

Historian

Essex-Kent Mennonite Historical Association

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



Spring 2025 Edited by Jill Nicholson Vol. 37 No. 1 Celebrating the 100th anniversary of Mennonites in Essex-Kent

From Reesor to Essex County *by Hedy Lepp Dennis, Irene Lepp Rempel and Herman Lepp*

The Reesor settlement was born on June 15, 1925, when Mennonite immigrants from the Ukraine took up homesteads at Mile 103 in the vast forests of Northern Ontario. By 1936, the population had grown to about 500 settlers - mostly of Mennonite, French, Finnish and Ukrainian descent.



Children in Cleared Reesor Forest Source: EKMHA

As the pulpwood, which was their main income, became depleted, and in order to maintain their Mennonite traditions, many Mennonites gradually left for greener fields - mainly Southern Ontario. Our father, H.P Lepp, as minister of the church, felt it was his duty to stay and serve the congregation there. After about 80% of the Mennonite settlers had left and, with encouragement from Nicolai Isaak and others, he too decided to pack up our belongings and head south. Consequently, in the month of May, 1943, all our modest possessions, including a cow named "die" (the rose), and a slatted crate of laying hens were loaded into a small rented railway boxcar - destined for

Kingsville, Ontario. This boxcar was shared with the John Loewen family. Since livestock was included, Rudy, at the age of 16, and the oldest of the Lepp children, was permitted to accompany this shipment. Loose hay provided fodder as well as comfortable sleeping accommodations. A milk pail and a manure shovel were also vital necessities. At various railway stations, water had to be secured for the animals. While travelling through Kent County, Rudy gladly accepted the invitation to ride inside the smoke belching steam locomotive. On the third day, leaning on the manure shovel and sucking on a straw, he arrived in Kingsville - pondering his future life in Essex County. In the meantime, the rest of our family, the parents and five children all squeezed into our small 1930 Model A Ford.



1930 Model A Ford Source: Classic Auto Mall

The parents and the youngest sat in front while the remaining four were in the back - sharing the limited

space with a bald spare tire that had been removed to accommodate a box for food. Four new wartime synthetic rubber tires and tubes had been acquired for the trip, along with an extra book of gasoline coupons. Even though the wartime speed limit was 40 mph, we travelled well below 30, due to loose gravel and winding roads. Suddenly, a groundhog was spotted along the roadway. Within seconds, Dad and the boys were in full pursuit of the animal. The trophy was then carefully laid out on the floor in the back, beside the spare tire and the four occupants, who were already packed in like sardines. And we were on our merry way once more. It was late at night when we Finally arrived at North Bay. Dad entered the local hotel lobby and an animated negotiation with the night clerk was launched. Dad felt that the going rate of \$2 per room was exorbitant. Eventually, a more favourable agreement was reached - possibly three rooms for the price of two. The parents occupied one room, the two girls another, while the three boys shared a bed by sleeping cross-ways on it. Prior to retiring in this firetrap, Dad made everyone aware of the exact location of the fire escape. It was well after midnight when Henry was desperately searching the dimly lit hallway for the familiar outhouse. He finally noticed a bathroom - the first one he'd ever seen - but it served its purpose. As he was about to crawl back into bed, he inadvertently became aware of a strange woman, sound asleep. Still in a daze, he looked around the room - the wrong room. We started again early the next morning. When we reached the Queen Elizabeth Highway we were overawed. Here was an all concrete highway with overpasses and all. How impressive!



