

Seeds from the Steppe:
Mennonites, Horticulture, and the Construction of Landscapes
on Manitoba's West Reserve, 1870–1950

by
Susan Jane Fisher

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Department of History
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg

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Abstract

In this study, I offer a new research direction on the history of the Canadian prairie West with a joint focus on emotional history, life stories, and horticulture among the Mennonite immigrants from imperial Russia, who first assembled villages on Manitoba's West Reserve in the 1870s. In this study, I trace oral culture, expressions of emotion, and the inter-generational transfer and preservation of botanical materials and traditions, in order to help us understand how individuals within a distinct ethno-religious group and in a colonial setting, experienced immigration and resettlement, and constructed landscapes accordingly.

In the processes of their encounter, construction, and remembering, landscapes in history entail intricate myths and emotional attachments, whether they are explicitly known or implicitly understood. I argue that traditions of horticulture and homemaking, and the myths and memories surrounding prairie settlement, are creative acts through which West Reserve Mennonites at once reinforce settler-colonial agendas of success in the Canadian prairie West, and tie themselves emotionally to both a real and imagined history as a quiet, self-sufficient, agrarian people.

Memoirs, diaries, newspapers, material artefacts, and oral histories connected to people on the West Reserve demonstrate that late nineteenth century Mennonite immigrants placed significant emotional value on the plant materials they carried with them in the hopes of reestablishing their sectarian, agrarian communities on the Canadian prairie. Emotional ties to the seeds, trees, flowers, and landscapes associated with this migratory moment, despite their roots in imperial Russia, have a lasting impact on the way the prairie is imagined as an ethnic and religious home among Mennonites living on the West Reserve.

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Glossary of Low German Terms

<i>Boom</i>	tree
<i>Cershownki</i>	muskmelon, Crenshaw melon
<i>Heimat</i>	homestead, village (signifying a place to which one feels emotionally connected)
<i>Keifkje</i>	pre-chewed food
<i>Kjoasch Ssiaropp</i>	chokecherry syrup
<i>Knacksot</i>	sunflower seeds
<i>Krüse Marie</i>	curly Mary, or tandy
<i>Krüt</i>	herbs
<i>Kurrei</i>	Russian thistle
<i>Fattahan</i>	portulaca
<i>Fausting</i>	feasting
<i>Gebeitsamt</i>	village council
<i>Loddejk</i>	sour dock
<i>Marienblatt</i>	pennyroyal
<i>Meddelienje</i>	dirt road, or middle line
<i>Mumtjes</i>	married women
<i>Oberschultz</i>	colony mayor
<i>Oma</i>	grandmother
<i>onn</i>	and
<i>Onnkrüt</i>	weeds
<i>Plautdietsch</i>	Low German

<i>Prips</i>	warm drink made of roasted barley
<i>Privilegium</i>	official document outlining rights given to Mennonites in Russia and in Canada based on their religious beliefs
<i>Säajel'grauss</i>	foxtail barley
<i>Schlee'e</i>	prickly shrub that produces small, red, stony fruit
<i>Schwaun'sobel</i>	wild millet
<i>seie</i>	to sow (seeds)
<i>Semlinen</i>	sod houses
<i>Somma Borscht</i>	summer soup
<i>Sot</i>	seed
<i>Stockroose</i>	hollyhocks
<i>Teid'ja Gerkje</i>	early cucumbers
<i>Tjitj-derch-den-Tün</i>	look through the fence
<i>Tjwitsche</i>	high-bush cranberries
<i>wartle</i>	to root
<i>willa Howa</i>	wild oats
<i>Zinse</i>	zinnias

Introduction

We are all marked by the first world that meets our eyes, and we carry that imprint as a permanent image of the way the world should be. Memories of the homeland, or idealized versions of them, became templates for the future.¹

We take home and language for granted; they become nature and their underlying assumptions recede into dogma and orthodoxy.²

In the spring of 2014, at the brink of beginning my dissertation research, I purchased a 120-year-old house on an unkempt double lot in Gretna, Manitoba. Once a bustling town, Gretna is now a quiet village in the south-central part of the province within the former Mennonite block settlement—known as the West Reserve—in the middle of the Red River Valley. Gretna and its surrounding area are within the boundaries of Treaty 1 territory—the traditional lands of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation.³ Today, the village is located one mile from the Canada-US border, and a ninety-minute drive from the city of Winnipeg. My first year living in Gretna opened my eyes both to the stark beauty and the challenging realities of life on the West Reserve, as well as the ways myth and memory commingle in stories about land and place in what is a predominantly Mennonite community.

I was given the gift of a cottonwood sapling to plant on my new yard. The sapling, according to one local gardener, is a descendant of the trees that border the street in a Mennonite village not far from my house, which were planted by Mennonite settlers in 1876. He explained

¹ Ronald Rees, *New and Naked Land: Making the Prairies Home* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1988), 46.

² Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2000), 185.

³ For more information on the highly contested concept of Métis national identity and its relationship to Red River see Chris Anderson, *“Métis”: Race, Recognition, and the Struggle for Indigenous Peoplehood* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016).

that some people believe Mennonite immigrants brought the seeds for these trees with them on their journey from the province of New Russia (Ukraine after 1917) to Manitoba in the 1870s. Another community member reiterated similar folklore: “All the cottonwoods were brought from Russia,” he said. “There was nothing here, before. Nobody ever *bought* seeds.”⁴ Soon after these conversations, I was given a tour of a property in the nearby village of Neuberghthal. At the back of the yard, where the orchard and vegetable garden historically stood, there were many overgrown trees bearing small, red plums. “I’ll bet these are from Russia,” said my tour guide. “There’s nothing like them here.”⁵

With critical acceptance of these tree narratives (understanding on the one hand that Mennonite immigrants likely brought seeds with them to Manitoba, but also that the landscapes they inhabited in the 1870s were not unoccupied or uncultivated spaces), I took on the challenge that first summer in southern Manitoba to acquaint myself with my new surroundings: driving or cycling up and down the hard-packed dirt roads (*Meddelienje* in Low German) that separate surveyed quarter sections of cultivated land in search of further evidence of distinctly Mennonite settlement efforts on the former West Reserve. I found the architecture and verve of single-street villages intact as revealed by Mennonite housebarns, flower gardens, and well-groomed yards. Often, I found evidence of forsaken yards—long rows of stately cottonwood trees, once delimiting the perimeter of a farmyard or pond, with waxy leaves announcing the movement of the wind rustling one hundred feet above the ground.

The further I got into my research, the more often I heard stories about particular varieties of fruits, vegetables, flowers, or trees that were descendants of those brought to Manitoba by Mennonite immigrants fleeing the dislocating political reforms in imperial Russia (or simply

⁴ Jake Letkeman, telephone conversation with the author, 22 April 2015.

⁵ Neuberghthal resident, private conversation with the author, 23 August 2015.

Russia as the immigrants and their descendants referred to it) in the years following the Crimea War. What seemed to feature prominently in many West Reserve residents' narratives of the 1870s Mennonite migration to Manitoba was the environment—the land—and the people's efforts to shape it not only into a productive agricultural landscape, but also into a place inhabitable and homey, full of sheltering trees and fecund gardens.⁶

Later that same year, I discovered that the University of Manitoba's Department of Landscape Architecture had conducted a study of trees and hedgerows in the village of Neubergthal during the late 1990s. Apart from determining the age and health of the village's prolific cottonwood and Manitoba maple trees, the project set out to generate an inventory of plant material considered by village residents to be "heritage material."⁷ The report offers the following observations: "It is safe to assume that the first settlers would have brought seeds with them to this country for fruit, vegetables, and flowering plants, and that they would have supplemented these in the early years with root stock and cuttings from the riverside and neighbouring villages."⁸ This report and others also suggest that Mennonite settlers throughout the area commonly selected cottonwood trees from nearby waterways as shelter trees because they grow quickly, are large, and have a long lifespan.⁹ I also learned that for many Plains

⁶ Throughout this dissertation, I use the term *environment* to refer to "all the natural features of land, water, flora and fauna which support human life and influences its development and character ... In scale the environment ranges from the broad character of a country or continent at one extreme to the minutiae of an individual's living space at the other. In between these extremes are the fields, trees and buildings among which individuals or groups spend most of their lives." Ralph Turner and Colin Mitchell, *Religion and the Environment* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 1–2.

⁷ Department of Landscape Architecture, *Neubergthal Landscape Study: An Inventory of Street Trees and Hedgerows* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 1997), 20.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁹ Tom Lee et al, "Neubergthal Street Village National Historic Site: Commemorative Integrity Statement," *Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada* (1999): 1–18; Frieda E.

Indigenous peoples,¹⁰ cottonwood trees have historically been considered a sacred feature of the prairie landscape. As Mark St. Pierer and Tilda Long Soldier note in their study of healers and medicine women among the Plains peoples, “the cottonwood tree is the cosmic tree, its limbs in the clouds, its spiritual roots spreading deep into Mother Earth and to the four directions. This tree is [also] at the center of the sacred universe during the [Sun Dance] ceremony.”¹¹ While the above-noted reports confirm community memories of seed transfer, they and Indigenous history also dispel the community memory I have heard about the cottonwood trees. That is, it seems cottonwood trees were present on the landscape of the West Reserve prior to Mennonite settlement.

Klippenstein, *Neubergthal National Historic Site: A Cultural Landscape History* (Western Canada Service Centre: Parks Canada, 1997).

¹⁰ The University of Manitoba offers specific guidelines for the use of terminology related to “the original peoples of the land and their descendants, commonly referred to as ‘Aboriginal Peoples’ or ‘Indigenous Peoples.’” Where possible, I have tried to abide by these guidelines by adopting the terms *Indigenous* and *Indigenous peoples* as collective terms for all original peoples of the land in Canada, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. See “Briefing Note on Terminology: Concept Note – Terminology Related to Indigenous Peoples,” accessed 22 June 2017, <http://www.umanitoba.ca/student/indigenous/terminology.html>. At times, I use the term *native* as an adjective when referring to the Manitoba landscape and its flora prior to and during the initial years of Mennonite settlement in the province. As per the university’s and the Métis National Council’s guidelines, I also use the term *Métis* when referencing the specific society that with “the advent of the fur trade in west central North America during the [eighteenth] century [and] was accompanied by a growing number of mixed offspring of Indian women and European fur traders. As this population established distinct communities separate from those of Indians and Europeans and married among themselves, a new Aboriginal people emerged – the Métis people – with their own unique culture, traditions, language (Michif), way of life, collective consciousness and nationhood.” The term may also encompass any “person who self-identifies as Métis, is distinct from other Aboriginal peoples, is of historic Métis Nation Ancestry and who is accepted by the Métis nation.” See “Who are the Métis,” accessed 22 June 2017, <http://www.metisnation.ca/index.php/who-are-the-metis>.

¹¹ Mark St. Pierre and Tilda Long Soldier, *Walking in a Sacred Manner: Healers, Dreamers, and Pipe Carriers—Medicine Women of the Plains Indians* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 19. For more information on the governmental restrictions that were placed on Indigenous peoples’ religious ceremonies across the Canadian prairies, including the ban of the Sun Dance ceremony, see Katherine Pettipas, *Severing the Ties that Bind: Government Repression of Indigenous Religious Ceremonies on the Prairies* (University of Manitoba Press, 1994).

Based on these initial fieldwork experiences, the following questions became central to my research on the West Reserve: How did inherited ideas about nature shape one ethno-religious community's relationship to Manitoba's native landscapes? And, what does the bond between a particular people and a particular landscape reveal about the complex ways religion, ethnicity, colonization, and cultural change were understood through the moments, memories, and myths of migration and resettlement?

In this dissertation, I consider the many ways Mennonites on the former West Reserve think and talk about place. I explore how, in the historical contexts of migration and resettlement in Manitoba's colonial spaces, Mennonites on the West Reserve (re)conceptualized the prairie by constructing specific types of landscapes. I draw attention to intergenerational connections between the ethno-religious, emotional, narrative, and physical realities of landscape construction, or place making (the literal building of gardens, yards, farmyards, and orchards) among Mennonites who settled on the West Reserve between the years 1876 and 1950. I argue that memoirs, diaries, newspapers, material artefacts, and oral histories connected to people on the West Reserve demonstrate that late nineteenth-century Mennonite immigrants from imperial Russia placed significant emotional value on the plant materials they carried with them in the hopes of re-establishing their sectarian, agrarian communities on the Canadian Prairies. Emotional ties to the seeds, trees, flowers, and landscapes associated with this migratory moment, whether or not they have roots in imperial Russia, have had a lasting impact on the way

the prairie is imagined as an ethnic and religious home among Mennonites living on the West Reserve.

The research I conducted for this project is premised on the notion that landscapes are a form of material culture.¹² At the same time, my project is also centered on Native American historian Vine Deloria Jr.'s belief that Indigenous ways of understanding the relationship between land and community can offer an informative angle in any historical exploration of people and place. That is, Deloria Jr. argues that a community's experience of place, environment, and landscape can generate stories and myths that help a community to construct their collective sense of the past. These stories and myths about land and environment move through the generations by way of oral culture and collective memory, and contribute to a place-centered community identity.¹³ The gardens, seeds, trees, occupied, cultivated, and uncultivated spaces on the former West Reserve, therefore, are important and overlooked aspects of Mennonite culture and history. In the processes of their encounter, occupation, construction, and remembering, however, landscapes entail intricate myths and emotional attachments, whether they are explicitly known or implicitly understood. Landscapes, according to Jill Casid are thus part of the "dreamwork of imperialism,"¹⁴ and take visitors on a "voyage of highly selective remembrance."¹⁵ Accordingly, I believe that traditions of horticulture and homemaking, and the myths and memories surrounding prairie settlement are creative acts through which Mennonites

¹² Lyle Dick and Ron Frohwerk, "Introduction to a special issue on Horticulture," *Manitoba History* 31 (1996), accessed 31 March 2017, http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/31/introduction.shtml.

¹³ Vine Deloria Jr., *God is Red: A Native View of Religion, 30th Anniversary Edition* (Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 2003), 61–62. See also, Gail Guthrie Valaskakis, *Indian Country: Essays on Contemporary Native Culture* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), 99.

¹⁴ Jill Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 57.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 237.

on the West Reserve at once reinforce settler-colonial agendas of progress or success in the Canadian prairie West, and tie themselves emotionally to an imagined Edenic, utopian, self-sufficient, and separate history as *die Stillen im Lande*, or the quiet in the land.¹⁶

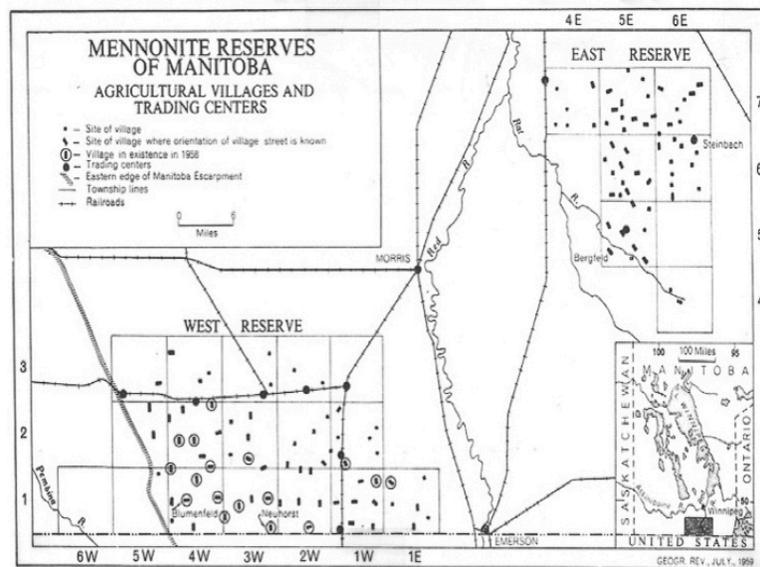


Figure 0.1 The Mennonite land reserves in southern Manitoba.¹⁷

¹⁶ This phrase has often been used in Mennonite (and Amish and Hutterite) communities, as well as by scholars of Mennonites, to define Mennonites' long-held ethno-religious stance of nonparticipation in the secular or political arena. Involvements such as voting, military work, and holding government office, among many others, have historically been considered too worldly by many Mennonites. For Mennonites throughout history, concentration on otherworldly pursuits and maintaining a life separate from the world were tasks believed to better facilitate salvation on the Day of Judgment. Though the phrase is not of Mennonite design, some scholars have speculated that it is derived from Psalm 35:20, which describes the humility, vulnerability, and peacefulness of people who trust only in God for their safety. And yet, as anthropologist James Urry has pointed out, "a closer examination of the many historical contexts in which Mennonites have lived soon reveals a rather more complex picture than simple images of a separated, apolitical religious minority." See James Urry, *Mennonites, Politics, and Peoplehood: Europe–Russia–Canada 1525–1980* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2006), 4. See also, Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, "From 'die Stillen im Lande' to 'Getting in the Way': A Theology for Conscientious Objection and Engagement," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 25 (2007): 178.

¹⁷ Map reproduced from John Warkentin's "Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba," *The Geographical Review* 49/3 (1959).

Theoretical Orientation

The extensive historiography of Mennonite life in Canada, and more specifically of Mennonites in Manitoba, has been an invaluable resource throughout the process of writing this dissertation.¹⁸ This historiography has not only filled significant gaps in my own understanding of Mennonite migrations, and political, institutional, religious, and cultural history, but has pointed me in the direction of key primary source collections related to Mennonite immigrant life in Manitoba and has offered rich interpretations of the extant materials. At the same time, however, taking seriously historian Royden Loewen's advice that in order to find "historical

¹⁸ See for example, Henry C. Smith, *The Coming of the Russian Mennonites: An Episode in the Settling of the Last Frontier, 1874–1884* (Berne: Mennonite Book Concern, 1927); E. K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia: The Mennonites in Manitoba* (Altona: D. W. Friesen & Sons Ltd., 1955); Robert Meyers, *Spirit of the Post Road: A Story of Self-Help Communities* (Altona: The Federation of Southern Manitoba Co-Operatives, 1955); Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786–1920: The History of a Separate People* (Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1974); Lawrence Klippenstein and LaVerna Klippenstein, *Mennonites in Manitoba: Their Background and Early Settlement* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mosaic, 1976); Peter D. Zacharias, *Reinland: An Experience in Community* (Reinland: Reinland Centennial Committee, 1976); Lawrence Klippenstein and Julius Toews, eds. *Mennonite Memories* (Winnipeg: Centennial Publications, 1977); Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920–1940: A People's Struggle for Survival* (Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1982); Esther Epp-Tiessen, *Altona: The story of a Prairie Town* (Altona: D. W. Friesen & Sons Ltd., 1982); Gerhard John Ens, *The Rural Municipality of Rhineland, 1884–1984* (Altona: R. M. of Rhineland, 1984); Royden Loewen, *Family, Church and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and the New Worlds, 1850–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Pamela Klassen, *Going by the Moon and the Stars: Stories of Two Russian Mennonite Women* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994); T. D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939–1970: A People Transformed* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); Royden Loewen, *From the Inside Out: The Rural Worlds of Mennonite Diarists, 1863–1929* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1999); Marlene Epp, *Women Without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); John H. Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba* (Steinbach: Hanover Steinbach Historical Society, 2000); Royden Loewen, *Hidden Worlds: Revisiting the Mennonite Migrants of the 1870s* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2001); Royden Loewen, *Diaspora in the Countryside: Two Mennonite Communities in Mid-20th Century North America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press and Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006); Marlene Epp, *Mennonite Women in Canada: A History* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2008); Royden Loewen and Steven Nolt, *Seeking Places of Peace: North America; A Global Mennonite History* (Intercourse: Good Books, 2012); Royden Loewen, *Village Among Nations: 'Canadian' Mennonites in a Transnational World, 1916–2006* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

accounts in which Mennonites encounter the environment, students of history need to exit the main corpus of Mennonite historiography,”¹⁹ this study indeed departs a great deal from histories that take Mennonites in Canada as their focus. As Loewen further suggests, much of the historiography of Mennonites in Canada has assessed church history, successful agricultural innovation, and theology or denominational differences. While more recently, historians of Mennonite culture and immigration have incorporated social concerns related to gender, ethno-religious identity, and class in their research and writing, few have considered the complex and intimate ties between Mennonites and the landscapes or environments they inhabit, particularly when analyzing individual or collective Mennonite experiences and memories of North America.²⁰ As Ruth Sandwell also points out in her extensive history of rural Canada, “The ‘opening up’ of the western Prairies is a passage in Canadian history ... that is firmly embedded in national narratives of development and in ideas about ‘typical’ rural life on the family farm. Less familiar is the nature of the social, economic, and environmental transformation of this region between 1870 and 1940.”²¹

In this study, I respond to what I see as a gap in the historiography of Mennonites in Canada by considering the multiplicity of ways Mennonite immigration and resettlement in a Canadian colonial context generated specific ideas and narratives about, as well as experiences of, a particular environment. I seek to make space within the existing historiographic and narrative arc of Mennonite pioneering hardship, agricultural success, and ethno-religious survival on the empty (according to much of the historiography of Mennonites in Manitoba) Canadian

¹⁹ Royden Loewen, “The Quiet on the Land: The Environment in Mennonite Historiography,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 23 (2005): 152.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 161.

²¹ Ruth Sandwell, *Canada’s Rural Majority: Households, Environments, and Economies, 1870-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 107.

Prairies by considering the relationship between the people and the land, and by questioning the processes through which the landscape was transformed according to particular religious beliefs, ethnic customs, and cultural traditions.

To do so, my work in this dissertation is in part built upon the points of connection between Christianity and agrarian life in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in North America. In his recent and comprehensive work on Christian agrarians in rural America, Kevin M. Lowe draws helpful attention to several historical characteristics of Christian agrarian communities. Namely, he explains, agrarianism in North America came to represent “a small-scale rural life devoted to place ... and communities [were] built upon that devotion.”²² But more specifically, Christian agrarians, in their commitment to the family farm, have historically understood environmental stewardship (the improvement of the earth) as a religious vocation—a calling that involved efforts in the construction of the kingdom of God on earth, and one that put individual farmers in close connection with the natural world, and therefore also with God.²³

But, I also consider specifically Mennonite theological reflections on landscape practices. Calvin Redekop’s *Creation & the Environment*, a collection of essays committed to exploring Anabaptism and environmental sustainability, provides a helpful starting point for students of Mennonite environmental history. Though the focus is not specifically on Mennonites in Canada, the contributors to this work collectively outline the historical perspectives that have shaped contemporary Mennonite theological approaches to the environment. On the one hand, Redekop explains with reference to a long history of colonialism and mismanagement of the environment (for example, the Dust Bowl era) in North America, “the Judeo-Christian record regarding the

²² Kevin M. Lowe, *Baptized with the Soil: Christian Agrarians and the Crusade for Rural America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 9.

²³ *Ibid.*, 10–12.

tending of God's creation is dismal ..."²⁴ Though biblical commands related to the stewardship of creation are clear, these commands have been "interpreted and rationalized in many self-serving ways."²⁵ Redekop also proposes, however, that given their long history of sectarian agrarianism, the Mennonite tradition can perhaps offer a different point of view on how religion informs the relationship between humans and the environment. Thomas Finger's essay in the collection nevertheless complicates Redekop's proposal with his suggestion that because Mennonites have for centuries been agricultural peoples with a daily existence closely tied to the natural world, it is particularly surprising that "almost no theological reflection on the doctrine most closely associated with nature, that of creation, has arisen."²⁶ At best, Finger explains, Mennonite theological emphasis on "living fully in God's kingdom while on Earth," informs "a positive valuation of creation, for that life is carried on in the material world."²⁷

At the same time, Loewen's extensive work on the history of Mennonite farm life in North America and beyond elucidates how the above reflections on Anabaptist theology have been lived out by Mennonites on a day-to-day basis. As "quintessential farmers," Loewen argues, Mennonites "imbued life on the land with religious meaning."²⁸ In other words, in the process of living out their sectarian religious calling, Mennonites have built their lives in rural environments whereby they "developed a resilient ethnic identity and communitarian culture."²⁹ Loewen's own examination of historical documents related to Mennonite rural life in diverse

²⁴ Calvin Redekop, "Introduction," in *Creation & the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World*, ed. Calvin Redekop (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000), xvii.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Thomas Finger, "An Anabaptist/Mennonite Theology of Creation," in *Creation & the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World*, ed. Calvin Redekop (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 154.

²⁷ Ibid., 169.

²⁸ Loewen, "The Quiet on the Land," 151.

²⁹ Ibid., 152.

locales—diaries, farm records, family histories, and letters—has nonetheless revealed that “few Mennonites possessed a spiritual tie to the land [or] mystical affinities with nature.”³⁰ Instead, historical records generated by Mennonite farmers suggest a complex relationship with the environment, yet also one that did not see clear distinctions between religion and the environment. That is, Mennonites have not historically been “unintentional in their relationship with nature.”³¹ On the one hand, Mennonites commonly renounced fieldwork on Sundays, practiced religious rituals surrounding the harvest and thanksgiving, and kept close record of weather patterns. On the other hand, Mennonites regularly drew linkages between their landscaping practices (planting trees, keeping tidy farmyards, and colourful flower gardens) and the creation of order in nature.³²

In my own research, contemporary Manitoba Mennonite voices lend credence to Loewen’s findings, indicating that the relationship between Mennonites and the land constitutes a sort of lived religion.³³ That is, many rural Manitoba Mennonites express themselves spiritually by way of the land, and these spiritual expressions do not always clearly resemble Mennonite institutional or theological religious practices and teachings. For example, Steinbach resident Ernie Braun explained that in his conservative Mennonite upbringing, making an explicit connection between the environment and religion would have implied that the two could be separated, “which is completely outside the paradigm [he] grew up with.”³⁴ Similarly, Altona area resident Shaun Friesen suggested that the biblical Eden, which was an ordered environment

³⁰ Ibid., 159.

³¹ Ibid., 162.

³² Ibid., 160.

³³ See for example Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). The term “lived religion” distinguishes the everyday experiences of religious people from those religious practices that are prescribed by religious institutions or theology.

³⁴ Ernest Braun, email communication with the author, 11 February 2016.

free of pain, toil, strife, and weeds, “occupies a deep place in our [Mennonite] psyche,” and informs the historical Mennonite approach to the landscape.³⁵ Other Altona area residents, such as Lois Braun, Mary Loewen, Marlene Plett, and Warren Loewen alluded to the intricate relationship between Mennonite agrarian life and religion with their suggestions that planting and harvesting were associated with trust in God, requests for blessings, and expressions of thanksgiving.³⁶ Eleanor Chornoboy, on the other hand, in conversation with her mother and her mother’s friend, reported their declarations that “you weren’t Mennonite unless you had a garden,” or “there wouldn’t be a garden without God.” With these reflections, the women thereby explain the intricate ties between Mennonite ethno-religious identity and the West Reserve landscape.³⁷

And yet, a focus on religion and the environment does not illuminate the whole story, here. In addition to considering the role of religion in the history of Mennonite landscape construction in Manitoba, therefore, my work in this dissertation also aims to put the existing scholarship of Mennonite history into conversation with scholarship of the divergent histories of immigrant families and ethno-religious groups in rural Canadian contexts, as well as of histories of imperialism which take moments of encounter as their focus.³⁸ Equally central to this work are also the disciplines of three additional fields of study—environmental history, cultural geography, and the history of emotions. When these fields are analyzed together they point to the inherently emotional underpinnings of the movement of people, the construction of home or

³⁵ Shaun Friesen, email communication with the author, 16 February 2016.

³⁶ Lois Braun, email communication with the author, 14 February 2016; Mary Loewen, email communication with the author, 9 February 2016; Warren Loewen, email communication with the author, 24 February 2016; Marlene Plett, email communication with the author, 21 February 2016.

³⁷ Eleanor Chornoboy, email communication with the author, 23 February 2016.

³⁸ See for example, John Sutton Lutz, *Makúk: A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009).

place, and the ensuing interactions with the local environment. Many of these works of history point to ways of reading primary texts that have been overlooked in Mennonite historiography specifically, and settler-colonial society more generally. These works also allude to the benefits of using material culture and oral history alongside archival research to highlight complex interrelations between people and places. Influenced by this diverse grouping of scholarship, in this study I consider the distinct points of connection formed between immigrants and the local environment, or between Mennonites on the West Reserve and their prairie home, and the intergenerational narratives about the land and environment that have grown out of these interactions. These historical moments and narratives among Mennonites in Prairie Canada have contributed to the production of place and of immigrant life and identity in a new homeland.

On the one hand, then, this study is “a meditation about what happened when a mass of people hit a geographical and cultural region that they felt entitled to reclaim from deficiency.”³⁹ As Frances Kaye has argued, once the collective political decision was made that the Great Plains of North America “was to become a garden,” the environment was transformed rapidly (within two generations) into “a society of production agriculture linked to world markets.”⁴⁰ Processes of claiming and improving land were central factors in both American and Canadian immigration and settlement policies throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; such began with the US Homestead Act in 1862, upon which Canada’s Dominion Lands Act of 1872 was later modeled. In Manitoba, the Manitoba Act of 1870 and the numbered treaties that were drawn up between 1871 and 1877 also played a significant role in validating the redistribution of Indigenous lands and the displacement of Indigenous peoples for colonization

³⁹ Frances W. Kaye, *Good Lands: A Meditation and History on the Great Plains* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2011), 5.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

and new agricultural purposes, and in drawing thousands of European agricultural settlers to newly reserved lands in the new province.⁴¹

These land and reserve policies were based on the long-held assumption that “a Christian society with an expanding population, an agricultural land-use ethic based on individualism and private property, and an increasing mastery of science and technology had an inherent right to land and natural resources ... [which] trumped the right of anyone else with whom such a society might come in contact.”⁴² In Canada, the “spatial practice of reservation,” as Ryan Eyford has argued, was fundamental to national policies that sought to create “a new liberal colonial order in the Canadian Northwest.”⁴³ Accordingly, the relationships forged between ethno-religious immigrants and the land on which they settled in Manitoba is a primary part of Canada’s contested colonial history. In an attempt to untangle some of the threads that run through this history, in this dissertation I analyze how Mennonites’ efforts to reshape their environments through plant life—transplanted and appropriated horticulture—were understood, experienced, challenged, and mythologized within the historical context of this group encounter with Manitoba’s native environment. I raise questions about how Mennonites reshaped the landscape of southern Manitoba according to their ethnic, religious, and agrarian lives. In so doing, I also seek to point out the multiplicity of ways the history of Mennonite settlement and landscape construction, and the relationship between Mennonites and the land in Manitoba, are inherently intertwined in settler colonialism, and in state policies related to the systematic apprehension of Indigenous lands and the direct aim to form a nation-wide agricultural economy.

⁴¹ Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 195–219.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 23–24.

⁴³ Ryan Eyford, *White Settler Reserve: New Iceland and the Colonization of the Canadian West* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016), 9.

On the other hand, if, as Denis Cosgrove has suggested, landscape is “a shorthand for a blend of land and life, of physical and social morphologies, that constitutes a distinct region and community,”⁴⁴ and as Eric Hirsch has argued, “landscapes as lived entail myths whether these myths are explicitly known or implicitly understood,”⁴⁵ this is also a history of the poetics of peoplehood as connected to the land in a particular place. In addition to engaging the premise commonly held among environmental historians that nature and culture are intricately entangled, in this dissertation I consider the stories people tell about the connections between the environment and their communities, identities, and group histories. I suggest, along with environmental historians like William Cronon, that “the rhetorical practice of environmental history commits us to narrative ways of talking about nature.”⁴⁶ And, more particularly, that “although narrative may not be intrinsic to events in the physical universe, it is fundamental to the way we humans organize our experience.”⁴⁷ In other words, there is no environment in human history that has not been shaped by human imagination. “Narrative is thus inescapably bound to the very names we give the world. Rather than evade it [narrative]—which is in any event impossible—we must learn to use it consciously, responsibly, self-critically.”⁴⁸ Because narrative and imagination are fundamental to the construction of landscapes, I believe that the stories Mennonites tell about the West Reserve environment are central to communicating a more complete history of this specific place.

⁴⁴ Denis Cosgrove, “Modernity, Community and the Landscape Idea,” *Journal of Material Culture* 11/1 (2006): 50.

⁴⁵ Eric Hirsch, “Landscape, Myth and Time,” *Journal of Material Culture* 11/1 (2006): 151.

⁴⁶ William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative,” *Journal of American History* 78/4 (March 1992): 1367.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1368.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1376.

Canadian historian Frances Swyripa's work is particularly central to my analysis of the relationship between community stories and the construction of the West Reserve landscape. In her book *Storied Landscapes*, Swyripa questions how both the identities and places inhabited by European immigrants and their descendants on the Canadian prairies were shaped and reshaped by a combination of new and old emotional, spiritual, and physical connections to the land, as well as by group experiences of immigration and stories of the homeland. More specifically, she argues that the immigrant settler generation on the Canadian prairies engaged in asserting their presence by way of land ownership, the naming of new geographic communities after places in their homelands, and by Christianizing the landscape—or the building of religious institutions, graveyards, and the erecting of shrines and crosses in the countryside. These groups individually and together “imposed order and meaning on the prairie landscape at the most basic and human level,” which at once localized and drew boundaries around specific groups, and promoted new formations of ethno-religious identities that were tied to a prairie place.⁴⁹ My work in this dissertation demonstrates similar processes of ethno-religious identity formation among Mennonites in Manitoba; immigrant Mennonites in the 1870s participated in reshaping the West Reserve landscape according to their specific agrarian cultural traditions and imbued it with stories about immigration, myths of belonging, and allusions to their former homes in Russia.

Landscapes and environments are not only shaped by narrative and imagination, however, but by contested histories of encounter between peoples; relationships between people and places are thus inherently political. For these reasons, I concur with Joseph Wiebe's suggestion that the environmental history of Mennonite settlement in Manitoba is inextricably

⁴⁹ Frances Swyripa, *Storied Landscapes: Ethno-Religious Identity and the Canadian Prairies* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2010), 74.

intertwined with the colonial history of Canada.⁵⁰ With particular interest in the historical connections between Mennonite settlement practices and Métis exile in Manitoba, Wiebe argues that Mennonite relations to place and their “religiously facilitated land-based identity [were] competitive with indigenous relations with the land.”⁵¹ Because Mennonites were granted blocks of land at the same time and in the same places that the Métis were denied their own petitions for land, Wiebe further suggests that we must approach Mennonite history in Manitoba as being “inextricably tied to Métis dispossession.”⁵² That is, the relationship between Manitoba Mennonites and the land on which they live—shaped by agrarian lifeways and agricultural practices—cannot be interpreted within the history of their environment alone. Rather, Wiebe argues that “the meaning of that environment in Manitoba is found in Métis history.”⁵³ It is my hope that the enquires taken up in this dissertation respond in some small way to Wiebe’s recommendation that an environmental history of Mennonites should consider the ways colonialism has formed Mennonite perceptions of the land.⁵⁴

Undergirding my work, therefore, is the assertion that landscaping was one of the primary ways immigrant groups in prairie Canada, such as Mennonites on the West Reserve, made sense of their history of migration and resettlement, their lives as a separate people, and their participation in a nation-wide project of settler colonialism.⁵⁵ Heeding the advice of Wiebe,

⁵⁰ Joseph R. Wiebe, “Mennonite Environmental History, Canadian Colonialism, and Settlement in Manitoba,” forthcoming in *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 35 (2017): 121.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 114.

⁵³ Ibid., 121.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ The term *settler colonialism* refers to a specific form of colonialism that operates by way of efforts to replace Indigenous peoples with a foreign, sovereign settler society. Settler colonialism can be identified by a number of features. First, settler colonizers arrive with intentions of permanently occupying Indigenous lands. Secondly, settler colonialism is an ongoing effort—the invasion is not represented by any one event, but rather by a structure of

Eyford, and many others, I suggest that it is the history of settler colonialism in Manitoba that has facilitated Mennonite relations with the land on the prairies. That is, settler colonialism is the basis for Mennonite agrarian identity in Manitoba, and enables their historical perception as the quiet in the land.⁵⁶ Part of my task, therefore, is to trace out the complex myths and memories of migration, settlement, and intergenerational Mennonite interaction with the prairie environment that reproduce ideas of the West Reserve as empty space, by placing West Reserve history in the context of (Canadian) colonial histories. At the same time, as British archaeologist Christopher Tilley argues in his study of identity and landscape, “the affective power of place and locality is . . . strong whatever the influences of global processes.”⁵⁷ He continues, “Myths assimilate historical events and processes into local understandings of the world, which serve to make that world appear self-evident and obvious. The intimate features of locality are used to re-work understandings of the global, or the world beyond.”⁵⁸ In other words, people’s understandings of place are typically made up of an assemblage of myths *and* past events. This combination of fact and folklore together assist individuals and communities in making sense of their environment on both the local and the global scale. I believe, as do Tilley, cultural and environmental

occupation, dispossession, and redistribution of lands. A third feature of settler colonialism is to “assert false narratives and structures of settler belonging,” which eliminate Indigenous peoples’ claims to land, if not Indigenous peoples themselves. One of the most popular narratives of settler colonialism is *terra nullius*, or the belief that lands once occupied solely by Indigenous peoples were in fact empty or unused prior to the arrival of settler colonists. The language of *terra nullius* justifies settler colonial efforts to divide and distribute lands as private property. Settler colonists “invest their identity and material belonging in these properities.” In recent years, scholars have demonstrated the centrality of settler colonization to larger imperial projects, and the impacts on global politics. See *Global Social Theory*, “Settler Colonialism,” accessed 27 June 2017, <https://globalsocialtheory.org/concepts/settler-colonialism/>. See also Lorenzo Veracini, *The Settler Colonial Present* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) and *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Christopher Tilley, “Identity, Place, Landscape and Heritage,” *Journal of Material Culture* 11/1 (2006): 14.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 25.

historians, cultural geographers, cultural anthropologists, and scholars of literature like Robert Pogue Harrison, Jill Casid, Frances Kaye, Eric Hirsch, William Cronon, and Simon Schama, that landscaping, or the construction of physical place, is fundamental to the ways in which individuals and groups of people construct and reimagine their ethnic, religious, national, familial, and gender identities, and their understanding of a transnational migration in a colonial context. As Cronon more clearly puts it, “The importance of the natural world, its objective effects on people, and the concrete ways people affect it in turn are ... at the very heart of [my] intellectual project.”⁵⁹

As noted above, a close reading of the scholarship concerning immigrant, ethnic, and ethno-religious group histories in Canada is also foregrounded in this dissertation. In this historiography, oral histories, photographs, immigrant diaries and letters, funeral notices, ethnic newspapers, and material culture—the everyday stuff of immigrant lives—has given new meaning to how Canadian historians have variously approached migration, adaptation, and cultural change. These studies emphasize the ability to locate in such cultural artefacts moments of immigrant agency in relation to shifting gender ideologies and familial roles, religious understandings, transnational and gender identities, relationships between people, measures of modernity, and measures of success in new settings. In my dissertation, I build on the methodologies this historiography has popularized by centrally considering the role of botanical culture in the lives of Mennonite immigrants and their descendants in processes of immigration and resettlement. I suggest not only that the lives of Mennonites on the West Reserve were intimately connected to their local environment, but also that their efforts in reconstructing this

⁵⁹ Cronon, “A Place for Stories,” 1349.

environment, and the narratives that ensued, assisted them in rewriting their story as a quiet people in a contested rural space.

At the same time, my findings are informed by classical and more recent studies of immigration—ranging from Oscar Handlin’s *The Uprooted* (1951) to Franca Iacovetta’s *Gatekeepers* (2006), which highlight immigrants’ feelings (of loneliness, love, joy, grief, and isolation) as indispensable to individual, familial, and community experiences of migration and settlement. Scholars of affect and emotion also argue that emotions are more closely linked to historical events and processes of social, political, and familial change, than has been previously acknowledged. Though emotions are rooted in psychological and biological responses, they are also part of “intimate family constellations.”⁶⁰ These scholars thus call for greater attention to the historical “processes by which emotions are managed and shaped, not only by society and its expectations, but also by individuals themselves as they seek to express the inexpressible, namely how they feel.”⁶¹ These scholars also argue that “emotions are engines of conversion [and are thus] important sources for historical change.”⁶² I suggest that emotions map a further avenue into a study of the relationship between people and the environment. Seeking to draw attention to the impact of place and the complex relationships forged between people and their environments in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Canadian immigrant rural life, I pursue in this project an investigation of emotional discourses associated with Mennonite migration, diaspora, transnationality, and botanical culture, as well as the emotional dimensions of landscape construction in what was oftentimes an inhospitable and unfamiliar environment. I also consider

⁶⁰ Barbara Rosenwein, “Problems and Methods in the History of Emotions,” *Passions in Context* 1 (2010): 5.

⁶¹ William Reddy, “Emotional Liberty: Politics and History in the Anthropology of Emotions,” *Cultural Anthropology* 14 (1999): 258.

⁶² Barbara Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 19.

the emotional lives of Mennonite immigrants and their descendants in relation to the changing Manitoba landscape by paying close attention to their poignant expressions of attachment to this prairie place.

Building on this scholarship of affect and emotion, I accept Barbara H. Rosenwein's claims that people live in and move between "emotional communities" big and small—such as churches, neighbourhoods, villages, gardens, and fields—and that any historical approach should seek, by looking at these emotional communities, to uncover the "systems of feeling" that structure daily life and identity.⁶³ Emotional communities are groups wherein people have a common set of values, interests, and beliefs. Moreover, in my work I aim to draw attention to the ways in which particular emotions related to immigration, ethno-religious and gender identity, diaspora, transnationality, community relations, histories of encounter, and family life have been negotiated over time, both publically and privately, by way of landscape construction. In this work, therefore, I analyze a dialectic of emotions. I ask how emotions helped to shape and were shaped by the West Reserve over the course of three generations.⁶⁴

By taking inspiration from scholars in transnational, post-colonial, and empire studies, I also draw attention to the "geographies of intimacy,"⁶⁵ or those affective ties and historical domains of personal connectivity and identity formation that do not fit into normative

⁶³ Rosenwein, "Problems and Methods," 11.

