cream. Making butter was a complicated job.

Homemade machines constructed of large lard pails were used to churn the butter. A circular wooden disc or plunger, somewhat smaller than the diameter of the pail, with several holes in it and a handle in the form of a shaft attached to the disc, and extending through a hole in the lid, would be used. By working the plunger with an up and down motion of the handle, butter could be produced in about half an hour.

As refrigeration was unavailable to the settlers, cream cans were hung in the well to keep the contents from spoiling during the warm summer months. Extra butter and eggs were often sold to the store keeper. Fresh cream and milk were shipped to Hearst in large cans.

**Anna Berg Klassen** writes that her Mother had arrived in Reesor at the end of March to join her Dad and brother Stan, who had come there in January. She had brought with her, on the train, a cage with five hens and a rooster. Since it was still cold outside she brought them into the house until it warmed up outside. She had lifted a board in the floor so that they could do some scratching. After a while some baby chicks arrived and were kept in a box behind the stove.





*Frieda Kroeker with the family's flock of chickens: about 1930*

Indians would occasionally come through the settlement selling moose and caribou meat. They would not accept paper money and had to be paid with coins. Sometimes they would pitch their tents and spend a few days in the settlement.

**John Wiens** tells of his experience with the Indians. "One day we noticed that some small trees had been cut down and two tents had been erected. Snow-shoes were stuck in the snow beside them. A dozen or so dogs were tied to the trees and several toboggans were present. The men were making a wood fire while the women were bringing evergreen twigs and moose hides into the tents to make floors and beds.

They were Missinabi Cree Indians, staying there a few days before setting out on a trek into the vast wilderness that stretched hundreds of miles south of the homesteads. They were on snow-shoes, the men carried rifles, and the women followed behind. The children were on the toboggan, wrapped in moose skins, and pulled by the dogs. Our family had been a bit concerned about the Cree heading into the vast wilderness, but then, they were not like us, they were Indians and knew what they were doing."

Every Friday Mrs. Wiens would bake white, dark rye or bran bread. It was on such a Friday while having their supper, that there had been a knock on their door. The Indians had returned and caught the scent of the freshly baked bread. They wanted to trade some moose and caribou meat. When John's Dad showed them an empty wallet; they understood and pointed to the food on the table. So they were served leftover



*Borscht*, bread and butter. When the soup was gone they were served bread and honey. They were not familiar with honey but enjoyed it spread on the freshly baked bread.

When the Indians were sated, John and his Dad lit a kerosene lantern, and followed them out. The Crees uncovered their toboggan and gave them a chunk of caribou meat. Johnny and his dad took the meat inside and brought back two large loaves of bread; for this they were given another chunk of meat. Again they took the meat inside and returned with two one-quart jars of honey. The natives then again uncovered their toboggan, this time giving them a large piece of moose meat. After shaking hands the Indians left with their dog teams.

John tells us that his family had greatly enjoyed the meat. The existence of woodland caribou in the Reesor area was not common knowledge at the time.



*The Heidebrecht's vegetable garden*

In later years the Mennonite tradition of hog butchering was taken up in Reesor. Usually two or three couples would work together in order to complete the task in one day. Almost every part of the animal was used. The stomach was cleaned and used as a pocket for ground-up meat scraps, like the head and feet and some pork rind. The small intestines were turned inside-out and then cleaned of fat and residue by pulling them between two knitting needles. These were then used as casings for the ground-up sausage meat, which was later smoked. The larger intestines were used for liver sausages, which were then cooked. The hams were trimmed and salted down for a few days before



smoking. The fat was cubed or coarsely ground and rendered in a large boiler. The rendering fat had to be stirred continuously. The spare ribs were then deep fried in the hot fat or lard. When the rib bones twisted they were done and were most delicious tasting. When the lard was done and clear it was strained and the crisp *Grieben* (cracklings) were a tasty by-product used with fried potatoes or eggs. The fine sediment at the bottom, *Griebenschmaltz* (crackling lard) was a tasty butter substitute.

In spite of all the work, they managed to socialize and play practical jokes, like pinning the pig's tail onto an unsuspecting worker, and when discovered he or she would pass it on to the next victim. For the older children who could participate in the work it was usually a day off from school. They would also have fun by blowing up the bladder, like a balloon, and putting in some beans and tying it to the cat's tail. The poor cat would sure take off in a hurry. The helpers would usually walk home with a liver sausage. Any unused scraps or fat were then made into lye soap. Every part of the pig was used except the squeal.

The settlers also turned to gardening to help put food on their tables. A vegetable garden was a must for their existence. Small plots were often dug up by hand with a spade.



*A settler working in her vegetable garden*

**Henry Penner** recalls that clearing and cultivating enough land for a vegetable garden was very important. Once in a while stumps would give them great difficulties. On one such occasion the three brothers had been chopping the roots around a particular stubborn tree stump. Once when Neil had rested his hand on the stump, the younger brother had made a mighty heave with the axe and hit the top of the stump. The result was a 90% severed pinkie finger on his left hand. While the accident was serious enough the circumstances were even worse. The nearest doctor and hospital were about twenty miles away. There were no roads and no cars to take one to the hospital.



The only transportation was the train, which was not due for four hours. After walking Neil to the station at mile 103, their father had supplied him with a bottle of water to help fight a fainting spell. The conductor and crew did not believe that it was water in the bottle, they were sure that it was "Moonshine" (alcohol). The story had a happy ending: the pinkie was sewn back on and it functions well to this day.



*A good radish crop!*

Their gardens grew onions, cabbage, carrots, radishes, beets, beans, peas and of course rhubarb. They even made ketchup from rhubarb stalks. Potatoes were usually grown in larger plots or fields as they were their main sustenance. The root crops did very well. Some tomatoes would also grow but had to be harvested green and hung indoors to ripen. Some years frost was experienced every month and the vegetables had to be covered during clear, cold nights. The chickens and goats helped to supply fertilizer for the gardens and trees.

Summer holidays were not all fun and leisure time for the children. They too had duties to perform. There was haying time; the early hay fields were cut by hand, using a scythe. In later years horses and mowers and rakes were used. The hay had to be cut, raked, cured and then hauled in. The potatoes had to be dug by hand and of course the wild berries had to be picked.

Three years after the slash had been burned, wild raspberries began to appear in abundance. In August, when the bug season was past its peak, it was time to pick berries. Lard or honey pails were used for picking, and often the same containers were used for school lunches. The wild berries added some zest to the somewhat mundane food. They were plentiful and very tasty. Some years the blueberries were in great abundance, other years they could be very scarce due to spring frosts that killed the blossoms. Later in the season cranberries could be harvested. These grew in heavy sphagnum moss areas, like precious jewels on a mossy knoll. They were greatly cherished, not just for their special tart flavour but also because they needed no preserving and could be stored in the cellar holes. As the alders and quaking aspen grew back in the burned-over areas, the raspberries diminished for lack of sunlight. They could, however, still be found along the roadsides.

**Anna Berg Klassen** tells us that one day while picking berries they found out that they were sharing the patch with a black bear. So they had gently backed off.





*The early hay was cut by hand*

**George Janzen** remembers a summer when there was a heavy crop of raspberries and their mother had all their containers filled. Since she couldn't see any berries going to waste, she tried to make some raspberry wine. The berries were dumped into a large stone crock, sugar added, then covered with cheesecloth to keep the flies out. The container was set in the sun to ferment. When she was ready to sample it for sweetness- SURPRISE- it was vinegar and had to be thrown out! George was told to dump it behind the chicken coop. When their father came home he asked what was wrong with the chickens. Obviously they had feasted on the discarded gourmet food and became so inebriated that they were unable to fly or stand on their feet; they were lying on their sides oblivious to their surroundings. By nightfall they had sobered up sufficiently to stagger to their roosts for a good night's rest!

**Hedy Lepp Dennis** tells a very different story. She remembers the day their Mother was sick in bed, which was very rare. They had to go and pick berries by themselves. Here they met Gitta in the raspberry patch, and explained their situation to her. Being older and much more knowledgeable, Gitta had informed them that when your mother is sick in bed that means that she is going to have a baby. "How could we concentrate on picking berries, when Irene and I had always wanted a little baby sister; the youngest in the family was already six years old." When their Dad came to get them he was rather disappointed when he saw how few berries they had picked but not as



disappointed as they were when there was no baby. (The mother had been laid up with a bladder infection).



*Mrs. Heinrich Enns and Mrs. Jacob Wiens picking raspberries*

Sealer jars were always an essential item. During the war years when the food was rationed, some of the Ukrainian settlers ran low on coffee coupons, so H.P. Lepp made a deal with them. He gave them some of his coupons and they then returned their empty coffee jars. These were used for canning raspberries. (The writer still has a few of these 'Blue Ribbon' vacuum packed coffee jars).





*Haying time at the Lepp's: Herman, Hedy, Henry, Irene, and Rudy*



*Hauling in hay: Irene, Hedy, Peter, with Rudy and Henry Lepp on the load*



## 10. Progress



*The Peter Berg family poses in front of their new home  
L to R, back: Albert, Anna, Herbert, Mary, and Constantine (Stan)  
Centre: Mr. and Mrs. Berg. In front are Hugo, Fred and Eric*

**C.F. Klassen** wrote: "The settlers have persevered in their efforts, although they were fully aware from the very beginning of the many difficulties and all the hard labour through which the road to ultimate success must lead. Their implicit faith in God and this perseverance in the monotony of dull every day life and true fulfillment of duty is always blessed."

**Mr. Unrau:** "The settlers have made remarkable progress during the two and a half years of existence. It is now slowly developing into one of the most successful Mennonite settlements in Canada. They have built two railway sidings, cut roads through the bush and put up homes. They cut the virgin forest down and cleared and cultivated the land. They built a home out of a wilderness. They are doing their part to make the settlement a success and if it should fail, that would not be their fault."



## Expansion

As the stumps started to rot away, more and more land was put under cultivation. Eventually several settlers had forty acres cleared. Henry Bergen had sixty acres in hay by the time he left in 1941. Few settlers could afford wire fencing, so their fields were closed in with large tree stumps, branches or logs.

Homes were improved and bigger ones were built.



*Heinrich and Tina Lepp at their first Reesor home (1932-1935)  
with children Abe, Betty, Paul, Alice, and Henry*

**Betty Lepp Warkentin** tells us that when her father would come home from cutting pulpwood he would bring back one or two long straight logs which he pulled with a rope over his shoulder. He had picked these specially to build a new house. It was a lovely home and was warm in the coldest weather because of the brick stove in the middle of the house. The bricks for the stove were homemade. Her father made the forms out of wood. Then her parents filled the forms with a mixture of mud, clay and manure, which they left out in the sun to dry. They were then hardened by placing them in a pit with wood coals and charcoals. The bricks were then covered up and left to bake. Once the stove was built, her Mom covered it entirely with whitewash. A cellar was dug under the house and a trap door covered the opening. Mr. Lepp had made compartments there to store their potatoes, carrots and beets. The small potatoes were stored separately



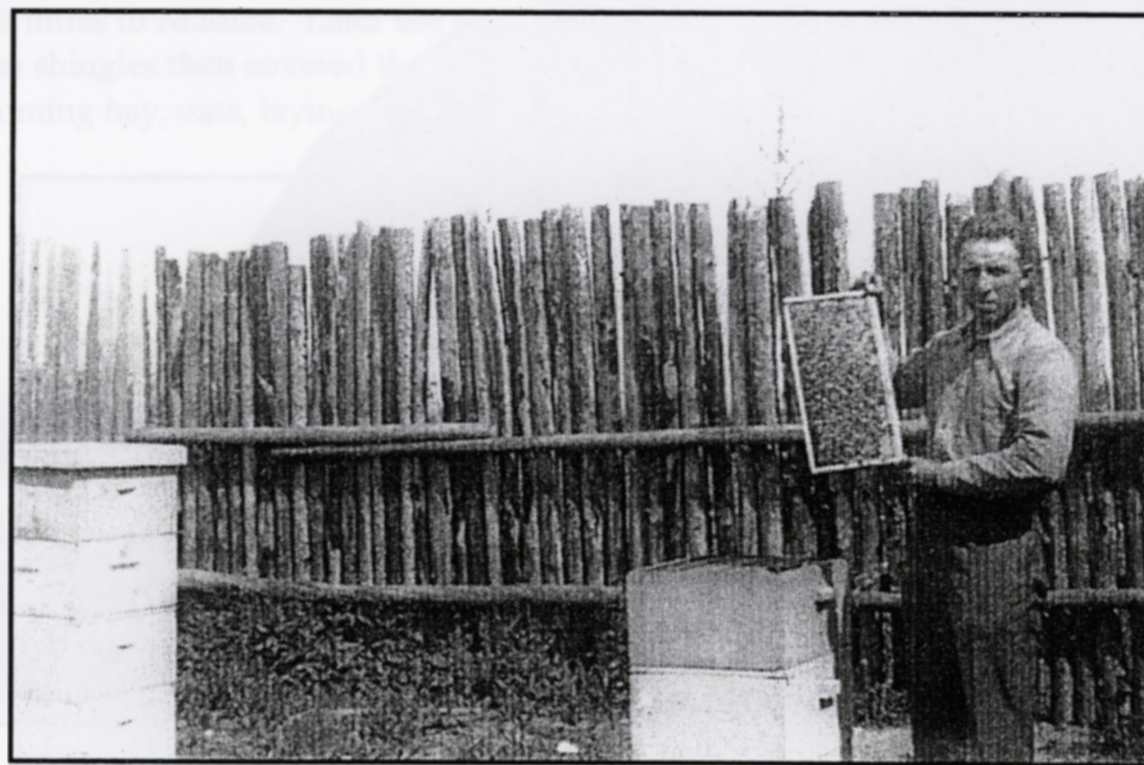
and used for planting next spring. A well was also dug in the cellar and a pump set up in the kitchen, which was very useful to them.



