

# Historian

Essex-Kent Mennonite Historical Association

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



Fall 2025 Edited by Jill Nicholson Vol. 37 No. 2 Celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mennonites in Essex-Kent

## This is the story of Anna Wiens Tiessen as told to my niece Anna Martha Wiens

I was born on October 1, 1909 in the village of Schonfeld, South Russia (now Ukraine). I am the youngest child of Heinrich Bernard and Agatha Wiens (nee Duck). I grew up in a family of four sisters and one brother. My parents had an 800-acre farm as well as a brick factory. Due to the revolution I did not attend much school as our Teacher's son had been shot and everyone was very frightened.

Some of my earliest recollections of life in that village were not very pleasant as anarchy reigned. I remember looking out an upstairs window with my sisters as my brother was fleeing for his life barefoot in the snow in the direction of a neighbouring village. I remember when my father was taken by marauding bandits and how my mother took us into the next room and prayed with my sisters for his safe return. He did return covered with blood with only his shirt and vest on in the snow. I remember also how my mother would go to the door alone when anarchists would arrive with all their weapons. She made my sisters and me hide so we would not be molested and then she would take the anarchists to the cellar to pick out the food they wanted and then she would cook it for them – this put them in a good frame of mind and then they would leave. I also remember how the remaining villagers and people from the outlying area congregated with their wagons and horses at my parents' home. We all left our homes forever to go the Molotschna Colony to stay with our relatives since life here had become very unsafe.

We stayed with our relatives in the Village of Blumstein for the next five years. I went to the village school and

learned to read and write German and Russian. But life here too was unsettling.

In 1924 I went with my family to the train station in Lichtenau where we gathered with other relatives and families for the first part of our journey to Canada. Everyone sang hymns. When we passed the Red Gate and entered Latvia, the train stopped and everyone was very happy as we sang hymns again to praise God for his deliverance.



Source: MaryLou Driedger

We arrived at Saint John, New Brunswick via the Minnedosa in July of 1924. We were quarantined on an island for two weeks because they thought my father and brother had smallpox – it was just a bad case of acne on their backs. Then we took the train to

Waterloo. We stayed with the Berscht family and I attended school in Wellesley. In February we moved to Newton Siding, Manitoba by train. I continued school there and found learning English difficult. Due to poor weather and rain we had very little harvest so we had to move again.



Source Greatships.net

In the meantime my mother had corresponded with our old friends – the Peter Tiessen family. They told her how good life was here in the Leamington area. In February of 1928 we moved to their home looking for a place of our own. My parents found a place in Ruthven where we farmed for the next three years. Here I got my first job as a maid. We had church services in Ruthven and I was baptised there on May 17, 1928.

On June 2, 1935 I married Nicholas P. Tiessen, my old classmate from Blumstein, South Russia. We had a dairy farm and grew tomatoes for the canning factory. We were blessed with two sons, Hardy and Larry, and a foster daughter, Lynn. On September 19, 1973, my husband passed away and my life on the farm changed.

**TIESSEN — Nick P., 54 years, Wednesday, September 19, 1973, at his residence Concession 1 East, Mersea Township. Beloved husband of Anna. Father of Hardy and Larry, both of Mersea Township; Mrs. Gary Goulet (Lynn), Windsor; dear brother of Frank, Leamington; Jacob of Mersea Township; Mrs. Peter Loewen (Anna), Mrs. Peter Janzen, (Elizabeth), Mrs. John Harder (Mary), all of Vineland; Mrs. John Barkowsky (Agatha), Port Rowen; Miss Katherine Tiessen, Leamington. Five grandchildren. Predeceased by one brother Peter and one sister Mrs. Margaret Goosen. Resting at the Reid Funeral Home, 14 Russell St., Leamington. Funeral Saturday, September 22 at 1 p.m., at the Oak St. United Mennonite Church, Rev. J. C. Neufeld and Rev. Henry Dueck officiating. Interment Evergreen Memorial Cemetery, Leamington. Memorial donations may be made to the U.M.E.I. Family will receive friends after 7 p.m. Thursday.**

At the age of 64 I took driving lessons and got my driver's licence. I stayed out in the country for a few years and then I moved into an apartment in the Town of Leamington to be next door to my two sisters. After they both passed away I moved into the Pickwick Apartments at the Mennonite Home.