⁶⁴ See for example Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-De-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Daniel M. Gross, *The Secret History of Emotion: From Aristotle's Rhetoric to Modern Brain Science* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007); Jerome Kagen, *What is Emotion? History, Measures, and Meanings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Esra Özyürek, *Nostalgia for the Modern: State Secularism and Everyday Politics in Turkey* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities*; Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁶⁵ Ann Laura Stoler, *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

constructions of family and community in middle class Canadian society and more particularly in Mennonite worlds. Works by historians such as Sylvia Van Kirk, Sarah Carter, Ann Laura Stoler, Nayan Shah, Tony Ballantyne, Adele Perry, Sara-Jane Mathieu, Eyford, and Antoinette Burton, for example, remind us that race, gender, and religion are not fixed categories of identity, but flexible and political categories in need of historical interrogation and explication. These scholars trace out historical examples of homosocial cultures, singleness, mixed-race, inter-religious, and unmarried heterosexual relationships; and settler-Indigenous encounters in order to challenge prevailing or prescribed understandings of modernity and normative frameworks for families and communities in history. They ask us to think about the multiplicity of ways power and categories of difference are enacted in intimate relationships. These works also challenge us to refocus our historical lens, and direct it to the unlikely, fringe, global, international, and intercommunity spaces transgressed by affection.⁶⁶ It is in this context that I wish to consider the specific way Mennonite emotional expressions reflected both men's and women's intimacies with the land. The voices of men and women reveal distinctive and multivariate lexes within the Mennonite family and community related to landscape, homemaking, and the construction of

⁶⁶ See for example: Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in the Fur Trade Society, 1670–1870* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983); Sarah Carter, *Lost Harvests: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993); Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849–1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); Antoinette Burton and Tony Ballantyne, *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Sarah-Jane Mathieu, *North of the Colour Line: Migration and Black Resistance in Canada, 1870–1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality and the Law in the North American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Adele Perry, *Colonial Relations: The Douglas-Connolly Family and the Nineteenth-Century Imperial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Ryan Eyford, *White Settler Reserve: New Iceland and the Colonization of the Canadian West* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016); Sarah Carter, *Imperial Plots: Women, Land, and the Spadework of British Colonialism on the Canadian Prairies* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2016).

place. At times landscaping practices allowed men and women to traverse prescribed and culturally limiting lifeways. In other instances, landscaping practices reinforced a particular ethno-religious identity in a modern, colonial setting.

Many studies of world and transnational history have also challenged us to fold material culture into our enquiries of particular historical moments. The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group, for example, demonstrates important intersections in global economic modernity, cultural artefacts and commodities, national and community identity construction, and emotional expression.⁶⁷ In my dissertation, I incorporate similar modes of exploration by considering the values placed on botanical culture and how these values structured community relations, individual identities, negotiations with modernity, economic conditions, relationships to the state, and community agency. I take seriously recent calls for greater analytical attention to affective processes and discourses, and material and economic culture in postcolonial, empire, and transnational studies to better understand how complexities of global mobility and rural community life, family obligations, moral expectations, gender roles, and “the experiential dialects of proximity and distance”⁶⁸ were worked out on the West Reserve landscape.

This is an intergenerational study that engages a rich corpus of primary source materials including newspapers, diaries, memoirs, photographs, material culture, and oral histories. Many of the secondary sources consulted for this study include the abundance of local community or village history books, family histories, and works of creative non-fiction. As well, by analyzing the primary and secondary source material available at the Altona and District Heritage Research Centre, Inc., Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives, the Steinbach Heritage Village Archives, the

⁶⁷ The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group, *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

⁶⁸ Svašek, “Who Cares? Families and Feelings in Movement,” 220.

Archives of Manitoba, and in the private collections of many West Reserve residents, I raise questions about how affective ties to place within one ethnic group in a colonial setting were generated by way of immigration, resettlement, and intergenerational storytelling. With this combination of source material, I am able to draw attention to the relationships that were forged between Mennonites on the West Reserve and the local landscape as it underwent significant changes between 1876 and 1950.

Fieldwork

This study of landscape construction and Mennonite life on the West Reserve is also embedded in an exploration of life histories, the communities in which these Mennonite immigrants lived, and the surrounding areas to which their descendants relocated in later generations. Over the course of two years, the ethnographic research I conducted on the West Reserve has allowed me to engage frequently, for extended periods of time, with community members in individual and group narrations of their history. My ethnographic work alongside archival research facilitated greater access to individual and community myths or memories that dictate a unique landscape imagination, and diverge from the official, documented story of Mennonite immigration and settlement in Manitoba. This is what anthropologists like James Scott have labelled a “discrepancy between hidden transcripts and the public transcripts.”⁶⁹ Uncovering and creating space for these hidden transcripts in the historiography of Mennonites in Manitoba in turn allows a more nuanced analysis of the impact of cultural domination, immigration and resettlement, and environment on both public and private discourses and actions.

⁶⁹ James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), 5.

After receiving a Certificate of Completion for Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2:CORE) and approval from the Joint Faculty Research Ethics Board (JFREB) at the University of Manitoba to conduct oral history interviews and engage in fieldwork on the West Reserve between 2014 and 2016, I spent countless hours in conversation with people, during which oral history interviews or informal discussions about the plants, places, and people in their family histories took place. Multiple email conversations were also instigated by way of my fieldwork on the West Reserve. In these instances, I followed-up on conversations that began casually at public events or after chance meetings in the community, with more pointed questions posed via email. Though I have no direct Mennonite heritage and do not attend a Mennonite church, the fact that I live and work on the former West Reserve has generated strong community connections and a distinct knowledge of the landscape in question, thereby adding depth and richness to my research. My involvement in the community took shape in a number of ways over the last two years: I worked part-time for the Neuberghal Village Heritage Foundation, served on the board of the Gretna Prairie Centre, attended seed-saving and gardening events, participated annually in the local history group meetings, volunteered to help serve at community meals, and attended community gatherings and festivals. During these times, I made note of those artefacts of material and botanical culture on which individuals continually or no longer place value, and I visited many sites of communal, familial, and individual importance (farmyards, gardens, agricultural fields, creek beds, graveyards, and housebarns). In this way, I am at once an insider and an outsider in the community of Mennonites on the West Reserve. Just as religious studies scholar Pamela Klassen has suggested of her own ethnographic research, “I have the links ... to bridge the distance between [West Reserve residents] and me.”⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Klassen, *Going by the Moon and the Stars*, 19.

My presence on the West Reserve has “allowed a certain easy familiarity to develop between [the local people] and myself, despite the many differences between our religious [as well as ethnic and cultural] lives stemming from age, family and education.”⁷¹ Yet, it is perhaps also my peripheral place in this community that allowed West Reserve residents to speak openly with me about their lives, both as somebody who might understand the complexities of rural life and culture in a Mennonite context, and also as somebody who might not know the legends and intricacies of this particular environment.

As both a historian working with a combination of archives, material culture, myth, and oral histories and as a community member, I was also faced with significant challenges in conducting ethnographic research on the West Reserve. On the one hand, I became concerned with how to be “respectfully and reflexively”⁷² present in the history I was aiming to revise, as religious studies scholar Paul Bramadat has put it—in a place I began to call home and in a community I began to call my own. Connected to this challenge was that my research often uncovered discrepancies between public and private, or official and unofficial discourses. What this meant was that in the writing process, I was occasionally called to dispel some of the myths and narratives of settlement and landscape construction that have sustained many of my informants’ Mennonite identities, or their communal memory as purveyors of particular gardening and landscaping traditions—of a peaceful, pioneering history in a so called empty prairie place. In his study, *Church on the World’s Turf: An Evangelical Christian Group at a Secular University*, Bramadat further outlines some of the same ethnographic challenges noted above by suggesting that

⁷¹ Ibid., 20.

⁷² Paul A. Bramadat, *Church on the World’s Turf: An Evangelical Christian Group at a Secular University* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 26.

... ethnography requires one to enter into a community and become enmeshed in the web of affinities, opinions, gossip, rhetoric, and beliefs that characterize this group. Then, at the end of the fieldwork, one must step outside the others' world and interpret it for (other) others and oneself. This analytical stage, however, compels one to condense one's experiences and, indeed one's newly acquired friends, to make them more manageable, less indeterminate elements of an academic study.⁷³

Bramadat further explains that while the researcher is tasked with recording the narratives shared by community members, she inevitably "imposes ... her own set of expectations on the narratives ..." and "situates [the] narratives and their speakers within ... relevant academic discourse(s)," thereby altering the stories in ways that make them more understandable.⁷⁴ In this way, Bramadat argues that oral history is inherently a joint endeavour between the researcher and the community members. The researcher must therefore strive to "problematize if not shatter what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes as the 'illusion that nothing [stands] between the reader and the subject, that one [is] in the presence of a culture authoring its own text.'" ⁷⁵ Throughout my dissertation, I have tried to do this by critically yet thoughtfully combining West Reserve resident myths, narratives, archival data, and secondary literature so as to tell a more complete story, while at the same time recognizing that my presence as an outsider in the community might summon specific interpretations and extravagant narrations of historical events.

Historian Paul A. Cohen has likewise argued that "the ultimate source of tension" in the work of the historian is the need to attend to both the present and the past "incessantly, sensitively, and with as much honesty as possible."⁷⁶ But this can be difficult gap to negotiate. In

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 52.

⁷⁶ Paul A. Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 297.

this context, he suggests that “the historian’s outsidedness can [thus] also be an asset. It is an essential part of what makes us different from both the immediate experiencers of the past and from the past’s mythologizers, enabling us, in our capacity as historians, to render the past intelligible and meaningful in ways unavailable to either.”⁷⁷ Cohen also argues that the historian may be able to recognize a range of cultural constructions that infuse the community. The fact is, that “on the level of actual operation, the distinction between history and myth, as alternate ways of relating to the past, is much less clear-cut.”⁷⁸ As Cohen further frames it, “event[s], experience[s], and myth[s] point to different ways of getting at the meaning of the past ...”⁷⁹ But they are not independent artefacts of memory.⁸⁰ Our task, Cohen suggests, is therefore “to try to find some meaningful pattern in this jumble of motives, to transform an event of exceptional complexity and confusion into an account that is coherent and makes sense.”⁸¹ Similarly, Alessandro Portelli suggests that those working with oral histories must always take into account the way informants construct their lives. He writes, for example, that an oral historians must consider “what informants believe is indeed a historical fact (that is, the fact that they believe it), as much as what really happened.”⁸² My work here, therefore, is an effort to trace the intermingling of myth, memory, and archives relating to the history of the landscape and people on the West Reserve and critically interpret them.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 211.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 289.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 289.

⁸¹ Ibid., 5.

⁸² Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” *The Oral History Reader*, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 2006), 36.

Social and Historical Context

Mennonites are an ethno-religious minority group with origins in the Anabaptist wing of the Protestant Reformation; they are named after Dutch-Friesland reformer Menno Simons, and their history is dominated by migration and resettlement in search of a religiously informed utopia.⁸³ Most Mennonites in Manitoba are the descendants of Dutch emigrants who settled in the Vistula Delta region of German-speaking Royal Prussia, a northern province in Poland, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, escaping persecution for their radical sectarian beliefs of separation of church and state, demonstrated in adult baptism, and for providing faith-based education for their children. Though Mennonites are often considered to be primarily an ethno-religious people, individuals with no European ancestry uphold the Mennonite faith all over the world.⁸⁴ The largest Mennonite communities are in fact in Africa and Asia, while the most conservative Mennonites (the horse-and-buggy Old Colony Mennonites, for example) live on numerous colonies throughout Latin America. These Mennonites are among those who uphold the most orthodox sectarian ideals in their rejection of modern innovations; such are efforts to more fully realize biblical warnings against worldliness. The majority of Mennonites in Canada live in cities, though the Manitoba prairie region remains home to large Mennonite agricultural settlements and small towns or villages. Knowledge of *Plautdietsch*, or the Low German dialect they acquired in Royal Prussia, which then became an ethnic dialect in Russia, is waning among

⁸³ The term *utopia* is much debated for its accuracy in describing Mennonite life in various global locales and in diverse historical moments. Sociologist E. K. Francis, in his 1955 study of Mennonites in Manitoba, however, helpfully suggests that the term nonetheless applies to the Mennonite history, for it is “determined not so much by a preconceived ideal of a perfect society, but by the indefatigable search for a form of social life which would allow [the community] to realize the ideal of a Christian life according to the Bible.” Francis further observes that Mennonite history “is one of search and hope, not of rigid insistence upon one definite form of perfection, and thus permits a more general application because it is so deeply human.” See *In Search of Utopia*, 5.

⁸⁴ Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786–1920*, 23–43.

Mennonites in Manitoba, and people are adopting small town or city life as farms are increasingly industrialized. This assimilative path represents a continuous departure from subsistence agriculture and communal life.⁸⁵ Yet, as is evidenced by my research on the former West Reserve, Mennonite ethnic and religious culture remains deeply embedded in southern Manitoba.

Tracing the history of Mennonite settlement in Manitoba often begins with 1762, when the state of Prussia partitioned Poland, leading to changes in military conscription policies. In 1789 many Vistula Delta Mennonites began to emigrate to New Russia or present-day Ukraine, where Catherine II was granting large numbers of western European farmers free land and freedom of religion in exchange for their agreement to cultivate the recently conquered steppes. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the majority of Mennonites in Russia lived in what were deemed by Russian officials to be the most successful foreign agrarian communities in the province of New Russia. In the decades following the Crimean War, Russia embarked on a series of political and social reforms, most famously the 1862 Release of the Serfs, but also new policies with regard to military conscription, local governance, and education, which challenged the Mennonite religious provisions granted to them upon settlement a century earlier. Threatened by the political changes that would no doubt reshape Mennonite life in Russia, Mennonites began to consider yet another migration.⁸⁶

After Manitoba entered Confederation in 1870, Canadian officials were keen to colonize the far reaches of Manitoba's prairie regions, and thus also to transform the landscape and the country's economic holdings by attracting agricultural settlers from Europe and Ontario. Hearing

⁸⁵ Royden Loewen, "The Poetics of Peoplehood: Ethnicity and Religion among Canada's Mennonites," in *Christianity and Ethnicity in Canada*, eds. Paul Bramadat and David Seljak (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 330–364.

⁸⁶ Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786–1920*, 183.

of the shifting political climate in Russia in 1872, and aware of the plight of the successful agriculturalist Mennonites, Canada's Department of Agriculture sent immigration agent William Hespeler, a German-speaking Ontarian, to visit the Mennonites in New Russia. Hespeler was tasked with encouraging the Mennonites to consider resettling in the new province of Manitoba on land that would be reserved for them. Intrigued by the Dominion government's offer, a twelve-person Mennonite delegation from Russia travelled to North America in 1873 to inspect settlement possibilities in Manitoba and parts of the United States. Hespeler and Ontario Swiss Mennonite immigration agent Jacob Shantz led the tour of available lands. Despite the unfavourable conditions of their tour in Manitoba (rain, swampy land, and hordes of mosquitoes), five of the delegates chose to recommend Manitoba for Mennonite settlement. These five delegates then travelled to Ottawa to obtain written guarantee of the privileges the Mennonites had been promised. These privileges were much like those granted to the foreign colonists in Russia; in addition to freedom of religion and education, the Mennonites were promised exemption from military service and the exclusive use of eight townships of land. In keeping with the homestead system of the Dominion Lands Act of 1872 each male Mennonite who was at least twenty-one years of age was given a grant of a quarter section of land, with the option to purchase more land at a rate of only one dollar per acre. The Mennonites were also promised more land in the province if they felt it was needed for their kin from Russia in the future.⁸⁷

The confluence of several lands acts and governmental efforts in the late nineteenth century provided the legal justification for the seizure and reallocation of Indigenous peoples' lands, making such invitations possible. On the one hand, Indigenous peoples challenged the

⁸⁷ Gerhard J. Ens, *The Rural Municipality of Rhineland, 1884–1984* (Altona: R. M. of Rhineland, 1984), 7. See also Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba*, 29.

authorities to recognize their claims to Indigenous territories. On the other hand, European immigrants negotiated the conditions of settlement in Canada.⁸⁸ The reserve, or block settlement system from which Mennonites and other European ethno-religious groups benefitted, developed in this contested socio-political time and space. As Eyford explains in his important work on Icelandic immigration and the politics of land reserves in Manitoba, “Colonization reserves were part of a patchwork of reserved spaces in Manitoba and the North-West Territories,”⁸⁹ which were “created simultaneously, and they shared borders with reserves for Indians, Métis people, and private corporations, such as the Hudson’s Bay Company and the Canadian Pacific Railway.”⁹⁰ The social and political intentions behind reserves were that Indigenous peoples would become “civilized” through scrutinizing processes of social experimentation. Yet, the reserve system was also deeply paradoxical for European newcomers, particularly where non-English speaking immigrants were concerned. While reserves assured settlers a certain level of autonomy, they were also spaces wherein immigrant lives were managed by the Canadian government, in the hopes that they could be assimilated or refashioned into civilized, English-speaking Canadian citizens.⁹¹

Mennonites and other non-English speaking immigrants in Manitoba had many more gains than the Indigenous peoples living on nearby reserves, including individual property rights, the freedom to practice their religion, the right to educate their own children according to specific ethno-religious customs, and the freedom to continue speaking their own languages. However, the Canadian government did also seek to improve the prairie’s people and environment by way of propaganda campaigns, modern farming instruction, and crop and weed

⁸⁸ Eyford, *White Settler Reserve*, 5.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

regulations, and healthcare reforms aimed at civilizing and educating immigrant and ethno-religious groups in the region. These efforts remade the prairie into a “whitestream”⁹² society, a capital-driven agricultural economy, and reshaped ethno-religious immigrant lives for the economic, social, and political betterment of the imagined nation at large. That is, the Dominion Lands Act and the ensuing political and cultural reforms became significant instruments of middle-class capital formation. The government’s influence, as my work demonstrates, consequently reshaped the relationship between Mennonites and the environment throughout the West Reserve.

Historian Gerhard Ens has suggested that “with the formation of Manitoba, and the signing of the first numbered Indian Treaties 1 and 2 in 1870 and 1871, the land in southern Manitoba was *thrown open* to settlement.”⁹³ Yet, others have reframed this idea by pointing out that the land “thrown open” for settlement was in fact set aside solely for the use of incoming, non-Indigenous settlers.⁹⁴ As alluded to above, this history of land reserves and settlement in Manitoba is a complicated intermingling of land appropriation, unfulfilled promises, and a particular reimagining of the Canadian prairie West that is sometimes difficult to trace chronologically, politically, or culturally. It is important to note that the influx of European immigration to Manitoba followed the Red River Métis armed resistance to the Canadian government, as well as the Manitoba Act in 1870 which resulted in the creation of “Half-breed Reserves,” and the numbered treaties that were brought into effect between 1871 and 1877,

⁹² This is a term used by Kaye, throughout her book *The Good Lands*, to describe the ethnically diverse population that arrived in North America from Europe in the late nineteenth century. This population overwhelmed the Indigenous populations that had farmed, hunted and gathered, and inhabited the region for 10,000 years prior.

⁹³ Ens, *The Rural Municipality of Rhineland*, 9.

⁹⁴ See for example, Sarah Carter, *Aboriginal People and Colonizers of Western Canada to 1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 106–120.

which saw the appropriation of Indigenous land and the relocation of Indigenous peoples. In other words, the Canadian government sought to minimize threats of further Métis conflict, and to justify their aims of European immigration and agricultural development.⁹⁵ As a precondition for European immigration to Manitoba, the government had the land surveyed; in general, settlement followed the compartmental completion of the sectional survey, though many immigrants and immigrant groups were invited to settle on reserved lands prior to the completion of this survey.

At the same time, the Indian Act of 1876 prevented Status Indians across the country from homesteading on any surveyed and unsurveyed lands, so as to leave them open for European immigrants. What is more, though with the Manitoba Act in 1870 the Métis were promised 1.4 million acres of land in acknowledgment of their Indian title, none of this land had been assigned by 1877.⁹⁶ Tactics of delay and the township surveys intended to disrupt Métis lives and settlements in Manitoba. European and Ontarian squatters had been permitted to settle on lands that were requested by the Métis, whereas in other instances, the land was sold interested parties.⁹⁷ In 1872, the Dominion Lands Act further stipulated that homestead lands could be given to intending settlers in exchange for a fee of ten dollars and the promise that immigrants would live on and cultivate a percentage of the land within the first three years of settlement. In 1874, the allocation of colonization reserves, which were intended to encourage the mass migration of ethno-religious groups from Europe, was also included in the Dominion

⁹⁵ Eyford, *White Settler Reserve*, 5.

⁹⁶ Gerhard Ens and Joseph Sawchuk, *From New Peoples to New Nations: Aspects of Métis History and Identity from the Eighteenth to the Twenty-First Centuries* (University of Toronto Press, 2016), 133–155.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11. See also Carter, *Aboriginal People and Colonizers*, 109.

Lands Act.⁹⁸ By 1888, nearly all Indigenous peoples' lands had been redistributed both legally and illegally to non-Indigenous settlers by the Canadian government.⁹⁹ Within this contested framework of land apprehension and settlement, over fifteen thousand people arrived to settle in Manitoba between 1875 and 1876. Between 1879 and 1881, this number increased to fifty-eight thousand. The vast majority of new settlers were of European origin; among them were approximately seven thousand Mennonite immigrants from Russia who arrived in Manitoba between 1874 and 1880. Like other white, Christian, European immigrants in the province, Mennonites were participants in a larger colonial project of land apprehension and transformation.

The common discourse in both scholarship and in community memory has long been that European immigrants in Manitoba—in this case the Mennonites—aided in swiftly converting the tallgrass prairie into capitalist agricultural communities on acquired treaty land, which saw the displacement and relocation of seminomadic Indigenous peoples throughout the area. More recently, however, scholars like Norma Hall have argued that that this perspective fails to account for the very particular history of the Red River Métis, who in 1869 represented more than eighty percent of the 12,000 people at Red River, and the majority from the Settlement's beginnings.¹⁰⁰ As historian Gerald Friesen also plainly notes in his sweeping study of the Canadian prairies, "The new province of Manitoba was a Métis settlement when it entered

⁹⁸ Eyford, *White Settler Reserve*, 6.

⁹⁹ Ens, *The Rural Municipality of Rhineland*, 13.

¹⁰⁰ Norma Hall, *A Casualty of Colonialism: Red River Métis Farming, 1810–1870* (Wordpress, August 2015), accessed 22 April 2017, <https://casualtyofcolonialism.wordpress.com>.

Confederation in 1870,” but “... Ontarians, French Canadians, and Mennonites moved in to take up farms near the rivers and on former Métis holdings.”¹⁰¹

In the decades following 1870, Métis dispersal and the available, colonial cultural framings, or the historically-persistent discourse used to articulate prairie settlement, have meant that many rural Manitobans have been inclined to narrate their group histories in ways that do not account for the specificity of Métis settlement in Red River at the time of their ancestors’ arrival. At the same time, scholars argue that a significant amount of decolonizing work remains to be done, part of which requires researchers to dispel these “myths about things that did not happen to people who were not there.”¹⁰² Hall’s work, for example, draws striking parallels between the Métis settlements throughout Red River and the efforts of white settlers, who are in numerous historical narratives “invariably celebrated as the ‘first in the field’ and are imbued with ‘stoic perseverance’ in rural Manitoba.”¹⁰³ As she points out, Red River Métis were active participants in the development of rural Manitoba. Not only was their labour central to the fur trade, they were also self-employed merchants. What is more, Red River Métis were employed in managerial positions with the Hudson’s Bay Company; many Métis were employed as doctors, teachers, and clergy members, while others ran mills, general stores, and post offices. Perhaps most importantly, as Hall points out extensively in her work on agriculture in Red River Settlement, Métis people were also successful mixed farmers, who marketed their goods to the local economy, a fact which wholly complicates notions of “cereal crop production as the only means of measuring agrarian development at the Settlement.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies*, 195, 201–202.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

Many Red River Métis settled on long, narrow farmsteads, which stretched back a number of miles from the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. This style of settlement offered each farmer access to water, prairie (hay lands), and a wood lot, while the river and the pathways along its banks connected the parish community and prevented isolation. The river offered water, fish, and transportation while the wood lots offered fuel for heating and cooking as well as space for collecting berries, and sap. The hay lands provided food for cattle and other animals, while families were sustained by gardens planted with imported seeds, as well as corn, potatoes, beans, squash, and sunflowers. Wheat was also planted and milled for bannock and other breads. This settlement structure was representative of the riverfront concessions of habitants in New France. Men and women typically co-worked, co-owned, and co-managed farms throughout the settlement, while in many cases Métis women owned and worked on their own farms. As can be noted, Métis society at Red River, though culturally distinct, held a great deal in common with other small settler societies in North America, including the Mennonites.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, the fact that Métis land assurances were not protected with the Manitoba Act, Hall argues, “cannot be attributed to a lack of Métis fitness and willingness to engage in agricultural pursuits. Their farming history at Red River dispels that myth.”¹⁰⁶

Métis people lived within, requested, and were denied permission to remain on lands that overlapped with the Mennonite reserves in Manitoba.¹⁰⁷ And yet, as my work demonstrates, the myth of settler colonialism, which suggests that European immigrants to rural Manitoba entered a vast and empty wilderness, and tamed it with their agricultural practices, continues to inform the way some Mennonites think about their ethno-religious relationship to the West Reserve

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Gerhard J. Ens, “The Manitoba Act, the Métis and the Mennonites: A Tale of Two Reserves,” *Preservings* 36 (2016): 4–11.

landscape, particularly where horticulture and agriculture are concerned. By looking specifically at Mennonite landscaping practices surrounding seeds, trees, flowers, herbs, and weeds, I seek to highlight and analyze some of the discourses wherein this myth is perpetuated.

The first Mennonites to settle in Manitoba did so on what became known as the East Reserve, a large tract of land made up of eight townships, in the summer and fall of 1874. Like the Métis, Mennonites chose not to settle on individual quarter sections of land. Rather, most Mennonites settled in single-street agricultural villages, where they pooled their lands, divided the most fertile land of each informal village district into equal strips, and maintained an open-field system as they had for centuries. The former East Reserve is located east of Manitoba's Red River, with the closest point to Winnipeg, today, being about twenty miles. Though the area met some of their major requirements for a large agricultural settlement—it was in close proximity to Winnipeg, contained an expanse of open prairie in the northern half, featured groves of trees for fuel and building in the southern half, and had a plentiful access to water—Mennonite settlers quickly learned that parts of the land were not suitable for farming due to numerous marshes, bogs, poor drainage, and stony soil.¹⁰⁸ Mennonite farmers on the East Reserve were also faced with one further challenge during their first growing season: grasshoppers devoured the gardens and crops, which put the Mennonites in an economically dire situation. Not surprisingly, in the autumn of 1874, some discontented Mennonites from the East Reserve were already seeking new land. While a scattering of families acquired homesteads across the Red River at Scratching

¹⁰⁸ Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba*, 30. See also Shannon Stunden Bower, *Wet Prairie: People, Land, and Water in Agricultural Manitoba* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011). Bower argues that while Manitoba is typically imagined as a semi-arid region, a larger portion of the province is “wet prairie”—poorly drained and prone to flooding. Not only was the 1872 Dominion Lands Act survey challenged by water flow patterns in the province, but homesteaders often found discrepancies between their agricultural intentions and the realities of the local environment.

River, northwest of present-day Morris, approximately thirty families moved south of the border to Minnesota.¹⁰⁹

The high rate of Mennonite migration from Russia to Manitoba in 1874, together with the disappointing features of parts of the East Reserve environment, led to an application by the Mennonites for another major land reserve in the province. In question was a nearly forty square-mile area of open prairie later known as the West Reserve: it hugged the international border, and was located between the Red River in the east and Manitoba's escarpment and the Pembina Hills in the west. Other settlers had largely ignored this area due to the overwhelming absence of trees, and the scarcity of water.¹¹⁰ In fact, historical geographer Ronald Rees has pointed out that it was perhaps William F. Butler, in his travels through the Northwest in 1870, who "set the tone for subsequent reactions to the Canadian Prairies. As cited in Rees's work, Butler suggests that the prairies represented an "utter negation of life" and a "complete absence of history." "... one saw here the world as it had taken shape from the hands of the Creator," he noted further."¹¹¹ Though most scholars do not share this desolate description, many do acknowledge that prairie space in Manitoba afflicted immigrants with psychological distress and physical hardship. Historical geographer John Warkentin, for example, has suggested, "Perhaps the treeless Red

¹⁰⁹ Epp-Tiessen, *Altona*, 15.

¹¹⁰ In her environmental history of the Great Plains, Frances W. Kaye argues that common language about the region around the time of settlement, which includes Manitoba's West Reserve, often describes the area as "treeless." Kaye suggests that such language "implies some kind of deficiency." She argues further that "no region in the world is deficient—or excessive—in terms of the organisms that have co-evolved with it. The Great Plains is *grassful*, not treeless . . ." which is "a deficiency for a sedentary agrarian society but an advantage for a pastoral lifestyle in ways that contemporary whitestream plains society does not yet seem to have fathomed." See Kaye, *The Good Lands*, 20.

¹¹¹ Rees, *New and Naked Land*, 35.

River plains was more of a psychological than a physical hazard” to those who declined settlement in the region.¹¹²

While the Mennonites were similarly concerned with having access to adequate amounts of wood and water, they were not entirely dismayed by the prospects of settling on the West Reserve. With encouragement from immigration agent Jacob Shantz, who saw agricultural potential in the area, the Mennonites decided go ahead with their application for the second reserve. Though the West Reserve, which consisted of seventeen townships, was not officially granted to the Mennonites until April 1876, the Mennonites were given permission to settle on the land in July 1875, even before it was finished being surveyed, unlike their Indigenous neighbours.¹¹³ The first Mennonites to settle on the West Reserve came directly from Russia. They selected land in the western part of the reserve where there was more access to trees (along the Pembina River), and where the land had better drainage due to slight gradient and sandier sub-soils. During the first winter, timber was sourced from the Pembina River (both north and south of the international boundary) for fuel and more permanent housing. Following this initial West Reserve migration, between 1875 and 1880, nearly half the population of the East Reserve—about four hundred families—relocated to the West Reserve to join their co-religionists. By 1877, despite the challenges of locating sufficient amounts of wood and water, the West Reserve had more land under cultivation than the East Reserve. The land could be tilled easily because of the absence of trees and stones. By 1879, there were 753 families on the West Reserve. By 1883, crop yields were high enough that surplus was brought to market.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba*, 17.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 32–33.

¹¹⁴ Epp-Tiessen, *Altona*, 16–17.

Apart from tasks related to creating culturally specific agricultural settlements, Mennonites on the West Reserve set out during the first decade of settlement to convert the landscape into a space they considered to be more inhabitable. On the one hand, buildings were constructed according to a traditional Mennonite style of architecture: houses were conjoined with barns, and simple church and school buildings were erected, now with wood rather than the brick of the old homeland. On the other hand, the Mennonites also made their presence on the West Reserve known by way of horticulture, and it was not long before the landscape of the West Reserve appeared completely transformed.

Cottonwood trees were selected for planting and were a popular choice for shelter and shade in Mennonite villages; cottonwood cuttings were gathered from the Pembina River and the Buffalo Creek and planted in villages in early 1876. Many of these trees are still standing today. Other types of trees, including poplar, ash, and maple trees were selected by Mennonite settlers to decorate their villages and homesteads. As well, local fruit trees were sourced from along rivers and creeks and planted in village farmyards; these commonly included cherries, gooseberries, plums, and saskatoons.¹¹⁵ Mennonites also planted vegetable gardens for sustenance according to traditions honed over centuries. To plant their gardens, Mennonites often used seeds they had carried with them to Canada from Russia or those they obtained or traded upon settlement.

For centuries prior to mass European immigration to Manitoba in the late-nineteenth century, the land was covered by tallgrass prairie, and dominated by herds of grazing bison. Scholars speculate that the number of bison per herd could have been upwards of ten or twenty thousand. Accordingly, the plains were marked by bison trails, and the landscape responded in

¹¹⁵ Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba*, 72.

kind. That is, when bison would have encountered stands of trees, they would have trampled or knocked them down—using them as scratching posts or not seeing them at all. Trees, therefore, such as cottonwoods, balsam poplars, Manitoba maples, and bur oaks, except where streams or rivers were concerned, were rare in the region.¹¹⁶ During the last century, grass fire control and the absence of bison herds on the prairies has led to an increase in aspen and bur oak trees. This scrub, which grows quickly, has in turn caused the enlargement of Manitoba’s parkland—the “transitional area between forest and grassland,” moving south from the boreal forest and extending across the northern prairies, despite the increase in farmland.¹¹⁷

In her comprehensive study of southern Manitoba’s landscape, historical geographer Shannon Stunden Bower has pointed out that the very flat expanse of land in Manitoba, known as the Manitoba lowlands, where the Mennonites would eventually settle, varies in width from forty to fifty miles and is divided by the Red River, which flows north. The land slopes gradually towards both the Red River and Lake Winnipeg. Though the area is known informally as the Red River Valley, Bower points out that the river itself had very little to do with the creation of the lowlands. Rather, the valley is a vestige of glacial Lake Agassiz, which covered the continental interior at the end of the last glacial period. When Lake Agassiz receded, it left a heavy deposit of silt and clay, to which later was added organic matter resulting in the rich, black topsoil for which the region is so well known. The region’s dark loam was created by centuries of tallgrass prairie decay and bison manure.¹¹⁸ For these reasons this land is among the most fertile agricultural land in North America. The Manitoba lowlands, or the area that is colloquially referred to as the Red River Valley, is bordered to the west by an escarpment—the Pembina

¹¹⁶ Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies*, 8. See also, P. J. Peters, *A Century of Horticulture in Manitoba, 1880–1980* (Winnipeg: P. J. Peters, 1988), 2.

¹¹⁷ Bower, *Wet Prairie*, 5.

¹¹⁸ Epp-Tiessen, *Altona*, 2.

Hills. On average, the area receives only about twenty inches of precipitation each year, though the gradual incline towards the Pembina Hills typically incites spring flooding from creeks that spread across the land.¹¹⁹ The area has been described as one of the largest of the flattest landscapes in the world.¹²⁰

Prior to the nineteenth century, the North American plains had sustained human societies for many thousands of years. The original peoples of the prairie region blended horticulture (the cultivation of corn, squash, and beans) with hunting, fishing, and gathering.¹²¹ And yet, as Kaye argues, “homesteads, allotments, and the rigid assignment of farmland on Canadian reserves ... succeeded in transforming the Great Plains from Buffalo Commons to fee simple agriculture in two generations.”¹²² At the same time, however, Kaye also suggests that this transformation was a not quite so simple. Indeed, “while the popular image of this human movement onto the Plains was, and is, that it civilized wild land and wild people and made the desert blossom like a rose, feeding a hungry world, the underlying economic [as well as social, cultural, and political] interactions were somewhat more complex.”¹²³ As we have seen by way of Hall’s work, for example, the Red River Métis were in fact farming on large portions of the land made available to European settlers for decades prior to the onset of European immigration in the 1870s. It is into this multifaceted and contested historical era that my research interjects.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 3.

¹²⁰ Bower, *Wet Prairie*, 4.

¹²¹ Kaye, *The Good Lands*, 19.

¹²² Ibid., 29.

¹²³ Ibid.

Discussion of Chapters

This dissertation is an interdisciplinary study that builds on scholarship related to immigration, ethnicity, and religion in the Canadian prairie West by examining material and affective ties to place in south central Manitoba's former West Reserve, among three generations of Mennonites whose histories are rooted in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century group migrations from imperial Russia. As Eric Hirsch notes in his editorial essay in a special issue on landscape in the *Journal of Material Culture*, "A concern with landscape, place, heritage and social identity truly blows conventional disciplinary boundaries apart forming a significant subject of study for anthropologists, archaeologists, human geographers, art historians, historians and sociologists amongst others."¹²⁴ I am centrally concerned with the process and politics of landscape construction during the years between 1876 and 1950 among one group of ethno-religious immigrants and their descendants. The focus is on the rapid transformation of the tallgrass prairie by European newcomers into a space that the Mennonites believed was a more hospitable, horticultural home. In the chapters that follow, I trace the narratives and materiality of landscape in order to help us understand in new ways how processes of migration, settlement, and identity construction among ethno-religious individuals and groups were uniquely connected to environment and place.

In chapter 1, I investigate the landscaping traditions practiced by Mennonites in Manitoba throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by focusing on memories and myths of seed saving and seed transfer. I analyze the methods and motives of landscape construction among Mennonites on Manitoba's West Reserve, and try to disentangle from the material history of these efforts the surviving myths that valorize the pioneering generation's labours to transform

¹²⁴ Eric Hirsh, "Editorial," *Journal of Material Culture* 11 (2006): 5.

the prairie landscape. On the one hand, this chapter acknowledges that landscaping and gardening among Mennonite immigrants—through seed transfer and seed saving—were in part emotional acts that assisted them in rebuilding a familiar life in an unfamiliar place. On the other hand, I draw from recent scholarship on empire and colonialism to demonstrate in my analysis of diaries, memoirs, and oral histories that Mennonites continue to place their landscaping efforts at the centre of how they imagine the prairie's genesis. Moreover, in this chapter I work with the stories of seeds to demonstrate how, in a multifaceted and contested quest for rootedness and belonging, Mennonites became participants in an extensive imperial project of refashioning native terrain. Efforts by Mennonites to redeem the prairies from assumed deficiency by imposing their particular horticulture and ensuing traditions upon the prairie landscape, whether knowingly or unknowingly, dramatically altered the land; community stories about settlement have shaped and sustained a way of thinking and talking about the prairies which devalues and overlooks the native landscape.

Chapter 2 extends the discussion of landscape construction, homemaking, and the identity of Mennonites in Manitoba into an analysis of trees and tree planting on the West Reserve. As in chapter 1, I suggest that in colonial spaces like the West Reserve, immigrants worked to create affective landscapes based on the designs and traditions cultivated in Russia, by eliminating what they found disagreeable and creating what they considered beautiful. I rely on a combination of material history, archival sources (such as newspapers, diaries, and letters), as well as fieldwork interviews and oral histories to explore the spiritual, emotional, and ethno-cultural dimensions of tree planting in southern Manitoba.

Engaging with the theoretical work of Tilley and Swyripa, in chapter 2 I argue more specifically that trees on the West Reserve landscape represent distinct tensions between the past

and present, and local and global. Trees offered comfort and familiarity to Mennonite immigrants. What is more, among many Mennonites on the West Reserve today, trees are symbolic artefacts that generate both a sense of material heritage and invite an imagined sense of connectedness to the people who planted them and the prairie landscape itself. Trees invoke for the immigrant generation their remembered, imagined, and mythologized connectedness to the land. Yet, planting trees also assisted immigrants and settlers in the colonial act of claiming native space. The presence of trees, therefore, on a landscape that was almost entirely treeless prior to European arrival, points to a contested history of horticulture in southern Manitoba. For Mennonites on the West Reserve, who arrived in Manitoba with significant experience in tree culture, trees at once offered the practical means of shelter from wind and weather, as well as imposed upon the landscape a particular historical and ordered aesthetic. Settlers planted rows of trees, marking boundary lines and shaping horticultural patterns that were directly associated with European and colonial design.

In chapter 3 I take flowers as my focus—flower gardens, native flora, and flowers in household decor—as outlined in Mennonite writing, photographs, community memory, newspapers, and in material culture on the West Reserve. By outlining the shifting relationship between Mennonites and flowers over the course of the twentieth century, I demonstrate that at specific points in history, flowers were central to creativity, reverence, friendship, and efforts in remembering and recreating a sense of home for men and women on the West Reserve. I also suggest that Mennonite flower culture offers a window into the multifaceted socio-political, spiritual, emotional, and gendered dimensions of life on the West Reserve. On the one hand, the social and political conditions of daily life on the Canadian Prairies produced a fastidious version of femininity, whereby flower culture became a conventional, if not essential feature of rural

(Mennonite) womanhood. I suggest that these ideas continue to influence modern Mennonite flower culture. On the other hand, I contend that the ethno-cultural specificities associated with flower culture among Mennonite immigrants and their descendants in Manitoba not be overlooked; Mennonite flower culture points to the complex ways in which cultural concepts of gender, work, functionality (the necessity or lack of flowers), beauty, modernity, and leisure were worked out in the midst of immigrant settlement and rural social change.

Particularly for Mennonite women on the West Reserve, who lived within patriarchal communities, flower culture aided them in challenging their socio-cultural worlds with the creation of separate, creative spaces. Because the flower garden was not a necessary facet of rural life, work in the flower garden provided many women (and some men) with the opportunity to embellish the monotony of everyday life. At the same time, however, with the advent of twentieth-century rural reforms, which tied flowers more intimately to the realm of women's work and moral betterment, flower gardening was also an avenue whereby women performed conventional versions of rural femininity.

In chapter 4, I use anthropologist Eric Hirsch's theoretical lens, which considers all landscapes to be constructed within the background and foreground of social and political life, or the pictorial ideal and the land itself. I consider plants that possess contradictory meanings—weeds and medicinal herbs—and explore the ways in which this bifurcation changed over time as Mennonites embraced modernity. With an analysis of weeds (Part I) and herbs (Part II) in the culture and history of Mennonites in Manitoba, and by considering the reconstruction of the West Reserve landscape, I draw attention to the changing and complex entanglement of everyday and official discourses about the land, particularly where twentieth-century modernizing reforms in Canadian agriculture and healthcare are concerned. As the Canadian government began to

stress the harms of noxious weeds and folk medicine, and as Canadians became increasingly concerned with a culture of tidiness in yard and household, Mennonite life on the West Reserve dramatically changed. Twentieth-century idealizations about nature and rurality, and the realities of the environment itself commingled to complicate Mennonite relationships with the landscape. By focusing on multiple intersections in the ways the landscape was used, controlled, memorialized, and discussed by government and healthcare officials as well as by Mennonite farmers, gardeners, midwives, and lay doctors, we can begin to see more clearly how the landscape both participates in and is transformed by particular historical and cultural contexts.

As in chapters 1 through 3, I rely on newspapers and government reports to highlight the changing relationship between rural prairie Canadians and the land between 1876 and 1950. Yet, while these official sources demonstrate that new laws regarding noxious weeds and medical care altered ethno-religious relationships with the West Reserve landscape, Mennonites themselves have distinctive memories and everyday experiences of the effects of new farming and medical practices introduced into the region. For many Mennonites on Manitoba's West Reserve, agricultural and healthcare reforms in the early 1900s were accompanied by their own move away from holistic and community-centered healthcare and agrarian, household-based farming practices. To highlight this historical context, I look to diaries, recipes, oral histories, German- and English-language newspapers, and memoirs.