*A chicken coop*

More and better barns and chicken coops were constructed to accommodate the growing need for livestock and poultry. Second hand wagons, disks, plows and hay rakes made their way into the young settlement. In later years even a few tractors arrived on the scene. Gradually the work changed from bush work more to farm work. The settlers also ventured into other areas of work.

Alice Lepp Kopp tells us about her father's hobby of keeping bees. He had to wear special clothing and netting when tending the bees. The highlight for them was always the time when the honey had to be separated from the combs. Their father would set up the big honey separator and bring in the frames containing the honey combs. He would use a hot sharp knife to cut off the lumpy wax layers that covered the combs. The trimmed frames were then put into the separator and spun around. The centrifugal force would spin out the honey. The real treat for them was getting pieces of cut-off wax to suck out the honey.



*Henry Lepp with his bee hives*



In the late 1920s there was a growing demand for a local blacksmith shop; the teamsters needed to get their horses shod. In 1930 Franz Janzen Jr. opened a shop and things improved for horse owners. He also repaired sleighs and other farm equipment. When Franz quit, Henry Bergen took over the job. But like in Franz Janzen's case, the shop did not pay for itself, and he too, needed to find additional employment. So he bought a tractor and hauled pulpwood in winter.

**Albert Berg** tells us that he and his friends liked to watch the local blacksmith, Henry Bergen, shoe horses or fabricate things. His forge fascinated them, the way the bellows would force air through the glowing embers and rekindle the fire. They had once asked Henry from where he got the coals. He had informed them that he had to buy them. There were always coal pieces lying alongside the railway tracks which had dropped from the coal car whenever the locomotive was stoked. So they had asked Henry Bergen if he would buy coal from them if they would pick it up, and he had agreed. They would then walk a few miles each way from the shop and collect what they could find. Henry would weigh the coal and pay them accordingly. They would receive eleven, twelve or even thirteen cents, not much by today's standards, but they were thrilled!



*Henry Lepp's new barn*



As cars began to arrive a need arose for a repair shop and service station. Trudel had an available building and persuaded Abram Lepp, who had received some apprentice training, to open a necessary garage there. He ran the shop until 1941 and then transferred his business to Mattice, where more work was available.

## Establishing stores

For the first two years the settlers did not have a store or post office. The mail was addressed to Mile 103 and sent to Mattice, a village seven miles west of Reesor. Settlers walked to Mattice along the railway track to get their mail and supplies. John Enns wrote: "Everyone felt the lack of a local store and railway station keenly". They were greatly inconvenienced by often having their freight delivered to Parthia where things frequently disappeared since there was no station agent available. They wanted their own Post Master to look after the shipments. In the fall of 1927 the settlers succeeded in persuading the clerk of the Mattice Hudson Bay Co. store to give up his job and open a store at mile 103. Louis Trudel, a Frenchman, was aware of the volume of business that came from the new settlement, so decided to give it a try. He put up a small, 16 by 20 ft. tar-paper covered building that was divided in half. One part became the store and the other portion the family's living quarters. It was the first non-residential building in the settlement. In 1928 he partitioned off a corner to accommodate a Post Office. The mail was the settler's lifeline with the outside world. It was by mail that the settlers were able to keep in contact with friends, relatives, and even those as far away as Europe. It was by mail that orders were made to Eaton's and Simpson's for items that could not be purchased locally. No longer did the settlers have to trek those seven arduous miles to Mattice. Later the store and living quarters were enlarged and improved. Wooden shingles then covered the outside walls. By 1940 Trudel also had a barn built for the incoming hay, oats, laying mash, and hog feed.



*Trudel's enlarged store and living quarters*



Trudel was perhaps the most influential man in the community. The settlers became very dependent on his credit and financial backing, especially during the depression years. He would never deny anyone a purchase for lack of money. As families left he would often accept their worthless homesteads as a final payment. His daughter, Annette Labrosse had said that some of those same Mennonites had tried to repay him years later.

Louis Trudel was very involved in the community. He was not just storekeeper and Post Master but also served as Justice of the Peace. This meant that the settlers did not have to go to a town to have signatures confirmed or an affidavit witnessed. He would also attend the local funerals, but was castigated if he entered our church, so he chose to join the procession and graveside service only.

Telephones were a rare commodity in Reesor. In later years there were two phones in the Trudel store, one of them was only available for fire emergencies. There was also a phone in Lepp's garage and in the Isaak store at mile 101.

Trudel prospered, for he not only sold general merchandise like groceries, dry goods, some hardware and gasoline but he was also involved as an agent, buying pulpwood for the Spruce Falls Co.. This necessitated him to hire help. At first it was only for evenings but later he had full time workers in the store. Henry Enns, who had worked part-time in the evening rush hours, became the first full-time employee there. He worked there until 1937 when he took a job in the Bucovetsky store in Kapuskasing. John Penner was his successor. The Community was saddened by John's early death in 1941.



*Interior view of Trudel's store*





*Trudel store with gas pumps*

**Rudy Wiens** tells of his first job after completing grade ten in the Reesor Public School. Trudel needed help in the store and had hired him. With this new position came many responsibilities and he tried to do a good job. Some of the work included serving customers of various languages: German, French, Finnish and Norwegian. He also had to fill orders for the lumber camps and unload railway cars. Bags of sugar, flour and 125 lb. bags of grain along with other freight needed to be handled. In time Rudy became assistant Post Master, this included putting the out-going mail into bags and unpacking and sorting the incoming mail.

In 1930 David Fast opened up another store at 101 to accommodate the settlers in McGowan Township. In 1934 he sold the store to Nicholai Isaak, who continued to serve the people at the east end of the settlement. It was closed in 1941 when the Isaaks left Reesor.



*The Isaak store at Mile 101*





*The interior of the Isaak's store at Mile 101*

**Rudy Lepp writes:**

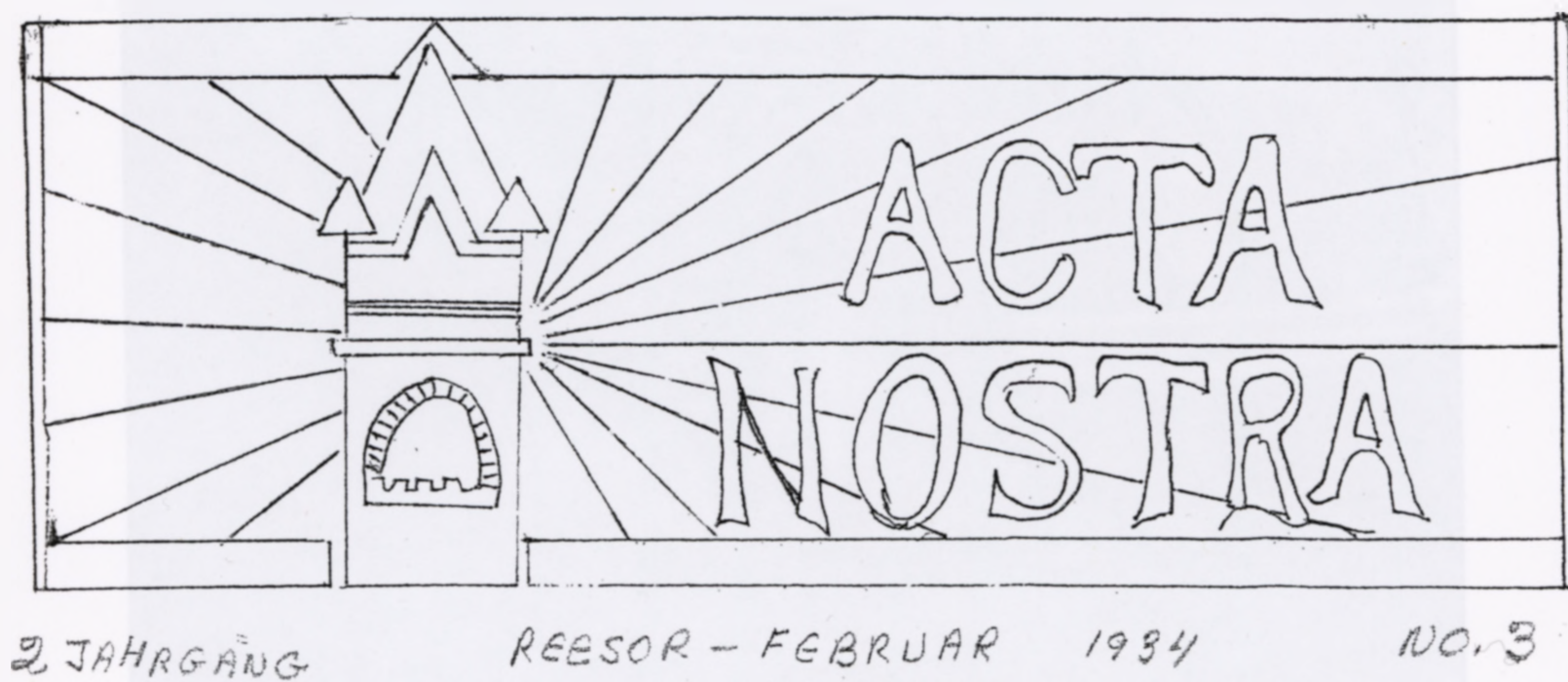
"We were a cashless society. Never once did I have even a penny with me when purchasing supplies at the store or when we would take our surplus eggs or butter to the store. No money would ever change hands. About once a year, after the pulpwood money came in, would we make a payment and settle our account".





*The Isaak family's new Chrysler Airflow parked at the Isaak's store, c 1938*





The settlement's newsletter: 1934 and 1939 Acta Nostra (Our Deeds) cover designs  
created by Rev. H. P. Lepp



# 11. Community life

## Adults



*Neighbours socializing, Front L to R: Gertrude Lepp, Erika Roetscher, Tante Ebba Holmberg, Anna Wiens, Jacob Wiens. Back: Frieda Isaak, Nicholai Isaak, Gerhard Enns, Herman Lepp, and Wolfgang Roetscher.*

Although the settlers were isolated from the outside world and lacked entertainment, there was no deficiency in community spirit. The Reesor Mennonites were not isolated from each other. Their dependence on neighbours, friends, relatives, the church, school and even the store was the source that bonded them into a meaningful community.

The men often went to the store, the focal point in the community, for provisions or the mail; here they met and socialized. This was a much needed contact after working alone in the forests and fields all day. Here they would occupy the benches or even the bread box. Louis Trudel accommodated this socializing and never closed the store until all the visitors had left. It was a man's world, as John Enns tells us. Rarely would a housewife go to the store, and if she did, she would hardly ever meet another woman there. So, in the late 1930s the women created their own get-togethers in the privacy of their homes. They organized a Sewing Circle called *Kränzchen* (little circle or wreath) They met on a regular basis and even mastered the art of skiing, sometimes using a broom to help keep their balance. This was the only means of getting around in winter until the roads were opened for hauling wood.





*The women's Verein group*

*L to R: Louise Penner, Liesel Martens and child, Mrs. Penner, Liesel Wiens, Mrs. Ratzlaf, Mrs. Berg, Erika Roetscher, Gertrude Lepp, Anna Wiens, Mrs. Enns, Tante Ebba, Annie Rempel, Mrs. Bergen, Mrs. Thiessen, Anna Reimer*



**Nicholai Isaak** wrote that on one occasion the ladies had a *Verein* or *Kränzchen* meeting at the Penners--who lived near the school--and his wife Frieda needed to go there. She walked along the tracks from mile 101 to Lepp's house near mile 103. The Lepp family had a small horse named Billy, which they hitched to a cutter, and they left for Penner's home. Along the way Billy was frightened by the ski poles of a passing Finnlander, made a sudden turn and headed home, dropping the ladies into a snow bank. Gertrude Lepp followed the horse home. When the horse arrived on the yard, Herman knew something was wrong and was relieved when he saw his wife arrive unharmed.

**Anna Berg Klassen:** "This group of pioneers, who had very little, felt the need to help the less fortunate. In spite of the hardships of getting around and so few things to work with, the ladies still managed to have their Mission Sales. Everybody did the best with what they had. Beautifully embroidered articles done on white bleached flour bags, white crocheted borders on pillow slips and tablecloths and knitted articles were made. I remember knitting a pink dress for one of the sales when I was a teenager."



*The Henry Lepp children. Back: Betty, Henry, Abe, Alice  
Front: Irene, Victor, Peter in front of Paul and Otto. 1947 photo*

**Victor Lepp** remembers that there were a number of German men in the Spruce Falls lumber camps. Several had been soldiers or prisoners of war, or had lost their



families and all in Germany and had come to Canada to begin a new life here. It was Christmas and the settlers felt that it was their Christian obligation to invite these men into their homes. As it is often the case, those who have least are the first to open their homes to visitors. So after the Christmas Church service, these men, as well as other friends had arrived at the Henry Lepp house. It was a great experience for him when one of the men had drawn a beautiful picture of a horse on his brand new Christmas blackboard. He had displayed the art piece for days while his siblings had played on their boards (slates). Later that same evening they had all gathered in the living room and there had transpired one of the most wonderful evenings of his young life. The small decorated Christmas tree stood on the treadle sewing machine, the coal oil lamps had been turned down and the candles were lit. The festivities consisted of story-telling, recitations and the singing of Christmas carols. Isaac Janzen had brought his concertina and the singing was in four part harmony. The visitor's singing voices had been just wonderful and *Stille Nacht* (Silent Night) had never sounded sweeter to his ears. The most important thing was the happiness that had filled their home, and to see his mother smile for the first time since they had lost their father one and a half years earlier.