Pickwick Apartments Source: Leamington Mennonite Home

Over the years I have I have enjoyed gardening, cooking, travelling, sewing and looking after my children and grandchildren. I now have eight grandchildren and two great grandchildren. I have also enjoyed getting together with my family and my husband's family as well as my church family. I am very happy that I have been privileged to live in this wonderful and peaceful country where I have been allowed to worship God in the Mennonite tradition and where my children have been able to attend school in a pleasant and safe environment.



Source:  
Find a Grave



# Jake Lehn's Saskatchewan Farm Miniatures

**by Linda Thiessen-Belch**

Jake Lehn, who lives in the Retirement Residence at the Leamington Mennonite Home, has built an amazing replica of his father's farm which was in Sonningdale, Saskatchewan.

Farming is one of the core elements of Mennonite heritage. It was Catherine the Great who invited the Mennonites, known for their farming skills, to the Ukraine to cultivate the fertile land. And so, they accepted her offer and experienced much success, many significantly increased their wealth and status. For many Mennonites, when they immigrated to Canada, farming was what they knew best and so many continued in this lifestyle and career.

I had the privilege of having a personal tour of his replica and labour of love. This was the farm where Jake was raised and experienced the joys and challenges of farming. His intention had always been to build the replica as a retirement project, but, after a significant illness in his 40s, he decided to get started on it then, instead of waiting. When asked about the date of completion, there was a hesitation – it will never be totally complete; there is always some tinkering to do. His replica now resides in the Essex-Kent Mennonite Historical Association (EKMHA) Museum where Jake gives guided tours through the farm homestead, explaining each piece and demonstrating the various moving parts. It is a wonderfully interactive creation.



He has been invited to be a guest at his grandchildren's schools where he brought farming in the 1930s to life with the demonstration of a portion of his replica. Jake has a great sense of humour which he

made sure to include in his presentations in the form of rubber spiders, snakes and such popping unexpectedly out of barn doors.



Jake is a great educator and advocates for remembering and celebrating things of the past. When giving a tour to a class of students, he breaks them into smaller groups and has various activities for them. One of the activities involves the identification of various artifacts. He has 42 miniature artifacts for the students to identify, and once they have done this, their task becomes finding the real piece in the museum.



Jake's contributions to the EKMHA museum are greatly appreciated. As we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the arrival of the second wave of Mennonites from the Ukraine in 1924/25, this visual display helps us to see what life was like for them as they settled in Canada having left everything behind and starting over. Thank you, Jake, for all your contributions.

Jake's Replica Collection includes the following:

- A. A working water wheel grist mill
- B. Their first home built in 1932 with a straw barn and a main barn



- C. 1890 horsepower threshing machine
- D. A windmill and trough
- E. His father's workshop with miniature tools and hoe
- F. A butchering set up



- G. An outhouse
- H. A summer kitchen with sausage maker and cream separator

- I. Their home built in 1936



- J. Steel porch table and chairs
- K. A country road travelled by a team of horses and a load of wheat, a team and a plough, and a team and a buggy
- L. He had a Model A car built by Harry Thiessen
- M. A calf barn with a thatched roof
- N. An old Waterloo tractor that saws firewood
- O. A pig barn
- P. A school built in 1935 (it burned in 1943)



- Q. A replica of a red barn built in 1919 that is still standing in Saskatchewan.



## BACKGROUND

Gerhard and Katherina Thiessen (Opa and Oma) at the ages of 28 and 22, with their one-year-old daughter, and a few other family members, left their home and wealth in the Ukraine for Canada to escape an increasingly difficult political climate. Gerhard found this to be a very difficult decision to make. He says: "We didn't know should we leave or not. At first, I was not for the idea, if we emigrated, we would have even less. But my brother wanted to leave and the rest of the family too, and I didn't want to stay behind alone. So, we made the decision to emigrate." This began the application process, medical exams, and selling most of their possessions for which they received next to nothing because many others were leaving as well. But in the end this didn't matter because the Reds cleaned out their bank account.

Finally, the time came for their journey out of the Ukraine which began with travelling by wagon train, followed by a train, until they boarded the ship "Minnedosa" for Canada. They crossed the Atlantic and landed in Quebec. Here they boarded another train which took them to Kitchener/Waterloo where, on July 19, 1924, they were welcomed by their connections and Gerhard was provided with work.