As historian Lyle Dick and others have argued, one of the largest recorded changes to the landscape of the Canadian Prairies occurred after Manitoba entered Confederation in 1870, and when the Dominion government began to invite European immigrants to create large agricultural settlements in Canada. Though farming had long been central to life in Red River Settlement, the scale and style of horticultural activity in the region changed dramatically due to the Dominion

Lands Act in 1872 and the resulting land survey. It was also influenced by European immigration to the Canadian prairies, the dispersal of Indigenous land holders, the introduction of new plant species, North American-style homesteads and farms, and the breaking up of the remaining tallgrass prairie. “European and Judeo-Christian concepts of improving the earth invested plant culture with a complex set of meanings extending far beyond its role in subsistence.”¹²⁵ For these reasons, Dick further argues, “Cultural landscapes serve as important documents to our collective history.”¹²⁶

By working with primary source material and existing historiography, I address the role of landscape in shaping human relationships, colonialism, diasporic attachments to homeland, gendered identities, and ethno-religious communities. I ask how these processes shaped wider community ideas about rural Canadian lifeways and the environment in one ethno-religious group between 1870 and 1950. Because stories and memories related to Mennonite immigration, settlement, and horticulture on the West Reserve are imbued with myth and emotion, I raise questions about the multifaceted horticultural efforts of Mennonites (such as seed saving and transfer, tree planting, vegetable gardening, herbal remedies, and weed control) in the Canadian prairie West. I am especially curious about how a historical process of envisioning and reconstructing a homeland by way of horticulture generated particular narratives about the relationship between an immigrant people and the environment on the West Reserve. That is, my research into the relationship between Mennonites and landscape is an attempt to bring understanding to how an ethno-religious people on the West Reserve came to envision, narrate, and live on the Canadian Prairies and call it home.

¹²⁵ Dick and Frohwerk, “Introduction to a special issue on Horticulture.”

¹²⁶ Ibid.

Chapter One:
Sot onn Seie (Seed and To Sow)

Even the best planned utopias contain seeds of imperfection.¹

Introduction

On 9 May 1876, 442 Mennonite immigrants from Russia destined for Manitoba boarded steamboat *Ontario* in Sarnia, Ontario, for the final leg of their journey from imperial Russia. On 16 May, as the boat came within five miles of the harbour at Duluth, Minnesota, it became immobilized by ice, hindering the journey of its passengers for over a week. Unsure of how long the boat would remain in the ice, and wary of walking to the harbour across a frozen waterway to acquire food supplies, the Mennonite passengers carefully rationed the remainder of the food they had packed. Days after being stranded in the ice, however, food supplies ran out. The Mennonites had to begin eating the seed potatoes they brought with them from Russia for planting upon their arrival in Manitoba.²

Newspaper reports, photographs, letters, travel diaries, and collective community memory combine to indicate that Mennonite immigrants of the 1870s had been told that the southern Manitoba landscape was, in the east, “covered with marshes, here and there alternatively [*sic*] interspersed by high prairie land, wherein the gravel having been burned, grow very tall weeds,”³ and in the west, “undulating prairie intersected by the bed of the Rivière aux Marais, which contain[ed] in some places ponds of water,” though timber was scarce.⁴ In summary, the prairie was perceived as a “vast, [largely] treeless plain of grass and sloughs

¹ Rhinehart Friesen, *A Mennonite Odyssey* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1988), 14.

² Unknown, “The Trip of the Mennonites,” *Manitoba Free Press*, June 3, 1876, 5.

³ John H. Warkentin, “Appendix A: Land Surveyors’ Descriptions—Township by Township,” *The Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba* (Steinbach: Hanover Steinbach Historical Society, 2000), 317.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 319.

stretching west to the Pembina Hills along the International Boundary ... black soil, aspen parkland,”⁵ and Mennonites prepared accordingly by bringing staple garden seeds with them from New Russia. Mennonite delegates sent to Manitoba to inspect the suitability of the land in 1873 confirmed the fertility of the soil in many areas, but they also cautioned the hopeful settlers about the complications they would encounter upon arrival.⁶ Not only was the environment unfriendly (mosquitos and grasshoppers), but the land itself belonged to Métis farmers.

According to one delegate,

The mosquitos were so bad that one could hardly defend himself. ... At some places the land is good, but railroad facilities are poor. ... The lumber for building purposes must be shipped by way of the Red River from Minnesota. ... Grasshoppers are very plentiful ... [and] the people are lazy farmers of mixed Indian blood. ... The half-breed Indians live on this land and it belongs to them.⁷

The complications surrounding land ownership and the environmental concerns alluded to by this delegate were further realized once Mennonites arrived on the West Reserve in 1875. As had been the case on the East Reserve, Métis petitions for land included areas that were in turn reserved for the Mennonites. What is more, with the West Reserve’s expanse of unbroken prairie, its insufficient amount of wood for building, heating, and cooking, and no towns or stores for supplies within walking distance, the challenges of homesteading here would be significant. After the arrival of the Mennonites, however, this so called immeasurable, rural landscape was quickly reconstructed into something more familiar to the European immigrants.

⁵ P. J. Peters, *A Century of Horticulture in Manitoba, 1880–1980* (Altona: Friesens Printers, 1988), 14.

⁶ J. Y. Shantz “Narrative of a Journey to Manitoba,” in *Brothers in Deed to Brothers in Need: A Scrapbook about Mennonite Immigrants From Russia, 1870–1888*, ed. Clarence Hiebert (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1974), 31–5.

⁷ J. M. Hofer, ed. “The Diary of Paul Tschetter, 1873,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 5 (1931): 112–128, 198–219.

Parcels of assigned grassland throughout the West Reserve became arable cropland peppered with single-street villages throughout which well-sheltered farmyards, sizeable kitchen gardens, flower gardens, and orchards were established, due in part to the preparedness of the Mennonites by way of seed transfer. What is more, the discourse surrounding this migratory moment among Mennonites, scholars, and outside observers alike told the story of immigrants settling an empty prairie landscape by imposing order and transforming it into arable cropland.

A number of Mennonite scholars, including historical geographer John Warkentin, sociologist E. K. Francis, and historian Frank H. Epp, have termed this particular migration and settlement a “transplantation,” or have emphasized the almost uncanny reproduction of European Mennonite architecture, village life, and culture on the late nineteenth-century Canadian prairies.⁸ At the same time, others, like historian Royden Loewen, while using the term, dispute the idea that transplantation occurred without cultural change, immediate ecological adaptation, or even the transnational connections that ensued as a result of the migration.⁹ A closer look at the methods and motives of landscape construction and gardening on the West Reserve, alongside the stories that survive and idealize or mythologize the efforts of its Mennonite pioneering generation, support the idea that transplantation is foundational to this community’s contemporary and historical reckoning of ethno-religious identity and the cultivated prairie land. Indeed, the notion of transplantation has become an intergenerational metaphor, which allows community members to hold historical knowledge of Indigenous presence, or Métis farming and land title, in the region and myths of their ancestors’ efforts to make something out of nothing on

⁸ Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba*, 1; E. K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia* (Altona, D.W. Friesen & Sons, 1955), 50; Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786–1920: The History of a Separate People* (Toronto: McMillian of Canada, 1974), 212.

⁹ Royden Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and New Worlds, 1850–1930* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 70–91.

the West Reserve in complex unity. Historian Frances Swyripa, in her study of ethno-religious identity and prairie landscapes, notes that this process of reckoning two distinct sets of knowledge, often occurs by way of a quest for roots, or an attempt to tie one's life story to a place where they imagine their ancestors belonged.¹⁰

In either notion of transplantation horticulture is central. Yet, the discourse of transplantation also sustains colonial agendas which sought with the Manitoba Act of 1870, the invitation to European immigrants to settle in Canada, and the homestead and land reserve systems to rescue the prairies from deficiency, and to transform Red River Settlement and Métis mixed farming into a more civilized, European, agricultural world. In her book *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization*, art historian Jill Casid similarly argues that by “paying attention to colonization on the scale of the intimate,” gardening in imperial history becomes an “art of memory.”¹¹ Thus it was not only through claims to land, but also through plant breeding, seed transfer, and the aesthetic and imaginative practices of refashioning indigenous and appropriated terrain that landscaping for Mennonites on the West Reserve can be analyzed as part of a larger imperial project. In these ways, Casid continues, landscaping operated as an “imperial mode that defined and transformed the ‘heartlands’ of nations.” But it was also a particular kind of transformation. For “... landscaping was one of the primary means through which particular formations of family, gender, nation, and colonial empire were engendered and naturalized,” she writes.¹² In addition to engendering the terrain, the land was also globalized,” if not entirely

¹⁰ Frances Swyripa, *Storied Landscapes: Ethno-religious Identity and the Canadian Prairies* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2010), 244.

¹¹ Jill H. Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xxi.

¹² *Ibid.*

refashioned,¹³ argues Casid. Renovating the environmental surroundings in colonial contexts was at the centre of determinations to control world markets in commodities of vegetable, sugar, and rare plant species.¹⁴ The history of gardening, therefore, particularly where the movement of people and the apprehension or settlement of land are concerned, challenges us to rework our understanding of “the matter of the archive,” or to look more closely at how particular landscapes have been physically constructed and reconstructed, emotionally experienced, remembered, and culturally imagined. For historians, this reworking becomes a process of “raking over and reseeding the ground of the past for the materialization of a different future.”¹⁵ In this future these constructed landscapes generate historical meaning in the myths and memories of those who inhabited them.¹⁶

Various studies of immigrant groups suggest that when material practices are put at the centre of our enquiry, we can begin to formulate a more elastic understanding of processes of emigration, ethnic maintenance and change, landscape construction, cultural negotiations with modernity, and an evolving Canadian imagination about rural life.¹⁷ These material practices of landscape construction and ethnic identity can include seeds and seed saving. Mennonites were not the only late nineteenth-century sectarian immigrants who transported seeds to North America. M. Stephen Miller’s work on Shaker communities and their ephemera throughout the late 1700s and early 1800s in the northeastern United States demonstrates one pacifist group’s efforts to establish a viable industry out of a long-held tradition of gardening and seed saving,¹⁸

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 49

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ M. Stephen Miller, *From Shaker Lands and Shaker Hands: A Survey of the Industries* (Hannover and London: University Press of New England, 2007).

and in so doing, emphasizes a transnational connection, that is, the overseas import of particular plant, herb, and flower varieties and eventually developed a nation-wide distribution plan. But even then it was not quite this simple, for these commercial efforts at once challenged Shaker religious tenets of self-sufficiency, and at the same time, reinvented the mythology surrounding their desired separation from the world.¹⁹ A similar evolution of the effect of a material artifact can be seen in the work of archaeologist Ágústa Edwald who investigates letters of Icelandic immigrants to Canada to understand the complexity of the “material network” between Iceland and Manitoba’s Interlake region as an indication of ethnic identity and change.²⁰ Again, a focus on materials of transplantation suggests a transnational encounter as materials, including seeds, were exchanged between countries. While the welcome receipt of objects such as seeds from Iceland indicates that the maintenance of a material relationship with their old home was important, a material tension at work was evidenced by the acquisition of new skills and the adoption of a new material culture. Edwald’s research demonstrates a “creative process of improvisation” and an ethnic “becoming” among Icelandic immigrants in Canada: the simultaneous adoption of new material culture and the preservation of cultural objects and folkways from Iceland.²¹

The presence of seeds and their stories as an aspect of Mennonite culture on the prairies similarly speaks directly to the efforts of preserving and negotiating an ethno-religious and cultural identity. Yet, like Manitoba’s Icelandic immigrants, early Manitoba Mennonite engagement with modern world markets raises questions about the accuracy of narratives that

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ágústa Edwald, “Fishing for Modernity: How Material Relationships can Mediate Tensions in an Immigrant Community, The Case of the Icelandic Emigration to Canada in the late Nineteenth Century,” *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 16 (2012): 537.

²¹ Ibid., 543.

place certain varieties of vegetables and fruits in individual Mennonite memories of settler gardens. Their use of seed catalogues, for example, both strengthens and contests those narratives of Mennonites bringing watermelon, muskmelon, cucumber, sunflower seeds, and seed potatoes with them on their journey to Canada in the 1870s.

In this chapter I focus on the seeds and roots that were brought to southern Manitoba by Mennonite immigrants in the 1870s, and the prominent role these seeds play in stories detailing the successful transplantation of Mennonites on the Canadian Prairies. I consider the divide between written texts, which emphasize the nature of the so-called transplantation, and the corporate memory of West Reserve residents, or a memorializing that reflects and emphasizes those cultural myths that hold the ethno-religious community together. More specifically, in this chapter the memories and myths associated with these seeds among Mennonite women and men on the former West Reserve are traced, so as to better understand the affective nature of landscape construction among a “stoic and reticent”²² ethno-religious people. By way of stories, the questions of what the prairie meant to Mennonite emigrants in the context of their nineteenth-century uprooting and what it means now to those who continue to sow their gardens in the Mennonite towns and villages of southern Manitoba, are raised in this chapter. An understanding of how the history of sowing seeds on the prairie landscape continues, through the generations, to be worked out in the process of conjuring a home away from home, in a so called empty space, is also explored.

²² Ken Loewen and Margaret Loewen Reimer, *Meditations on a Place and a Way of Life* (Winnipeg: Hyperion, 1982), 13.

Early Rumours and Reports

Evidence of seed transfer is prevalent in a range of documents detailing the first major Mennonite migration to Manitoba. Newspapers, government reports, and memoirs point to the introduction of specific grains, trees, vegetables, and fruits on the West Reserve by Mennonite immigrants. Efforts in seed transfer and plant propagation were not uncommon in the settlement of the Canadian West, or elsewhere in the colonial world. In fact, from as early as 1846, during the fur trade era, seeds were exchanged between Indigenous, American, and European communities. Two archeological excavations in the 1980s at Upper Fort Garry, for example, recovered over 12,000 fruit and nut seeds. Some of the varieties discovered included watermelon, domesticated and wild grapes, plums, cherries, as well as nuts such as almonds, hazelnuts, and walnuts. Spices such as coriander and dill were also discovered. Analysts suggest that the seeds reflect the expanded fur trade at Red River Settlement between after 1848, and can be used as tools in writing and researching the social and environmental history of the region.²³

In the wider history of seed transfer and plant propagation the effective cultivation of grain, fruits, and vegetables has usually been understood as a sign of success—cultural adaptation and sufficiency—among settlers of varied backgrounds and in diverse locales. In the case of the Mennonites, however, it seems this success was measured in two ways. On the one hand, the public’s anxieties about the Mennonites’ unconventional settlement structures and ethno-religious lifeways were addressed by laudatory government reports and newspaper columns documenting new agricultural and horticultural methods. For the Mennonites, however, nostalgia and the politics of homemaking in a new and perilous environment, often alluded to in

²³ C. Thomas Shay, “Seeds as Symbols: Reconstructing the Diet and Life of the Early Red River Settlement,” *Dawson & Hind* (Winter 1991/1992): 21.

personal documents and oral histories, were made more bearable not only by sustaining an agricultural way of life, but by the re-creation of beloved and familiar garden spaces.

Mennonites were encouraged to think about seeds in some of the reports made available to them before their migration. One of such reports came from Jacob Yost Shantz (1822–1909), an Ontarian Swiss Mennonite businessman and promoter of immigration to western Canada. Shantz was employed as an intermediary between the Canadian government and the Mennonites from Russia who were thinking of emigrating to Manitoba in the late nineteenth century. In 1872, Shantz travelled to southern Manitoba to assess the land’s adequacy for Mennonite settlement. A year later, Shantz guided a group of Mennonite delegates from Russia through Manitoba to further assist in determining the suitability of the land for the imminent mass migration. His writings were widely dispersed, appearing in government reports and newspapers both before and after the Mennonite settlement in Manitoba.²⁴

Given his unique position as both a Mennonite and an immigration agent, Shantz’s reports and observations were influential among Mennonite delegates, settlers, and Canadian government officials alike. Besides the central concern in Shantz’s reports over the years for the suitability of Manitoba soil for grain farming, is an ongoing focus on the planting and cultivation of fruit trees throughout the Red River Valley. Observing that the Manitoba climate, while ranging greatly in temperature between seasons, was “less subject to killing frosts than might at first be supposed to be the case on account of its high latitude,” Shantz encouraged the immediate sowing of apple seeds and the development of fruit culture upon settlement in Manitoba. In light of his report and reinforcement it is of little wonder why many Mennonites transported seeds of all sorts to Manitoba in efforts grow familiar varieties of fruit. Referencing

²⁴ Jacob E. Peters, et al, eds. *The Outsider’s Gaze: Life and Labour on the Mennonite West Reserve, 1874–1922* (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2015), 33.

an 1873 publication by the Department of Agriculture, for example, Shantz's *Narrative of a Journey to Manitoba*, expresses the following concern:

The culture of fruit, especially apples, has been entirely neglected in Manitoba hitherto; in fact there has never been a practical test made to really know whether fruit trees will flourish or not. ... When we find so great an abundance of wild fruit in the forests, I cannot but believe that many kinds of apples would do well in Manitoba, particularly along the edge of the timber lands. ... I would advise all settlers, once established, to plant apple seeds; the expense would be only trifling and trees grown from seed will always be better adapted to the climate.²⁵

Shantz was inviting settlers to transform the prairie by observing its natural qualities but transplanting their own cultural preferences.

That Mennonites heeded Shantz's suggestions is clear from his October 1879 update on the progress of Mennonite settlement published in the *Manitoba Free Press*. In fact, Shantz notes his surprise that he found apples flourishing on the trees he sent to their villages just four years earlier. "In one instance I found an apple which had ripened on a tree which had been only one year transplanted. This will prove that apples can be raised here," he wrote. "I have also been treated with excellent ripe watermelons during last week, the Mennonites having large quantities of them yet."²⁶ In a transcript of an oral report on Mennonite immigration and farming successes given in Ottawa on 8 April 1886, Shantz also comments on the Mennonites' successful grain-growing operations based on transplanted seeds throughout the West Reserve. When asked what the reason for their success might be, Shantz suggests that the Mennonites "have different kinds of wheat among them ... a particular kind of wheat they used—what they call 'Russian wheat,'

²⁵ J. Y. Shantz "Narrative of a Journey to Manitoba." In *The Outsider's Gaze: Life and Labour on the Mennonite West Reserve, 1874–1922*, eds. Jacob E. Peters, et al (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2015): 33.

²⁶ J. Y. Shantz, "Mennonite Progress," *Manitoba Free Press*, 8 November 1879.

which they brought from Russia.”²⁷ As an immigration agent and mediator between the first wave of Mennonite immigrants and the Canadian government, Shantz’s reports offer a window into some of the primary concerns among newcomers and government officials alike about settlement on the Canadian Prairies. At the same time, these highlighted suggestions and observations imply an overarching concern with the ability to swiftly transform the prairie landscape into a more European place, complete with orchards and grain fields.

The fact that many Mennonites arrived in Manitoba equipped with seeds and a honed agricultural lifestyle that helped make this vision of transformation a reality, also facilitated a secure place in the broader Canadian imagination. This conclusion is apparent from a second set of observations on their agricultural success from outside visitors Lord and Lady Dufferin, who in August of 1877 paid a visit to several Mennonite villages on Manitoba’s East Reserve. In her travelogue, Lady Dufferin noted that the Mennonites were “most desirable immigrants,” not only apparent in the “prosperous-looking villages,” but in their tidy homes with “flowers in the windows” and the “nice gardens.” But she also looked beyond the farmyard to the fields and observed “great corn [wheat]-fields” and the excellent “specimens of their farm produce,” based in large measure on wheat “grown from Russian seed.”²⁸ During the first decades of Mennonite presence in Manitoba, they were celebrated for their efforts to transport seeds and transform the landscape.

A second observation from an outsider comes from William Henry Barneby, lord of the manor at Bredenbury, Herefordshire, who visited Canada in 1883 as a guest of the vice president and general manager of the Manitoba & North Western Railway. The Mennonite village of

²⁷ J. Y. Shantz, “The Mennonite Immigration—Mode of Settlement—Success of Settlers—Repayment of Loan,” *Victoria Appendix* no. 6A (1886): 49.

²⁸ Lady Dufferin, *My Canadian Journal, 1872–1878* (London: John Murray, 1891), 333.

Rosenfeld was a notable stop during his travels and he recorded his thoughts and observations. His writings detail the nostalgic splendour of Mennonite yards and gardens, and placed them in the context of a similar admiration for their transfer of village structures to the Manitoba landscape.²⁹ He wrote that “The form of the village is generally a broad prairie street dividing two lines of houses, each with a very large and beautifully-cultivated garden attached, stocked with every description of what we should call old-fashioned flowers, and an abundance of vegetables. The homesteads are very picturesque, being as nearly as possible, exact copies of the inhabitants’ old Russian homes.”³⁰ Barneby also lists over forty varieties of flowers, vegetables, and trees present on Mennonite farmyards in Rosenfeld, among which he notes cottonwood trees, rhubarb, watermelons, portulaca, roses, hollyhocks, peas, potatoes, beans, and onions. Some gardens are even noted to contain plum and dwarf mulberry trees, he exclaimed, while others included “wild hops, Scotch kale, very fine cabbages, and a few apple-trees [*sic*].”³¹ Especially apt, however, are Barneby’s observations that many such plants, including “the sunflower seed came direct from Russia.”³² Like Shantz, Lady Dufferin and Barnaby’s writings fixate on Mennonite efforts in transplanting seeds to transform Manitoba’s prairie into what they observed to be a more hospitable and recognizable landscape.

Of course, the southern Manitoba prairie was not the only region in North America that witnessed change and reconstruction with the advent of Mennonite settlement. Norma Jost Voth’s collection of Mennonite food traditions and other folkways speak to oral reflections and

²⁹ W. Henry Barneby, “Chapter 24,” in *Life and Labour in the Far, Far, West: Being Notes of a Tour in the Western States, British Columbia, Manitoba and the Northwest Territory* (London, Paris & New York: Cassell & Company, 1884), in *The Outsider’s Gaze: Life and Labour on the Mennonite West Reserve, 1874–1922*, eds. Jacob E. Peters, et al (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2015): 75–84.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

³² *Ibid.*, 80.

memories of those ten-thousand Mennonites from Russia who chose the United States—Kansas, Nebraska, and Minnesota—over Manitoba in the 1870s. Her work also indicates distinctly Mennonite landscapes and “European-style villages.”³³ From these sources we learn that those Mennonites who settled on the land along the South Cottonwood River near present-day Hillsboro, Kansas, for example, are said to have introduced Turkey Red wheat, a hardy winter cereal, to Kansas.³⁴ Having had success with this crop in New Russia where it was native along the Black Sea and the coast of Azov, and was raised by Cossacks, Ukrainians, Turks, Greeks, Bulgarians, Germans, and Mennonites alike, Mennonites were inclined to bring the seeds with them to North America.³⁵ But Voth surmises that Mennonites brought more than wheat seeds with them; they also brought apple, cherry, peach, olive, and mulberry seeds and pits from Russia. For example, one of her interviewees, Anna Barkman, recalls assisting her parents with their preparations for migration to North America by filling cloth sacks with the very best kernels of wheat,³⁶ and a family letter, located in Voth’s research, written by a Mennonite father in Kansas to his children still in Russia, reads:

There are all kinds of flowers here which we do not know, but similar to our wild roses and kind of aster, and many more. And now, dear daughter, when you come, bring seeds for carnations, a few tulip bulbs, and if possible, a small rose bush. The latter may be difficult. ... Do bring seeds. And do bring winter wheat. That, if only several pounds per

³³ Norma Jost Voth, *Mennonite Foods & Folkways from South Russia, Volume II* (Intercourse: Good Books, 1991), 186.

³⁴ For more on the introduction of Turkey Red wheat in North America see Norman E. Saul, “Myth and History: Turkey Red Wheat and the ‘Kansas Miracle,’” *Heritage of the Great Plains* 22:3 (1989): 1–13; Harley J. Stucky, “Catalysts, Immigrants and Miracle Seeds from Russia,” *Journal of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia* 17/3 (1994): 35–43; David Moon, “In the Russians’ steppes: the introduction of Russian wheat on the Great Plains of the United States of America,” *Journal of Global History* 3/2 (2008): 203–225.

³⁵ Barneby, “Chapter 24,” 187.

³⁶ Voth, *Mennonite Foods & Folkways*, 186.

family.³⁷

Voth poetically speculates that following the winter of their arrival in Kansas in 1874, the Mennonite “women brought out their little bags with flower seeds, carefully sorted, perhaps along with tears, from their gardens in the Ukraine. In the summer of 1875 flowers from these seeds bloomed outside the adobe houses in many of the settlements.”³⁸

The transfer of seeds to North America by Mennonites from imperial Russia in the late nineteenth century, then, has been recalled by many, showcasing an integral aspect of Mennonite migration and settlement—the effort to construct familiar landscapes. While we cannot be certain of the sentimentality behind these gestures of seed transfer and sowing, it might be surmised that both were a nod to tradition, a love of the familiar, and a longing for a particular kind of rootedness.

Food historian William Woys Weaver has written extensively on plant exchange and seed saving among North American Mennonites. Though his research has focused particularly on Mennonites of Dutch heritage as well as their Quaker neighbours in Pennsylvania, Weaver’s work offers socio-historical context for an exploration of Mennonite migration and botanical culture in southern Manitoba. That is, Mennonites seem to have brought seeds with them wherever and whenever they immigrated, as was customary in colonial contexts focused on recreating familiar spaces in faraway places. In one of Weaver’s books, *Heirloom Vegetable Gardening: A Master Gardener’s Guide to Planting, Growing, Seed Saving and Cultural History*, he traces the influence of seed saving and transfer among Mennonites in the United States to a Dutch Mennonite art collector and horticulturalist named Agnes Block (1629–1704). Though Block did not directly participate in seed exchange with colonial Americans, money

³⁷ Ibid., 187, 237.

³⁸ Ibid., 237

from her estate in Amsterdam provided assistance for the first groups of Dutch Mennonites to settle in Pennsylvania in the eighteenth century. Throughout the 1700s, members of Block's church congregation are believed to have sent numerous plant stocks and seeds to their coreligionists in America, thereby providing an "important source of European kitchen vegetables reaching the Middle Colonies through Philadelphia."³⁹ This Dutch connection, Weaver posits, "bypassed the usual London business networks and remains to this day one of the most fascinating, yet largely unexplored, chapters in American gardening."⁴⁰

Weaver believes that Agnes Block, as an avid plant collector and gardener, became a role model for Mennonite horticulturists in America. Another horticulturist of note is Jacob B. Garber (1800–1886) of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, whose exemplary greenhouse and promotion of grape culture provided numerous new varieties of garden plants to the area.⁴¹ Horticulturalists, like Garber, also worked on harvesting and distributing seeds from plants that came with Mennonite immigrants to North America in the nineteenth century and beyond. The common early horn carrot, for example, is noted in Dutch sources from the 1740s. Yet, Weaver believes the carrot seeds were likely sent to America by Dutch Mennonites, and were grown and cultivated in Pennsylvania throughout the nineteenth century before they were introduced to wider colonial America.⁴² Celtuce (asparagus lettuce), speckled lettuce, the Martin's carrot pepper, as well as the Brandywine tomato, are all fruit and vegetable varieties that can be traced to the kitchen gardens of Pennsylvania and Dutch Mennonites.⁴³ Some contemporary

³⁹ William Woys Weaver, *Heirloom Vegetable Gardening: A Master Gardener's Guide to Planting, Growing, Seed Saving and Cultural History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 9.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 121.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 180–352.

horticulturists believe that the rather eccentric Moon and Stars watermelon—an extremely sweet, dark green watermelon with varying sizes of yellow spots akin to a night sky on its outer skin—was also brought to the United States by Mennonites from Russia. An 1830s edition of *Gardener's Magazine* recounts a story about American and English diplomats in Saint Petersburg tasting the Moon and Stars watermelon. Impressed with the fruit's sweet taste, they set out to assemble a collection of fourteen distinct varieties of Russian watermelons. Much to their dismay, none “even hinted at a melon resembling the popular Moon and Stars watermelon, which some horticulturists believe [eventually came] to this country with the Mennonites from Russia.”⁴⁴

Discussions of seed transfer are also present in semi-fictional and creative non-fictional accounts of Mennonite migration to Manitoba during the 1870s that are also based on collective memory. They further denote the central role of seeds in the place-making traditions of Mennonite immigrants. Where such accounts differ from government reports and newspaper columns documenting the success of Mennonite settlement is in their emphasis on the relationship between seed transfer and the poignancy of uprooting. Rhinehart Friesen's stories about the tribulations experienced by one family who settled unsuccessfully on the East Reserve in 1874 and subsequently relocated to the West Reserve only to begin the homesteading process again, is one such example. While this collection of stories is based on the oral accounts of the author's mother and grandmother, they are ornamented with Friesen's own interpretations of the events discussed, as well as primary source research on Mennonite settlement in Manitoba. The first chapter, “Exodus,” is modeled on the travel diary of Franz Harder, who, according to the SS

⁴⁴ Ibid., 377.

Peruvian No. 47 passenger list, was on the same ship as Friesen's grandparents,⁴⁵ and according to the author, was a good friend of the Friesen family. While the Harder diary itself does not offer such detail,⁴⁶ Friesen's interpretation of the diary, combined with his familial memory, provides a fearful yet nostalgic account of the seeds that were packaged and carried over by one family emigrating to Canada. The fictionalized conversation between Jacob Friesen and his wife Margaretha is presented as follows:

'Is there no end to this, Jacob? Day after day, train after train. Herded from one train to another like cattle on the way to market. I'd give anything just to be able to shoo the children out of the door to play by themselves for a while.' 'Try to be patient, Greta,' said Jacob calmly. 'I agree it's unpleasant living on a crowded train. Just keep thinking about the new home we'll soon build for you.' 'A big brick one like we left behind in Friedrichsthal? With a flower garden in front and a fruit orchard in the back? I've packed some stones of peaches and apricots and mulberry seeds for silkworms,' Jacob interrupted her. 'They say it's much colder where we're going. I hope we'll be able to grow the things that we need to keep ourselves alive, but I have my doubts about fruits and silkworms.'⁴⁷

Altona area resident Shaun Friesen, a descendant of this very Friesen clan, notes, in one of many conversations, that his great-grandparents, Jacob and Margaretha Friesen, brought peach pits and mulberry seeds with them to Canada. Though it is unclear whether Shaun's recollection of this detail is dependent on the above fictional account or on family stories, the Friesen family's emigration tale offers a fascinating interpretation of the emotion attached to their botanical imports and the reconstruction of familiar landscapes.

⁴⁵ "S.S. Peruvian No. 47 arrived in Quebec on July 27, 1874," accessed 8 February 2016, http://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/canada/quebec/peruvian_47.html.

⁴⁶ Franz Harder's short travel diary was published in William Schroeder's *Bergthal Colony* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1974), 54–55.

⁴⁷ Friesen, *A Mennonite Odyssey*, 18–19.

Like Shaun's narrative, a collection of even more recent personal writings by Maria Braun from the village of Blumenort on the West Reserve details long-standing knowledge of those seeds in her family's garden that came from her ancestors who emigrated from New Russia. Her writings, compiled in 2012, also speak to the cultivation of local, indigenous fruit near their Manitoba homestead. She writes, for example, that on the right side of the driveway to her family's house was a small orchard with wild plum, chokecherry, crab apple trees, strawberries, raspberries, gooseberries, and rhubarb. She concludes that "There was enough for all the jellies and pies that the family consumed"⁴⁸ and further describes that in front of the house was a large flower garden, which was her mother's "pride and joy," while the vegetable garden contained enough to feed their family.⁴⁹ As Braun explains, "No vegetables were ever purchased from the Gretna grocers. [Though] the grocers did supply the flour, sugar, salt, oatmeal, tea and other dry goods, compared to today the grocery list was quite small. Mother never went to town and Dad only needed to bring home these bare necessities."⁵⁰ Further, Braun implies that vegetable seeds were never purchased from the Gretna grocer. Rather, "the seeds for the vegetables and flowers had been originally brought to Canada by the immigrants from the Ukraine. With the vegetables and flowers, some plants were allowed to go to seed each year, and then exchanged by the village gardeners for the next year's planting."⁵¹ Braun's writings offer important reflections on life as a Mennonite woman in the mid-twentieth century in the West Reserve. Her childhood memories are rooted in a Blumenort village upbringing where food, the ordered landscape, and the garden take centre stage. Like all the writings noted above, official or

⁴⁸ Susan Empringham, ed. *A Village Saga: the Writings of Maria Klassen (Braun)* (Self-published: 2012), 51.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

personal, Braun's memories provide a window into the complicated nature of European settlement on the Canadian Prairies. Her writings are a contested confluence of outside efforts to familiarize what was foreign, the realities of homesteading, the re-imagination of an ethno-religious lifeway and the prairie landscape, and nostalgically inclined reflections on the work of resettlement.

Saved Seeds as Historical Artefacts

Equally important to written documents about seeds in a historical exploration of Mennonite landscapes on the West Reserve is an analysis of seeds themselves, as artefacts from and within these constructed places. In so doing, we not only cultivate a better awareness of the complex ways that these items shape both history and our narratives about history, but we make room for a deeper understanding of how artefacts, too, can be read like historical texts for cultural truths, signs, symbols, poetics, and myths.⁵² Texts (like newspapers, diaries, and governmental reports), oral accounts, and seeds (as well as trees, flowers, and weeds) together divulge the historical and, to borrow a phrase from archaeologist Roland Sawatzky, the “materiality of daily life.”⁵³ Even when found to be factually inaccurate or embellished with fiction, these sources are nonetheless saturated with practicality and socio-cultural clarification, offering glimpses into a society's view of itself. Where seeds as material culture differ from other primary sources, however, is in their inability to convey direct meaning. Nonetheless, their lasting physical presence and preservation among Mennonites in southern Manitoba stands to be reckoned with, alongside their accompanying stories.

⁵² Karen Harvey, ed. “Introduction” in *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 4.

⁵³ Roland Sawatzky, “Blumenhof Village and the Archaeology of Difference,” in *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 34 (2016), 33.

My field research has offered ample opportunity to consider and observe a great variety of seeds. As additions to my own seed collection, I have been given gifts of watermelon and honeydew seeds, as well as cucumber seeds said by community members to be descendants of those brought from Russia in the 1870s. These seeds, as Roland Sawatzky suggests of artefacts found in museum collections, seem to have been “rescued [from obscurity] by sentimentality.”⁵⁴ Given their continued presence and preservation in the Mennonite museums, and the homes, garden sheds, and keepsake boxes of West Reserve residents, these seeds are indicative of key values about Mennonite landscapes in Manitoba and the role of nostalgia in the imagination, construction, and intergenerational maintenance of a particular place.

As part of a small archival collection of kitchen herbs, teas, and seeds at the Mennonite Heritage Village (MHV) in Steinbach, Manitoba, there is small jar of round, pale yellow, pea-sized beans. They are smooth to the touch and when shaken in clasped hands the beans make a delicate, hollow, rattling sound. With blue ink in basic print on a piece of masking tape, the jar is labeled “Oma Anna Penner’s beans, Steinau Russia, 1926.” Apart from the collection notes, which suggest the beans were donated to the Museum archives in 2006 and were originally brought to Canada by Peter and Anna Penner (nee Klassen), we know very little about the story of these beans. According to her descendants, Anna is said to have grown the beans each year, following her arrival in Manitoba. She set aside some of the beans for seed over the course of her lifetime on a farm near Oak Lake, Manitoba. Anna later passed some of the seeds on to her daughter Elizabeth Kathler, who then passed some along to her son, William. The beans continue to be grown on a farm near Rosa, a small town on the east side of southern Manitoba, near the

⁵⁴ Ibid., 35.

Red River.⁵⁵

Also present at MHV are numerous acorns from trees believed to be descendants of a supposedly 800-year-old oak tree in Chortitza, Ukraine (formerly New Russia which was settled by Mennonites in 1789). One such descendant of this tree has been planted at MHV, another is present in Winkler, Manitoba, on the former West Reserve. The original Chortitza oak, which is said to have been forty feet high and thirty feet in circumference, served as a central landmark and meeting place for the people who lived in its vicinity.⁵⁶ A now-classic photograph of Mennonite children sitting in the oak's impressive and wide-reaching branches stands as a reminder of the tree's centrality in Mennonite heritage in Russia. Nonetheless, the tree, which died over twenty years ago, has descendants alive and well in many Mennonite communities in North America. The plaque that stands in front of the Winkler descendant reads that the Chortitza oak was a symbol of the Mennonites' home on the steppes. Similarly, the sapling in Winkler represents the efforts of Mennonites in the successful settlement of Manitoba, the planting of "sheltering trees, gardens and thriving farms ... in ... the West Reserve." The sapling was planted "in a [*sic*] humble recognition of our history and our roots."

⁵⁵ Elizabeth Kathler, as cited in donor file, MHV, acc. no. 2006.11.2.

⁵⁶ Carol Sanders, "Oak Tree's Seeds Keep Mennonite History Alive," *Winnipeg Free Press*, 23 June 2006.



Figure 1.1: A plaque explaining the significance of the Chortitza oak tree in Winkler, Manitoba.⁵⁷

The tradition of seed saving and transfer, and the planting of the Chortitza oak tree's descendants, offers a present-day example of the ways Mennonites construct landscapes that are instilled with corporate memory, nostalgia, and Mennonite folklore. Such corporate memory represents an emotional and psychological effort to claim rootedness and history in a particular place.

Other stories told to me about Mennonite botanical culture connected to the East Reserve include one about sorrel, another about an apple tree, and a third about an attic full of seeds. Over a bowl of *Somma borscht* (summer soup) at Mennonite Church Canada head offices in Winnipeg one June lunchtime in 2015, archivist Conrad Stoesz and Executive Minister Tim Froese began a conversation about sorrel—a sour, leafy green perennial and key ingredient in the above-noted Mennonite summertime soup. Tim told the story that the sorrel used in his borscht was believed to be a descendant of the sorrel root that was brought to Canada by his wife's

⁵⁷ Photograph courtesy of Mary Lou Driedger, <https://maryloudriedger2.wordpress.com/tag/chortitza-oak/>.

paternal grandmother in the 1870s who carried it along with fava beans for planting upon arrival on the East Reserve.⁵⁸ Conrad Stoesz had other stories to match Tim's; he spoke about an apple tree on the old C.P. Hiebert yard in Steinbach, Manitoba, a tree said to be original to the establishment of the yard. The tree, according to Stoesz, has been verified by the Prairie Fruit Growers Association as a species that came from New Russia. It is presumed that the immigrants who constructed the yard brought with them a graft of an apple tree or an apple seed over one hundred years ago.⁵⁹

Further, on a research trip to the MHV archives one winter morning in 2015, I stopped by the local bakery near Mitchell, Manitoba for a coffee and cinnamon bun. This bakery, located in the renovated foyer of an old church along a gravel road, was founded and owned at the time by Larry and Marigold Peters who also live on the property. I spoke with Larry for some time about his work and the history of the bakery site. Our conversation revealed that when he and Marigold were preparing their country yard for the moving of the church to the site in the 1990s, they cleaned out and tore down the old house that stood there. In the attic of this house Larry found a large box full of vegetable and fruit seeds, sorted into a variety of rusty tobacco containers and paper bags, and labeled from the 1920s and early 1930s. On my next visit to the bakery, Larry presented me with this very box full of seeds, which he had salvaged from the former property and kept over the years. Larry believes that the former owner of the house was a market gardener and fruit grower.

While the question as to why the seeds remained housed in an attic for sixty years remains unanswered, a number of things are revealed when reflecting upon this collection. Quite simply, the recognizable varieties of beans, melons, cucumbers, squash, and plums that were

⁵⁸ Tim Froese, email communication with the author, 11 June 2015.

⁵⁹ Conrad Stoesz, email communication with the author, 12 June 2015.

presumably grown and regrown from year to year by the former Mennonite owners of this property demonstrate key linkages in the gardening traditions, popular food types, and practices between the East and West Reserves, and between Russia and Manitoba. As well, the careful preservation, labelling, and storage of these seeds by the gardener highlight the enduring tradition of seed saving among Mennonites in Manitoba. Seed saving was not only a viable option for rural Manitobans prior to the establishment of greenhouses and nurseries, but for Mennonite gardeners, it sustained the regrowth of vegetable and fruit varieties familiar in their ethno-religious customs in cooking and food preservation. For contemporary Mennonite gardeners, the seeds are a material manifestation of a time-honoured tradition and a lifeway that hones a collective ethno-religious identity and sharpens a sense of fixed history as a people in a particular place.

The Social Life of Seeds

Oral history lends yet another perspective to the place of seeds, particularly when considering the social and cultural history of Mennonites on the West Reserve, or the imaginative and emotional underpinning of a distinct ethno-religious lifeway. For example, Sara Krueger, who grew up on a farmyard near Altona, Manitoba, told me that she was the only girl of many children, and was thus typically responsible for helping her mother with seeding and tending the garden—chores she disliked a great deal. Now eighty-eight years old, she recalled aloud in her Altona home the day she protested assisting her mother in the garden by saying, “You won’t have to irrigate the garden, because I’ll do it with my tears.” While Sara’s memories of working in the garden as a child do not hinge on specific knowledge of heritage seeds or plants, her reflections point to another important aspect of seeds in Mennonite history: the

gathering of family and community members around the seeds themselves. Sara further recalled just how much her mother loved to eat sunflower seeds (almost as much as her father loved to smoke tobacco). “There was a time when both of them vowed to give up these vices. I think Father lasted longer in his commitment than Mother.” The sunflower seeds were dried and roasted for visitors on Sundays, especially in winter. They were often enjoyed around the table during a game of cards.⁶⁰

The memories Sara shared with me about sunflower seeds are supported by the collective memory of West Reserve community members. Seeds from sunflowers and pumpkins were routinely dried, roasted, and eaten by Mennonites in Manitoba—a social tradition that harks back to the visiting customs taken up by Mennonites in Russia during the winter months. On the Canadian Prairies from January through March, when the winter season with its darkness, wind, and cold kept everyone from their outdoor labour, Mennonite men, women, and children gathered in each other’s homes to visit, sing, discuss politics, play games, spin, and knit. Freshly roasted sunflower seeds, or *Knack’sot* in Low German—crack seeds—were shared at such gatherings. Many recall that sunflower seed shells were often spit directly onto the floor. If the family had wooden floors, the seed shells left behind a desirable, shiny, and protective coating of oil after being swept up.⁶¹

The stories my informants shared with me about the Mennonite social tradition of eating of sunflower seeds is supported by Voth’s oral history collection in which one man reminisces about the prairie winter with simultaneous fondness and unease: “In January winter set in with a vengeance. Coping with the cold on the prairies was a challenge. A prairie house on a hill may

⁶⁰ Sarah Krueger, interview with the author, 11 May 2015.