As a result, to this day, Victor Lepp still puts real candles on their Christmas tree and on Christmas Eve, after the others have gone to bed, he turns out the lights, except those on the Christmas tree. He then puts German carols on his stereo, sits in his favourite chair, and remembers Reesor.

**Ernie Schmidt** writes about a beautiful, surprise Christmas gift that had arrived at the Isaak home. Nicholai Isaak and little Hildi had spent all day preparing for Christmas. That evening Nick was busy, so Hildi and her Mother walked the long, one hour stretch to school for the Christmas concert. But before they left, they carried in the evening firewood. This was their surprise gift to Nick. To surprise his wife, Isaak had ordered a used piano from southern Ontario as a special gift for her. A neighbour with a team of horses helped him bring it home. He had purposely left the firewood outside so he would have room to bring in the piano. When he arrived home he found the wood neatly piled and blocking his way. He had to remove the wood before he could bring in the piano. Then, thoroughly exhausted, he carried all the wood back into the house before Hildi and Frieda returned from the concert.

The surprise was complete! After Frieda Isaak had wiped away her tears of joy, she hesitatingly touched the piano keys. Then the beautiful and beloved *Stille Nacht* (Silent Night) flowed through the log cabin, accompanied by a raspy bass and a sweet little child's voice, "All is calm, all is bright."

There were several people who had special attractions and were fondly remembered. One of those was Abram Wiens. Since there were two Abram Wienses in the community he was fondly known as Bachelor Wiens. Had the bachelor title not been



bestowed upon him he would likely have been called Rhubarb Wiens. His claim to fame was his rhubarb patch. He took pride in growing the tallest rhubarb in the settlement which he generously shared with the rest of the community. In later years he was one of the few who owned a car and was always willing to transport people.



*Bachelor Wiens in his rhubarb patch*

Bachelor Wiens was known to everyone young and old. He loved to socialize; visiting the people in the community was his favorite pastime, and he always carried an armful of his famous rhubarb with him. He also loved to fish but could get rather upset and even humiliated if anybody out-fished him. He was also known for the woodwork he did on his wood lathe, built on an old treadle-type sewing machine. By the depth of the wood shavings on the floor it was obvious that he used his lathe quite frequently. The Lepp girls still have their tiny, 6 inch rolling pins made by his skilled hands.

*“Tante (Aunt) Ebba”* (Leopoldowna Holemborg), as she was known throughout the settlement, had a great influence on many of the settler’s children. She was not of Mennonite background, but having been a home-school teacher among the Mennonites in Ukraine, she fit right in, and was accepted by the community. After arriving in Reesor she stayed with her nephew, Wolfgang Roetscher, assisting with household chores.

**Rudy Lepp** reminisces in his memoirs: “The stork continued to make regular visits to our house, so Dad built a new, somewhat larger house (20 ft. by 24 ft.) with two rooms upstairs. It was here that *Tante Ebba* joined the Lepp family in 1933, to help out when the sixth child was born. She was a rather amazing person; what made her unique was the fact that she was always knitting. Her hands were never idle. She would even knit when she was walking, except in winter. She could speak and read several languages, and English language books she read to us in German, knitting all the while.”

In the evenings, while knitting, she would read to the adults who were busy sharpening the Swedish buck saw, sewing or mending. She helped out until the youngest was six, then went back to the Roetscher family who had younger children. (*Tante Ebba* was born in Riga, Lithuania in 1883 and died in Hearst at the age of 83.) There was a rather fitting story going around concerning her. It went something like this: *Tante Ebba* was on her way to Isaak’s to teach piano lessons. Walking along the railway tracks, and knitting away, she accidentally dropped her ball of wool. Upon arriving at mile 101 she



realized what had happened and simply knitted her way back. It may be just a fable, but like all good fables it was based on truth!”



*Tante Ebba with the Herman and Gertrude Lepp family at Reesor's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary. L to R: Irene, Gertrude, Herman Jr., Henry, Rudy, Herman Sr., Hedy, Tante Ebba holding Peter. Children are all wearing red sweaters knit by Tante Ebba*

**Jacob T. Wiens** writes: “I must mention a person who played an important role in the lives of our children, our neighbours as well as ourselves, was Ebba Holmberg, known to everybody as “*Tante Ebba*.” She was a nanny to the six Lepp children and the six Roetscher children, living and sharing her time with both families. She loved children and would gather them, not only at Lepps’ or Roetschers’ house but often at our house, also. She would read to them and also instruct them in primary reading and writing skills and some simple arithmetic. Of course all her teaching was done in German, but still it made a difference when the children started school; it gave them a little head start. Besides spending time with the children, the three activities she loved doing the most were: reading, knitting and drinking coffee. And she was very capable of doing them all at the same time!”

**Herta Bergen Swartz** tells us about Abram and Anna Lepp, known as *Ola enn Taunte Lepp* (Low German for Old and Aunt Lepp). *Ola Lepp* was a story teller. He captured everyone’s attention and his wife was his greatest fan. She would listen to his stories with such anticipation that you would think it was the first time that she had heard them. At the conclusion of the story she would laugh so heartily that it brought spontaneous laughter from everyone. *Ola Lepp* was also very handy with the barber’s



scissors. He would go to the homes and cut peoples' hair. *Taunte* Lepp would always accompany him; they were inseparable. Herta was ten years old when her family left Reesor and she has never seen the Lepps since but they left a great impression on her.



*Tante Ebba with the Wiens and Lepp children: Tante Ebba is holding Walter Wiens and Irene Lepp, twins Henry and Hedy sit beside her and Rudy Lepp and John Wiens are seated in back*



*Visitors at the Lepp residence: Jake and Anna Wiens, Henry and Mrs. Enns, and Gertrude Lepp holding Rudy*



## Youth

**John Enns:** Teacher Nick Martens and Mrs. Martens were fond of young people and got very involved with them. He organized a youth group and choir. They often invited large groups into their home on Sunday evenings where they enjoyed singing, playing musical instruments and socializing. After a full week of hard physical labour in the bush, or with lonely household duties, these get togethers were times of mental and spiritual stimulation. He also supported the little newspaper, the *Acta Nostra* meaning "Our Deeds". It contained poems and articles by local writers. The work was done voluntarily by the youth. In 1932, six biweekly issues were produced on a hectograph. The next six, in 1934, were done in mimeographed form. In all, eighteen issues were produced and they represented a unique and irreplaceable set of memorabilia. Mr. Martens was also the only one in the settlement who knew how to play tennis. His enthusiasm for the sport resulted in the construction of a tennis court, with the volunteer labour of the youth, on the Enns property. It was built in 1931 and ten years later was moved to the McGowan school yard. Frank Janzen made a heavy roller for the tennis court and Cornelius Toews built an outdoor bowling alley.



*Gitta Roetscher's birthday party*

*Front: Mary Wiens, Walter Wiens, Irene Lepp, Hedy Lepp, Gitta  
Back: John Wiens, Rudy Wiens, Oskar Isaak, Henry Lepp, Rudy Lepp*



**Henry Klassen** recalls: "The houses were too small for the young people to meet in groups, especially in winter. Sometimes we met at school or the teacherage. Mr. Martens started a choir and we did a lot of singing, not just in church but for the sheer enjoyment of it, like a glee club."



*The Youth group*

*Front: Mary Wiens, Tina Tjart, Margaret Klassen, Mary Wiebe, Mary Berg, Mary Tjart, Annie Bergen, Gitta Roetscher*

*Row 2: George Janzen, Rudy Lepp, Herman Klassen, Ernie Penner*

*Back: Jake Janzen, Jake Tjart, Rev. H.P. Lepp, Rudy Wiens, Nick Janzen, Henry Lepp*

The young people also organized outings. In spite of mosquitoes and blackflies they would take excursions to back-wood lakes. After packing a picnic lunch, they would follow trappers trails that led to the lakes. A Sunday afternoon activity before the roads were completed was strolling along the railway tracks. During these walks they would often plan and organize evening programs of drama and poetry. These were then presented to the community. The now vacant *Immigrantenhaus* was transformed into a backwoods theater. This building was also used for the traditional pre-nuptial parties known as *Polterabende* (wedding showers). Skits, recitations and delicious food and lots



of good banter marked these social events. Choir practices and some religious programs were also held here.



*In the rowboat are Hildegard Isaak,  
Margaret Bergen and John Enns*

There was also a library in the community which consisted of about 200 books. It was housed in the Enns's upstairs hallway. They were all German books and provided good reading for both the youth and the adults. As the settlers gradually left Reesor, the books usefulness waned, and they were donated to the U.M.E.I. school in Leamington Ontario.

**Mary Tjart Wiebe** writes:  
"About 1938-39, John Enns and Rev. Lepp organized a *Jugendgruppe* (youth group) and a choir with a group of teenagers. There were about 12 or 15 in our group. We sang with *Ziffern* (numbers). At Christmas we had a party and gift exchange at the Lepps'.

My sister's gift was a box of Pot of Gold chocolates, an unheard of gift in those days!"

As the teenagers got older they were often expected to find employment. Most of the boys found work with the Spruce Falls Co. The older girls would leave for Hearst or Kapuskasing to do house work there. The money they earned was sent home to help with the expenses. The well-to-do families in Kapuskasing valued the Mennonite girls as maids, for these girls had been well-trained at home. They were good housekeepers and hard workers. But the jobs outside the settlement really diminished the youth group size.

Many of the young people who grew up in Reesor and attended church regularly, decided to become active church members and asked for baptism. They were given instruction in catechism by the local Minister and were baptized and accepted into the church by a visiting *Ältester* (Bishop), usually Jacob Janzen from Waterloo.



## 12. The Church



*The Penner Family. Front: Mrs. Penner, Ernie and Rev. C. Penner, Back: Louise, Cornelius, Henry, and John*

**F**rom the very beginning in 1925, the settlers strived to uphold their religious traditions and beliefs. They did not have an ordained Minister; sermons were read by lay people Sunday mornings. In 1926, Cornelius Penner was asked to conduct the services which were held in the homes until the school was built. There was at that time no formal Mennonite church organization. Attending the church services in Reesor was no easy task. Often it required a walk of up to five miles. As the settlement grew, the distance to the church building increased.

On December 8, 1926, H.P. Lepp arrived in Reesor. He had come with David Paetkau, having left his expectant wife in Waterloo until a cabin could be built. During this time the Mennonite group was seeking to choose a Minister from their midst. H.P. Lepp was chosen and ordained by *Ältester* Janzen on July 18, 1927 at the age of twenty-



four. His response was: "Have I not commanded you? Be of good courage, be not afraid, neither be dismayed; for the Lord, your God is with you wherever you go." Joshua 1: 9.



*Rev. H. P. Lepp, Deacon Abram Wiens,  
and Ältester J.H. Janzen from Waterloo*

Because Herman Lepp had no theological training he spent many hours preparing his weekly sermons. Whenever Frieda Isaak saw the lamp light in the Lepp's attic window, she knew he was preparing his sermon, and she would then support him in prayer. The Lepp children recall having to remind each other with the words, "*Still, Papa denkt*" (quiet, Dad's thinking).

On December 16, 1928, Cornelius Penner Sr. was ordained by Ältester Franz Enns of Manitoba.

Rev. Penner conscientiously served the group of Mennonites meeting in the Eilber school. As John Enns said: "Both Ministers served their congregation faithfully". Rev. Penner became a victim of cancer in 1938 and passed away on January 18, 1939. This left Rev. H.P. Lepp as the only Minister.

**John Enns** writes: "It was a difficult load for a young father but he took his work seriously, and served his flock with unfailing devotion and dedication. Besides the work of preaching, which necessitated long walks to church every Sunday, he visited the sick, solemnized marriages, served at funerals, instructed young people who were preparing for baptism and carried on a good deal of correspondence for the church. He liked to work with the young people and often contributed to their paper, the *Acta Nostra*. His lot was not an easy one since there was no remuneration for his work. He also officiated at some of the Finnlander's funerals. Even though he could not speak their language, they appreciated his German prayers. His wife Gertrude often became a widow to the needs of the settlers."

On September 8, 1932 the congregation was incorporated and patented as the Reesor United Mennonite Church. The congregation felt they needed a more centralized



meeting place. At that time Peter Dyck wanted to dispose of his property, which was near the railway. This presented a great opportunity to acquire a very suitable lot. There was a good sized, two-story log house on the premises which could be altered into a church sanctuary. Jacob Toews, a good carpenter, converted the building into a place of worship. He took out the inside walls, built a pulpit and benches. A lean-to was added to serve as a cloakroom. The church building stood on a two acre lot, which had to be cleared of stumps and was later enclosed by a fence.



*The Janzen family from Waterloo visiting with the Lepp family  
L to R: Mrs. Janzen, Hedy Lepp, Henry Lepp, Tante Ebba, Rudy Lepp,  
Gertrude Lepp holding Irene, and Ältester J. H. Janzen: 1931*

The settlement was frequently visited by Ministers and missionaries from other Mennonite congregations. Even the blind Rev. Esau from the United States visited the church. He inspected the building with his cane and then wrote home about his experience of speaking in a log church.



*Rev. Esau from the U.S.A. and Rev. Lepp in front of the Barker Church building*



The families living in McGowan Township had a long walk to the Barker church. It was then decided to build another church in the McGowan district. Peter Janzen donated a lot and Jacob Toews built another small church there in 1935. The settlement had only one Minister at that time, so once or twice a month H.P. Lepp would walk the seven miles each way, to serve the church there. John Loewen was chosen to read a sermon on the remaining Sundays at the McGowan church.

