“AND IN MEXICO WE FOUND WHAT WE HAD LOST IN CANADA”: MENNONITE IMMIGRANT PERCEPTIONS OF MEXICAN NEIGHBOURS IN A CANADIAN NEWSPAPER, 1922-1967

by

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A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of History
University of Winnipeg
Winnipeg, Manitoba

© August 2007

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

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Abstract

The first conservative, Low German-speaking Mennonites from Canada arrived in Mexico in 1922, setting up colonies that were to be apart from the rest of society in order that they could enjoy complete religious freedom. Over the ensuing years, however, this isolationist position has been tempered by a number of factors that have served to place this ethno-religious group into regular contact with the surrounding Mexican world.

The case of the Mennonites living in Mexico serves to illuminate relations between immigrants and a host society. The connections that have been formed across the cultural, economic, and religious boundaries dividing Mennonites from their Mexican counterparts provides an opportunity not only to observe the nature of inter-ethnic relations but also to examine the process by which such associations help to foster an evolving ethnicity in an immigrant group. As Kathleen Conzen and David Gerber argue, ethnicity is not a stagnant concept but is in continuous flux. A minority's identity and self-perception, therefore, is defined in relation to the majority and is constantly renegotiated through these interactions.

By examining the letters written by Mennonites in Mexico and published in the Manitoba-based newspaper, *Die Steinbach Post*, it becomes evident that Mennonite encounters with Mexicans did not weaken the immigrant group's ethnic and religious identity. Instead, these interactions in the marketplace, in times of conflict, and in interpersonal relationships served to create a communal Mennonite identity and strengthen their self-perception as an ethnic minority living on foreign soil.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Royden Loewen, for his advice, guidance, and diligence throughout every stage of this thesis. Without my introduction to the world of Mennonite history as an undergraduate student in his class six years ago, I never would have come to realise the richness of the field; without his encouragement, friendship, and patience this project would not have been possible. I would also like to express my appreciation to the members of my advisory committee, Hans Werner, David Burley, and Kathleen Venema, for their careful evaluation and insightful comments, and for making my thesis defence such a positive and enriching experience. My family and friends have also been there with their encouragement and understanding, not only throughout every step of this project, but also throughout all of my studies, and my thanks goes to them as well. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the financial assistance from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Manitoba Graduate Fellowship, without which this research would not have been possible.

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INTRODUCTION: ETHNIC IDENTITY AND IMMIGRANTS

In December 1954, Canadian Mennonite settler J. Banman of Apertido 199 in Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua, Mexico wrote a letter to *Die Steinbach Post*, a weekly, German-language, Mennonite newspaper stationed in Steinbach, Manitoba, and distributed throughout Canada and Latin America.[1] His letter inquired on the state of affairs in the Mennonite community in Tampico, located in central Mexico. After asking about the crops, whether there was a good harvest, and what industries were viable in the area, Banman inquired how his coreligionists were getting along with the indigenous population there. He wondered whether the *Einheimischen*[2] in that region of the country had received "foreigners, like us" in the same way as they had the Mennonites in Chihuahua, in northern Mexico.[3] While Banman does not shed any light directly on the subject of how he thinks Mexicans had received his community in Cuauhtémoc, his opinion that Mennonites were *Fremden*, or foreigners, in Mexico is telling. It demonstrates a self-perception of being an outsider in Mexico, even after thirty-two years of Mennonite colonization in the country.

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[1] The title of this thesis is taken from: Isaak M. Dyck, *Auswanderung von Canada nach Mexiko, ano 1922*, Robyn Sneath, trans., (Cuauhtémoc: Imprenta Colonial, 1995), 115.

[2] Although no exact English word exists for *Einheimischen*, this translates roughly as "indigenous." It is unknown whether Mennonites, who used this phrase liberally in their letters, were referring to the aboriginal population or to *mestizos*, who had mixed Spanish and aboriginal bloodlines, in Mexico. Due to this lack of clarity, I will be using the German term used by the letter writers themselves, *Einheimischen*, throughout this study.

[3] Banman wrote: "In spirit I will quickly travel to Tampico, Mexico. I and many others are very curious to hear about the relations in Tampico, whether there was also a harvest there, how the land is, what the possibilities for industry are, also too how the relations between the natives and foreigners, like us, are, whether the relations are like they are here." *Die Steinbach Post*, [hereafter *SP*], 8 December 1954, 4.

This study explores the lives of Mennonites in Mexico through the lens of *Die Steinbach Post*.[4] These Canadian immigrants arrived in Mexico in search of what they considered to be religious freedom, an aim they thought could be achieved only through isolation from the wider society. An examination of the German-language letters written by this ethno-religious group to their relatives and friends in Canada between 1922, when Mennonites first migrated south, and 1967, when the *Post* stopped publication, reveals a reality, however, that is at odds with the Mennonites' original intention.[5] Despite their desire to remain aloof from society, letters published in the *Post* reveal a Protestant, German-speaking, and pacifist ethnic minority that came into regular contact with members of the Catholic, Spanish-speaking, post-revolutionary society in Mexico. These connections, significant in and of themselves, also demonstrate that these associations with wider society did not undermine the Mennonite lifestyle, but served instead to help define and sharpen their unique religious and cultural identity.

Mennonites were a distinct Christian sect emerging from the Anabaptist movement in sixteenth century Europe, which emphasized simple living, believers' baptism, and nonresistance.[6] The history of this ethno-religious minority is characterized by repeated migrations as its members fled persecution and were dispersed throughout Europe. Therefore, the relocation of approximately 5,800 Mennonites, mostly members

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[4] A note about language: Though the newspaper was entitled *Die Steinbach Post* for most of its run, it did undergo a name change in the 1960s. The switch to the title *Die Post* seems to have been made to reflect the paper's world-wide readership more accurately than its previous title had been able to; this is, though, pure conjecture for there is no documentation to explain the rationale behind the change. I will, however, be using both titles interchangeably and without regard to which period of the paper's life I am referring. This reflects the way the letter writers often referred to it in their correspondences published in the paper.

[5] Since the letters appearing in the *Post* were all written in German, I have translated any quotes from the *Steinbach Post* letters used in this study from German into English.

[6] Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920* (Toronto: Mennonite Historical Society of Canada, 1974), 31-32.

of the conservative Old Colony (or Reinländer) Mennonite Church from southern Manitoba and Saskatchewan, to Mexico in 1922 closely followed a pattern of religiously-motivated migrations, set throughout Mennonite history.[7] This particular Low-German group of Mennonites most recently exhibited this pattern of migration in its migration from Imperial Russia to Canada in the 1870s.[8] Threatened with the Russian government's plan of "russification," which included plans for universal military service for young men and governmental control over schools and other civil institutions, approximately one third of the Mennonite population chose to seek out emigration opportunities rather than submit to the new laws.[9] In total, 17,000 Mennonites chose to immigrate to North America. Of these, 7,000, encompassing the Fürstenländer and Chortitza (or Old Colony) Mennonites, the Bergthal settlement, and the Kleine Gemeinde chose Canada as their new homeland. The remaining 10,000, mostly Kirchliche and Mennonite Brethren from Molotschna Colony, settled in the United States.[10]

The majority of the Mennonites who chose to immigrate to Canada elected to live in two bloc settlements, the East and the West Reserves, both located in southern

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[7] The 1922 emigration to Mexico consisted of 3,200 – 3,300 Fürstenland Mennonites from Manitoba, 800 Fürstenland Mennonites from the Hague-Rosthern Colony in Saskatchewan, 1,500 Fürstenland Mennonites from the Swift Current Colony in Saskatchewan, and 1,000 Mennonites from the Sommerfelder churches in both Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Another emigration to the Paraguayan Chaco took place between 1926 and 1930 and consisted of 819 Mennonites from the East Reserve and 341 from the West Reserve in Manitoba, and 246 Mennonites from Rosthern, Saskatchewan. E. K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia: The Mennonites in Manitoba* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1955), 192.

[8] Old Colony bishop Isaak Dyck summarizes the Mennonite migrations throughout their history this way: "our parents and forefathers, with a lot of concern and sadness, had to leave their first homeland in order to be able to pass Christianity on only through taking up their walking sticks. Namely, from Holland to Germany, from Germany to Russia, from Russia to...Canada, from Canada here, our present home in Mexico..." Isaak Dyck, *Auswanderung von Canada nach Mexiko, ano 1922* (Cuauhtémoc: Imprenta Colonial, 1995), 11.

[9] John Friesen, "Reinländer Mennonite Settlement on the West Reserve, 1870s-1920s," in Delbert Plett, ed. *Old Colony Mennonites in Canada, 1875 to 2000* (Steinbach: Crossway Publications Inc., 2001), 6-7.

[10] *Ibid.*, 8.

Manitoba. The immigrants from the Russian Fürstenländ and Chortitza colonies, who were now located in the western half of the West Reserve, formed the Reinländer Mennonite Church, later renamed the Old Colony Mennonite Church. Believing in the importance of community in their religious life, the Reinländer saw salvation "as a corporate reality...God had called them to faith in Jesus Christ, and the response to this call was properly expressed by committing themselves to the believing community."[11] This religious emphasis on a corporate lifestyle influenced the daily life of the church's members. As historian John Friesen suggests:

> This commitment [to the church] meant subjecting individual desires and wishes to the good of the whole group. The believer lived in the village and participated in its communal structures. Individualism in dress, lifestyle, consumption, and land use was submerged in order to maintain harmony in the community. In this manner the Reinländer Church attempted to maintain a spirit of equality, unity, community, and a setting in which mutual admonition among church members could occur.[12]

Thus, the lives of those belonging to the Reinländer Mennonite Church were heavily involved with the well-being of the whole community. When faced with the amendment of education laws in Manitoba and Saskatchewan in the early twentieth century, therefore, Reinländer Mennonites in both provinces responded to the perceived intrusion upon their educational system as a corporate entity. Eventually, the new legislation would lead the majority of the Reinländer Church to migrate to Latin America.

The new regulations surrounding the education of children were introduced in Manitoba in 1916 and in Saskatchewan in 1917. Both of these legislative changes made attendance at publicly-inspected, English-language schools compulsory for children

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[11] John Friesen, "Reinländer Mennonite Settlement on the West Reserve, 1870s-1920s," 12.

[12] *Ibid.*

between the ages of seven and fourteen.[13] Thus, the practice of using German as a language of instruction in schools, which many Mennonite private schools relied on to pass their religion and culture on to the next generation, was effectively ended.

The new school laws were perceived by the Mennonite community as a betrayal by the federal government in Ottawa, from whom they had received special privileges upon their immigration to Canada.[14] Among the concessions they had received from the government at that time had been the freedom to educate their children as they saw fit, according to their pacifist religion and in the German language. Fearing that this infringement on their freedom might lead to the further curtailment of the other rights and privileges they enjoyed in Canada, these conservative Mennonites began to seek out immigration opportunities in a number of Latin American countries, as well as the United States and other Canadian provinces.[15] As early as August 1919, a delegation representing three Old Colony Mennonite Church settlements was organized and sent to tour Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay.[16]

The secondary works written on this topic differ in their accounts of how the Canadians first became aware of the possibility of immigrating to Mexico. According to

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[13] Bill Janzen, "The 1920s Migration of Old Colony Mennonites from the Hague-Osler Area of Saskatchewan to Durango, Mexico," *Preservings* 26 (2006): 67.

[14] A portion of a letter written in 1919 by the Reinland Mennonite Church in Manitoba to their MLA, Valentine Winkler, demonstrates this feeling of betrayal in the Mennonite community: "[The] 'School Law' [has] the purpose of depriving the Mennonite people of the Province of the privilege which they have had since they immigrated to Canada, of having our own schools.... [B]elieving then as we do now that the word of the Government is inviolate because the Government is ordained by God, we started our own schools right from the beginning, although we had to go through many hardships to do so. And we have continued to build and maintain our own schools ever since in good faith and without asking for assistance." Reinland Mennonite Church to the Legislative Assembly, February 1919, Manitoba Archives, Valentine Winkler, MG 14, B 45, box 4, file 2957-2985.

[15] Janzen, "The 1920s Migration of Old Colony Mennonites from the Hague-Osler Area of Saskatchewan to Durango, Mexico," 68-69.

[16] *Ibid.*, 68.

Winfield Fretz, the Mennonite's eventual migration to Mexico was the result of a chance meeting between the Mennonite delegation and the Mexican Consul in Buenos Aires. Fretz explains:

> After hearing [the Mennonites'] story the Consul invited the delegation to visit Mexico and promised them all the freedoms for their people they were looking for. In addition, he assured them that economic and political conditions in Mexico were more favorable than they had previously thought.[17]

According to Mexican Mennonite bishop Isaak Dyck, however, a representative of the Mexican government named Salez Lopez first approached Mennonites in Saskatchewan in 1920, when they were still in the midst of the crisis over the introduction of public schools in their community.[18]

No matter the exact sequence of events, a Mennonite delegation from Canada was sent to Mexico in 1921 to investigate any immigration opportunities open to them.[19] After meeting with the country's Minister of Agriculture and the Mexican President, Alvaro Obregón, in Mexico City, an agreement was reached between the government and the Mennonite delegation that would facilitate the Mennonite immigration to Mexico. The accord, or *Privilegium*,[20] as the Mennonites called it, was signed on 25 February 1921. It

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[17] Winfield Fretz, *Mennonite Colonization in Mexico: An Introduction*, (Akron: The Mennonite Central Committee, 1945), 10.

[18] Dyck, *Auswanderung von Canada nach Mexiko, ano 1922*, 66.

[19] Details of the trip by Mennonite delegates from Canada to Mexico were outlined by one of the delegates, Johan Löppky, in his 1921 unpublished typscript *Ein Reisebericht von Kanada nach Mexico im Jahre 1921.*

[20] *Privilegium* is the German term used by Mennonites throughout their history to describe the documents that outlined the various agreements they made with national governments, granting the community a certain set of privileges. These agreements were always secured from governments prior to Mennonite immigration and were sought and received from Prussia, Russia, Canada, and Mexico, along with subsequent agreements made prior to migrations to Paraguay in the late 1920s and to British Honduras in the 1950s. Rodolfo Groth, *Gold, Indianer, Mennoniten: Schicksale in der Nordwestlichen Sierra Madre von Mexiko,* (Lübeck: Rodolfo Groth, 1960), 120. For a re-print of the October 1921 letter sent from the Mennonites seeking immigration in Canada to the Mexican Government, which outlines the various Mennonite requests, see: *SP*, 25 November 1925, 1, 3.

granted the immigrants military exemption, permission to affirm rather than swear oaths in court, religious freedom, the right to educate their children in their own religious, German-language schools, and independence in matters relating to industry and the governance of daily life in their colonies. This granting of special privileges by the Mexican government enabled Mennonites to settle in exclusive, bloc settlements in the states of Chihuahua and Durango and to live according to their unique brand of Anabaptism in isolation from Mexican society.

The Mennonite settlement in Mexico seems, on the surface at least, to embody a fundamental contradiction in terms, not least because of the tumultuous decades of the Mexican Revolution that had preceded the arrival of this pacifist group of Anabaptists. The Revolution, beginning in 1910 and lasting into the early 1920s, began as a violent reaction against the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. Over the course of his thirty-five years in power, Díaz embarked upon a campaign to modernize Mexican industry and infrastructure.[21] The social costs of these measures and the abusive political manoeuvres used by Díaz to remain in power were, however, strongly felt among the population and by 1906, a small group of liberal intellectuals began to call for an open political system, the separation of church and state, and the introduction of a wide number of social reforms. These reforms included, among other things, an eight-hour workday and a six-day workweek, the establishment of an agricultural credit bank that would provide small farmers with low interest loans, the redistribution of uncultivated lands to the landless, and the restoration of *ejido*[22] lands taken illegally from indigenous communities.[23] The

[21] Susan M. Deeds, Michael C. Meyer, and William L. Sherman, *The Course of Mexican History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 430.

[22] The Spanish term *ejido* denotes the government-issued lands used for cooperative farming in Mexico.

revolutionary calls for changes to the agricultural and political landscape in Mexico would have tremendous impact upon the Mennonite newcomers in the years to come.

Using sources from the Mexican government, historian Martina Will notes the paradox of the entire situation for both the Mennonites and the Mexicans. For their part, Mennonites in Mexico left the wider community of their co-religionists in Canada, which had provided a "buffer" between outsiders and themselves, only to colonize "the very lands upon which the revolutionaries met, in a state where the warring factions had left little untouched and which for years after the Revolution remained plagued by small-scale uprisings and banditry."[24] On the other hand, the Mexican government's actions also seemed to carry a paradox of their own, as they permitted this "religious-ethnic minority" to settle, and indeed "stand above the law," in a post-revolutionary context that saw "both clerics and foreign interests...as pariahs."[25] In spite of these apparent contradictions, Will argues that Mennonite colonization was indeed more in line with the goals of the Revolution than it might at first appear.

While Mennonite settlement did not always agree with regional or state interests in Mexico, it did meet federal policies "of pacification, economic growth, modernization, and a Positivist view of ethnicity."[26] Mennonites' presence in northern Mexico, where post-revolutionary unrest was ongoing, helped to lend the region the peaceful image Mexico needed in order to encourage foreign investment, while Chihuahua's flagging

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[23] Deeds, Meyer, and Sherman, *The Course of Mexican History*, 466-467.

[24] Martina E. Will, "Old Colony Mennonite Colonization of Chihuahua and the Obregón Administrations's Vision for the Nation" (MA Thesis, University of California, 1993), 2.

[25] *Ibid.*, 3.

[26] Martina E. Will, "The Mennonite Colonization of Chihuahua: Reflections of Competing Visions," *The Americas* 53, 3 (January 1997), 363.

economy was spurred by the influx of capital Mennonites had brought to the country with them.[27] Furthermore, the fact that Mennonites specialized in agriculture was another asset to the region as their farming expertise helped to boost dwindling livestock numbers and was seen as a way to introduce more modern techniques to the surrounding Mexican farming operations.[28] Finally, while the special rights granted to Mennonites did indeed contradict the new Constitution, Will argues that the contributions in agriculture and the capital brought to the region around Chihuahua through Mennonite settlement was "less offensive to the nationalism of the period than the characteristic foreign investment by wealthy entrepreneurs who came to exploit Mexico's labor and land resources."[29] Therefore, while the Mennonites' demands of the Mexican government were all fulfilled, Mexico too reaped benefits from inviting this foreign ethno-religious minority to settle in their territory.

In spite the Mexican government's wish that Mennonites integrate with the general Mexican populace, and that they teach their agricultural practices to the population, the immigrants from Canada had an entirely different goal in mind. Their foremost desire was to live in isolation from the rest of society, insulated against the worldly effect that extensive contact with outsiders would have on their communal lifestyle and unique belief system. Despite this wish, however, Mennonites were in almost continuous contact with outside society during the period under study.[30]

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[27] Will, "The Mennonite Colonization of Chihuahua," 364, 369.

[28] *Ibid.*, 371, 374.

[29] *Ibid.*, 377.

[30] One letter writer in 1936 commented that Mennonites had come to Mexico in order to ensure the very survival of their "isolated, pure German folk group with their own confession of faith." *SP*, 16 September 1936, 3.

Communal Identity, Social Boundaries, and Evolving Ethnicity

Fredrik Barth's work on social boundaries helps to place this Mennonite-Mexican interaction in a broader, theoretical context. Arguing that the social boundary enveloping an ethnic group is a more critical factor of investigation than the cultural traits the boundary contains, he contends: "ethnic distinctions do not depend on the absence of social interaction and acceptance, but are quite to the contrary often the very foundations on which embracing social systems are built."[31] Within this framework, Barth outlines the means by which minority groups place certain limitations on their members in order to maintain the integrity of the group. Membership in an ethnic group "implies a series of constraints on the kinds of roles an individual is allowed to play, and the partners he [or she] may choose for different kinds of transactions."[32] This, thereby, guards some aspects of the community's culture from any outside pressure while leaving others open to influence from the broader society. Barth also points out that in settings where groups occupy geographical areas that are clearly distinct from one another, their interaction becomes limited to public areas like the marketplace. According to him, these very interactions with outsiders may lead not to the demise of its unique features, but might in fact sharpen its distinctive qualities and strengthen its sense of communal identity.

In his seminal work *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson explores the idea of cultural and social self-perception in more depth. Unlike Barth, Anderson focuses on the nation, and specifically on the rise of nationalism during the nineteenth century. He argues that a nation is "an imagined political community – and imagined as both

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[31] Fredrik Barth, "Introduction," in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference.* Fredrik Barth, ed. (Bergen-Oslo: Universitets Forlaget, 1969), 10.

[32] *Ibid.*, 17.

inherently limited and sovereign."[33] The nation is "imagined" because the majority of its members have no contact with most of the other members, "yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."[34] Thus, a group of people with very few similarities among them will, nonetheless, strongly identify with one another rather than with outsiders, despite the cultural commonalities they may share with those outside the group.

Although Anderson's study concerns itself with the modern nation-state and distinguishes it from a village context where interaction between citizens is face to face, his ideas can still be helpful in illuminating the process of identity formation in the latter case. Not only do members of an ethnic group imagine one another, they also imagine themselves in relation to outsiders. This process of turning their attention to those beyond their own group in turn reinforces the group's own identity. Thus, the bond Anderson identifies on a broader scale, which unites vast categories of people through the concept of nationalism, may also apply to smaller groups like ethnic minorities whose self-perceptions are formed, as Barth indicates, by their beliefs about non-members. A minority group's communal identity, then, is partly formed through how it imagines outsiders.

Another concept useful in illuminating the social interaction analyzed in this thesis is the idea of inter-ethnic relations. Historian Rudolph Vecoli argues that the concept of ethnicity "can only be understood in the context of group interaction."[35] Indeed, studying an ethnic group's identity requires an inter-ethnic analysis, as it is at a

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[33] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd Ed., (London: Verso, 1991), 6

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] Rudolph E. Vecoli, "An Inter-Ethnic Perspective on American Immigration History," *Mid-America* 75, 2 (1993): 234.

community's social boundaries, where it interacts with other ethnicities and with the host society, that the dynamic process of reinvention and evolution occur. Additionally, Vecoli points out that "boundary maintenance is a characteristic of, indeed prerequisite for, a viable ethnic community," but he cautions that, no matter how stringent the social or geographical boundaries defining a group, a certain degree of acculturation or assimilation is bound to occur.[36]

Historians Kathleen Conzen, David Gerber, Ewa Morawska, and George Pozzetta push the idea of inter-ethnic relations further, arguing that the kind of social interaction described by Vecoli leads to a dynamic and changing group identity. They write:

> Ethnic groups in modern settings are constantly recreating themselves, and ethnicity is continuously being reinvented in response to changing realities both within the group and the host society. Ethnic group boundaries, for example, must be repeatedly renegotiated, while expressive symbols of ethnicity (ethnic traditions) must be repeatedly reinterpreted.[37]

Conzen and her colleagues suggest that this "reinvention" of ethnicity in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries involved both the American host society as well as the individual immigrant groups. As increasing numbers of immigrants arrived on American soil, the host society was forced to reinterpret what it meant to be an American. Simultaneously, immigrants used their ethnic identities to create a place for themselves in their new homeland.[38] Thus, it was the relationship of both the newcomer and host society groups that shaped ethnicity among immigrants.

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[36] Vecoli, "An Inter-Ethnic Perspective on American Immigration History," 234-235.

[37] Kathleen Neils Conzen, David A. Gerber, Ewa Morawska, and George E. Pozzetta, "The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the U.S.A." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 12, 1 (Fall 1992): 5.

[38] *Ibid.*, 6.

It was not, however, only in relation to the receiving society that immigrants reinvented themselves. Different ethnic groups encountered one another in the labour force, the marketplace, and in times of leisure. Conzen and her colleagues argue that "[m]uch of the negotiation of identities was through interaction with these 'others,' both as models of ethnic performance to be emulated or spurned, [and] as sources of cultural elements to be assimilated or rejected."[39] Accordingly, immigrants used these interactions with other ethnic groups to form their own self-identity. As Conzen and her colleagues argue, the "invention of ethnicity also served that function: to define the group in terms of what it was not."[40] This continual invention and reinvention of ethnicity, these historians suggest, never really reached completion. Rather, it required "constant invention, innovation, negotiation, and renegotiation on the part of those [who sought] to organize identities, patterns of daily life, or the competitive struggle for social resources around ethnic symbols."[41] Thus, immigrants were constantly in the process of defining and redefining their identity.

Though Conzen and her colleagues argue that this type of ethnic reinvention did not take place to such a great degree in rural, isolated areas where ethnic groups did not come into contact with other minority groups as often as in urban centres, the concept of the reinvention of ethnicity is still useful to an analysis of the case of the Mennonites in Mexico.[42] While Mennonites desired to remain set apart from the wider Mexican society,

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[39] Conzen, et. al., "The Invention of Ethnicity," 15.

[40] *Ibid.*, 14.

[41] *Ibid.*, 17.

[42] *Ibid.*, 14.

Walter Schmiedehaus notes that Mexican towns surrounded the Mennonite settlements.[43] Therefore, although Mennonites lived in separate villages from their Mexican neighbours, they nonetheless came into situations similar to those outlined by Conzen and her co-authors, coming into contact with non-Mennonites on a frequent basis in the marketplace or through the labour force. While Mennonites continued to base their self-perception on their unique religious beliefs and Old Colony culture, the frequent interaction with Mexicans nonetheless pushed the Mennonite community to reassess and sharpen their identity as an ethno-religious minority.

Additionally, Conzen and her colleagues focus on ethnic minorities rather than ethno-religious minority groups. The Mennonite case is admittedly unique from the case studies used by these historians, for Mennonites came to North America in the late twentieth century as a distinct and identifiable ethnic and religious minority group from Europe;[44] however, even an ethno-religious minority like the Mennonites needed to renegotiate a new environment in Canada and later in Mexico, reinventing themselves in the process. Added to this process of renegotiation in Mexico was the racial element of the Mennonite relation to the native population. Therefore, though they arrived in Mexico with an already-distinct and established identity, it was further reinforced in Mexico through the racial differences between the Mennonite community and Mexican society; Mennonite feelings of racial and cultural superiority then further buttressed the social boundaries that separated these two groups.