⁶¹ Norma Jost Voth, *Mennonite Foods & Folkways, from South Russia, Volume II* (Intercourse: Good Books, 1991), 161.

be a subject for art or poetry in summer, but in January it made life a battle for survival. Without storm windows and insulation, the winter wind seemed to blow through with scarcely a pause.”⁶²

And yet, as Voth, via her informant, elaborates, “when the drifted roads cleared and the sun shone ... neighbors and relatives used weekday afternoons to call on each other. They talked about the old country, the farm, the church and sometimes even the relatives. Usually guests stayed for supper. In spite of the cold and boredom, winter provided its own beauty and calm.”⁶³

She gives as an example, Anna von Kampen Funk who recalls it was winter evenings when the women did their visiting, spinning, and knitting while eating sunflower and pumpkin seeds.⁶⁴

Similar thoughts were shared by oral history participants in the transcripts of interviews undertaken in a museum setting. In 2004, Tracy Ruta Fuchs was hired by MHV to undertake research on the history of Mennonite gardens and orchards in both Russia and Manitoba. While the larger research project culminated in the publication of a small booklet on the practical and aesthetic components of gardening in the Mennonite tradition, Fuchs’ investigation also produced an important series of recorded oral history interviews with Manitoban Mennonite men and women. These interviews have been transcribed and catalogued at the MHV Archives. These interviews are an invaluable resource, offering a broader understanding of how the historical relationship between Mennonites and their garden spaces is imagined, narrated, and complicated by contemporary Mennonite gardeners.

In one of these interviews, former Neuberghthal resident Norma Giesbrecht shared that when she was a little girl, “there was always sunflowers planted in the garden ... [because] at that time it wasn't a field crop. [We had] huge sunflowers ... and they were ... big sheaves and

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 160–1.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 161.

they were dried ... knocked out, dried, and they were roasted and then they ate them. Oh yeah, we used to harvest quite a bit of them. [These] huge sunflowers, like, they would get this big and they would hang down. ... Part of winter preparation was sunflower seeds.”⁶⁵ Boosting the narrative of the unique relationship between Mennonites and sunflower seeds, George Neufeld spoke with Fuchs about growing up outside of a Mennonite community in Gardenton, Manitoba, and about his parents’ garden. “We always had all the regular vegetables,” he explained, and “We had quite a lot of watermelons. And one thing that we had that nobody around there had, was sunflowers. We had enough sunflower seeds to fill a big bag. Quite unusual. People would come to our place on Sunday to crack sunflower seeds. That was different.”⁶⁶

In another interview with a group of East Reserve Mennonite women about gardening, Fuchs’s questions led to a fuller consideration of the social matrix interwoven with sunflower seeds. These, along with the above noted recollections, speak to the central place of seeds in the collective memory and the cultural imagination of Mennonites in Manitoba. Audrey Toews professed that sunflower seeds were indeed introduced to Manitoba by Mennonites from Russia. Liz Toews, Bettie Hiebert, and Chris Peters spoke of their memories of sunflowers in their families’ gardens. “We usually had some sunflowers in the garden,” said Liz Toews. “Like we had a few rows of corn, we would have a few rows of sunflowers.” Bettie Hiebert recalled that her family would dry sunflower seeds and eat them in winter: “We would sit and eat sunflower seeds. You wouldn’t put [the shells] in a container, you would spit them on the floor and the floor would become all shiny from it.” When asked whether consuming sunflower seeds was more commonly a tradition among men, the women affirmed that while they and their mothers

⁶⁵ Norma Giesbrecht, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 21 October 2004, MHV, *Beauty and Sustenance* research files.

⁶⁶ George Neufeld, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 2 November 2004, MHV, *Beauty and Sustenance* research files.

and grandmothers certainly engaged in *knacking sot*, they rarely sat “with idle hands.” Women were “always knitting, or crocheting, or something like that. I’m not saying we didn’t eat sunflower seeds. I remember [eating them] even as a kid.” These women’s reflections indicate that they, more often than not, ate the seeds while tending to other tasks, particularly in the winter when there was mending and other household tasks to tackle, as opposed to the men, who seem to have eaten sunflower seeds whilst sitting and visiting.⁶⁷

Seed Savers and Nostalgia

My own oral history interviewees similarly spoke about saving seeds amidst emotions of nostalgia. On a hot July morning over coffee with Mary Loewen on her sparsely treed farmyard in the village of Silberfeld, our conversation turned to gardens as we peered out her living room window to watch her husband Benno, a retired farmer, tend to their large vegetable garden. In preparation for our visit, Mary had arranged some of her most prized possessions on the dining room table: the porcelain teapot that belonged to her great-grandmother, brought by her ancestors to Manitoba from Russia; the recently published Silberfeld history book that she and Benno co-authored; a few arrowheads that were found near the creek that runs through their farmyard; and a small box containing some items that belonged to her mother and grandmother—two crocheted lace hair coverings, keepsake cards, and stamps; and two paper bags, three glass jars, and one old baking powder container filled with seeds. On the one hand, this assortment of prized possessions lends credence to the contested way West Reserve Mennonites hold stories of their efforts to transform a so called empty prairie place into an ethno-cultural space, and Indigenous presence in this very same space, in unison. On the other hand, the assortment of seeds lends a

⁶⁷ Bettie Hiebert, Chris Peters, Audrey Toews, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 23 November 2004, MHV, *Beauty and Sustenance* research files.

clue into the specific horticultural traditions practiced among Mennonites in the settler generation. Of particular interest to me were the watermelon, cucumber, muskmelon, dill, and carrot seeds. The variety of watermelon, Winter Queen, is of special importance to Mary—she has fond memories of her mother growing the melons, of their sweet taste, and their of prominence in her childhood summer cuisine.

Mary also spoke about the peonies on their yard that began as cuttings from her grandmother. They had been transferred and replanted on all three of the yards she and Benno have established. Another peony on the yard marks the grave of an infant. Further to the topic of gardens, seeds, and flowers, Mary shared her memory of the abundance of potted red geraniums that used to adorn her aunt's and grandmother's windowsills. The two women also had pansies and gladioli in the garden. Mary remembers plenty of onions and radishes and three kinds of cabbage in the vegetable gardens of her childhood: "They were so different back then and so big! My mother always planted the tomato seeds straight into the garden and she would get lots of tomatoes before the end of the summer," Mary proudly declared. Mary also recalled her grandmother having *Schlee'e*, a prickly shrub that produced red fruit with stones, "about the size of a wild plum," she recollected. She recalls her grandmother making jam out of the fruit—"it wasn't the tastiest." Though it is quite likely that the shrub was indeed a variety of native fruit, cultivated from a nearby wooded area and reconstituted on the yard as was the tradition among many settlers, Mary believes this plant came from Russia. She says that this is the discourse and popular memory in the area: Mennonite immigrants transferred seeds and plants to Manitoba in the context of their migration from imperial Russia in the 1870s.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Mary Loewen, interview with the author, 20 July 2014.

Stories, like Mary's of seed transfer in the migration history of Mennonites in Manitoba, add another layer to the complex cultural significance of seeds. Such reports place emphasis on the consideration and care that were taken by their ancestors in selecting and packaging seeds so that gardens and ethno-religious and agricultural ways of life could be re-established in southern Manitoba. Yet, these accounts also accentuate the importance of intergenerational seed saving as a Mennonite gardening tradition. Most importantly, the collective memory of seed saving and transfer among Mennonites in Manitoba relays an ethic of belonging and rootedness in the Canadian Prairies, thereby also facilitating a sense of nostalgic responsibility for the involvement of Mennonites in the transformation of a foreign landscape into a place of familiarity. During both oral history interviews and casual conversation with community members, women and men spoke of passing down the seeds of certain, so-called heritage vegetables and fruit—deemed in their family narratives to have Russian ancestry—to their children and kin. These conversations offer an inside perspective on the meanings associated with a cultural narrative of migration and settlement. Even in their possible conjecture, these oral accounts serve to root contemporary West Reserve gardens and gardeners in a particular and sentimental understanding of peoplehood, prairie land tenure, and successful settlement.

Seeds evoke a range of emotion, as seen in the people around a big table in the sunny visiting area at Salem Home in Winkler, Manitoba. Eighty-six-year-old Bill Zacharias, a retired West Reserve farmer, excitedly emptied three five-gallon pails of their contents: bag upon bag of vegetable, fruit, and flower seeds, gathered and saved from the garden over the course of many years. Bill's wife Anne, eighty-seven, looked on from her motorized wheelchair while his daughter Hayley and his two grown grandsons settled themselves in preparation for our visit. Anne resides at the care home in Winkler. Two years ago, she suffered a stroke that left her

largely paralyzed. Bill travels from his home in Morden to visit Anne at least once every day. Despite the circumstances, Bill and Anne's abiding love for one another is palpable, not only in their style of joint conversation, their shared laughter, and their affectionate gazes, but also in stories of farming and gardening together throughout their married life.

Nostalgia and a sense of a lost way of life also inform this family's relationship to seeds. Family lore holds that Anne's prized *Teid'ja Gerkje*, a variety of early cucumber, that is excellent for pickling and fresh eating, are grown from the seeds that were carried over to Manitoba via New Russia by her grandmother. Anne's mother, who saved the cucumber seeds each year, and who passed them on to Anne, grew this particular variety from the seeds her own mother had handed down to her. Anne reminisced that she has always loved working in the garden and on the farm. She believes she developed this interest as a young girl, when she assisted her mother with the work. This appreciation of gardening has extended through the generations as her daughter and grandsons have become interested in preserving the tradition of Anne's vocation and growing the family's heritage seeds.

The affection for traditions of gardening and farm work in Anne's life was further confirmed by her stories of drying seeds on every conceivable surface in their family's home each autumn and early winter. The care and time she took to "make the seeds," as Bill named the process, ensured a sound effort towards a successful garden the following year. Bill's stories about Anne driving the combine, baling hay, and happily singing the hymn "I Walk in the Garden" while she planted, hoed, and worked on the yard also validated the centrality of this vocation in Anne's life. Bill and Anne recalled together the many seasons they grew prolific crops of Winter Queen watermelons. During our group interview, their daughter Hayley cried joyfully when she recalled the truckloads of melons the family gathered from her mother's

garden each autumn. One year the couple had ripe watermelons that lasted until the celebration of their November anniversary. “For Mennonites,” Bill explained, “Watermelons are life!”

Anne explained that gardening and farming were tasks that brought her “very close to God.” As Bill elaborated on her behalf, “Gardening is a part of life. There is no question about it. A garden you must have. We sow the seeds on the farm [and] in the garden, and then we say: Now, Lord. I’ve done my part. We put our trust in you.” Planting and saving seeds is a main theme in Bill and Anne’s telling of their life story. In their theological understanding, gardening works to emphasize the complex relationship between humans, nature, and God. Practically, gardening sustained their family. Emotionally, garden work drew Anne and Bill together and rooted them in evocative familial traditions of tending the earth. Anne’s work in the garden and her efforts in seed saving have ended since her stroke. Bill, however, has ensured that at the very least, the *Teid’ja Gerkje* are replanted in the garden each year and that seed is saved again for the year to come—an embodied sign, it seems to me, of his love for Anne, his faith, and his family history.⁶⁹

This centrality of heritage seeds to the memory, experience, and culture of landscape and place making among Mennonites is also illuminated in the 2004 Fuchs interviews conducted for the Steinbach MHV garden project. Many of her interviewees recalled stories from parents or grandparents about seeds and plants that were brought to Canada from Russia. For example, Helen Peters told Fuchs that when her grandparents immigrated to Canada in the 1870s, they “brought *all* their seeds.” As she further explained, “Yes, I remember my grandma always saying, ‘Oh, these [seeds] are still from Russia.’” It was the “old fashioned kind” of parsley that stood out strongly in her memory as being of Russian origin. Helen also commented on the care

⁶⁹ Bill and Anne Zacharias, interview with the author, 29 April 2015.

her grandmother must have taken when packaging the seeds to ensure their safe journey to North America. Helen remembers her grandmother explaining how she packaged the seeds: using small, thin bits of cotton material, carefully cut into squares, she placed the seeds in the middle, and then tied the corners together judiciously with a string.⁷⁰ Others simply reiterated knowledge of seed transfer gained by means of books or word of mouth. Norma Giesbrecht recalled that she read of requests made by mail from those who were already in Manitoba asking those still coming to bring vegetable and flower seeds with them. “Yeah. 'Cause there was nothing here, eh? There was nothing here. No seed catalogues so ... so a lot of that stuff must have come over from Russia.” Norma mused further:

I imagine cuttings from different people [were exchanged], like, but the original apple seed, they may very well have brought [them] from Russia and I would almost think that that's ... that's how they would've got the first apples started. ... It was amazing what they all did bring. That was definitely very, very important to the Mennonites. Uh, I know they brought a lot of wheat, like, different varieties of wheat along.⁷¹

Seed saving and exchange are identified by interview participants as necessary and commonplace activities among early Mennonite gardeners in Manitoba. However, these everyday gestures were also alluded to as continued practices imbued with the valued traditions of Sunday visiting, garden strolling, and community care—passed down to subsequent generations of gardeners. Those who did not or do not save seeds expressed slight embarrassment. In response to Fuchs’s question about whether seed saving was common practice among her relatives, Anne Bartel said, “my mother would [save seeds]. Yeah. Anything. If we had a delicious watermelon, that seed had to be saved. Or a tomato or who knows. Seeds were

⁷⁰ Helen Peters, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 20 October 2004, MHV, *Beauty and Sustenance* research files.

⁷¹ Giesbrecht, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 21 October 2004.

always saved. And I haven't been good," she laughed. "Well, no," she continued. "A muskmelon. That I will save."⁷² Helen Peters told Fuchs that her mother and grandmother would "never" have purchased seeds for the garden. "No. No, no. Then, there would be exchanging seeds, like friend to friend. They always exchanged seeds. [They might say:] 'Oh, I had a very nice tomato this year and I saved all the seed, do you want some?' You know, that was the idea. ... Like, they always visited with each other ... sometimes afternoon, sometimes evening, yeah? And they would always exchange seed. And with cucumber the same way, or almost anything in the garden."⁷³ Rose Wiebe explained that seed exchanges most often began with visits or strolls through neighbours' gardens. "Oh, yes. That's why they visited in the garden. [They would say], 'Can I have some of those seeds for next year, yours look so much nicer than mine.'"⁷⁴ Norma Giesbrecht recounted a childhood memory from the 1940s of being asked by her mother to gather the big black seeds from all the four o'clocks in the flower garden, which was not a preferred chore. As Norma further explained, however, these were not the extent of her mother's seed-saving efforts:

[She saved] a lot of flower seeds too. They would be very carefully gathered in fall and put in ... in little packages, very often from old stockings or something so that there was air ... and then they were carefully stored [and they would store it] for the next spring. That was quite a process. Like even the, uh ... the tomato seeds ... she would see from year to year what worked, like beans, watermelon, muskmelon seeds. Those seeds were all kept all very carefully kept. That was quite a process to dry the different varieties of tomatoes. But, [my mom] was a little bit adventurous and so [when a] new kind [was] coming out, she would have tried it. Or all of a sudden, somebody would have ... uh ...

⁷² Anne Bartel, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 13 October 2004, MHV, *Beauty and Sustenance* research files.

⁷³ Peters, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 22 October 2004.

⁷⁴ Rose Wiebe, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 27 October 2004, MHV, *Beauty and Sustenance* research files.

visiting [somewhere] would have this tomato, well ... then she, you know, would have to take one tomato and ... and let it ripen and ... and get the seeds from that.⁷⁵

Stories about seed saving connect interviewees to their family and community histories. Norma tells Fuchs how she herself has become an active participant in the tradition of seed saving in the Altona area. Norma describes the seedbeds in front of her childhood in a 1901 housebarn in Neubergthal which was converted into a small community-run museum; at the time of her interview with Fuchs, those beds featured impressive heritage zinnias, which Norma claims were descendants of those grown in the gardens of some of the village's first settlers. She describes how each autumn she removed and dried the flower heads and seedpods so as to ensure their regrowth the following summer. The women of the Steinbach Gardening Club also shared memories with Fuchs of such efforts, further confirming that for many Mennonites living in Manitoba during the first half of the twentieth century, seeds were collected, dried, and stored in containers of all sorts—tobacco tins, pill bottles, and syrup pails—for future years and future generations. As the women note, seeds were also rarely, if ever, purchased. As one participant put it, “if you didn’t have it from your garden in the summer, you didn’t have it.” “Except,” another woman interjected, “if you got it from the neighbours.”⁷⁶

While women’s voices are dominant in the community memory of seed saving, in my own oral history research, I learned of Mennonite men who participated in both the tradition of seed saving, and in the perpetuation of stories that link the arrival of Mennonites from Russia on the prairies to the genesis and presence of certain varieties of vegetables and fruits. In April 2015, I received a telephone call from Jake Letkeman of La Rivière, Manitoba, in response to an

⁷⁵ Giesbrecht, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 21 October 2004.

⁷⁶ Hiebert, Peters, Toews, and Toews, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 23 November 2004.

article he had seen about my research in the local newspaper insert, *The Prairie Farmer*. Jake relayed that he was born in 1938 in the village Eigenfeld on the West Reserve, and remembers fondly the gardens of both sets of his grandparents; each family had a small orchard as part of the garden, and both planted the typical peas, potatoes, and corn. One of his grandmothers had a summer kitchen in which he remembers busy autumn seasons with sunflower seeds, watermelon seeds, pumpkin seeds, tomato seeds, etc., drying on newspapers in the sun on every surface. Though Jake does not recall whether any of his grandparents' seeds had Russian ancestry, he did attest that “nobody ever *bought* seeds.” When I questioned him about this knowledge, or if he could recall any stories about the seeds, he declined to answer.⁷⁷ Jake did nonetheless offer that he believed that many of the West Reserve poplar trees, or cottonwoods, are from Russia.

Other local people spoke to be about heritage seeds, such as Jake Rempel of Halbstadt, who is a keen community historian with numerous tales to share. At a Seedy Saturday meeting in February 2013, Jake was offering any interested parties small bags of *Cershownki* melon seeds, along with heritage stories. The melon in question is a small and delicate member of the cucurbit family; it produces a fruit with a thin skin and light-green flesh. According to Jake, the *Cershownki* cannot be planted in the vicinity of other melons due to the likelihood of cross-pollination; however, they can be seeded as soon as the soil can be worked in spring, and will stay on the vine up until the first frost in autumn, which make them a desirable and relatively maintenance-free variety. Though not widely known among gardeners in the West Reserve, two others relayed memories of this melon variety; one gardener also shared some of her family's heritage seeds with me. Jake's understanding is that Mennonite immigrants brought the *Cershownki* melon to Manitoba from Russia in the 1870s. He thinks it was his great-great-

⁷⁷ Jake Letkeman, telephone conversation with the author, 22 April 2015.

grandparents, Jacob Kehler and Katharina Penner, who arrived in Canada in 1874, that brought this particular variety, “our variety,” according to Jake. The seeds from Jake family’s *Cerstownki* melons have supposedly been passed down from mother to daughter through the generations. Today, Jake’s family members continue to grow these heritage melons and save the seed for their gardens in future years.

Storied Seeds

The ancestry of many of today’s plants in Mennonite gardens cannot be confirmed, nor can the continuous survival of the plant species be proven. However, the efforts of community members to preserve the storied ancestry of these plants are central to the memory of Mennonite immigration and settlement in Manitoba. The University of Manitoba’s Department of Landscape Architecture conducted a study of the trees and hedgerows in the Mennonite village of Neuberghthal. One of the main objectives of this project, apart from determining the age and health of the trees in the village, was to generate an inventory of plant material considered by village residents to be “heritage material”—or, plants that were grown in the gardens and on the farmyards of early settlers and have survived through familial and community propagation.⁷⁸ According to the Department of Landscape Architecture researchers, it is “safe to assume that the first settlers would have brought seeds with them to this country for fruit, vegetables, and flowering plants, and that they would have supplemented these in the early years with root stock and cuttings from neighbouring villages.”⁷⁹ Today, a number of hedgerow plants are considered by residents to be an integral part of the village’s “cultural landscape” because it is believed they

⁷⁸ Department of Landscape Architecture, *Neuberghthal Landscape Study: An Inventory of Street Trees and Hedgerows* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 1997), 20.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

have had an unbroken chain of continued propagation.⁸⁰

A large variety of so-called heritage plants in Neuberghal remain, most of which are grown in residents' gardens. The village was established in 1876 by a group of related families (the Hamms and Klippensteins) who settled on a block of six contiguous quarter sections. Fields and pastures were divided into strips of ten to fifteen acres, running east and west, and distributed equally between the villagers. This style of settlement represented an "open field economy," whereby cropland was joined together, yet each family had a private farmyard. These long, narrow farmsteads ran perpendicular to the village street and most villagers built housebarns, a traditional style of Mennonite architecture, which housed humans and animals all under the same roof. The arrangement of the cropland allowed individual farmers to better share their workloads. The architectural organization of the housebarn afforded warmth and protection for people and livestock, which was particularly important during the harsh prairie winters, for it allowed for the arduous, daily care of animals without having to go outside. Straight rows of trees were planted along the village street to protect the village from the wind, and to define and beautify the village. In Manitoba, Mennonite settlers most commonly selected cottonwoods (a variety of large poplar that each June produces seeds enclosed in a snow-white, cottony casing), and Manitoba maple trees for planting. Flower gardens, fruit orchards, and vegetable gardens were located on the sides of individual yards.⁸¹ Among these plants are a number of old and

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Tom Lee, et al "Neuberghal Street Village National Historic Site: Commemorative Integrity Statement," *Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada* (1999), 1–18; Frieda E. Klippenstein, *Neuberghal National Historic Site: A Cultural Landscape History* (Western Canada Service Centre: Parks Canada, 1997).

towering cottonwood trees, daylilies, goutweed, hollyhocks, hops (which was traditionally used for baking bread and brewing beer), lilacs, peonies, raspberries, and yellow roses.⁸²

Though traditions of seed collection and storage are important within the narratives of West Reserve community members, and seem to have been among the important rituals in rural late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century households, the rise in popularity of Canadian mail order catalogues most likely altered the seed-saving and exchanging customs in many Mennonite villages and towns on the West Reserve, and thus complicate the community memory. While it seems a marked contrast to the time-honoured traditions of seed saving and transfer in the narratives of Mennonite immigration and settlement in southern Manitoba, not to mention the ethno-religious emphasis on self-sufficiency and simplicity detailed in this chapter, for those Mennonites who could afford to purchase seeds or for those keen to try growing new varieties of vegetables and flowers, companies such as Eaton's, Simpson's, and McFayden's, which distributed catalogues to rural Canadian locales from the late 1880s onward, may have provided these options.⁸³ As early as 1884, books and catalogues such as Robert McNeil's *Practical Test on Gardening in Manitoba* encouraged pioneer gardening as a central component of settling distinctly European landscapes on the prairies, for the means of beautification, familiarity, and recreation. McNeil's guide states, "We cannot too earnestly recommend the growing of flowers. In the push and hurry of the first years of a settler's life these ornaments of our homes are apt to be neglected; but it will not be found wasted time to give a little attention to these old friends. Their familiar faces smiling on us from day to day will cheer us and make us more contented

⁸² Department of Landscape Architecture, *Neubergthal Landscape Study*, 21–22.

⁸³ See Canadian Museum of History, "The story of the mail order catalogue," accessed 26 February 2016, <http://www.historymuseum.ca/cmhc/exhibitions/cpm/catalog/cat0006e.shtml>.

with the new home and life which opens before us in a new country; while the care of them will provide a recreation after the toils of the day.”⁸⁴

Eaton’s, which operated a central factory and supply outlet in Winnipeg, marketed a number of specialized catalogues for western Canada, such as the 1898 *Klondike Catalogue* and the 1903 *Settlers Catalogue*. The *Eaton’s* seed catalogue at one time a specialized mailshot, or brochure, quickly became part of the annual distribution roster.⁸⁵ Cross-checking the availability of particular flowers and vegetables in a selection of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century seed catalogues with those written and oral reports on what was traditionally grown in Mennonite gardens on the West Reserve certainly gives credence to local conviction that some seeds were brought by Mennonites from Russia, saved, and passed down between generations. On the other hand, the availability or lack of particular plant varieties in seed catalogues may challenge us to reread West Reserve community memory about the 1870s immigration and settlement. That is, the important role played by nostalgia in narratives of successful prairie settlement by way of both cultural and literal transplantation must be considered. The use of seed catalogues at once strengthens those narratives of Mennonites bringing watermelons, muskmelons, cucumbers, sunflowers, and potatoes on their journey to Canada in the 1870s, and raises questions about the precision of narratives that assuredly place these varieties in the historical memory of settler gardens.

The 1898 *Eaton’s Spring and Summer Catalogue* lists only bean, beet, carrot, corn, onion, turnip, tomato, and radish seeds as the extent of vegetable varieties available for purchase, apart from common herbs. No watermelons, cucumbers, or sunflowers are listed, yet dahlia bulbs

⁸⁴ Robert McNeil, *Practical Tests on Gardening for Manitoba* (Winnipeg: Wilson, 1884), 31.

⁸⁵ Canadian Museum of History, “The story of the mail order catalogue,” accessed 26 February, 2016, <http://www.historymuseum.ca/cmhc/exhibitions/cpm/catalog/cat0006e.shtml>.

were available for purchase in the same catalogue, which adds a layer of complexity to popular opinion that it was Mennonites who introduced the flower to the prairies.⁸⁶ By the turn of the century, seeds were listed for purchase that many of the narratives above deem common in Mennonite gardens prior to and during the early years of their Canadian settlement, long before seed catalogues were distributed in the rural prairie region. The tall sunflower is listed, for example, in a spring 1899 *Simpson's Spring and Summer Catalogue*, while a 1908 *Eaton's Spring and Summer Catalogue* lists cucumber, muskmelon, and four varieties of watermelon. By 1936, both kohlrabi and dill, two garden plants that were common in Mennonite gardens, were available for mail order purchase in the nation-wide catalogue.⁸⁷

As was revealed by several participants in Fuchs's oral history interviews for Steinbach's MHV Garden Project, catalogues were more commonly used in the mid-twentieth century to round out the supply of saved seeds in some households. Significantly, even those women who claimed that their mothers or grandmothers did *not* purchase seeds discussed their families' common use of seed catalogues. The varied nature of these narratives, I believe, provides opportunity for an analysis of the affective, ethnic, and religious reasons why seed saving might have been understood to be a superior practice to purchasing seeds, both historically and in the present-day memory and retelling of family garden traditions. Women like Norma Giesbrecht, who grew up in Neubergthal in the 1940s and 50s, recalled her own mother's excitement when

⁸⁶ See for example Ronald Rees, *New and Naked Land: Making the Prairies Home* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1988), 77; Monique Roy-Sole, "Street Smart: Villages of farms that line a single street dot the Manitoba landscape, the legacy of Mennonite immigrants who refused to settle on isolated homesteads," *Canadian Geographic* 121 (2001): 82.

⁸⁷ Robert Simpson Co. Limited, *Spring & Summer Catalogue* 62 (Toronto, 1899), 107; T. Eaton Co. Limited, *Spring and Summer* 85 (Toronto, 1908), 304; T. Eaton Co., *Spring and Summer* (Toronto, 1936), 194a, 194b, 194d. Library and Archives Canada, Canadian Mail Order Catalogues, accessed 7 November 2016, <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/postal-heritage-philately/canadian-mail-order-catalogues/Pages/canadian-mail-order-catalogues.aspx?PHPSESSID=56r030hfruboeq1uev0ql7cqc6>.

the *Eaton's Spring and Summer Catalogue* arrived by post. "She would always order early in spring, when the Eaton's catalogue came out. She would order all her seeds—those that she didn't keep from the year before," explained Norma. Though Norma's mother typically collected beans, watermelon, muskmelon, and some varieties of flower seeds from her garden produce for replanting, "all the other seeds and occasionally some new kinds that she found interesting, she would always order through Eaton's. I remember that as a kid, when she would put in that big order for seeds from the catalogue, the Eaton's catalogue. That was so much fun."⁸⁸ In a group interview, Liz Toews similarly recalled to Fuchs that her mother "used to order quite a bit of seeds from the McFayden catalogue. Pumpkins she ordered every year." As a rebuttal to Liz's comment, Bettie Hiebert interjected and said that her mother "dried that," indicating to some extent that the process of seed saving was superior to ordering from a catalogue. With a cautious response, Liz corrected her initial reflections on the McFayden's seed catalogue and told the group that while she did not remember, her mother "must have dried seeds." Audrey Toews's mother also purchased garden seeds in the store. "But something like those beans," she explained, referring to a heritage variety discussed earlier in the interview, "I don't remember ever being able to buy them in the store." Prompted by Fuchs's rather leading reflection, "it makes you wonder if the beans weren't brought over, if you can't find them in a store," Audrey mused further about the beans: "I wouldn't doubt it at all. Because I *know* they brought seeds with them."⁸⁹ The varied nature of these narratives, I believe, provides opportunity for an analysis of the affective, ethnic, and religious reasons why seed saving might have been understood to be a superior practice to purchasing seeds, both historically and in the present day memory

⁸⁸ Giesbrecht, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 21 October 2004.

⁸⁹ Hiebert, Peters, Toews, and Toews, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 23 November 2004.

and retelling of family garden traditions.

Settler Gardens & Colonial Spaces

Stories of certainty, together with material and written evidence of seed transfer and propagation suggest a common belief that prior to the arrival of the Mennonites, the Canadian prairies were a vast, inhospitable wilderness. They also suggest a constant negotiation with homesickness, cultural identity, and homemaking within a set of ethno-religious landscaping desires. Yet, as Mary's arrowheads and the initial Mennonite delegate's reflections on the land being occupied by Métis farmers together reveal, there is also historical knowledge in the community that the land was not empty, and that there were Indigenous agricultural people here before Mennonite arrival. These prairie Mennonite gardening stories, seeds, and landscapes exist within a complex settler-colonial longing for genesis and rootedness. Examples of such a linkage of emotion and horticulture from other colonial contexts and immigrant traditions abound.

Catherine Parr Traill, for example, was an English-Canadian settler, naturalist, and renowned writer of early rural Upper Canadian life. In a letter to her mother on 18 April 1833, she details her relocation to a newly built log cabin with her husband, near Peterborough. Following a description of the house and its simple furnishings, she turns to a discussion of her hopes for creating a landscaped area at her new home. "I am anxiously looking forward to the spring," she writes, "that I may get a garden laid out in front of the house; as I mean to cultivate some of the native fruits and flowers, which I am sure, will improve greatly by culture." The fruits of the "backwoods," among which Traill noted were "high bush cranberries, choke cherries, blackberries, wild plums, raspberries, and strawberries," while used frequently by the "Indians" and "squaws," were also used by settlers to make "admirable preserves" that stand "on

the tea-tables in most of the settlers' houses." Despite Traill's interest and appreciation of local flora, the letter reveals her longing for the familiar landscapes of England. This is further illustrated in her desire to transform the "wild" surroundings into something more recognizable, like the gardens in her memory. Later in the correspondence, Traill requests that when her mother first sends a parcel she must

not forget to enclose flower-seeds, and the stones of plums, damsons, bullace, pips of the best kinds of apples, in the orchard and garden, as apples may be raised here from seed, which will bear very good fruit without being grafted; the latter however are finer in size and flavour. I should be grateful for a few nuts from our beautiful old stock-nut trees. Dear old trees! how many gambols have we had in their branches when I was as light of spirit and as free from care as the squirrels that perched among the topmost boughs above us. ... I am very desirous of having the seeds of our wild primrose and sweet violet preserved for me; I long to introduce them in our meadows and gardens. Pray let the cottage-children collect some.⁹⁰

Traill's nostalgia is palpable in this letter, particularly with reference to her desire for a cultivated garden filled with familiar fruits and flowers. While she demonstrates a keen interest in the native fruits of the Ontario backcountry, she is also concerned with creating a little England, thus improving, cultivating, refining, and making the fruits familiar so that they might be better suited to an English kitchen garden planted with seeds from home. Her efforts to envisage an English garden against the backdrop of a backwoods wilderness in Upper Canada during the first half of the nineteenth century represents one minor example in a very long history of landscape construction—designing distinctly familiar places in unfamiliar locales.

⁹⁰ Catherine Parr Traill, *The Backwoods of Canada*, ed. Michael A. Peterman (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 103–4, 107–8.

If applied to the case of Mennonite settlement in Manitoba, stories of certainty, together with material and written evidence of seed transfer and propagation, suggest a common belief that prior to the arrival of the Mennonites, the Canadian Prairies were a vast, inhospitable wilderness. Yet, when one looks more intently at the negotiations of homesickness, cultural identity, and homemaking in Traill's landscaping desires, these prairie Mennonite gardening stories, seeds, and landscapes as a complex settler-colonial longing for genesis and rootedness can be seen. Such a reading of Traill's letter, or the nostalgic quality of Mennonite stories of seed saving is inspired by the work of cultural historian Paul Carter. In his book on the exploration and place-naming efforts in Botany Bay, Australia, through an analysis of British explorer James Cook's (1728–1779) travel diaries and maps, Carter elucidates Cook's explorations as the transformation of space into historical place, or the confusion of settler "routes with roots."⁹¹ More specifically, in writing about the emergence of Botany Bay as a discovered and mapped locale, Carter's work challenges historians to write against a particular place's "mythic imaginings," and to consider "the lacuna left by imperial history," which typically understands the settlement and construction of landscapes to be "the emergence of historical order and narrative clarity," and "nullifies time's cultural peculiarities." We must not treat "the historical space as 'natural,' passive, objectively there,"⁹² argues Carter, but rather, our work must seek to locate the "spatial forms and fantasies through which a culture declare[d] its presence."⁹³

Historians must seriously consider the experiences of the explorers and settlers, and the processes through which they chose directions, applied names, imagined goals and inhabited a space—consider their "active engagement with the road and the horizon"—while also keeping in

⁹¹ Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), xviii, xxii, xxiii.

⁹² *Ibid.*, xxi.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, xxii

mind that the documents recording these historical moments are illusions of picturesque completeness.⁹⁴ We are challenged by Carter's theoretical angle to read the stories and documents not for their description of the facts of settlement, but rather for the experience of settlement and the reckoning of an unfamiliar space, and to critically analyze the nostalgic memory of the places from which immigrants came. In so doing, we take notice of the fact that the longing to plant gardens with seeds from home represents an attempt at refashioning what seemed to be an ahistorical space into a settled place with a rootedness in a very particular fantasy of past and future. It is here that individual understandings of a historical beginning take root, and an ephemeral landscape is transformed to suit an imagination of home and place.

A recent documentary outlining garden history in Australia and New Zealand combines Carter's theoretical perspective with its proposition that establishing a garden might best be understood by its creators as the symbolic beginning of a "modern nation." Yet, as the documentary demonstrates, settler gardens in Australia and New Zealand were (as the garden was for Traill) both a hedonistic pursuit meant to beautify an indigenous or drab landscape, and a deliberate re-creation that conjured the homeland. Upon the settlers' arrival, requests were sent back to England for familiar plants and even songbirds. Eventually, flowerbeds and borders, vegetable gardens, herb gardens, and orchards re-created the style and appearance of English gardens. Such efforts, claims British documentary host Monty Don, represent "a kind of homesickness for the homeland they would never see again," or an attempt to relieve "a brutally harsh pioneer existence." Yet, the formality and topiary applied to these colonial spaces also represented an attempt to control the perceived hostility that lay beyond the edges of the gardens.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

Gardens in eighteenth-century Australia and New Zealand were beautiful fantasies, claims Don, and settlers worked to bring these fantasies into reality.⁹⁵

In her article on Creole elite James Douglas in late nineteenth-century Victoria, British Columbia, Canadian historian Adele Perry takes a similar analytical angle to that of Carter's. She explores the "layered politics of home" represented by Douglas's garden on Vancouver Island. By highlighting an interaction between Douglas and another traveller on a journey to France wherein Douglas shares a detailed description of the plants in his beloved garden on Vancouver Island, and is asked by his listener whether the garden is in England, Perry argues that Douglas's reckoning of home was not a "simple embrace of metropolitan places and values" nor a "rejection of the periphery." Rather, for Douglas, a home and garden on Vancouver Island, built with a keen eye to British tradition, represented a "complicated articulation" of a "personal and political space of identification, loyalty, and affect,"⁹⁶ which challenged "knowledges rooted in the schism between the old and new worlds."⁹⁷ Similarly, Jill Casid argues that "the contested terrain of empire" is inextricable from practices of landscaping that emerged in eighteenth-century imperial locales.⁹⁸ What these scholars are suggesting is that claims to land, plant breeding, seed transfer, and the aesthetic and imaginative practices of refashioning indigenous and appropriated terrain, landscaping operated as an "imperial mode that defined and transformed the 'heartlands' of nations," and was at the centre of determinations to control world

⁹⁵ *Around the World in 80 Gardens, Episode Two: Australia and New Zealand*, Presented by Monty Don, Directed by Mark Flowers, Produced by Kerry Richardson (BBC, 2008).

⁹⁶ Adele Perry, "'Is Your Garden in England, Sir?' Nation, Empire, and Home in James Douglas' Archive," *History Workshop Journal* 70 (Fall 2010): 79.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 78

⁹⁸ Jill H. Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xxi.

markets in vegetable, sugar, and rare plant species commodities.⁹⁹ Simultaneous efforts to reproduce recognizable metropole settings through the transfer and adaptation of plants to colony sites, and to bring plant species native to the colony to imperial countryside, landscaping demarcated and extended the boundaries of colonial imagination.¹⁰⁰ The case of the Mennonites on the West Reserve tells a similar tale.

Conclusion

Historian Lyle Dick argues that the events of the year 1870, while central in numerous ways to Manitoba's history, were particularly pivotal to the future of horticulture in the West. Farming and gardening in Red River Settlement was overshadowed by active efforts to beautify rural and urban landscapes among immigrants to the region. As a result, a specific kind of horticulture was promoted as a scientific, moral, and political tool for the betterment of Canadian society.¹⁰¹ At least five hundred years before the arrival of Europeans, Indigenous peoples throughout the prairie region had extensive and intricate knowledge of the growing habits and availability of native plants and berries, which were used for both medicine and food. Many Indigenous peoples also cultivated varieties of corn, beans, squash, and sunflowers. During the nineteenth century, European fur traders, colonists, and Métis residents farmed and planted gardens for the purposes of self-sustenance and produce for sale or trade at various posts across the prairie region. Between 1870 and 1930, however, the development of government programs, community farm organizations, agricultural colleges, and horticultural societies promoted an

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, xxi.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 49

¹⁰¹ Lyle Dick, "The Greening of the West: Horticulture on the Canadian Prairies, 1870–1930," *Manitoba History* 31 (1996), accessed 31 March 2017, http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/31/prairiehorticulture.shtml

increase of vegetable, flower, and tree culture in the province as ethically and aesthetically supplementary to the grain economy which was also established during this time. These programs generated the “systematic promotion in support of sustained settlement by Euro-North Americans and Europeans,” which further encouraged the establishment of a new, white, middle-class society in Western Canada.¹⁰² It was in this setting that Mennonites were invited to settle the southern Manitoba prairie landscape.

In his foundational study of the history of horticulture in Manitoba, president of the Western Canadian Society for Horticulture P. J. Peters reminds readers that the early Mennonite emigrants were aware of the southern Manitoba landscape’s vast, uncultivated attributes. They prepared accordingly by bringing flower and vegetable seeds from Russia, by picking up young trees for planting on their assigned parcels of land as they made their slow journey up the Red River by riverboat from South Dakota, and by adapting their lifestyles to suit their surroundings.¹⁰³ Peters suggests looking at the “living evidence,” and as remains notable today throughout the former West Reserve, Mennonite village communities also planted local varieties of fruit trees on their yards upon settlement. Plum, chokecherry, and saskatoon berry bushes were transplanted from nearby brushes, and Mennonite recipes were amended to include these new fruits. What is more, the Mennonite contribution to seed culture and production in Manitoba cannot be ignored—it is a further indication of their preparedness for settlement on the prairies. As Peters notes, “a number of Canadian muskmelon and watermelon varieties can be traced back to the seeds brought to this country and to the seeds saved from year-to-year by the Mennonites. And, their greatest contribution has been in the introduction and production of sunflower seeds

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ P. J. Peters, *A Century of Horticulture in Manitoba*, 399, 14.

for oil.”¹⁰⁴

Mennonite community members hold historical writings, physical evidence, memories, and legends of seed transfer and intergenerational propagation in complex unison. Together, materials and stories reflect the efforts to make sense of their ancestors’ group migration, to root them in a particular, and historical ethno-religious tradition. Their participation in a nation-wide settler-colonial project of modernity is redeemed by placing their landscaping efforts at the centre of the prairie’s genesis. Retired teacher Shaun Friesen recalls that his great-grandparents brought peach pits and mulberry seeds with them on their journey from Russia to Manitoba with the intention to start an orchard and silkworm culture upon settlement.¹⁰⁵ Friesen’s insights hold that these seeds contained meaning for the emigrants who carefully packaged them for the long journey, and continue to hold within them a distinct, historical sense of peoplehood. “Seeds contain life,” he pondered. Seeds offered Mennonites a chance at a new, yet familiar life in an unknown place within the “trauma of their migration.”¹⁰⁶ It is a multifaceted trauma, Friesen believes, that Mennonites have not yet overcome. Friesen’s observations and the complexity of community stories divulged by these observations align with literature scholar Robert Pogue Harrison’s own musings. In his book *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition*, Harrison notes that human beings are not intended to look too closely at the tumult of history. Rather than seeing this as a shortcoming, he suggests that “our reluctance to let history’s realities petrify us

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 401. See also W. J. Carlyle, “Mennonite Agriculture in Manitoba,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 13/2 (1981): 92–97. According to Carlyle, sunflowers were not grown on a commercial basis in Manitoba until the 1940s as part of a nation-wide program in self-sufficiency in vegetable oils. Mennonite farmers were approached to grow sunflowers as a cash crop, because they were “known to have introduced sunflowers to Manitoba from Russia and continued to grow them in gardens for domestic uses.” Not long after Mennonite farmers were approached to experiment in sunflowers, a co-operative seed crushing plant was established in 1946 in Altona.

¹⁰⁵ Shaun Friesen, interview with the author, 10 February 2015.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

underlies much of what makes human life bearable. ... If ever history were to become everything,” he continues, “we would all succumb to madness.” The garden, for Harrison and perhaps for the Mennonite settlers of the 1870s and their descendants, “whether real or imaginary ... has provided sanctuary from the tumult of history.” And yet, as this chapter demonstrates, gardens created by humans, whether real or imaginary, “however self-enclosed their world may be, invariably take their stand in history, if only as counterforce to history’s deleterious drives. ... It is because we are thrown into history,” argues Harrison, “that we must cultivate our garden. ... History without gardens would be a wasteland. A garden severed from history would be superfluous.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Robert Pogue Harrison, *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), ix, x.

**Chapter Two:
*Boom onn Wartle (Tree and To Root)***

It is not so much time that myths obliterate, but particular effects of time. ... Westerners and others ... seek to reveal time's presence in the unique ways each constitutes the mutual arrangements of landscapes and myths. However, in a world influenced by colonial and post-colonial relations such landscapes are inherently contested, where diverse views of power contend.¹

Our roots can be anywhere and we can survive, because if you think about it, we take our roots with us.²

Lyle Dick suggests that tree planting coincided with efforts to create a distinctly European agricultural space throughout Red River Settlement, after Manitoba entered Confederation, and with little wonder. For many European settlers in the south central part of the province, the open and seemingly featureless prairie grasslands induced deep-seated anxieties about becoming lost, or being caught in the open during a prairie fire or storm.³ With encouragement from immigration agents like Jacob Shantz along with the memory of their successful horticultural efforts on the Russian steppes, Mennonites were among the first

¹ Eric Hirsch, "Landscape, Myth and Time," *Journal of Material Culture* 11/1(2006): 153.