**Mary Stoll Richards** writes: "Our social life was the church which we attended every Sunday, arriving by wagon or sleigh. We would have people over for dinner after the church service or be invited out for *Vesper*, an early afternoon supper of coffee and *Zwieback* (double buns). There are many special times I can remember, and my children and grandchildren often ask about my life up north, where they think only Eskimos live."

**Mary Tjart Wiebe** tells us that she remembers Rev. Cornelius Penner starting Sunday School at the Eilber School building. Louise Penner was their teacher until she left to work in Hearst, then they went to the mile 103 church where Abram Wiens taught Sunday School on Sunday afternoons. He was also the deacon of the church.

**John Wiens:** "One heating device used in Reesor was the 'Quebec Heater', a high-risk stove because of its thin gage metal construction. Stoves constructed of oil barrels were also used in some buildings. The log church building in which we worshipped on Sundays had one. Henry Lepp tells the story how he would go early on Sunday morning to light the fire in the church stove. Then, when he had a roaring flame in it--which made the stove vibrate and jump, and the pipes turn red from the extreme heat--he would damper it down. Then he'd take off his parka and flail it wildly in a circular motion, in an attempt to distribute the heat. However, when the people came, they would still find the wooden benches too cold to sit on. As a result, they'd keep their coats on and crowd around the stove. It would never fail that someone would get too close to the hot stove--trying to warm up their cold behind--which suddenly caused the stench of burning fabric and smoke rising from the back of the coat. Adding to the embarrassment, the poor soul would get a proper slapping from others as they tried to extinguish the smoldering garment!

Henry's father Herman Lepp, the Minister, did not have the privilege of joining the assembly of parishioners around the hot stove. He would have to go to other end of the room and stand behind the pulpit. The vapour of his breath was clearly visible as he preached in the frosty air surrounding him."





*Interior view of Barker Church*



*The Barker Church*

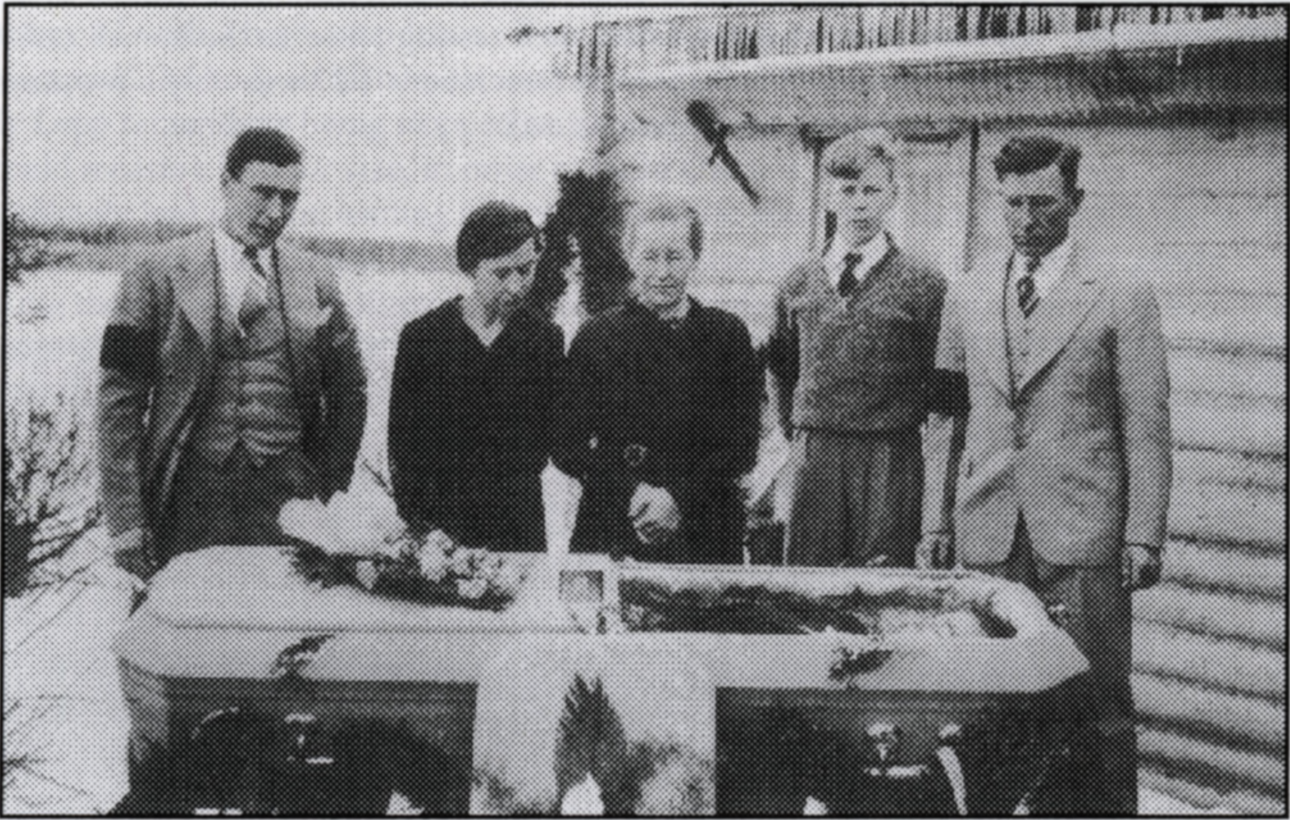




*The McGowan Church building*



### 13. Bereavements



*The grieving Penner family at John's funeral, Henry, Louise, Mrs. Penner, Ernie, and Cornelius*

**T**he church family shared both joys and sorrows, happy times and sad occasions. There were weddings, births, sicknesses and deaths. Several children lost their lives in house fires. Crow Creek claimed the life of a seven year old boy. Three young mothers were laid to rest, leaving behind their young families. A young man in his twenties also found an early grave.



*June, 1927: Reesor's first death, Isaac Bergen.  
Mrs. Bergen holding Annie, Ben, Margaret, Mr. A. Bergen, and Peter*



**Margaret Bergen Sawatsky** recalls: "My parents were barely settled in when they had a tragedy. Our young brother, Isaak, died of dysentery. There was as yet no cemetery, so they buried him in our flower bed, where he still rests. His was the first death in Reesor." Several other children found their resting place on the homesteads in those early years. Little Thomas Wiens, born in December, 1927 was only a few days old when he died. He too, was buried on the homestead.



*Funeral of the Henry Bergen's infant daughter who lost her life in a house fire*

In 1930 two cemeteries were established, both in the Eilber Township. Cemetery #1, near the Highway, was located on a one-acre lot donated by Jacob Toews and Wilhelm Rempel. Cemetery #2 was located on a half-acre plot donated by Jacob Heinrichs. The first adult death was that of Anna Enns Martens. At that time cemetery #1 was nearing completion, and she was the first person to be laid to rest there.

**Mary Tjart Wiebe** shares her memory: "When my mother passed away in April of 1932, there was still snow on the ground. She died in Hearst, about 28 miles one way, and the doctor told Dad that it would cost a lot of money to rent a train car, so he hired a farmer with a sleigh and team of horses to transport her body home to Reesor. How hard it must have been for him being left alone with five small children, ages six months to nine years of age."

**Nicholai Isaak** wrote his sad story: "After we moved to Mile 101 we lost our dear son when he drowned on May 9, 1934 in the flood waters of the Crow Creek. Nine days after we moved there, Herman and Margaret Klassen came and asked if Oskar could go with them to see the flood waters. Hardly half an hour later they came running back



telling us that Oskar had fallen into the water. I ran to the creek searching for him, but in vain. We searched for two weeks until Jacob Wiens and Herman Lepp caught his clothing, using a hook while in a boat and pulled him to the surface. He was buried in the cemetery #1 with a high attendance. Yes, God's ways are not our ways." Herman Lepp had wrapped the body in his almost new denim jacket and it was buried with him, and Rudy Lepp remembers being stopped on his way home from school by Jacob Toews, so he could measure him for size, in order to build Oskar's coffin. His body was immediately laid into the waiting casket and a white sheet was tacked over the body. At the funeral his mother Frieda Isaak sat next to the casket, seeking comfort by gently stroking the facial features through the shroud covering the remains of her only son. How heart-wrenching it must have been for a mother not being able to even view her son for the last time."



*Seven-year-old Oskar Isaak died May 9, 1934. The son of Nickolai and Frieda fell off the railway bridge that crossed Crow Creek and drowned*

**Henry Klassen** tells us: "Jacob Toews usually built the coffins as there was no funeral home. The coffin was taken to the cemetery for burial by a team of horses on a wagon or sleigh. When my little sister died, the roads were impassable. I took her little coffin in a packsack and carried it for over two miles to the cemetery."

**John Enns** writes: "When I worked around the last resting places of those who were buried here in the cemetery, there was time to ponder the fate of each one of them. Varied as they may have been, there is one thing these quiet sleepers have in common: they have found what all those who came to Reesor had sought, a "Permanent Home".



**Rudy Lepp** writes: "As my thoughts return to Reesor I recall the funerals of yesteryear. By today's standards they may appear quaint and old-fashioned. The caskets were usually constructed locally. The grave was dug by friends and neighbours. The service at the cemetery would be short and the casket would be lowered into the grave with ropes, usually by male family members of the deceased. Home-made cedar wreaths, and spruce or balsam boughs would be tossed in, to somewhat dampen the sound of the lumps of clay falling upon the casket. There would be several shovels, and the men of the community would take their turn at the shovel, while hymns were being sung. No one would ever think of leaving until the grave was filled. Sadly, today the mourners simply depart while the casket is still above ground. The most important ingredient is missing: that of being present when the departed is laid into the grave--not by strangers--but with respect and dignity by family, friends and neighbours."





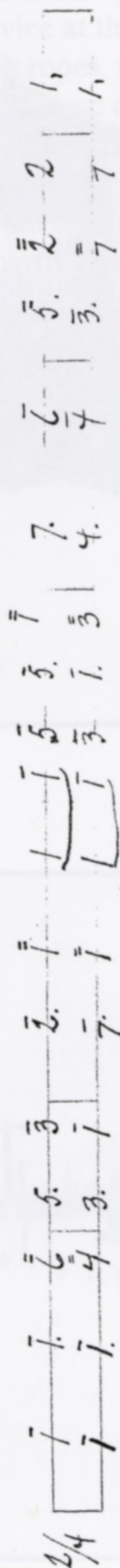
*Funeral of Mrs. Frank (Olga) Janzen*



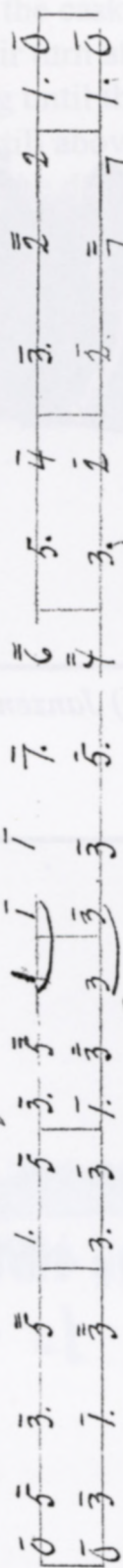
*A funeral procession*



Ddur, a=5. Wenn du noch eine Mutter hast.



- 1) Wenn du noch eine Mutter hast, so danke Gott und sei zufrieden!
- 2) Trägt sich doch leichter Leid und Karm, solange dich noch ihr Arm umschleuet,
- 3) Es gilt kein Herz auf dieser Welt, das dir so treu und fest ergehen;

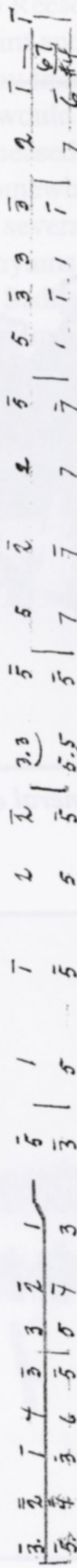


Dir ist die allerbeste Rast in Freud' u. Leid ja noch beschieden.

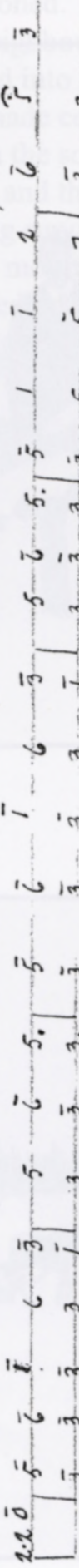
An ihrem Herzen liebe warm, die bitt're Fähr' sanfter fließet.

Es liebt dich mehr als Zeit u. Geld, es liebt dich mehr wie's eigne Leben.

a=5. Mutter ist alles, allen mir.



Mutter ist alles, allen mir, mein Klich, mein Sonnenstrahl, die ergötzt für mich ja jeden Tag so fleißig über Mutter sie liebt mich ganz wie ich als ich es weis, sie betet für mich immerfort so treulich u. so Mutter tut alles, allen mir, so war es immer noch, ob ich ihr danke oder nicht, Mutter die tat es



all! Wenn ich betrübt u. traurig bin, tragt ich mein Leid zur Mutter hin u. weis dass sie mir hilft u. heilt, die lenkt mein ersten Schritt, u. lehrt mich mein erst bebt, mein bester Freund ist sie, mein doch, Drum will ich jeden Tag auf's neu trachten dass ich mein Mutti, fern u. niemals, traurig sei, und u. so.

6 | 3 5 4 3 ||  
weis dass sie mir hilft.  
bester u. u. w.



## 14. Medical care



*Doctors Margaret Arkenstal and Bill Arkenstal  
are invited guests at the 1975 Reesor picnic*

**Dr. Arkenstal** wrote: "There emigrated to this rugged North Country groups of pioneers with whom we were intimate, both as patients and friends. One was a group of Mennonites. It was a privilege to be able to serve these people who had so little, to make their lives happy and comfortable."