Their original plan was to settle in western Canada, but Opa was given the opportunity to move to Pelee Island and work a farm on shares. The plan to move west was abandoned; they arrived on Pelee Island in April of 1925 and became part of a vibrant Mennonite community. While on Pelee Island, they were blessed with 8 more children. In 1942, they decided to move to the mainland where one more child was born in 1943, completing their family. Opa found another opportunity for share cropping until he bought his own farm in 1950 at the age of 56. He purchased 75 acres on the 8<sup>th</sup> concession for \$9,000.

Gerhard and Katja's ten children, added 19 grandchildren, 40 great grandchildren, 44 great great grandchildren, 3 great great great grandchildren for a total of 116 descendants and a grand total with spouses is 155.

## AN OPPORTUNITY IN 2024

In 2021, we celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their marriage. We were still in the throws of COVID resulting in a Zoom family gathering. At that event, we wondered how to remember and celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our Grandparents arrival in Canada in 2024 and the life we have enjoyed because of their



Thiessen Family Tree Source: Linda Thiessen-Belch

decisions, sacrifice, perseverance, faith and prayers. A party seemed appropriate! It was decided to have a family gathering June 28 to 30, 2024 in Ruthven, Ontario. Approximately 71 of us gathered to celebrate this significant anniversary and the lives of our Grandparents.

## WHY BOTHER?

Many Mennonite families may have reached or will be reaching this milestone anniversary in the next few years and may be considering a gathering. Because I believe strongly that these events need to be remembered and celebrated, I am happy to share our experience. Psalm 71:17-18 says "*Since my youth, God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvellous deeds. Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come.*" We are to declare the power and work of God to the next generation. This means that we need to recognize the acts of God not only in our own lives but in the lives of those who have gone before us as well. Unfortunately, when our elders still have cognition and memory and would love to share their stories with us, we are teenagers or married with young families and have no interest in our heritage. In my family, we have been blessed by an aunt who has beautifully and completely documented the ancestors and descendants of my grandparents; we have my

Opa's journals and partial memoir, and lots of photos. A book called "The Next Generation" was compiled to continue the story of Gerhard and Katharina; It focuses on the lives of their grandchildren. Taking the time to document our stories has tremendous value which requires tremendous commitment. It was interesting for me to hear how many of my cousins had read my aunt's book in preparation for the gathering.

## THE PLANNING PROCESS

We set the date and location, sent out a save the date to the entire family in October 2023. At that time we also began brainstorming and throwing ideas around. There are about 10 - 15 of us who meet once a week on a regular basis and were willing to be involved in the planning and execution of the plan.

Our goals were:

- To remember and celebrate the lives and accomplishments of Gerhard and Katharina Thiessen
- To have the majority of the family attend,
- To have an engaging agenda and activities
- To celebrate milestone birthdays and anniversaries
- To have a display of memorabilia
- To have a formal time with everyone together to share memories
- To have lots of time for getting caught up
- To have lots of food
- To have fun

Through the course of the winter and spring, the agenda, menu, and memorabilia display was planned. The tasks were divided among the members of the group

The party began Friday afternoon on the second floor terrace of long-term care at the Leamington Mennonite Home to spend some time with aunts and uncles who would not be able to join us for the rest of it. We enjoyed the warm breezes, sunshine, snacks, and conversation for the afternoon.

The main event took place in Ruthven at the home of Deb and Rick Froese where we were able to enjoy their beautiful gardens, shade trees and hospitality. Thankfully, we did not have to go with the rain plan and move to the shop, but it was a good option to have. For those interested, there was a game of golf organized for Saturday afternoon. We kicked off Saturday at 4:30pm with Happy Hour; the Overtime band entertained us with great music by talented musicians (guitar, bass, drums, sax, trumpet, trombone, and keyboard) who set the mood for us to mingle and get caught up with one another. We had cousins from California, Thunder Bay, Amherst Island, Hamilton, Kitchener-Waterloo and area. There was lots of catching up to do. Pizza was ordered for our meal and

dessert was 3 birthday cakes to celebrate all the significant birthdays and anniversaries (of which there were approximately 36). The evening culminated with fireworks at sunset.

