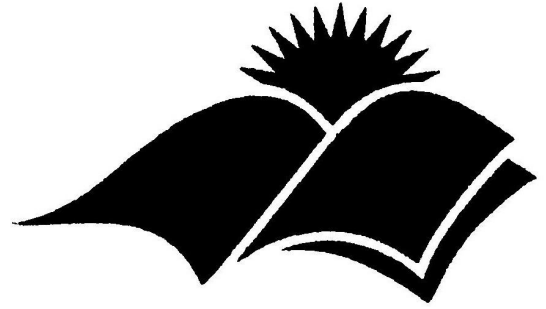


Historian



Essex-Kent Mennonite Historical Association

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

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Edited by Jill Nicholson

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History of Pyramid Cannery

by Jill Nicholson

Many of us who grew up in Essex and Kent Counties either worked in a canning factory or knew someone who did, especially during the 'busy' season. To this day, the smell of tomatoes wafts through the area in August and September.

In Essex and Kent Counties, the Mennonites are known for their contributions to the success of farming and greenhouses which has been well documented. However, what is less known, is the impact that Mennonites have made in the world of business.

One enterprise that was important to the economy was Pyramid Cannery. The cannery was started by a group of ten business people including Paul Klassen, Hedy Klassen, Sam Schostak, Henry Koop, Jake Koop, Diedrich Dick, Henry Dick, Jacob Willms and Jake Tiessen. It was located at the north end of Victoria Avenue in Leamington, Ontario and opened with a new factory building processing tomatoes in 1952. During this time, the

plant averaged between 90 and 100 employees including many Mennonites and Italian immigrants.



In 1956 Pyramid Cannery was purchased by Boese Foods Ltd. based in St. Catharines, Ontario operated by Martin Boese, who was born in the Crimea, Southern Russia in 1888. As a young married man, he had a farm in the Ukraine. He, his wife and his seven children moved to Canada in 1930, first to Kitchener, and when he could not find work, to Vineland, Ontario. He farmed in Beamsville, established a trucking company and then bought a fruit operation in Port Dalhousie. He

later set up the canning factory on the property producing the brand name Henley.



Martin Boese

Martin Boese became Vice-President for Pyramid Canners when his son-in-law, Frank J. Andres became President and General Manager in 1958. Some familiar faces continued to work at the plant; Jacob Willms, one of the original owners, was retained as Plant Manager and Lawrence Gaboury was Office Manager.

Frank J. Andres: entrepreneur and pastor; born September 28, 1907 in the village of Lapkopp, Molotschna, Mennonite Settlement, Russia. In 1926, Frank left Russia and went to live in Morris Manitoba where he worked for a Rempel family. Frank Andres came to Ontario in 1932 to work on a fruit farm in Vineland, Ontario, where he learned every facet of fruit growing and marketing. In 1934, J. B. Fairbairn, then Ontario's Deputy Minister of Agriculture, hired Frank to manage his farm. Two years later, Frank bought his first 10-acre farm and became assistant manager of the newly formed Niagara Township Fruit Cooperative. His interest in the canning business led him to a managerial position in the Niagara Canning Company. In 1946 Frank joined his father-in-law's Boese Foods Ltd., company as general manager. Frank Andres was ordained into the ministry in 1949 by Johann Wichert and served as leading minister in the United Mennonite Church on Garnet Street in St. Catharines from 1950-1953. Thereafter, he continued preaching and officiating at weddings.



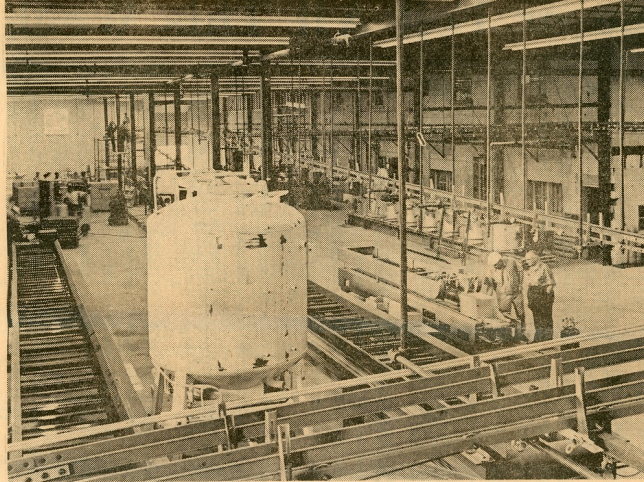
Frank Andres

The Andres family left St. Catharines in 1958 when Boese Foods purchased the Pyramid Canners company in Leamington. During this time, business travel became a regular occurrence for Frank, taking him to Toronto and Montreal to promote the Seaclyff Brand of canned goods. As president of the Ontario Food and Processors Association his travels took him as far as London, England.. Frank's time at home was often spent working on sermons which he presented at the Leamington United, Faith, North Leamington and Harrow Mennonite Churches.