² Gertrude Stein with John Hyde Preston, "A Conversation with Gertrude Stein," by John Hyde Preston in *Gertrude Stein Remembered*, ed. Linda Simon (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 157.

³ Lyle Dick, "The Greening of the West: Horticulture on the Canadian Prairies, 1870–1930," *Manitoba History* 31 (1996), accessed 20 February 2016, http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/31/prairiehorticulture.shtml. See also Margery Fee, "Literature in English: Theory and Criticism," *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (July 2006): accessed 24 June 2017, <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/literature-in-english-theory-and-criticism>. One of the most common themes in Canadian literature and cinema has been the "garrison mentality," which was perhaps coined by Northrop Frye. Frye argued that the natural world in Canada inspired "deep terror" which led to "a garrison mentality." This was the threat of a "huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting," that promoted particular morals and human behaviours.

newcomers to “demonstrate the viability of tree culture in areas of open prairie.”⁴ Mennonites were also unique in that they established single-street agricultural villages lined with trees like cottonwoods and Manitoba maples, transplanted from nearby riverbanks. By 1883, Manitoba’s 9,077 farmers were cultivating 120,000 hectares of land, of which 1,400 hectares were devoted to trees, gardens, and orchards. The importance of tree culture on the prairie was officially recognized in 1886 with the proclamation of Arbor Day.⁵ Yet, “in this vast, often sparsely treed region,” Dick aptly notes, “settlers planted trees for a variety of reasons” beyond aesthetic enhancement and the protection of their farmsteads from wind. Trees also offered newcomers a sense of psychological security, separating what was considered wild from the familiar.⁶ In colonial spaces, the western Canadian prairie included, migration and settlement worked to create an affective European landscape: shading the disagreeable, and displaying what was beautiful.⁷

Today, trees stand out mostly as reminders of European settlement on the flat agricultural land formerly known as the West Reserve. Sometimes trees draw attention to waterways, but most often they signify over one hundred years of continuous, European landscape construction by way of village, former village, town, shelter belt, or active or abandoned farmstead. For this reason, trees have been described as the most “conspicuous” element of Mennonite settlement on the West Reserve, an area identified by poet Robert Kroetsch as the most “inscribed landscape”

⁴ Ronald Rees, *New and Naked Land: Making the Prairies Home* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1988), 36.

⁵ See Gordon Goldsborough, “Greening the treeless plain,” *Manitoba History* 53 (2006), accessed 16 February 2017, http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/53/arborday.shtml.

⁶ Lyle Dick, “The Greening of the West,” accessed 20 February 2016, http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/31/prairiehorticulture.shtml.

⁷ Ibid.

in Canadian history.⁸ If, however, as archaeologist Christopher Tilley writes, “landscapes are structures of feeling, palimpsests of past and present ... places of terror, exile, slavery and of the contemplative sublime,”⁹ and if “every spatial practice traces a particular kind of narrative,”¹⁰ the presence of trees also plays a conflicted role in the history of Mennonites on the West Reserve. The application of critical lenses to the settler-colonial project of Manitoba prairie settlement and the contemporary Mennonite memory of tree planting on the prairies reveal a variety of contested social and political agendas and embodied narratives about landscape, homemaking, and identity.

Tilley further suggests that if we want to understand the “powers of place today,” our work must alternate between the global and the local, the present and the historic. While landscapes “have their own distinctive and intrinsic qualities,” he argues, “the ‘inside’ qualities of place are also constructed, and changed, through processes that are beyond them and quite remote.”¹¹ Ideas about landscape, Tilley continues, “are inextricably bound up with the politics of identity ... [and] relate to whom we want to live with and whom we want to exclude, who belongs and who does not, to issues of class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality.”¹² Moreover, Tilley believes that perceptions people have of themselves and the landscapes in which they live are foregrounded in and understood by the tension between present and past, the local and global. For Mennonites on the West Reserve, trees thus point to overlapping and complicated histories

⁸ Peter J. Priess, *Neubergthal National Historic Site: The Cultural Resources of Neubergthal National Historic Site, an Archaeological Perspective* (Winnipeg: Cultural Resource Management and Western Canada Service Centre, 1998), 19.

⁹ Christopher Tilley, “Introduction: Identity, Place, Landscape and Heritage,” *Journal of Material Culture* 11/1 (2006): 14.

¹⁰ Jill H. Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 55.

¹¹ Tilley, “Introduction,” 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, 15.

of the formation and maintenance of ethnic, religious, and social identity over the course of several centuries.¹³

Mennonites arrived on the Canadian Prairies with intimate knowledge of and experience with tree culture. Throughout the nineteenth century in New Russia, agricultural reformers had overseen Mennonite efforts to transform the steppes into a model farm region with thousands upon thousands of domestic trees. In Manitoba, Mennonites maintained their tree-planting culture. While planting trees offered a practical means of shelter from the wind and harsh prairie weather in all seasons, particularly in a place with very few trees in sight, such efforts also imposed a particular order and meaning on the prairie landscape. And, as Canadian historian Frances Swyripa demonstrates, prairie immigrant land possession, the formation and memory of ethno-religious identity, and the construction of places such as yards demarcated by trees, offered subsequent generations access to founding stories and group mythologies of rootedness in place. These stories and group mythologies denote the immigrant settler generation's physical and emotional intimacy with the land and are maintained by continued emotional attachment to particular places and materials on the prairies. For Mennonites on the West Reserve, trees invoke the immigrant generation and their connectedness to the land—remembered, imagined, and mythologized.¹⁴

Yet, West Reserve history and community memory relating to trees also speak to a tenuous chronicle of interaction with Manitoba's Indigenous peoples and its native environment. As historian Gerhard Ens aptly reminds us, at the passing of the Manitoba Act in 1870, the Métis population of ten thousand in southern Manitoba was guaranteed 1.4 million acres of land “in

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Frances Swyripa, *Storied Landscapes: Ethno-Religious Identity and the Canadian Prairies* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2010), 74.

recognition of their aboriginal rights to the land ... which were to be laid out in reserves and allotted to individual Métis.”¹⁵ By 1877, however, no land had been allotted to individual Métis, and anyone else squatting on the designated land had been allowed to remain. Frustrated by this delay, and with the increasingly popular belief that the Métis were a detriment to the country and its modern progress, many Métis were forced to disperse, “losing their land even before they had seen it.”¹⁶ Those who remained were eventually allocated smaller, less desirable parcels of land. At the same time and in the same setting, Mennonites had been granted two large land reserves—encompassing some of the land promised to Manitoba’s Métis inhabitants—and were allowed to settle them immediately, despite the fact that the land had not yet been fully surveyed or legally reserved.

With this colonial history in mind, landscape construction on the West Reserve takes on new meaning. Settlers planted rows of trees, marking boundary lines that “signified imperial power in shaping patterns most immediately associated with European design.”¹⁷ In this chapter, I draw attention to some of the complicated, and at times contrasting, narratives about trees in the history of Mennonites in Manitoba. Focusing on these narratives about tree culture on the West Reserve disrupts the Mennonite immigrant community narrative about a historically rooted and inward-looking sense of peoplehood. Drawing attention to the psychological, emotional, and spiritual implications of tree planting on the West Reserve from the immigrant generation (1870s) to the present is an attempt to offer a new view of this complicated story of Mennonite

¹⁵ Gerhard J. Ens, *The Rural Municipality of Rhineland, 1884–1984* (Altona: Rural Municipality of Rhineland, 1984), 11. See also D. N. Sprague, *Canada and the Métis, 1869–1885* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988); Gerhard J. Ens, *Homeland to Hinterland: The Changing Worlds of the Red River Métis in the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); Nicole St-Onge, Carolyn Podruchny, and Brenda Macdougall, *Contours of a People: Métis Family, Mobility, and History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014).

¹⁶ Ens, *The Rural Municipality of Rhineland*, 11, 13.

¹⁷ Casid, *Sowing Empire*, 201.

migration, settlement, and interaction with an environment once believed to be foreign, frightening, and wild.¹⁸

From Russia to Manitoba

The late eighteenth-century migration of thirty thousand Mennonites from what was formerly West Prussia to Russia's newly acquired territory in present-day southern Ukraine, during the reign of Catherine the Great (1762–1796), occurred within the context of a much larger imperial project. The uncultivated grasslands of the steppe were viewed as both a “groundspring of national wealth and a tabula rasa upon which to create new moral orders and shape new national identities.”¹⁹ Accordingly, the Russian imperial recruitment of model colonists—Germanic peasants, Mennonites among them—known to be skilled in areas of trades, crafts, and agriculture, took priority. Catherine intended to transform this new Russian steppe land into a productive agricultural landscape. Russian and Ukrainian peasants, alongside the

¹⁸ Joseph Wiebe's article, “Mennonite Environmental History, Canadian Colonialism, and Settlement in Manitoba,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 35 (2017): 111–126, is an example of recent scholarship that carefully problematizes the interactions between Mennonite immigrants of the 1870s and Indigenous peoples on the prairies. Wiebe argues that “Mennonites’ religiously facilitated land-based identity was competitive with indigenous relations with land,” and that “an environmental history of Mennonite settlement cannot [therefore] be separated from the colonial history of Canada.” In the most recent issue of *Preservings* 36 (2016), scholars Gerhard J. Ens and Darren Courchene similarly raise important questions about Mennonite and Indigenous interpretations of land, historical understandings of Treaty No. 1, and Mennonite-Indigenous encounter on the Manitoba prairie. All three scholars suggest that the history of interaction between immigrant settlers and Indigenous peoples in Manitoba cannot be properly understood unless the accounts of Indigenous peoples are also taken into consideration. These scholars ask us to consider, for example, mapping out Métis requests for lands overtop of maps indicating lands reserved for European immigrants, or studying the interpretations of Treaties of both Indigenous peoples and Canadian officials in order to more fully understand their discrepancies.

¹⁹ Ingrid I. Epp, Harvey L. Dyck, and John R. Staples, *Transformation on the Southern Ukrainian Steppe: Letters and Papers of Johann Cornies, Volume 1: 1812–1835* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), ix.

incoming German-speaking migrants, were relocated to swiftly achieve this conversion. The Mennonites brought conventions of hard work and a deeply rooted Christian Anabaptist faith, which among the more conservative settlers promoted tenets of withdrawal from secular engagements. The terms of Mennonite settlement in Russia were recorded in a *Privilegium* (an official document defining the rights given to Mennonites based on their religious beliefs), which guaranteed them not only exemption from military service and the right to freely practice their religion (which was offered all settler immigrants), but also economic liberties on their allocated land, certain tax exemptions and their inheritance protocols. Mennonites regarded this *Privilegium* as a “fundamental, God-willed guarantee” of their rights in Russia,²⁰ and modeled their communities on the ethical rules and church governance of those they had left behind in the Vistula Delta region of present-day northern Poland.

Some scholars argue that Mennonites were already divided in their approaches towards community isolation in the Vistula Delta—that is, the more pietistic and hence more individualistic Mennonites are said to have called for deeper engagement with the world, while the more traditionalist and communitarian advocated greater separation from the wider world. Other scholars suggest that it was the conditions Mennonites encountered upon arrival in New Russia that shaped a spiritually withdrawn and isolationist identity amongst most Mennonites. While the steppes offered rich agricultural soil, the harsh weather conditions in winter and summer, as well as the multitude of unfamiliar ethno-religious groups, languages, and lifeways in the vicinity, contributed to their collective and inward-looking character.²¹ Mennonites thus relied upon figures like Johann Cornies (1789–1848), an ambitious Mennonite and controversial agrarian reformer, as well as president of a newly constituted Agricultural Association, to assist

²⁰ Ibid., xxxi.

²¹ Ibid., xxxiv.

them in understanding the Tsarist Russian empire in order to sustain their role as model settlers in the eyes of Russian governmental authorities.²² Andrei M. Fadeev's letter to Cornies in July 1831 demonstrates the palpable tension between imperial efforts at creating model settlers and plans to improve not only the cropland, but also Mennonite horticultural traditions. Fadeev writes to Cornies:

Mennonite settlers already distinguish themselves from others with their special dedication to several branches of agriculture new to this area. ... Their villages are well arranged and are kept in good condition, as are most of the agricultural establishments in these villages. They pursue a quiet, peaceful way of life and their behaviour is highly regarded. This [approach] has earned them the praise of the government and of all visitors to the region. ... The Mennonites, however, can accomplish still more by making special efforts to achieve the highest possible level of perfection. This [effort] would justify the government's expectations in the fullest measure, and demonstrate that their significant advantages over other settlers have not been given to them in vain. ... Mennonite communities in general, and every individual in particular, must henceforth give preferential and continuous attention to the development of orchard- and forest-tree culture. Both of these branches can help lay the foundation of prosperity for Mennonites and their descendants, and visibly distinguish their villages from others.²³

Cornies assisted Mennonites in undertaking modernized agricultural methods, refined their economic and political engagements, and thus encouraged them to live up to the expectations of their success as participants in the expansion of the Russian empire. He also became a key figure in transforming everyday Mennonite life with the introduction and improvement of traditions in landscaping, shelter belts, orchards, and kitchen gardens.

With Cornies' assistance, guidelines were created for the establishment and maintenance

²² Ibid., xxx.

²³ Ibid., 227–8.

of tree culture in Mennonite communities in New Russia. Mennonite efforts in tree and garden culture were to be focused on “limiting empty space” in both Chortitza and Molotschna colonies, the two main Mennonite districts, by encouraging the planting of trees—fruit trees, mulberry bushes, and complete forests.²⁴ Cornies believed that Mennonites were destined to be model farmers, “paragons of progress and industry,” and “when faced with the promise of improvement, would accept reform without question.”²⁵ Though over the years he received criticism for his allegiance to the state above the ethno-religious interests of Mennonites, he has nevertheless been labeled by scholars of Mennonite history in Russia, such as James Urry, as a “prophet of progress,”²⁶ and as somebody at the “forefront of the economic and social transformation of the [Mennonite] colonies [in Russia] in the three decades after 1820.”²⁷

When Mennonites first arrived on the New Russian grasslands, there were few trees. By 1855, approximately seven million fruit and shade trees grew in the region, ranging from mulberry, apple, pear, plum, peach, cherry, walnut, and hazelnut trees, to poplar, willow, acacia, and coniferous trees. There were also grape vines for viticulture.²⁸ During his lifetime, Cornies’ personal model farm, Yushanlee, was not only an example of a successful tree culture for Mennonite communities, but also a nursery where Mennonite farmers could purchase seedlings of tested and approved tree species. On a practical level, Mennonite orchards and tree groves in New Russia provided food for the community, introduced seasonal variety to family diets, ensured future generations had access to fuel and lumber, and aided in protecting the villages

²⁴ Ibid., 232.

²⁵ James Urry, *None but Saints: The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia 1789–1899* (New York: Hyperion Press, 1989), 137.

²⁶ Ibid., 108.

²⁷ Ibid., 109.

²⁸ Tracy Ruta Fuchs, *Beauty and Sustenance: A History of Mennonite Gardens and Orchards in Russia and Manitoba* (Steinbach: MHV, 2007), 17.

from snowdrifts and strong winds. The village economy also benefitted from fruit tree and mulberry tree (silkworm) culture as produce and silk could be sold in neighbouring communities or city centres. Shade trees were considered equally important for sustaining beauty, safety, and shelter in Mennonite steppe communities, wherein families could gather and children could play in peace. Cornies stressed uniformity, order, and tidiness as part of Mennonite tree culture, thus trees were evenly spaced and the soil between them was kept weeded and black.²⁹ These specific traditions in tree culture—including an inward-focused approach to village structure alongside efforts to act as model settlers—were transferred to Manitoba in the late nineteenth century as a changing political climate threatened the Mennonite *Privilegium* in the Russian empire.

This was the tree culture Mennonites transplanted to Manitoba in the 1870s. British Canadian reporter J. B. McLaren painted a clear picture of Mennonite efforts in cultural transplantation and horticultural success in a new colonial environment when he wrote in 1882 that “belts and bluffs of wood break the monotony of the prairie almost everywhere in Manitoba except on the Mennonite Reserve.” He continued, “this great treeless expanse was shunned by the first immigrants into the province.” After observing their newly treed, cloistered villages and immaculate farmyards, however, he also suggested that “the Mennonites have proved ... [to the earlier settlers] their mistake.”³⁰ Similarly, Tracy Ruta Fuchs’s oral history project on Mennonite gardens and orchards in Russia and Manitoba reveals that one of the primary goals upon arriving on the Manitoba prairies, and particularly the treeless West Reserve, was to “plant trees for

²⁹ Ibid., 20. See also William Schroeder, *The Bergthal Colony* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1974), 15 and John H. Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba* (Steinbach: Steinbach Historical Society, 2000), 336.

³⁰ J. B. McLaren, “The North-West,” in *Picturesque Canada: The Country as it was and is* (Toronto: 1882), in *The Outsider’s Gaze: Life and Labour on the Mennonite West Reserve, 1874–1922*, eds. Jacob E. Peters, Adolph Ens and Eleanor Chornoboy (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2015): 57.

shelter and beauty.”³¹ And yet, as Dick and others have suggested, conceptions of, interactions with, and efforts to transform the native landscapes on which Mennonites settled in Russia or in Manitoba must not depend solely on friendly host society visitors or in-group accounts. If this were to be the case, the tenacity of stories about Mennonite religious values and community lifeways would be sustained, while ignorance towards their role in larger stories of colonization and the economic transformation of particular regions would remain hidden from view.

Shelter

When Mennonites first arrived on the West Reserve in 1875, they were confronted with the vexing realities of homesteading in an environment consisting of mainly tallgrass prairie. As the above reports make clear, the most significant challenge of settling on the West Reserve was the near-complete absence of trees—for shelter, wind protection, fencing, building construction, and fuel—within the boundaries of the allocated land. In fact, the sole reason the area was not commonly selected for European immigrant settlement prior to 1875 was due to the lack of trees. But, the area west of the Red River was reconsidered when the number of Mennonite immigrants from Russia increased in the province and the northern part of the East Reserve was shown to be flood-prone, and in the south, there were frustrations with rocky soil.³² Ens has suggested that there was considerable concern among Mennonites regarding the suitability of the future West Reserve land. It was not until after Mennonites were “assured timber areas along the Pembina Hills would also be reserved for them, that they accepted the proposed reserve.”³³ Ens also notes that while there were several Ontario and English settlers on the land that would later become the

³¹ Fuchs, *Beauty and Sustenance*, 20.

³² Ens, *The Rural Municipality of Rhineland*, 2.

³³ *Ibid.*, 3.

West Reserve, they tended to remain in the wooded areas by the Rivière aux Marais and in the northwestern portion of the reserve along the Pembina Hills. The “prospect of settling on the treeless prairie, however, deterred [many other] Ontario settlers who were accustomed to settling in close proximity to water and wood.” Despite a few squatters in the western part of the West Reserve, the Mennonites were thus among the first European immigrants to consider settling on this tract of open prairie land in southern Manitoba.³⁴

Upon initial settlement, West Reserve settlers seemed very vulnerable: many dug shallow ditches or furrows around their homesteads to protect their sod huts and livestock from violent and swift grass fires due to lightning.³⁵ While in some cases these furrows provided space for establishing early, yet familiar, vegetable gardens that were a necessity for sustenance, unfamiliar land and weather patterns shaped initial settlement experiences in the Red River Valley. Reflecting on her family’s relocation to the Blumenort area of the West Reserve in 1878, and the furrow they dug around their homestead, Maria Klassen describes the anxiety generated by open prairie settlement: “We were always uneasy when a small thundercloud was visible in the west at nightfall, and with good reason. These clouds usually developed into severe storms [capable of igniting a prairie fire]. There was always flash upon flash of lightning. ... We also had terrible windstorms in those days. We had such fear of the weather.”³⁶ As Maria’s memories make clear, protection from the weather by way of a more permanent dwelling and a shelter belt were the primary tasks of settlement:

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Maria Klassen, “Moving to the West Reserve,” in *Mennonite Memories: Settling in Western Canada*, eds. Lawrence Klippenstein and Julius G. Toews (Winnipeg: Centennial Publications, 1977), 73.

³⁶ Ibid.

Logs were hauled to make the frame for a grass hut. . . . The grass was all cut with hand scythes which we had brought with us from Russia. . . . After this we diligently hauled logs from the woods and hired a man who knew how to put up a log hut. . . . After the dwellings were ready for occupancy, work was started on furniture. Smooth poplar logs were split and planed with the hatchet and made into benches.³⁷

While in Russia, many Mennonites had grown accustomed to the tradition of using dried bricks of manure mixed with grass as a suitable option for fuel when felled wood was scarce. For those who were not too proud,³⁸ this also proved an effective means for home fires—heating and cooking—on the West Reserve throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Constructing more permanent dwellings, however, would require timber. While *Semlinen* (temporary homes fashioned with sod walls and grass-thatched roofs) worked well as initial shelters, being that they were warm in winter and cool in summer, they “tended to melt away” in heavy rains.³⁹ Thus, before mills were constructed in the area, the limited stands of oak trees in the far south of the Reserve along the international border, and the woodlands on the banks of waterways such as the Pembina River, Rivière aux Marais, and Buffalo Creek, were regularly

³⁷ Ibid., 69.

³⁸ See for example Rhinehart Friesen, *A Mennonite Odyssey* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press), 84. “Fuel was an increasingly troublesome problem. They had very soon burnt up the straggly bushes that grew in patches in low-lying areas. The cottonwoods they had planted with such high hopes were growing, but slowly. The two- or three-day expeditions to get larger trees from along the river were hard and unpleasant work because they had to be made in winter, otherwise it was almost impossible to haul such heavy loads except when the prairie was frozen and covered with snow. So far [Margaretha] had resisted the alternative—burning dried manure bricks. She had seen this done in Russia and more and more of their neighbours were resorting to it, but she insisted you could smell it burning as soon as you opened the door.”

³⁹ Conrad Stoesz, “The Post Road,” in *Church, Family and Village: Essays on Mennonite Life on the West Reserve*, eds. Adolph Ens, et al (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2001), 82.

relied upon for building supplies.⁴⁰ Trips to haul wood from these locations were most often made in winter, for the frozen ground offered smoother and more reliable pathways for transferring such heavy loads. Nonetheless, as community memory and narrative make clear, producing flooring, siding, and finishing wood from trees, and the shaping of timbers, which were to be used for framing houses and barns, were incredibly strenuous tasks. Jacob Friesen of Rosenort had particularly rough and gnarled hands, which he told his grandchildren was a result of cutting timber on wood lots in North Dakota.⁴¹

In his detailed analysis of Mennonite settlement efforts in Manitoba, historical geographer John H. Warkentin notes that during the first year on the West Reserve (1875–1876), Mennonites typically were unconcerned about whether anyone owned the land from which they obtained timber.⁴² On many occasions, logs and firewood were even hauled from across the international boundary.⁴³ Evidence suggests that some Mennonite communities also went so far as to purchase land in the Dakota Territories, just across the US border from the West Reserve,

⁴⁰ Dick, “The Greening of the West,” accessed 20 February 2016, http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/31/prairiehorticulture.shtml.

⁴¹ Bruce Wiebe, “The Timberlots of the Manitoba Mennonites in St. Joseph Township, Pembina County, Dakota Territory” (Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives: unpublished research paper, November 2004), 4.

⁴² Ens, *The Rural Municipality of Rhineland*, 22–23. Gerhard Ens’s research negates Warkentin’s claim. According to Ens, a number of Canadian farmers who had settled in the wooded areas in the northwest corner of the West Reserve petitioned Ottawa in 1876 to remove their townships from Mennonite West Reserve. Mennonites apparently countered, arguing that they “were being restrained from cutting timber on their own land by Ontario settlers, who threatened to tear down any village which the Mennonites might attempt to found in that area.” The government attempted to solve this dispute by redrawing the western boundary of the reserve so as to exclude non-Mennonite settlers. As Ens points out, however, the new boundary did not solve the problem between Mennonite and non-Mennonites, who continued to clash over timber land. As such, “a legacy of distrust and suspicion between the Mennonites and Anglo-Saxon settlers in the area” was created. “Nothing was solved until all arable land had been claimed and wood lots cleared of their useful timbers.”

⁴³ Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba*, 50; Conrad Stoesz, “The Post Road,” 82.

to be used exclusively for the communal collection of timber. Local historian Bruce Wiebe has done extensive research on this phenomenon of cross-border timber collection by Mennonite settlers. According to the West Reserve *Gebietsamt* (village or area council) records, Isaac Mueller, as part of his official duties as *Oberschultz* (colony mayor), was the first to acquire wooded land in the vicinity of the Pembina River for the sole benefit of West Reserve settlement. In October 1875, Mueller purchased 160 acres for \$1,000. By 1878, an estimated 1,300 acres had been purchased in the vicinity of the Pembina River—all adjoining the West Reserve—with the nearest access point at Blumenort, the village west of present-day Gretna. Several individuals, like Johann Wall, a sawmill owner in Blumenort, also purchased land in the Dakota Territory.⁴⁴ In the fonds pertaining to Wall at the Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives in Winnipeg, a hand-drawn map of a sub-divided section of land (NE ¼ Sec 12 Tp 163 R56 W), which spanned both sides of the Pembina River and points out the locations of timber, offers a glimpse into his (and others’) land purchases. Before Mennonite-operated mills were constructed on the West Reserve, sawn timber had to be purchased.⁴⁵ In the village of Neuberghthal, it is rumoured by contemporary residents that some early houses and barns were moved to the West Reserve by those people relocating from the East Reserve—the timbers numbered to assist reassembly as

⁴⁴ Wiebe, “The Timberlots of the Manitoba Mennonites,” 1. See also David Schellenberg, unpublished memoir (1944), 1–5. Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives: Mennonite Historical Society fonds, Historic Sites and Monuments Committee, research on the Post Road, Volume 4995, file 2.

⁴⁵ Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba*, 50. See also Rees, *New and Naked Land*, 120. Rees notes that the Canadian government introduced a Wood Culture Act in 1876, modeled after the American Timber Act, which granted settlers in treeless areas the right to take out 160-acre tree claims, on the basis that the homesteader would plant and care for thirty-two acres of woodland. “Patent to the land was not to be issued until six years after the planting. Fifty-one tree claims were entered before the end of 1878, and eighty-one before the system was abandoned in 1879, but only five patents were ever issued. Without the incentive of short-term gains, the work of planting and caring for the trees was too great, so most settlers simply converted their tree claims to pre-emption and bought them.”

Mennonites prepared for the transition away from a wooded area.⁴⁶ Such efforts demonstrate the high value that was placed on lumber. In later years, it was more common that fir was purchased in the form of milled lumber from yards in Blumenort, Emerson, or Gretna.⁴⁷

Mennonites were not alone in their efforts to establish tree culture on the Canadian Prairies in the 1870s. Indeed, the Dominion Lands Act was amended in 1876 to include provisions for those willing to establish what they called “Forest Tree Culture.” More specifically, men and women could enter to receive a free land grant of up to 160 acres, if they could demonstrate, over a period of six years, that one sixth of the 160 acres had been planted with timber.⁴⁸ As John L. Tyman notes in his 1970s explication of the Forest Tree Culture provisions, “the idea was to render the open prairie more hospitable” by cultivating treed areas.⁴⁹ The Forest Tree Culture legislation was abandoned just a few years after it was introduced, in 1879, as it proved to be unpopular among European settlers. And as Sarah Carter explains in her recent study of European settlement on the Canadian prairies, “tree claims did not catch hold of the imagination of prospective settlers, either women or men. Few seized the opportunity: in the first six months of 1877 in Manitoba, for example, ... there were ... [only] five forest tree culture

⁴⁶ One such rumour is attributed to Neuberghthal resident Peter Klippenstein (1831–1904). After living on the East Reserve for a number of years, Peter decided to relocate to the West Reserve in 1881. “Peter marked each beam of wood with a Roman numeral for re-assembly in Neu-Bergthal [*sic*]. On arriving in the town, he put the structure back together with new shingles.” See Susan Huebert, “Klippenstein, Peter (1831–1904),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (2007), accessed 31 January 2017, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Klippenstein,_Peter_\(1831-1904\)&oldid=95559](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Klippenstein,_Peter_(1831-1904)&oldid=95559).

⁴⁷ Peter J. Priess, *Neuberghthal National Historic Site*, 8.

⁴⁸ *The Dominion Lands Acts: Consolidated for Office Reference* (Victoria, 1876), 49-51.

⁴⁹ John L. Tyman, “Patterns of Western Land Settlement,” *MHS Transactions* 3/28 (1971-72), accessed 23 June 2017, <http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/transactions/3/landsettlement.shtml#36>.

entries.”⁵⁰ It is unclear whether any Mennonites on the West Reserve took advantage of this legislation.

Nonetheless, for Mennonites on the West Reserve, concerns about timber were somewhat alleviated by 1877, with the construction of numerous steam-powered mills, such as the one owned and operated by Johann Wall in Blumenort. With the purchase of timber lots in the Dakota Territories, and the support of the local church and immigration agent Jacob Shantz, Wall and his colleague Peter Peters were able to mill and sell oak, birch, and poplar as building material to Mennonites in the vicinity. In a 1973 article in the *Red River Valley Echo*, well-known reporter and community historian Elizabeth Bergen reminds readers that such mills allowed the community to access visions of a more modern existence on the prairies beyond the construction of permanent, culturally informed Mennonite housebarns. Apparently, oak, birch, and poplar sawdust was saved and distributed among Blumenort village women to spread over their earthen or unfinished floors of their living or great rooms, to give them a “cozy” and “clean” look.⁵¹

While hauling wood for the construction of permanent dwellings was a crucial and challenging aspect of settlement culture among late nineteenth-century Mennonites on the West Reserve, so were efforts to plant trees as shelter belts on the open prairie surrounding farmyards and villages. Horticulturalist P. J. Peters poignantly describes this process of transformation in Manitoba: “On the bare, windswept prairie lands, a shelter belt was the beginning.”⁵² Once

⁵⁰ Sarah Carter, *Imperial Plots: Women, Land, and the Spadework of British Colonialism on the Canadian Prairies* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2016), 82.

⁵¹ Elizabeth Bergen, “Recalling Past Days: Steam Mill Built in Blumenort,” *Red River Valley Echo*, 24 January 1973.

P. J. Peters, *A Century of Horticulture in Manitoba, 1880–1980* (Winnipeg: P. J. Peters, 1988),

16.

established, writes Peters, the trees would ideally create significant barriers against the forceful prairie winds, fires, and the sun, thus also forming microclimates within which gardens, people, and animals could flourish. Indeed, a common expectation among European settlers on the prairies was not only that trees would reduce winds and rate of evaporation, but also increase rainfall.⁵³

Whether mirroring similar efforts in orchard culture and afforestation under the administration of Johann Cornies in mid-nineteenth-century New Russia, or following the lead of new community influences, Mennonite settlers in Manitoba took on the task of planting trees almost immediately upon arrival. Local figures like David Schellenberg and immigration agent Jacob Shantz were particularly influential in establishing precedents for tree planting upon settlement. Shantz's efforts were directed to the cultivation of fruit trees, while Schellenberg, who is credited with being the "[West Reserve] father of rural tree planting" encouraged community members to plant poplar trees surrounding their future yards before beginning any other settlement task.⁵⁴ In Schellenberg's 1944 memoir, written for his grandchildren as "a lasting remembrance," the struggle of locating and hauling wood in the pioneer generation is prominently featured, offering a window into the reality of the early settlers' anxieties about reconstructing the West Reserve landscape.⁵⁵ Mennonite settlers who had foreknowledge of the West Reserve landscape urged their migrating kin to collect young trees en route for planting on their assigned village lots. Such recommendations were taken seriously as Mennonites made their way down the Red River by barge from Fargo—which was the end of the railway—and

⁵² Rees, *New and Naked Land*, 40.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵⁴ Peters, *A Century of Horticulture*, 14.

⁵⁵ David Schellenberg, "Dear Grandchildren," Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives, Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society fonds, Historic Sites and Monuments Committee, research on the Post Road, Volume 4995, file 2.

gathered young trees along the way.⁵⁶ By far the most popular choice of tree was the cottonwood: its “slender trunk, the delicate green of the leaves in spring and—thanks to a flexible stalk attachment—leaves that dance in the wind and catch the sun were irresistible attractions,” notes Ronald Rees.⁵⁷ Other varieties commonly selected were Manitoba maples or box elders, ash, and golden willows, or caragana. Eventually, walls of trees ten or twelve rows deep on all sides enclosed entire farmyards, while groves on the yard itself were planted “so that a pleasant farmyard was in prospect.”⁵⁸ Village streets were also demarcated with a single row of trees on each side. As many scholars have observed, and as I have discovered throughout my fieldwork associated with this project, cottonwood trees in particular remain key living evidence of Mennonite efforts in the reconstruction of the southern Manitoba landscape.

Tree-planting efforts also feature prominently in outsider reports of Mennonite settlement on the West Reserve, confirming the extent and rapidity of changes to the southern Manitoba landscape in the late nineteenth century. In his report to the North West Mounted Police in 1891, J. A. McGibbon notes that the West Reserve “is thickly populated” with Mennonites who have settled in villages that are “in summer very pleasant in appearance. . . . The houses are generally almost hid from view by groves of ash and other trees, while little flower gardens are attached to even the poorest houses.”⁵⁹ Further, in his 1884 account, *Life and Labour in the Far, Far, West*, W. Henry Barneby affirms the orderly rows of trees planted on Mennonite village farmyards,

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Rees, *New and Naked Land*, 40.

⁵⁸ Edwinna von Baeyer, *Rhetoric and Roses: A History of Canadian Gardening 1900–1930* (Markham: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1984), 113; see also Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba*, 203.

⁵⁹ Victor Joseph St. George (VT), “Annual Report of the Commissioner of the NWMP, report of JA McGibbon, Inspector, Commanding Manitoba Frontier to the Officer Commanding ‘B’ Division NWMP, Regina, dated at Morden, November 30, 1891, 55–85,” in *The Outsider’s Gaze: Life and Labour on the Mennonite West Reserve, 1874–1922*, ed. Jacob E. Peters et al (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2015), 86.

with young cottonwoods, dwarf mulberry trees, and plum trees among them.⁶⁰ Finally, in a 1984 article in the *Red River Valley Echo*, J. C. Fehr retells the story of a young man's visit from the nearby town of Morden to the Mennonite village of Rhineland in 1900 with the intention of documenting Mennonite life. Apparently, the fellow struggled to photograph the village buildings, for they were barely visible behind the thick foliage.⁶¹

As Canadian garden historian Edwinna von Baeyer has suggested, most European settlers on the prairies had hopes of establishing productive farmyards; popular conceptions of a well-arranged homestead demanded that shelter belts be planted during the initial years of settlement. By 1930, however, farm landscape design on the Canadian Prairies had become a moral, sophisticated venture aimed at creating a more familiar, European, "lived-in" space. For many settlers, these efforts were communicated as a "love of nature, nurtured in the old country, transplanted to the new." For others, they confirmed that the fruitful soil could "produce tall trees for shade, shelter and ... gardens."⁶² Von Baeyer writes of farmyards being described as "properly landscaped," "dignified and plain," or as three-roomed areas, which included public space, private space for family use only, and a service area wherein the refuse pit and driveway were located.⁶³ "Farm beautification" was also central to government programming, which sought to educate rural Canadians on growing forest and fruit trees, ornamental shrubs, and

⁶⁰ Henry W. Barneby, "Chapter 24," in *Life and Labour in the Far, Far, West: Being Notes of a Tour in the western States, British Columbia, Manitoba and the North West Territory* (London: Cassell & Company, 1884), in *The Outsider's Gaze: Life and Labour on the Mennonite West Reserve, 1874–1922*, ed. Jacob E. Peters et al (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2015), 80.

⁶¹ J. C. Fehr, "Rhineland was capital of West Reserve," *Red River Valley Echo*, 28 November 1984.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ von Baeyer, *Rhetoric and Roses*, 113.

gardens “in an environment always ready to reject them.”⁶⁴ In all of these cases, shelter belts offered a sense of environmental control for settlers in western Canada—an area of direct contrast to the perceived “immense black dome” and “immeasurable distances” of the prairie, where ethnic or religious customs could be best practiced, and geometric order might be better achieved.⁶⁵

Similar commentary even in mid-twentieth-century Mennonite reflections on Mennonite pioneer tree-planting efforts can also be noted. In 1944, local resident Menno Klassen published an article in the *Altona Echo* entitled “A Thing of Beauty is a Joy Forever,” lauding RM of Rhineland settlers for planting shelter belts. As he saw it, “these trees are still serving faithfully.” Though “the reason for tree planting might have been merely that of providing protection for the farmstead and for the personal comfort and enjoyment of farm life,” Klassen continues, “these trees are a delight to all in the community and to those who visit or pass through it.” Nonetheless, Klassen also notes that it is not enough to merely acknowledge the work of the settlers, rather, residents of the West Reserve must continue to plant trees and shelter belts. “We can best express our appreciation by carrying this work another step ahead,” he explains. “There is nothing to hinder us from making this municipality outstanding for having developed its horticultural resources.”⁶⁶

Settlement efforts almost always reduced the perceived scale of the wilderness. Ronald Rees’s work highlights prairie novelist Annora Brown’s reflections on plains life, in which she claims that a shelter belt functioned to shut away the prairie, as “we looked in upon ourselves,”⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Rees, *New and Naked Land*, 109.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁶⁶ Menno Klassen, “A Thing of Beauty is a Joy Forever,” *Altona Echo*, 28 February 1944, 4.

⁶⁷ Rees, *New and Naked Land*, 109.

to demonstrate the inward-looking effect of the shelter offered by trees. It was a similar experience for Mennonite settlers of the 1870s on the West Reserve who perceived the vast landscape to represent the end of the earth. Pioneering Mennonites did not distinguish philosophically between notions of a private familial home or a village—both were shelters. From the moment trees were planted to demarcate a West Reserve village, the village became a sanctuary. As local historian Peter Zacharias writes, “Underneath the shadow of the trees, barns and summer kitchens linked together to form their own private refuge,” which on the horizon “merged into one rising bluff, one prairie shelter.” On the West Reserve, Mennonites at once “defied the elements,” “sheltered themselves from the wilderness,”⁶⁸ and transformed the village into a “thing of beauty.”⁶⁹ With time, though the landscape itself changed, the discourse of agrarian discovery persisted.

Fruit Trees and Shrubs: “Wild” Made Familiar

In keeping with the landscaping traditions honed over almost a century in New Russia, the planting of orchards was central to the construction of village settlements among Mennonites on the West Reserve. In early nineteenth-century Russia, orchards were considered central to the village economy as well as a source of family and community sustenance. And, while establishing orchards in Manitoba in the 1870s contributed to the maintenance of similar lifeways, orchards also endorsed the future with a familiar, sheltered, and beautiful village landscape; the orchard itself thus carried particular ethno-religious connotations of “home.”⁷⁰ In Chapter 1, I demonstrated that efforts to transport and plant particular fruit and vegetable seeds

⁶⁸ Warkentin, “Going on Foot,” 65

⁶⁹ Peter D. Zacharias, *Reinland: An Experience in Community* (Altona: Reinland Centennial Committee, 1976), 85. See also Rees, *New and Naked Land*, 74.

⁷⁰ Warkentin, “Going on Foot,” 68.

to Manitoba have carried subtexts of nostalgia into future generations. That is, seeds represent longing for an ethno-religious “home” in both past and present. Similarly, analyses of fruit tree culture on the West Reserve, by way of documents such as newspapers, memoirs, oral histories, and trees themselves as forms of material culture, reveal distinct efforts in the preservation of culture. Analyses of these documents also show complex (conscious and unconscious) emotional and psychological efforts in the maintenance of deeply ingrained colonial ideals about settlement, improvement, and ethno-cultural distinction from ethnic or Indigenous others by a mastery of the perceived wilderness.

The trends in establishing fruit culture with the use of native plants also sheds light on the complicated relationship between the Mennonites who settled on the West Reserve and the Indigenous peoples displaced due to treaties created to prepare the plains for European settlement. As was the case in Russia, traditions of tree planting and fruit culture helped Mennonites to cope with their feelings about building communities in what were simultaneously perceived as empty spaces and Indigenous spaces, and to ensure they were distinguished as model settlers, they were actively involved in the improvement of the landscape and the nation at large. In Manitoba, Mennonite tree culture was also believed to demarcate and improve land that was otherwise wild and desolate, thereby transforming the landscape into something that was more manageable, familiar, and progressive. After all, the uncultivated “bush” was where the “Indians” dwelt.⁷¹ Just as community memory holds that many cherished vegetable seeds in

⁷¹ Klassen, “Moving to the West Reserve,” 10. See also Friesen, *A Mennonite Odyssey*, 42–47. This section of Friesen’s creative work, entitled “Episode Four, 1874: The Indian,” recounts a time when an Indigenous man came to the home of the newly settled pioneer family in the hopes of selling them an ox. The family expresses a great deal of fear and conjecture about the habits of Indigenous people. Nonetheless, it offers an important window into the interactions that Mennonites must have had with Indigenous people already present in both the East and West Reserves. There are very few stories in existence about such encounters.

Manitoba are of Russian heritage, some West Reserve residents believe that certain trees on their farm and village yards are also of Russian ancestry. These complicated and contradictory feelings about trees in Manitoba Mennonite communities opens up space for the reconsideration of the history of Mennonite settlement and interaction with the existing landscape in southern Manitoba—efforts to make order out of perceived disorder.