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[43] Walter Schmiedehaus, *Die Altkolonier Mennoniten in Mexiko* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1982), 93-94.

[44] Conzen et. al. use the examples of the Scots, English, and Irish in Buffalo, New York in the 1840s and 1850s, immigrants from Eastern European origin in the 1880s until the 1930s, and Italian Americans. Conzen, et. al., "The Invention of Ethnicity," 18-31.

This Mennonite perception of racial superiority in relation to Mexican caused Mexicans to be seen as the non-Mennonite "other" in the eyes of the Mennonite community. Conzen and her co-authors' use the term "other" to describe the foreign and unknown minority groups entering the United States in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. This concept is articulated in more detail, however, in Edward Said's *Orientalism*, in which he argues that "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self."[45] Thus, European identity was reinforced through a continuous comparison with the non-European "other." As such, Said asserts that the concept of Orientalism "has less to do with the Orient than it does with [the European] world."[46] Additionally, this fascination with Orientalism was not merely academic discourse, but was instead "a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient."[47] Seen in this light, the term "other" denotes the external object against which Europe compared itself, namely the Orient, but also signifies the hierarchical relationship between Europeans and non-Europeans.

These arguments about the role of the "other," the maintenance of social boundaries, the reinvention of ethnicity, and the concept of inter-ethnic relations contribute significantly to a discussion on an ethno-religious group like the Canadian Mennonites in Mexico. An imagined sense of community among these Mennonites shaped the social boundary between them and their Mexican neighbours. And, just as immigrant groups in nineteenth century United States constructed their ethnic identities

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[45] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 3.

[46] *Ibid.*, 12.

[47] *Ibid.*, 6.

in relation to American society, Mennonites in Mexico created an identity not in social isolation, but through their daily interactions with the non-Mennonite "other," Mexicans.

This constructed identity and the boundary Mennonites negotiated between themselves and their Mexican neighbours can be seen in their letters written to the Canadian-based immigrant newspaper, *Die Steinbach Post*. In his examination of immigrant letters, historian David Gerber argues that through the act of writing letters, immigrants imagined themselves, reinvented their lives, and constructed their own understandings of the social relations in which they were enmeshed. In similar fashion, while Mennonite immigrants came into contact with Mexicans on a daily basis, the language they often used in their letters reveals their deep sense of cultural and religious separation from the surrounding Mexican population and their own self-perception of being foreigners in the land.

This self-imposed separation from Mexican society, and the subsequent perceptions Mennonites constructed about Mexicans, were not only product of the type of social boundaries highlighted by theorists like Barth. The boundaries Mennonites constructed between themselves and Mexican society were also heavily influenced by ideas of racial superiority. David Roediger's work, highlighting the importance of race as an evolving social category among immigrants in the early twentieth century, helps to illuminate the ways in which race played a role in Mennonite notions of Mexican inferiority. His study *Working Toward Whiteness*, focused on the East European immigrants arriving in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sees race as a fluid category with changing cultural meaning, variously shaping the process of social integration. Sociologist Carl James, who explores the concepts of

race and ethnicity in the Canadian context, concurs with this assessment, defining race as "the socially constructed classification of human beings based on the historical and geographic context of individual experience."[48]

As in the American context highlighted in Roediger's work, Canada also experienced an increase in immigration from eastern Europe during this period. Canadian society reacted to this influx in a fashion similar to its American counterpart, drawing racial boundaries between the established classes and the newcomers. This is demonstrated by one writer in 1912, who judged that the newcomers were "'of inferior races and lower civilizations'" than those of the country's early settlers.[49] As historian Richard Day notes, public figures like J. S. Woodsworth raised alarm about the immigrants, calling them an "amorphous heap of problematic Others," systematically classifying the ways in which they were different from Canadian society.[50] Historian Howard Palmer also highlights the growing unease among the British, Protestant population in the Canadian prairie provinces "over the type of social 'vices' and problems" which were associated with the recently-arrived immigrant population.[51]

This interpretation of race can be applied to the Mennonites who arrived in Canada from Russia at the end of the nineteenth century. As immigrant farmers of eastern European origin, this ethno-religious minority came to Canada harbouring no

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[48] Carl E. James, "Constructing Cultural Identities," in *Seeing Ourselves: Exploring Ethnicity, Race and Culture*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc., 2003), 40.

[49] R.G. MacBeth, as quoted in Richard J.F. Day, "Canada and the Proliferation of Immigrant Otherness," in *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 127.

[50] *Ibid.*, 128.

[51] Howard Palmer, "Strangers and Stereotypes: The Rise of Nativism – 1880-1920," in *The Prairie West: Historical Readings*, R. Douglas Francis and Howard Palmer, eds. (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1985), 310, 312.

illusions of superiority. While they were not judged as inferior and racially different "new immigrants," as peasants from eastern Europe Mennonites certainly did not hold a high rank in the social and racial hierarchy of Canada. Perhaps, as Palmer has argued, Mennonites were considered superior to Aboriginals and even fellow Ukrainian immigrants, but they did not meet the venerated category of Britishness, especially when they resisted pressures of Anglo-conformity in the period leading up to the First World War.[52]

The southern migration of this ethno-religious minority, however, reversed this reality. Mennonite letters to the *Post* show that coming to a developing and relatively unstable country in the south from a wealthier, more stable society in the north meant that Mennonites already possessed a conception of their own superiority toward Mexicans, based largely on economic status. Indeed, where they had once been poor immigrants in relation to their Canadian host society, these same Mennonites now came as wealthy and successful farmers to an economically depressed region ravaged by years of political instability and violence.[53] In addition to their higher economic status, while their forebears had arrived in Canada as, to borrow Roediger's term, "inbetween peoples,"[54] Mennonites arrived in Mexico from the developed north and were viewed as desirable additions to society by the Mexican government, who wished to raise up the supposedly

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[52] Howard Palmer, "Strangers and Stereotypes: The Rise of Nativism – 1880-1920," 314.

[53] Mark Wasserman, "Chihuahua: Politics in an Era of Transition," in Thomas Benjamin and Mark Wasserman, eds., *Provinces of the Revolution: Essays on Regional Mexican History, 1910-1920* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990), 219.

[54] Roediger, "New Immigrants, Race, and 'Ethnicity' in the Long Early Twentieth Century," 13.

backward segments of its own population through the addition of northern European-based immigrants.[55]

Additionally, arriving in Mexico with the idea of the Mexican as "other" in the Mennonite conscience meant that, no matter how associated individuals from the Mennonite community became with Mexican society, colour always mattered. Although influenced greatly by race, this Mennonite sense of superiority was as often characterized in religious terms. Thus, both Bishop Isaak Dyck's description of Mexico as a "land of heathens"[56] in 1922 and a 1950s Mennonite missionary's observation of a Mexican fiesta, with its late-night music, revelry, and drunkenness, as "a sad picture of sin!"[57] carry inherent racial connotations.

Thus, the letters written to the *Post* reveal a complex picture of Mennonite life in Mexico and show how the experience of this minority group reflected North American society's prevailing ideas about race and class. The record of daily Mennonite-Mexican interactions, given by the individual writers, reveals an integral part of this understanding. These details shared by writers with their Canadian audience illuminate how the Mennonite community perceived their non-Mennonite neighbours and influenced how they imagined themselves as Mennonites. Through these interactions, the Mennonite community in Mexico was able to "define [itself] in terms of what it was not,"[58] forming a distinct identity for itself as an ethno-religious minority living on foreign soil.

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[55] Will, "The Mennonite Colonization of Chihuahua," 375.

[56] Dyck, *Auswanderung von Canada nach Mexiko, ano 1922*, 66.

[57] *SP*, 11 November 1958, 6.

[58] Conzen, et. al., "The Invention of Ethnicity," 14.

Historiography

In general, scholars have not emphasized the connections made between Mennonites and wider Mexican society. Academics from a variety of backgrounds, from anthropology to linguistics, have examined topics ranging from the institutional organization of the Mennonite colonies, to their house and furniture styles, to their everyday language usage. Within this broad scope, however, the focus of the numerous studies carried out over the years has undergone a slow evolution, from a relatively confined analysis of the Mennonite colonies themselves in the first half of the twentieth century to a broader examination of the Mennonites as part of a wider, non-Mennonite community in the last few decades. Still, none of these studies make the relations between Mexicans and Mennonites their primary focus.

Winfield Fretz's early 1945 volume, sponsored and published by the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in Akron, Pennsylvania, provided readers unfamiliar with the Old Colony Mennonites in northern Mexico with a brief introduction to the subject. Fretz described the Old Colony belief system, the reasons for their decision to immigrate to Mexico, and life in the colonies, involving agriculture, business and industry, villages, morals and ethics, education, social customs, and health and hygiene practices in his narrative. Fretz did not view the Old Colony Mennonites in complete isolation from the rest of society, as he occasionally did compare the Mennonite settlements to surrounding Mexican villages and briefly considered the question of what Mexicans thought of Mennonites. Still, the heart of Fretz's book focused on the social and religious conditions prevailing in the Mennonite settlements in the new Mexican homeland.

More scholarship on Mennonites in Mexico followed. Sociologist Calvin Redekop's 1969 *The Old Colony Mennonites: Dilemmas of Ethnic Minority Life* and geographer Leonard Sawatzky's 1971 *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* kept the Old Colony Mennonites in sharp focus, but widened the examination to include inter-ethnic relations. Redekop focused on the changes in the Old Colony belief system as the group increasingly interacted with Mexican society. Similar to Fretz's work in many respects, Redekop used his categories of analysis to engage the idea of Mennonite-Mexican associations. He outlined the importance of an increased dependence on the larger economy outside of Mennonite settlements. Redekop argued that this dependance "created networks of social interaction which [broke] down the emotional, social, and cultural ethnocentric stances and force[d] an exchange [that]...in the long run, will destroy the Old Colony way of life."[59] Though his outlook for the Mennonite colonies was pessimistic, Redekop furthered the idea that the Old Colonists were part of a larger community.

Sawatzky also considered the relationships between Mexicans and Mennonites, specifically placing the Old Colony Mennonites into the context of Mexican history. Sawatzky detailed how the Mennonites were influenced by the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution and the agrarian reforms it introduced to Mexican society by focusing on the Mennonite conflict with the *agraristas*[60] about land ownership in the Valle de Bustillos,

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[59] Calvin Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites: Dilemmas of an Ethnic Minority Life* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1969): 204.

[60] *Agrarista* is a Spanish term meaning agrarian reformer. It is used to refer to the Mexicans who, following the famous saying "He who tills the land, owns it" by the Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, claimed the land they had been working on as their own after the conclusion of the Mexican Revolution in the early twentieth-century. Leonard Sawatzky, *They Sought A Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971): 67.

Chihuahua. The author also discussed the state of the economy in Chihuahua at the time of the Mennonites' arrival in 1922 and outlined the local and regional economic growth that this migration sparked. Sawatzky thus expanded the discussion of this ethnic-religious group beyond the boundaries that had held it during the early years of scholarly exploration.

A third major work, *Die Alt-Kolonier Mennoniten* written by Walter Schmiedehaus, further expanded the field.[61] Schmiedehaus was a non-Mennonite author, the German-consul in Chihuahua, and a friend of the Old Colony during the difficult early years of Mennonite settlement.[62] He was first introduced to the Mennonites upon their arrival in Chihuahua, and his work, like Sawatzky's, focused on the conflict between the Mennonite and the *agrarista* populations in the 1920s. The author outlined the Old Colony perspective as it negotiated with the Mexican government throughout the dispute. But Schmiedehaus also included the Mexican peasants' point of view, as well as the relationship between the Mexican government and the Mennonite colonists during the school crisis in the 1930s.

Kelly Hedges' 1996 dissertation "'Plautdietsch' and 'Huuchdietsch' in Chihuahua: Language, Literacy, and Identity among the Old Colony Mennonites in Northern Mexico" diverged sharply from all the other works before it. Hedges conducted

[61] Though modeled after his 1948 publication, *Ein Fester Burg ist unsere Gott: Der Wanderweg eines christlichen Siedlervolkes*, this work resembles studies of the last half of the twentieth century more than it does those of the first half, such as Fretz's book.

[62] Old Colonist Peter Rempel, the author of the foreword to *75 Jahre Mennoniten in Mexiko*, a pictorial history of Mennonite settlement in Mexico, writes of Schmiedehaus: "In his book 'Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott,' [Schmiedehaus] wrote a beautiful history of the Old Colony and Sommerfelder Mennonites unlike any other writer had before him, even if he was not himself a Mennonite; but it is not for this reason alone that we devote a few pages of this book to him, but we also do so, with joy and high respect, because he, unlike any other outsider, did so much for us during the first years of the existence of our colonies and because he so often and so willingly stood beside our leaders in word and in deed." Peter Rempel, "Foreword," in *75 Jahre Mennoniten in Mexiko*, ix.

her study through the lens of linguistics, probing the cultural and religious identity of this Mennonite group. She explored the extent to which they had either remained isolated from, or had become acculturated to, Mexican society. Using the study of Low German and High German as the medium through which to view her subject, Hedges recognized:

> The prevalent rhetoric of apartness that is so important in Old Colony Mennonite identity construction processes…rarely really succeeds in hiding the fact that the Old Colonists often find themselves mired in workings and problems of the world that they can neither control or oftentimes even begin to understand.[63]

Nevertheless, she concluded that previous scholars' predictions of the collapse of Low German Old Colonist culture was "exaggerated," even though an increasing number of Old Colonists were learning Spanish and borrowing words from it.[64] She ended her study on an optimistic note regarding the future of the Mennonite colonists.

David Quiring's 2003 *The Mennonite Old Colony Vision: Under Siege in Mexico and the Canadian Connection* picked up on yet another heretofore unexamined dimension of the Old Colony settlements in Mexico. He argued that the Old Colony way of life in Mexico was threatened specifically by Canadian immigration and citizenship laws, which allowed the Mennonites in Mexico to retain their Canadian citizenship and to travel back and forth between the two countries with relative ease. As Old Colonists moved between Canada and Mexico, usually to find temporary employment for the summer months, they accepted the mindset of the more liberal Canadian culture.[65] Thus, Mennonites in Canada who assisted Mexican Mennonite migrants in Canada incurred the

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[63] Kelly Hedges, "'Plautdietsch' and 'Huuchdietsch' in Chihuahua: Language, Literacy, and Identity Among the Old Colony Mennonites in Northern Mexico." (PhD Dissertation, Yale University, 1996), 12-13.

[64] *Ibid.*, 335.

[65] David Quiring, *The Mennonite Old Colony Vision: Under Siege in Mexico and the Canadian Connection* (Steinbach: Crossway Publications Inc., 2003), 7.

resentment of the Old Colonists who remained in Mexico. The presence of other, often more progressive, Mennonite groups in close proximity to the Old Colony villages in Mexico also undermined the settlements. Even though they tried to assist the Old Colonists economically, socially, and spiritually, their presence was "one of the most disruptive factors to Old Colony life in Mexico."[66] In contrast, Mexican society over the years proved to be a very hospitable environment for the Old Colonist aim to maintain their isolationist religious and cultural values.[67]

All of these various studies in some way do address the issue of the Mexican populations surrounding the Mennonite settlements and the interactions between the two groups resulting from this close proximity. While some have dealt with this topic more than others, none place their primary focus on the encounters that occur in the zones between these two ethnic groups. Neither have historians nor other scholars examined how Old Colonists themselves perceived those relationships or how these interactions played a role in forging group self-perception and identity. The letters written by the Mennonites in Mexico and published in *Die Steinbach Post* demonstrate a correlation between these two ideas. As Barth contends, ethnic distinctions do not rely on geographical or cultural isolation, but they persist in spite of – and often because of – social interactions with other groups. Thus, this study examines Mennonite-Mexican relations through the lens of the *Post*, exploring how the interactions between these two groups in the areas of economics, conflict, and interpersonal relations contribute to the identity of Mennonites in Mexico.

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[66] Quiring, *The Mennonite Old Colony Vision*, 131.

[67] *Ibid.*, 63.

Die Steinbach Post and Immigrant Newspapers

As the only newspaper distributed throughout conservative Mennonite communities in both North and South America, *Die Steinbach Post* is a unique source for an historical examination of the communal identity and self-perception of the Mennonites in Mexico. Far from being the representative of conservative Mennonites across two continents that it was later to become, the *Post* began as a small community newspaper in southern Manitoba in 1913. Though founder Jakob S. Friesen intended it "to be a link between far apart living Mennonite people,"[68] it took ten years for the *Post* to realize this goal.[69] While letters sent to the paper by readers were at first confined mainly to the Canadian Mennonite community, with the migration of Mennonites from Manitoba and Saskatchewan to northern Mexico in 1922 and to the Paraguayan Chaco in 1926, letters began to arrive from Latin America as well. After July 11, 1923, when the first letter from a Mennonite in Mexico appeared on the first page of the *Post*, through to its discontinuation in 1967, nearly every issue contained correspondence from both Mexico and Paraguay. The migration of Mennonites from Manitoba to East Paraguay in 1948 and then from Mexico to British Honduras in the late 1950s further extended the paper's readership into Central and South America. By the early 1960s, therefore, *Die Steinbach*

[68] Jakob S. Friesen, as quoted in Jeannie L. Hiebert, "Jakob S. Friesen (1862-1931): 'Drekjha Friesen,'" 11.

[69] The *Post* underwent very few major changes from the 1920s through to the 1960s. The paper's size increased from a small 8.5 x 11 inches to a larger 11 x 17 inch format in the mid 1920s. It also nearly doubled in length in 1959, from a relatively short eight pages to twelve or fifteen. The word "Steinbach" was dropped and then added back into the paper's title more than once throughout its lifespan, only to be dropped once and for all in 1963. The *Post's* content underwent very few changes until the expansion of the newspaper in the late 1950s. These longer editions included more news items, personal interest pieces, and sermons. A greater number of pictures also appeared in the pages of the *Post* during this time. New sections meant exclusively for women and children, entitled "Für Frau und Heim," ["For Woman and Home,"] and "Der Jugendfreund," ["The Friend of Youth,"] respectively, were also introduced in 1963.

Post could accurately proclaim itself the central "bridge for the German-speaking Mennonites of North and South America"[70]

Moreover, the fact that the *Post* has been the only newspaper subscribed to and regularly read by the Old Colonists in Mexico speaks to the significant role it played in this ethnic community. In his investigation of Old Colony life in Mexico in the 1960s, Redekop briefly alluded to the extent of the *Post*'s readership in that country:

> the *Steinbach Post*, published at Steinbach, Manitoba, is the only paper that is regularly read by the Old Colony. Almost every family gets it. Upon investigation it appears that the *Steinbach Post* early began having correspondents from all outlying Mennonite settlements. The best reason why the Old Colony read only the *Steinbach Post* is because it carries reports of "our people who live in various parts of Mexico and other areas."[71]

With such a wide distribution, and with Old Colonists from all the various Mennonite settlements in Mexico writing in, the *Post* stands as a crucial voice of the Old Colony people. Moreover, this denominational weekly represents an historical source of such regularity that, between 1923 and 1967, few of its issues appear without letters from Old Colonists and other Mennonites in Mexico. The forty-four years of letter writing from Mennonites to the *Post* offers a unique perspective of two generations of Mennonite colonization in Mexico, a look at the initial years of settlement, and an exploration of the community's gradual development over four and a half decades. Additionally, the letters published in the *Post* present a significant source of information on an ethnic minority group whose members, according to Hedges, did not write very often other than when it was necessitated by daily activities like signing bills or making labels.[72] Accordingly,

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[70] This subtitle was added to *Die Steinbach Post* in approximately 1963.

[71] Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites, 135.*

[72] Hedges, "'Plautdietsch' and 'Huuchdietsch' in Chihuahua," 274-275.

sources like personal diaries or autobiographies often used in historical research are not as readily available for this community as they might be for others.

Despite the important role *Die Steinbach Post* had in the Mennonite communities in North and South America, it has been neglected as an historical source. Other Mennonite newspapers such as *Der Bote*, which was the leading immigrant newspaper for Mennonites from Russia; the *Mennonitische Rundschau*, which served the Mennonite Brethren community in Canada and Russia; the *Zionsbote*, which served the same church group in the U.S., and *Die Mennonitische Post*, the successor to *Die Steinbach Post* in catering to North and South American Mennonites since 1977, have been the subjects of historical analysis. The pages of *Die Steinbach Post*, however, have as yet not been investigated. Thus, to a certain extent, this study also serves to introduce this historical source into the scholarly dialogue about the Mennonite population in Mexico.

The letters from Mexican Mennonites published in the *Post* are of course not unique; this ethno-religious group does not stand alone in using such a medium to articulate a sense of social boundary in the new homeland. The practice of writing letters to a community newspaper was itself quite widespread among immigrants in North America. Although he examines the case of Swedish-American immigrant newspapers, Ulf Jonas Björk highlights the prevalence of the foreign-language press in the United States generally at the height of European immigration to North American in the early twentieth century. According to Björk, "for the year 1915, we find a total of 1,268 publications, divided among thirty different languages…the largest group of publications was published in German (531), followed by Italian (96), Spanish (73), and Swedish

(72)."[73] Clearly, community newspapers were of vital importance to newcomers to the United States. Oscar Handlin's *The Uprooted* also examines this widespread tendency among immigrants to start up their own newspapers upon their arrival on foreign shores. He explains, "[I]n the New World there was no life without some kinds of knowledge; and often only [the immigrant's] own press could give the immigrant the explanations his [or her] troubled experience demanded."[74] Immigrant newspapers, therefore, served a unique function in their communities, helping their readers adapt to the new environment while still allowing them to maintain connections with their old homeland.[75]

The ties between immigrants and small, denominational newspapers also existed throughout the many branches of the Mennonite community. One study of the Mennonite Brethren *Zionsbote*, highlights the important role this small denominational paper had among immigrant communities in the United States and Russia throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The paper was a transnational "messenger" between the MB communities, but it was also seen in a more personal light by its readers, as they often "addressed it as a 'good friend' or a guest on a 'dear visit.'"[76] It united a geographically scattered ethno-religious community, providing "a strategic sense of belonging" for its readers.[77] Another study of the non-denominational *Die Mennonitische*

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[73] Ulf Jonas Björk, "The Swedish-American Press as an Immigrant Institution," *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly* 51, 4 (2000): 296.

[74] Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted*, 2nd Ed., (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002): 160.

[75] Ulf Jonas Björk, "Perhaps There Is Someone Who Wants to Know How We Live: 'Public' Immigrant Letters in Swedish-American Newspapers," *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly* 56, 2 (2005): 184.

[76] Dora Dueck, "Print, Text, Community: A Study of Communication in the Zionsbote, A Mennonite Weekly, between 1884 and 1906," (MA Thesis, University of Manitoba, 2001), 2.

[77] *Ibid.*, 4.

Post investigated the role it played in uniting the "Kanadier"[78] diaspora across North and South America in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Similar to that of its predecessor *Die Steinbach Post*, the purpose of the *Mennonitische Post*, was to create a sense of community among the Kanadier Mennonites scattered across two continents. This study concluded that the "community formed by the *Post* [was] no less 'real' than a literal, face-to-face neighbourhood; it [was] simply a different type of community, one united by common interest as opposed to common place."[79]

Immigrants of many different backgrounds, cultures, and ethnicities used the community newspaper to keep kinship ties and friendships intact, in spite of geographic distances. Letters made public by being published in a newspaper for all to read, however, constitute a unique form of communication and must be read with care. In his work *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong delves into the worlds of oral and written communication and argues that it is not only the form of communication that is altered when something is written down, but that the act of writing, by its very nature, actually restructures one's consciousness entirely:

> Without writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing but normally even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form. More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness.[80]

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[78] The German term "Kanadier" is often used to describe the conservative Mennonite groups who immigrated to Canada from Russia in the 1870s. After approximately fifty years in the country, many of these Mennonites moved from Canada to various Latin American countries in the early twentieth century. Some have once again returned to Canada, while others have undertaken repeat migrations back and forth between Canada and, for example, Mexico.

[79] Robyn Sneath, "Imagining a Mennonite Community: The *Mennonitische Post* and a People of Diaspora" *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 22 (2004): 206.

[80] Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1982), 78.

Scholars have critiqued Ong's construction of a dichotomous relationship between orality and literacy; nevertheless, his idea that the act of writing filters knowledge in a particular way is useful for my study.[81] Ong writes that the "writer must set up a role in which absent and often unknown readers can cast themselves....The reader must also fictionalize the writer."[82] Clearly the writer chooses materials the reader would find interesting. But Ong also argues that writers structure stories beginning with ascending action, allowing the tension to build to a climax, then retreating into descending action, and finally concluding with the denouement. Writers in a print culture, Ong concludes, have "from the start a control of [their] subject and of the causes powering its action."[83] Thus, the world of print communication is not merely filtered to include only certain, specific pieces of information, but also highly structured in how it relates its message.

Letters written by Mexican Mennonites conform to Ong's observations on print communication. A vast majority of letters published in the *Post* over forty-four years conformed to a specific pattern set out already in the early 1920s and carried through to the termination of the newspaper in the late 1960s. Though letter writers could have chosen from any number of subjects upon which to write, most chose to follow a specific pattern of categories set by the other Mennonite letter writers before them. In her study

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[81] In his article "Custom and the Social Organization of Writing in Early Modern England," Andy Wood argues that orality and literacy both contributed, in their own unique ways, to the evolution of customary law among early modern English elites and commoners alike, and to the sustenance of the local and regional identities of English peasant communities. Thus, he contends that these two concepts ought not to be seen as polar opposites of one another, as many social historians view them. Andy Wood, "Custom and the Social Organization of Writing in Early Modern England," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 9 (1999): 258, 267.