During the time Pyramid Canners was owned by the Boese Family, it was community minded. it sponsored a number of local baseball teams.

In 1964, the Sun Parlour Greenhouse Growers Co-op purchased the plant from Boese Foods Ltd. The Directors were Sam Shostak, Sales Manager, Cecil Derkach, Henry Epp, M. M. Berholz, C.A., Vern Toews, Gino Pannunzio, Earl Sargeant, Floyd Cacciavillani, Ben Koop and Frank Pannunzio. In 1965, a new 45,000 square foot addition to the plant costing \$750,000 was constructed including new cooling lines, peeling lines and sterilization equipment. To accommodate some of the more than 600 staff employed during busy season, the company leased and renovated the old high school on Talbot St. W. for women coming in from Maritimes and Quebec. A baby-sitting service was set up for local workers. The next year, the ambitious expansion almost caused

the company to go into bankruptcy and arrangements were made through the Bankruptcy Act to pay creditors over a six year period.



One of the features of the new addition to the plant of Pyramid Canners Ltd., Leamington, is the new equipment which has been installed. New cooling lines, peeling lines and sterilization equipment are an important part of \$750,000 total cost. (Essex Bureau Photo)



Directors of Pyramid Canners are proud of the new addition to their plant which is being completed in time for the current tomato pack. From left, Sam Shostak, salesmanager; Cecil Derkach, Henry Epp, M. M. Bernholz, C.A., Toews, Gino Pannunzio, Earl Sergeant, Floyd Cacciavio, Ben Koop, Frank Pannunzio.

Windsor Star July 10, 1965

However, the payment plan could not be sustained and Pyramid Canners was purchased by Canadian Canners (CCL) in 1967 as a subsidiary with Pyramid Canners retaining its name and product lines. It continued as a subsidiary until 1976, when the assets were transferred to CCL. During that time, the variety of products increased. Along with tomatoes, beets, carrots, white and sweet potatoes and later jam were also processed. The products were sold with the following labels: Seacliff, Erieglo, Bella Rossa and Bonta. The managers included George O. Hellerud, 1967-1974, E. J. (Ed) Clark 1974-1978 Milan Sedlak 1978-1979 and Terry Bourne 1979-?. In 1982, the company spent \$1.5 million to upgrade and automate the tomato-handling facilities.



In 1979, R.J. Reynolds Industries, Inc. of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, purchased the total assets of the Del Monte Corporation, which included CCL. The following year, CCL merged with RJR Foods Ltd. of Montreal, (a subsidiary of R.J. Reynolds Industries, Inc.). During 1985, R.J. Reynolds Industries, Inc. (now called RJR-Nabisco Inc.) acquired Nabisco Brands Inc., and early in 1986 combined Del Monte Corporation and Nabisco Brands Inc. to form a world-wide food and beverage company, bearing the name Nabisco Brands Inc. On November 28, 1986, the business of CCL was purchased by Nabisco. Effective January 1, 1987, CCL merged with the Foods Division to form its Grocery Division.

The Pyramid Canners enterprise was renamed Nabisco in 1987. The plant, under Nabisco's ownership, closed in 1993 following a consolidation of food processing plants which had been happening over the past two decades.

In later years, the plant building and warehouse buildings were used by a number of trucking and storage businesses, including the Clark Group.

Memories of Life on Pelee Island 1925-1950

*Based on Mennonite Settlement
on Pelee Island
by Astrid Koop*

When, in 1925, George O. Cruickshank needed sharecroppers for his Pelee Island farms, he did what Catherine the Great had done 150 years earlier when she needed people to settle her Russian Steppes; he invited Mennonite farmers to take up residence on the island.