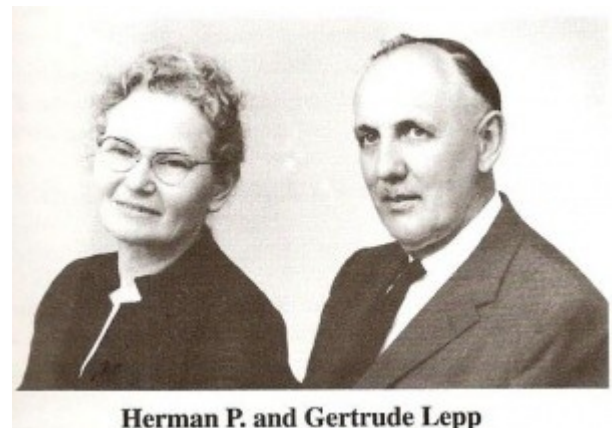
QEW Overpass near Grimsby, ON, 1959

Source: kingshighway.ca

Amidst all this sophistication and aware that our next stop was at Ältester (Bishop) Koop's at Vineland, we now sensed that the lowly groundhog must go.

So, with everyone's consent, the woodchuck was unceremoniously tossed out the window onto the shoulder of the "Queen E." Sadly, but with it, we also threw out the last traces of our northern way of life which we had loved so well. We were still some distance from our intended stopover at Vineland when it began to rain. As darkness set in we had a flat tire. With the aid of tire irons, Dad removed the tire and tube and applied a patch - all in the dark. After pumping up the tire with a hand pump, a loud hiss indicated that the whole procedure would have to be repeated. By now Dad was all soaked and cold. We finally arrived at the Koops' at 2 a.m. After recuperating for a day we left for Kingsville once more. On one occasion, when Dad pulled off the road to consult a road map, a policeman suddenly appeared and curtly advised him that he was illegally parked. When we arrived in Kingsville our furniture had not yet been set up in the small house we were renting and so we spent the night at our relatives, Peter and Johanna Lepp Thiessen.

Years later, the Thiessens mentioned to us that when we arrived from Reesor we all smelled like moss. Mother tallied up our gasoline expenses for the 900 mile trip. We had used 45 gallons of fuel at the total cost of \$17.25. About a year after arriving in Kingsville from Reesor, Dad (Rev. Herman P. Lepp) bought a farm near Harrow, our home for many years to come.



Herman P. and Gertrude Lepp

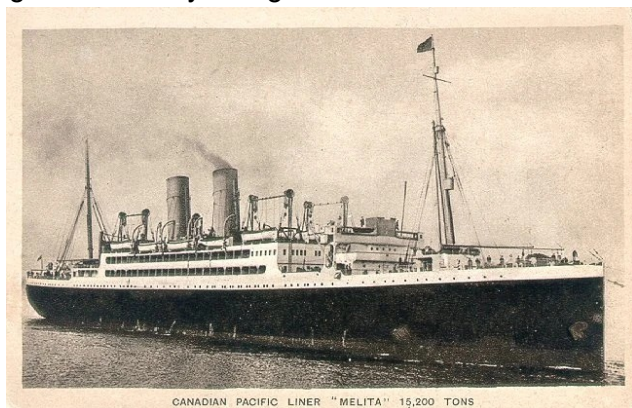
Source: GAMEO.org

My First Years Here

by Agatha Enns Peters

Thank the Lord for memories
For they are so dear
Some bring us laughter
Others a tear
Some bring us peace

My family was among those who had to flee from their Schonfeld estate to Gnadenfeld where we lived for seven years. Then Dad heard about Canada, so on the 17th of September, 1925, my parents Peter and Agatha Enns and children, Uncle Heinrich Enns, and my Tante (Aunt) Greta and my sister and husband and their family left Russia together. We travelled out of Russia on wooden cattle cars. Our first boat was the Melita - not the cleanest boat, but we children were so happy because there, on the tables, were sugar bowls. So we could put a lot of sugar into our coffee cups. That coffee really tasted so good! There were many with sea sickness: a Mr. and Mrs. Warkentin had an 18 year old daughter who they thought was sea sick.