[82] Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 102.

[83] *Ibid.*, 142.

on literacy among Old Colony Mennonites in Mexico, Hedges comments on this repetition of topics, which often included health updates, weather and crop reports, and urgent requests for letters from friends and relatives.[84]

Different from other sources of immigrant writing such as memoirs, personal letters, or diaries, these immigrant letters from the Mennonites in Mexico were produced by people seeking to explain their experiences in Mexico to the Mennonites who stayed behind in Canada. The repetition of topics in the genre of immigrant letters is a subject examined by numerous immigration historians who argue that, while it is true that most letters written by immigrants to family or friends left behind follow certain patterns and, therefore, share details about specific, oft-repeated topics, this does not render the source ineffective or worthless. As Gerber contends, in his examination of the uses of immigrant letters as historical sources:

> we may…find emerging out of letters experiential categories, such as birth, death, generations, relationships, security, fear and anxiety, the body, health, food, material possessions, and so on. These conform more closely to people's lived experience and aspirations, and above all to their own self-understandings. We will need, in effect, to find ways of taking more seriously precisely those matters that appear routinely in correspondence, but that historians have frequently dismissed as too trivial to be worthy of scholarly attention.[85]

Contrary to the assumption that the often-mundane repetition of the same subjects in immigrant letters renders this historical source meaningless, it is precisely these details that shed light on the world of the letter writer as he or she experiences it. Walter Kamphoefner, Wolfgang Helbich, and Ulrike Sommer's collection of letters written by

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[84] Hedges, "'Plautdietsch' and 'Huuchdietsch' in Chihuahua," 275.

[85] David A. Gerber, "The Immigrant Letter Between Positivism and Populism," 23.

German-American immigrants underscores the importance of this type of historical resource. The editors of this volume note that immigrant letters are

> uniquely valuable as documents of social history, showing what no immigration statistics, no consular reports, no theories of assimilation can convey: how individual immigrants came to know and appraise a new society, how they met the challenges and tensions of living between two cultures, and perhaps most important, how they felt about this process that called many of their old values into question.[86]

Therefore, while immigrant letters must be read with care, they are an important historical source that can shed light on the immigrant experience in ways many other sources cannot.

Additionally, the categories contained in the letters written by Mennonites in Mexico directly address the community-wide scope of this study. The patterns that writers largely conformed to, encompassing the lifecycle, Mennonite social networks, and agricultural reports, all reveal the communal-orientation of this immigrant group. Though the Canadians to whom they wrote had been excommunicated from the Old Colony Mennonite Church after electing not to immigrate to Mexico in 1922, friendships and kinship ties between these groups remained intact. Nonetheless, the act of writing letters to their friends and relatives who stayed behind in Canada was a political one that served to demonstrate that Mennonites in Mexico were faring well in their new homeland and were staying true to their religious beliefs in ways that the Canadian Mennonites could not. Bishop Isaak Dyck's belief that "in Mexico [Mennonites] found what [they] had lost in Canada"[87] demonstrates the divide drawn between the Old Colonists who had migrated to the south and those who had stayed behind in Canada. Despite the tensions

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[86] Walter D. Kamphoefner, Wolfgang Helbich, and Ulrike Sommer, eds. *News from the Land of Freedom: German Immigrants Write Home* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), viii.

[87] Dyck, *Auswanderung von Canada nach Mexiko*, 115.

that existed between the Old Colonists in Canada and Mexico, the Canadians were curious about the experiences of their coreligionists in Mexico, and so the Mexican Mennonite letters were filled with details about their daily lives in their new country.

The tensions that existed between the two groups in 1922 could have caused letter writers in Mexico to put a positive spin on their experiences, to validate their decision to immigrate to Mexico; however, this hypothesis proves to be incorrect, as letters frequently contained details about negative encounters with the Mexican government, the tremendous adversity of farming in the early years, and described of the self-doubts expressed by many when faced with the hardships of pioneering. Thus, a careful reading of the letters from 1922 until 1967 demonstrates that the Mennonites in Mexico did not whitewash their experiences in their new homeland.

Conscious that they wrote their letters for public consumption by a largely Canadian audience of friends and relatives, writers seem to have placed more emphasis on the events and topics that pertained to the entire group and not only to their individual households. Personal subjects like births, marriages, illnesses, or deaths in the family, or even journeys to visit friends in other colonies and trips taken to town to sell produce, were only shared in so far as they reflected the wider experience of the community. Topics not often addressed by Mennonites in these letters, such as private struggles or observations on family life, might have been too personal to describe in a public forum. When exploring questions on how a community perceives itself in relation to its neighbours a community-wide voice piece like *Die Steinbach Post* can in many ways be a more appropriate resource than more private sources would be.

The filtered narratives of Mennonite letters demonstrate the important role the interactions between Mexicans and Mennonites had in their experience as an immigrant minority living in Mexico. These letters suggest that these dealings occurred frequently and from the very outset of Mennonite colonization in the country. In addition, the information the letters provide on this subject sheds light on how the letter writers perceived themselves and their community. Gerber highlights a similar phenomenon in the letters of twentieth-century American immigrants, commenting:

> These letters...provide evidence of the subtle personal transformations of consciousness and self-concept that accompanied, over the course of decades, the experience of emigration and resettlement and the confrontation with new patterns of work and new cultural codes.[88]

By remaining relatively consistent in what subjects they broached over this forty-four year span, Mennonite letter writers revealed the constancy of their association with, and views of, their Mexican neighbours and thereby highlight their own self-perceptions as an ethno-religious minority living in Mexico.

In order to gain a broad sense of Mennonite-Mexican relations over time in Mexico, I have mined each edition of the *Post* from its first issue in 1915 through the end of its run in 1967. The issues published between 1915 and 1922 help to clarify Mennonite perceptions of outside society in Manitoba and Saskatchewan in general, and of the school laws in particular. The letters between 1923 and 1967 reveal the broad Mennonite view of the migration and settlement in Mexico and specifically illuminate their views of Mexican neighbours. Taken together, this fifty-two year period serves to

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[88] David A. Gerber, "You see i speak very well Englisch: Literacy and the Transformed Self as Reflected in Immigrant Personal Correspondence," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 12, 2 (Winter 1993): 59.

illuminate the broad immigration experience of this Canadian ethno-religious group in Mexico.

My research method remained fairly consistent for the fifty-two years of *Die Steinbach Post* under review here. For the decade of the 1920s I read both the letters coming from Mexico and those originating in Canada, but as Mexican Mennonites began writing to the *Post* more regularly, I focused solely on those letters. Throughout my analysis I was cognizant of the fact that not all Mennonites living in Mexico belonged to the Old Colony. There were also conservative Sommerfelder Mennonites who came in the 1920s and the Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites who arrived in 1948. In addition, members of more progressive Mennonite groups like the General Conference, the Mennonite Brethren, and the Holdeman Mennonites also immigrated to Mexico, usually to evangelize among both the Old Colony and Mexican populations. Very often, these groups settled in areas immediately surrounding the Old Colony settlements. Despite differences between denominations that influenced each group's area of settlement, letters from different denominations were remarkably similar, with the exception of those written by evangelistically-minded Mennonite missionaries.

Conclusion

Studies over the years have addressed the issue of the Mexican populations surrounding the Mennonite settlements and the interactions between the two groups resulting from this close proximity. None, however, have placed their primary focus on the encounters that occur in the zones between these two ethnic groups. Neither have historians nor other scholars systematically examined how Old Colonists themselves

perceived those relationships or analyzed the manner in which they played a role in forging the group's self-perception and identity. The Mexican Mennonite letters published in *Die Steinbach Post* demonstrate a correlation between these two ideas. As Barth contends, the distinctive traits of an ethnic group are often strengthened when faced with interaction from other groups.[89] To study these social connections, therefore, Chapter Two in this study examines the business transactions and economic ties between the Mennonite community and Mexican society. Chapter Three investigates accounts of violence in the Mennonite colonies at the hands of Mexican thieves and tensions between the Mennonites and the Mexican government, while Chapter Four analyzes various stories and anecdotes about the informal or friendly relationships forged between some Mennonites and Mexicans.

This study, therefore, examines interactions between these two groups in the areas of economics, conflict, and interpersonal relations. By exploring these inter-group relations through Mennonite public letters it also becomes evident that interactions with Mexican society not only helped to build the perceptions Mennonites had of their Mexican neighbours, but also allowed them to construct their own identity as an ethno-religious group. As they commented on the Mexican population and made comparisons between themselves and the surrounding society, Mennonites in Mexico were able to build a cohesive perception of themselves as a group of German-speaking, Anabaptist Canadians living as foreigners in the Spanish-speaking, Catholic culture of Mexico.

[89] Barth, "Introduction," 10.

CHAPTER TWO

"WITH THE UTMOST EXERTION AND WITH THE HELP OF TWO MEXICANS"[1]: MENNONITES AND MEXICANS IN THE MARKETPLACE

On April 25, 1928 an anonymous writer identifying as "A Reader," wrote to *Die Steinbach Post* with a description of Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua:

> When one observes our little city and how it has changed, then the outlook here cannot be that bad; indeed, the people have high hopes. This is to be seen in how the city is being cleaned up. The telephone already reaches almost through the entire city. The streets are being improved, the houses and warehouses are being brightly painted, and even in the German language. And in addition to that the elevator stands as a beacon in the city, because it is the highest building. Only with the pigs is it as it always has been, as they are always roaming free, together with the goats.[2]

This description of Cuauhtémoc as "our little city" belies the writer's strong sense of pride in its achievements and the way in which it was being improved. Observing the town, the author noted the enhancements made to its physical appearance, its economic progress, and certain perennial problems. The vibrant and growing town described in this letter, however, stands in stark contrast to the condition of Cuauhtémoc, then called San Antonio de los Arenales, at the time the Mennonites arrived in 1922. At that time, the city

> was still only a railroad station. There was a big storage shed and a few barracks that the [Mennonite] immigrants were temporarily permitted to use. Other than that, there were only a few tiny houses belonging to workers and the train station itself. There were no businesses or doctors there yet.[3]

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[1] Isaak M. Dyck, *Auswanderung von Canada nach Mexiko, ano 1922*, trans. Robyn Sneath (Cuauhtémoc: Imprenta Colonial, 1995), 110.

[2] *SP*, 25 April 1928, 3.

[3] Gerhard Rempel and Franz Rempel, compilers, *75 Jahre Mennoniten in Mexiko* (Chihuahua: Prisma Impresiones, 1997), 22.

The Bustillos Valley, where the Mennonites had purchased land from the Zuloaga family, represented only "nearly endless, dry grasslands and nowhere was a building to be seen."[4] By April 1928, however, the town had not only grown, but Mennonites had developed a sense of ownership and pride in its progress.

A similar sense of civic pride can be found in numerous other letters appearing in *Die Steinbach Post* over the forty-five year span of the paper from 1922 until 1967. Writers often commented on the economic improvement of Cuauhtémoc since they had arrived, noting the town's physical growth, the burgeoning business sector, and the emergence of a small market for the produce and other goods Mennonites had for sale. On the reverse side of this sense of satisfaction, however, Mennonites writing to the *Post* expressed a pessimistic note of displeasure with the Mexican business environment in Cuauhtémoc. While letter writers noted the success of their town, they also commented at length on the unreliability of their Mexican workers, gave voice to a sense of being cheated by their Mexican customers and by the country's legal system, and expressed discouragement at obstacles placed in their path to economic achievement in their new homeland.

While these two aspects of Mennonite economic life in Mexico seem to stand in stark contrast to one another, they are in fact two related parts of the answer to a key question: how did Mennonites perceive themselves as an ethno-religious group in the foreign Mexican environment? Mennonites had to find a balance between their involvement in the market and their attempts to remain separate and distinct from the rest of the population in Mexico. As historian Janis Thiessen notes of Mennonites in Manitoba, "[t]he dialectic of separation from and dependence on the world – 'in the

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[4] Rempel and Rempel, compilers, *75 Jahre Mennoniten in Mexiko*, 22.

world but not of the world' – has long been a central facet of the Mennonite faith."[5] The same can be said of the Mennonites living in Mexico. Thus, letters gave voice to a feeling of exclusion in the sense of their receiving unfair treatment in the labour pool and at the hands of corrupt Mexican officials, while still expressing pride and a sense of responsibility for the growth of Cuauhtémoc. Additionally, the Mennonite practice of consistently identifying the race of their Mexican employees or customers, while providing their readers with no other specific information about these non-Mennonite neighbours, reinforced their sense of being racially superior to Mexicans. The Mennonite sense of being foreigners, as well as their claim of responsibility for the economic advancement of nearby Mexican towns, permitted Mennonites to stand aloof from their surrounding environment and to maintain their identity as outsiders, while still being heavily involved in the local Mexican economy.

Historiography

Although the Old Colony Mennonites immigrated to Mexico from Canada in order to maintain their identity through isolation from the rest of society, in reality, they had to engage with Mexican communities surrounding their colonies on an almost daily basis. Of the various arenas where Mennonites came into contact with their Mexican neighbours, the marketplace is the most visible and one of the most significant. The importance of the business sector in inter-group relations is highlighted by Glenda Miller's comparison of Mennonite and Mormon communities in northern Mexico. She writes, "For most subgroups the economy is the cultural area where their boundary

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[5] Janis Thiessen, "Mennonite Business in Town and City: Friesens Corporation of Altona and Palliser Furniture of Winnipeg," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 73, 3 (July 1999): 587.

maintenance mechanisms are the weakest and the systemic linkages with the outside world are the strongest."[6] As Mennonites settled into their new surroundings in Mexico, they simultaneously developed a growing interdependency with the local population. Both as settlers and later as business people, Mennonites became an important sector in their local economies. Simultaneously, Mexicans also came to play a vital role in Mennonite economic endeavours. It is necessary to first examine the secondary literature written on this topic, as well as to explore various theories concerning employer-employee relations throughout Mexican history, however, before delving into the evidence presented in the Mennonite letters themselves.

Mennonite scholars have frequently drawn attention to the economic interdependence of the Mennonite colonies and the Mexican population, especially in the northern regions of the country. Calvin Redekop draws attention to the increasing dependence of Mennonites on their host society, focusing especially on Mennonites' growing reliance on mechanization and the group's subsequent technological integration with the neighbouring Mexican communities. Leonard Sawatzky also notes that, in areas where Mennonites had at one point been more advanced than Mexicans, the reverse was found to be more accurate by the late twentieth century. In farming, as well as in other areas such as literacy, Mennonites had not advanced at the same pace as Mexican society. Indeed, Sawatzky claims they regressed: where Mennonites were once viewed as the bearers of modern agricultural techniques, they later became seen as backward by

[6] Glenda Miller, "A Comparison of Mennonite and Mormon Colonies in Northern Mexico." (MA Thesis, University of Texas at El Paso, 1993), 44-45.

Mexican farmers who had become more scientific in their farming practices and achieved greater successes than the Mennonites.[7]

If the historiography seems to skirt the issue of Mennonite agriculture, the opposite is true of its emphasis on the business sectors of the Mennonite colonies in Mexico. Although Redekop contends that "because working outside the colony [was] tantamount to being out of fellowship with the church, it [was] almost never done,"[8] all other scholars highlight the impact of non-agricultural businesses on Mennonite society. Among the industries that sprang up among Mennonites in Mexico were cheese factories, machine repair shops, agricultural supply companies, and hardware stores. A service industry also sprang up within the Old Colony community, offering the services of seamstresses, self-taught bonesetters, and dentists. Restaurants and ice cream shops owned by Mennonites also served as arenas where Mennonite and Mexican clientele mixed together.[9]

Various factors led to the gradual rise in non-agricultural businesses and industries in Mennonite colonies. Redekop points to the lack of land within the colonies in the 1960s as an impetus to the introduction of non-farming businesses. Insufficient land to adequately sustain individual colonies led to the introduction of other industries, channelling some members of the community into businesses rather than farming. The persistent droughts of the 1930s also served to move Old Colony Mennonites into cheese

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[7] Harry Leonard Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 324.

[8] Calvin Wall Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites: Dilemmas of an Ethnic Minority Life* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1969), 88.

[9] Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites*, 88, 127-128, 172-173; Kelly Lynn Hedges, "'Plautdietsch' and 'Huuchdietsch' in Chihuahua: Language, Literacy, and Identity Among the Old Colony Mennonites in Northern Mexico" (PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan Press, 1996), 33, 238, 253.

production.[10] By introducing this industry, the colony could supply employment to some of its unemployed members.[11] Since many factories were run as cooperatives, these initiatives also provided the community with a cash income during the years when farming alone was not adequately providing for their economic needs.

In addition to the Mennonite-owned businesses, Mexican-owned stores and shops also attracted Mennonite customers. Hedges notes that businesses in Cuauhtémoc "actively pursue[d] Mennonite customers and clients, advertising in High German on their shop windows [and] learning a few words of Low German."[12] Therefore, while the growth of Mennonite industry has been the impetus behind the increasing presence of Mennonites in Mexican society, scholars demonstrate that the development of Mexican businesses also served to bring these two groups into closer contact with one another.

It was not only through the exchange of business that Mennonites and Mexicans were drawn into increasing interaction with each other. Another aspect of the inter-ethnic relationship between these two groups resided in the Mennonite reliance on the services offered by Mexicans to the Mennonite community. Scholars demonstrate, for example, that, due to the strict guidelines of the Old Colony Church, which forbade the purchase of cars and trucks and the use of rubber tires on tractors, tasks such as transporting produce would be impossible without the assistance of paid Mexican employees.[13] Redekop notes that it was "considered permissible [for Mennonites] to hire a car or truck owned by a

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[10] Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites*, 88.

[11] Each private and village-owned factory employed five to ten workers who would collect milk from their suppliers every morning and deliver monthly milk cheques. *Ibid.*, 88-89.

[12] *Ibid.*, 34.

[13] *Ibid.*, 203.

Mexican in order to have some hauling done."[14] Mennonites therefore frequently hired Mexicans to provide them with transportation for business purposes or simply to take them on a trip to the city.[15]

In addition to the services Mexicans offered their Mennonite customers, these two groups came into contact with one another through the labour force. With the rise of non-agricultural businesses within the Mennonite community came the need for employees knowledgeable in the areas of business administration. Due to the low literacy rates of many Old Colonists, both Sawatzky and Hedges point out that Mexicans were frequently hired to help in Mennonite-owned businesses. Mennonite storeowners often trained Mexican personnel to perform secretarial and bookkeeping tasks, as well as to act as their legal representatives.[16] Redekop also notes that, in rare occasions, business partnerships were forged between Mennonites and Mexicans. In one such case in the 1960s, a box factory in Silberfeld, Campo 26 was jointly owned by an Old Colonist and a "wealthy Mexican from Chihuahua." The partnership helped to make the business viable, as one of Redekop's interviewees explained: the Mexican partner did

> most of the "dirty work" of avoiding the payment of income tax and other taxes which [could] be avoided if the right people [were] known....The factory was not able to function and make profits as long as only Old Colonists were running it because of the red tape and governmental interference, which they did not understand and were not able to sidestep.[17]

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[14] Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites*, 43.

[15] *Ibid.*, 126.

[16] Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 329. Hedges, "'Plautdietsch' and 'Huuchdietsch,'" 254-255.

[17] Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites*, 129.

In this instance, only by bringing in a Mexican business partner, and utilizing his skill in manoeuvring the Mexican taxation system to their mutual benefit, was the Old Colonist entrepreneur able to been running a profitable enterprise.

This last example sheds light on one final area in the historiography of Mennonite-Mexican relations. Many of the works highlight the Mennonite opinion that their Mexican counterparts often had low ethical and moral standards, especially when it came to business affairs. Hedges notes an Old Colony family who told "stories of Mexicans trying to swindle or rob Mennonites."[18] Similarly, Redekop relates that even though one half of the clientele in Old Colony shops and factories were Mexican, this arrangement presented problems, as some shop owners tried to limit business with Mexicans, fearful that these customers would not pay their bills.[19]

Further evidence of the low opinion Mennonites had for Mexicans in their business relations comes from Winfield Fretz's 1945 study which notes the Mennonite distaste of the "bribery and graft" seen as accepted practice among Mexican officials and businessmen.[20] Redekop's 1969 study also points out that Mennonites blamed their own lapses in integrity in their business dealings on the Mexican political system and its corruption. One of his interviewees claimed: "one is forced into being dishonest" by government corruption that exists "from top to bottom."[21] While Mennonites and Mexicans had increasingly become interdependent in the economic arena, Mennonites

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[18] Hedges, "'Plautdietsch' and 'Huuchdietsch,'" 75.

[19] Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites*, 173.

[20] Winfield Fretz, *Mennonite Colonization in Mexico: An Introduction* (Akron: Mennonite Central Committee, 1945), 35.

[21] Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites*, 53.

nonetheless managed to maintain their self-identity as a separate people by regarding their Mexican neighbours as untrustworthy and deceitful.

The scholarship of Mennonites in Mexico highlights the inroads non-agricultural industries made into the colonies, as well as the ways in which this change tightened Mennonite-Mexican relations. Whether through the businesses themselves or through the employer-employee relationships, it is clear that Mennonites and Mexicans came into contact with one another on a continual basis. An examination of *Die Steinbach Post* furthers this discussion begun by Sawatzky, Redekop, Hedges, Quiring, and others, by revealing the regularity of contact between Mennonites and Mexicans and by demonstrating the continuity of these relations over forty-five years of Mennonite settlement in Mexico. Additionally, by examining this source it becomes clear that, as Mennonites related their experiences with Mexicans and expressed opinions about these neighbours to their friends and relatives back in Canada, they simultaneously forged an identity for themselves as an ethnic group intricately woven into the local Mexican economy, yet still set apart from the mainstream.

The Patrón-Peón Relationship on Mennonite Colonies

A comparison of relations within the Mennonite immigrant communities and Mexican society in general suggests a number of historic similarities. In his study on labour relations in Huecorio, Mexico in the 1960s, Michael Belshaw discovered a set of unskilled, though relatively well educated, *peones*.[22] The author found that most labourers were employed on a day-by-day basis in the agricultural sector, paid six to

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[22] Michael Belshaw, *A Village Economy: Land and People of Huecorio* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 96.

seven pesos for an eight-hour day.[23] The nature of the relationship between employer and employee, however, is illuminated by the fact that, in addition to their daily wage, it was expected that employers provide their day labourers with an afternoon meal, itself worth nearly half a worker's daily wage.[24] As Belshaw notes, the *patrón* was expected to "provide some protection for, and be indulgent of, his [worker]" in exchange for the worker's labour and his or her "intangible loyalty."[25] Leigh Binford, in his examination of peasants and petty capitalists in the southern Oaxacan region, concurs with this assessment of the relationship between employers and employees in rural Mexican society. He asserts that the "patron-client relationship [was] based upon loans and other favours" made by the employer to his or her workers.[26]

In looking at the historical roots of this type of vertical relationship, Frank Miller's 1973 work identifies its characteristics as part of the pre-revolutionary economic landscape in Mexico. He notes that while employees offered "cheap labour, loyalty, and deference," employers gave their workers "a degree of security and a sense of belonging to an important social unit with a glorious past and a guaranteed future."[27] While the Mexican Revolution and the subsequent land reform movements did much to undermine the landowning class, Miller asserts that these events did not fully eliminate this unique relationship between employers and workers. He writes, "Patron-client relationships

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[23] Belshaw, *A Village Economy,* 103.

[24] The afternoon meal was worth three pesos. *Ibid.*

[25] *Ibid.*, 254.

[26] Leigh Binford, "Peasants and Petty Capitalists in Southern Oaxacan Sugar Cane Production and Processing, 1930-1980," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 24, 1 (Feb. 1992): 47.

[27] Frank C. Miller, *Old Villages and a New Town: Industrialization in Mexico* (Menlo Park: Cummings Publishing Company, 1973), 136.

seem to be an enduring aspect of Mexican culture. Since they carry some advantages for everyone concerned, they will probably persist in those segments of society that are insulated from the influences of industrialization and bureaucracy."[28]

Indeed, some of the enduring aspects of the patron-client relationship seem to have taken root in some form in the agriculture-based Mennonite colonies in Mexico. In the farming sector, Mexicans filled the majority of the Mennonite need for workers. Sawatzky characterizes the employer-employee relationship between Mennonites and Mexicans as an extension of the patrón-peón relationship that existed prior to the Mexican Revolution. He explains that in many cases Mexican labourers got a job on a Mennonite farm, then asked their employer for a small loan to be paid off out of their future earnings. Gradually, an employee's debts to his or her employer would grow and would ensure that he or she would have future employment with that particular farmer. Sawatzky explains this behaviour as a deliberate policy of the labourer, who, by becoming indebted to the employer, would gain a type of social security in the form of constant employment, as well as assistance from this employer in times of sickness.[29] Redekop voices a similar understanding of the relationship between Mennonite employers and their Mexican employees, noting that labourers would occasionally even stay the night and eat at their employer's home.[30] This demonstrates that, though they considered themselves to be outsiders in Mexico, Mennonites nonetheless seem to have

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[28] Miller, *Old Villages and a New Town,* 136-137.

[29] Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 328.

[30] Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites*, 125-126.

managed to align themselves somewhat with the dominant position in the hierarchical structure of Mexican society in relation to their Mexican employees.

The subject of Mexican employment in the Mennonite colonies is first raised in the pages of the *Post* in a translation of a 1922 Mexican government report on labour relations between these two groups. According to the report, Mexicans employed by the early Mennonite settlers were treated well and were satisfied with their Mennonite employers. Echoing the findings above, the report stated that all "people who find work among the colonists receive lodging and eat with the colonists at the same table."[31] Evidently some aspects of the traditional Mexican "patrón-client" relationship could be found among the Canadian colonists and their Mexican employees.