It had been a problem for the settlers to find the services of a physician. When someone was ill or injured the nearest Hospital was 27 miles away in Hearst, and could only be reached by the evening train.

The doctors in Kapuskasing could be reached by taking the morning train to town and the evening train back to Reesor, making it a one day trip. The Doctor in Hearst was used more often than those in Kapuskasing, even though these could be reached on a one-day trip. However, the settlers preferred Doctor Arkenstal in Hearst. To get to Hearst the patient had to take the evening train into town and spend the night there to be able to see the doctor the next day. They then had to spend another night away from home so they could catch the morning train back to Reesor. The Doctors in Hearst did not refuse to ride out to the settlement on the section--man's little motorized rail car, in case of an emergency. Dr. Arkenstal became the extended family doctor for the settlement. "It was amazing how few really bad illnesses happened in those early years. The main support needed was at the time of birthing", Anna Berg Klassen tells us.

Mary Wiens was the first baby born in the Reesor settlement. In the beginning there were no doctors or midwives available in this pioneering district. So Olga Janzen served as the midwife and helped deliver the baby.



Frieda Isaak, who had experience as a midwife in the Ukraine, became one of the mid-wives in Reesor. She was an angel of mercy and on many occasions; when the birthing was hard or difficult, she would kneel and pray with the mother-to-be. In the winter she would travel on skis or with a dog and sled, carrying her backpack of supplies with her.

Frieda Isaak's first delivery in Reesor was the Lepp twins. Immediately after Henry (Heinrich) was born, the mother was very ill. They feared for her life. Mrs. Isaak then realized that perhaps there was a second child on the way. Fifteen minutes later Hedy (Hedwig) was born. The mother was so sick that she was unaware that she had given birth to a second child. The tiny 3.5 lb. girl had refused to breathe and her grandmother, who was staying with them at the time, had been instructed to exercise the infant girl. Seeing the great poverty around her, she prayed that the child might not live. With Rudy being only one and one-half years old, the Lepps would now have three children in diapers and only six diapers were available. This latest addition to the family would also put a great strain on their meager food supply. And there would now be a total of three adults and three children living in a small 16 ft. X 20 ft. log house. The anxious father, however, responded with: "Oh, if she could only live, it's a girl." Suddenly, defying her grandmother's prayers, the little girl let out a hearty sneeze and joined the family!



*Midwife Frieda Isaak on her way to a delivery*



**George Janzen** tells of the other mid-wife: "My parents had not lived in Reesor very long when my grandmother Janzen had asked my mother to accept the duties of a mid-wife in the section of Reesor east of mile 102, while Frieda Isaak would cover the mile 103 area. In those days talks of pregnancies and maternity cases were not meant to be topics of public discussion, and I recall occasions when a father-to-be would come and speak to my father and we children were sent to play elsewhere. He would then call my mother and I believe arrangements were made for the mid-wife to be prepared for duty at a moment's notice. Many years later, as Mom and I were discussing the days of Reesor, she told me that in her prayers she still thanks God for His guidance and that not a single mother or infant under her care had died during childbirth, which was a miracle, considering the conditions of the day."



*Peter Friesen and wife Jessie, one of Reesor's midwives*

Dental care was almost non-existent. There was a gentleman in the settlement who had pliers that could be used to extract teeth. One year a dentist came to the school and all the students had their teeth checked and worked on. He had come with a bus, in which he lived and from where he worked. The bus stood on the schoolyard and the children took turns visiting him. None of the children had ever been to a dentist before.

H. P. Lepp had a small cabinet in his home in which he kept Homeopathy pills from Europe, and people often came to him for medicine.





*Frieda Isaak with the children she delivered*

*L to R: unknown, unknown, Frieda Kroeker, Waldie Kroeker, young boy Wiebe, Annie Bergen, Hedy Lepp, Fred Berg, Ilse Roetscher, Herta Bergen, Horst Roetscher, Gerta Bergen, Martha Wiens, Walter Wiens, Peter Lepp, Henry Lepp, Peter Stoll, Herta Wiens, Martha Kroeker, Irene Lepp, Herman Lepp Jr., Hilda Bergen*



## 15. The great outdoors



*A view of nature in Northern Ontario*

**Doctor Arkenstal** wrote: "Nature up north was free and unspoiled as God had created it."

What the adults considered a wilderness the children saw as a playground. The forests intrigued the younger generation. The virgin forests lined the mud roads and surrounded the fields. In the damp, soft sphagnum moss grew the insect-eating Pitcher Plant, the Labrador Tea, and the Leather leaf and Pussy Willow; Alder and wild flowers were everywhere. The settlers were not the only foreigners to the primeval forest. Wild flowers, not native to the area, sprung up in abundance. They lined the roadways and headlands in a profusion of colour. Whenever the wilderness was pushed back and civilization moved in, they found a home.

**Charles Klassen** recalls: "Spring was the time of the year when nature was at its prime. The beauty was there for whoever took the time to view it. It was the time when flowers were in full colour: the pink roses, the blue gentians, the white Labrador tea, the mauve sheep's laurel, and even the bright yellow dandelion. And it was then that the birds were in their best plumage."





*A killdeer chick*

**Albert Berg** writes: "We had fun with the Canada Jay. They came to beg for food, and if we had any bread left over from our lunches, we threw pieces out to them, drawing them closer and closer, until they dared take it from our hands. Sometimes we were nasty and grabbed them and held them for a while before letting them go."

**Jacob T. Wiens:** "It always seemed to me that there were fewer birds in Northern Ontario than back in South Russia, from where we came. The reason for this may have been that it took more birds to fill this vast expanse of forest. There weren't any starlings or house sparrows in the area at the time. The most interesting of all the birds was the Canada Jay--the local people called them Whiskey Jacks, now also known as the Gray Jay. They really liked to be around people, especially if there were food scraps to be found. They were constant companions to people cutting pulpwood in the bush."

**Jacob T. Wiens** wrote that when lunchtime came, the Canada Jays were always there. "They would hop closer and closer to my open lunch bucket, then at the right opportunity they would get right into it and steal something. One day I found a Canada Jay caught in a leg-hold trap that our boys had set for foxes. After I released him from the trap, he flew away with his leg dangling. In time his damaged leg fell off. This bird now had an identity and so I began to notice that he followed me around wherever I went. I would see him and his mate at our house, or even when I went five miles away to cut pulpwood at our government lot. I often wondered if it was common for Jays to follow people around? Or did this particular one feel some kind of loyalty to me because I had released him from the trap? Maybe he felt that because I had somehow mutilated him, I now owed him and his family their daily bread. The bond between us lasted a number of years."

The ruffed grouse or partridge was a symbol of the North. It was well adapted to survive the winter there, finding shelter in the dense evergreens or tunneling into a snow bank during a severe storm. Partridge tunnels could be up to ten feet in length. In the spring the males would establish their territory by actively drumming while standing on their favourite log. The drumming sound was created by rapidly beating their wings. After the young were hatched they were taught how to feed and recognize danger.



In case of danger the female would often play the “wounded bird” to give her chicks a chance to flee.



*A Canada Jay*

**Henry Martens** reminisces. “One of my fondest memories of growing up in Reesor is hunting partridges with my air rifle. As a twelve year old I was not allowed to have a 22 caliber rifle. The air rifle did not come easy. One whole winter I had to split and saw enough firewood every Saturday to last the coming week. In spring my reward was an air rifle. How I treasured that gun! The partridges were very delicious to eat, especially in the fall when they fed on birch tree buds. In winter their diet consisted of spruce buds and leaves. They were a welcome source of meat at the homes of the settlers.

I also learned to clean the birds that I shot, but I can’t say that I enjoyed dressing the grouse. It was however a small price to pay for the absolute joy of going into the forest and the excitement and exhilaration of the hunt. I have only one memory of getting lost in the thick growth of trees but not feeling any panic as I felt at home in the bush. Finding an old pulpwood road, I got my bearings and made it home.”

**Henry Lepp** recalls two partridge hunting experiences. “In the winter, the partridge would sometimes dig tunnels in the snow to keep warm at night. On one



occasion I approached one of these tunnel entrances. I could tell which way the tunnel went, but not how long it was. So I made an educated guess and threw myself on the snow, where I thought the partridge should be. As luck would have it I hit it right on, and ended up going home with a live bird."

"On another occasion, I was too sick to go to school, but made a miraculous recovery by 10 o'clock. Instead of heading for school, I went into the bush to hunt, where I came across three partridge. Two had left their snow tunnel and the third was still in the snow with just it's head showing. As was my custom at the time I always carried a length of copper wire in my pocket, in fact I would have felt quite naked without it. I cut an alder stick, and fastened a snare with a three or four inch loop. Approaching the birds cautiously, I decided to first try for the bird with its head sticking out of the snow. I slowly placed the snare over the unsuspecting bird's head and worked the loop down into the snow. With a jerk of the pole the partridge was mine; I quickly dispatched it and tossed it to the side. Even though the bird was fluttering like crazy in its death dance, the other two didn't fly away. I wasn't long in adding the other two to my collection. In my opinion this sure beat going to school."

Wildlife was abundant, though often unseen. The moose was common in the north but was seen in Reesor only occasionally.



*Hunters John Wiens and Henry Martens*

**Cornelius Penner** wrote many years ago: "There was the romantic appeal of possible adventure in the untouched wilderness. We had read stories about Indians hunting wild animals and brave settlers facing the wild unknown. I recall so vividly one of the first moves I made, after we arrived in our log cabin. I walked over to the closest



bush and looked behind it for a moose. I checked behind every thicket and all I found were numerous rabbit tracks.”

**Jacob T. Wiens** tells us “One Sunday in 1942, 14 year old Johnny, our oldest son, and 15 year old Rudy, H.P. Lepp’s oldest son, left home very early in the morning. With them they had their backpacks with some lunch, fishing lines and hooks, and they also had their fathers’ 25 caliber single shot rifles. The boys were back before their families were even out of bed. At the far end of the Lepp homestead they had shot a cow moose. Of course both our families got out there to help skin the animal, and clean up the meat. Herman Lepp had to leave before they were done because he was expected to serve the church at McGowen that morning.”



*15 year old Rudy Lepp, and 14 year old John Wiens with their moose*

“The black bear often made its presence known. The bear are omnivorous: feeding on game animals, insects, honey, berries and vegetables. They fed in the fields in early spring, enjoying the sweet clover. They also loved the wild berries and were very adept at picking them off the bushes. Occasionally they would attack a vegetable garden or visit a chicken coop.”

**Gitta Roetscher Sainio** recalls the following: “A bear once feasted in our garden, digging up 17 potato plants, not leaving one potato. He had also cleaned out our summer



kitchen of food and pulled our bedding out through an eight inch opening in our window.”

Joe Fisher had also experienced bear problems. A bear had broken the window in his chicken coop. Fisher had entered the chicken coop and confronted the bear but was hesitant to shoot it at such close quarters. After the bear had left he boarded up the windows. When the bear returned the next day, it tore off the boards as if they were masking tape. Fisher rounded up some hunters who shot and wounded the bear but the troublesome bear had managed to escape the hunters. The next morning the bear returned for the third visit but this time he went to the house, instead of the chicken coop. The hunters were prepared and waiting and this time the bear did not survive but fell prey to the hunter's gun.



*Above: Patsy bear in her abode*



*Right: Rudy with his cub named Patsy Bear*

Rudy Lepp found an orphaned bear cub, which the family put up for the winter. After hibernation, she became a family pet named “Patsy Bear”. The bear, although tame, would enjoy an occasional chicken or kitten dinner whenever these would venture into her territory.

**Jacob T. Wiens** writes: “The northern environment, in which our boys grew up, was home to them. They got to know the surrounding wilderness well: the creeks, beaver dams, the lakes and rivers and the fish in them. They learned the skill of hunting and fishing at an early age. One spring day Johnny left for the back of the homestead with a shovel. He was up to something and when he wasn't back by suppertime we became concerned. We all went out looking for him and met him carrying two red fox kittens. The boys built a cage for them and raised them. Once in a while they would get away but always came back starved. Johnny sold the pelts for \$24. each, which was a lot of money



in those days. The following year he raised four red foxes and four silver foxes. Two of the pelts sold for \$45. each, a very good price.”

Muskrats and weasels were also trapped and their pelts were taken to Mattice, a seven mile walk each way which the boys didn't mind. The pelts sold for \$2.50, or more.

The snowshoe rabbit is actually not a rabbit but a snowshoe hare. It is due to the extremely large hind feet and the snowshoe effect of the widely spread toes that the rabbit, or hare got its name. It can obtain speeds of up to thirty miles an hour. This rabbit turns white in winter, providing an excellent camouflage in the snow. In spring the winter coat is shed and replaced with brown hair. The years of 1930-1931 were the high point of the rabbits' ten-year cycle, and there were tracks everywhere. Rudy Lepp remembers shooting his first rabbit when he was eight years old. Rabbit snares were set up even in the school area and had to be checked during recess, often making the young entrepreneurs late for class.

The skunk and weasel enjoyed an occasional chicken dinner. One family had heard a loud commotion in their chicken coop only to discover the presence of a skunk. It had removed the heads of eight chickens. The skunk was shot but the odour remained with them for the rest of the summer.

**George Janzen** writes: “During the summer we went for daily swims in the Crow Creek beaver pond. We had a fish net set up in the creek and it supplied more fish than we cared to clean. To solve this problem we would release some, giving them the opportunity to grow larger. Sometimes we would make an opening on top of the beaver dam just to watch the busy beavers do their repair work. Myriads of toads and frogs, teeming in the water holes and railway ditches, filled the spring night air with their inharmonious chorus.”