Source: GreatShips.net

The nurse thought that fresh air would do her good, so they bundled her up and took her outside. This was in October and it was cold; that night she died. Mrs. Warkentin begged them not to put her into the ocean, but Cornelius Tiessen, along with my dad and another person, conducted a service. Cornelius Tiessen had a prayer and after 10 minutes the boat stopped and let her into the water. In Riga, the 10 year old son of the Warkentins got sick and died. So Mr. and Mrs. Warkentin lost both their children on their trip to Canada. We arrived in Quebec on the beautiful ship Minnedosa and before we boarded the train we were given some hot chocolate and a piece of sweet bun, and also a Testament of St. John, which I was very

Some bring us strife
But each one is part
Of our earthly life

happy to get.

We came to our Uncle Cornelius Neufeld's on the October 17, 1925. We had travelled one month. We were 24 people that arrived on a Monday at the Coatsworth train station. The household consisted of Cornelius and Aganeta Neufeld with their children Cornelius, George, Peter, Annie, Henry, John, and Jake. Then there was our family: Peter and Agatha Enns with children, Annie and George Schroeder, Peter and Johanna, Margaret, George, Henry, Agnes and me - Agatha. Brother Peter stayed in Russia. Next was Heinrich and Gertrude Enns with children Peter, Henry, John, Dietrich (Dick), Gertrude and Annie. Agnes was born in Canada. Lastly there was Widow Greta Dick with John, Margaret, Agnes and Annie. All these relatives lived in the Neufeld house from October 17, 1925, until after Christmas, early in 1926. It didn't take long for us children to go to Coatsworth School. Jake Neufeld was our age and was so good to his girl cousins. John was a little older and could speak a little English. We girls were very shy. When it came time to eat our lunch, we would sit behind the furnace on the woodpile. You see, all our sandwiches were very thick, made with homemade bread and apple jam. There was one girl who would follow us around and make us feel very uncomfortable.



Source: GreatShips.net

Christmas came before we knew it, but in the meantime, the older sisters and brothers went to work at the tobacco factory in Kingsville to make some Christmas money.



Water tower - MacDonald Leaf Company
Source: Facebook

My dear sister Margaret, who took care of us younger ones, told us stories in the evenings, and sometimes she'd use our names in a story. Christmas came, and we all went to the John Martens on Highway #3. The older people sat on the wagon with lots of straw and we younger ones ran or walked behind the wagon. Of course, we had learned our poems and we were so thankful to our God for how He had led His people to a beautiful land. For Christmas my brother Henry bought me a Eaton's Beauty doll. Henry was about 18 years old. After Christmas the families, one by one, left. Some got work at Grant Fox's, others at Cora Duke's,



Eaton's Beauty Doll 1926 Source: Canadian War Museum

and other places. Our family moved to Orval Fox's where my dad and brothers worked for Jim Hicks, who was the first sharecropper for Mr. Fox.

The house we were moving to had many bed bugs, but Dad soon fixed that. And from the flour bags, my sister washed them when they were empty, and made the most beautiful cottage curtains, embroidered with daffodils and gingham sashes. Since my dad and mother were so well known, we had lots of company.

Our first church was the Ruthven Town Hall, not much of a building, then we went to the Ruthven United Church for a short while.

Then more and more people came to Leamington, we met upstairs at the Brown's Hotel on Erie Street South, and they had to set many pots around the sanctuary to catch the water when it rained. I can remember my cousins John and Dick Enns, with a one-horse buggy, picking me up from home and then we went to Sunday School, which was in the afternoon at Brown's Hotel. Later we decided to rent the IOOF Hall upstairs where now the Et Cetera Shoppe is. I think after four years, more and more people came and we decided to build a place of worship. But we had no money - it was depression time and numerous families had not yet been able to pay their Reiseschuld (travel debt). With many prayers our first church on Oak Street was built.



Leamington United Mennonite Church
Source: EKMHA

The writer was born in Schonfeld, Molotschna Colony, Ukraine in 1917, and is a member of the Faith Mennonite Church in Leamington. Agatha speaks English, High German and Low German. (Biography

Our Nine Years on Pelee Island

by *Cornelius Driedger*

written in 2005.)