Heinrich Bergen, writing to the *Post* from Cusi, Chihuahua, in 1924 echoes the positive assessment made by the Mexican government.[32] Writing in response to an angry letter written earlier that year by a writer named Thomas Horsky, who had portrayed Mexican men and women as lazy and devious, Bergen launched into a rigorous defence of his Mexican neighbours. On the subject of their economic productivity, Bergen began:

> Our friend Horsky describes the Mexicans as lazy folk, almost without exception. I have only been in Mexico for one year and five months, but I worked alongside Mexicans for six weeks last summer. The people worked, according to their standards, very well, though not as well as Mennonites do. I wanted to begin threshing at five in the morning, and the people were punctually ready to go. Then we threshed until four or five o'clock in the evening. That was already more than nine hours in one day.[33]

[31] *SP*, 15 November 1922, 1.

[32] This letter, along with the letter from Horsky to which it responded, were first printed in *Der Herold*. They were subsequently reprinted in the pages of the *Post*.

[33] *SP*, 2 July 1924, 3.

Though drawing distinctions between the Mennonite and Mexican work ethics and firmly asserting Mennonite superiority in this area, Bergen supported Mexicans' work habits. He then continued his letter by defending Mexicans' moral character and their trustworthiness as employees:

> And in the six weeks I did not see even once that the Mexicans drank after they finished work, at least not so much, that they did not know anything anymore, and not even that much that they became funny to watch....Many Mexicans are employed by Mennonites and I have not heard that our Mennonites overly complain about them. The Mexicans do good work in stone and brickwork.[34]

This affirmative, though still condescending, attitude toward Mexican employees was carried through in a number of letters over the forty-five years of this study. Nearly thirty years after their arrival in Mexico, G. M. Siemens, a Canadian visiting the Mennonite colonies in Mexico,[35] observed that the Mexicans who came into the colonies "asked about work, and when there was no work to be had, then they asked about lunch. They were very friendly and polite. Isaak Penner says that when you treat them fairly, Mexicans are fine." Further on in the letter, he continued: "One day, we had the pleasure of having lunch with a friendly Mexican at Isaak T. Penner's." Not only did this guest of the Mennonites in Mexico have the opportunity to sit in on a lunch between a Mexican and Penner, but his observations about the meeting describe a friendly visit between the men: "This [Mexican] man already spoke a bit of Low German and Penner spoke a bit of mexikanisch [Spanish], and so they can understand each other."[36]

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[34] *SP*, 2 July 1924, 3.

[35] Though the background of Siemens' Mennonite hosts in Mexico is unknown, they are likely members of the Kleine Gemeinde and not the Old Colony.

[36] *SP*, 12 April 1950, 6.

Several conclusions can be gleaned from Siemens' letter regarding the associations of Mennonites with their Mexican neighbours. First, employed Mexican labourers seemed to be frequently supplied with a meal during the workday. Though many Mennonite letter writers noted the regularity with which neighbouring Mexicans came to beg in the Mennonite colonies, the tone of this letter suggests that the Mennonite provision of lunch was not an act of charity. Secondly, the relations between Siemens' Mennonite host, Isaak Penner, and Penner's Mexican guest were amicable. It appears that the camaraderie evident in the lunch meeting was evidence not only of good working relations, but perhaps also of a type of friendship between the men.

Good relations between Mennonite employers and their Mexican employees, was not however, always the case. While these letters do not indicate how Mexican workers felt about their employers, they do draw attention to existing inter-ethnic tensions. J. B. Doerksen, for example, used the medium of the *Post* in 1950 to voice his frustration with Mexican workers. Noting the poor weather conditions that had rendered his bean crop useless, Doerksen drew a connection between the drought and the plague of insects that had damaged the crops so much, and his workers. "If it does not rain soon," he wrote,

> it will soon be time to cut our corn and then we will have to deal with the plague of workers. Those who actually want to work are useful, but those who do not want to, they come to us too and sell their labour cheaply. Oh yes, that's cheap, what more can I want? So then it's time to work – but wait! [The worker] has prior commitments, then he's missing a bit of money. Can you now loan me ten or twenty pesos? When we do that, then he goes and does his shopping and then is gone, everything is gone. When we don't [loan him money], then he makes other arrangements…and leaves anyway.

The writer concludes by saying that he hired a Mennonite from Saltigo, commenting, "that is much better than it is with the Mexicans."[37]

Clearly, as aspects of traditional Mexican employer-employee relations persisted, some Mennonite farmers became impatient with their workers. Though Mennonites as a whole participated in the patrón-peón form of labour relations, albeit perhaps unconsciously, it seems Mennonite employers and their Mexican employees interpreted this relationship in very distinct ways; while Mexican employees, according to Binford and Belshaw, may have expected occasional loans or other favours from their employers in exchange for their labour and loyalty, Mennonites like Doerksen seem to have interpreted their workers' demands on them as mere laziness or sloth. J. B. Doerksen's assertion that Mennonite workers were superior to Mexican ones highlights the way these tensions in the employer-employee relationship helped to buttress the existing racial, economic, and cultural barriers between the two groups. Clearly, labour relations were not always satisfactory for Mennonite employers as they and their Mexican employees often failed to bridge the cultural divide between them.

The Exchange of Goods and Services Between Mennonites and Mexicans

As studies of the Mexican Mennonites have shown, the relationship between Mennonites and Mexicans was heavily influenced by the exchange of goods and services between the two groups. Mexican Mennonite letters frequently drew attention to the persistent nature of this exchange. The first letter mentioning services Mennonites offered to Mexicans was published in the October 26, 1927 edition of the paper. It

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[37] Presumably, this writer's worker came from Saltillo, and not "Saltigo," as it is written in the letter. *SP*, 20 September 1950, 6.

appeared as part of the regular column, "Something from Santa Clara, Mexico," written by an anonymous writer. It states in a matter-of-fact tone that two Mennonites from the area, Julius and Daniel Harder, were thinking of taken their threshing machine fifteen miles away to the Mexican village of Santa Clara the next day, where they would thresh wheat for the farmers.[38] Appearing only five years after their arrival in Mexico, this letter indicates that Mennonites quickly adapted to the Mexican economic environment by branching their businesses out beyond their enclosed communities.

Other instances of this type of exchange are found in letters written throughout the 1930s. In 1935, one writer reported that Bernhard Schmidt, of Schoenberg, Swift Current Colony, "is at this time in higher lying ground with his well driller and is drilling a well for a Mexican."[39] Johann Ginter, it was reported in 1936, was also selling his services to Mexicans, threshing their wheat,[40] while Johann Neudorf had taken his tractor and binder and had "gone to make hay for the Mexicans."[41] The number of letters mentioning this type of activity occurring throughout the later decades of Mennonite settlement, indicates that this exchange of goods and services became increasingly important for the subsistence and survival of the Mennonite community. As Mennonites in Mexico turned to non-agricultural enterprises to supplement their income, and as they extended their business base outside their own communities, they increasingly came into contact with their Mexican neighbours.

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[38] *SP*, 26 October 1927, 5.

[39] *SP*, 3 July 1935, 1.

[40] *SP*, 8 July 1936, 1.

[41] *SP*, 18 November 1936, 6.

Based on the information in the letters to the *Post*, many of these economic encounters with Mexicans proved satisfactory to Mennonites. On October 19, 1949, for example, A. B. Schmitt of Blumenort, Durango, reported that a Mennonite operated a business picking up milk from neighbouring ranches. Mexicans drove each of the man's two wagons, one going east and the other heading southeast every evening. They both returned in the morning to exchange their horses for rested ones and then headed out again to resume their work.[42]

Other letters shed light on the extent to which Mennonite goods were sold outside of their own communities and highlight the success of Mennonite enterprises in the wider Mexican economy. In August 1950, for example, Heinrich I. Fehr writes of the benefits of operating the cheese factories on the colony. He implies that the enterprise is doing so well that the young people on the colony have a far greater measure of financial security than his generation had had in the initial years of settlement.[43] A letter written by Jakob H. Banman in 1963 also attests to the economic success of the cheese factories and the popularity of this product with their Mexican customers, saying: "The cheese is shipped far and wide. The cheese is worth a lot to Mexicans, who fry beans, mix them with cheese, and eat them with corn cakes."[44] Likewise, in his November 21, 1951 letter, Cornelius Krahn of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) also attested to the success of Mennonites in selling their products on the Mexican market in Cuauhtémoc. He notes that he saw several signs in shop windows identifying Mennonite products by name and

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[42] *SP*, 19 October 1949, 3.

[43] *SP*, 9 August 1950, 5.

[44] *SP*, 17 December 1963, 14.

discovered that the label "Mennonite" was well known throughout Mexico and was in fact a selling feature for merchants.[45]

Approximately half of the economic encounters between Mennonites and Mexicans reported in letters to the *Post*, where Mennonites offered services or sold goods to the wider Mexican public, were reported in a positive tone. Other economic dealings were quite frequently reported negatively. Isaak E. Klassen, for example, sympathetically described the circumstances of Jakob Harms, a Mennonite blacksmith in the village of Schönthal, who serviced a car belonging to the doctor in Rubio and who was not paid for his work. After the repairs on the vehicle were completed, Klassen reports, the doctor simply picked up his car without paying his bill. The doctor then proceeded to bring a complaint against Harms to the police, saying that Harms had not fixed the car's motor at all. The police ruled that Harms would be required to pay for an entirely new engine or work on the old one until it was like new. Klassen concluded his account of Harm's business dealings with the doctor by saying: "This is such a hard blow to the poor J. H., who lives solely off of his handiwork in the smith!"[46] Clearly, even if Klassen's account was not completely unbiased, neither Harms nor his Mexican customer were satisfied with this particular transaction.

Other accounts highlight similarly negative economic encounters between Mennonites and their Mexican customers. H. C. Penner, a member of the Kleine Gemeinde's Quellenkolonie, for instance, used humour and sarcasm to describe the way in which Mexicans occasionally stole Mennonite straw. He wrote: "A lot of straw is

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[45] *SP*, 21 November 1951, 1.

[46] *SP*, 28 September 1949, 4.

being driven from the colony by Mexicans; in the midst of this [trade], however, are many who load up before [the straw] has been honestly purchased."[47] In 1953 A. A. Krahn used his letter to the paper to vent his frustrations with the Mexican economic landscape and the country's legal system:

> Our business is still poor here; at the end of most days, the cash register displays zero; whoever is good at math can still figure out how much is left. It is lucky that I still have debt, otherwise I really would have nothing. But the business must keep turning. The Mexicans turn business upside down when they think that we owe them something or when a transaction has not gone the way they had wished. Then, the entire Mexican law comes after you and we have to pay penalties; when they make a mistake or steal a little, which also happens now and again, everything falls on deaf ears and nothing can be done. Then there is no law to be found.[48]

Openly frustrated with the perceived mistreatment he had received, Krahn clearly found his relationship with his Mexican customers and his protection under Mexican law unsatisfactory. Additionally, this letter betrays Krahn's sense of being outside the Mexican legal structure and, by extension, fundamentally different from his Mexican customers, who, in his opinion, were favoured in this system and reaped all its benefits.

Though not as openly hostile, other letter writers expressed similar sentiments about the prospects of economic success in Mexico. Abram C. and Maria Giesbrecht voiced such concerns in their 1958 letter to the *Post*, noting the high prices of farming supplies. After purchasing all the necessary goods for a viable farming enterprise, they lamented, a farmer did not have much money left over. They concluded this portion of their letter by alleging: "The Mexicans pay special attention so that a farmer does not do

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[47] *SP*, 6 June 1951, 5.

[48] *SP*, 15 July 1953, 6.

too well for himself."[49] Rather than attributing the poor condition of their chicken farm to bad business or other factors, these writers chose to blame Mexican society as a whole, which they perceived to be deliberately working against Mennonite farmers.

Where some writers were openly critical, others chose subtler methods of analysis. The high number of negative reports, however, demonstrates that the Mennonites made the conscious decision to analyze the negative outcomes of business deals. It is true that the accidental death of a Mennonite blacksmith at the hand of his Mexican customer,[50] the inability of a Mexican woman and a Mexican doctor to save a Mennonite man's dying wife,[51] or the discomfort of a Mennonite storeowner serving his Mexican customers[52] are all, for example, described in a seemingly neutral tone. Despite the superficial neutrality of these accounts, it is important to note the frequency with which they surface in the letters sent to the *Post*, in comparison to the number of descriptions of more positive economic encounters between these two ethnic groups. The frequency with which such negative reports about the results of Mennonite-Mexican economic interaction were given in these letters demonstrates the Mennonite sense of being fundamentally distinct from their Mexican counterparts. Moreover, this clear differentiation between their own community and the surrounding Mexican population reaffirmed the implicit Mennonite sense of superiority, based on culture, ethnicity, and race, in comparison to their non-Mennonite neighbours.

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[49] *SP*, 28 January 1958, 3.

[50] *SP*, 10 May 1954, 1. See also *SP*, 12 May 1954, 8.

[51] *SP*, 19 October 1949, 8.

[52] *SP*, 22 February 1950, 3. See also *SP*, 22 March 1950, 3.

The Importance of Race in the Mennonite Imagination

Whether or not a letter writer chose to report on the negative or positive outcomes of business encounters with Mexicans, they seemed never to fail to mention the ethnicity or race of their Mexican customer or employee. When letter writers reported on Mennonites who rendered services for Mexicans, the inter-ethnic quality of the exchange was duly noted. In an unusual circumstance in 1951, Ida Köhn, likely of a tiny American Holdeman Mennonite community, reported that "Jakob Görtzen…has decided to become the boss for a man from Saltillo; this man bought land in our colony. And Jakob must ensure that the land is worked."[53] In 1954 a letter signed by Peter and A. Braun described the business enterprise of "Brother Heinrich" and Gerhard who "are working together with a well-digging machine for Mexicans a little ways off."[54] Both events may have been somewhat unusual, but the ethnic or racial designation, which served to reinforce the notion of difference between Mennonites and Mexicans, was not.

Examples of letters written in a similar tone can be found in reports involving Mennonites engaging in economic transactions with Mexicans. These types of letters appeared with far greater frequency than those reporting on the positive outcomes, or even those commenting on the negative consequences, of economic interactions with Mexicans. Much like when they wrote about Mennonites working for Mexicans, letter writers wrote about these exchanges in a very forthright tone and descriptive manner, but always designating the inter-ethnic nature of the exchange.

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[53] *SP*, 14 March 1951, 7.

[54] *SP*, 26 May 1954, 5.

Instances of this sort of letter can be found throughout the forty-five year period under investigation here. Five years after the Mennonites' arrival in Mexico, in the regular column "Something from Santa Clara," the anonymous writer wrote about apple vendors coming through the village to sell their wares: "Here we also buy apples in sacks. Two apple sellers came by today: in the morning a Mexican and near evening G. G. Voth came. The first one sold for 3.25 per sack. The last one had more variety, from 4.25 to seven per sack."[55] From this letter, we do not know from which, if any, seller the letter writer purchased apples, or anything about the sellers themselves. What this letter does reveal, however, is the race or ethnicity of the two vendors; where many other details are left out of this account, the writer deems it important to include the fact that the first seller was Mexican and that the second was Mennonite.

While such examples can be found throughout the years from the 1920s to the 1960s, they became more numerous in the latter years. Perhaps not surprisingly, considering the prevalence of the farming industry in the Mennonite colonies, most of the transactions described by Mennonites involved the sale of agricultural goods or the lease of Mexican land by Mennonites. Based on the letters that appeared in the *Post* throughout these years, it seems Mexicans often frequented Mennonite villages selling produce, livestock, fuel, or feed. But again, even when these events were simply reported in a straight-forward manner by Mennonite letter writers, race identification seems to have been important. In November 1950 Mrs. J. Enns told her Canadian audience that her neighbour had purchased a few piglets from a Mexican.[56] In April 1952 Ida Köhn

[55] *SP*, 26 October 1927, 5.

[56] *SP*, 29 November 1950, 6.

reported on the frequency with which Mexicans came through the village selling chickens[57] and in January 1958, Abram C. and Maria Giesbrecht wrote of Mexicans offering firewood for seventy-five centavos per cartload.[58]

This style of writing can also be found in the reports letter writers wrote about the medical care Mennonites received from Mexican practitioners outside the boundaries of the Mennonite colonies. Mennonites began to seek Mexican medical attention a relatively short while after their initial settlement. As one study demonstrates, though Mennonites in Mexico often tried to treat their illnesses and diseases through traditional means inside their own communities, they were not averse to seeking outside medical advice or treatment if their own methods proved fruitless.[59] Indeed, by early 1928, six years after their arrival in Mexico, H. A. Friesen wrote that he had traveled to Chihuahua City to see a doctor for his eye condition.[60] This practice continued throughout the forty-five years under investigation in this study. Gerhard Enns of Patos, Durango, wrote to the *Post* in 1949 to report that his wife had died, but only after he had called a Mexican woman to her bedside to see if she could help her. Presumably an herbal practitioner, she did make a diagnosis of his wife's condition, but was not able to do anything to help; Enns then called for the doctor who was also not able to save his wife.[61]

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[57] *SP*, 30 April 1952, 6.

[58] *SP*, 28 January 1958, 3.

[59] Kerstin M. Reinschmidt, "A Medical Anthropologist's Approach to the History of the Mexican Mennonites: A Case Study of Health in Local and Global Contexts," (unpublished typescript): 14.

[60] *SP*, 25 January 1928, 3.

[61] *SP*, 19 October 1949, 8.

The practice of seeking medical attention from Mexicans seems to have expanded over time. By the 1950s, Mennonites regularly traveled great distances for medical care from Mexican doctors throughout the county. In April 1955, for example, Bernhard Penner wrote that Abram K. Klassen had traveled all the way to Mexico City from Nuevo Ideal, Durango, to receive medical advice.[62] Later that same year the Abram Schmitts journeyed from Blumenort to Mexico City to receive treatment as well.[63] Similarly, in the following year, Bernhard Penner himself wrote about visiting a doctor in Durango with his wife regarding a growth on her throat. When the doctor diagnosed the growth to be the onset of cancer and recommended they seek treatment from another practitioner in Mexico City, the couple seems to have made this trip without hesitation, though Penner reports that they left for Mexico City with some trepidation in their hearts. After performing a three-day examination on his wife, the doctor in Mexico City informed them that the growth might not be cancerous after all, but that he had decided to operate anyway. In a week's time, the writer's wife went into surgery to have the growth removed. In total, the couple was in the country's capital for twenty-one days. After the surgery, Penner reported that they returned home and that his wife was doing well, but that she was due for another follow-up appointment with the doctor in Durango soon.[64] It seems that, despite their desire to remain set apart and isolated from wider society and their sense of racial superiority towards their Mexican counterparts, Mennonites did not hesitate to seek assistance from beyond the boundaries of the colony to call upon the Mexican medical services when their own traditional means proved to be inadequate.

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[62] *SP*, 13 April 1955, 1.

[63] *SP*, 19 October 1955, 5.

[64] *SP*, 4 January 1956, 2.

The style in which Mennonite letter writers wrote of these events, what types of information they chose to report on, and what they chose to exclude from their accounts, speaks volumes for the news-worthiness they attributed to such day-to-day transactions with Mexicans. Understandably, such outings beyond the boundaries of the colony were newsworthy in a community wishing to remain separate from the mainstream of Mexican society. Certainly, the intention of the frequent reports on seeking medical attention was simply to let friends and family in Canada and throughout Mexico know of their welfare. Yet it is curious that most writers did not share more information about the patient's condition and their well being in these reports. The exclusion of such seemingly significant details reinforces the importance of the information letter writers did share with their Canadian readership about the inter-racial nature of the medical transactions that took place beyond the confines of the colonies.

Still, David Gerber's comments on the historical usefulness of precisely such mundane details of daily life serve to remind us of the significance of these very aspects of the Mexico Mennonite letters. Gerber notes that the "experiential categories" that surface in immigrant letters, such as birth, death, food, or cost of goods, "conform more closely to [writers'] lived experience and aspirations, and above all to their own self-understandings."[65] What then, do these ordinary events of everyday life, recorded so often in the letters written by Mennonites in Mexico, contribute to our understanding of their lives?

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[65] David A. Gerber, "The Immigrant Letter Between Positivism and Populism: The Uses of Immigrant Personal Correspondence in Twentieth-Century American Scholarship," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 16, 4 (Summer 1997): 23.

The most significant attributes of these economic and medical events, beyond the fact that they occurred so often in a community desiring to be set apart from its Mexican neighbours, is the frequency of their appearance in the letters written to family and friends in Canada, and the neutrality with which they were recorded. As Gerber contends, the very existence of such reports in immigrant letters provides us insights into writers "own self-understandings."[66]

Indeed, the fact that these transactions were specifically described by the writer to inform the reader that the exchange had occurred between Mennonite and Mexican parties demonstrates the significant role race played in the Mennonite imagination. While letter writers did not bother to note whether economic interactions occurred between men and women, or between those of different generations, they specifically made note of the fact that a certain transaction had taken place between a Mennonite and a Mexican. The most important dichotomy that characterized the lives of Mennonites in Mexico, therefore, seems not based so much on gender, age, geography, or any similar distinction, as upon ethnicity and race.

This emphasis may help to explain the way letter writers frequently spoke of the economic encounters they or their neighbours had had with Mexicans. As previously noted, many writers chose to use the medium of the *Post* to voice their satisfaction, distaste, or anger with their business dealings with Mexicans. Many more, however, used their letters to simply note the fact that these types of inter-ethnic economic relationships existed. All of these transactions, though superficially mundane, highlight the significance letter writers placed on these encounters with Mexicans and how these

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[66] Gerber, "The Immigrant Letter Between Positivism and Populism," 23.

relationships helped to shape a communal conception of themselves as Mennonites living in the foreign environment of Mexico.

Conclusion

In the midst of all their daily connections with the Mexican population surrounding their colonies, Mennonites in Mexico managed to maintain an identity as a people set apart from mainstream society. This self-perception was articulated rigorously throughout their first years of settlement as they attempted to re-build their lives in the new country and still maintain their distinct cultural traits and the religious identity that had driven them to leave the comfort of Canada for the uncertainty of Mexico. As part of this exercise, Mennonites used the medium of the *Post* to reflect on the impact they had had on their Mexican surroundings, and over time such letters appeared with increasing regularity. By the 1940s, the fact that Mennonites had had a significant influence on the economic growth of cities like Cuauhtémoc was a foregone conclusion; in the 1920s, it was still being discovered.

During the first years of settlement, a few Mennonite voices emerged in the pages of the *Post* as unofficial spokespeople for the community at large. Anonymous letter writers signing "A Reader" and "A Correspondent" were some of these key figures. "A Reader" could in 1926, therefore, write with wonder and a firm conviction about the sound economic future in store for those who would only remain in Mexico through the tough times, rather than abandon the colonies and return to Canada:

> When one witnesses what progress in construction and agriculture San Antonio [de los Arenales] is making, one can easily understand that the natives would not invest so much in the town if they planned on simply letting the money that has been brought into it [with the arrival of the Mennonites] leave the city again;

> rather, [one sees] that they, as "Einheimischen," have the foresight to realise that progress can be made here in agriculture.

Noting the impact Mennonites had had on the economic progress of the town, the writer, displaying unmistakable pride, follows this appeal for Cuauhtémoc's potential with a physical description of this growth: "S. Antonio already has three oil and gasoline dealers, three lumberyards, three machine shops, twelve stores, and two banks."[67] A year later, another writer signing "A Reader" drew attention to the effect Mennonites had already had on the surrounding population: "If you look at the people in the city on their festival days, you can clearly see how they have bettered themselves through Mennonite money."[68] By pointing out their impact on the Mexican economic environment, this writer contributed to the formation of a communal identity as a people set apart from the surrounding Mexican population. In this way, they saw themselves as exacting an influence on their surroundings while remaining true to their ethnic and religious identity by standing aloof from Mexican society.

In another letter, written this time by someone signing off as "A Correspondent," the same awe and pride is evident. This writer concludes a lengthy column by boasting:

> But the little city Cuauhtémoc is growing quite nicely and is already building a park, which will beautify the city. One must assume that a lot of money has already been brought in from the newly-arrived [Mennonites.] Before the Mennonites settled here, this place was only a stopping point with several "Leimkluben." Before, if we wanted to buy oil, there was none to be had. [The town's] entire order [of oil] was five gallons. These same [gallons] were quickly snatched up and then it meant that one had to wait until more was ordered. But now, oho, now the oil dealers, of which there are three in the city, deliver the oil directly to the farmers' yards. Even flour is home delivered, as well as machines and everything else that one needs on a farm.[69]

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[67] *SP*, 1 September 1926, 3.

[68] *SP*, 1 June 1927, 3.

[69] *SP*, 30 May 1928, 2.

As a self-proclaimed reporter for the Mennonite community, "A Correspondent" championed the gains made over a relatively short period in Chihuahua. More even than "A Reader," this writer clearly claims the responsibility of Cuauhtémoc's growth for Mennonites; while local businessmen like the oil, flour, and machinery dealers capitalized on the money Mennonites brought to Mexico with them, "A Correspondent" is quick to note that it was Mennonites who provided the initial impetus for this economic drive.

Mennonites in Mexico unquestionably had a complex relationship with the economic side of life in Mexico. While they displayed an unmistakable sense of pride in, and responsibility for, Cuauhtémoc's economic progress and growth, they also clearly expressed their displeasure with the Mexican business environment. These two seemingly competing perceptions of their lives in Mexico highlight the sense of being *Fremden*,[70] or foreigners, that Mennonites in Mexico claimed as a part of their identity as an ethno-religious group set apart from the rest of society. While they were of necessity heavily involved in the Mexican economic world and therefore came into regular contact with Mexicans through their patrón-peón relationships or through the exchange of goods and services, Mennonites could still retain their sense of remaining distinct from their environment by claiming sole responsibility for the economic progress of the region. Thus, while the two sides of this dynamic seem to stand in open contradiction to one another, they are in fact two aspects of the communal identity that Mennonites in Mexico forged for themselves.