The Northern spring had its pros and cons, its beauties and its perplexities. In June, millions of mosquitoes and blackflies would arrive and in July the pesky horse flies would join them; these would torment the livestock. They made life for the settlers pretty miserable too. No one would ever sit outside in the evenings because of the insects.

**Rudy Lepp**: “Indoors we would use a product called ‘Fly-Tox’ and a hand sprayer to keep the insects at bay. When we were still living in the log house we did not even have a hand sprayer, but a ‘T’ shaped device was used instead. This device would be inserted into a container of insecticide and by blowing into one of the horizontal ends by mouth, a fine spray would result at the opposite end. It is amazing how simple our lifestyle was in the Depression Years.”



The Northern Lights or Aurora Borealis, literally "Dawn of the North", are so vast and awesome that none of us Reesorites will ever forget them. This natural phenomenon is like a huge curtain moving as though blown by a breeze, and dancing across the northern sky. The impact of this spectacle can best be illustrated by an incident that happened many years ago. A young man, visiting from the south, entered a house, pale and almost speechless. When he finally found the words, he mumbled over and over again that the end of the world had come. He beckoned everyone outside and pointed to the sky. What they saw was one of the most magnificent displays of the Northern Lights. "The Dawn of the North" may well be the most splendid display that nature had bestowed upon the humble Northern settlers.



*The Redekops*

*Front: Henry, Helen, Mary Back: David, Nick, Susan*



## 16. The decline and end



*The local train*

*By* 1936 the population in Reesor had grown to 500, and of these, about 300 were Mennonites. This was the high point in the history of the Reesor settlement, but then the decline began. By now most of the settlers had depleted their pulpwood sources. It was clear that new sources of income would have to be found. The young men could go to work for the Spruce Falls Company, which meant spending most of the year in the bush. Some of the girls went to Kapuskasing or Hearst to do housework. These situations broke up the families and separated the close knit community, so this did not offer a long term solution. The farms were generally too small to support their owners, and a suitable market for their products was not available. The cost of shipping farm produce to distant markets was prohibitive. This left the settlers with two choices: accepting relief or turning their backs on their hard-earned achievements and leave Reesor. For many it was a time of reflection and contemplation. They had struggled and worked unrelentingly to see their hopes and dreams come true. For a time they had created a home in the wilderness and a community in the vast virgin forest, but the end was inevitable.



In 1936, the Government sent L.H. Hanlen, from the Department of Agriculture, to compile a report on the situation. It was a "snap shot" report, as Bob Enns put it, giving a detailed account of each settler's economic and personal situation. The report showed, in brief, that the average 75 acre homestead could yield up to 1,000 to 1,500 cords of wood, but the average pulpwood remaining to be cut was only about 125 cords per lot. However, 40 of the settlers had no pulpwood left to cut. The record showed that thirty settlers were on relief. A family of eleven received \$24. per month, a family of five received \$16. When asked if they intended to stay, sixty settlers answered "yes", seven said "no", and six were undecided.

*Altester* J.H. Janzen, who had negotiated extensively with the Government officials to have more homesteads made available, reported that the settlers stood at a critical turning point. If the government continually refused to help the settlers meet their needs, the continued existence of the settlement was questionable.

Several families had come and gone, some only stayed a few years, but the real decline was initiated when the Toews family left Reesor in 1936 for Leamington, Ontario. Jacob Toews had been a pillar in the settlement. For the settlement, this was the beginning of the end. Thus the trend was established, and in the following year, several more families left for new horizons. It was only a matter of time now. Every year more and more families abandoned their homesteads, severed their hopes and dreams, and boarded the local train for a new life elsewhere.



*1937: A group of families leaving Reesor*





Most left for Southern Ontario where more job opportunities were available. Others travelled as far as British Columbia, while some found permanent employment locally.

*The Henry Woelk and Rempel families waiting for the train*

Friends gathered at the (wheel-less) boxcar station at mile 103 to bid their good-byes, and sing their farewell song: *Gott mit Euch bis wir uns wieder sehn* (God be with you till we meet again), while tears flowed. Some never met again, while others met at the annual gatherings in Southern Ontario.

In 1940, the Government finally granted wood lots to those who had a deed for their property. They were allowed to cut 100 cords a year. This would supplement the meager farm income. For many this offer came too late, as the exodus had begun and could not be reversed.



*A bush camp in the woodlot granted by the government in 1940*



The first year one was allowed to have someone cut one's wood but the following year the Government insisted that each settler had to cut his own pulpwood. So in the winter of 1942-1943 H.P. Lepp, assisted by son Rudy, cut his 100 cords of pulpwood. They had to hire someone to haul it out while Rudy did the piling. This brought in the highest net income. Their cheque for the 100 cords amounted to exactly \$400.. This was the biggest cheque Herman Lepp had ever received in his entire life. Trudel was given a substantial amount of money, as well as the Lepp lot at the tracks, and the lumber left on their original homestead to cover the bill. After buying four new tires for their Model A Ford and paying the portion of rent on the boxcar they shared with the Loewens, the Lepp family had about \$100. left for travelling expenses.

**John Enns** writes: "When H.P. Lepp expressed his intention to leave Reesor it was in these words: "It is a pity to see more and more of the good settlement crumble and fall away. As for me, I have the feeling that the time has come for me too, to depart. Things are no longer what they used to be, and I feel that under the developing trends I can no longer continue to do fruitful work here as a Minister. The thought of leaving fills me with sadness. As for the hopes and faith in the success of our venture here, where have they all gone? It seems unthinkable that here anyone will ever again plow a new furrow in hope."



*The way it used to be*





*Anna Berg and Henry Klassen wedding: 1943*

H.P. Lepp's last function as Minister was officiating at the marriage of Henry Klassen and Anna Berg on May 15, 1943. The Lepps left a few days later, with Rudy travelling in the boxcar, since there was a cow and some chickens that needed taking care of. The other seven family members piled into the old model A Ford car.

Abram T. Wiens was then chosen as leader of the congregation. He read the sermons and taught Sunday School. Rev. Enns, from Manitoba, visited the settlement and baptized Wilhelm Janzen, who became the last person to join the Reesor church.



*The Reesor church group*



After Rudy Wiens left the store, Trudel hired Constantine Berg. Soon after this, seeing the settlement decline, Trudel moved to Hearst and opened another store there. Mary Berg joined her brother and helped run the store until they left in 1943. Trudel then chose to leave the store in the hands of his brother-in-law, Norbert Gamache. In 1945 the store burned down, and Gamache moved into an adjacent building and set up his business and living quarters there. When the government decided to widen the highway, the building had to be relocated, and Gamache moved his business to Opatatika. Cornelius Rempel, who lived next to the store in Reesor, took over the Post Office in 1954 and even built a little store to serve the few settlers left in Reesor. They kept the store going until they too decided to leave in September of 1967 and the Post Office was closed. Beginning in August 25, 1967, the settlers had to once again get their mail from Mattice, as they had done years before. But it was different now, no longer a 7 mile walk; they went by car on a paved highway.

By 1947 the enrollment at the McGowan school had dropped significantly with only seven pupils attending. The School Board decided to move John Enns to the Eilber school. All German classes were dropped. Jeanette Balesdent, who had attended the Eilber school, was hired to teach at McGowan, S.S. #4. It was during this time that this school burned down and its seven pupils were sent to the Eilber school.

The Eilber school building, then twenty-five years old, began to lean, since it did not stand on a proper foundation. So, in 1951 a new school was built near the railway tracks on a two-acre lot donated by Max Balesdent. It was well-insulated and wired for electricity even though electric power was not available until September 8, 1953. As far as the school was concerned, the pioneering days were over. In 1966 the Department of Education decided to close most of the rural schools, including the Reesor school. For one year the pupils were transferred by bus to Kapuskasing. After that they were taken to the Hearst school. John Enns had served the schools in Reesor for twenty-eight years. To quote him: "For every dollar I earned I had to walk a mile first." He taught another five years in Kapuskasing before retiring.

Conscription during the Second World War also played a role in the demise of the settlement. Some of the young men were drafted and sent away for Alternative Service (Conscientious Objectors). Rudy Wiens tells us that when the war broke out in 1939, several young men were sent to a C.O. camp in Montreal River. His dad had served earlier as *Sanitäter* (similar to Red Cross) in the Russian army. Rudy felt that it was a good way to help the wounded soldiers. After helping out at the Trudel store for about a year, and working two summers in Southern Ontario, he got his call for service in the Medical Army Corp. Some felt that this was not a good idea for they would be putting their lives in danger. He had prayed about it and confesses that it had been one of the biggest struggles of his life. Henry Penner and Rudy both enlisted on November 18, 1943 and were sent to Calgary, Alberta. They were assured that they would never be expected



to take up arms. There were quite a few who enlisted in this non-combatant part of the army. It had been a six day trip to Northern England. While in camp there Rudy had taken courses in nursing and achieved the highest certificate a private could get. The extra training had helped him treat the wounded soldiers. In November of 1945, when his father and sister were diagnosed with tuberculosis he was returned to Canada, even though his X-ray results were negative. This experience in England had taught him lessons that he would otherwise not have learned. He had no regrets about going into the Medical Corp.

As there were very few church members left in 1947, it was decided to dissolve the Reesor United Mennonite Church. John Enns contacted the Government Office in order to register the dissolution. The church registry was then sent to the Conference for safe keeping. These few members of the Reesor group were not forgotten by the Conference. Once or twice a year they would send a Minister to serve the people there. In most cases it was H. P. Lepp, who had been their Minister, and knew the place and the people.



*H. P. Lepp's visit to the Reesor group in the new school*

*L to R: Elsie Rempel, John Enns, Cornie Rempel, Annie Rempel with Anne and Edward, H. P. Lepp, Mrs. Enns, Cornelius Rempel, Henry Rempel, Mrs. A. Lepp, Bachelor Wiens, Jake Rempel*

Bob Enns remembers that long after the settlement was disbanded, H.P. Lepp would return for an occasional visit and Minister to the people there. After the services, as the adults conversed, he would draw simple sketches for the children and tell them a story to go with it. It was a personal recollection for Bob since he had been one of these children. "Herman Lepp was spiritually inclined to feel close to God in the wilderness",



writes Bob Enns. Several Ministers from various denominations in Kapuskasing and Hearst would avail themselves for Sunday afternoon services, between 1949 to 1956.

The cemeteries received little care for several years, then in 1967, George Enns upgraded both cemeteries as a centennial project. He poured seventeen concrete headstones for the unmarked graves at cemetery #1, and also seventeen crosses for the non-Mennonite gravesites there. Though neglected, the mounds of the seven graves at the other cemetery were still visible. For these George Enns made wooden markers, bearing their names. At the 1967 Ontario Mennonite Conference sessions, Nicholai Isaak moved a resolution that the Conference accept transfer of ownership title of the Reesor Cemetery. The transfer was entered in the Land Title Office in March 1968.



*Memorial Park with rocks along the fence-line and the Reesor cairn.  
The cemetery is located behind the evergreens in back*

John Enns took the initiative to ensure that the memory of Reesor and its settlers would not be forgotten. After two years of red tape he managed to purchase a small parcel of land for a Memorial Park. It bordered the Highway and adjoined the cemetery. After having it surveyed he had 400 cubic yards, or 22 truckloads of clay brought in. A hired bulldozer spread the clay and he later levelled it all by hand. He dug holes for 25 cedar fence posts to surround the area. He located ten large boulders and had them put along the fence on either side of the Park to represent the ten original settlers who had



arrived there in 1925. All this was done at a personal cost to him of almost \$2,500. A memorial fund was later created to provide perpetual care for the cemetery. Most of the money came from the estate of John Enns. Henry Rempel, of Mattice, was given trusteeship of the cemetery's maintenance.

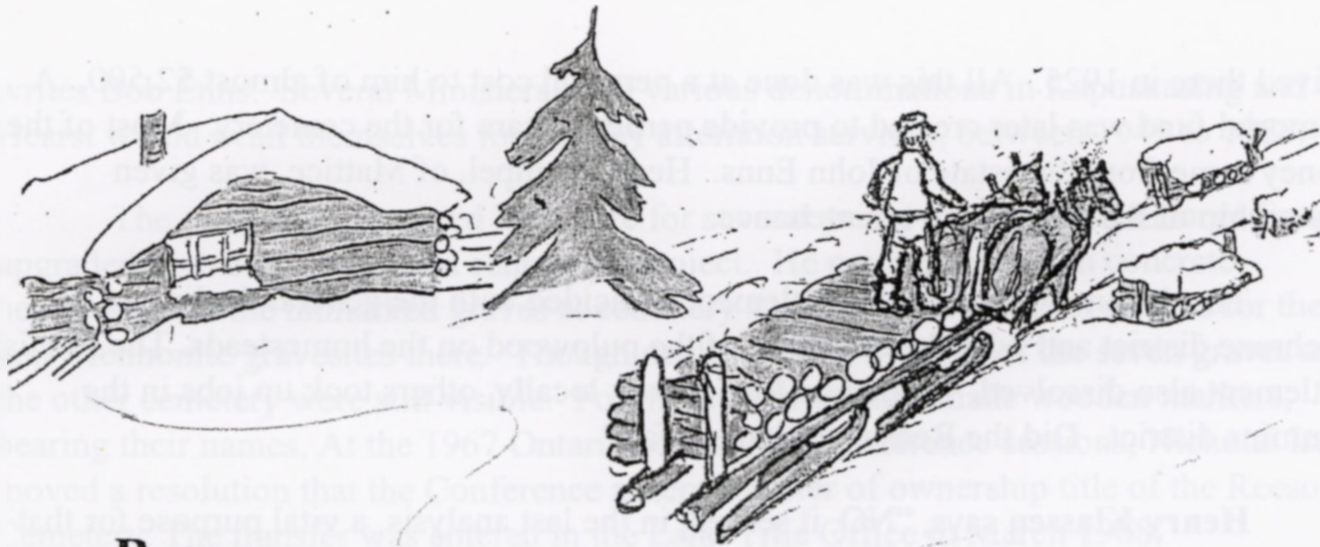
The decline of the Reesor settlement coincided with the general decline of the Cochrane district and with the depletion of the pulpwood on the homesteads. The Finnish settlement also dissolved. Some had found work locally, others took up jobs in the Timmins district. Did the Reesor settlement fail?