For millennia prior to European settlement, the Canadian Prairies were home to numerous Indigenous peoples. As Theodore Binnema has suggested, until 1806 “the nonwestern plains was the common and contested ground of various [Indigenous] societies,”⁷² and while “cultural contact, clash, change, and continuity are the dominant themes of twentieth-century literature in Indigenous North American history[,] they were not the preoccupations of the historical actors themselves.”⁷³ Rather, these multifaceted, organized societies, over the course of many centuries, moved onto the northwestern plains and “defended themselves there through complex combinations of trade, warfare, and diplomacy with neighbors who were often very unlike themselves.”⁷⁴ Groups of Indigenous peoples on the northwestern plains, known as bands, were organized around extended families, and bands were linked by kinship and ethnic networks. Intimate knowledge of the prairie landscape and its flora and fauna contributed to the cultural and physical survival of these groups. As Binnema’s work suggests, the history of the region’s environment and its human history are intricately connected.⁷⁵

The vegetation of the northwestern plains, particularly the large river valleys throughout which there were “luxuriant grasses and stands of cottonwood and deciduous shrubs,” supported

⁷² Theodore Binnema, *Common & Contested Ground: A Human and Environmental History of the Northwestern Plains* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 198.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

more bison herds than anywhere else, which in turn supported human populations, seasonal village settlements, and distinct hunting traditions.⁷⁶ The seasonality of the grasslands meant that location of bison herds became easily predicable. Wooded areas supplied material for building and burning. Berries such as saskatoons, strawberries, raspberries, and chokecherries, as well as leaves and sap from the Manitoba maple were key supplements to a meat-based diet of bison, fish, deer, and pemmican. Chokecherry and cottonwood tree branches were also used to construct arrow shafts, while bows were made of yew and ash trees. Cottonwood branches were often used as the framework for dwellings, and later for horse saddles, while their bark was used as a remedy for drinking water tainted by alkali. Cottonwood buds were used as yellow dye; the roots of cherry trees were used as cures for upset stomachs; and cattail down served as an absorbent lining in diapers or for binding wounds.⁷⁷

While Indigenous peoples were intimately aware of their local surroundings, and used plants and berries to support their communities in various ways, Sarah Carter reminds us in her work on women homesteaders on the prairies, that agriculture also predated the arrival of Europeans on the Great Plains. Indeed, Indigenous women, in particular, were commercial farmers, “raising corn, beans, squash, melons, pumpkins, and sunflowers.”⁷⁸ Indigenous women were also involved in plant domestication—particularly in developing early, hardy varieties of corn that would succeed even in the region’s short growing season—and they also dried and sold produce to their neighbours or European traders. Carter argues that “for this time and place and available technology, this was large-scale agriculture and should not be dismissed or diminished as ‘horticulture.’” This was not a vocation, but a trade, Carter argues further, and “Indigenous

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷⁷ Rees, *New and Naked Land*, 31.

⁷⁸ Carter, *Imperial Plots*, 30.

women were deeply attached and strongly committed to caring for the land.” Not only were sacred ceremonies and songs were critical components to the work of Indigenous women farmers, but the knowledge and skills were handed down between women across the generations.⁷⁹

As Norma Hall’s work also points out, Métis people in Red River Settlement constructed their farmyards on river lots so as to have greater access to trees for shelter, building material, and a source of fuel.⁸⁰ Despite an awareness of Indigenous peoples in the prairie region and an understanding of their keen uses of the rich landscape, reactions to the Canadian Prairies were often akin to British Army Officer William F. Butler’s late nineteenth-century travelogue which reported that the area held an “utter negation of life, and a complete absence of history. . . . One saw here the world as it had taken shape from the hands of the Creator.”⁸¹ Other European immigrants similarly reported that the prairie was a landscape “from which the hand of God had been withdrawn before the act of creation was complete.”⁸²

For European settlers, then, it seems feelings of isolation and fear of the vast landscape were intensified by what Rees refers to as “the absence in the new land of a culture or history with which they could identify.” Thus, in efforts to remake the prairies according to their own notions of livable and comfortable space, European immigrants not only annihilated Indigenous ways of life, but also separated themselves from “the history and traditions of the [place] they

⁷⁹ Ibid., 31.

⁸⁰ Norma Hall, *A Casualty of Colonialism: Red River Métis Farming, 1810–1870*, accessed 22 April 2017, <https://casualtyofcolonialism.wordpress.com>.

⁸¹ William F. Butler quoted in Rees, *New and Naked Land*, 35.

⁸² Rees, *New and Naked Land*, 35.

had come to occupy.”⁸³ This process of historical obliteration is evident in analyses of horticultural practices and memories surrounding fruit trees on the West Reserve.

So, “how did the wild cherry [chokecherry trees] and wild plums make their way into [Mennonite] gardens?” asks community historian Peter Zacharias.⁸⁴ The answer perhaps lies in the fact that the peach pits and mulberry seeds⁸⁵ that were brought from Russia did not typically survive in Manitoba (these were fruits better suited for longer growing seasons), so Mennonites cultivated local fruit trees in the early years of settlement until those imported were mature enough to generate edible fruit. When Mennonites travelled to the bush in the western part of the Reserve, where fruit trees grew in abundance, Zacharias explains, “They selected the best and transplanted them in their gardens.”⁸⁶ Others have suggested, however, that while Mennonite community memory has historically held the legend that the plains of Manitoba were uninhabited before the arrival of Europeans, entire generations of Mennonites failed to connect their community’s intimate knowledge of the Manitoba landscape to the “Indians who came to the doors of their comfortable homes begging [and] starved.”⁸⁷ In fact, while Métis people often helped Mennonites locate their reserved lands, they also often showed Mennonite settlers where to find chokecherries, plums, blueberries, saskatoons, and cranberries on the West Reserve. Yet, as Susan Hiebert notes, “the Métis people became a people of ghosts. Entire generations of Mennonites grew up on the ground which still bore the imprint of the massive buffalo herds

⁸³ Ibid., 87.

⁸⁴ Peter Zacharias, *Rineland*, 91.

⁸⁵ Shaun Friesen, interview with the author, 10 February 2015.

⁸⁶ Zacharias, *Rineland*, 91.

⁸⁷ Susan Hiebert, “Indians, Métis and Mennonites,” in *Mennonite Memories*, ed. Lawrence Klippenstein (Winnipeg: Centennial Publications, 1977), 52.

which moved across the freshly ploughed acres, without ever learning about Louis Riel, the Red River carts, or the background of the men who built the immigration sheds in 1874.”⁸⁸

This language of forgetting or historical obliteration does not account for the actual relationships that existed between Mennonite people and their Indigenous neighbours. These relationships may have assisted Mennonites in constructing comfortable landscapes on the Canadian prairies. In her article “Kookoom Mariah and the Mennonite Mrs.,” for example, Maria Campbell details the kinship between her grandmother and a Mennonite woman in the *Nugeewin* (Park Valley) region of Saskatchewan in the mid-twentieth century, thereby verifying the stories of interaction and exchange between Mennonite and Indigenous people regarding botanical culture. According to Campbell, although the two women did not speak the same language, they spent many afternoons together sitting among the willows, or “bent over digging sticks in wet meadows or picking berries along the road, ... in the garden exchanging wild ginger and dill, ... in the summer kitchens making head cheese, cooking moose nose.”⁸⁹ This relationship stands out in the documentation of Mennonite history and interaction with Indigenous peoples on the Canadian Prairies, though it is likely that many other such friendships existed. A similar friendship was described by Altona resident Joe Braun, who, over dinner one evening, told me about his mother’s friendship with an Indigenous woman, Louise, who visited on occasion for a homemade meal. While Joe’s mother was typically an introverted woman, often adverse to

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Maria Campbell, “Kookoom Mariah and The Mennonite Mrs.” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 19 (2001): 11. See also Kristen Burnett, *Taking Medicine: Women’s Healing Work and Colonial Contact in Southern Alberta, 1880–1930* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 3. Burnett’s work outlines similar encounters between Indigenous women and immigrant women in the prairie west between the 1870s and 1930s. More specifically, she suggests that like Kookoom Mariah and The Mennonite Mrs., Indigenous and Euro-Canadian women encountered each other and “participated together in an informal system of healing and nursing care that drew on both traditions...” and on Indigenous ways of knowing the environment.

visitors, she always opened the door to Louise, never knowing when she would arrive. Joe suspects that the main reason his mother invited Louise in for dinner was the fact that his mother had experienced food shortages growing up in Ukraine.⁹⁰

Despite these (few) positive stories of friendship between Mennonite and Indigenous individuals, more often it seems that primary and secondary sources detail feelings of fear and mistrust as undergirding Mennonite interaction with Indigenous people. Some of the more popular, yet negative descriptions of Indigenous people by Mennonites in Manitoba include Jacob Shantz's early 1870s reports of the East Reserve landscape in which he suggests that while the "Indians ... are quiet and inoffensive and well satisfied with the Government," they are nonetheless unsophisticated in their apparent failure to cultivate native fruit trees.⁹¹ A newspaper report from an unknown source in 1873 documents a now well-known encounter between the Mennonite delegates sent from Russia to Manitoba to inspect the land, and a group of Métis people. The report suggests that "a party of Mennonites who were prospecting in Manitoba, to find a suitable location for a large colony of intending immigrants, were attacked by half-breeds." The reporter continues, "the result will probably deter the Mennonites."⁹² Prevalent discourse about Indigenous people among some of the Altona area's older residents, today, has shifted. Rather than expressing fear or discontent about Indigenous presence in the region, Altona residents often tell stories about Indigenous people that include references to their impoverishment, without any clear indication of how and why. For example, Altona resident

⁹⁰ Joe Braun, conversation with the author, 8 August 2016.

⁹¹ See *Narrative of a Journey to Manitoba Together with an Abstract of the Dominion Lands Act* from the Government Pamphlet on Manitoba (Ottawa: Department of Agriculture, 1873), in *Brothers in Deed to Brothers in Need: A Scrapbook about Mennonite Immigrants from Russia, 1870–1885*, ed. Clarence Hiebert (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1974), 31.

⁹² "A Party of Mennonites," (unknown source, 1873). In *Brothers in Deed to Brothers in Need: A Scrapbook about Mennonite Immigrants from Russia, 1870–1885*, ed. Clarence Hiebert (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1974), 60.

Marlene Plett relayed her memory of Indigenous families, in search of bread, selling carpets or beadwork, travelling through the West Reserve village where she grew up. While her mother offered these families food, other village residents apparently “shooed” them away with feelings of discomfort about “outsiders” in “our community.”⁹³

Still, despite select histories of encounters and exchanges, “white people [including Mennonites] could not see the Indians and Métis,” suggests Hiebert.⁹⁴ Efforts by Mennonites to demean the quality of fruit native to Manitoba while also narrating tales of mastery over the wilderness and native fruit acculturation has contributed to historical erasure. In his 2011 lecture on Anabaptist-Mennonite Studies at Conrad Grebel University College, Roger Epp, a Mennonite political science scholar cited Keavy Martin, a scholar of indigenous literature, suggesting that the complex relationship between Mennonite and Indigenous history in Canada is part of “a longing for oblivion,” or the “luxury of forgetting,” and the “absolution of amnesia.”⁹⁵ Such oblivion is due in part to myths in the Mennonite community that work to preserve the prairie provinces as Mennonite sacred ground. Moreover, the “settler mythology” of *terra nullius*— “[e]mpty land. Vacant, uncultivated, unproductive. Somehow lacking or incomplete ...”— continues to inform the stories Mennonites tell about their land.⁹⁶ Epp argues that “the settler mythology ... is more powerful and ideologically attractive than any corrections proposed by historians. For it has *continued* [emphasis mine] to offer something more profound: a ‘sacrament

⁹³ Marlene Plett, interview with the author, 12 November 2015.

⁹⁴ Hiebert, “Indians, Metis and Mennonites,” 52–53.

⁹⁵ Roger Epp, “‘There was no one here when we came,’ Lecture One: What is the ‘Settler Problem,’” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 30/2 (2012): 122. See also Keavy Martin, “Truth, Reconciliation, and Amnesia: Porcupines and China Dolls and the Canadian Conscience,” *English Studies in Canada* 35 (March 2009): 61.

⁹⁶ Roger Epp, “What is the ‘Settler Problem,’” 123.

of innocence,’ and ‘a new world,’ a clean slate, and a justification of hard work.”⁹⁷ Similarly, Donovan Giesbrecht has worked to point out several late nineteenth-century cases wherein Métis land claims were overlooked or dismissed in favour of Mennonite settlement on Manitoba’s East Reserve. Giesbrecht’s research also notably demonstrates that Mennonites were aware of these disputes and claims. Giesbrecht suggests that these cases clearly decentre any sustained myth of an “unoccupied prairie” as well as “the nonintrusive Mennonite immigrant,” and challenge Mennonites to reconsider the overarching view of themselves as peaceable people, and as spokespeople for the oppressed.⁹⁸ Writer Dora Doerksen Dueck further contextualizes this darker side of the relationship between Indigenous peoples and Mennonites from the perspective of a Mennonite on the West Reserve in her essay “Whose Land.” Dueck reminds readers that while Mennonites have long sustained narratives of their migration and resettlement by way of ethno-religious persecution, a search for Utopia, and land made available by a generous God, their failure to recognize that their coming meant the eviction of Indigenous peoples from ancestral lands and a sweeping disruption of many ways of life contributes to a misremembered history of Mennonite settlement.⁹⁹ Scholars of Mennonite history have infrequently written about the complex roles played by intolerance, encounter, “patterns of dominance and submission,” and the psychosocial “upheaval” of migration and resettlement that characterize the history of Mennonites on the West Reserve.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Ibid., 123–124.

⁹⁸ Donovan Giesbrecht, “Métis, Mennonites and the ‘Unsettled Prairie,’ 1874–1896,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 19 (2001): 109.

⁹⁹ Dora Doerksen Dueck, “Whose Land,” in *Mennonite Memories: Settling in Western Canada*, eds. Lawrence Klippenstein and Julius G. Towes (Winnipeg: Centennial Publications, 1977), 45.

¹⁰⁰ Sociologist Leo Driedger was one of few scholars to raise concerns in the 1970s about the relationship between Indigenous people and Mennonites in Manitoba in the late nineteenth century. In his article “Native Rebellion and Mennonite Invasion: An Examination of Two

In fact, scholars are only beginning to write about the points of connection between the aims of the Canadian government to settle the prairie West and the preconditions for Mennonite settlement (land ownership and improvement, the establishment of agricultural lifeways, and the growth of rural churches, schools, and social institutions). As well, acknowledgement that Mennonite settlement on both the East and West Reserves came in the wake of Métis resistance and land demands is only now contributing to a more intricate understanding of the struggles Indigenous prairie residents faced in inhabiting this vast landscape. As sociologist Leo Driedger has suggested, turning our attention away from in-group community histories about homemaking and towards analyses of the landscape itself is one way of acknowledging the complexities of encounter on the West Reserve.¹⁰¹ Though such analyses raise difficult questions about conflicts

Canadian River Valleys,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 46/3 (1972): 291, Driedger argues that “our research must not be limited to the closed community system, as if contact with surrounding peoples were of minor importance, but must extend to the struggle between Mennonites and others for scarce land, to the invasion and succession of other peoples, to patterns of dominance and submission, to forms of prejudice and conflict, and to social and psychological upheavals of migrations.” Similarly, historian and archivist Lawrence Klippenstein concludes his article “Manitoba Métis and Mennonite Immigrants: First Contacts” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 48/6 (1974): 488, explicating the records of encounter between the Mennonite delegates sent from imperial Russia to Manitoba and Manitoba’s Métis inhabitants, by suggesting that “it was impossible for the Mennonite delegates not to notice the presence of Manitoba natives as they travelled about the countryside inspecting the land. Impressions about them varied, but most of the contacts were pleasant, and those otherwise did not deter ... [them] from recommending the move to the province. They found little opportunity to learn to know the native people in depth, and perhaps not much reason existed ... to broaden their knowledge in that regard. Of talks with the Métis about the land itself there is no record, though opportunities may have presented themselves. ... Today there may be reason enough, in looking back, to acknowledge the moments when, even at that time, the Métis and Indians of Manitoba showed themselves willing to host these strangers in their own land.”

¹⁰¹ Sherry Dangerfield, Calvin McLeod, and Pierre Johnstone, *Existing Conditions: Buffalo Creek Management Plan* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Natural Resources Institute, 1991), 7–8. The material-historical realities of encounter are not only present in analyses of West Reserve flora and horticulture, but in other areas as well. In an excellent study of the Buffalo Creek (a waterway that runs through the centre of the West Reserve) undertaken between 1991 and 1992 by the University of Manitoba’s Natural Resources Institute, researchers suggest that there is significant evidence that the oxbow bend in the Buffalo Creek was used by

between Mennonites and their neighbours, as well as compromise Mennonite religious beliefs about nonviolence, nonresistance, and neighbourly love, they offer a subtler reading of everyday settlement efforts.

Fruit Trees & Shrubs of the West Reserve

These reflections on the settlement of Mennonites on the West Reserve, as well as the study of early accounts about local fruit trees and the wilderness from which they came, reveals a complex and fragmented history, infiltrated with the emotionality of migration, the politics of colonialism, and the hardships of settlement. In many accounts, Mennonite orchards in Russia continued to be claimed as superior to any fruit that was found and grown in Manitoba. On the other hand, living evidence in villages and farmyards, as well as Mennonite food practices on the West Reserve, demonstrate the continued cultivation, use, and increasingly nostalgic appreciation of the fruit (and shade) trees that have characterized the culture of Mennonites in Manitoba. The following examples further detail the emergence of historical accounts and contemporary perspectives of trees on the West Reserve, in an attempt to untangle some of the complexity of the history of this particular landscape.

First Nations peoples as means of trapping and hunting bison herds. Folklore of Mennonites on the West Reserve confirms speculation that the site was used for bison hunting, meat preparation, and perhaps even an encampment as in their own place-naming traditions, the area around the creek oxbow is known as the *Fausting*, which translated from Low German means the feasting. The researchers for the Natural Resources Institute suggest that this very area was used for butchering the bison, after they were trapped in the oxbow, and speared by hunters. Though the Buffalo Creek and its wooded banks are now locally enjoyed by Mennonites for hiking, canoeing, and star-gazing, and its surrounding areas are now predominantly agricultural land, all local residents surveyed for this study, whose land incorporates the creek, reported finding “native American artifacts on their land. Prior to seeding when the land is bare, many artifacts can be seen glistening in the sun. Artifacts found on the areas surrounding the Buffalo Creek include arrowheads, tomahawks, and broken bison bones.” Moreover, the creek also incorporates several historic Mennonite sites, including a cemetery, a former village, and several old schoolhouse sites.

In his memoir, West Reserve resident Jacob Fehr indicates that his departure from Russia was often recalled with sadness in the years following his 1875 migration to the village of Reinland. Especially poignant is the fact that Fehr's written expression of nostalgia draws attention to the prominence of the garden and orchard in connotations of home among the West Reserve's first Mennonite immigrants. Fehr remembers entering his family's garden and orchard on the eve of his departure from Russia, and writes:

[As] I walked in the garden before evening, how I criss-crossed it in various directions. I remembered how often I had hoed it and cleaned it of weeds. I observed the fruit trees and how promising they looked and what a blessing they could bring forth, without our being able to enjoy it. The May cherries were almost ripe. The other sweet cherries were less advanced. The plums were greener still; one plum variety when it ripened became white as snow and was to have an unusually excellent taste. I have not tasted them because the trees were still young—they were to show forth their art for the first time and were now heavily-laden with fruit. I remembered how so often I had worked in the garden with my mother. . . . When I had observed all these things and reflected on them I walked out of the garden and closed the gate. I remained standing at the gate and looked at the garden once more and said to myself, "I will never again enjoy your fruit. My eyes filled with tears."¹⁰²

After his arrival in Manitoba, Fehr's wistfulness was advanced by the sight of the bank of the Red River at Fort Dufferin, which he experienced as a "place of mourning" and "sadness." Here, he yearned for the friendships he had left behind and the "beautiful *Heimat* [homestead or village—often signifying a place to which one feels emotionally connected] with its precious orchards."¹⁰³ Weeks later, after the Fehr family had secured land for homesteading, they set out from the immigration sheds at Fort Dufferin to their future West Reserve home. During their

¹⁰² Fehr, unpublished memoirs, 34.

¹⁰³ Warkentin, "Going on Foot," 65.

journey, the travellers stopped at an established French farm in the Dakota Territory, where Fehr was amazed to see an orchard of “wild cherry trees” on which the fruit grew in clusters like grapes (likely chokecherries), that had been cultivated by the farmer. According to Fehr’s memory, however, the fruit was not good. Though supposedly ripe, the small cherries were sour and dry; their bitter taste inspired facial contortions and the fruit was spit out accordingly.¹⁰⁴

Rhinehart Friesen’s creative work similarly alludes to a complex set of relationships between the Mennonite settlers of the 1870s, notions of what was wild, and the use of native fruit trees in his retelling of family folklore. The most distinctive stories revolve around the difficulties that ensued during the Friesen family’s migration from the East Reserve to the West Reserve in 1882, conceptions of modernity, and interaction with the landscape. Friesen explains that Jacob Friesen, a relative, had prepared for his family’s cross-Manitoba migration (in search of better farmland) by cutting logs along the banks of the Pembina River and hauling them to their future farmstead a season prior to the family’s relocation. Before they travelled westward, Jacob had planned on building his family “a traditional house and attached barn,” but when he arrived for construction in spring, he found the logs had been stolen during winter. The family was forced to live in a *Semlin* (sod hut) for a second summer since their arrival in Manitoba. Friesen’s fictionalized account notes that wood was not the desired building material—rather, Jacob and his wife Margaretha would have preferred brick, “like they had in Russia.”¹⁰⁵

Friesen also notes that the need for fuel “was an increasingly troublesome problem” for his ancestors. Not only did his grandmother, Margaretha, refuse to burn dried manure bricks instead of wood as more of their Mennonite neighbours from Russia were doing—insisting that it produced a foul odor—but the family had burnt nearly all the “straggly bushes that grew in

¹⁰⁴ Fehr, unpublished memoirs, 34.

¹⁰⁵ Friesen, *A Mennonite Odyssey*, 79.

patches and low-lying areas”¹⁰⁶ around their yard. For Jacob and his sons, the two- or three-day journeys to collect trees from along the river were unpleasant, especially because they had to be made in winter over frozen ground. One such journey, recounted by Friesen, found Jacob in severe distress. The young colts he and his sons brought with them on their travels to the Pembina River were spooked by something in the night, and the sleigh in their wake crushed Jacob. Under the weight of the sleigh, Jacob bit off his own tongue and as the story goes, the boys repaired their father’s tongue using several thorns from a plum tree. When Jacob’s tongue swelled to a dangerous degree, they used a bulrush reed to open his throat. Jacob’s tongue supposedly healed.¹⁰⁷

While Mennonite tree-planting efforts and the adaptation of native fruits were questionable, the enduring influence of the ever optimistic and encouraging Jacob Shantz in the development of fruit culture among the first Mennonite immigrants to the West Reserve in the 1870s cannot be ignored. As historian Samuel Steiner notes in his biography of Shantz, his efforts in “successful transplanting did not just happen by itself. These new immigrants needed wise counsel and material aid if they were to find a firm and fruitful footage on the unbroken sod stretches of the western prairies.”¹⁰⁸ Well-prepared for the task of offering settlement counsel, given his travels to inspect the sum of the Manitoba reserve land prior to Mennonite migration, Shantz praised the swiftness with which Mennonites established fruit culture. Many Mennonites accordingly carried seeds with them to Manitoba, while others placed orders with Shantz for

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 84, 88.

¹⁰⁸ Samuel J. Steiner, *Vicarious Pioneer: The Life of Jacob Y Shantz* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press Limited, 1988), 9.

apple, pear, plum, and cherry trees from his Ontario nursery.¹⁰⁹ Yet, Shantz's letters and reports also encouraged the belief that Manitoba's native fruit trees and Indigenous peoples were wild, and the native fruit uncultivated. In an 1873 government pamphlet about Manitoba, Shantz's report on his journey to Manitoba observes a "great abundance of wild fruit" in Manitoba's bushes and forests, including "wild plum, grapes, strawberries, currants, red and black raspberries, cherries, blueberries, whortleberries, [and] high bush cranberries." For this reason, the "emigrant need not suffer for the want of good fruit in abundance," he continues. Yet, far superior to this "wild fruit" would be the establishment of apple orchards. For, according to Shantz, "though the natives ... [were] entirely unacquainted with the culture of fruit trees ... bred and born without seeing any such under cultivation," he believed that many varieties of European apples would do well under cultivation in the province.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹A long, handwritten list of tree orders indicating persons, several fruit tree varieties, West Reserve villages, and funds owing, documents the fact that hundreds of trees were ordered via Shantz in the 1870s. This list is available at the Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives in Winnipeg. See J. Y. Shantz, "Buch Haupanschreibugen und Ausgabender Kolonie Reinland 1877–1878," microfilm 653, file 13.

¹¹⁰J. Y. Shantz, *Narrative of a Journey*, 33.

with her Ukrainian home: “I often thought of the hundreds of fruit trees, the vineyards, the lanes and hedges, all part of the lovely home at the *Kuban* [a Mennonite settlement dating from imperial Russia].” Anna continued, “There we had lived as though we were on a beautiful island. Here in Manitoba there seemed to be only small gardens and strange fruits, such as the choke cherries [*sic*] which puckered one’s mouth.” Evidently, nostalgia for the well-treed homeland was continuously expressed throughout different generations of Mennonite immigrants, war and revolution in Russia notwithstanding. Also noteworthy are similarities in these nostalgic reflections among both men and women.¹¹²

In her Mennonite Heritage Village oral history project Fuchs spoke about orchards with many contemporary Mennonites who similarly suggested that fruit trees were simply “better” in Russia. Most of these reflections were based on the memories or stories passed down by their immigrant ancestors, rather than on the individuals’ own migration experiences. Distaste for Manitoba’s local fruit was collectively expressed by Mennonite women in a group interview for the same project. These women spoke, for example, of the annoyance of eating pies full of *Tjwitsche* (high-bush cranberries), and having to spit out all the stones from the fruit.¹¹³ Other sources, like photographs, also reveal the multifaceted emotional attachment to fruit trees from the old homeland. As presented in Figure 1.2 in chapter 1, a photograph of Katharina Bergen Penner, taken just prior to her 1926 emigration from Ukraine, depicts her sitting between buckets of young fruit trees. According to Penner’s family members, the trees were dug up and placed into buckets for the journey to Manitoba, indicating concern about the varieties of fruit trees available in Manitoba. Though the trees did not survive their first winter in Manitoba, Penner’s

¹¹² A. R. Dyck, *Anna: From the Caucasus to Canada*, trans. Peter J. Klassen (Hillsboro, Kansas: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1974), 151.

¹¹³ Fuchs, *Beauty and Sustenance*, 20–21.

efforts demonstrate worry about maintaining particular horticultural traditions, food practices, and an awareness of discourse about the poor quality of native fruit in Manitoba.¹¹⁴ Finally, on a tour of a property in the village of Neubergthal, I was shown an overgrown stand of trees bearing small, red, plum-like fruit. The owner of the property indicated that these fruit trees stood where the orchard and vegetable garden had been historically situated on the yard, and that she had reason to believe the trees were original to the establishment of the farmyard. “I’ll bet these are from Russia,” said my tour guide, “[t]here’s nothing like them here; they’re small, but they are so sweet.”¹¹⁵ In the weeks that followed, my research into these so-called heritage plums revealed, rather, that the species is native to Manitoba. My tour guide’s suspicions indicate a complicated effort to preserve the storied superiority of Russian Mennonite horticultural traditions—an effort that has continued over the generations to inform Mennonite people’s relations to the local landscape.

While the value of local fruits on the West Reserve is not always reflected in Mennonite community memory, cherished food practices, traditions of summer berry-picking expeditions, and the continued cultivation of native fruit trees indicate local historical appreciation and adaptation to what this particular landscape had to offer Mennonites upon settlement.¹¹⁶ Today,

¹¹⁴ Martin Penner, email communication with the author, 25 November 2015.

¹¹⁵ Neubergthal resident, private conversation with the author, 23 August 2015

¹¹⁶ An email conversation with East Reserve resident Ernie Braun confirms deeply rooted knowledge of the southern Manitoba landscape and Mennonite efforts to develop fruit culture using local and indigenous trees. Braun wrote: “Although I am well acquainted with the settlement of the East Reserve, and have read all about the marvelous orchards and gardens that sprang up quickly especially in the Kleefeld area, my sense is that most of the evidence points to improvement of local fruit, pin cherries, choke cherries [*sic*], wild plums, strawberries, ground cherries, red and black currents, gooseberries, while other wild fruits were picked religiously in their native habitat, since they did not do well except in very specific soils: e.g. saskatoons, high-bush cranberries (*Tjwitsche*). One shrub that tends to grow wherever there has been a Mennonite yard one hundred years ago is a ‘fruit’ we used to call mulberries but for which I do not [know] the proper German or English name. These are probably related to the hawthorn, complete with

Kjoasch Ssiaropp (chokecherry syrup), for example, is a staple West Reserve summer treat, often paired with fried dough and fresh watermelon, whereas plum jam, with the pits and all, is prized as the perfect filling for shortbread cookies. In one Altona resident's family lore, memories of his grandmother's summer trips to pick chokecherries along the Rivière aux Marias stand out. Similarly, one-time Gretna resident Helena Penner's memoirs relay the centrality of "wild strawberries" in connection to her family's arrival in the new town during the summer of 1893. She writes, "Mother gave us pails and told us children to go and pick strawberries for supper and we did. Never have I experienced anything like it before or since. Of course, once the country became settled and cultivated, that virgin glory, alas disappeared."¹¹⁷ One of Tracy Ruta Fuchs's interviewees similarly recalls picking strawberries on the East Reserve. "We picked enough so that mom could can them [for jam]. We'd pick lots of them where we lived ... in the bush behind us."¹¹⁸ Blueberry (saskatoon) picking trips were also advertised in the *Altona Echo* during the mid-twentieth century, thereby showcasing the time-honoured tradition of engagement with indigenous plants on the West Reserve. In August 1948, for example, a community correspondent reported to the *Altona Echo* on the enjoyment experienced by Gretna residents who traveled west to the nearby Pembina Hills (the western edge of the West Reserve) to collect blueberries (saskatoons). The following year another community correspondent wrote about the scarcity of berries in the area due to spring frosts—a woman reported being unable to fill even

1.5-inch spines that can tear clothing without even going out of its way. We of course also harvested wild hazel nuts [*sic*], even in my day. ... We had wild strawberries and wild raspberries in the southeast in sufficient quantity in my day to stop and eat as the opportunity arose, although we never made an excursion just to pick those, the way we did for saskatoons, wild plums, cranberries, and chokecherries." Ernie Braun, email communication with the author, 2 January 2016.

¹¹⁷ Helen Penner Hiebert, *Granny Stories* (unpublished memoirs, 1960). Photocopies, Box 1, Folder 1-2, Hiebert and Brown Family: An Inventory of their Papers, 1868–2007 at the University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections.

¹¹⁸ Fuchs, *Beauty and Sustenance*, 21.

one pail with saskatoons.¹¹⁹ While many West Reserve residents seem to have historically enjoyed the fruits available in uncultivated areas, many others concentrated their efforts on transplanting fruit trees from wooded areas along waterways to their farmyards and villages. In the University of Manitoba's Department of Landscape Architecture study of the Neuberghal village landscape, some of the village's earliest and thus "culturally significant" plantings are noted. While cottonwoods and Manitoba maple trees are described as the oldest trees in the village (more than one hundred years old), "native chokecherry" trees and "early Manitoba crab apple" trees are also original to village settlement.¹²⁰

Despite the initial reliance and continued use of local fruit among Mennonite residents on the West Reserve, the influence of the Morden Experimental Research Station on southern Manitoba's horticultural diversity, particularly in the area of fruit cultivation, cannot be denied. Between 1929 and 1979, over twenty-five varieties of apple trees were introduced into the province; numerous varieties of pears, cherries, plums, strawberries, and raspberries were also introduced during this time period. By 1948, the Morden Experimental Research Station was a regular contributor to the *Echo*, offering advice for planting, suitability, fruit breeding and improvement, and recommendations about new varieties of fruit and shade trees, shrubs and vegetables for Mennonites in the vicinity; evidence of which is noted on properties throughout the area.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ "Gretna," *Altona Echo*, 4 August 1948, 1; "Gretna," *Altona Echo*, 13 July 1949, 5.

¹²⁰ Department of Landscape Architecture, *Neuberghal Landscape Study*, 10–11, 18, 42.

¹²¹ See for example, W. R. Leslie, *Report of the Superintendent for the Year 1929* (Morden Experimental Station: Dominion of Canada Department of Agriculture Dominion Experimental Farms, 1929), W. R. Leslie, *Progress Report 1947–1954* (Morden Experimental Farm: Canada Department of Agriculture Experimental Farms Service, 1954). See also, "Morden Experimental Station," *Altona Echo*, 18 February 1948, 3; "Pear improvement," *Altona Echo*, 15 February 1950, 7.

Historians of European settlement on the Canadian Prairies have pondered the psychological weight of homesteading in a treeless, flat, and harsh environment. In the case of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Mennonite migrations to Manitoba's West Reserve, John Warkentin's reflections on in-group literature describing this relocation clarifies that Mennonites considered this particular landscape to be "flat, treeless, and empty." Mennonites were not only "over-awed and deeply disturbed," but were "frightened by the relentless space and loneliness" of this "wilderness." For many, the stark West Reserve represented the "end of the earth,"¹²² and the orchards and gardens that were left behind in Russia thus came to symbolize home in poignant and deep-seated ways. Records of early interactions between Mennonites and Manitoba's landscapes indicate that Mennonites at once dreaded and sought to appropriate this so-called wilderness. Historical efforts to establish orchards and to make something familiar out of Manitoba's fruits are rooted in a long history of settler-colonial homemaking among Mennonites. While Mennonites planted orchards for sustenance and as a symbol of home, Mennonite interaction with the native landscape and Indigenous people in the area have been largely disregarded in the historical record of Mennonite settlement. An analysis of the establishment of fruit culture on the West Reserve alongside the study of the varied and contradictory discourses relating to this homesteading process draws attention to the messy relationship between landscape and memory.

Burying sorrow, rooting culture

The construction of landscape, and the kinds of places we envision as home, suggests British archeologist Christopher Tilley, are inseparable from the ethnic, religious, class, race, and

¹²² Warkentin, "Going on Foot," 65, 68.

gender politics of our identities.¹²³ Felling trees for building houses, as well as transplanting saplings for shelter belts and orchards, therefore, manufactured a sense of home, enclosure, and control over the Mennonite culture and the environment for Mennonite immigrants on the West Reserve in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet, the interwoven emotional, spiritual, and aesthetic role of trees on the Canadian prairie West also contributes significantly to the complex ways trees are storied, remembered, and imagined in the history of Mennonites on the West Reserve, or more particularly in narrations of contemporary Mennonite identity and relationships to the landscape. As contemporary West Reserve resident Warren Loewen has noted, “trees were a big thing with Mennos [*sic*] ... and it was so for my dad. He planted a lot of trees on our yard and on the shop properties, and I learned from that.”¹²⁴

Canadian historian Frances Swyripa suggests that material remnants of the European settler generation—like trees, churches, and wayside cairns—become symbols that connect the contemporary moment to the past. In Chapter 1 I demonstrated the centrality of the Chortitza oak tree to Mennonite identity and a vision of home for numerous generations. This centrality is revealed in efforts to save, transfer, and replant its acorns—to memorialize the tree and its descendants—in Mennonite areas of settlement. On the West Reserve, trees planted by the immigrant settler generation are also memorialized in this way. In some cases, trees are believed to be used as grave markers for pioneers and early Mennonites, while in others, particular trees are believed to have come from Russia with the late nineteenth-century immigrants. Oak beams, shaped by hand, from one of the oldest buildings in the village of Reinland are on display in an early housebarn because they represent one of the earliest efforts at home construction on the West Reserve. In contemporary life narratives, old West Reserve trees stand out as representative

¹²³ Tilley, “Identity, Place, Landscape and Heritage,” 15.

¹²⁴ Warren Loewen, email communication with the author, 24 February 2016.

of both homecoming and painful departures. Accordingly, it seems trees do indeed play a role in the way identities are constructed and feelings about Mennonite history are understood for many Mennonites on the West Reserve today. An analysis of trees as remnants of the settler generation and as spiritual symbols of rootedness in contemporary Mennonite identity on the prairies, also offers a greater understanding of the way trees contribute to mythologized versions of Mennonite history.

Stories about Mennonite immigrants bringing trees and root cuttings to Manitoba in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries abound, as do rumours about either the Russian origin of the trees or the connectedness of the landscape of New Russia to West Reserve villages. For example, during a phone conversation with a West Reserve community member in the summer of 2015, I was told, “*all* the cottonwoods were brought from Russia. There was nothing here before.” Despite an arborist’s report detailing the botanical histories of Neuberghal’s Manitoba trees,¹²⁵ which negates such legends, a rather evocative photograph of Katharina Bergen Penner in the Ukraine, sitting between fruit trees that have been dug up and put into pails a few days prior to her emigration to Manitoba in 1926, is one example to the contrary. Altona resident Dave Harms is also of the opinion that his grandparents planted the trees they brought to Manitoba on their original settlement in the East Reserve. “Theory has it they even planted mulberry bushes,” explained Harms.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Department of Landscape Architecture, *Neuberghal Landscape Study*, 4–19.

¹²⁶ Harms, email communication with the author, 29 January 2016.



Figure 2.2: Katharina Bergen Penner with fruit trees in pails, circa 1926.¹²⁷

While it is unlikely that the cottonwood trees on the West Reserve are from Russia, these suppositions are not outlandish, particularly when one takes a wider view. In November 1882, for example, the *Herald of Truth*, a Mennonite periodical based in Illinois, reported on the success of the “Russian Mulberry,” brought to the United States by Mennonites from Russia in the 1870s. Reporter G. J. Carpenter describes the Russian mulberry as “perfectly hardy,” and as a “valuable and ornamental tree.” “The seed [sic],” he continues, “which was planted five years ago, are twenty feet in height and six inches in diameter, and have borne crops of fruit since they were two years old.”¹²⁸ Moreover, the similar varieties of trees on the steppes of New Russia and the Canadian Prairies may also have contributed to narratives of tree transport. In the section of

¹²⁷ Photograph courtesy of Martin Penner and the Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives.

¹²⁸ C. J. Carpenter, “Russian Mulberry,” *Herald of Truth*, 1 November 1882.

the Silberfeld village history book entitled “If Trees Could Talk,” for example, West Reserve resident and book editor Mary Loewen infers that the name *Silberfeld* (silver field) was chosen because of the wolf willow shrubbery that grew along creeks in the West Reserve. These trees “gave the landscape a silvery sheen,” yet reminded Mennonite immigrants of the wolf willow that “grew in Russia on their prairie land.”¹²⁹

According to members of her family, Katharina Bergen Penner’s fruit trees did not survive their first year on the flood-prone East Reserve. Despite the nostalgic inclinations of family stories about the transfer of seeds and trees, David Punter, senior scholar, plant pathologist, and botanist at the University of Manitoba affirms that the likelihood of success in transporting and transplanting trees from Russia to the East Reserve is slim, as is their eventual transfer to the West Reserve among those who resettled once in Manitoba.¹³⁰ Rather, it is more likely that the trees were harvested from beside the waterways near the reserve lands and the plants were cultivated, traded, or purchased upon the Mennonites’ arrival.¹³¹ Punter cautioned against the uncritical acceptance of stories about intergenerational seed saving and the successful transfer of seeds to Manitoba and between settlements; the germination of seeds is less likely

¹²⁹ Benno Loewen and Mary Loewen, *Silberfeld 1878–2008: One Hundred and Thirty Years of Change* (Rosenort, 2013), 12.

¹³⁰ In June 2015, I was introduced to Alan Giesbrecht of Steinbach. Giesbrecht was raised on a yard on which there is an apple tree that has been verified by the Manitoba Apple Growers Association as having come from Ukraine. Giesbrecht and his family are of the opinion that the homesteaders of this yard carried an apple tree graft with them from Russia to Manitoba in the 1870s. Alan Giesbrecht, email communication with the author, 12 June 2015. See also Linda Buhler, “The Apple Tree,” *Preservings* 6 (June 1995): 27. In this short article, Buhler relays the story of another historic apple tree in Steinbach, which was planted by Anna Barkman in 1906, and has withstood many changes to the property surrounding it, as well as harsh wind and weather. According to Buhler, this is the oldest apple tree in Steinbach, and is now considered a historic part of the town’s heritage. Buhler explains further that Anna’s “love of gardening resulted in a landmark which has graced [the] town with its beauty and history.”

¹³¹ David Harms, email communication with the author, 29 January 2016; Martin Penner, email communication with the author, 25 November 2015; David Punter, conversation with the author, 15 April 2015.

after one or two years even if they have been properly dried, stored and kept at an optimal temperature. This advice is pertinent when studying the immigration histories of those families who moved from the East to the West Reserve after an unsuccessful first few years of homesteading on land that was marshy or grasshopper-infested or both. However, Punter did suggest the likelihood of Mennonites bringing portulaca, now considered an invasive weed, to the province. Wheat, barley, and oats are of also of European origin, and particular varieties were likely brought by Mennonites from Russia, or, upon their settlement, ordered for agricultural use. In an effort to make sense of the stories of tree transfer, Punter posited: “People seem to have a strong attachment to the surroundings in which they were brought up, and plants and trees are an important part of our surroundings, perhaps even more so when there aren’t many around. We remember with joy the things we scrounge from nature—berries, roots, and twigs.” Punter continued, “Such memories and emotions may have been more prominent in the years prior to World War II when the ‘ethic of self-reliance’ would have largely informed the thoughts and behaviours of people in relation to nature.”¹³²

Contemporary stories that detail the Russian and Mennonite prairie settlement heritage of seeds and plants work to preserve this ethic of self-reliance, as well as root modern day Mennonite identity in a particular place and history. Both Russia and early villages of the West Reserve feature in these narratives. As East Reserve resident Ernie Braun aptly noted in an email, “I have walked over a good part of [this landscape] in my time ... although there may well be some family traditions about what was brought over 140 years ago, aside from herb seeds

¹³² David Punter, conversation with the author, 15 April 2015.

which may have survived the climate shock, I suspect there will be more passion than fact on the topic.”¹³³

What is more, an 1895 letter from E. Winkler to a Mr. Greenway in Gretna and its interpretation by local historian F. G. Enns at once confirms Punter’s speculations, strengthens the relationship between turn of the century concerns about the “greening of the prairies” alongside European settlement in western Canada, and affirms the memorializing effect that early trees have on West Reserve residents. The letter seems to have accompanied a shipment of cottonwood seedlings that was sent from Crystal City (in western Manitoba) to Gretna. As written by Winkler, “If you want more when these arrive, let me know at once. I can get you a few thousand the same as these shipped, if it don’t freeze up too soon. They grow on water edge of a river so you have to start them in a well watered piece of land.”¹³⁴ Mennonite community leaders in the area at that time were especially concerned with “changing the barren landscape into a well-treed garden.”¹³⁵ As such, cottonwood seedlings were transplanted from the banks of the Pembina River, and transported to nearby villages and settlements. The streets, like those in Gretna, “became lined with quick, straight grown trees.”¹³⁶ According to F. G. Enns, the work done in those years continued to benefit Gretna residents in later generations, for “the tall trees provide a physical symbol of the foresight, work and planning which took place a century ago.”¹³⁷

Trees and the pioneer generation are also co-memorialized in other ways. In the village of

¹³³ Ernie Braun, email communication with the author, 2 January 2016.