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[70] *SP*, 8 December 1954, 4

Additionally, their very involvement in the local Mexican economy played a large role in allowing Mennonites to imagine themselves as being set apart from Mexican society. Though they could not but involve themselves in business dealings with the surrounding Mexican community, letter writers to the *Post* could still draw strong distinctions between themselves and their native employees or customers. By carefully recording the race of the people they dealt with in their daily economic transactions, letter writers constructed an image of themselves as fully integrated into the local Mexican economy and directly responsible for the growth of nearby cities, while still remaining set apart from the Mexican mainstream.

CHAPTER THREE

"MANY HAVE BECOME CYNICAL AND MISTRUSTFUL"[1]: TENSION AND CONFLICT BETWEEN MENNONITES AND THEIR MEXICAN NEIGHBOURS

On July 4, 1956, W. Wiebe wrote a letter to *Die Steinbach Post*, at the end of which he informed his readers that on the night of May 5, "someone 'borrowed' two wheels with tires from F. Knelsen." The only problem with this arrangement, Wiebe sarcastically told his audience, was that the individual "forgot, however, to leave his name." He concluded his letter with one final account of a robbery that had taken place that same night at A. Peters' in Neureinland in the Manitoba Colony. Here, the thieves, only two of whom had since been apprehended, had made off with "a neat sum of dollars" and several watches and clocks.[2]

While this letter writer chose to present the incident of the robbery at the Knelsen home in a humorous light, crime in the Mennonite colonies had not always been taken lightly. Throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and into the 1940s, break-ins, thefts, and even murders took place so often throughout the colonies in northern Mexico that most issues of the *Post* contained letters that referenced the problem. During this period very few writers approached the problem with sarcasm. October of 1933, for instance, brought the murder of the entire Schellenberg family. Living on a farm behind Blumenthal, the family was found dead the morning after their murder. Both parents had been shot and their only child had had its throat slit.[3] Only during the periods in the 1930s and 1940s

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[1] *SP*, 29 January 1936, 3.

[2] *SP*, 4 July 1956, 2.

[3] Isaak Dyck, *Anfangs Jahre der Mennoniten in Mexiko* (Cuauhtémoc: Imprenta Colonial, 1995), 21.

when government troops had been stationed in the colonies to protect Mennonites and their property from thieves and bandits could one *Post* reader finally write: "And so the hammering of one's heart finally quiets more and more, when the dogs bark at night."[4] While other writers commented that even the presence of soldiers did not fully solve the problems with thieves, this move by the Mexican federal government to protect the colonists clearly made a difference in some of the villages.

Thieves and bandits were not, however, the only problems present in the Mennonite colonies throughout the forty-five years under examination in this study. Tensions, brewing disagreements, and major disputes involving local and federal levels of government all characterized Mennonite settlement in Mexico. As much as economic integration with the surrounding Mexican communities was a fact of life for this ethno-religious group, so too was conflict. Since the establishment of Mennonite colonies in the early 1920s, several issues of contention made themselves known between the settlers and the Mexican government. Among them were the conflict with *agraristas* in the 1920s, acts of crime against Mennonites and their property, and the school crisis in 1935 and 1936. While acts of aggression against Mennonites and other areas of tension between Mennonites and Mexicans typified the 1940s, 1950s, and to a lesser extent, the 1960s, the two decades of the 1920s and 1930s proved to be the most trying for the immigrants.

In the same way that economic integration played a large factor in shaping Mennonite self-perceptions, so too did the conflicts that characterized Mennonite-Mexican relations. These conflicts played a major role in shaping Mennonite consciousness, turning them inwards in their attempts to protect themselves from

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[4] *SP*, 28 April 1932, 8.

violence or from government encroachment into the life of their colonies. As a result of the difficulties experienced during these two decades alone, many Mennonites took up a renewed call to further migration, either back to Canada or farther south to various South American countries. Letter writers formulated a dichotomy between themselves and Mexican society beyond the boundaries of the colonies. Even after school closures had been reversed and the community had received a renewed commitment from the Mexican President to the Mennonite privileges they had originally been granted in 1921, one writer pronounced:

> We have heard that the big colony [Manitoba colony] once again has the freedom to open their schools and to run them as they were accustomed to running them before. There are, however, already many people who have become mistrustful, of which I am also one. Better let us find a place, where they will take us in and we can exercise our beliefs, and emigrate.[5]

Other writers, reliving the same feelings of betrayal at the hands of a national government that they had experienced a scant ten years earlier in Canada, similarly closed themselves off to Mexico, pronouncing dispiritedly: "Canada and Mexico have been placed on the same level."[6]

The majority of Mennonite writers picked up on the tensions existing in the community, making frequent references to the difficulties they were experiencing in Mexico. Letters continually discussed the numerous delegations sent to Mexico City to discuss the situation with the government there, the attempts to establish contact with other countries for potential immigration opportunities, and to the frequent church meetings held throughout the colonies to formulate emigration plans. Clearly, the two

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[5] *SP*, 29 January 1936, 3.

[6] *SP*, 11 March 1936, 6.

decades of the 1920s and 1930s played a large role in forming Mennonite opinions and perceptions of Mexico, Mexican society, and their own precarious position within the dynamics of a post-revolutionary country.

Historiography

The literature written on this subject highlights the significance of conflict on the lives of the Mennonite communities in Mexico. The drawn-out conflict with Mexican *agraristas* in the 1920s and problems of theft and other crimes committed against the colonists throughout the 1920s and 1930s, as well as the closure of Mennonite schools in May of 1935, are all documented and have been commented upon by historians and other scholars studying the case of the Mennonites in Mexico. The first of these three conflicts, the disputes with *agraristas*, began in the first two years of Mennonite settlement in Mexico. Walter Schmiedehaus' 1982 *Die Alt Kolonier-Mennoniten in Mexiko* covers the initial problem of the disputes with the *agraristas* in the most detail, although Leonard Sawatzky and a few others provide some commentary on the matter as well.

Conflict with the land reformers in Mexico began soon after the arrival of Mennonites in 1922 and continued throughout the first half of the decade. While difficulties with *agraristas* were experienced in Durango in the 1930s and even in the 1960s,[7] most of the conflict occurred in the Bustillos Valley of Chihuahua in northern Mexico, where Mennonites had purchased various land parcels from the Zuloaga estate, between 1922 and 1925. At the very outset of Mennonite colonization much of the

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[7] David M. Quiring, *The Mennonite Old Colony Vision: Under Siege in Mexico and the Canadian Connection* (Steinbach: Crossway Publications Inc., 2003), 65.

230,000 acres[8] they had purchased remained unsettled and unused, as the entire group had not yet arrived in Mexico. The ensuing hurried settlement of the majority of the Mennonite lands, however, brought Mennonites into conflict with the Mexican peasants who had, unbeknownst to the Canadians when they had purchased the vast tracts of land, already settled on the Zuloaga properties and claimed them as their own. Sawatzky points out that, though only one *agrarista* settlement, Oje Caliente, could be found within the borders of Mennonite land, the many others that dotted the landscape surrounding the colonies frequently extended their land use onto Mennonite property.[9]

The conflict over land understandably soured the relations between these two groups. While the Zuloagas, whose duty it was to clear the land they had sold to the Canadians,[10] pledged to evict the Mexicans, no substantial action was taken for two full years. "In the meantime," Schmiedehaus writes, "things were bad, and relations [between the groups] worsened from month to month, from year to year."[11]

Sawatzky is quick to note that the disapproval shown by *agraristas* toward the newcomers was not levelled at them because they were Mennonites, but because they were foreigners seeking to take over land the peasants saw as being rightfully theirs.[12] Schmiedehaus concurs with this assessment, explaining that *agrarista* antipathy toward foreigners stemmed from the abuse and repression of natives working in mines owned by

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[8] Calvin Redekop, "Mennonite Displacement of Indigenous Peoples: An Historical and Sociological Analysis," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 1982 14(2): 78.

[9] Harry Leonard Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 67.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Walter Schmiedehaus, *Die Altkolonier Mennoniten in Mexiko* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1982), 94.

[12] Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 68-69.

foreign multinationals and on cattle ranches run by members of the upper classes in Mexico.[13] Despite this historical context, however, relations between Mennonites and Mexicans soured quickly and by 1923, the situation had deteriorated substantially. Agrarista cattle trampled Mennonite crops, and fences erected by Mennonites on the western boundary of their land were repeatedly cut by the Mexicans.[14]

Some progress was finally made in the matter in 1923 when a delegation traveled to Mexico City to discuss the matter with the federal government. Business leaders and the local government took positions in favour of Mennonites in the dispute, as the group had brought both business and tax revenue to the region and the Mennonite proposal to emigrate over the issue threatened to put an end to both. Despite this support and the delegation's trip to the capital, the problem was only solved two years later in 1925. As a solution, agraristas were forced to vacate Mennonite property. As a compromise, however, the Zuloagas were obliged to grant the peasants other land in the vicinity of San Antonio de los Arenales, to pay each individual family two hundred dollars to compensate them for their moving costs, and to provide them with enough wood to build houses and fences for themselves.[15] Additionally, the new Mexican settlements were to be supplied with water through the construction of a dam and reservoir on Arroyo de la Casa Colorada.[16]

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[13] Schmiedehaus, *Die Altkolonie -Mennoniten in Mexiko*, 96.

[14] Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 68-69. Schmiedehaus, *Die AltkolonierMennoniten in Mexiko*, 94.

[15] Schmiedehaus, *Die Altkolonie -Mennoniten in Mexiko*, 108. Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 69.

[16] There is no agreement in the literature on which party paid for the construction of this water project. Schmiedehaus reports that the Zuloaga estate provided the money, while Sawatzky claims that Mennonites, as the foreign owners of the disputed land, were obligated by the government to build the dam and reservoir. Schmiedehaus, *Die Altkolonier Mennonites in Mexiko*, 108; Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 70.

While the two-year period in which the dispute with agraristas went unsettled was a long period of uncertainty for the Mennonites, the perennial danger presented by thieves committing crimes in the Mennonite colonies far outlasted the former problem. Though the 1930s witnessed the greatest rise in robberies and other crimes in the colonies, Sawatzky points out that such activities also characterized the early settlement years in the 1920s, while Quiring notes that the thefts persisted throughout the 1940s as well.[17] Historians and other scholars list a number of reasons why Mennonite colonies were so hard hit by these crimes.

First, the region in northern Mexico into which the Canadians settled had been a significant locale in the recent violence that had characterized a decade of Mexican history. Martina Will comments on the fact that Mennonites colonized "the very lands upon which the first revolutionaries met, in a state where the warring factions had left little untouched."[18] Additionally, as both Will and Sawatzky note, the Mennonite arrival in 1922 occurred a mere two years after the end of the Mexican Revolution; thus, the newcomers were clearly settling in "the shadow of the Revolution" and were therefore exposed to "small-scale uprisings and banditry"[19] committed by "revolutionary raiders still active in the Sierra Madre."[20] Furthermore, significant leaders in the Revolution such as Francisco (Pancho) Villa were still quite active in the region. Stories and folk tales surrounding Villa circulated in the Old Colony settlements, telling of Villa showing

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[17] Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 146. Quiring, *The Old Colony Mennonite Vision*, 66.

[18] Martina E. Will, "Old Colony Mennonite Colonization of Chihuahua and the Obregón Administration's Vision for the Nation," (MA Thesis, University of California, 1993), 2.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 67.

up in a Mennonite village in order to purchase provisions[21] or of the treasure he had supposedly buried in the hills surrounding the Old Colony villages.[22] Along with the threat of former revolutionaries, Winfield Fretz highlights the instability of the local government in the post-revolutionary period and "the unscrupulousness of some of the natives" as other factors in the acts of aggression against the colonists.[23] Under these unstable circumstances, scholars point out that while no major, high-scale operations were carried out in the colonies, thefts and "highway robberies" were frequent events.[24]

The great discrepancy between the relative wealth among Mennonites and the poverty of their Mexican counterparts exacerbated the already precarious situation. Redekop notes that, while the conflict with the agraristas was eventually solved, the resentment felt by the peasants toward the foreigners at being expelled from their land did not immediately disappear, but in some cases grew worse as the economic condition of the Mennonites rose in relation to that of the Mexicans.[25] Indeed, when comparing the wages earned by Mexican and Mennonite workers, the socio-economic difference between the two groups is placed in sharp relief: where the average Mexican wage was only fifteen to twenty pesos for a full day's work, Mennonites employed by fellow Mennonites were paid thirty to forty pesos per day, nearly doubling their earning power

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[21] Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 67.

[22] Calvin Redekop, *The Mennonite Old Colony Vision: Under Siege in Mexico and the Canadian Connection* (Steinbach: Crossway Publications Inc., 2003), 199.

[23] Winfield Fretz, *Mennonite Colonization in Mexico: An Introduction* (Akron: Mennonite Central Committee, 1945), 35.

[24] Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 68.

[25] Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites*, 78.

over that of their Mexican neighbours.[26] Multiple crop failures in the late 1920s, in addition to the generally "depressed economic condition" prevailing in Chihuahua,[27] also exacerbated the destitution of the native population, causing an increase in begging, theft, and armed robberies in the early 1930s.

By the end of the 1920s, Mennonites sought to relieve their precarious situation by appealing to the Mexican government for protection. Accordingly, troops were called in and stationed throughout the villages to ward off thieves. The existence of soldiers posted in the colonies, however, presented new dilemmas for the pacifist Mennonites, for in many cases, force and even extreme violence were used by the federal forces to put down the problem presented by the thieves and bandits.[28] Additionally, Fretz points out that, not only were the Mennonites being protected through the use of violence by the soldiers, they also had to provide for the material support and provisions required by the troops stationed throughout the colonies, thus binding the immigrants to a military organization they had moral objections to.[29] Nonetheless, in many cases Mennonites welcomed the protection and, in spite of their trepidation, the presence of soldiers in the colonies continued on and off well into the 1940s.

The final major conflict that characterized the Mennonite experience in Mexico was the school crisis of 1935 and 1936. In 1921 the Mennonite delegation from Canada had requested and received a certain set of privileges that preceded their immigration.

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[26] Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites*, 129.

[27] Mark Wasserman, "Chihuahua: Politics in an Era of Transition," in *Provinces of the Revolution: Essays on Regional Mexican History, 1910-1929*. Thomas Benjamin and Mark Wasserman, eds. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990), 219.

[28] Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 147-148.

[29] Fretz, *Mennonite Colonization in Mexico*, 23.

Many of the concessions granted by the government in this agreement, however, were privileges that the country's citizens themselves did not have a right to in the post-revolutionary context. Mennonite freedoms to operate their own schools according to their language and religion, as well as the complete religious freedom granted them in their churches and institutions, did not correspond to the rights enjoyed by the rest of the Mexican population.

The conclusion of the Revolution in the second decade of the twentieth century ushered in the new Mexican Constitution of 1917 that reflected the anticlerical ideology prevalent in Mexican politics at that time. Accordingly, numerous articles were enacted to curtail the power of religious institutions.[30] As the new Constitution began to be more strictly enforced in 1926,[31] and as the Catholic Church experienced a sharp limit to its activities, Mennonites were permitted complete religious freedom in their schools, churches, and throughout the rest of their institutional life.[32] Though the mid-1930s found Mennonite religious-based schools closed by the government, this ethno-religious minority did not experience any restriction in the number of ministers allowed to perform

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[30] Article Three of the Constitution prohibited religious instruction in schools; Article Five prevented the establishment of religious orders; Articles Twenty-four and Twenty-seven proscribed religious services outside of church buildings and forbade churches from owning property, respectively; and Article Thirty withheld legal recognition of churches, denied members of the clergy political right, and sought to prevent the participation of churches in political matters. Roberto J. Blancarte, "Recent Changes in Church-State Relations in Mexico: An Historical Approach," *Journal of Church and State* 35, 4 (Autumn 1993): 782.

[31] Turner, "The Compatibility of Church and State in Mexico," 598.

[32] There is disagreement among scholars, however, about the extent to which Protestants in general were affected by the anticlerical laws. Though both Frederick Turner and Roberto Blancarte contend that these reforms did not really disturb Protestant churches, as they were meant to limit the political power of the Catholic Church specifically, other scholars like Paul Bonicelli contend that the new Constitution was anticlerical toward all religions and denominations. Frederick C. Turner, "The Compatibility of Church and State in Mexico," *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 9, 4 (October 1967): 596-597. Blancarte, "Recent Changes in Church-State Relations in Mexico: An Historical Approach," 782. Paul J. Bonicelli, "Testing the Waters or Opening the Floodgates: Evangelicals, Politics, and the 'New' Mexico," *Journal of Church and State* 39, 1 (Winter 1997): 110.

their duties in Mennonite churches. Conversely, within the state of Chihuahua during this same period the rights of other clergy were being severally curtailed. Blancarte notes that in a state of two hundred square kilometres only one minister per denomination was authorized to perform his duties. Chihuahua, therefore, "practically vetoed the clergy altogether."[33] Contrasted with the wider Mexican society, then, Mennonites experienced far greater religious and institutional freedoms. Both Schmiedehaus and Hedges make note of this reality on numerous occasions, observing that these special privileges for the Mennonites fostered resentment among some of the local population.[34]

While Mennonites managed to bypass most of the anti-clerical legislation coming into place in Mexico during the years immediately following their arrival, they were eventually affected by the new Constitution, specifically Article Three, in May 1935 when government inspectors shut the denominational schools after finding they did not conform to Mexican law.[35] This move caused widespread uproar not only in the colonies in Chihuahua, where the school closures took place, but throughout the entire Mennonite community in Mexico, prompting a delegation led by Reverend Johann P. Wall to seek an audience with the Mexican President. As a result of the meeting, President Plutarco Cárdenas personally intervened to re-open the schools and uphold the Mennonite *Privilegium*.[36] While the conflict was finally decided in favour of the Mennonites in 1936, the resolution did not come soon enough for some within the community. Amid

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[33] Blancarte, "Recent Changes in Church-State Relations in Mexico," 786-787.

[34] Schmiedehaus, *Die Altkolonier Mennoniten in Mexiko*, 119, 212. Kelly Lynn Hedges, "'Plautdietsch' and 'Huuchdietsch' in Chihuahua: Language, Literacy, and Identity Among the Old Colony Mennonites in Northern Mexico," (PhD Dissertation, Yale University, 1996), 301. Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 135.

[35] Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 150-151.

[36] Quiring, *The Old Colony Mennonite Vision*, 70. Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 154.

frequent calls for emigration within the colonies, two major Mennonite groups eventually chose to return to Canada in response to their perceived betrayal by the Mexican government.

As illustrated by these three major disputes between Mennonites, native Mexicans, and the Mexican government, conflict was consistently present throughout the years under review in this study. Characterized by tensions between two, or even all three, of these parties, the Mennonite experience in Mexico was, according to the secondary literature, fraught with difficulties as they tried to relate to their new neighbours and their new government. The letters written into the *Post* corroborate this assessment while at the same time presenting a new perspective that is often missing from the historiography. These letters add an individual perspective to the issue, where the one given in scholarly works focuses more on the institutional level of the Mennonite communities. This point of view illuminates the way in which these conflicts and interactions with the wider Mexican society helped to shape Mennonite conceptions of themselves as a foreign ethno-religious group living in what had, by that time, seemed to become hostile territory.

Mennonites, Agraristas, and Thieves

Both secondary sources and the letters in the *Post* give no indication that Mennonites were aware of any prior claims to the Zuloaga property before they arrived in Mexico. Indeed, Schmiedehaus writes that the realization that the land they had purchased was not free of previous claims was "the first major disappointment" faced by

Mennonites upon their arrival in Chihuahua.[37] Despite the serious nature of this setback, letters written in Mexico chose to share this experience with *Post* readers. Nevertheless, some indirect references and veiled comments that could have alluded to problems with the local Mexican population occasionally appeared throughout the 1920s.

That Mennonites were aware that Mexico had just undergone a long and violent revolution and that the conflict affected various aspects of life in Mexico in the post-revolutionary days is, however, evident. In May 1923, B. R. Doerksen, a Canadian Mennonite visiting the Mexican colonies, wrote about his host, David Schultz, taking him to see a cave where "the Mexicans, during the time of the war, had taken protection and cover, and had shot at the enemy."[38] The murders of Francisco Villa, "the former leader of the bandits," along with three of his men, were published in the "Daily News" section on the front page of the paper on August 1, 1923.[39] In July 1924, Heinrich Bergen from Cusi, Chihuahua, displayed quite a bit of knowledge about the geographical locations where fighting took place during the Revolution in his letter to the paper.[40] Several letters, both from American Mennonites writing about their counterparts living in Mexico and from the Mennonites in Mexico themselves, commented on the Mexican Constitution and how the new religious laws did not affect Mennonites.[41] One writer self-identifying as "A Reader" let *Post* readers know that a small "revolution" had taken place near San

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[37] Schmiedehaus, *Die Altkolonier Mennoniten in Mexiko*, 93.

[38] *SP*, 23 May 1923, 3.

[39] *SP*, 1 August 1923, 1.

[40] *SP*, 2 July 1924, 3.

[41] *SP*, 26 March 1924, 1; 13 October 1926, 3.

Antonio, but that the police had put it down.[42] A year later another writer informed friends and family back in Canada that fighting had taken place nearby over the upcoming presidential election,[43] and in the spring of 1929, several writers commented on the unrest in Mexico, which included bank closures and the suspension of postal service, following the assassination of the Mexican president.[44]

These references to landmarks left over from the Revolution and to the ensuing political instability in the country, however, are the only bits of information letter writers offered their readers about their situation in the post-revolutionary context of Mexico. In fact, so much silence reined over the Mennonite circumstances there that B. R. Doerksen, the afore-mentioned Canadian who had visited the colonies around Cuauhtémoc in 1923 at the height of the conflict with the agraristas, reported in May of that year:

> The Mennonites in Mexico seem to be completely happy, for at my questioning what I should tell the people in Manitoba about their situation, I received the following response: Things are going well here for all of us and we are very satisfied. The Mexicans leave us in peace; only the ploughing is very hard.[45]

Despite such remarks, it is reasonable to assume, given Schmiedehaus' description of the location of five agrarista settlements surrounding the Mennonite colonies, with two more villages directly inside the borders of Mennonite property, [46] that Mennonites must have come into a considerable amount of contact with their Mexican neighbours and that these

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[42] *SP*, 27 July 1927, 5.

[43] *SP*, 25 April 1928, 3.

[44] *SP*, 15 May 1929, 4; 15 May 1929, 6; 12 June 1929, 4.

[45] *SP*, 16 May 1923, 2.

[46] According to Walter Schmiedehaus, eight different agrarista settlements surrounded the Mennonite colonies: to the south was Chocachic, to the west Napavechic, to the east El Muerto and El Gato, and to the north El Moyote and La Quemada. In the middle of the Mennonite lands were Oje Caliente and Rubio. Schmiedehaus, *Die Altkolonier Mennoniten in Mexiko*, 93-94.

associations would have contained, at the very least, an occasional measure of tension. Nonetheless, for one reason or another, letter writers chose to remain silent on this issue. The causes behind such decisions, however, are left to speculation, for no indication is given of why Mennonites did not inform their friends and relatives of the difficulties they were experiencing with respect to the local peasant population.

Mennonite contact with thieves, bandits, and former revolutionaries, on the other hand, were well documented in the pages of the *Post*. Canadian letter writers, drawing examples from personal correspondence they received from their friends and relatives in Mexico, also related robberies occurring there in the dead of night. Johann Kehler of Wymark, Saskatchewan, for example, wrote that he had changed his mind about moving south after he read that five men had broken into Jakob Klassen's house in Mexico. One of the intruders had aimed a revolver at him while another held a knife to Klassen's wife's throat. The group then proceeded to steal everything that appealed to them, from beds to food. After taking one hundred pesos the thieves left the family with no food and no money to buy more provisions. Kehler concluded that it was better to stay in Canada, for at least he and his family had security at night.[47]

While the 1920s saw its share of thefts and violence, the 1930s seemed to be an especially hard time for Mennonite settlers with regard to the crimes committed on the colonies. Of this period, Bishop Isaak Dyck writes: "It was in the winter of the year 1931, when one had to hear nearly every day, where here and there [the thieves] broke in again during the nights, robbed and scared the people."[48] According to letters published

[47] *SP*, 15 August 1923, 2, 3.

[48] Dyck, *Anfangs Jahre der Mennoniten in Mexiko*, 18.

in the paper, the number of criminal events fluctuated quite a bit throughout this decade, reaching intolerable levels in the first years of the 1930s. Several writers during this period wearily commented: "The Mexicans are at the same old thing again with their stealing."[49] Little had changed in the situation by 1932, for early that year, J. J. Peters complained, "It seems almost, as if there are no laws as punishment against [thieves]. Added to this even is the worst: one who goes to stealing, he also will go for murder."[50]

In response to the crisis, soldiers were posted in several of the colonies to protect the colonists and their property in the spring of 1932. Some letter writers reported that this precaution did not seem to ease the situation all that much and a writer signing "P.H.W." wrote about being unsure if this latest development was for the best or for the worst.[51] Most writers, however, wrote that instances of theft decreased dramatically after the arrival of the troops in the villages. In May 1932 H. Penner wrote into the *Post* to chastise a fellow Mennonite for characterizing the government as not doing enough to protect Mennonites there. He wrote, "I read in the last edition of April 7, that a certain reader here in Mexico wrote, that a lot of thefts were happening here and that the government didn't do anything against it." Contrary to this false assessment, Penner reported, the government reacted to the crisis quickly and the soldiers they sent exacted quick, harsh punishments on the thieves they found and arrested:

> As soon as it was reported in the capital of Chihuahua, the government sent a number of soldiers, who were to look through the ranchers and make quick process of the thieves. Two thieves were found at a ranch a short time ago. The soldiers rode their horses and the thieves had to run ahead of the horses. They got

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[49] *SP*, 10 October 1931, 3. Similar sentiments were expressed by a Mennonite self-identifying as "Ein Mitleser." *SP*, 18 February 1932, 6.