In the Spring of 1925 our family, along with the Jacob Driedger family, the N. N. Driedger family, and the Abram Dick family, together with the David and John Cornies families, moved to Newton Siding, Manitoba and bought a huge farm there. Here sister Margaret was born. We farmed for three years, and when the market went kaput (crashed) we could not make payments and so we left. We spent one year in Glenlea, Manitoba, the home of Mother's (Friesen) side of the family. Brother Abe was born there. The following year we moved to Pelee Island. We arrived on Pelee in Spring of 1929. These were very important years for me, especially in building my character. They included my graduation from primary school and one year in Continuation School (High School), and my entry into the world of youth as well as the field of hard labour. We moved into a small house on Albert Stoltz's place on Middle Island Road. Brother Abe became very sick with the croup here. That fall we moved into a house on the East Beach, just north of Parson's Road. And next spring we moved into a house on Elmer Reh's farm on Victoria Road. Dad worked for Mr. Reh, and as part of his salary, we were allowed to plant one acre of tobacco, with the understanding that Mother and I would take care of it.



Loading tobacco on Pelee Island Source: EKMHA

It was at Reh's that I remember Dad falling off the haymow and hurting his back so badly that he never fully recovered. Hee wea toonijcht. In Spring of 1931, we ventured into the "Cash Rent World". We rented a

35-acre farm from Camille Rowan for \$600. To get to this farm, one turned right at the North Dock, drove for about a mile, then turned left on a very hilly lane, about 1/2 mile in length. My brother John was born here, which completed the family. Our total crop income was just over \$600. I think we sold our tobacco, which had sweated a lot while curing in the barn, to the Consolidated Tobacco Company in Kingsville for 3/4 cents per pound. When we deducted the cost of the fertilizer, it was obvious that we had lost money that we didn't have in the first place. As a result, we had to buy our groceries on credit, and we owe a debt of gratitude to A.M. McCormick's Grocery store for being very generous with us.



A. M. McCormick Store, Pelee Island Source: EKMHA

It was at this time that the Rempels moved to the mainland and Uncle Jake moved to the Cruikshank farm the Rempels had sharecropped. Dad then hired out to Ed White, where Uncle Jake had lived. This was on the West Side, right by the lake. Here Dad worked for two years, and as a bonus, we were allowed to plant a few acres of corn. I became very much involved and stayed home from school to learn to plough. We had a 1924 Model T Ford by then, but it stayed jacked-up in the barn much of the time because we couldn't afford to pay the 25 cents per gallon for gas. We went the three miles to church in a gravel wagon drawn by horses. When it rained, we used a tarp for cover, and never missed a service.

Our preachers were Uncle Reverend Jacob N. Driedger, and Reverend Abram Rempel, followed by Reverend Gerhard Thiessen.



Rev. Jacob N. Driedger and Maria Driedger circa 1960

Source: EKMHA



Rev. Abram Rempel and Margarethe Rempel circa 1970

Source: EKMHA

Dad did some choir directing, mostly at our home, and we young folks got together often as we walked to wherever things were happening.

In Spring of 1934, we moved onto a Cruikshank farm, a definite turn for the better financially. This farm was on

the Middle Island Road. The deal was that the owner supplied the home, barns, horses and machinery, while we did the work and split the income and fertilizer expenses 50/50. I remember two tragedies while we lived there. My cousin Katie, 20 years old, fell on the ice at our place, resulting in an aneurysm. She died just before Christmas of 1936. I remember watching spellbound while her Dad preached the sermon at her funeral, his voice quivering and tears in his eyes. And I remember this same Uncle Jake preaching the Good News of Christmas just a few days later. Again I saw the tears running down his cheeks, and heard his voice quiver as he preached. What a lasting impression he made on me. The second tragedy was an accident in which my friend John Heinrichs, son of Jacob and Helena, was killed in 1938. He was riding his bicycle along the East-West Road in the evening and collided head-on with a car with one headlight. He was taken across the lake to the Leamington Hospital and died there. Again God spoke very seriously to us in John's death. In thinking back, I believe that God gave us a chance there to get our feet on the ground, as it served a very definite and positive purpose in my life, and that of my family there.