¹³⁴ E. Winkler, letter to Mr. Greenway regarding a bundle of cottonwood seedlings, 22 October 1895, in F. G. Enns, *Gretna: Window on the Northwest* (Altona: Village of Gretna History Committee, 1987), 104.

¹³⁵ Enns, *Gretna*, 104.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

Reinland, as mentioned earlier, a corner section of a log building from 1877 is on display. The oak logs are believed to be from the first house built in the village, and were sawn and planed by hand. In the village of Neubergthal, a tree's absence is also upheld as an important memory in the history of the village. The study of village trees and hedgerows by the University of Manitoba's Department of Landscape Architecture contains an account of John Klippenstein planting trees at the front of one property in 1920 when he was a boy at age ten. After being warned by his father that the trees would not grow, he carried pails of water from a nearby well to keep them watered. In one spot, despite Klippenstein's efforts to replace it many times, the sapling always died. The spot remains empty to this day.¹³⁸ Several of the area's oak tree stands and the treed locations of former villages, some of which were abandoned only a few years after being established, are all affectionately remembered by elderly West Reserve residents as "the bush." Here, people picnicked on Sundays, walked while courting, and found shelter from the summer sun. Trees also stand out for some residents as memorials and as symbols of overcoming grief. For Altona resident Marlene Plett, who watched the big old cottonwood on her family's farmyard near Edenthal in the rearview mirror as she left an abusive marriage, the sight of the tree came to represent the eventual overcoming of a painful situation, but also leaving behind her childhood home. She would never see that tree again. Local writer Eleanor Chornoboy's story "Seven Cottonwoods," relays Peter Hildebrand's efforts to plant seven cottonwoods "to shelter his frame farm house half a mile north of the Canada-U.S. border. Each tree honoured one of his first seven children."¹³⁹

Finally, particular trees on the West Reserve landscape are also remembered among

¹³⁸ Department of Landscape Architecture, *Neubergthal Landscape Study*, 8.

¹³⁹ Eleanor Chornoboy, *Faspa with Jast: A Snack of Mennonite Stories told by Family and Guests* (Winnipeg: self published, 2007), 221.

residents as early grave markers. This memorializing further unites the landscape with Mennonite people. Though trees were selected as grave markers among late twentieth-century Mennonites on both the East and West Reserves for their austerity, as “virtually devoid of visual symbols identifying the dead with their regional or personal roots,” which some scholars speculate was an effort to forget the life-altering hardships of the settlement period, nonetheless, today they stand out as important and appropriated symbols.¹⁴⁰ As “nostalgia for the past and its artifacts gathered momentum,” suggests Frances Swyripa, “the material heritage of the settlement era—defining the land, recalling its human dramas—acquired unprecedented symbolic value.”¹⁴¹ Today, these markers at once commemorate the pioneer dead, proclaim the pioneers’ descendants’ own roots in the land, and reaffirm individuals’ ties to larger groups and diasporas. Of course, Mennonites are among other ethno-religious immigrant groups that memorialize their ancestors through stories about trees. Lawrence Rettig, a scholar of Amana history, notes for example that Amanas often planted pine and spruce trees around cemeteries at the edges of their villages. “Not only did they define the cemetery borders and provide a bit of green during a rather bleak time of year,” explains Rettig, “they were regarded as symbolic of eternal life.”¹⁴² The appropriation of a particular history in a particular place alongside efforts to mythologize and memorialize are represented well in the following West Reserve stories of tree-marked graves. For example, a 1955 photograph at the Manitoba Provincial Archives depicts

¹⁴⁰ Friesen, *A Mennonite Odyssey*, 79. Reinhart Friesen’s creative work alludes to the phenomenon of austerity as a part of an attempt to forget the hardship and loss encountered by the migrating generation of Mennonites in southern Manitoba. Main character Jacob Friesen recalls his efforts to construct a home on the West Reserve despite the tribulations the family encountered. “As to the family outgrowing the house—this country certainly was hard on children. He thought of the two little graves they had left behind on the East Reserve and of the four new ones here in the corner of the garden.”

¹⁴¹ Swyripa, *Storied Landscapes*, 201–203.

¹⁴² Lawrence Rettig, *Gardening the Amana Way* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2013), 43.

four mature cottonwood trees that were apparently planted to identify graves near the former village of Kronsthal on the West Reserve.¹⁴³



Figure 2.3: Four cottonwood trees mark the graves of Mennonite immigrants near Kronsthal, Manitoba.¹⁴⁴

Similarly, the Silberfeld centennial history book relays the story of Cornelius Martens and Katharina Friesen, Mennonite immigrants from Russia, who, after marrying in 1895, homesteaded on quarter section SW 12-1-1W where they began their life together. Their first three children died before the age of one year; a cottonwood was planted on each one's grave, and to this day remain on the yard. A photograph of these trees is included in the Silberfeld history book.¹⁴⁵ Market gardener Joe Braun and his wife Lois have also speculated that three large cottonwood trees on their former country yard mark the graves of members of the

¹⁴³ Archives of Manitoba, Mennonites, 26. In Swyripa, *Storied Landscapes*, 203.

¹⁴⁴ Photograph courtesy of Archives of Manitoba, Mennonites 26 and Swyripa, 203.

¹⁴⁵ Loewen and Loewen, *Silberfeld*, 64.

homesteading family. And, according to members of the University of Manitoba’s Department of Landscape Architecture research team in Neuberghal, “the grove of trees located in the cemetery is of cultural importance [to the village]. Not only does it create a unique visual impression ... but these trees are close to 100 years old.”¹⁴⁶ The report goes on to suggest that “the first trees in the cemetery had been planted in rows,” potentially indicating their early use as grave markers. According to researchers, “one maple [in the cemetery] has an early wooden grave marker attached to it.”¹⁴⁷ Shaun Friesen’s family narrative also holds the story of a tree-marked grave. In the Friesen family memoir, it is recorded that to the north of the family’s Gretna home, was a circular flower bed, at the centre of which stood a lilac bush. The family’s matriarch very carefully tended this flower bed. When the house and yard were eventually sold, its new owners removed the old house and dug a new foundation, wherein they discovered a grave under the circular flower bed. In it was a coffin containing the remains of a young woman and a newborn infant. Though the family has advanced many theories of who this woman had been and what events transpired, the family matriarch, when questioned about the bones, replied, “some things are best forgotten.”¹⁴⁸

Finally, Altona-born artist Teresa Braun’s creative work, which builds on local and familial Mennonite mythology about cottonwoods, the story of her family’s overgrown West Reserve cemetery is retold. She describes the large cottonwood that towers over the cemetery, and the recent attempt by her father and uncle to locate the graves of particular family members rumoured to be buried there. Her reflections, below, speak directly to the way trees both memorialize and mythologize the pioneer generation, and root contemporary Mennonite

¹⁴⁶ Department of Landscape Architecture, *Neuberghal Landscape Study*, 7.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁴⁸ Alvina Giesbrecht, “Mystery of the Bones,” *Memories* (Manitoba: self-published memoir, 2009), 31–32.

identities in the landscape:

The mother, the father and two daughters lived on a pig farm on the northeast corner of the land. One winter a flu went round and father and the two little daughters died. Mother planted a cottonwood tree right where they were buried. The tree grew down into their bodies until there was nothing left but soil ... Each summer the tree sent down cotton and made the ground white ... The air sweetly rots. It smells of autumn and spring together. I stand before the tree rooted in the graves of my family. They are so vague, they are barely a story! I look for them in what's left: the dirt that grows the tree that makes the seeds ... Are they there? Are they in me? I look for them there, but I don't know what to recognize.¹⁴⁹

Mary Loewen's reflections on trees also poignantly summarize narratives of tree-marked graves and is an attempt to locate and explore Mennonite history and identity in the Canadian prairie West. "God has impressed on me the sight of the old cottonwood trees within my landscape," she writes. "No matter what the season, they stand out and beg to be noticed. I think of who may have planted them, and nurtured them on the raw prairie. The trees tell a story. They have withstood many storms, sheltered many with the shade of their leaves. The old pioneers have disappeared, just as most of the pioneer trees. The old trees represent the legacy of the pioneers."¹⁵⁰

Conclusion

Scholars like Ronald Rees and Frances Swyripa have noted that especially for European settlers at the turn of the century, trees generated "feeling[s] of rest and comfort."¹⁵¹ This chapter has demonstrated these observations to be correct in the lives and histories of Mennonites on the

¹⁴⁹ Teresa Braun, *De Schwoate Bruhne von Eigengrund (The Blacks and Browns of Our Own Ground): In Five Parts* (Jersey City: Conveyor Arts, 2015) 9, 13.

¹⁵⁰ Loewen and Loewen, *Silberfeld*, 259.

¹⁵¹ Rees, *New and Naked Land*, 107.

West Reserve. Without trees, and in the midst of migratory upheaval, landscapes were understood by Mennonites to be lonely, frightening, and wild. With the planting of trees, feelings of isolation and loneliness instigated by an immense and unfamiliar landscape were lessened. However, tree planting on the West Reserve by Mennonites was a contested and complex feat, rooted in a long history of colonialism. Establishing tree culture on the prairies aided immigrant settler Mennonites in ordering their collective experiences and narrating a sense of heritage on the Canadian Prairies.

These stories illuminate how planting trees assisted the Mennonite settler generation in claiming space, and created a sense of distinctiveness and historical rootedness on the prairie landscape. Yet, in many cases, these efforts erased histories of encounter with Indigenous peoples and the native landscape; what is remembered by Mennonites today, are instead mythologized and memorialized efforts to make something out of a perceived nothing. Whether used as grave markers, property demarcations, or barriers, trees in Mennonite communities on the West Reserve became physical memorials of “group consciousness and a sense of achievement around a particular interpretation and valuation of the past [which] enabled immigrant settler peoples not only to explain and justify who they were but also to argue for their uniqueness and importance.”¹⁵² The immigrant settler generation worked to align the past with the future by planting trees—aiming for demarcation and shelter. Over time, however, trees became symbolic artefacts of prairie Mennonite identity. For Mennonites on the West Reserve today, trees generate a sense of material heritage and invite an imagined sense of connectedness to both the people who planted them, and the prairie landscape. As Manitoba artist Teresa Braun aptly notes, “trees are more than themselves ... and the idea of planting a tree is especially

¹⁵² Swyrpia, *Storied Landscapes*, 9.

powerful in the prairies. My people are inside this ground, but they're also inside this tree. One day I'll be here and I won't be a body anymore."¹⁵³

¹⁵³ Braun, *Eigengrund*, 68–69.

Chapter Three:
Stockroose onn Zinse (Hollyhocks and Zinnias)

28 May 1936—It is windy today.
We still have a lot of work in the garden. Everything is coming up.
The lilacs are blooming and so are the tulips and hawthorn bushes too.
To the Lord be much praise and thanks for it.¹

Growing up I remember my maternal grandmother, *Oma* Regier, having wonderful wide flowerbeds around all sides of her house, which she tended with love and care. ... When I got married, *Oma* graciously let me dig up some flowers to start my own flowerbed. ... My mother, having raised ten children, was a gardener out of necessity. I don't remember a lot of flowers, but [I] do remember rows of carrots, peas, beans, corn. ... I often imagine that God looks upon us as his garden. We are as varied [and] unique as the flowers and plants of this world.²

Students and researchers of prairie horticulture have found few references to flower gardening by rural immigrants in late nineteenth-century Manitoba; one speculation is that “the pioneer doubtless was too busy raising crops to bother himself or herself with flowers.”³ Historians, like Gerald Friesen and Paul Voisey, have focused their studies of culture and European settlement on the western Canadian Prairies more on the emergence of a grain economy than on farm household landscaping efforts.⁴ Yet, reporters who observed Mennonites on Manitoba's West Reserve from the time of their arrival in 1876 and into the twentieth century, frequently mentioned flowers. These accounts convey a sense of appreciation for Mennonite efforts in flower gardening and in floral decor, and praise flowers as a distinctive

¹ Maria Voth, “Glimpses into the Life of a Farm Woman during the War Years: From the Daybook of Maria Voth,” *Preservings* 27 (2007): 91.

² Liz Koop, “Gardening delights over generations: Women Walking Together in Faith,” *Canadian Mennonite* 17/6 (2013).

³ William Douglas, “Winnipeg Parks,” in *MHS Transactions* 3/14 (1957–8), accessed 26 January 2017, <http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/transactions/3/winnipegparks.shtml>.

⁴ See for example Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987) and Paul Voisey, *Vulcan: The Making of a Prairie Community* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988).

feature of Mennonite culture. But, as Sarah Carter has recently pointed out, flower gardens were also celebrated in the Canadian prairie West as “small-scale models of the wider imperial project.” That is, “the flower beds and neat rows of vegetables proclaimed a superior civilization, triumphing over the wilderness.”⁵ As Carter further argues, pioneer women’s flower gardening was commended as an activity that did not pose any challenge to specific ideas of femininity or the traditional gender order of settler colonial life on the prairies. Such celebratory language can be noted in the following reports of Mennonite life in Manitoba.⁶

In his study *Life and Labour in the Far, Far West*, for example, W. Henry Barneby observes countless flowers in one Mennonite village on the West Reserve in the 1880s. Barneby is particularly fascinated with Mennonite houses, where “in the windows stood neat little pots of flowers and prairie roses,” and Mennonite yards, “each with a very large and beautifully-cultivated garden ... stocked with every description of what we should call old-fashioned flowers and an abundance of vegetables.” His report likens Mennonite gardens to English gardens, and expresses contentment with the way some women’s vegetable gardens were even bordered with flowers. Barneby goes on to list numerous varieties of flowers, among which he notes nasturtiums, pinks, sweet williams, pansies, Indian pinks, scarlet stars, marigolds, China asters, mignonettes, hollyhocks, chamomile, roses, and portulaca, thereby praising Mennonites for their progressive horticultural ways.⁷ Likewise, a July 1884 article in the *Emerson International*, a newspaper serving the nearby British-Canadian community of Emerson, affirms West Reserve

⁵ Sarah Carter, *Imperial Plots: Women, Land, and the Spadework of British Colonialism on the Canadian Prairies* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2016), 79.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ W. Henry Barneby, “Chapter 24,” *Life and Labour in the Far, Far, West: Being Notes of a Tour in the Western States, British Columbia, Manitoba and the NorthWest Territory* (London: Cassell & Company, 1884), in *The Outsider’s Gaze: Life and Labour on the Mennonite West Reserve, 1874–1922*, eds. Jacob E. Peters et al (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2015), 79, 80.

Mennonite efforts to cultivate flowers, and highlights outsider attraction to such. The writer suggests that the “drive to the eight-mile (away) village—Halbstadt—is becoming a favourite amusement with Emersonians. The flower gardens of the Mennonites prove a great attraction and are a source of profit for the ‘aesthetic’ owners, visitors paying liberal prices for bouquets.”⁸

Scholars of Mennonite culture offer a range of observations about the relationship between Mennonites and flowers. Some have warned that historical perspectives on Mennonite women in North America have been especially limiting in that they often describe Mennonite women as “silent, working doggedly and artistic only in their nurture of the ubiquitous flowers.”⁹ Scholars who take gender and sexuality as their focus, however, have pointed out that because European settler women in Manitoba were limited in terms of landownership and farming due to efforts in establishing a traditional gender order, flower gardening and other horticultural activities, besides marriage and motherhood, were some of the only acceptable ways to perform femininity in the rural Canadian imperial world.¹⁰ Others, such as anthropologist James Urry, suggest instead that flowers were considered by Mennonite men *and* women to be a form of “God’s beauty and decoration,” hence flower gardens, crafts, and floral decor were permissible and popular in spite of a lack of more general decoration in Mennonite households.¹¹ More recently, photojournalist Eunice Adorno, whose work documents the lives of contemporary conservative Mennonite women in their closed communities in Mexico (Nuevo Ideal, Durango and La Honda, Zacatecas), observes that flowers represent a unique and lasting affinity for Mennonite women in particular. Flowers, Adorno argues, are a “common denominator among

⁸ “Flower gardens of the Mennonites,” *Emerson International*, 31 July 1884.

⁹ Royden Loewen, *Hidden Worlds: Revisiting the Mennonite Migrants of the 1870s* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2001), 53.

¹⁰ Carter, *Imperial Plots*, 84.

¹¹ James Urry, email communication with the author, 14 March 2016.

Mennonite women in the village; the flowers appear in their dresses, in their objects, in their names, and in their gardens.” After spending considerable time with Mennonite women in Mexico, Adorno writes that their flower-adorned spaces “[constitute] a kind of secret on the horizon where the Mennonite [women] take refuge. ... Separated from the work and from their husbands, the women forge their own universe, fashioned out of chats, memories, secrets, friendships, pleasures, and diversions.”¹²

Local writers, Tracy Ruta Fuchs, Eleanor Chornoboy, as well as other researchers, have similarly demonstrated that it was Mennonite women throughout West Reserve history who took greatest pride in flower culture; they worked hard to keep their flower gardens, in particular, “productive and attractive.”¹³ At times, women’s flower gardens generated a certain level of competition between households, or were perhaps devised and maintained according to home fashion trends accompanying a shifting national socio-cultural climate. Most Mennonite women recall, nonetheless, that flower gardens were spaces in which they sought solitude or fostered kinship.¹⁴ Like Adorno, these researchers believe that Mennonite women expressed their individuality, creativity, and femininity by way of flower culture, and thereby shaped a distinct version of Mennonite ethnicity. However, the archives also offer a window into the historical relationship between Mennonite men and flowers, particularly in the decades leading up to the turn of the twentieth century. Artefacts, diaries, oral history, and memoirs together offer a unique

¹² Enuice Adorno, *Las Mujeres Flores* (Madrid: La Fábrica Editorial, 2011), 17. President Álvaro Obregón granted Mennonites several blocks of land in the states of Chihuahua, Durango, and Zacatecas between 1920 and 1924. Those who immigrated were conservative Mennonites from Manitoba, seeking to escape the instillation of provincial school curricula.

¹³ Tracy Ruta Fuchs, *Beauty and Sustenance: A History of Mennonite Gardens and Orchards in Russia and Manitoba* (Steinbach: MHV, 2007), 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

reading of the multiple ways Mennonite men treasured and documented the flora of their surroundings.

Keeping in mind the wide range of extant scholarly perspectives on Mennonites and flowers, in this chapter I will trace the history of flower culture among Mennonites in New Russia and in western Canada in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. I will analyze how flower culture was understood by insiders and outsiders, women and men, over time and in the context of immigration and resettlement. More specifically, by analyzing flower culture on the West Reserve, records of which are abundant, I suggest that flower gardens and floral decor offer unique material-historical records of Mennonite lives, contestations, social networks, and shifting conceptions of gender throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While flowers were central to creativity, reverence, and friendship for many Mennonite pioneer women and men, flower culture also assisted individuals in cultivating a specific nostalgia for the homeland. In this chapter, however, I also propose that the social and political dimensions of daily life on the Canadian Prairies worked to produce a particular and lasting version of femininity, whereby flower culture became an acceptable and defining feature of upstanding moral behaviour and (Mennonite) womanhood.

Sarah Carter has argued, for example, that when British women settlers arrived on the Canadian Prairies in the late nineteenth century, they were expected to be models of an idealized femininity, and were not, therefore, to be seen “toiling” in the fields. Those women who advocated for the rights to occupational farming and land tenure were told that work connected to the land was improper and masculine. “The result was a division of agriculture into feminine and masculine spheres,”¹⁵ explains Carter. “Lighter” forms of agriculture, such as poultry

¹⁵ Carter, *Imperial Plots*, 90.

keeping, dairying, vegetable and flower gardening, thus became the standard by which women's rural femininity was measured.¹⁶ Similarly, Horticulturalist Edwinna von Baeyer's research denotes twentieth-century efforts to link flowers and yard beautification with notions of social progress, praiseworthy work, mental and moral health, and cultural refinement among immigrant women.¹⁷ Von Baeyer's research indicates that earlier, imperial ideals regarding rural femininity pushed through into the twentieth century, but were couched in different language. In this chapter, I suggest that modern, colonial ideals connecting women, femininity, and horticulture were taken up and sustained in Manitoba Mennonite flower culture over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This also indicates that Mennonites were not isolated by their religious and cultural traditions, but interacted with the ideals of their host society. However, with the help of newspaper accounts, diaries, memoirs, and oral histories, I demonstrate in this chapter that the gendered dimensions of flower culture were multifaceted among Mennonites, and changed over time, in Manitoba. While flower culture was gradually honed according to immigration, resettlement, and a distinct, rural ethno-cultural lifeway in West Reserve settings, the advent of twentieth-century modernizing reforms encouraged the feminization and moralization of Manitoban flower culture.

Moreover, recent studies suggest that flower gardening as a leisure activity plays an important role in the "reappraisal of life situations," in "meaning-focused coping," in an "expression of inner being," and that gardeners commonly experience the "garden as a spiritual place."¹⁸ Expanding this view of flower culture, Jack Goody warns that while the topic of flower

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Edwinna von Baeyer, *Rhetoric and Roses: A History of Canadian Gardening 1900–1930* (Markham: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1984), 178.

¹⁸ Anita Unruh and Susan Hutchinson, "Embedded spirituality: gardening in daily life and stressful life experiences," *Scandinavian Journal of Caring Sciences* 25/3 (2011): 567, 573.

culture may appear “narrow and restricted,” having more to do with leisure and decoration than with the “serious things of life,” such a view is limited.¹⁹ He argues that growing flowers “is obviously affected not only by utilitarian considerations but by aesthetic demands, by the meanings allotted to them and by the level of horticulture and of ‘civilisation’ [*sic*] in general.”²⁰ Drawing on Goody’s observations, I argue that to ignore the ethno-cultural specificities associated with flower culture among Mennonite immigrants and their descendants in Manitoba is also to overlook the complex ways in which cultural concepts of gender, work, functionality (that is, the necessity or lack of flowers), beauty, class, modernity, and leisure were worked out in the midst of settlement and social change. An examination of the complexity of flower culture among Mennonite immigrants and their descendants in Manitoba is also an attempt to ruminate on the very conditions of the possibility of flower culture. Flower culture among Mennonites is not only a matter of the interplay between the historical presence of flowers in gardening, household artistry, and the divergences of personal tastes and popular trends in decor. Flowers also represent socio-political, spiritual, emotional, and gendered dimensions of life among Mennonites on the West Reserve.

Witnessing Landscapes: Mennonite Men Consider the Flowers

Native flora and flower gardens in Mennonite villages on the landscape of New Russia are alluded to in the personal documents of numerous Mennonite men, unlike North American Mennonite flower culture, which seems in both reports and memories to be more closely associated with Mennonite women’s work, identity, and delight. The Mennonite flower culture

¹⁹ Jack Goody, *The Culture of Flowers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993),

²⁰ Ibid.

of Russia, in particular, is associated with the work, enjoyment, and the nostalgic reflections of Mennonite men. Such extensive commentary reflects Russia's evocative hold in the mind's eye of Mennonite individuals, alongside the time-honoured convention of concern for beauty rooted in the colours and textures of nature. These writings also point the reader to the continuous horticultural efforts among Mennonites to differentiate themselves as model settlers on the steppes, as highlighted in the discussion of trees in chapter 2. Mennonites worked to beautify the landscapes they inhabited, and upon leaving these landscapes behind, longed for the splendour of their former home. More importantly, the writers of these documents do not speak to an exclusive association between flowers and femininity. Mennonite men documented flowers in efforts to express affective concern for the people with whom and places in which they lived their daily lives.

In a 1913 issue of the Russian Mennonite journal *Mennonitische Jahrbuch*, Cornelius Hildebrand Sr. offers readers a melancholy vignette of Mennonite life in Chortitza in May of 1840, centered around careful observation of flower culture. The article opens with a discussion of the “peaceful, restful atmosphere [which] seems to have taken over all of nature”²¹ on a Sunday morning in the village. Hildebrand explains that on Sundays, Mennonites from Russia were beckoned to a collective worship service in the local schoolhouse.²² As per tradition, the *Mumtjes* (married women) carried sprigs of *Marienblatt* (pennyroyal), grown in their gardens especially for these walks to the church. If pennyroyal was not available, they instead carried a sweet-smelling rose or a sprig of “wild thyme” brought in from the fields the previous day.

²¹ Cornelius Hildebrand, “A Sunday in 1840 on the Island of Chortitza” trans. by Peter Pauls, *From Danzig to Russia: The First Emigration of Mennonites from the Danzig Region to Southern Russia*, trans. Walter E. Toews and Adolf Ens (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 2000), 51.

²² *Ibid.*, 52.

“After all,” explains Hildebrand, “when one sits in church one’s senses must be able to perceive a ‘Sunday fragrance.’”²³ Once in the sanctuary, a young woman, “feeling a delicate sneeze coming on, cautiously takes her stiffly starched cloth bag which contains the *Marienblatt* or a sprig of thyme, and wafts it back and forth a few times under her nose, releasing a veritable cloud of herbal perfume which drifts slowly over to her neighbour.”²⁴ To further invoke the festive atmosphere of a spring Sunday, every household was adorned with “a cluster of blue lilacs interspersed with long-stemmed tulips set in a vase or pitcher and plated on the table in the best room.”²⁵ Hildebrand posits that this practice “could be seen as a kind of alter offering, not unlike the practice followed by worshippers in the temple of ancient Jerusalem.”²⁶

Hildebrand’s vignette is similar to an experience described a generation later in the diary of thirty-seven-year-old farmer and landowner Dietrich Gaeddert, who richly documented his everyday life in Russia. In April 1872, Gaeddert joyfully observed, alongside other “heavenly” signs of spring, that “in the meadow the cowslips, violets and many lilies [were] blooming.”²⁷ Likewise, in his autobiographical collection of memories from the Molotschna colony in the 1920s, Henry Bernard Tiessen offers a description of Mennonite flower culture in Ukraine. His writing emphasizes the temperate climate of the area, due in part to the nearness of the Sea of Asov. Accordingly, “all kinds of fruits, vegetables, and flowers grew in great profusion.”²⁸ Tiessen notes that every villager, regardless of wealth, had some flowers at the front of their homes or in their gardens, indicating that class did not dictate one’s will or ability to plant

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 54.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Loewen, *Hidden Worlds*, 13.

²⁸ Henry Bernard Tiessen, *The Molotschna Colony: A Heritage Remembered* (Kitchner, 1979), 20.

flowers. Rather, flower gardening and yard beautification were symbols of friendly, neighbourly competition, regardless of wealth. “There seemed to be some unwritten law among the villagers,” he suggests, “which led them to try to outdo each other in beautifying their places.” Even Mennonite children had a special affinity with flowers in New Russia. Tiessen explains, “In the twilight the children would play hide-and-go-seek behind the trees and dense bushes. The young lads and lasses, inspired by romanticism, would carry beautiful roses in their lapels.”²⁹

Immigrant Mennonite men also treasured the native flowers on the south Russian landscape. In October 1998, Helen Reimer Bergmann donated an assortment of pressed flowers—gathered by her father throughout the 1920s in and around the Molotschna region—to the Mennonite Heritage Centre (MHC) Archives in Winnipeg. Following his service as an ambulance attendant in World War I, Jacob H. Reimer began this collection of flowers in 1919, which he continued until his departure from the Soviet Union. Reimer immigrated to Manitoba with his young family in 1924, and they settled for a time in Gretna. As per the collection notes accompanying Reimer’s notebooks, the pressed flowers offer a window into the native vegetation of the Molotschna area, and may give some suggestions as to what inhabitants used for daily food, medicine, or beauty.³⁰ A sampling of the collection reveals the following flowers and plants, which may have been used for any of these purposes: chamomile, summer savory, sage, love in a mist, loosestrife, wallflower, clover, nettle, wild sunflower, pansy, shepherd’s purse, sweet violet, larkspur, and silverweed. The fact that Reimer brought thirteen notebooks filled with carefully arranged pressed flowers with him to Canada—and took the time to tag

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁰ Jacob Heinrich Reimer Fonds, 1920–1923. Winnipeg: Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives, volume 5155; CD coll. no. 26.

them with their popular and technical names in Russian, German, and English—indicates that these flowers held significance in his life.



Figure 3.1: Pressed flowers from the Jacob Heinrich Reimer Fonds, 1920–1923.³¹

Much is known about Reimer’s life in Canada—he was a teacher, an occasional farmer, he married for a second time after the death of his first wife, and retired in southern Ontario. Less is known, however, about what inspired him to generate this collection of flora. Manitoba poet Sarah Klassen, who became acquainted with the Reimer family when Reimer married her aunt Aganetha Klassen in 1938, remembers him as a “quiet, sensitive man who spoke only High German.” Klassen also recalls that Reimer “suffer[ed] from nerves and needed to rest often,” but that he was also an intelligent and curious man, a “bookish person who loved learning and would

³¹ Jacob Reimer fonds, Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives, volume 5155; CD coll. no. 26.

have wanted more education.”³² While Klassen’s recollections do not relate directly to the native plant collection, they do provide some insight into Reimer’s personhood as a quiet and learned man. These traits align with the activity of collection, for it seems Reimer spent a great deal of time in solitude, outdoors, and paid careful attention to his surroundings.³³ Reimer’s daughter’s travel diary also lends a clue to the meaning of the collection in his life and the lives of his kin. On 28 October 1998, upon leaving the MHC Archives building, she wrote: “so this precious piece of Papa’s life is left behind. As we walk outside the building genuine sadness overtakes me; it is as if I have left a part of myself there.”³⁴ The collection and its preservation over the course of Reimer’s life disclose the enduring power of landscape and flora in shaping individual identities.

Though memories of both cultivated and native flowers on the New Russian landscape are connected with documents produced by Mennonite men—indicating perhaps that in large part, it was the North American socio-political climate that advanced associations between flowers and femininity—some women’s writings offer similar nostalgic reflections on flora. Quite in line with Tiessen’s descriptions, above, Helena Goosen Friesen’s memoir, which details her childhood spent on a Mennonite estate on the Molotchna Colony in imperial Russia in the early 1900s, notes the “magnificent sight” of the flower garden behind her family’s house, which was tended by a “crew” of hired gardeners. She remembers the wooded area and meadow next to the garden, where she used to play. “That patch at the edge of the woods was my favourite place,” she writes. She continues in more detail:

³² Sarah Klassen, email communication with the author, 18 December 2015.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ See Bergmann’s letter to archivists at Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives, which accompanies the Jacob Heinrich Reimer pressed flower collection, volume 5155.

Often I stole away to that spot, threw myself down in the grass and dreamed. ... What a joy it was on a hot summer afternoon to recline there and listen to the humming of the bees in the grass and the chirping of the birds in the trees, and, when all was still, to enjoy the fragrance of the grass and the flowers; to lie there, to think and to dream. One of my favourite activities was to pick a big bunch of wild flowers and arrange them in a bouquet.³⁵

By 1874, once Mennonites began to arrive in Manitoba, men continued to document both the land and landscaping efforts in their communities, though seemingly with less poeticism, and little nostalgia. Interestingly, the concern for neighbourly competition does remain. In his 1879 diary, seventy-one-year-old Abraham F. Reimer of Blumenort, located on the East Reserve, writes about the arrival of spring by detailing local instances of flower planting. On 6 May, Reimer reports that he ploughed the garden, and his wife “planted all her flowers in the garden and [so] have others in the village. And in Steinbach [they] have all planted their flowers.” More concern with the neighbours’ yard beautification can be noted when later that week, Reimer explains that at the household of Johan Kops they “transplanted all their [house-begun?] [interpretation in the original translation] flowers.”³⁶

Photographs of early West Reserve life also provide a small window into early North American Mennonite flower culture. Because Mennonites rarely documented their daily lives by way of photographs—believing photography to be too worldly—and if there were photographs, they were commonly taken by outsiders or young Mennonite men not yet baptized, pictures indeed reveal the extent to which men’s aesthetic concerns were considered in daily life. At the turn of the twentieth century, Mennonites in Manitoba were commonly photographed in front of

³⁵ Helena Goosen Friesen, *Daydreams & Nightmares: Life on the Wintergruen Estate*, trans. Neta Enns (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1990), 17.

³⁶ Royden Loewen, *From the Inside Out: The Rural Worlds of Mennonite Diarists, 1863-1929* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1999), 94–95.

the natural backdrop of a flower garden, lilac hedge, or picket fence lined with flowers. Indoor portraits, too, frequently exhibit flowers that have been deliberately positioned in the photo. And in candid photographs, flowers are easy to spot in the background. The photographs of Peter Gerhard Hamm (1883–1965), an amateur photographer in Neuberghthal who left a rich legacy of nearly five hundred photographs, document well the daily lives of Mennonites on the West Reserve.³⁷ Hamm’s photographs capture a great deal of Mennonite flower culture from the turn of the twentieth century into the 1930s. For example, an interior portrait of the photographer’s parents-in-law shows the couple sitting in the formal parlour of their housebarn; between them is a table on which sits a deliberately placed arrangement of flowers. Beneath them is a hand-painted, floral-patterned floor.³⁸ Another photograph pictures a group of well-dressed women outside, amidst and adorned with flowers. In the foreground of the photo are day lilies, while their hats are trimmed with daisies and marigolds, and on their dresses are large corsages.³⁹

³⁷ Frieda Esau Klippenstein, “Neuberghthal Mennonite Street Village: A Photographic Essay,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 18 (2000): 177.

³⁸ P. G. Hamm Fonds. Winnipeg: Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives, Collection number 526:19.2. Though the collection notes suggest the floor is linoleum, based on some knowledge of common painted floor patterns, I speculate this is, rather, a hand-painted floor.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 562:13.2.



Figure 3.2: “Poorly exposed photo of well-dressed women.”⁴⁰

In an indoor photograph of four children in a three-season porch, viewers can see several tobacco tins of overwintered geraniums in the background, tall and reaching for the light.⁴¹ Finally, a formal indoor portrait of a woman before a curtained backdrop also depicts a potted geranium on a table before her, presumably intended to add interest and beauty to the photograph. These photographs demonstrate flowers to be among Hamm’s aesthetic and cultural preferences as well as a central feature of daily life in Mennonite villages and households. But what is more, particularly in photographs such as the one pictured here, women are bedecked and surrounded by flowers, also indicating an association between femininity and flower culture in Manitoba’s early twentieth century Mennonite locales.

⁴⁰ From the P. G. Hamm Photograph Collection, 19[??], courtesy of the Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives.

⁴¹ Ibid., 526:44.8.

As historian Simon Schama has argued, and as the above examples demonstrate, humans have long communicated cultural and spiritual affinities with nature.⁴² Landscapes, memories of landscapes, and efforts to document such, can be read like texts to reveal these affinities. Mennonite memories of flowers in New Russia delineate the inviolability that certain landscapes take on, particularly after they have been left or are no longer in view. This nostalgic perspective, over time, carefully preserves memories of a particular landscape. These memories assume the form of the landscape itself, therefore transforming absence into ever-presence in the mind's eye. Documents like Jacob Reimer's pressed flower collection, alongside diaries and memoirs, are thus "archives of the feet," to employ Schama's terminology, representing an identity, wanderings and sightings, and a sustained memory of home by way of flowers.⁴³ In Manitoba, records produced by Mennonite men, such as photographs, also depict flowers, though in a much more systematic way—either in the background of daily life, as decor or outfitting, or in casual references to changing seasons. While this trend indicates a change to the overarching Mennonite relationship with flowers, they are nonetheless a pervasive cultural influence.

Outsiders Celebrate Mennonite Flower Culture

Outsiders' references to Mennonite flower culture were plentiful in the post-pioneer period. Many reports about the West Reserve express awe and surprise at the extent to which Mennonites incorporated flowers into their daily lives. Reporters also commended Mennonites for their efforts to make their homes and villages more familiar and attractive, in a European style, thus celebrating what they and the rest of Canadian society might have understood to be fashionable and acceptable methods of settlement. Reporters thereby worked to alleviate their

⁴² Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 24–25

⁴³ *Ibid.*

own and public anxieties about ethno-religious immigrants on the prairies. German- and French-speaking Catholic priest Father Jean-Théobald Bistsche, for example, who wrote about the history of the Mennonites in 1884, comments on the ever-presence of flowers in the life of Mennonites on the West Reserve. Not only does he suggest that Mennonites planted numerous flower gardens, but he also notes that they often named their villages according to this same tradition of botanical appreciation. Bistsche observes that “All the villages have German names, which are very well chosen.” “Here are a few of them with their translations,” he continues. “Blumenort—place of flowers; Blumenfeld—field of flowers; Blumengarten—garden of flowers; Rosengarten—garden of roses; Rosenau [*sic*—place of roses ... etc.”⁴⁴ Similarly, in 1891, fifteen years after Mennonites first settled on the West Reserve, J. A. McGibbon describes the appearance of Mennonite farmyards in his report for the Commissioner of the North West Mounted Police. As did many other report writers of the time, McGibbons alludes to his amazement at the landscaping efforts of Mennonites—particularly regarding the already heavily treed properties. But, like Bistsche, he also notes the pleasantness of Mennonite villages by way of “little flower gardens ... attached to even the poorest houses.”⁴⁵

Yet another perspective notes that flowers were commonly used to decorate furniture in Manitoba Mennonite households. Well-known agricultural reporter and correspondent for the *Manitoba Free Press*, E. Cora Hind, who suggests that Mennonites on the West Reserve grew

⁴⁴ Fr. Jean-Théobald Bistsche, “Études historique sur les Mennonites,” *Le Manitoba*, December 1883–January 1884, in *The Outsider’s Gaze: Life and Labour on the Mennonite West Reserve, 1874–1922*, ed. Jacob E. Peters, et al (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2015), 71.

⁴⁵ St. George, Victor Joseph (VT), “Annual Report of the Commissioner of the NWMP, report of JA McGibbon, Inspector, Commanding Manitoba Frontier to the Officer Commanding ‘B’ Division NWMP, Regina” (Morden, 1891), 55–85, in *The Outsider’s Gaze: Life and Labour on the Mennonite West Reserve, 1874–1922*, ed. Jacob E. Peters, et al (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2015), 85.

“great masses of flowers . . . in addition to the gardens proper,” and that “many of the houses [had] flowerbeds under the windows, and few houses [were] without window plants,”⁴⁶ also wrote of Mennonites using flowers in home decor. During her 1895 visit to a village near Winkler, Hind was invited into the home of a local Mennonite family and observed a large chest under the front room window, which stood “about four inches from the floor on claw feet.” She notes the “exquisitely dovetailed” corners on the piece, as well as its panels, which were decorated with a “bunch of roses, [and] in another, pansies. The colours were perfect and we thought they were painted, but upon examination we found it to be appliqué or transfer work, so beautifully executed that the flower seemed wrought into the very grain of the wood.” Hind further comments that “These pieces of furniture have been entirely made by the men of the house.”⁴⁷ Though, as Hind notes, the presence of flowers on furniture in part reveals the prevalence of flower culture in Mennonite households, Mennonite men’s act of embossing furniture with flowers might also have functioned as an expression of familial love through which gendered relationships to flowers, beauty, and home decor were enacted. What is more, the roles of men (carving flowers in the workshop/barn) and women (appreciating the beauty of flowers in the household), might be further indicative of gendered engagements with flower culture on Mennonite farmyards at the turn of the twentieth century. That is, men’s engagement with flower culture was acceptable if it was an act of familial love, or an appreciation of the natural world. For women, flower culture was in part an acceptable form of household decor, and a means of beautifying the monotony of daily life.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 100.

⁴⁷ E. Cora Hind, “The Mennonites of Manitoba” in *The Northwest Illustrated Monthly Magazine* XIII: 3 (1895), 3–7, in *The Outsider’s Gaze: Life and Labour on the Mennonite West Reserve, 1874–1922*, ed. Jacob E. Peters, et al (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2015), 95.

Into the 1900s, however, outside references to Mennonite flower culture became increasingly associated with Mennonite women. J. F. Galbraith's account of Mennonite life in Manitoba notes the centrality of flowers to his interpretation of Mennonite femininity. He is especially impressed with Mennonite women's efforts to bring with them "from their old European home a variety of flower seeds and a number of flowering plants."⁴⁸ As soon as their villages were established, "they set these out, and in a year or two their homes were beautiful in summer with gardens of bright flowers. They were the first to introduce the dahlia," he writes. Galbraith's report congratulates Mennonites for differentiating themselves from other settlers by "[taking] the trouble to beautify their homes with flowers."⁴⁹ Galbraith also introduced another perspective on Mennonites and flowers by arguing that flower culture was inherent to Mennonite life. Their "natural love of flowers," he explains, was even "manifested in the names given to their villages." Just as Bistsche observed, Galbraith lists those Mennonite villages with flower-centred names: "Rosenfeld (field of roses), Rosenthal (dale of roses), Blumenort (place of flowers), Blumengart (flower garden), etc." Most importantly, he affirms the efforts of Mennonite women who "added something to the family income by the sale to townspeople of Morden of ever-blooming roses in pots, which they cultivated in their houses."⁵⁰

Oral history, too, substantiates the prominence of flowers in Mennonite villages. In his report on the cultural and historical resources in the village of Neuberghthal, Peter J. Priess argues that while some late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Mennonite families may have considered flower gardens to be an unnecessary extravagance because flowers did not contribute to feeding the family, the culture of flowers was considered by others to add to the beauty of

⁴⁸ J. F. Galbraith, *The Mennonites in Manitoba, 1897–1900: A Review of their Coming, their Progress, and their Present Prosperity* (Morden: Chronicle Press, 1900), 40.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 41.

individual yards and the village as a whole. According to local Neuberghthal lore and oral history, the cultivation of flowers was a matter of personal taste and preference, and was not a requirement for familial sustenance, social belonging, or a means of feminine expression. Nonetheless, flower gardens were understood to generate an uplifting atmosphere in the village, and thus contributed to the mental well-being of those who tended them and those who enjoyed their splendour.⁵¹ The University of Manitoba's Department of Landscape Architecture also reported on heritage plant material in Neuberghthal in 1997. The report confirms Priess's observation that flowers were and continue to be integral to the landscape culture of the village. Among those plants listed as heritage material in the village are numerous varieties of flowering plants that contemporary residents believe were tended by women in the village since the founding of Neuberghthal. Many of the plants listed also correspond to the memories offered by Mennonite women's oral accounts describing the varieties of flowers that were grown by their mothers and grandmothers: day lilies, delphiniums, hollyhocks, irises, lilacs, peonies, poppies, tiger lilies, sweet peas, and roses.⁵²

Modern Women Grow Flowers: Mennonites and Flower Culture in the Twentieth Century

As the above reports demonstrate, notwithstanding prairie Canada's notoriously cold climate, flower gardening has shaped an important part of the collective "Canadian experience," particularly since the advent of settler colonialism.⁵³ Nonetheless, as landscape historian

⁵¹ Peter J. Priess, *Neuberghthal National Historic Site: The Cultural Resources of Neuberghthal National Historic Site an Archaeological Perspective* (Winnipeg: Cultural Resource Management, Western Canada Service Centre, 1998), 17–18.