Sunday began with a continental breakfast being served. It included some Mennonite favorites of raisin bread and brown bread. After breakfast, we had a formal gathering to remember, celebrate, share stories and do church. Opa had been a lay preacher for almost 40 years and we wanted to include this aspect because of its influence on us. Each of the grandchildren, read a small portion of Opa's journals. We also remembered the 15 of our family who had died by calling out a one word or phrase description of the person followed by the release of 15 butterflies.

Sunday afternoon was open for checking out the family memorabilia in the gazebo, for participating in some interactive activities, for visiting, and for checking out the draft copy of the book "The Next Generation" which is a sequel to Aunt Martha's book and focuses on the lives of Opa and Oma's grandchildren. A playlist was also created with everyone's top 10 songs. The Thiessens have a wonderful, varied and eclectic taste in music. The afternoon concluded with a group photo being taken.

The final event of the weekend was more food. We shared dinner and dessert before saying "auf wiedersehen" - "till we meet again."

The event was a huge success and we are grateful to God for the legacy of our grandparents and for the opportunity to celebrate 100 years in Canada. We have so much to be thankful for and I encourage everyone reading this to remember that we too are leaving a legacy whether we know it or not...so let's be intentional about it.

For more information on legacy contact:  
[linda.thiessen.belch@gmail.com](mailto:linda.thiessen.belch@gmail.com)

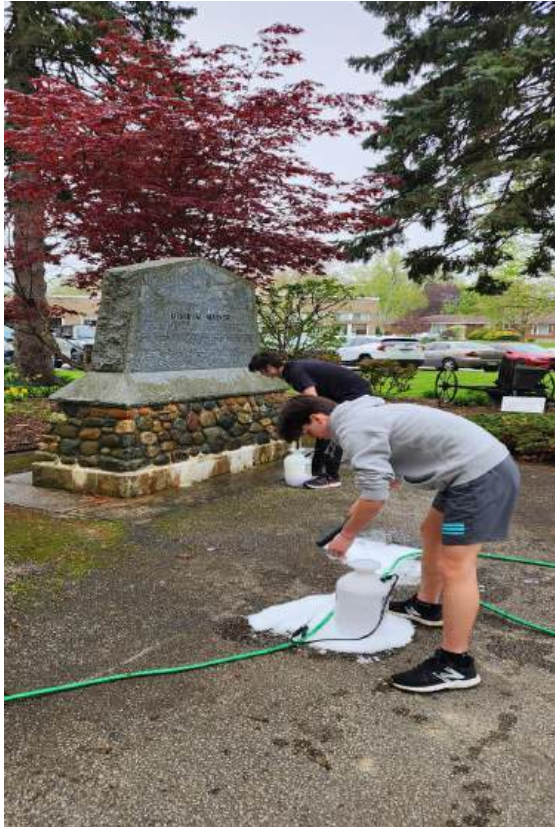


Source: Linda Thiessen-Belch



# EKMHA Happenings

## Millennium Monument Cleaning



Many thanks to Nathan and Owen for their great work cleaning the Millennium Marker in the Heritage Centre Peace Garden for UMEI Service Project Day in May.

## Weekday Coffee Hour



Join us Monday to Friday 9-10 for coffee and companionship.

## Millennium Garden Maintenance



The EKMHA Board would like to thank the Anne, Irma and the other Millennium Garden volunteers who have beautifully maintained the garden throughout the season.

## EKMHA Youtube Channel

EKMHA has just launched its own Youtube channel with the name EKMHA Media. There are currently two videos on the letters of Jacob P. Driedger 1901-1989. Other EKMHA programs will be recorded and added as they come on line.



Jacob P. Driedger

*Nich dit...Nich daut*

Enjoying this newsletter? Help make the next one even better! Send submissions to [info@ekmha.ca](mailto:info@ekmha.ca)

**Upcoming activities at the Heritage Centre**

- Jan. 9: 100 & 25 Year Mennonite Story Telling with Luise Taves
- Jan. 16: MEDA Trip Travelogue with Dean Shoemaker
- Friday January 30: Travelogue

**Call 519-326-0456 or email [info@ekmha.ca](mailto:info@ekmha.ca) for updates.**

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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

*Please make cheques payable to EKMHA and deliver or mail to:*

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31 Pickwick Dr.  
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Memberships valid from January 1<sup>st</sup> to Dec 31<sup>st</sup>  
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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.



Mennonite Church service in Coatsworth, Ontario (near Leamington) late 1920s?  
Source: EKMHA