[50] *SP*, 4 February 1932, 5.

[51] *SP*, 7 April 1932, 6.

> tired and the horses hit the thieves with their feet on the men's heels until blood came. Some thieves are hung high from trees, others, when they don't want to follow, are shot dead right away.[52]

Many other Mennonites writing in this year agreed with Penner's assessment, expressing the hope that thefts would decrease a little,[53] repeatedly affirming that robberies and other criminal acts had decreased ever since government troops had arrived to watch over the colonists,[54] and confirming the harsh punishments meted out against the guilty parties.[55]

Despite the protection provided by soldiers, 1932 still saw its share of robberies committed against Mennonites. A writer signing "Correspondent" could, therefore, still write in June of that year: "While the government is holding watch here, a robbery still occurs now and again."[56] Notwithstanding such comments, the number of such instances reported in the *Post* did decrease dramatically throughout this time. The mid- to late 1930s, however, brought further acts of aggression to the Mennonite colonies.

Writing from Patos, Durango, in 1934, a correspondent reported on a particularly bad night in which thieves broke into no fewer than five homes. The writer began by wishing readers a merry Christmas, but wearily added that the accumulation of recent events would not fit well with Christmas notions of "peace of earth." The writer went on to explain the situation, writing:

> A short time ago two robbers broke into Peter Bückerts' house, one through the door and one through the window, but at the same time, and demanded money. They took clothing and when one of Bückert's boys refused to hand over the

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[52] *SP* 12 May 1932, 2.

[53] *SP*, 14 April 1932, 6.

[54] *SP*, 31 March 1932, 3; 28 April 1932, 5; 28 April 1932, 8; 9 May 1932, 8.

[55] *SP*, 28 April 1932, 8.

[56] *SP*, 9 June 1932, 3.

> flashlight, there was a ringing and he received quite a knife wound in his hand, as a gunshot brushed through his hair he pulled back and gave up the fight.[57]

As the family's neighbours began to rush over, the thieves fled the scene, shooting about four or five times, hitting Heinrich Wall in the shoulder. That violent confrontation, however, was not the end of this report, which further described four more robberies occurring that same night, one of which involved an attack on the sixteen-year-old daughter of Jakob Hiebert. The writer attributed all the events that night to the same group of thieves.[58]

Throughout the periods of intense theft throughout the 1930s, nearly all letters carried some type of information on the events occurring all too often throughout many Mennonite villages. Along with these reports, however, letter writers also offered commentary on Mexicans. Not surprisingly, Mennonite perceptions of their neighbours during this period often were not very charitable. Even a writer who debated whether Mexicans really stole as many cattle as was attributed to them, or whether Mennonite horses and cows simply strayed from their own herds and ended up mixed together with Mexican livestock, ended his discussion of the issue by stating forcefully: "But whoever steals once, that person is never to be trusted again."[59]

Seemingly innocuous comments also often belied the hidden prejudice of many Mennonites towards their Mexican counterparts, one that judged the latter as inherently dishonest and not to be trusted. A February 1932 letter signed "Ein Mitleser,"[60] for

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[57] *SP*, 10 January 1934, 5.

[58] *Ibid.*

[59] *SP*, 11 August 1932, 3.

[60] There is no direct English translation for the phrase "Ein Mitleser," however, it translates roughly to "one who reads along."

example, begins with: "Well, so what's new? The Mexicans are still at their old game of stealing."[61] Other writers blamed the soldiers sent to protect them from the ongoing theft, using black humour to convey their clear distrust for the troops. "The break-ins have not yet stopped completely," Bernhard Penner reported in 1936, continuing "and when our protecting soldiers can't catch the thieves, then they catch chickens during the night instead, [for] this is easier." He concluded derisively: "We've had plenty of time to contemplate if this is the reason [the soldiers] were sent, as we sit behind lock and key."[62]

In addition to the opinion that even the soldiers sent to protect them, much less ordinary Mexicans, were not to be trusted, comments by other writers spoke to the belief that their Mexican counterparts were also inherently lazy, and therefore their poverty only reflected their poor work ethic. In December 1933, a correspondent wrote:

> When one looks at the Mexican fields, then comes the thought, whether they haven't relied on theft for a long time already. One hundred acres are not even worked at all and one thousand acres are in a sorry state of neglect, so that a lot will not even be harvested. And in addition, poverty and need have made themselves felt by many Mexicans, because our fields yield average crops nearly every year while their fields go to ground through the primitive methods of their farming and through neglect.[63]

Clearly, optimistic appraisals of Mexicans did not flow freely in Mennonite letters to the *Post* during this turbulent period.

School Closures

[61] *SP*, 18 February 1932, 6.

[62] *SP*, 14 October 1936, 4.

[63] *SP*, 13 December 1933, 8.

Even when thefts and crimes decreased in the colonies, the 1930s remained a tumultuous period for Mennonites, due in large part to the school closures in the middle of the decade. Under fire since 1927, the year when Fernando Orozco replaced Jesús Antonio Almeida as governor of Chihuahua and began to reinforce the constitutional changes made by President Plutarco Calles, the schools were finally closed in 1935.[64] On June 12, 1935 Johan B. Wolf from Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua wrote into the *Post* to inform readers that the Mexican President and the school inspector had shut down many of the schools on the Manitoba Colony the week before. He continued, "Whether out of a misunderstanding or if it was ordered by the government is to be investigated." Wolf also informed readers that a delegation of four men had already been sent to Chihuahua, and they would, if need be, continue all the way to Mexico City in order to discover the cause of the school closures.[65]

Wolf's letter announcing the beginning of the closures was the first in a flurry of letters discussing the issue that would last the better part of two years. While the issue of theft garnered a wider spread of opinions from letter writers, the school closures were met with an almost entirely united Mennonite front. Writers from colonies in Chihuahua as well as Durango, where schools remained open throughout the entire episode, were greatly concerned at the turn of events. Not atypical was a letter from Durango in June 1935, which stated, "Many believe it doesn't pay [to live] here in Mexico, because many schools have already been shut in Chihuahua." The writer went on to say that a school inspector had also visited the schools in Durango, but that they had remained open. The

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[64] Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 134.

[65] *SP*, 12 June 1935, 3.

writer finished by relating the measures that the Mennonite community had taken within the last two weeks in order to investigate the matter and bring it to a satisfactory resolution: "Delegates from Chihuahua were here, to go to the high government in Mexico City to ask about our rights. Two men from here also went along."[66] Displaying disbelief and disappointment in the turn of events, the writer nonetheless continued to have faith in the good relations enjoyed by Mennonites with the Mexican government and hoped that a respectful appeal to the "high government" in the capital would solve the issue.

As the matter dragged on, however, letter writers began to display more and more cynicism toward the government and the hope of a future for Mennonites in Mexico. True, one writer in July gave Mexico the benefit of the doubt, questioning, "Where is a place, where there isn't either this or that, which makes the people feel unsettled?"[67] True, too, some writers expressed guarded measures of hope, even three months after the schools remained closed.[68] Despite such signs of good faith and optimism, the majority held little hope. Already by the end of August, Johan B. Wolf commented bitterly:

> The delegates from Mexico City came back with next to nothing accomplished. They weren't able to speak to the President. A piece of writing, which was to give us our freedoms in schools and our churches, was supposed to be sent after them, but we still haven't received anything satisfactory.[69]

By July of that year, writers were reporting that many Mennonites in Mexico were considering seeking emigration opportunities. Abraham Wolf wrote of the overall mood

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[66] *SP*, 19 June 1935, 1. A letter writer signing "A Writer" identified similar sentiments a few weeks later. *SP*, 26 June 1935, 3.

[67] *SP*, 3 July 1935, 1.

[68] *SP*, 14 August 1935, 6.

[69] *SP*, 28 August 1935, 3.

prevailing in the colonies: "People talk mostly now about the schools that the government took away from us. We're still working on the issue, but we still haven't had the wished-for answer. There is also talk of a fresh emigration, if the issue isn't solved." Wolf continued by reporting that many were thinking of going back "home" to the "Fatherland," Canada, where they would at the very least receive the protection they did not have in Mexico.[70] Four months later in October, the desire to emigrate seemed to have grown throughout the colonies, and in particular in Chihuahua. "A Writer" noted that the thoughts about emigration "have not yet disappeared; better said, they are growing. Though there are of course still some whose hope isn't completely gone, those people aren't more than ten per cent." The writer also reported that people were already talking as though their churches might also be shut down, wondering worriedly if their privileges in Mexico did indeed only have a certain lifespan and would soon be coming to an end altogether.[71]

The pages of the *Post* were filled with similar worries throughout 1936. By February a group of Mennonites in Santa Clara had decided to immigrate to Paraguay, where all their religious freedoms would be granted,[72] while others still hoped that Canada might provide them with the sought-after haven.[73] Indeed, so many were intent on bidding Mexico farewell that they felt no need to work their fields anymore, assuming they would soon be leaving anyway. By the end of March, P. W. from Cuauhtémoc

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[70] *SP*, 3 July 1935, 3.

[71] *SP*, 2 October 1935, 3.

[72] *SP*, 5 February 1936, 4.

[73] *SP*, 11 March 1936, 2; 25 March 1936, 3.

reported, "Up until now only a very little land has been ploughed, because people all lack courage and hope and because there is still much talk about emigrating."[74]

By July, a second Mennonite delegation had returned from a successful trip to Mexico City. Individuals, however, were still very mistrustful, seemingly not able to believe that everything had been straightened out. A doubtful B. B. Hildebrand from Patos, Durango, finished his letter, writing hesitantly, "and as I have heard from others, everything should be in order again now."[75] Others slowly began to give similar reports. "Yesterday the papers from the President arrived," one writer wrote, "stating that we can have our full and complete freedoms, that we have been promised protection, and that we are allowed to keep our land."[76]

While the situation appeared to have been solved, the distrust bred in the Mennonite population through this event did not dissipate easily. Eight months after the initial school closures Julius Harder commented warily that, though their freedoms had been regained and the schools were permitted to open and function as they had previously, "many people have become cynical and mistrustful."[77] By 1936, this had indeed become the case. As word gradually spread that the schools were once again open, many letter writers seem not to have let down their guard against further betrayals by the government. Several writers, despite the reopened schools and regained freedoms, questioned how long the good news would last,[78] and though one writer claimed "things

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[74] *SP* 25 March 1936, 3.

[75] *SP*, 22 July 1936, 4.

[76] *SP*, 5 August 1936, 3.

[77] *SP*, 29 January 1936, 3.

[78] *SP* 26 February 1936, 6; 11 March 1936, 5; 22 April 1936, 4.

would now be somewhat quieter here,"[79] many others noted that emigration plans were still in motion for the many Mennonites who were not swayed by the good turn of events.[80] Indeed, in September, three months after the schools had been re-opened, one writer wrote a full-page spread entitled "Should the Mennonites Leave Mexico?,"[81] which outlined the reasons for and against emigration.

Mennonites felt betrayed by a government with whom they had previously enjoyed good relations and as a letter from Johan B. Wolf demonstrates, the resulting pessimism and suspicion remained in the Mennonite consciousness. In April 1936, this writer scoffed at the apparent ill will and negligence displayed by government officials toward the Mennonite delegates who had come to Mexico City seeking a resolution to the impasse. "As it sounds, all freedoms have once again been granted here," he began, but continued with sarcastic bitterness:

> The government in Mexico was, apparently, ignorant of the situation and how we were maligned through the situation with the schools, through theft, murder, etcetera. Our delegates had only been there in Mexico City in May and June 9 and for six weeks in November and December and [the government] couldn't once in such a short period of time come forward [to meet with the delegates], as they had so much other work before them. Now, though, everything is supposed to be in order.[82]

Evidently, many individuals in the community would continue to have doubts about the government's sincerity throughout the coming years.

Conclusion

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[79] *SP*, 1 January 1936, 2.

[80] *SP*, 5 February 1936, 4.

[81] *SP*, 16 September 1936, 2.

[82] *SP*, 1 April 1936, 5.

The events surrounding the closure of Mennonite schools throughout Chihuahua had a similar effect on the collective Mennonite psyche as the plague of thefts and other crimes had had. The simultaneous nature of these events throughout the 1930s seems to have augmented their effect on the community, as Mennonites perceived both of these issues as betrayals by the government. As one letter writer in 1936 commented:

> Freedoms are now being granted here, if we promise with our signatures to remain here. But we lack more than simply school freedoms; we lack protection for our lives and property; for robberies are frequent, nowadays almost a daily occurrence and the entire situation here [in Mexico] doesn't permit us to stay.[83]

The result of the perceived assault on the rights and privileges granted to the Mennonites in 1921 by then-President Alvaro Obregón, in addition to the lack of protection given them by the government in the disputes with agraristas and in the face of widespread lawlessness throughout the 1930s, served to heighten Mennonite defences against non-Mennonite outsiders. The frequent references made to the nature of Mexicans throughout the letters written into the *Post*, however, did more than simply convey Mennonite distrust for their non-Mennonite neighbours. The targeting of Mennonite households by thieves and other criminals caused Mennonites to use their letters to the *Post* to focus on the character of Mexicans. By being victimized so often and by concentrating their reports on Mexicans, Mennonites as a group turned their focus inwards and underscored their own perceptions as outsiders living in hostile, foreign territory. The organization of *Selbstschutz*, or self-defence groups, throughout the Mennonite territories[84] demonstrates how this turning inwards was sometimes put into literal action. Indeed, bitterness against government inaction caused many individuals to

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[83] *SP*, 6 May 1936, 1.

[84] Dyck, *Anfangs Jahre der Mennonited in Mexiko*, 15-16.

consider casting Mexican society off altogether and immigrating to a more suitable country that would recognize their rights and would grant them the protection they thought they deserved. As one writer identified by the initials "L. S." reflected wistfully, "The Mennonites would only like to stay in Mexico." The letter, however, ended on a firm note as the writer concluded, "Yet, every single one of them would leave if the government implements its socialistic program in the schools."[85]

Sources such as the memoirs of Mennonite minister Isaak Dyck recount the early years in Mexico in similar undertones as the letters carried in the *Post*. In relating the murder of Peter Letkeman's son, who had been trying to ward off thieves at the door of his father's house one night, Dyck states, "But he soon had to agree, that these Godforsaken Reds were in fact stronger than he was. One revolver shot followed soon from the hand of the murderer, and lodged in his body."[86] The anti-communist undertones of his account speak volumes about how Mennonites and their leaders perceived their precarious situation in Mexico. This particular Old Colony leader not only framed his opinions in terms of Mennonites being the constantly targeted victims of crime, but also as being God-fearing people amongst the godless, and even communist. If the Mexican perpetrators in this narrative were "Godforsaken Reds," Dyck seems to suggest that Mennonites were the virtuous and blameless foreigners trying to survive in hostile territory. Mennonite experiences throughout this period served not only to form their opinions of their Mexican neighbours, but also seemed to have shaped their own identity as an ethno-religious group.

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[85] *SP*, 7 October 1936, 2.

[86] Dyck, *Anfangs Jahre der Mennoniten in Mexiko*, 18.

Ironically, the increased interaction with Mexican society, brought about through periods of intense conflict and serious tensions, served to reinforce Mennonite self-perceptions. This clarification of Mennonite identity is summed up nicely by one writer, who, commenting on the school crisis, wrote: "Now we'll find out, how much our schools are actually worth to us."[87] This individual accurately notes that Mennonite values were sharpened and honed through the conflicts in which they were embroiled throughout the first decades of their settlement.

[87] *SP*, 26 February 1936, 6.

CHAPTER FOUR

"THAT THE LORD WOULD RICHLY REPAY THIS LOYAL FRIEND"[1]: INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS ACROSS SOCIAL BOUNDARIES

On June 2, 1954, Isaak C. and Agatha Banman, from Hoffnungsthal in the Ojo de la Yegua colony north of Cuauhtémoc, wrote a letter to *Die Steinbach Post* exemplifying a very distinct reaction to the many instances of theft occurring in their area. They wrote:

> The working wage [for Mexicans] is very cheap. Poverty makes the Mexicans steal, which also happens quite a bit. One cannot wonder about this too much, however, for need breaks steel. Mexican children wander through the villages and ask for food, for beans and corn. It seems difficult [for one to imagine], how the people are to go on living like this.[2]

Not dwelling upon the crime itself, the items stolen, or the Mennonite people affected by the frequent acts of theft, these letter writers focus instead on the plight of poverty that, in their minds at least, literally drove members of the surrounding Mexican population to steal from their wealthier Mennonite neighbours.

As reviewed in the previous chapter, tension often characterized the interaction between Mennonites and their neighbours in Mexico. While numerous areas of conflict, from the land disputes with agraristas in the early years to the government-instituted school closures, existed, most often tensions revolved around the frequent instances of theft throughout Mennonite villages. Many colonists reacted with hostility in these circumstances, either arming themselves against the thieves lurking in the night or calling upon the Mexican government to send troops into the colonies to protect Mennonites and

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[1] Isaak M. Dyck, *Auswanderung von Canada nach Mexiko, ano 1922*, trans. Robyn Sneath (Cuauhtémoc: Imprenta Colonial, 1995), 95.

[2] *SP*, 2 June 1954, 8.

their property. Others chose simply to leave Mexico behind entirely and return to Canada, where they hoped to have some measure of security. These varied reactions, while characterizing the vast majority of the Mennonite responses to the persistent threat posed by thieves, did not, however, exemplify the reaction of some Mennonites towards their Mexican aggressors, as Isaak and Agatha Banman's letter demonstrates.

This sensitivity and compassion toward Mexicans, the majority of whom were relegated to a lower economic position than Mennonites, exemplifies one final, heretofore unmentioned, area of interaction between these two groups. The hierarchical, racially-charged element of these associations highlighted in previous chapters always played an important role in inter-ethnic relations between these groups. Though economic transactions and various areas of conflict were clearly important, the acts of compassion, the casual agricultural advice shared between farmers, the occasional visits between neighbours, and the informal friendships struck up between Mennonites and Mexicans all played no less significant a role in this inter-ethnic relationship.

Historiography

The migration of Old Colony Mennonites from Canada to Mexico was meant to maintain the distance they had traditionally held between themselves and the world at large. Despite the Old Colony vision of living separate from the world, scholars of Mennonites argue that the "elaborate defence mechanisms" utilized by this ethno-religious group to isolate themselves have not always succeeded at holding the world at bay.[3] Historians and other academics studying the case of the Mennonites in Mexico

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[3] David Quiring, *The Mennonite Old Colony Vision: Under Siege in Mexico and the Canadian Connection* (Steinbach: Crossways Publications Inc., 2003), 6.

have drawn attention to the ways in which Mennonites have interacted with the Mexican world surrounding them; they have not emphasized, however, the significance of the informal relationships struck up between Mennonite colonists and Mexicans. Instead, scholars have focused on the institutional or economic levels, examining the relations between, for example, the Old Colony Mennonite Church and the Mexican government, or investigating the economic interdependence that emerged between Mennonite and Mexican populations shortly after the arrival of the Mennonites in 1922.

While the informal connections between these two groups have not been the chief focus of previous studies, it does not mean that it is entirely absent from the historiography. The earliest work produced about the Mennonite experience in Mexico, written by Bishop Johan Löppky on the investigative trip he and other Mennonite bishops undertook in 1921, provides some insight into their first impressions of Mexico and its inhabitants. After describing their first glimpses of the Mexican countryside and various infrastructure projects, for example, Löppky comments:

> The people seemed pretty foreign to us, for as soon as the train stopped in the city, it was surrounded on both sides by people, who were selling all sorts of food and other things, some of them with great noise. Beggars and society's elite are all mixed together...They [the poor] are terribly skinny. It was for us newcomers something new, for we were not at all accustomed to such things.[4]

Further on in the narrative, Löppky's comments belie the fervent religiosity of the Mennonite delegation in their observations about the Mexican population. In one instance, upon seeing people prepare for a coming festival on a Sunday, the bishop comments:

> The people were funny and content. We soon noticed, that they were preparing for the next days, Monday and Tuesday. They were to be festival days. A wild

[4] Johan M. Löppky, "Ein Reisebericht von Kanada nach Mexiko im Jahre 1921," (N. P.: Self-published, 1921), 13.

> busyness of the world's children, so that I often thought about the word of God: "All flesh loses its way..." Genesis 6: 11 and 13. They sang and jumped until late into the night. But they always left us to ourselves. Nothing uncomfortable was felt, [they were] always very polite toward us.[5]

Löppky's observations give voice to the contradiction that was to characterize much of the Mennonite attitude toward Mexicans throughout the years of their settlement: Mexicans were considered to be ungodly, or in Löppky's words, "the world's children," and yet were often seen to be polite and deferential toward Mennonites. Standing aloof from the Mexican society surrounding them, the Mennonite delegates appear to have held a paternalistic attitude toward Mexico's inhabitants.

The superiority felt by Mennonites toward Mexicans, hinted at in Löppky's account of the Mennonite delegation's trip to Mexico, proves to be a common theme throughout the historiography. Bishop Isaak Dyck's account of the migration, for example, further reveals the Mennonite self-perception of being morally and spiritually more advanced than their Mexican counterparts. Within the narrative Mexico is described as "that foreign, thief-infested land,"[6] and a "land of heathens."[7]

Mexicans also fared poorly in the Mennonite imagination during the initial months of settlement in the new country. Though members of the group's 1921 exploratory delegation had spoken of "how likeable the people there were," and that "both parents and children appeared nice and healthy,"[8] Mennonite attitudes toward Mexicans were not charitable during their first months in the country. As their train

[5] Löppky, "Ein Reisebericht von Kanada nach Mexiko im Jahre 1921," 17.

[6] Dyck, *Auswanderung von Canada nach Mexiko, ano 1922*, 66.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*, 71.

finally arrived in Chihuahua, Mennonites came into contact with Mexicans en masse for the first time. Dyck relates the trepidation of the newcomers at the experience:

> [T]hey surrounded our train because they had never before seen Mennonites. This made us uncomfortable, for we had never seen such dark people, who crowded around our train by the hundreds to get a look at us...O, how strange and unfamiliar everything was.

As the Mennonites began to unload their possessions from the trains in Chihuahua to transport them to their land a day's journey away from the city, Mexicans swarmed around them offering their assistance. Of this, Dyck writes: "We didn't know what to do with them. We couldn't talk to them, and anyways, at that time we still thought there was something suspicious and off-putting about them and we would just as soon have had them far away as up close."[9] Similar sentiments were felt after the Mennonites had moved to their land and set up tents in their new makeshift village:

> The Mexicans, who surrounded our village as if it were under siege, were constantly trying to sell us things – firewood, grain, horses, pigs, and slaughtered cattle. We found them rather repugnant, not only because we couldn't speak to them but because it didn't take long for us to notice their disloyalty and deceitfulness.[10]

Clearly, Mennonites did not hold Mexicans in especially high regard during the early days of settlement.

Nonetheless, even one month into their settlement, Dyck seemed to begin coming to terms with the new land in which they lived. The surroundings that had "felt strange and unfamiliar"[11] on their first morning in Mexico had by then come to be considered

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[9] Dyck, *Auswanderung von Canada nach Mexiko, ano 1922*, 85-86.

[10] *Ibid.*, 91.

[11] *Ibid.*, 87.

"the new homeland."[12] Mennonites found themselves on Sunday mornings worshiping in makeshift churches, thanking God for their new country:

> Through singing and prayer we would praise and thank our loving God for his indescribable grace, love, and goodness, which he gave to us sinful people, and that after much searching and anxious waiting he once again brought us into a land where we could enjoy our precious freedoms in our schools and in our churches.[13]

Their first impressions of Mexico's inhabitants also seem to have taken a turn for the better. Toward the end of his narrative, Dyck reflects on the ways in which Mennonites slowly altered their opinions about their neighbours. He writes:

> And though we were initially afraid of the people of this land, it didn't take long for us to realize that we had a lot to learn from them....Mostly we learned to appreciate their simple and modest lifestyle, and though we may have found some of their practices distasteful, we learned from their patience and contentment.[14]

Just as they became accustomed to their environment, it seems, Mennonites slowly began to warm to their new neighbours as well.

In addition to the first-hand accounts of the Mennonite delegation's initial trip to Mexico and of the group's subsequent migration, academic historians and other scholars have also taken up this thread of investigation. Calvin Redekop's 1969 *The Old Colony Mennonites: Dilemmas of Ethnic Minority Life* is replete with interviews, conducted with members of the Old Colony Mennonite Church, that pick up on the theme of Mennonite superiority. One of Redekop's interviewees, for instance, outlining the Old Colony belief system, asserted: "It does not matter if the outsider is a better Christian and adheres to the Bible twice as much. He belongs to the world. There is no hope for the Mexicans to ever

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[12] Dyck, *Auswanderung von Canada nach Mexiko, ano 1922*, 111.

[13] *Ibid.*, 104.

[14] *Ibid.*, 95.

come out of the world."[15] David Quiring concurs with Redekop's assessment of Mennonite attitudes. Quiring argues that this self-perception of being superior to Mexican society might have served as an important barrier between the Mennonite and Mexican communities.[16]

Other scholars, including Redekop and linguist Kelly Hedges, point to other methods utilized by the Old Colony in maintaining the boundaries between themselves and society. According to these two scholars, derogatory names used by some Mennonites to refer to Mexicans was another method that served to strengthen the patronizing attitude of Mennonites toward Mexicans. Redekop states that "schvoate Tjarscht," Low German for "burnt piece of toast," was a phrase used in normal conversation among Old Colonists to refer to Mexicans.[17] In a similar vein, Hedges identifies the term "Meksa" as another word used by some members of this community towards Mexicans.[18] Using negative phrases and names to refer to Mexicans allowed Mennonites to cultivate a sense of superiority in relation to their non-Mennonite neighbours, as well as to fortify the social boundaries that separate the two groups.