The McKee farm, share-cropped by Jake Gossen, 1939

The six immigrant families who accepted Cruickshank's invitation were an organized lot and they met as a congregation on the first Sunday – complete with a minister and a choir. That same year they instituted religious and German language instruction and *Frauenverein*. They also befriended their neighbours, devised methods of clearing their homes of bed bugs, and promptly mastered the Canadian way of farming.

It is evident that these people thrived socially. The older generation *spaziered* over coffee and their traditional *zwieback*. The youth played circle games accompanied by musical instruments. Later, baseball and segregated swimming in the summer, and ice-skating and board games in the winter occupied much of the young people's free time. The winter sport of crossing the ice bridge to the Canadian and American mainland proved to be a challenging and sometimes dangerous pastime for young and old alike.



As Mennonite people from Reesor, Ontario and the Canadian West joined their ranks, the congregation grew to about 100 adherents. By 1949, that number had dwindled to six adults and seven children, and in July of 1950, the last Mennonite worship service took place there.

One may wonder why the Mennonite people chose to leave Pelee. Some feared that their farms would flood – a valid fear since much of Pelee Island lies below sea level, and others found employment on the mainland. In most instances, however, the move was made for what the Islanders like to call “social reasons” - they did not want their children to associate with, and marry non-Mennonite people.

Mennonite Settlement on Pelee Island is available for sale for \$25. Contact EKMHA for more information.



Mission Hall

A Brief Biography of N. N. Driedger

Oak Street Leaves, December 1988

Rev. Nicolai N. Driedger was born on June 7, 1893 in the Mennonite settlement of Schoenfeld – Brazol in southern Russia, the third son of Nicolai and Katharina Driedger (nee Warkentin).

At 11, he lost his father and a year later his mother married Johann Peter Cornies. Upon graduating from the Central School in Schoenfeld, his stepfather, a bank director, gave him employment in a bank at Goitschar.

On confession of his faith, he was baptized in the Schoenfeld Church by Lichtenauer Elder, Bernhard Epp.

When war broke out in 1914, N. N. Driedger served the Russian nobility for a year on hospital train No. 160, and then two years as secretary in their Central Office in Moscow.

On February 15, 1918, with the land in revolutionary turmoil, he married Tina Dick, the youngest child of Schoenfeld's leading minister. Not long after the wedding, because of dangers brought on by marauding bands, N. N. Driedger and his family fled to Neukirch in the Molotschna colony.



Nicolai and Katharina Driedger, c. 1970

When the opportunity came, they emigrated to Canada, landing in Quebec in 1924, first going to the Kitchener-Waterloo area, then moving to Newton Siding, Manitoba, where they lived until 1927. It was here that N. N. Driedger was called very informally to the ministry. Since there was no minister in the group, Henry Wiens arranged for the men to take turns reading Scripture passages, leading in singing and prayer. One Sunday, as N.N. Driedger led the service, Mr. Wiens said, "We should nominate Nicolai as preacher." Everyone said, "Yes", and thus he was called.

Their next move was to Ontario to Pelee Island. Here, on September 9, 1929, N.N. Driedger was ordained as Minister by Elder Jacob N. Janzen in the Pegg Church.



Baptism. Rev. N.N. Driedger, Rev. Gerhard Thiessen, Ben Konrad, Rev. Jacob Driedger, Katie Driedger on Pelee Island in 1935.

In 1930, the family moved to the mainland and farmed near Ruthven.

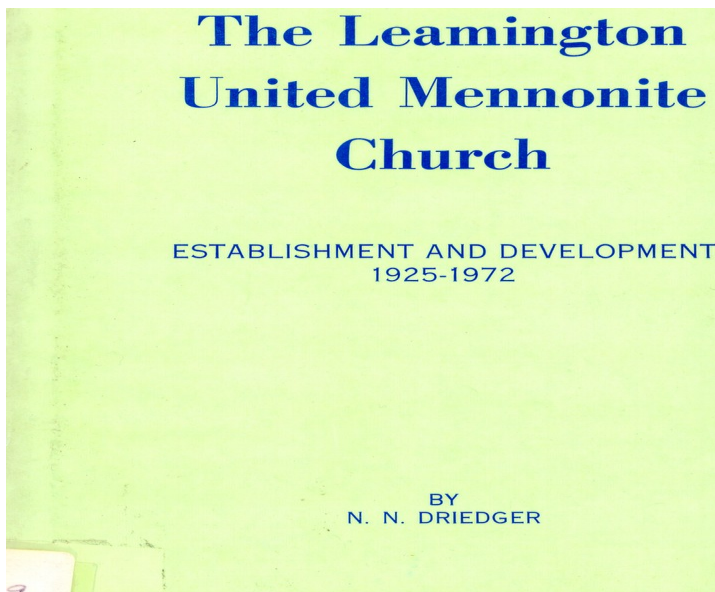
In 1933, N. N. Driedger was ordained as the elder of the Essex County United Mennonite Church, and functioned in the capacity with commitment and devotion until he chose to step down in 1958. The late Rev. J.C. Neufeld succeeded him.