**Henry Klassen** says, "NO, it served, in the last analysis, a vital purpose for that time. It presented an opportunity for advancement much better, in fact, than that which awaited many settlers going to the western Provinces". The settlement was a stepping stone in the journey of this group of people. They became a close-knit family, helping each other spiritually and physically and they have maintained a bond to this day.



*Alice Schmidt and Mary Berg in a warm embrace as the Schmidt family leaves Reesor*





## Reesor

Der letzte Baum ist gefällt  
 Der Hieb der Axt Verklungen,  
 Wo Waldesrauschen sich gesellt,  
 Wo manches Lied gesungen,  
 Das Herz gelacht:  
 Der Mut erwacht:  
 Da stellt sich ein der Kummer.

Es beugt der Mann das stolze Haupt,  
 Er legt die Stirn in Falten  
 So lang hat er gehofft, geglaubt  
 An Gottes gnäd'ges Walten.  
 Als das Beil erklang  
 Die Sege sang  
 In günstigen Erntestunde.

Doch nun, -- die Arbeit ist getan  
 Die Ernte, -- auch verzehrt  
 Was ist's das sich der Mann erwarb  
 Wonach sein Herz begehrt?  
 Ein Stumpenfeld,  
 'ne trostlos Welt,  
 Bar aller freudigen Hoffnung.

Gottes Ernte hat man gedroschen  
 Von Seinen Korn sich froh genärt.  
 Doch ist hier jetzt der Mut erloschen  
 Hat sich im Zweifel umgekehrt  
 Als Gottes Hand  
 Den Blick entwandt  
 Aus lichten Zukunftsweiten.

The last tree has been felled,  
 The axes' blows have ceased  
 The whispering pine are compelled  
 With song and laughter to concede  
 Where the hearts rejoiced,  
 Where valour shone  
 Hope and courage now are gone.

Man's once proud head now is bowed,  
 His brow in wrinkles laid.  
 In hope and faith his field he ploughed,  
 His homage to God he paid.  
 As the axe-blow rang,  
 As the Swede-saw sang  
 Contentment and happiness reigned.

The laborers now are idle,  
 The larders are empty too.  
 What was the gain he earned,  
 For which his heart had yearned?  
 Stump-filled fields,  
 Meager yields,  
 Hopelessness, despair and tears.

God's harvest has all been flailed,  
 From his bounty we are all fed.  
 But spirits and hearts have failed,  
 Courage and hope have fled,  
 When God's hand  
 Changed their plans,  
 Of future fruitful lands.

H. P. Lepp  
 (Hedy Lepp Dennis, English translation)

*In his poem above, Rev. H. P. Lepp expresses the Reesorite's anguish  
 about leaving their beloved settlement*



# Epilogue

## a) The tradition of picnics

An annual picnic was usually held at the Loewen, Rempel, or Enns homesteads and less frequently at the Missinabi River in Mattice. This tradition, started in Reesor many long years ago, is still in practice today. Former Reesor settlers and their families gather annually for a picnic of fellowship, food and fun. The second Sunday in August is always "Reesor Day". For years this picnic was held at the Forestry Station in St. Williams, Ontario, often drawing as many as 150 former Reesorites and their families for the occasion.

At the 1974 reunion, picnic plans were made to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the settlement. This event was to be held in 1975, at the former Reesor Community. John Enns had prepared his yard and field to accommodate tents, trailers and motor homes. The event exceeded all expectations: people came from as far away as British Columbia, Manitoba, and of course, Southern Ontario. The Reesorites visited and decorated the graves of loved ones, and hiked across overgrown roads to seek out their former homesteads, often finding only a hidden cellar hole. Treasures of old cutlery, chipped china, a school desktop, even a few stalks of rhubarb, were carried back. In the evening the former settlers gathered around a campfire to reminisce and visit. Only those who have lived there can truly feel the depth of emotion that prevailed. The hard times had been forgotten, but the good and cherished memories remained.



*Picnic at Mattice*





*The Reesorites enjoy an afternoon swim in the Missinabi River*



*A cellar hole is all that remains of this settler's home*





*Campers set up on John Enns's field*



## b) The Memorial Park is established



*This is the only remaining Reesor sign, located at the former school road  
L to R: Irene Lepp Rempel, Hedy Lepp Dennis, and Henry Lepp*

**What** is left to mark Reesor's place in history, since the road sign was removed in 1969?

**John Wiens** reports: "It is ironic that the only obvious means of identifying that geographic location, which was once the Reesor settlement, is the Woodcutters Union Monument at mile 101. It was erected exclusively as a result of a tragic outcome of a violent conflict between members of the Woodcutters Union and the neighbouring non-Mennonite settlers. It was contrary to everything that this peaceful community had stood for." As a result, in 1975 at the 50th. anniversary celebration and home-coming of the former Reesor people, the thought was conceived to erect a monument to depict its true history. Consequently funds were raised, close to \$2,000, and a design and script were approved. On August 19, 1978, a 2 metre stone, which was cut and carved in Leamington, Ontario, was erected in the Memorial Park between the Highway and the cemetery. The second, and official dedication ceremony took place on August 10, 1980 at the second Reesor homecoming.





*The monument was erected in August of 1978  
Present were John Enns (left back), Ken and Hedy Dennis, John and Edith Wiens,  
and Rex VI--John Enns's dog*



*The monument's headpiece*

“The stone reveals a brief history of the settlement's early beginnings in 1925, in both English and German. On the headstone is a sketch that first appeared on the cover page of the 1939 issue of the “*Octa Nostra*” paper, with the initials H.P.L. They stand for the artist who designed it, Herman Lepp, an artistic individual.

On the sketch we see the walking plow deeply entrenched in the newly cultivated soil and the sun on the horizon.”





*English inscription*



*German inscription*

**H.P. Lepp** wrote the Frontispiece in the German language; it was translated by John Enns, who said: "Take a good look at it, it is simple to be sure, but not merely prosaic and matter-of-fact. Even the axe handle, which may well be stained with the sweat of your hands, is touched by a light-ray of the coming day. It is so, that even this inanimate steely companion of many years is called upon to work with every new stroke, some worthwhile thing for the new age. The sun that rises with wide-reaching rays from behind every upturned sod, is the mystery of light and warmth, the essence of the Eternal, who dwells above all eternity. He has been entrusting our people for centuries, with the plow, this symbol of service and peace among men, to plow and plow until the earth is ready to receive the seed. Surely, a glorious vocation."

The inscription reads: "This stone was erected by the immediate descendants of the settlers who founded the Settlement of Reesor in 1925 and those who arrived later. Most of them were German-speaking Mennonites who had come from the Ukraine only a short time prior to settling in the pathless bush which at that time prevailed in the area, homesteading on some ten square miles surrounding this stone. They and their neighbors founded a community of some 450 people which existed, gradually diminishing, until 1967. To commemorate the fortitude of their pioneering parents and a happy, if rigorous, childhood in Reesor, this marker was gratefully dedicated in the year 1978."

During the morning dedication service on August 10, 1980, Joshua 4: 1-9 was read, "and when they shall ask, tell them." Cornelius Toews delivered the message, and



Eric Berg led the congregational singing. The choir, organized the night before, sang several appropriate songs of praise and thanksgiving. Then John Wiens unveiled the monument and read the inscription on it. David Mathies, the last surviving founder, presented John Enns with a wooden bowl that he had made from Reesor birchwood.



*August 10, 1980: David Mathies, the last surviving founder, presents John Enns with a bowl made of Reesor birchwood*

John Enns then introduced Amos Reesor, son of Thomas Reesor who had assisted the early settlers and in whose honour the settlement was named.



*Amos Reesor, son of Thomas Reesor, brings greetings*



Like a lifeguard this cairn stands there to protect the final resting place of the former Reesor settlers and to assure their memory in years to come.



*The Reesor natives gather for a family picture*





*The Reesorite gathering in 1993*



### c) The last Reesor Mennonite inhabitant is laid to rest

There was another Reesor gathering in 1986, but of a very different nature. It was the funeral of John Enns, the last of the Mennonite settlers of Reesor. John Enns had always enjoyed the solitude of the north and had even declined an invitation to go teach in Manitoba when a position was available there. After having lived so many years in Reesor he had learned to love and respect the nature that surrounded him. Civilization could not replace the wonders of God's creation.



*John Enns's funeral in 1986*

On August 30, John Enns was called home. The funeral was held in the Catholic Church in Mattice. John Wiebe and priest Noel officiated at the service and the congregation sang "Nearer my God to Thee". Friends from Southern Ontario joined his family and his many French friends and neighbours as they laid him to rest in the Reesor cemetery, beside his parents and sister.

John Enns had come to Reesor in 1926 with his parents, two sisters and two brothers. He taught school for many years in Reesor, and then in Kapuskasing. He had also hosted the Reesor reunion three times, in 1975, 1980, and in 1985. He always stayed in touch with the former settlers, and many families would come to visit him, bringing their children to introduce them to the former settlement. Some of those children developed a kinship with him, and later would even go up by themselves to camp and fish with him.





*John Enns and Rex VI*

John Enns had maintained the cemetery for years and it was there, while mowing the lawn, that he suffered a heart attack. Friends had rushed him to the hospital in Kapuskasing. While resting there he had voiced his wish of not having to stay there too long, and his wish was fulfilled four hours later, when God called him home.



*A Reesor Picnic*



This closed a vital chapter in the history of Reesor but the Reesor story did not end there. A group gathered there again in 1990, 1993, and in 1996, but now no longer at the Enns residence; there was an available parking area near the cemetery which was the former Cornelius Rempel farm. The Rempel children--one-time students of John Enns--now hosted these reunions. Elsie, with her husband Gilles Gagnon (Mayor of the town of Hearst), supplied and erected a tent with dropdown side walls to protect against wind and rain. This open tent was large enough to shelter the whole group, plus all could be seated at the same time to share meals and picnic lunches. Dora (Parise) Dechamps and her sister Aurore DeCamps (passed away 1999), organized games and prizes.

Other Reesorites still living in the area are John Reimer, Bill and Jake Janzen, Ursula (Roetscher) Flesher, Eric and Mike Peltinen, and Jim Zvezdaryk. Jim took it upon himself to care for the Eilber Road cemetery (#2). Plans were in progress for perhaps the final meeting in the year 2000, marking the 75th anniversary of Reesor's founding.

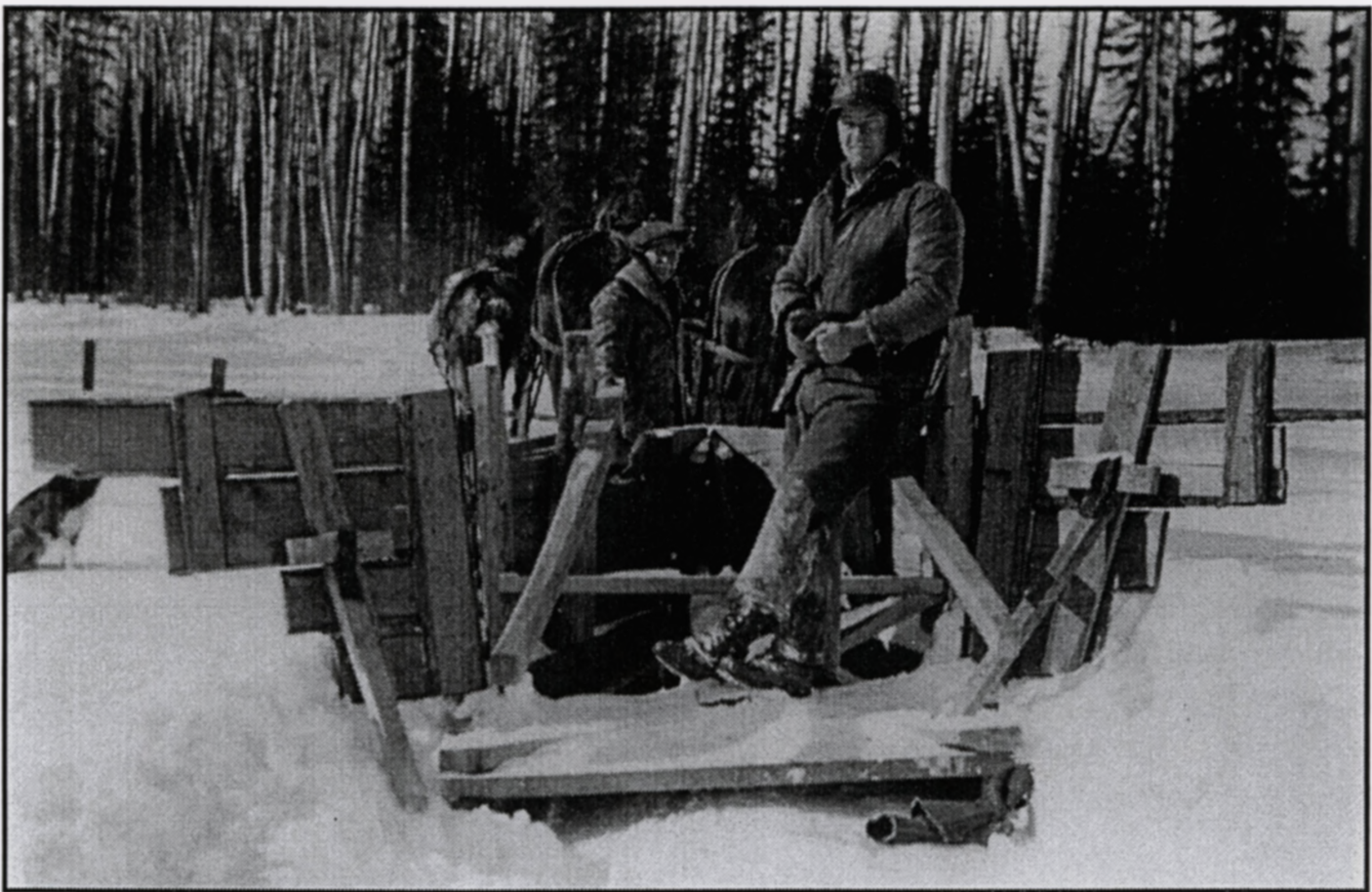


*The local train with the settlement of Reesor in the background*





*John Enns cutting pulpwood*



*John Enns with homemade snow plough shown in action on page35*



#### d) The settlement's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary



*August 12, 2000: Reesor's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary picnic*

The year 2000 marked the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Reesor settlement in Northern Ontario. About 250 former Reesor residents and their descendants journeyed back on August 12 and 13 to revisit and re-experience their past. They were drawn there to relive, reflect and remember. Some had travelled long distances, coming from Texas, British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba and Southern Ontario. Friendships were renewed and memories shared.