As a result of their beliefs, as well as from their continuing negative impression of Mexicans, Mennonites tried to mix as little as possible with society around them, in order to remain, as one letter writer put it, an "isolated, pure German folk group."[19] As we

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[15] Quoted in Calvin Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites: Dilemmas of Ethnic Minority Life* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), 31.

[16] Quiring, *The Mennonite Old Colony Vision*, 64.

[17] Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites*, 93.

[18] Kelly Lynn Hedges, "Plautdietsch and Huuchdietsch in Chihuahua: Language, Literacy, and Identity Among the Old Colony Mennonites in Northern Mexico" (PhD Dissertation, Yale University, 1996), 75.

[19] *SP*, 16 September 1936, 3.

have seen, they were not as successful in this endeavour as they might have liked. While economic relations and other activities drew these two groups together, other areas of interaction, such as marriages between Mexicans and Mennonites, remained proscribed.[20] Despite such prohibitions, however, intimate relationships between members of these two groups did exist. Though not dealing with the topic in any depth, Redekop's work is the only major study that touches on this subject. He quotes a Mennonite bishop, who commented on the growing instances of such relationships, saying: "Just as the children of Israel were punished when they mixed and intermarried with the world, so God will punish us for being impure."[21] In another instance, Redekop relates the story of walking through an Old Colony village with an Old Colonist and seeing an Indian woman with children begging for food at the roadside. Upon seeing the light skin and hair of the youngest child, the author asked his guide if the girl's complexion could indicate mixed parentage. The man commented candidly:

> Yes, it may quite well be a Mennonite. It often happens, and nothing is said or done about it. When we came to Mexico, the idea was that we would stay completely separate and would never mix with these strange colored and acting people. But we are mixing quite a bit, so that purpose was defeated.[22]

Such relationships, Redekop suggests, while by no means commonplace, occasionally brought people from these two groups closer and closer together, despite the paternalistic attitude held by Mennonites toward Mexicans.

While intermarriage is a subject rarely broached in the historiography, scholars have paid more attention to other, less intimate relationships that have been formed

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[20] Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites*, 178.

[21] Quoted in Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites*, 42.

[22] *Ibid.*, 178-179.

between members of the Mennonite and Mexican communities. These relations occurred during the 1990s, according to Glenda Miller, especially among the youth within the Mennonite community. She points out that it was the youth who could be found mixing with young Mexicans. Quoting an article in the *El Paso Times* in 1991, Miller tells of "the young [Old Colony] men...driving around with radios blasting, drinking beer, interacting with young women, frequenting bars, and occasionally attending dances in the neighbouring Mexican communities."[23] Clearly, the "boundary maintenance mechanisms"[24] that once kept Mennonites separate from the rest of society did not play as significant a role amongst the young, unmarried population on the colonies in later decades.

Hedges also makes note of this development in Old Colony life in her 1996 study. Using case studies throughout much of her work, she points out that a number of families exist in which young people actively engage Mexican society through their jobs in restaurants or by taking Spanish language classes. In one instance, Hedges found three sisters who attended Spanish classes and listened to Mexican radio on a daily basis. Hedges notes that the girls, clearly enjoying the cross-cultural experience, attempted to sing along with the Spanish songs and endeavoured to understand the station's announcer.[25] Other Old Colony participants in the study also admitted to taking Spanish lessons. Among them were "Mrs. Z's" daughters. After attending Spanish classes, they

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[23] Glenda Miller, "A Comparison of Mennonite and Mormon Colonies in Northern Mexico," (MA Thesis, University of Texas, El Paso, 1993), 63.

[24] *Ibid.*, 63.

[25] Hedges, "'Plautdietsch' and 'Huuchdietsch' in Chihuahua," 237-238.

tried to practice the language while they worked at the restaurant their mother and aunt opened up, by speaking with the Mexican customers in Spanish.[26]

Despite these descriptions of informal connections occurring in the late twentieth century, very few instances of actual relationships, much less friendships, are to be found in the literature, historical or contemporary. Only Hedges briefly mentions one example of such an association taking place. While the girls of one of the families she interviewed, "Mrs. Z's" daughters already mentioned above, "all expressed a desire to have Mexican friends" and "resent[ed] having to live within the constraints of the 'oole Ordnunk,'"[27] only one family admitted to having active friendships with Mexicans. The family Hedges called the "X's" reported that they had cultivated personal relationships outside colony borders. Moreover, "[u]nlike most Old Colonists, the X's ha[d] Mexican friends whom they visit[ed] and whom they [had] to their house."[28] While they were secretive about the Spanish language classes Mrs. X attended with her daughters, evidently the "X's" did not feel the need to keep their friendships with Mexican neighbours quiet, for they openly invited them into their home on the colony.

Aside from these references, very few works examine informal interactions and friendships that have been fostered between members of these groups. Letters written by Mennonites and published in the pages of the *Post*, however, demonstrate the existence of such associations and their continuity throughout the period under investigation. Along with explicating their views on their new homeland and its inhabitants, letter

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[26] Hedges, "'Plautdietsch' and 'Huuchdietsch' in Chihuahua," 89-90.

[27] *Oole Ordnunk* is translated in English as "Old Order" and denotes the beliefs and values held by the Old Colony Mennonite Church. *Ibid.*

[28] *Ibid.*, 81.

writers repeatedly illuminated the many and varied interactions they participated in with Mexicans. While not always describing intimate friendships, the letters clearly demonstrate that the connections fostered between Mennonites and Mexicans in the business world and put to the test through the conflicts that inevitably characterized Mennonite-Mexican relations, also sometimes extended to the level of the individual.

More important than the fact that these relationships existed, however, is how they influenced Mennonite self-perceptions in Mexico. Clearly, the Mennonite associations with Mexicans could not be classified as primary relationships. As Milton Gordon defines the concept, primary relationships are "personal, informal, intimate, and usually face-to-face." Additionally, these bonds involve "the entire personality, not just a segmentalized part of it" and play an important role in "moulding human personality."[29] On the other hand, Gordon characterizes secondary relationships as those tending to be "impersonal, formal or casual, non-intimate, and segmentalized."[30] On the whole, Mennonite-Mexican connections fit firmly into the category of secondary relationships, as they did not encompass deep, emotional bonds between the individuals involved. Despite the secondary nature of Mennonite-Mexican relationships, they were significant in the Mennonite experience in Mexico for they helped shape the identity of this ethno-religious minority by creating and reinforcing social boundaries that divided them from the wider Mexican world.

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[29] Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 31.

[30] *Ibid.*, 32.

Mennonite Impressions of Mexicans

The Mennonite arrival in Mexico heralded a sharp deviation from the kind of lifestyle this group had enjoyed in Canada. A move from a wealthy, developed country to a developing nation like Mexico meant Mennonites underwent a significant setback in their economic standing. Hardships in the agricultural and personal spheres took a heavy toll on the newcomers as they struggled to become accustomed to their new environs. These significant difficulties, however, served to temper the initially negative view Mennonites carried of Mexico, and in time, of its citizens as well. While a patronizing attitude was always a part of Mennonite associations with their Mexican neighbours, the privation Mennonites experienced in their new homeland gave them a type of appreciation for the skills and knowledge Mexicans possessed about life in that country.

Despite the numerous hardships experienced by the newcomers, when the first letter from Mexico appeared in the *Post*, an optimistic spin was given to the Mennonite situation in Mexico. Written in 1923 by Reverend Abraham Görssen, the letter briefly outlined both the negative and the positive sides of the settlement experience. While the trip south was "slow," everything "thank God, went very well." Though the only buildings standing on his land were "of course only of the Mexican style, of raw clay bricks," at the very least, Görssen wrote, "we had a roof over our heads." In the same vein, while the winter "was outstandingly nice," with good precipitation and no overwhelmingly hot weather, "the cattle and horses we brought along seem to have taken the temperature change hard, they have become very thin, many have also already died, while the Mexican cattle on the other hand are doing well." The Reverend ended his letter

on an optimistic note, stating: "all beginnings are difficult; but with God's help, one can get through anything, and on his help we want to rely and build."[31]

This optimism also shaped Mennonite opinions of Mexico's inhabitants, especially throughout the early years. The first letter to directly comment on the merit of Mexicans was written by Heinrich Bergen in July 1924 as a rebuff to Thomas Horsky's criticism of Mexicans. Of the hardworking nature of Mexican women Bergen wrote:

> I've also seen everywhere that we thresh, that from four o'clock in the morning onwards, [Mexican] women, using a wooden hammer, thresh out the grain they have gathered from the fields. Then they rub the wheat or the corn with two stones, a big one and a small one, in order to bake their bread. Every day I saw women at the water, who were washing clothes. The laundry is washed very punctually, especially the men's clothing.

Bergen also responded to Horsky's charge that all Mexicans had a penchant for thievery, commenting:

> I've often driven through cornfields at night and have never sensed anything awry. But nevertheless, I don't want to dispute that the Mexicans also have those among them who steal....But we don't want to blame the entire group for the few among them who steal when they have a good opportunity to do so. For where is there a land, where there is no theft?[32]

Other writers throughout the years of Mennonite settlement in Mexico also took a positive approach to their Mexican neighbours. By 1950, despite all the conflicts and tensions that had characterized Mennonite-Mexican relations over the past three decades, letter writers still came to the defence of their neighbours. In June of that year, Ida Köhn, a US Holdeman Mennonite living in Saltillo, noted that a rumour was circulating that the Mexican government was planning to create taxation laws like those of the United States. After a cursory comment about what inhabitants must report for tax purposes, she mused

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[31] *SP*, 11 July 1923, 1, 2.

[32] *SP*, 2 July 1924, 3.

about the impact such a change could have on the Mexican population. "[Mexico] has so many poor people, who have such worry-filled lives," she wrote, "How can they also pay taxes?"[33]

Numerous other letters conveyed equally compassionate accounts of the Mexican population. Despite the optimistic tone of the letters, however, many letters still reflected the patronizing attitude identified by Redekop, Sawatzky, Quiring, and Hedges. A letter written in August 1950 by P. A. Friesen stands as one such example. Responding to a letter from South America that had addressed the question of the indigenous population in that area, this writer took a few sentences to explain their situation with the indigenous Mexicans in the Chihuahua region, the Tarahumara, for his or her South American reader. Friesen wrote, "We know around here only one branch of these children of nature,[34] namely the always-friendly Tarihumaris [sic], who alternately come begging and with every such small thing [that we give them] go on their way satisfied."[35] Clearly, though some letter writers may have thought their relations with the population around the Mennonite colonies were constructive, they were still based on the notion of Mennonite superiority over the Mexican and indigenous populations.

Mexican Assistance

When Mennonites arrived in Mexico, they came preceded by their reputation as simple, pious, hard-working farmers. In the November 9, 1921 letter from Mexican President Alvaro Obregón to Abraham Dörksen, a bishop and representative of the

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[33] *SP*, 21 June 1950, 8.

[34] The word Friesen uses is "Naturkinder," literally translating to "Nature children."

[35] *SP*, 9 August 1950, 8.

Sommerfelder Mennonite Church, the Mexican government's favourable assessment of the Mennonites was outlined. It stated, "It is the fervent wish of this government, to support the settling of order-loving, morally-upright, and hard-working elements, to which the Mennonites fit."[36]

Other reports echo the high expectations of the Mexican administration for their new settlers. In 1922, Mexico sent a government commission to investigate the situation of the Mennonite colonies just established in Chihuahua. The findings of the commission, translated and published on November 15, 1922 in the *Post*,[37] gives a glowing report of the Mennonite settlements and the progress the newcomers had made within the short period since their arrival. The committee wrote about the "roomy houses" of some of the Mennonites and the agricultural technologies already in use on the colonies, such as "feed packaging, gas engines, woodworking, metal smiths, yes, even...windmills, with whose help the water is pumped from the wells and through the pipe system is led into the various houses or used to water the gardens."[38] Evidently, the Mexican government was impressed with the resourcefulness displayed in the Mennonite villages.

The gains of the Mennonite colonies, the report stated, could serve as an education for Mexicans, teaching them "modern methods, with which one sows crops, corns or other fruits of the field today" and introducing them to "plants, which they don't already know." Furthermore, the commission speculated on the possibility of settling

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[36] *SP*, 2 December 1925, 1.

[37] Leonard Sawatzky also writes about the conclusions of this report. Harry Leonard Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 129.

[38] *SP*, 15 November 1922, 1, 2.

"Mennonite colonies throughout the Republic," reflecting: "it would definitely be a practical way, to broaden the usage of modern farm equipment."[39]

Despite this praise, in many ways the initial experience of the Mennonites in Mexico fell short of these high expectations. As previously related, the immigrants themselves were thoroughly disappointed and disheartened in what was to be their new homeland upon their arrival in Mexico.[40] Their disenchantment with their surroundings, however, was only the beginning of their arduous task of settling in a foreign land. As time went on, Mennonites underwent the devastating effects of sickness and disease, in both humans and livestock, as well as many poor harvests, as they struggled to understand the agricultural conditions of Mexico.

Though Mennonite delegates in 1921 had reported, somewhat patronizingly, that Mexicans "try to sustain themselves with such a simple lifestyle,"[41] Mennonites soon came to realise that some of the apparently simple Mexican ways proved to be better than the methods the Canadians had brought south with them. Midway through his memoirs Dyck candidly relates this changing perception of Mexicans held by Mennonites, noting that, while they were initially afraid of Mexicans, "it didn't take long for us to realize that we had a lot to learn from them."[42] This attitude is reflected, albeit not as directly, in many of the letters appearing in the *Post*.

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[39] In fact, the only drawback the committee included in their glowing report of the Mennonite settlements was that the immigrants assimilated so little into the surrounding society, preserving German rather than learning the language of their new homeland, Spanish. *SP*, 15 November 1922, 1, 2.

[40] Dyck, *Auswanderung von Canada nach Mexiko*, 82.

[41] *Ibid.*, 71.

[42] *Ibid.*, 95.

One of the primary areas where Mennonites first began to adapt their ways to those used by Mexicans was in their building methods. Though many began their settlement in Mexico building Canadian-style houses of lumber,[43] the scarcity of timber,[44] along with the gradual realization that these structures did not suit the Mexican environment, meant that this practice eventually faded in the Mennonite colonies. By the 1930s, many Mennonites had adopted the Mexican architectural style. As one writer explained, clay bricks were used to make these adobe homes, each brick measuring twelve by sixteen inches, with a thickness of four inches.[45] In May of 1934 another writer, calling him- or herself "A Southerner," used a poem to inform readers of some details about colony life in Santa Clara. The poem outlines the number of villages in the colony and how many schools, churches, and ministers served the community. Additionally, the author used the fifth stanza of the poem to report on the physical details of the simple houses in which many Mennonites lived:[46]

> Of bricks are the houses here
> From earth the roof, completely without beauty
> At the house one plants a little tree
> So that it too also has its purpose[47]

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[43] Dyck, *Auswanderung von Canada nach Mexiko,* 96. Sawatzky also mentions this problem, stating that the practice of building Canadian-style homes characterized the "early period," from 1922 until 1926. Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 110.

[44] Even in 1941, nearly twenty years after the initial establishment of the colonies, letter writer Gerhard G. Hiebert wrote of the dearth of wood in the Durango region, commenting: "It would really suit us, if a wōod dealer, like Monarch Lumber Co. in Hague, Sask., would also be here." *SP*, 15 October 1941, 3.

[45] *SP*, 22 September 1932, 4.

[46] Not all Mennonites, however, lived in Mexican-style homes. In 1938, Jacob H. Harder of Grünfeld, Durango reported: "Here in the new village Blumenhof a lot is being built; the buildings look much like those in Canada, are covered with shingles." *SP*, 6 July 1938, 2.

[47] *SP*, 9 May 1934, 6.

While "A Southerner" seems to be accustomed, or at the very least resigned, to the Mexican style of his or her home, it seems to have taken other individuals longer to make this transition.

As late as 1944, writers continued to make note of the style Mennonites were following in building their houses, demonstrating that the Mennonite acceptance of Mexican norms was not a foregone conclusion even at this point in time. Some families, like the Thiessens of Cuauhtémoc and the household of the letter writer "A Southerner" in Santa Clara, had by this time made this transition. In October of that year, C. P. Friesen also noted: "Abram A. Thiessen is having a cute little house built with a nearly-flat roof after the Mexican style; it has a very nice look."[48] Other individuals, however, took longer to adapt to the Mexican ways. Friesen, for example, mentions that Peter B. Fehr was also building himself a house, this one, though "out of raw bricks," was being built so that "the style resembled a little Canadian house."[49] By the 1940s some of the immigrants had managed to blend their old Canadian practices with their newly acquired Mexican ways.

Adopting the native Mexican form of housing was a new and difficult development for Mennonites in that country. While such buildings tended to lack aesthetic value for the Canadians, as the letter from "A Southerner" illustrates, even the building method Mexicans utilized in such homes left Mennonites perplexed. In 1933, a letter from Abram Wolf pointed out how long it took for Mennonites to learn how to build the much superior Mexican-style adobe houses:

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[48] *SP*, 18 October 1944, 6.

[49] *Ibid.*

> This morning, as we got up, we saw our buildings in shambles. Several walls of the clay-brick buildings had fallen out, from the big rain, that had fallen during the night. We had wondered at first, at how the Mexicans had built such thick walls on their houses. One always learns more...We Mennonites understand how to save money, but often not in the right places: we saved on the buildings; made the walls only twelve inches thick, while it would have been better eighteen to twenty-four inches.[50]

Wolf concluded ruefully: "The Mexicans are in some things ahead of us."[51] Evidently the arduous process of accepting some Mexican customs and methods was not simply an act of acculturation, but also reinforced a sense of separateness between Mennonites and their Mexican counterparts.

In some cases, Mennonites fared no better in adapting new farming and agricultural practices in a strange physical environment. Dyck notes that in the first months before Mennonites had constructed houses and outbuildings on their land, they had to survive outdoors in the "inconvenient weather"[52] of soaring daytime heat and freezing temperatures during the night.[53] G. C. Rempel's family history concurs, reporting that Abraham and Anna Peters, settlers in Schönthal on the Swift Current Colony in Chihuahua, "had to re-learn many things in order to become successful farmers in the new, strange land."[54] For the Peters and other Mennonite immigrants to Mexico, becoming accustomed to the different agricultural environment also required much patience, hard work, and resilience.

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[50] *SP*, 27 September 1933, 6.

[51] *Ibid.*

[52] Dyck, *Auswanderung von Canada nach Mexiko,* 98.

[53] *Ibid.*, 92, 93, 98.

[54] G.C. Rempel, comp. *Rempel Family Book: A Family History and Genealogy of Wilhelm and Agatha (Sawatzky) Rempel and Their Descendants* (Winnipeg: Friesens Corporation, 2000), 32.

Sawatzky makes note of the many difficulties faced by Mennonite farmers throughout the 1920s, noting that their new location required new farming practices that Mennonites did not always understand. He cites an example from 1923 where Sommerfelder Mennonites observed their agrarista neighbours planting corn in April and quickly followed suit. The Mexican corn grew, however, while the crops the Mennonites had sown did not. Sawatzky explains that, while Mennonites had the correct idea in planting in April, they did not realise that the agraristas had planted their corn in the subsoil moisture with iron-tipped planting sticks, while the Sommerfelder had planted shallow and with mechanized planters.[55] Clearly, initial ignorance of agricultural conditions and the drawbacks of using modern farm technology were a major setback to Mennonite farmers in the early years.

Letter writers in the *Post* also paid attention to the agricultural successes of their neighbours. In his 1923 letter written to the *Post*, Abraham Görssen wrote of the poor condition of Mennonite cattle and crops, comparing them to the animals and farms owned by Mexicans, which "were in good condition" and "growing very nicely," respectively.[56] In 1924, B. B. Zacharias observed the Mexican farmers in the vicinity of San Antonio, noting: "The Mexicans, who have old land under cultivation, planted their corn very deep [in the soil] in the middle of April, and it had moisture to go up; though they also had some frozen corn mixed in too."[57] But the newcomers did not merely notice the relative success of the Mexican farms with envy, but also learned from their farming techniques.

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[55] Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 117.

[56] *SP*, 11 July 1923, 1, 2.

[57] *SP*, 17 December 1924, 1.

As Dyck notes in his memoirs, Mennonites had much to learn from the Mexican example, "especially regarding the cultivation of the soil, such as the proper time and luck required for planting."[58] In some cases, Mennonites even adopted some of the Mexican methods. Despite the notions of superiority held by the Mennonite community itself, as well as the high expectations applied to it from outsiders, in the first years of settlement Mennonites came to realise that Mexicans had the knowledge and expertise required to survive in the Mexican environment, which the Mennonites lacked.

Early letters printed in the *Post*, however, illuminate another angle in this story of acculturation. Mennonite writers frequently mentioned Mexican advice or words of wisdom about the cycles of weather. At the end of the long and hard year of poor crops in 1929, J. Wiebe wearily noted that the Mexicans "prophesy a rich harvest for the coming year, which is also the wish of many, but the probability of coming through the long, tight year seems sad."[59] Clearly, Wiebe took a measure of comfort in the optimistic predictions of his Mexican neighbours. Even after the Mennonite communities were accustomed to their surroundings, they continued to listen to Mexican counsel. In mid May 1949, A. B. Schmitt of Blumenort, Durango, informed his or her readers of a temperature of minus six degrees Celsius overnight that likely caused many of his early fruits and vegetables already in bloom to freeze. He added, however, that Mexicans "were here yesterday as it froze, and were happy; [the frost was] an indication, that [the season] can yield a good crop."[60] A year later, a frequent correspondent from

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[58] Dyck, *Auswanderung von Canada nach Mexiko*, 95.

[59] *SP*, 24 December 1929, 3.

[60] *SP*, 18 May 1949, 4.

Quellenkolonie, H. C. Penner, began his letter by writing: "The weather here sets itself ever more toward rain. The 'Einheimischen' prophesy too of an early rain season. This would also be very wished for, for the grazing grounds and gardens."[61]

Similarly, when storms repeatedly buffeted the Santa Clara and Quellen colonies in April and May of 1953, Mennonite writers once again wrote of the words of advice and encouragement given by their Mexican counterparts to help them understand the weather patterns and not become discouraged at the heavy winds and inhospitable conditions. In Santa Clara, Gerhard G. Both shared that the earth was so dry that many people were having trouble ploughing. Others were wanting to cut corn straw already, but, Both wrote, "Almost every day it is [a] storm. Thursday the nineteenth was [a] storm, so that I would rather have preferred not to look outside; there were quite a number of dirt drifts; but the Mexicans say, when we have a lot of storms, then we also have a lot of rain."[62] In a similar vein, H. C. Penner's May 1953 letter stated, "We had last week Wednesday, [and] this week Thursday, lots of wind, which also then turned into a storm; the *Einheimischen* tell us, the more wind, the more rain; therefore, let us only keep good courage!"[63] In times of trouble or when Mennonites had become perplexed and disheartened by the sometimes harsh Mexican climate, these letters suggest that their Mexican neighbours repeatedly offered them words of wisdom or, as in the final two examples, of encouragement. Therefore, while Mexicans were still viewed as the racially and ethnically "other" in the Mennonite imagination and were therefore usually kept at a distance, these letters suggest that some members of these two groups

[61] *SP*, 14 June 1950, 1.

[62] *SP*, 1 April 1953, 4.

[63] *SP*, 13 May 1953, 8.

shared a bond in a few areas of life, like agriculture. They demonstrate that, though strict social boundaries continued to play a very significant role in Mennonite life in Mexico throughout this period, individual Mexicans nonetheless played a significant role in assisting and encouraging the relative-newcomers from Canada.

Associations and Friendships Across the Social Divide

Another aspect of these cultural associations between Mennonites and their Mexican counterparts is the Mennonite awareness of, and even interest in, the events taking place within the surrounding Mexican community. Individuals, for example, often referenced specific events occurring beyond the borders of the colonies, especially in the later years of the period under investigation here. While writers sometimes simply singled out certain mundane events occurring in Mexican society, they also wrote about the horrible accidents or tragedies that took place within that community. This type of reporting is exemplified well in a piece written in July 1949 by Isaak E. Klassen:

> Here in the city Cuauhtémoc should, as I have heard, have been a Mexican, who had apparently wanted to secretly sneak along with a train, and had positioned himself between the cars, perhaps on the connectors or something, and had sat there, fell down and both legs were driven off. He was then taken right away to the hospital, where he died in a short time.[64]

Further on in the letter, Klassen continued: "Also apparently in July were two Mexicans sleeping in the fields, who were killed by lightning and the third is supposed to have been severely burned."[65] Though somewhat unusual in the incredibly macabre nature of the events described, this letter is a good representative of the many others appearing

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[64] *SP*, 27 July 1949, 5.

[65] *Ibid.*

between the years 1922 and 1967.[66] Letter writers often reported on the murder of individual Mexicans or instances extraordinary deaths occurring within that community. In May 1950, Diedrich Elias of Waldheim, for example, told his readers that a Mexican and his two horses were shot and that it was unknown if the murderer had been caught yet or not,[67] while a letter written in August of that year by H. G. and Maria Martens reported that two Mexicans on a ranch to the west of the colony had been hit by lightning. The Martens shared that such instances were far from rare, but that they were "something you hear from many different places," concluding, "That is, obviously, a quick crossover [into death.]"[68]

Tragic accidents happening within the Mexican world were of course of interest to Mennonites. H. G. Martens, for example, wrote into the *Post* again in 1952, reporting that a Mexican man riding a bus accidentally dropped his gun, which then went off and shot him. Martens related that the man, who was traveling with his wife and children, died, after which the bus turned back to town and the police took the body off the bus. He concluded the tragic story with the comment: "That surely must have been a big shock. But lucky are the ones who can come away from that with only a shock!"[69] Such letters illustrate how accidents, unusual deaths, and utterly tragic stories about Mexicans in the surrounding communities frequently caught Mennonites' attention.