The writer, a retired NLUMC Pastor, was born in Tiege, Molotschna, South Russia in 1921. Cornies serves as chaplain at the Mennonite Home in 2005. (Biography written in 2005.)

Source: Gameo.org

Anne Enns & Cornelius Driedger, 1942

The Beginnings of the Leamington United Mennonite Church

by Rev. N. N. Driedger

To the Mennonite immigrants of that time, no doubt ever existed concerning whether or not they worship together. "No Sunday with a religious service" had been the watchword before coming to Canada, and the same watchword was to remain in effect. For this reason, smaller and larger worship units appeared almost spontaneously in various places, at times with a minister in charge, and at times simply having a sermon read. On occasions a Sunday school was only conducted. The John J. Dick home at Cottam was the site of some of these assemblies. As many as 30 children went to Sunday school there. The John Bergs of Kingsville also had services at their home, and in Coatsworth they were held in the home of John Martens. Similar meetings were held around Leamington, for a time in an upstairs room of Arthur Brown's hotel and the corner of Talbot and Princess.



Hotel: Talbot St. E. and Princess St. Source: Facebook

For a while Miss Mary G. Dyck was in charge of a Sunday school at the Abram Berg home.

Occasionally through special efforts all the of units assembled together as in the summer of 1925 when the first baptismal service was held in the Ruthven United Church with Rev. Janzen of Waterloo officiating.

The following persons were baptized: Frank Tiessen, now Leamington, Gustav Fast, Kingsville, Heinrich J. Tiessen, Leamington Mennonite Home.

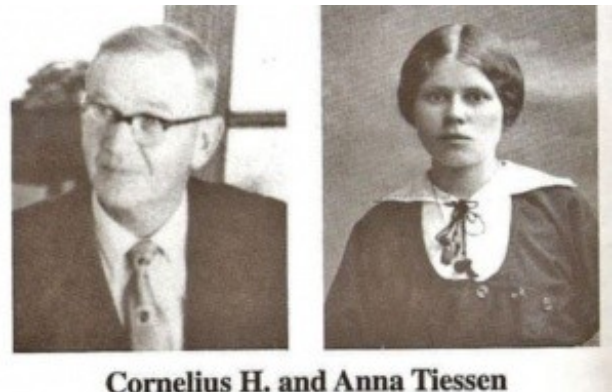
In the spring of 1926 the following three persons were elected as ministerial candidates: Jacob D. Janzen, Nicolai Schmidt, Cornelius Tiessen.

The first two were ordained on June 13 of the same year by Rev. J. H. Janzen, again in the Ruthven United Church.



Rev. J. H. Janzen Source: GAMEO.org

Brother Cornelius Tiessen declined ordination at the time but continued to preach and to assist in youth work. Having been a teacher in Russia, he had taught classes preparing for baptism even before his candidature.



Cornelius H. and Anna Tiessen Source: GAMEO.org

Yet in spite of all attempts and efforts to narrow the ties between the people, these ties between 1925-1928 were rather tenuous and flexible

Nich dit...Nich daut

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Upcoming activities at the Heritage Centre

- Leaving Soviet Ukraine: Mennonites and the Politics of Emigration presented by Aileen Friesen, Centre for Transnational Studies, University of Winnipeg June 9, 7:00 p.m.
- AGM June 17, 2025, 6:30 p.m.
- Mennonite Heritage Tour - Pelee Island July 2
Registration: www.daytripsleamington.ca or by calling Jim Konrad at: 226-202-0405

Call 519-326-0456 or email info@ekmha.ca for updates.

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Mission Hall, Pelee Island, 1930s. Source EKMHA