George Reesor, grandson of Thomas Reesor, after whom the settlement was named, and his wife Anna from Stouffville, Ontario and George's sister, Carol and her husband Lorne Smith from Markham, Ontario joined the celebration. Their presence was much appreciated and they were made to feel at home with the group.





*Reesor picnic sign*

Several trailers and campers had arrived already on Friday evening. They were joined the next day by many more, and the gravel pit parking lot started to fill up. Tents were set up and campers parked, the motel rooms in Kapuskasing, reserved months before, were filled. With every new arrival the excitement grew.



*Tents and trailers set up for the reunion*



A large open tent shelter was set up to house the tables and chairs, propane stoves and barbecues. Several traditional meals were shared, like *Borscht* and crusty bread, and also a Sunday morning pancake breakfast.



*A large open-sided shelter was set up*

On Saturday most of the guests revisited their former homesteads, which were now reclaimed by nature. All they could find were the overgrown cellar holes, an occasional well, a few surviving flowers and some neglected rhubarb stalks.

The cemeteries were revisited, and loved ones remembered. The Memorial Park, between the Highway and the cemetery, where the cairn is located, also drew many visitors. The upkeep of the cemetery and park is financed by the Reesor Historical Memorial Fund to which several former Reesorites have contributed--John Enns being one of them. The fund is now under the trusteeship of the Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada.

On Sunday morning a worship service was held on the cemetery grounds. Jim Penner, grandson of Rev. Cornelius Penner of Reesor, was the speaker. His message was very appropriate, "When your children ask, tell them." Joshua 4, 21-22. A choir, led by Helen Wiens, was a wonderful addition to the service. The congregational singing was also a powerful uplifting rendition of praise and thanksgiving. Betty Penner accompanied the singing on a key-board.





*Louise Enns Martens, 95 years*

*"Es waren zwei unvergessliche Tage",*  
(They were two unforgettable days) Louise Enns Martens writes. At the age of 95, she was the oldest participant there.

**Rudy Lepp:** "Today wild flowers grow in profusion on the Township roads, speckled alders fill the ditches once dug by settlers, now long departed. Fields, once lush and green, are once again reverting into forest. Where once proud log houses stood, now stand the alders, tamaracks and poplars, concealing the cellar holes we so fervently try to locate. The wilderness we once attempted to tame, is returning with a vengeance to reclaim its own. The North cannot be conquered, yet, given time, it may well conquer us."

The wilderness is slowly reclaiming the homesteads and country roads. Reesor will always be remembered even though the forests reclaimed its fields and the log houses have crumbled years ago; Reesor is gone but not forgotten.



## e) Postscript

“Those of us, now in our seventies, were the true ‘Children of Reesor’. Reesor does not exist anymore, except in our hearts.” (Rudy Lepp)

“These years went a long way in shaping my life and I thank God for the memories, the experiences, and above all, the people of our Reesor experience.” (Susan Friesen Pankratz)

“Reesor lives on in the stories told, experiences shared and passed on to children and grandchildren.”

“Thanks to loving parents and two older brothers, I had a sheltered and carefree childhood and youth there. Reesor still holds happy memories for me.” (Albert Berg)

“If the people in this world would work together, get along and help each other like the people in Reesor did, there would be no wars and it would be a peaceful world to live in.” (Bill Janzen)

“How would the current generation react to a lifestyle that was ours in the thirties? Would they have the pioneer spirit to attempt to tame the wilderness? Would the women of today remain with their men through poverty, tribulation and misery, the way the women of Reesor did? Perhaps not, those were unique times that will never return.” (Rudy Lepp)

“I remember Reesor more as an event and occasion than a place. These memories appear like fragments in time, like a snapshot of occasions.” (Victor Lepp)

“I feel my Reesor days have greatly influenced my life. It is here that I developed an awe for trees, for the serene, and an appreciation for the primitive. Even the fact that we have, for over 50 years, kept the bush on our farm in Harrow, with its well-trodden trails, while the neighbouring farmers eradicated theirs, has its roots in our early Reesor days and has in turn kept something of Reesor alive in us.” (Herman Lepp)

“It was in the mid 1930s that the population of Reesor stood at its maximum. Estimates place it at around 500. Of these approximately 300 were Mennonites, 150 were Finlanders and about 50 were of various other ethnic groups. The earliest settlers of Reesor were Mennonites, whose dream was to establish a closed community. This dream did not materialize, but what emerged was a rich mosaic of ethnic cultures and customs, blended into this colourful community we know as Reesor!” (Rudy Lepp)





*John Enns is taking a break from his building project*



## f) Reflections

**H**erta Bergen Schwartz: "Memories are a wonderful treasure and I have many to draw from."

Rudy Lepp: "Reesor is seeing the 'Local' approach, smoke belching and steam hissing."



*The approaching train: from left, in background we see Rempel's two-story home, the Immigrantenhaus, Trudel's store and barn*



John Enns: "Rev. Thomas Reesor was invited to C. Rempel's and Annie Martens' wedding, which was his last visit to the settlement that bore his name."

David Tjart: "I remember the way men stood to pray in church (I peeked): one foot ahead of the other, one work-gnarled hand clasped over the other. For years, I thought you couldn't pray unless you stood just like that."

Mary Tjart Wiebe: "...my uncle and my Dad shooting a spruce grouse and the soup we cooked was green."

*To the left: 1937 Wedding of Annie Martens and Cornie Rempel*



Margitta Roetscher Sainio: "We had to try the ice in the ditches and I broke through and filled my boots, and by the time I got home my boots were frozen to my clothes. What parents didn't have to put up with."

David Tjart: "Skiing in the moonlight and coming home to fresh bread and hot chocolate."

Charlie Klassen: "In March the snow would start to melt on sunny days, but during the night it would freeze and a hard crust would form that could carry a man or even a horse, in the early morning hours. It was a great opportunity to go places not easily accessible at other times."

Hedy Lepp Dennis: "In spring when the snow melted it flooded the Crow Creek and it became a torrent river. To this day, whenever we cross this creek, we think of Oskar Isaak."

David Tjart: "At recess time, Ernie Penner took us kids over to test out their new electric fence. We would hold hands and then the one nearest to the fence would touch it and transmit the shock down the line."

Rudy Lepp: "We used to catch horse flies and dip their heads into soft mud. When released these huge flies would always fly straight up and we would watch them until they disappeared from view. It is possible that they were the very first astronauts."

Hedy Lepp Dennis: "Irene and I walking home in the evening and staring into the forest along the road, in fear of a bear, and saying over and over again; 'God will protect us' Then realizing that we were using Gods name in vain, we changed it to: 'someone is looking after us.' We had never heard swearing and did not know what that was."

David Tjart: "The sight of my brother coming home, several hours late. The new horses had been spooked by the train whistle, and had bolted and run away, demolishing the sleigh, and almost my brother."

George Janzen: "During the summer our swimming hole would become infested with blood suckers; they were so plentiful that the pikes could not devour them all. These creatures were determined to attach themselves to us. We would sit in a row, on the bank, like sparrows on a telephone line, and pull these leeches off our bodies."

David Tjart: "Going into the bush to cut wood for a whistle, with my brand new jack knife and cutting my thumb which left a scar I can still see."

Margitta Roetscher Sainio: "We'd hike to Boundary Lake, miles and miles away and had fun there. Oh yes! The boys would upset the boat with us girls in it. That was fun?"

Irene Lepp Rempel: "I was delighted the Christmas Hedy received her second toothbrush at school, because I inherited her old one. I felt that I had reached the next step in my life, that of being almost an adult now."



Margaret Bergen Sawatsky: "As soon as we girls were 15 or 16 we went to Kapuskasing to do house work and sent the money home to help out."

David Tjart: "My sister Tina going to Hearst to work in St. Paul's Hospital, twenty miles away and being able to find her way home."

Rudy Lepp: "One Christmas Mother found herself in possession of only 90 cents, so that was all she was able to spend for presents. She ordered a 15 cent item for each of us six, from Eaton's."

Hedy Lepp Dennis: "Our absolute favourite gift was an old Eaton's catalogue. We would cut out the items from the children's page and these dolls created our large families, always without parents. The bigger boys in our make-believe families would go and pile wood, while the girls would keep house and look after the younger siblings, and yet they all managed to go to school."



*Eaton's catalogue paper dolls*

Margaret Bergen Sawatsky: "We children didn't notice how poor we were, we made our own fun. Ben and Peter were quite ingenious in making sleighs and whatever else they needed."

Mary Tjart Wiebe: "Mrs. Jessie Friesen taught us girls how to knit and embroider. She also sewed some dresses for us from checkered flour bags. Mrs. Friesen would also invite us to look through the catalogue and pick out a style that we liked and she then did her best to copy it."

Herman Lepp: "We never owned new bought clothes, they were either hand-me-downs, sewn from gifts of used clothing, or homemade."

Anna Berg Klassen: "When we go back to our old homestead we still find beautiful, large, rhubarb plants that were planted over 60 years ago. There are also lovely patches of flowers still in bloom."



Victor Lepp: "A trip on top of the hay wagon, hanging on to my Dad for dear life as Abie trotted the horses across a log corduroy bridge and Dad shouting for him to slow down and Abie just grinning."

David Tjart: "At pig-butcher time, being given the bladder to use as a balloon."

Hedy Lepp Dennis: "Henry and I going to the store with our vinegar bottle and asking for coal oil; we were lucky that they were out of coal oil."

David Tjart: "My first job, helping Peter Friesen cultivate potatoes with a horse-drawn cultivator and my pride and joy at earning 35 cents, truly a fortune!"



*Working the land for the potato crop*

Mary Tjart Wiebe: "Who remembers dancing to the record, From Frisco to Cape Cod, and when the gramophone didn't work we would take turns spinning the record by hand."

Henry Lepp: "There were snow fleas up north and since they were black they attracted the heat from the sun. As a result we would find a bunch of them together melted deep into the snow."

Hedy Lepp Dennis: "Walking home from school and seeing a most splendid rainbow. The amazing thing was that the end of the rainbow rested in the middle of the road right in front of us. We all took turns going to stand in the rainbow."



### **g) Statistics (chronology)**

- 1926** - Siding built at Mile 103
  - School section # 3, Eilber opened
- 1927** - Herman P. Lepp ordained, June 18
  - Trudel opens store
- 1928** - Cornelius Penner ordained, December 16
  - Post Office opened
- 1930** - Roads opened
  - Blacksmith shop opened
  - First frame house built, the teacherage
- 1931** - First car arrives
  - Garage opened
- 1932** - Church patented, Reesor United Mennonite Church, Sept. 8
  - Second school opened, Barker School Section #4
- 1934** - Last homestead taken up by new Mennonites
- 1935** - Second Church built
  - Coldest day , January 24, minus 64 F. or -53 C.
- 1936** - Reesor reaches its peak, 450 population
  - 73 homesteads owned by Mennonites, 50 by others
  - Settlers had cleared a total of 850 acres of land
  - Beginning of the end: exodus
- 1938** - New school built in McGowan Township
- 1942** - Only 18 families left in Reesor
- 1947** - Reesor Mennonite Church dissolved, February, 23



- 1948** - Final annual church meeting, January 5
- 1949** - Sunday services discontinued after November 13
- 1967** - Reesor Post Office closed
- 1968** - Cemetery ownership transferred to Conference, March 6
- 1969** - Reesor road sign removed and taken off the map
- 1975** - Reesorites return for 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary picnic
- 1978** - Monument erected at Memorial Park
- 1980** - Reesor Monument dedicated
- 1985** - Third reunion at Reesor
- 1986** - John Enns, last Reesor Mennonite inhabitant, laid to rest
- 1990** - Reesor Homecoming Reunion
- 1993** - Reesor Reunion in Reesor
- 1996** - Reesor Reunion in Reesor
- 2000** - Reesor Settlement's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration, August 12-13 in Reesor





*The 1996 Reesor picnic in Reesor*