Essex County United Mennonite Church (now Leamington United Mennonite Church)

He continued to serve on a reduced workload until New Year's Day 1972, at which time he preached his last sermon from the pulpit. He continued to be actively involved with the Friday evening Bible Studies as long as he was physically able.

N. N. Driedger then had the time to write his book: *The Leamington United Mennonite Church, Establishment and Development, 1925-1972* (1973)



N. N. Driedger developed his preaching skills in prayer with God. He had the wonderful gift of saying much with a few words. His messages were effective and went to the heart. With a gentle quiet nature he could smooth over misunderstandings. He was a good teacher and a good leader. His co-workers attest to that.

Rev. Driedger led our congregation at a time when ministers were not paid but had to earn their own livelihood. His dedication was exemplified by his attendance at conferences. In midsummer, he left his wife and young children alone on the farm fields; going by train, he would be gone for two weeks. There were no phone calls home at that time. And there was never a complaint; just a very interesting detailed report.

Death came to him gently, shortly before noon on Wednesday morning on August 24, 1988 at the age of 95. The memorial service was held at the Leamington United Mennonite Church, Oak Street on August 27. Fourteen ministers formed an honour guard in the church and at the cemetery. He was interred in the Evergreen Memorial Cemetery beside his beloved wife Tina. Mourning his passing were five children, 19 grandchildren and 30 great-grandchildren, many nieces, other relatives and friends.

N. N. Driedger is remembered for building and enlarging the Mennonite community of faith in Essex County generally and the Leamington area in particular. He performed 279 marriages and 702 baptisms. He served his people with sacrifice and devotion, often placing the church's well-being ahead of that of his own family.

My first recollection of Christmas goes back to the mid-1930s. These were the years before the Second World War. Canada was struggling out of the Depression. Our parents had been in Canada barely ten years with a large family to feed. The Reiseschult was not paid for yet. These years were sometimes called the "Dirty Thirties". Money was very short.

I remember going to the traditional Christmas Eve program put on for the Sunday School children. We would go home with our sack of peanuts, candy and goodies and a gift from the teacher. At home we would set plates under the tree for Santa to fill, a custom brought along from Russia. My present beside the plate filled with treats was a car with battery operated head lights and a coupler trailer – overall length about 2 feet.



To this day, I don't know how our parents could afford it. In those days my sister Betty did house work for Mr. Harold Lee, owner of Lee's 5 & 10 cent Store. Mr. Lee would often be generous to our family by sending clothing and other things home with Betty, so maybe he had something to do with it.



When Christmas day was over, I could always look forward to one more gift on New Years Day when our cousins, the Boshmens, would



come for Niy

Nch dit...Nich daut

Special thanks to Linda Driedger, Walt Koop, Veronika Reiser and Scott Holland for their information and photographs on Pyramid Canners.

Enjoying this newsletter? Help make the next one even better! Send submissions to info@ekmha.ca

Donations of print materials and artifacts welcome!

Upcoming activities at the Heritage Centre

- Cafe – Monday-Friday 9:00-10:00 a.m.
- Call 519-326-0456 or email info@ekmha.ca for updates

Support Essex-Kent Mennonite history! Become a member of EKMHA or renew today

Your support helps EKMHA continue its mission of preserving the histories of the Mennonites of Essex and Kent Counties. Membership costs only **\$15/year** for an individual, church, organization, or business. Visit www.ekmha.ca/membership to join online or fill out and return the form below.

Name: _____

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Membership Fee (\$15 per person/group) \$ _____ Donation to Heritage Centre (Optional) \$ _____

Would you like to receive email about EKMHA news and events? Yes please No thank you

Are you interested in volunteering 1 hour/month or more? Yes, send me info No thank you

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Memberships valid from January 1st to December 31st
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Pyramid Canners Staff – 1954. Can you name them?