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[66] For other such examples, see: *SP*, 18 June 1952, 5; 8 September 1954, 5; 21 September 1955, 3; 18 April 1956, 6; 27 June 1956, 4; 30 July 1957, 6; 17 July 1958, 2; 12 August 1958, 3; 4 November 1958, 2; 16 December 1958, 8; and 23 December 1958, 4 (written by A.W. Peters).

[67] *SP*, 31 May 1950, 2.

[68] *SP*, 23 August 1950, 5.

[69] *SP*, 2 April 1952, 1.

The tone of other letters, however, belie a sense of sympathy toward Mexican individuals affected by averse circumstances. In 1926 a writer identifying only as "A Reader" commented on the poverty evident in Mexico, writing:

> It isn't bad here for those who have money, [and] are smart, and where the biggest houses are, are where people will get along best, but one casts a sidelong glance at the poor and thinks like this: 'you work for only a very poor wage, so that you too can make a living'...the wealthy stand there upright with their thick pockets before [the poor] and comfort him: 'It's not bad, everyone can make a living here,' but no one thinks to reach out their hand.[70]

In another letter, written this time in 1952, a similar sense of sympathy, or at the very least sensitivity, toward the poor is evidenced. In this one, Agatha Enns observed:

> The weather has once again been very nice these last few days after the rain shower. It can already be felt that last year was a crop failure here, especially among the "Einheimischen." Everyday a great number of women with children come before our door, wanting to have food and clothing, yes even the wild ones let themselves be seen often now.[71]

Johan G. Friesen's 1952 letter also carried a compassionate tone as he reported on the condition of the peasant farmers surrounding the colonies. He explained that the Mexicans could not work all of their land because "they do not have enough to allow them to eat until they are satisfied."[72] A year later in October, Bernhard Penner wrote about the working conditions and poor wages Mexicans received, commenting, "It is to be seen in many places that [working in Mexico] won't amount to anything, or will have very few results, so many [Mexicans] simply drop everything and drive [to the United States] to earn dollars." While this practice seems to have benefited some, however, Penner noted, "I also know of some who worked in the U.S. for two or three months and

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[70] *SP*, 4 August 1926, 1.

[71] *SP*, 24 April 1952, 4.

[72] *SP*, 13 August 1952, 2.

then had to work on their way back yet too, only to be able to make it back home again."[73]

The dramatic floods near the town of Nuevo Ideal in Durango late in 1958 also drew the attention of Mennonite letter writers to the events occurring among their Mexican neighbours. Though many Mennonites themselves were affected by the disaster, many writers focused their attention on conditions in the Mexican community instead of on their own circumstances. Jakob Enns of Yermo, Durango, for example, reported that over half the houses in the nearby Mexican town of Yermo were so damaged by the floods that they had caved in completely, noting that for many, half or even all of their crops had also been wiped out. "The poor people," Enns wrote, "had to flee to the hills, where they are still living now."[74] A month later, the floods still dominated the news from Durango. D. F. Braun observed that, though the situation was not that bad in the colony,

> the poor Mexicans almost all have houses built of raw clay bricks, which then soak up all the water from the great rains, and collapse inwards. In their hurry to flee from the flood with their lives, some people have only the clothes on their backs, and even those are soaking wet.[75]

P. I. Harder echoed both Braun's assessment of the conditions among the Mexican population and his sympathetic tone, writing:

> Although our Mennonite colonies have also experienced quite a bit of damage from the water and hail on the crops, the Mexicans have experienced much more of this, as many of their houses fell together completely and almost all of their worldly possessions have been stolen by the floodwaters.[76]

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[73] *SP*, 7 October 1953, 8.

[74] *SP*, 11 November 1958, 3.

[75] *SP*, 9 December 1958, 1.

[76] *SP*, 23 December 1958, 9.

Clearly, Mennonite letter writers did not only make note of the tragic murders and horrible deaths among their Mexican neighbours, but many also paid attention to the extraordinary natural disasters that devastated entire communities, as well as to the daily hardships and grinding poverty experienced by many Mexicans.

These letters, and the many others like them that appeared in the pages of the *Post* throughout this period, demonstrate two points:[77] first, that Mennonites paid attention to the events and circumstances governing the lives of the non-Mennonite population living beyond the boundaries of the colonies; and second, that despite their oft-patronizing attitude toward the indigenous and Mexican populations, Mennonites repeatedly and consistently expressed concern for these neighbours. Sawatzky concurs, noting that, though Mennonites in Mexico lack patriotism for their new homeland, they "manifest a considerable sense of responsibility toward government and the Mexican population in their immediate environs."[78] Letters written by this community and published in the *Post* support this claim again and again.

In addition to the frequent commentaries on Mexican society, Mennonite letters also indicate the existence of relationships, as well as some apparent friendships, fostered across the racial, ethnic, and religious boundaries that divided the two communities. As shown above, most of the secondary literature does not shed much light on such occurrences. While scholars have highlighted the patronizing attitude held by Mennonites toward Mexicans, they do not emphasize the connections made on an individual level between people from both groups.

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[77] For other examples of this type of letter, see: *SP*, 2 July 1924, 3; 9 December 1953, 3; 9 November 1955, 2; 18 April 1956, 3; and 23 December 1958, 4 (written by Abram B. Friesen).

[78] Sawatzky, *They Sought A Country*, 326.

Isaak Dyck's personal account of the Mennonite arrival in Mexico, however, does illuminate the complex relationships that sometimes evolved between Mennonite newcomers and their Mexican counterparts. Upon their arrival in San Antonio de los Arenales, Mennonites had a mere two days to empty all their goods out of the train cars they had arrived in. Their possessions then had to be transported a full day's journey to the land they had purchased. Dyck gives an extensive description of two unnamed Mexican men who assisted him in unloading and transporting his goods to his property. Though he had found "something suspicious and off-putting" about Mexicans at their initial arrival in San Antonio, Dyck soon came to see his two Mexican helpers as a gift from God, writing, "It seemed to me that God, in his great providence, had sent me these two strong souls to help me in my time of need."[79] The relationship between Dyck and one of his unnamed Mexican workers continued for some time and seems to have been characterized by kindness, as the Mexican even visited Dyck and his family at their home one Sunday. As the Dyck family had been eating when the man arrived, they invited him to eat with them. After the meal, Dyck writes,

> we sat for a while at the table with him and our children without saying a single word. We all just sat and looked fondly at one another. After he had looked around our house, and looked benevolently at our children, he bid us farewell and rode away.[80]

Dyck concludes this portion of his narrative commenting thoughtfully, "O, how often I have wished that the dear Lord would richly repay this loyal friend for all his work, just as he has blessed me."[81] Though his perception of Mexicans had been harsh upon his

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[79] Dyck, *Auswanderung von Canada nach Mexiko*, 87.

[80] *Ibid.*, 94.

[81] *Ibid.*, 95.

arrival in Mexico, Dyck's relationship with this Mexican man led to a camaraderie between these two men that surmounted the obstacles of language and culture. While his overall assessment of Mexico and its population as "heathen"[82] did not change, the significance of this friendship to Dyck is plainly evident in this narrative.

While the letters in the *Post* are not as candid or detailed as Dyck's account, they do suggest that such associations were in fact more frequent than the secondary literature would indicate. Although it took some time for Mennonites to begin commenting on events and living conditions within the Mexican community, it seems that loose, informal associations sprang up between individuals from the very beginning of Mennonite settlement in the country and continued right through until the end of the forty-five years under investigation here.

Already by January of 1925, for example, Peter Schulz wrote of a five-day sightseeing trip[83] he, along with three other men, Johann B. Hiebert, Heinrich Bergen, and Peter R. Penner, had taken. Starting at one o'clock in the afternoon from their homes in Cusi, Chihuahua, the travel party rode all that day and arrived at their planned destination for the night at seven o'clock that evening. The men had arranged to stay in the home of a Mexican family that night. Little is said about their hosts or how they got along, although Schulz concludes his account of that first day of travel by stating: "Although the people were very poor, we still found a nice welcome there."[84]

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[82] Dyck repeatedly refers to Mexicans as "heathens." Dyck, *Auswanderung von Canada nach Mexiko*, 23, 67.

[83] During the course of the trip, Schulz displays a keen interest in the Mexican indigenous population. He notices and then visits their abandoned houses, carved out of stone in the mountains, and seems quite impressed by their workmanship. *SP*, 28 January 1925, 3.

[84] *Ibid.*

Other letter writers also wrote about trips they had taken, this time with Mexican friends. A March 1937 letter found the writer "F. B." reminiscing about a trip he had taken with P. Neudorf, whom he addressed personally in the letter. "F. B." wrote: "Friend P. Neudorf, I remember you often, also on the little trip we took, when we brought that Indian along with us."[85] Another writer calling him- or herself "Correspondent" told readers that a "Mexican friend wanted to ride to a friend in the vicinity of Santiago Paposquianio and wanted me to accompany him. As I have desired to ride there for awhile now, in order to take care of a some small business, I accepted the request." The planned trip was delayed for a week due to unforeseen circumstances with one of the donkeys serving as a pack animal, and by the time they departed, "one other Mexican had decided to accompany us."[86]

These three accounts of connections between Mennonites and Mexicans do not reveal very many details about these associations. "Correspondent," for example, gave *Post* readers a detailed account of the treacherous route the travel party traversed, of the difficulty of traveling with donkeys, and the other complexities of the trip, but said nothing about his two Mexican friends or how the three of them fared together. Indeed, the Mexicans involved in all three accounts are left nameless and little is said about their relation to the Mennonite writers. There is little to suggest, therefore, that these would have been primary relationships. The fact that such ties, however loose, existed and were included in Mennonite letters is significant in light of the Mennonite desire for isolation from Mexican society.

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[85] *SP*, 31 March 1937, 6.

[86] *SP*, 12 October 1933, 6.

Indeed, based on the information available in Mennonite letters to the *Post*, most connections between Mennonites and Mexicans seemed to be secondary in nature. Mennonite letter writers very seldom mentioned primary relationships such as, for example, romantic ties forming between Mennonite and Mexican individuals. In fact, in the forty-five years under examination here, only one such event was even hinted at in the newspaper's pages. On August 9, 1950, Ida Köhn from Saltillo wrote into the paper delivering the news that Herman Köhn, the son of the community's storekeeper, had disappeared without a trace, explaining: "one Sunday, about three months ago [he went] to a Mexican wedding and has not yet returned." The letter writer continued: "He didn't tell anyone here where he was going. After receiving a ride with a truck up until Saltillo, no one has seen him. And he hasn't let himself be heard from either."[87] Just over seven months later, on 14 March 1951, Köhn wrote again, this time to give her readers the joyous news that Herman had returned. Framing the narrative within the framework of the story of the Prodigal Son from the New Testament, Köhn wrote:

> Herman Köhn has once again returned. It was a joy for his parents, also for others. It is like we read in the Bible of the lost son. He was lost and is found again! He was dead and is now alive! He has put away his unrighteous ways and wants to now lead a better life![88]

Köhn never offered her readers any further details about Herman's time away from the Mennonite colony, leaving his motives, his whereabouts for the past eleven months, or details of his "unrighteous ways" all to speculation. Certainly, a year-long romantic

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[87] *SP*, 9 August 1950, 5.

[88] *SP*, 14 March 1951, 7.

interlude is a possibility, for Redekop noted that in Mexico "occasionally some young fellows may go to the larger towns to get drunk or to rendezvous with Mexican girls."[89]

Although short in detail, letters published in the *Post* are peppered with references to relationships between Mennonites and Mexicans. Most of such examples are found in short paragraphs buried in the rest of a letter's text or in passing phrases, such as the question raised by the editor of the newspaper on the identity of a Mennonite standing with two indigenous Mexicans.[90] Such references are so small and easily overlooked that they might appear, on the surface at least, to be insignificant. The importance of these types of comments in the letters, however, lies not only in what is directly stated, but also in the reality to which they point. Though Mennonites may have been more reserved about reporting on their associations with Mexicans than their relationships with their coreligionists, the fact that many do mention these relations demonstrates their importance in the daily lives of Mennonites living in the colonies. Not only did they rely on Mexican workers, customers, and the Mexican market in which they sold their goods, but Mennonites also formed alliances and interpersonal relationships with Mexicans outside of the world of business and economic necessity.

Nevertheless, it is important to keep the hierarchical nature of Mennonite-Mexican relations in mind. Whether letter writers wrote with irony about the deadly accidents occurring in Mexican villages, with sympathy about the plight of poverty among their indigenous neighbours, or simply mentioned connections forged between members of the two groups, the notion that Mennonites were socially, culturally, and economically superior to Mexicans was front and center in their minds. By highlighting

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[89] Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites*, 135.

[90] *SP*, 9 January 1929, 4.

the increasing number of Mexican beggars appearing at her door, for example, Agatha Enns simultaneously established for her readers that her household, though by no means wealthy, was still not as poor as those of the surrounding population.[91] Similarly, while floods affected both Mennonites and Mexicans, by drawing attention to the disastrous situation in the latter communities, Mennonite writers like Jakob Enns, D. F. Braun, and P. I. Harder could silently assert Mennonite superiority, which had allowed them to survive the calamity when their Mexican neighbours had not.[92]

Furthermore, it is important to also bear in mind that letter writers always highlighted the fact that their subjects were Mexican. Whether they described a murder or a hapless victim of flooding or other natural disasters, the racial identity of the people Mennonites described for their Canadian readers was always emphasized. On the other hand, reports written by Old Colonists never mentioned a single Mexican by name.[93] Even in circumstances where it can safely be assumed that writers knew their Mexican subject by name, as in the case of Isaak Dyck and the man who helped him unload his belongings in Cuauhtémoc, the individuals nevertheless remained nameless. While letter writers used both first and last names, as well as sometimes middle initials, to identify their Mennonite neighbours, leaving their Mexican subjects nameless seems to have been another way writers expressed the separateness between themselves and Mexicans in the very language they used.

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[91] *SP*, 24 April 1952, 4.

[92] *SP*, 11 November 1958, 3; 9 December 1958, 1; and 23 December 1958, 9.

[93] The only letter I came across that identified a Mexican by name was written by an anonymous Mennonite missionary from the mission in Picacho, Mexico. The author commented that a Mexican named Ernesto Palomo was of great help to them in building houses. This is, however, the only such letter I found throughout the forty-five years under review. *SP*, 28 October 1958, 1.

While these letters do illuminate the frequent linkages and relationships that were forged between Mennonites and Mexicans, no matter how sympathetically Mennonites wrote of these associations, their letters still played a role in "othering" the Mexican population. This act of reporting on the Mexican community reinforced the social boundaries dividing the two groups. Letter writers who reflected on and highlighted the differences that distinguished them from their Mexican neighbours were also underscoring their distinctive identity as Mennonites.

Conclusion

The existence of so many connections between members of the Mennonite and Mexican communities is amply illustrated in the letters written in to the *Post*. That relationships existed outside of the economic associations that historians and other scholars have frequently drawn our attention to is demonstrated by the evidence provided by letter writers, who commented on their changing perceptions of the Mexican population, the assistance given to Mennonites by their non-Mennonite neighbours, and the friendships forged across social boundaries. Furthermore, in many areas, the commentary given by Mennonites about their Mexican counterparts spans all five decades between their arrival in the country and the conclusion of the *Post* itself in 1967. The consistency of these relations demonstrates that associations with people outside the borders of the colonies were not only fostered in the difficult early years of settlement when Mexican expertise was needed, but also long after the Mennonites had settled into and become accustomed to their new country.

It is important to note many scholars' claims that Mennonites, by and large, have managed to maintain their isolation in Mexico. While numerous academic studies illustrate the interrelated nature of the economies of the Mennonite colonies and of the surrounding Mexican communities, it is essential to bear in mind that Mennonites, though relying on outside society to a certain degree, still remained aloof from non-Mennonite society. Though broadening bases of business on the colonies required more extensive involvement with Mexicans, most Mennonites in Mexico, the majority of which belonged to the Old Colony, still upheld their agricultural way of life on the land. The aspiration to maintain their distance from outsiders, moreover, led to a number of secondary migrations to British Honduras and Bolivia, as well as back to Canada. The desire to remain isolated, therefore, persisted among the colonists and continued to be a significant part of their identity throughout the period under study.

The evidence of relationships and the closer ties of friendships given in this chapter does not seek to undermine this indisputable fact of life for Mennonites in the colonies, for separation from Mexican society has been the dominant reality characterizing the Mennonite experience in Mexico throughout the five decades under investigation here. What this chapter has sought to contribute is a more nuanced approach to the connections made across the many social barriers separating these two ethnic and racial groups. Though Redekop's assertion that very few primary relationships can be found between Mennonites and Mexicans has proved accurate,[94] the many secondary relationships that infuse the letters written into the *Post* also played a significant role in the lives of the Mennonite letter writers. While community leaders like

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[94] Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites*, 117.

Isaak Dyck continued to look down upon Mexico as a land "of heathen people,"[95] his experiences with his unnamed Mexican worker and "most loyal friend"[96] did form an important juncture in his understanding of the Mennonite position in Mexico and his perception of Mennonite interactions with Mexico's citizens. Similarly, while most Mennonites continued to forge primary relationships solely within their group, their secondary associations with Mexicans helped shape a communal conception of themselves as a foreign ethno-religious minority and reinforced their "sense of separation and apartness"[97] from the surrounding Mexican world.

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[95] Dyck, *Auswanderung von Canada nach Mexiko*, 23.

[96] *Ibid.*, 95.

[97] Hedges, "'Plautdietsch' und 'Huuchdietsch,'" 173.

CONCLUSION

"AND IN MEXICO WE FOUND WHAT WE HAD LOST IN CANADA"[1]: THE EVOLUTION OF MENNONITE IDENTITY IN MEXICO

Historian David Quiring contends that Mennonites in Mexico have been successful in attaining their vision of remaining separate from the world. While many of the Old Colonist Mennonites who remained in Canada became "English," for Mennonites in Mexico, the Mennonite culture and tradition seemed to remain intact.[2] Still, Quiring and other scholars note that, though Mennonites have had remarkable success in perpetuating their religious beliefs through the maintenance of strict cultural and social boundaries between themselves and their Mexican neighbours, they have not been able to live in complete isolation from Mexican society.[3]

This study has examined Mennonites' relations with the wider Mexican society over the course of forty-four years. These interactions are most obvious in the areas of business where the local economies around the Mennonite settlements were heavily influenced by the arrival of the Mennonites from Canada. As scholars like Calvin Redekop and Leonard Sawatzky have shown, Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua, became especially dependent on the large Mennonite population in the region. Sawatzky's study of the Old Colonists also highlighted the capital and resources brought into the area by Mennonites in 1922 and the market they in turn provided for Mexican businesses and

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[1] Isaak M. Dyck, *Auswanderung von Canada nach Mexiko, ano 1922*, trans. Robyn Sneath (Cuauhtémoc: Imprenta Colonial, 1995), 115.

[2] David M. Quiring, *The Mennonite Old Colony Vision: Under Siege in Mexico and the Canadian Connection* (Steinbach: Crossway Publications Inc., 2003), 6. Calvin Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites: Dilemmas of Ethnic Minority Life* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), 63.

[3] Quiring, *The Mennonite Old Colony Vision*, 163.

products,[4] while Redekop pointed to the Mennonite production of goods that were exported to the wider Mexican markets as another area of reciprocal economic exchange.[5]

The scholarship on this ethno-religious group has also highlighted the various conflicts and tensions that arose throughout the period of Mennonite colonization in Mexico. Studies conducted in various academic disciplines have thoroughly examined major disputes between the colonists and agraristas, instances of theft and other criminal activities occurring within the colonies, and the government closure of Mennonite schools in the 1930s. Schmiedehaus focused on the Mennonite conflict with agraristas in the 1920s, as did Redekop's study of Mennonite displacement of indigenous populations throughout Mennonite history. Sawatzky and Redekop also both delved into the issues of crime in the colonies and the school crisis of the mid-1930s in great detail. The interpersonal relationships fostered between Mennonites and Mexicans are less represented in the secondary literature, covered significantly by only Kelly Hedges and Redekop. Most historians conclude that these informal, inter-ethnic relationships did not play a major role in the Mennonite experience in Mexico.[6]

Though scholars have noted all three of these key areas, my study has sought to bring a more nuanced approach to the understanding of Mennonite-Mexican relations.

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[4] Mennonites brought approximately four million dollars to the Mexican economy when they came. Harry Leonard Sawatzky, *They Sought a County: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 125

[5] Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites,* 89-90.

[6] According to Redekop, for example, very few primary relationships are fostered across the Mennonite-Mexican divide. Not surprisingly then, he also concludes that "in the Mexican Old Colony Mennonite systems, intermarriage is almost nil," citing only five known instances of such unions. Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites*, 117, 149-150.

By using letters written by Mennonites in Mexico and published in the pages of *Die Steinbach Post* as its primary source, this analysis has highlighted the voice of individuals, rather than the record of community institutions with respect to inter-group relations between Mexicans and Mennonites. This focus illuminates the many and varied voices of the Mennonite experience in Mexico. Additionally, the longevity of this newspaper, its constancy over four and a half decades, and its prominence within Old Colony households,[7] offers a unique perspective not fully realized in other historical sources. The regular and steady stream of letters from a wide variety of Mexican Mennonites to the *Post* presents a broad overview of the settlement experience of Mennonites in that country. While the newspaper's overarching view illuminates the major events impacting Mennonite life, the reliance on personal letters published in the public domain also allows for an intimate examination of everyday life in the colonies, through the eyes of individual letter writers.

Furthermore, focusing on this source highlights a facet of Mennonite-Mexican interaction that has not been thoroughly examined in earlier works on this topic. Though the secondary literature largely does not take Mennonite-Mexican interaction as its primary focus, it does provide an overview of this subject and the issues that have driven these two groups into closer contact with one another. While these connections are significant in and of themselves, they also lead to the greater issue of self-perception within the Mennonite community in Mexico, and how questions of Mennonite identity have been influenced by the group's connections with Mexican society.

As this study has demonstrated, the interaction between Mennonites and Mexicans did not lead to an erosion of Mennonite values and beliefs, as the community

[7] Redekop, *The Old Colony Mennonites*, 135.

there had feared and as scholars have repeatedly predicted throughout the years. Rather, contact with outside society allowed the Mennonite community in Mexico to sharpen its values, beliefs, religion, and culture. As Fredrik Barth argues, ethnic distinctiveness is not dependent on a group's geographical or even cultural isolation.[8] Instead, ethnic groups exercise "social processes of exclusion and incorporation," by which they strengthen some of their borders while at the same time allowing for a dynamic exchange between themselves and other groups.[9] It is this latter practice, Barth argues, that allows ethnic groups, with all of their distinctive traits, to survive.

Ironically, in the case of the Mennonites in Mexico, crossing the social boundaries between themselves and Mexican society in fact reinforced those very same boundaries. The desire behind the Mennonite migration to Mexico had been to allow Mennonites to keep their distance from "worldly" society, thereby safeguarding their conservative cultural and religion. Although it may appear contradictory, the interactions with outsiders that they had feared would lead to their cultural demise were among the very means by which their distinctive identity remained intact. Being forced into regular contact with non-Mennonite society led this ethno-religious minority to tighten its defences and, in many ways, turn inwards away from outside pressures. This inward focus, however, helped to shape the Mennonites' self-perceptions as an ethnic and religious minority in Latin America. While it is important to document the many ways in which Mennonites and Mexicans were co-dependent, it is perhaps even more significant to note how this interaction with outside society helped to mould Mennonite identity.

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[8] Fredrik Barth, "Introduction," in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference*. Fredrik Barth, ed. (Bergen-Oslo: Universitets Forlaget, 1969), 9.

[9] *Ibid.*, 10.

Kathleen Conzen and her colleagues' study on immigrant ethnicity in the early twentieth century United States finds that not only did ethnic groups survive, they also underwent continual evolution as they came into contact with other minorities and the American host society. Rather than a static set of cultural traits and values, ethnicity proved to be a dynamic process of exchange with the wider society. This argument is useful in understanding the Mennonite experience in Mexico. As the letters Mennonites wrote throughout this period displayed continuity, both in the subjects they wrote about and in the textual templates they employed, it would seem to suggest that their ethnicity and culture remained constant from 1923 until 1967. Such an interpretation of the Mennonite settlement in Mexico, however, does not take the full experience of this ethno-religious group into account. What the letters to the *Post* reveal about Mennonite ethnicity in Mexico is that there was in fact an evolutionary process that took place at the moment Mennonites set foot on Mexican soil. Their southern migration represented a significant disjuncture in how Mennonites perceived themselves, for as they settled in Mexico their ethnicity's distinctiveness from Mexican society was emphasized.

After 1922 Mennonite ethnic identity acquired a new sense of racial "otherness." Though race had played a role in Mennonite identity formation throughout the history of this group, it was heightened in the Mexican context as Mennonites settled among what they perceived was a racially inferior society. This emphasis on race became a significant part of the Mennonite ethnic repertoire and contributed to a change in the evolving sense of what it meant to be a Mennonite. Indeed, letters from the Mennonites in Mexico demonstrate that as their contact with Mexicans grew, so too did the Mennonite awareness of race and ethnicity. The frequency with which writers to *Post*

readers in Canada noted the Mexican identity of their employees, customers, or acquaintances, illuminates how Mennonite writers in Mexico imagined their world.

Thus, Old Colony Bishop Isaak Dyck, reflecting on the Mennonite migration and commenting on the gains Mennonites had made in Mexico despite all the hardships of their settlement, could state "and in Mexico we found what we had lost in Canada."[10] Clearly, Mennonites achieved few, if any, physical or economic gains in relocating to a developing country. What they did secure was their ethnicity, culture, and most importantly, their unique religious beliefs. Ironically, a crucial feature of this increased ethno-religious identity lay in the very avenues of interaction with outsiders in their new Mexican homeland. The interaction, experienced and then articulated in the letters to an immigrant newspaper in Canada, gave expression to their wish to remain a distinctive people in Mexico.

[10] Dyck, *Auswanderung von Canada nach Mexiko, ano 1922*, 115.

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