⁵² Department of Landscape Architecture, *Neuberghthal Landscape Study: An Inventory of Street Trees and Hedgerows* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 1997), 20.

⁵³ It is important to note, as do Catherine Flynn and E. Leigh Syms in their article "Manitoba's First Farmers," *Manitoba History* 31 (1996), accessed 9 January 2017,

Edwinna von Baeyer suggests, the history of flower gardening in Canada has been significantly overlooked, particularly as flower culture pertains to Indigenous traditions. She argues further that studies which take flowers as their focus reveal a great deal about the socio-political climate of particular moments in Canadian history, and the religious beliefs, behaviours, and limitations of those who participated in gardening traditions.⁵⁴ Von Baeyer's own historical inquiries into gardening traditions among European settlers and their descendants in Canada divulge a complex set of principles that emerged at the turn of the twentieth century. These principles worked to align gardening, and particularly flower gardening, with women's personal and societal betterment. In the 1900s, "beauty ceased to be the main goal; it now struggled for a place alongside good citizenship, improvement, social remedy, morality and material progress."⁵⁵ The news reports outlined above offer an example of changing beliefs about the relationship between good citizenship, progress, and flowers in their descriptions of Mennonite women's flower gardening.

In urban environments, the "reforming zeal" of this social gospel also called for the enhancement of the Canadian landscape and a nation-wide cultivation of love of nature, by way of individual horticultural duty. Canadians were challenged to clean up and weed their backyards as a collective act of social welfare, civic beautification, and a united political stance against the feared and foreign. Immigrants were to be incorporated as citizens through a love of gardening,

http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/31/firstfarmers.shtml, that while most people believe that Manitoba's pioneer homesteaders were the first farmers in the province, the land had been worked by Indigenous peoples for several centuries prior to the Selkirk settlers and European arrival. "Archaeologists have documented a long tradition of plant domestication and crop harvesting among the Aboriginal people of North, Central and South America ... domesticated crops include a variety of beans and gourds, tobacco, sunflowers, potatoes and numerous indigenous seedy plants such as chenopodium and amaranth."

⁵⁴ von Baeyer, *Rhetoric and Roses*, 178.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

and slums were to be “cleansed” by way of gardening education, as well as “through gifts of cuttings, pots of geraniums, and seed packets of annual asters.”⁵⁶ Tidy, British-style flower gardens in both public (parks, post offices, train stations, and schoolhouses) and private urban locales were especially celebrated as spaces wherein Canadians would learn to think for themselves, develop habits surrounding orderliness, spiritual welfare, and ultimately become good citizens.⁵⁷ The benefits of gardening and yard beautification were also celebrated in lectures and pamphlets intended for a range of “impressionable home gardeners.” To Christian Canadians, writers promoted closeness to God as well as the acceptance of God as directly connected to garden work. The mental and physical health benefits of gardening were equally endorsed by the work of statistics analysts who argued that few gardeners were found in penitentiaries, and more saloon keepers than gardeners were known to die in a given year.⁵⁸ Domestic life was also argued to benefit from the beauty of a home garden and was thus considered an important duty for any homemaker: “A house was not considered a home until it was beautified.”⁵⁹

Though rural Canadians were not as engaged in the gardening rhetoric of the turn of the century as their urban counterparts, these socio-political and moral reforms did indeed generate praise for greater efforts in farmyard and household beautification. Like their urban neighbours, rural Canadians were also influenced by horticultural magazines and farm journals. Following the homesteading phase, rural Canadians were encouraged to exert more effort in landscape design, thereby giving more attention to cultivating desirable, natural rural surroundings. Rural women in particular were encouraged to simplify their farm work and housework and endeavour

⁵⁶ Ibid., 4.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 100.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 98

to plant gardens, thus developing a “satisfying hobby, a hobby which gave a ‘real interest in life,’ refreshing minds and spirits.”⁶⁰ As the above reports demonstrate, Mennonite women were celebrated for their British-style flower gardens, which differentiated them from other settlers.

It is unclear to what extent this early twentieth-century rhetoric—which made connections between rural beautification and self-betterment—infiltrated Mennonite communities in southern Manitoba. It is also unclear whether this discourse directly reshaped the flower culture that was transferred by Mennonites from New Russia to the Canadian Prairies in the decades that followed, or whether it altered the collective memory of flower culture among contemporary West Reserve residents. Yet, oral history accounts wherein present-day women describe the spiritual peace of mind they, their mothers, and grandmothers gained by way of the flower garden suggest that rhetoric about the connections between Mennonite women’s spiritual health and flowers may in part inform some people’s reflections on the attitudes and actions of the gardeners in their past. These will be discussed in greater detail below.

Newspapers like the *Altona Echo*, which began publishing in 1943, printed countless articles and outsourced advertisements throughout the 1940s and ’50s that supported twentieth-century ideals uniting rural beautification with moral and spiritual uplift. The sources of the texts may have varied widely, yet the underpinnings of the messages were the same: flower gardening was an enriching hobby for rural women; modern, attractive yards followed particular landscaping trends, and certain varieties of flowers were preferable to others.

During the winter of 1944, for example, the *Echo* advertised a Rhineland Agricultural Short Course, offered by the local Agricultural Society, for lessons in tree planting, fruit

⁶⁰ Ibid., 111.

growing, and “home and yard beautification.”⁶¹ Moreover, in March of 1948, the weekly paper ran a privately produced article reassuring town and farm women with a religious message in flower culture; that is, women were encouraged to decorate the Easter table with flowers. Spring “is a time of promise,” suggests the reporter. “Life begins again in the flowers of spring—and in high hopes of hearts ceased from the gray dreariness of winter. So let hearts cease and promise be the theme of your Easter dinner table setting. Flowers make an attractive setting, will lend colour and zest to the most ordinary meal. Why not try it sometime?”⁶² In June of 1948, with the same idealized and reforming tone, the cover story of the *Echo* called for a joint effort to make the town of Altona more attractive after a “discouraging spring.” Among many other suggestions, the journalist recommended that homeowners paint the house, replace damaged shingles, whitewash the fence, and spruce up the trees and shrubs on individual properties so as to “make it look a lot prettier.” The journalist continued: “Attractive homes, well-kept lawns, neat fences and good sidewalks and roads are what visitors judge our town by. Let’s make our grounds attractive for our own satisfaction and other people’s pleasure.”⁶³

In May 1950, another reporter suggested that “window boxes are within the [budget] range of every person,” and that “nasturtiums, geraniums, asters and petunias,” were popular choices for such exhibitions. Emphasizing a particular vision of beauty, the writer further suggests that the expense of water wastage would not be of concern for any homeowner with window boxes. “Although these [boxes] cannot be expected to produce blossoms without a daily soaking, there is plenty of water poured down the sink that could be utilized here.”⁶⁴ Finally, and perhaps most directly, in March 1954 the *Echo* republished a short article from the *Canadian*

⁶¹ “Rhineland Agricultural Short Course Schedule,” *Altona Echo*, 16 February 1944, 4.

⁶² “Decorate with Flowers for Spring,” *Altona Echo*, 3 March 1948, 3.

⁶³ “Let’s Make our Town More Attractive,” *Altona Echo*, 2 June 1948, 1.

⁶⁴ “Peony Shoots & Window Boxes,” *Altona Echo*, 24 May 1950, 5.

Press about the impending arrival of spring, which is accompanied by a picture of an attractive woman in a sunhat, beaming as she is reading about flowers. The overriding message is that gardening is the key to a woman's happiness. "The garden is an inviting, wide open space for hoeing, spading and planting," suggests the author. "And just think! In a couple of months it could be a riot of blooms. All that is required is energy, enthusiasm, patience, determination, time, labor, and confidence. This gal has 'em all—plus a smile that should charm her petunias into startling growth."⁶⁵ The national press put it more boldly than any local advocate, though the message from both was clear: flowers and the middle class ideal of womanhood were intrinsically linked.

But, it was not just in flower gardens where Mennonite women on the West Reserve expressed creativity or aligned their interests and endeavours with changing perceptions of happiness, modernity, and femininity. The creative work of beautification also took place within the home, and was especially prominent for those women who disliked keeping a flower garden. As art historian Reinhild Kauenhoven Janzen and cultural anthropologist John M. Janzen have observed of Mennonites in North America, "furniture provides a unique material record of a way of life and a people," for it "serves as a mirror of the culture in which it is found—a reflection of the "varied tastes determined by class or grouping," and the "sense of privacy, of domestic function and of family organization."⁶⁶ As furniture was also central to the household, which was largely the domain of women, it can be assumed to expose the preferences and design tastes of Mennonite women, despite being most often constructed by men. Interestingly, a great deal of nineteenth-century Mennonite furniture, as E. Cora Hind's report demonstrated above, was

⁶⁵ "Zero Hour for Gardeners Approaches," *Altona Echo*, 24 March 1954, 5.

⁶⁶ Reinhild Kauenhoven Janzen and John M. Janzen, *Mennonite Furniture: A Migrant Tradition, 1766–1910* (Good Books: Intercourse, 1991), 8.

adorned with flowers. Wooden pieces, such as dowry chests, cradles, wardrobes, parlour tables, and clocks displayed both inlaid and painted roses and garlands.⁶⁷ Table linens, on the other hand, and headscarves, which were the handwork of women, were also often adorned with floral patterns. In the mid-twentieth century, flowered dresses, kerchiefs (head coverings), and aprons were in greater fashion among Mennonite women. Not only do these efforts in household decor stand in stark contrast to popular beliefs and scholarly accounts of Mennonite austerity, uniformity, and a simplistic material culture, but, as archeologist Roland Sawatzky has noted, household decor and domestic architecture among Mennonites in Manitoba also reveal varied and changing conceptualizations of identity, gender roles, and ethno-religious beliefs.⁶⁸ That is, brightly painted housebarn floors and flowered furniture point to individual women's concerns with the material beauty of daily life, and attention towards shifting ideologies about aesthetics, consumption, and modernity.

Interior painting trends, too, lend an eye to flower culture among Mennonite women on the West Reserve. Since 2001, local artist Margruite Krahn has been actively engaged in the process of restoring and documenting Mennonite housebarns in the West Reserve village of Neubergthal. Notably, Krahn's restoration work has unearthed, beneath more modern layers of linoleum and carpet, a trend in hand-painted patterns on the original wooden floors of housebarns—a task she believes pioneer Mennonite women on the West Reserve would have typically undertaken during the winter months. Krahn's work in the restoration of these hand-painted floors in Neubergthal and other West Reserve village housebarns thus also reveals some

⁶⁷ Ibid., 24, 26, 32, 35, 37.

⁶⁸ Roland Sawatzky, "Ideology, Space, and Social Control: The Russian-Mennonite Family in Historic Manitoban Domestic Architecture" *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 26 (2008): 95–110; Roland Sawatzky, "Blumenhof Village and the Archeology of Difference" *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 43 (2016): 13–38.

of the unique and artistic efforts that went into Mennonite women's resettlement and homemaking during the years surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. Prior to the 1920s, housebarn floor patterns were most often floral, thereby demonstrating late nineteenth-century Mennonite women's affinities towards a particular or acceptable form of decor. For example, in a late nineteenth-century housebarn in the village of Sommerfeld, one mile west of Neuberghthal, the sitting room floor was painted ochre and overlaid with a handmade stencil of blue hyacinths and red tulips. In the bedroom of Neuberghthal's Klippenstein housebarn, the floor was painted a vibrant blue-grey and overlaid with two types of large, light blue flowers. The main room of the village's Herdsman's House in Neuberghthal is also painted in ochre, though it is overlaid with red and white flowers made with what appears to be the imprint of a small fingerling potato, cut in half. Lastly, a housebarn floor in nearby Bergfeld depicts a mustard-yellow background with small green, red, and white floral motifs.⁶⁹

Mary and Benno Loewen, who both grew up on the West Reserve, recall their grandmother and mother, respectively, having painted floors. For these women, floral motifs, particularly around the border of the room, were common. The tools used for painting were wool socks, potatoes, and sponges.⁷⁰ Mary posits that painting floors for her mother and grandmother was an expression of artistic sensibility, rather than a process of conforming to particular ideas about the acceptable parameters of femininity, modernity, or worldliness. This may perhaps, however, be a case of reading the past through modern experience. Nonetheless, writer Eleanor Chornoboy's collection of local Mennonite lore also suggests that Mennonite women on the West Reserve painted their floors with floral motifs, in the mid twentieth century, but further

⁶⁹ Margruite Krahn, "Bomwoll Dakj—Mennonite Floor Patterns and Floor Cloths," *Margruite Krahn*, accessed 25 April 2016, <http://margruitekrahn.squarespace.com/#/gallery-6/>.

⁷⁰ Mary Loewen, email communication with the author, 26 April 2016.

posits that it was the “artistic women [who] painted flower borders on the floor using stencils made of heavy brown paper” which they “saved and reused . . . only changing the paint colour from year to year,”⁷¹ thus indicating that floor painting was not always an effort of artistic expression, but an act of maintaining acceptable forms of femininity, modernity, and Mennonite womanhood.

The most popular colours women used for painting floors were yellow and blue-grey, indicating some consistency in style between homes. As well, the tools that were used (such as halved potatoes or overturned buckets) to generate circular and oval patterns seem to have been similar between houses. Significantly, Krahn has found that after the 1920s, efforts to imitate linoleum-flooring fashions meant that women moved away from painting floral designs to more geometric patterns—a trend that clearly indicates an association with changing concepts of modernity and an awareness of the linkages between class, social status, and household decor. Despite these trends in floor fashion, however, housebarn floor patterns are incredibly diverse and reveal Mennonite women’s distinct artistic affinities. Even within a single dwelling, several different patterns in various main floor rooms have been identified.⁷²

Mennonite Women Cultivate Creative Spaces: Manitoba Flower Gardens

In late nineteenth-century Mennonite villages in Manitoba, as in many other rural communities, household and farmyard tasks were typically divided according to gender. On occasion, however, these gendered divisions in the pioneer household fell by the wayside. The British Canadian reporter J. B. McLaren, who observed and wrote about Mennonite life in

⁷¹ Eleanor Chornoboy, *Faspa with Jast: A Snack of Mennonite Stories told by Family and Guests* (Winnipeg: Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing, 2007), 29.

⁷² *Ibid.*

Manitoba during the first few years of settlement, was surprised by the extent to which pioneer Mennonite women seemed to engage in “men’s work.”⁷³ As Shelisa Klassen has suggested in her writing about Mennonites in Manitoba in English-language newspapers, Mennonite women were often described by outsiders as hard workers, which can be read as an attempt to “communicate with the rest of the nation that the Mennonite women . . . were suitable settlers, proving that the frontier could in fact be a space for women and families.”⁷⁴ McLaren states that Mennonite women were commonly seen harrowing or ploughing fields, thatching roofs, or plastering houses.⁷⁵ Similarly, Manitoba farmer and Secretary of the Department of Agriculture John Lowe reported seeing Mennonite women engaged in field work. When asked whether this work “improve[d] the condition of the women, or tend[ed] to their refinement,” Lowe suggested that Mennonite social ideas were very different from British or Canadian-born farmers. He went on to say that he was told “hard work was considered to be of the highest good to the women . . .” and that “finery of dress” was “rigorously discouraged.”⁷⁶ A reporter for the *Manitoba Free Press* in 1881 analogously commented on the industriousness of Mennonite women. While he describes all Mennonites as “thrifty and industrious,” he also suggests that “the women do most of the work. An open ditch about a mile in length, beautifully dug and with the turf neatly

⁷³ J. B. McLaren, “The North-West,” in *Picturesque Canada: The Country As it Was and Is* (Toronto: 1882, in *The Outsider’s Gaze: Life and Labour on the Mennonite West Reserve, 1874–1922*, ed. Jacob E. Peters, et al (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2015), 53–60.

⁷⁴ Shelisa Klassen, “‘Recruits and Comrades’ in ‘a War of Ambition’: Mennonite Immigrants in Late 19th Century Manitoba Newspapers” (M.A. thesis, University of Manitoba, 2016), 78–9

⁷⁵ McLaren, “The North-West,” 53–60. See also Royden Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and the New Worlds, 1850–1930* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 101.

⁷⁶ “Minutes of Evidence Taken: Immigration to Canada: Mr. Lowe’s Evidence,” *Journals of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada* (from 7 February to 10 May, 1878, being the 5th session of the 3rd Parliament of Canada, session 1878), A2-16. Cited in Carter, *Imperial Plots*, 79.

banked up on each side, was said to be all women's work. Large numbers of women were also to be seen [working] in the fields."⁷⁷ These reporters' efforts to describe women engaged in "men's work" further indicates to readers that "when the entire family was engaged in labour, farms were settled and successful in much less time."⁷⁸ Others, however, were concerned that immigrant women's fieldwork would set a poor example for Indigenous women and other immigrants. Officials who shared these concerns urged British and Canadian-born women to act differently, and were thus instructed to take up only horticulture—vegetable and flower gardening—as a means of farm work.⁷⁹

Historian Marlene Epp speculates that interruptions to the otherwise established gender divisions of work in the Mennonite pioneer household sometimes resulted from the experience of uprooting and resettlement, which had an "equalizing tendency," and thus "offered a point at which gender roles were destabilized and reconstructed according to the limitations and possibilities of [their] social and religious environment."⁸⁰ Pioneer Mennonite women were typically involved in generating income for their families in the first years of their Manitoba lives, working to produce butter, or collect and market eggs, while other women sold garden produce and handmade goods. Epp also argues that such efforts were not only "crucial to the economic viability of the rural family enterprise,"⁸¹ but offered women status, power, and meaning in their daily lives. Even if the hardships of resettlement in Manitoba were considerable and not especially welcomed by women, in the pioneer economy—which revolved around a grain economy as well as farm and household subsistence—"women's productive and

⁷⁷ *Manitoba Free Press*, 2 September 1881.

⁷⁸ Klassen, "Recruits and Comrades," 79.

⁷⁹ Carter, *Imperial Plots*, 77.

⁸⁰ Marlene Epp, *Mennonite Women in Canada: A History* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2008), 29.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

reproductive work was necessary and valued.”⁸²

Despite these economy-based partnerships, women did have distinctive responsibilities within the household and restricted roles on the farm. Historian Royden Loewen, in his analysis of the writings of Mennonite diarists across Canada, suggests that though the “tone and subject of women’s diaries are the same as those of men, it is still true that men and women exhibited different perspectives on the household, based on gender. ... Unlike men,” he further posits, “women seem to have viewed the farm from within the house.”⁸³ For example, Mennonite women’s writing and collective memory commonly references vegetable gardens, which were large enough to feed large families, as the sole domain of women. Women were responsible for planting, hoeing, weeding, and collecting produce. Women also worked to prepare and preserve garden produce for the winter months. The perception that gendered work divisions in daily life were potentially limiting has been discussed by numerous scholars. Mennonite women’s private creative acts, specifically diary and letter writing, were considered an avenue through which they might have “[clarified] the nature of everyday patriarchal structures and the manner in which ... [they] exercised historical agency: they did contest male power, they constructed the story as they saw it unfold, and they participated in creating the symbols and structures of the ethnic community.”⁸⁴ More recently, others have pondered the role of artistic efforts as another avenue by which Mennonite women have participated in carving out distinct cultural identities. Flowers, flower gardening, and floral decor, like floor paintings, are featured in these recent

⁸² Ibid., 30.

⁸³ Royden Loewen, *From the Inside Out: The Rural Worlds of Mennonite Diarists, 1863–1929* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1999), 17.

⁸⁴ Royden Loewen, “As I Experienced them Myself: the Autobiographical German-Language Immigrant Women in Prairie Canada, 1874–1910,” in *A Chorus of Different Voices*, eds. Angelika E. Sauer & Matthias Zimmer (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 130, 125.

considerations of creativity in Mennonite women's lives.⁸⁵ Though there are certainly exceptions in both Mennonite men's and women's relationship to flowers, it seems that Mennonite men more often documented flowers with a wider view to the landscape, whereas women's lives incorporated flowers on the home front.

While planting trees, vegetable gardens, and crops took precedence in late nineteenth-century Mennonite immigrants' efforts to build village landscapes on the West Reserve, Mennonites also established familiar scenes and lifeways on the Canadian Prairies with flower gardens. While Mennonite flower gardens on the West Reserve caught the attention of outsiders, the memoirs, diaries, and recorded oral histories of West Reserve residents more intricately reveal the prominence of flowers in the everyday life of Mennonites in Manitoba, and more particularly the burgeoning centrality of flowers to Mennonite women's lives and identities. Margaretha Plett Kroeker, of Manitoba's East Reserve, wrote of preparing the garden in early May 1892. "On the 4th I began to rake the garden. On the 5th I began to dig and plant potatoes. ... On the 13th we began to dig the flower plot."⁸⁶ West Reserve farm woman Maria Voth wrote similarly about flowers throughout the 1930s. On 3 June 1936, Maria wrote: "It is a cold day. Today we are washing sheep's wool. Both Marias are planting their shoots and flowers near the kitchen."⁸⁷ The following year, on 28 May 1937, Maria comments again on flowers as a marker of spring: "It is windy today. We still have a lot of work in the garden. Everything is coming up.

⁸⁵ Pamela Klassen, "What's Bre(a)nd in the Bone," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 66/8 (1994): 229–230. In this article, religious studies scholar Pamela Klassen argues that Mennonite women's self-understanding has long been drawn from the "material specificity" of daily life. Though Mennonites themselves have argued the material, ethno-cultural aspects of everyday life are "harmful to the revelatory task of Christianity," Klassen suggests that material matter—cooking, gardening, sewing, and other domestic arts—have been central to Mennonite women's sacred experience and community participation throughout North American Mennonite history.

⁸⁶ Loewen, *From the Inside Out*, 237.

⁸⁷ Maria Voth, unpublished diaries, 3 June 1936.

The lilacs are blooming and so are the tulips and hawthorn bushes too. To the Lord be much praise and thanks for it.”⁸⁸ On 19 June 1937, Maria notes the unseasonable warmth. Accordingly, she observes: “the gold and red roses are blooming. Very nice!”⁸⁹

While diaries kept by Mennonite women in the twentieth century offer a glimpse of the traditions surrounding their home-centered, cultivated flower culture, oral history and creative writing offer more reflective vignettes, indicating further the impact of turn of the century ties between femininity, flowers, and moral or spiritual uplift. Maria Klassen Braun, for example, who grew up in the West Reserve village of Blumenort, writes about her family’s farmyard at length in her memoirs. At the centre of these recollections is the large flower garden at the front of the house, in which her mother planted “peonies, marigolds, phlox, pansies, snapdragons, morning glories, petunias, zinnias, asters, tulips, narcissus, sweet peas, larkspurs, hollyhocks, lilacs, bridal wreath, and caraganas.” More poignantly, she writes that this garden was her mother’s “pride and joy.”⁹⁰ Similarly, Rose Marion Hildebrand distinctly recalls the garden of her family’s Neuberghthal neighbour. The neighbour was a single woman, who worked diligently to maintain her vegetable and flower gardens throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Rose’s memoir alludes to the meaning and aesthetic concern allotted to everyday life by an unmarried Mennonite woman. Rose writes that “at noon [her neighbour] faithfully took a nap, but other than that her hoe was never far away. ... Her gardens were kept under control and her fruits, vegetables and flowers flourished.” Her flower garden was filled with many kinds of flowers “which bloomed throughout the summer and there was always a fresh supply for her vase on the

⁸⁸ Ibid., 28 May 1937.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 19 June 1937.

⁹⁰ Maria Klassen Braun, *A Village Saga* (self-published memoirs, 2012), 51

kitchen table.”⁹¹

Flower gardens also play a central role in creative accounts of the life of Mennonites on the West Reserve, demonstrating further the ethno-cultural specificity of the relationship between Mennonite women and flowers on the Canadian Prairies. In Mary Giesbrecht Friesen’s work of creative non-fiction, for example, she writes about the common childhood process of learning to identify flowers common in West Reserve women’s gardens. The specific flowers she lists as features in women’s gardens, or the “old favourites,” are nasturtiums, portulaca, marigolds, hollyhocks, sweet william and larkspur.⁹² Mary also writes about reaching an age where she was able to have a flower garden of her own; she remembers feeling enthusiastic about planning and developing the beds. Not only did she and her sister build a gate for the morning glories to climb, the two women also lined the flower beds with bricks, and planted pansies, marigolds, petunias, cockscomb, delphinium, zinnias, daisies, hollyhocks, and peonies. “How [we] enjoyed planning, planting and transplanting,” writes Mary.⁹³ The drawings accompanying Mary’s creative account confirms the splendour of the flower gardens that were grown throughout her childhood and adolescence.

Other creative writers include the spiritual and social elements of flowers. Writer Eleanor Chornoboy’s two collections of stories about the experiences of Mennonite settlers in the 1870s and 1880s on the West Reserve, informed by family oral histories, offer several reflections on the centrality of flowers to Mennonite women, and further contextualize the memories of the above noted West Reserve residents. Katharina Hildebrand, for example, “loved her gardens.” The flower garden in particular

⁹¹ Rose Marion Hildebrand, *More Precious than Gold: Our Heritage* (self published, date unknown), 38.

⁹² Mary Giesbrecht Friesen, *A Time to Say I Three* (Winnipeg: self-published, 1990), 23.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 71.

nourish[ed] her soul. ... [It] bloomed from the fresh early spring until the crisp late autumn. Spring welcomed fragrant lavender lilacs, perky vibrant tulips and heavy-headed fuchsia peonies. The summer delivered saucy little multi-coloured Bachelor Buttons and aromatic Sweet Williams next to the cherry purple-and-yellow pansy faces. Every day when Katharina looked out her front door, her eyes feasted on her flower garden.⁹⁴

While Katharina enjoyed the beauty and splendour of her flower garden, she equally appreciated the way it allowed her to sustain friendships with other women in her small farming community. Chornoboy explains that “throughout the garden’s growing season, the women ... showed off their gardens to their female friends, neighbours, and relatives. ... The women leisurely strolled along the rows ... and made U-turns at the end of each row, chatting and discussing the merits and shortcomings of the garden.”⁹⁵ For Katharina and her neighbour Aganetha, it was not the flowers that were most beloved, but rather the well-trodden dirt footpath, which connected their gardens, and represented an important and lasting friendship.⁹⁶ This footpath epitomized years of continual visits and strolls, for “the two women regularly wandered over to each other’s plots to have a little chat and to give their backs a rest from bending over to pick buckets of green beans or lifting striped beetles from the potato plants.”⁹⁷ Chornoboy’s account speaks directly to the ways Mennonite women carved out private and creative spaces for themselves. Flower gardening facilitated such space, wherein women, away from men, could privately discuss, contextualize, and escape the monotony of daily life and work.

Descriptions of flowers in oral histories conjure memories that relay the points of connection between West Reserve flower culture and Mennonite women. Anne Giesbrecht, who

⁹⁴ Eleanor Hildebrand Chornoboy, *Faspa: A Snack of Mennonite Stories* (Winnipeg: Interior Publishing and Communication, 2003), 30.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

spent part of her childhood on a farmyard near Bergfeld in the 1930s, recalls her mother's flower garden being significantly beloved. One story that stands out in Anne's recollections of the relationship between the flower garden and her mother involves Anne as a girl begging for permission to pick some of her mother's prized irises for her schoolteacher. Anne's mother submitted but responded defensively that the flowers would die if they were picked. Anne also remembers her father affectionately nicknaming her mother Petunia in an Onion Patch, or My Petunia.⁹⁸

Mary Loewen of Silberfeld holds her Grandmother's flowers in a special place in her memory. The peonies that grow today on Mary's farmyard began as shoots from her grandmother, a gift to Mary on her wedding day in 1961. Like many other Mennonite women on the West Reserve, Mary recalls her grandmother regularly growing pansies and gladiolas in the garden, as well as an abundance of red geraniums, which were always overwintered and placed in tobacco tins in the windows of the house.⁹⁹ Shaun Friesen, who spent his childhood in Gretna, also remembers the women in his family tending impressive flower gardens. Of his aunt, he notes: "Her gardens mattered. I wish I would have had the insight to talk with her about this." Despite being a sick woman (Margaret was a survivor of tuberculosis), she always had pansies along the sidewalk and red tulips beside the back door, as well as an abundance of vegetables and fruits. When her legs became too weak, she would nonetheless crawl through her garden to do the planting and weeding which became a source of embarrassment for her siblings and thus a major factor in their decision to move her to a care home in Winnipeg.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Anne Bergman Giesbrecht, interview with the author, 25 June 2015.

⁹⁹ Mary Loewen, interview with the author, 20 July 2014.

¹⁰⁰ Shaun Friesen, email communication with the author, 10 May 2015.

The analysis of other oral history interviews also points to links between Mennonites, flowers, and distinct ethno-cultural understandings of the landscape itself. That is, interviews conducted by researcher Tracy Ruta Fuchs in 2004–2005 with a number of East and West Reserve women demonstrate a sustained appreciation among Mennonite women for a cultivated beauty, particularly as it relates to flowers on the yard and in the home. The interviews also highlight women’s concerns with having gardening to do apart from the work of maintaining a vegetable garden. Not only did most of the women interviewed recall the varieties of flowers grown by their mothers and grandmothers, and verbalize *Plautdietsch* (Low German) names of the flowers, many also spoke of their mothers and grandmothers upholding traditions of visiting in the flower gardens. Moreover, the women themselves have in most cases continued the work of flower gardening, valuing the traditional, aesthetic, and the near-sanctified nature of their efforts and time in the garden.

For Norma Giesbrecht, now in her eighties, who spent much of her life in the village of Neubergthal, the significance of flowers—and her own efforts in preserving this heritage—in Mennonite culture on the West Reserve is connected chiefly to the horticultural practices of the first wave of Mennonite immigrants from New Russia. The linkage of flowers to women’s concern for uplift and beauty is also present in Norma’s oral account. Norma believes that because “flower gardens were so very important to the Mennonites, ... the first thing they did [when they arrived in Manitoba], even before they had a roof over their head ... was plant a flower garden.”¹⁰¹ Norma remembers her mother’s large perennial garden behind the summer kitchen on their farmyard, in which there were cosmos, tiger lilies, peonies, bleeding hearts, poppies, *Stockroose* (hollyhocks), black-eyed Susans, asters, *Krüse Marie* (curly Mary, or

¹⁰¹ Norma Giesbrecht, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 21 October 2004, MHV, *Beauty and Sustenance* research files.

tandy), and many other varieties of self-seeding flowers. “That was a wonderful garden,” recalls Norma. “[It was] very little maintenance. [Though], she still always seeded some stuff in between [such as morning glories, zinnias, and sweet peas], amongst the perennials [because] she liked to [have everything covered] with flowers.” Norma goes on to describe a photograph, in which her mother and aunts are standing on the pathway between the vegetable garden and the flower garden, visiting, which was a common occurrence in summertime. As the early reports of Mennonite homes and villages also suggest, Norma remembers that each village house, including their own, displayed red geraniums in the windows. “Of course, there were the geraniums,” she explains. “...They were always brought inside in wintertime. ... Not a great thing of beauty but those windowsills ... were always standing full of geraniums in winter. You kept them going through the winter and then [in summertime they went] outside again. ... You [would] see those in everybody's windows in wintertime.”

Reflecting further on the tradition of overwintering geraniums, Norma suggested that “actually, when I think of it, you know, the, uh ... the red geraniums in the windows ... I'm sure that gave them hope during the winter, right?” And, upon reflecting further about her mother and the flower garden, Norma explains: “oh, but my mother was a gardener ... from the [top] of her head to the tip of her toes and the garden was her life. ... I think that's where she drew her strength.” Choosing to read a piece of writing she said she prepared for the interview, Norma poetically verified that the garden offered a sacred space for her mother and for Mennonite women in rural Manitoba at large:

Mother was not an educated woman but she knew a lot about plants. ... She knew all about seeds, when to plant, when to hoe, and when to harvest. She knew how to keep them healthy without the magic of fancy garden books or commercial fertilizers. At the end of the summer, she carefully saved seeds from her flowers. They were marked,

labelled, and put away till spring. She never owned a fine painting or had the time to try her hand at watercolours but she knew how to make a flower garden as beautiful as any museum piece. ... I believe she felt the nearness of God in her garden and there drew peace of mind. ... It was a bright spot in the midst of days of drabness and demanding work. She took humble pride in sharing a task with the master gardener. Mennonite women here share the joy and love their mothers and grandmothers found in their gardens and orchards.¹⁰²

In contrast to Norma Giesbrecht's memories, Sharon Friesen recalls her mother contesting the traditions of her ancestors. Sharon's childhood town yard in the 1950s and 1960s was merely adorned with a few white petunias: "My mom's idea of colour on the yard was to buy some white petunias," she explains. At the same time, Sharon speculates that her own love of gardening was perhaps instilled in her by her mother's lack of love for flowers, for as a young woman, she was tasked with purchasing the white flowers from the greenhouse for her family's flower beds, which she found terribly monotonous. Sharon also recalls her father speaking often about how much he disliked the geraniums of his own rural childhood: "He said that on every windowsill there was a tobacco can that was filled with a rooted geranium and he said they stunk. ... Then the mothers would plant them the next [spring] outside ... as soon as the weather would warm up ... [by that] time they were already very messy, eh?" Today, Sharon resides on a farmyard in Neubergthal where she makes great efforts to maintain the heritage of the landscape by planting and tending flower gardens filled with many of the flowers generations of its former owners would have grown.¹⁰³

Several other women who spoke with Fuchs about the beauty of flowers highlighted their

¹⁰² Ibid. Nearly the same poetic vignette, attributed to another woman's oral history, is included in Norma Jost Voth's book *Mennonite Foods and Folkways from South Russia, Volume II* (Intercourse: Good Books, 1991), 232.

¹⁰³ Sharon Friesen, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 21 October 2004, MHV, *Beauty and Sustenance* research files.

mothers' and grandmothers' intentions of procuring beauty. Liz Toews, for example, whose mother grew flowers *in* the vegetable garden, insisted that it was done with the intention to make things look "pretty."¹⁰⁴ Others recall their mothers planting flowers especially for picking, such as gladiolas. Audrey Toews suggests that some Mennonite women, even if they were not "big gardeners" grew flowers that represented "an individual thing," implying that each woman planted what suited her and her tastes.¹⁰⁵ Some women opted to place their flower beds away from the street, perhaps in efforts not to be too flashy or proud, while others confidently displayed the many years of work by placing their gardens in the front of the house or yard, or by maintaining window boxes. Lou-Ella Reimer in Rosenort shared with Fuchs vivid memories of her grandmother's gardens. While she maintained a large vegetable garden, an orchard, and a melon patch, the garden bed that ran from the house to the road was entirely dedicated to flowers. Hedged on one side with lilacs and outlined by a white picket fence on the other side, Lou-Ella recalls the garden always containing nasturtiums, which her grandmother referred to as *Tjitj-derch-den-Tiin*, (look through the fence). Lou-Ella also remembers the flower garden having large footpaths. As a little girl, she loved to stroll along on visits with her grandmother. "Never at that point would I have thought of how much work it was [for her]," she explains. "She must have loved her garden."¹⁰⁶

For Sarah Klassen's mother, who did indeed love flowers, it was not until the children had grown up, and the vegetable garden was not as vital as it had been, that flowers became a greater priority. Before this, Sarah recalls her mother planting flowers that could be grown from

¹⁰⁴ Liz Toews, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 23 November 2004, MHV, *Beauty and Sustenance* research files.

¹⁰⁵ Audrey Toews, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 23 November 2004, MHV, *Beauty and Sustenance* research files.

¹⁰⁶ Lou-Ella Reimer, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 19 January 2005, MHV, *Beauty and Sustenance* research files.

seed. Such varieties included marigolds, snapdragons, cosmos, *Fattahan*, (portulaca), as well as “lots of geraniums” and castor beans.¹⁰⁷ In contrast to many women’s narratives, Anne Bartel recalls both her mother and father working diligently to tend flower gardens on her family’s farmyard. “My parents had a lot of flowers because they both loved flowers,” she explains. “And [now] I have a lot of flowers!”¹⁰⁸ Chris Peters, on the other hand, recalls that while her mother planted flowers, her colour-blind father would inadvertently dig them all up, believing they were weeds, or, indicate his lack of care for flowers.¹⁰⁹

But some Mennonite women on the West Reserve, particularly those who grew up in the mid twentieth century, did not appreciate the flower gardening culture promoted by their mothers and grandmothers. To a certain extent, these women stand out as dissenters in their communities, for by that point, Mennonite femininity was closely tied with yard work and gardening. As Marlene Epp has argued, “a [Mennonite] woman’s particular productive activity also reflected the degree to which she wished to acquiesce or resist the prescriptive gendered ideology directed at her.” Though many of the women highlighted below did not participate in flower gardening traditions or flower culture at all, others simply found alternate modes of flower culture to express their femininity and creativity. For some of those who dissented, flowers and flower culture were appreciated, yet their artistry was cultivated in ways that stand out as acts of resistance in their daily lives.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Sarah Klassen, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 19 November 2004, MHV, *Beauty and Sustenance* research files.

¹⁰⁸ Anne Bartel, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 13 October 2004, MHV, *Beauty and Sustenance* research files.

¹⁰⁹ Chris Peters, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 23 November 2004, MHV, *Beauty and Sustenance* research files.

¹¹⁰ Epp, *Mennonite Women in Canada*, 273.

For Carol Penner, who grew up on a farmyard near Horndean, flowers summon negative memories of monotony and work. Carol's mother apparently planted the same flowers year in and year out, never venturing to incorporate new colours or varieties. Carol, who was jointly responsible for the work in the flower garden, accordingly developed an aversion to the task and the flowers themselves. "Without variety, it was not enjoyable work," she explained. Though Carol does grow flowers in her own garden today, she "never" plants petunias, pansies, geraniums, or marigolds, which were grown each year by her mother, and are commonly beloved by many Mennonites. Instead, she chooses unfamiliar, brightly coloured flower varieties from the greenhouse each year.¹¹¹

Altona resident Elizabeth Falk, on the other hand, spoke to me about the connection between flower gardening and memories of times in her life wherein she felt significant self-doubt and loneliness. Elizabeth explained that for the first several years of her marriage in the 1970s, she lived on her husband's family farm (a shared property with many other relatives) in his deceased grandmother's house. The flower garden on this property summons memories of what she was told were her shortcomings as a young farm wife. "The pear blossoms at the centre of *Oma's* garden stand out in my memory," explained Elizabeth. "All the rest may fade as it appears now to be primarily an exposure of my own inadequacies," she continued. Though Elizabeth recalls the beauty of this flower garden, which was filled with mature trees, peony bushes, irises, hollyhocks and an "old bench where *Oma* used to sit in the shade," she also recalls feeling anxious about her "rightful jurisdiction over the garden, now that *Oma* was gone," especially after being reprimanded by a relative for improperly tending the space.

¹¹¹ Carol Penner, email communication with the author, 28 November 2015.

Elizabeth explained further how the garden produced tension for her. “My husband and I were living in [*Oma*’s] old house, true,” she noted, “but my sister-in-law who lived next door had become attached to the garden when *Oma* lived there and she believed she still had a claim to it.” One particular moment stands out in Elizabeth’s memory and is especially formative: “I recall standing in *Oma*’s garden next to the peony bushes with a hoe in hand when my husband and his older brother walked by in their coveralls. My new husband remained silent while my brother-in-law reprimanded me for making Esther [his wife] cry.” Elizabeth remembers her sister-in-law later confessing to her “that she had resented [Elizabeth’s] coming into this family from the beginning, not wanting to share her position as the only daughter-in-law on the family farm.” Elizabeth’s feelings of inadequacy and non-belonging were made manifest in the flower garden. After she and her family moved away from the farm, Elizabeth chose not to grow flowers in a garden, but rather to become a florist and own a flower shop.

For underprivileged or intellectually disabled women like Annie Neufeld of Winkler, commonly known as Flower Annie, growing and tending a flower garden may not have been a feasible or desirable option. Local lore has it that in the 1980s she was someone “who [was] part of the fabric of the place, but somehow [did] not fit in.”¹¹² Annie constructed and sold paper flowers to the people of Winkler, and was frequently spotted wandering the town trying to sell her creations. Though she was often treated callously, others have tried to keep her memory alive. Local singing duo Orlando and Grace Sukkau wrote a song about Annie, long after she had died. The lyrics identify competing social, ethnic, and religious perspectives that would have infiltrated Annie’s upbringing and daily life:

¹¹² Hans Werner, *Living Between Worlds: A History of Winkler* (Winkler: Winkler Heritage Society, 2006), 156.

There's a lady in our town, she walks along the street
Handing pretty flowers to the people that she meets.
They're only made of paper, but you know it doesn't matter
The memory is sweet.
Flower Annie, Flower Annie, living in the dreams of yesterday.
Flower Annie, Flower Annie, somebody listens when you pray.
She used to be a little girl, sat on Mama's knee
Her mother asked her Annie, what would you like to be?
She said, I'd like to be a princess, in a kingdom fair,
Handing pretty flowers to all the people there.
Flower Annie, Flower Annie, living in the dreams of yesterday.
Flower Annie, Flower Annie, somebody listens when you pray.
Her mother said, now Annie, that is a pretty dream,
But when you're getting older, life's not always what it seems.
You've got to make a living, you gotta work in this land.
Someday, Annie you'll understand.
Flower Annie, Flower Annie, living in the dreams of yesterday.
Flower Annie, Flower Annie, somebody listens when you pray.
She doesn't walk along the streets of this town anymore.
She's gone on to better places, to a city on that shore.
Walking along the streets, in her kingdom fair,
Handing pretty flowers to all the people there.
Flower Annie, Flower Annie, living in the dreams of yesterday.
Flower Annie, Flower Annie, somebody listens when you pray.¹¹³

Conclusion

Though scholars of agrarian societies in particular have long questioned distinct separations between the public and private spheres, arguing that male and female worlds were in constant interaction with each other, Marlene Epp has maintained that “Mennonite women were

¹¹³ Hans Werner, *Living Between Worlds*, 156.

often associated with the material world, in contrast to men who were [more formally] connected with the intellectual, the spiritual, and the divine.”¹¹⁴ Epp explains further that “within a community that already maintained an ethos of dualities and separations—between believers and the world, good and evil, worldly and otherworldly, spiritual and material—a separation of gender spheres was also fitting.”¹¹⁵ And yet, while one might choose to view Mennonite women’s connection with material culture as “pejorative and limiting,” particularly in cases where individual women did not fit the image of a homemaker with expertise in creative handwork, others might “examine the ways in which women did exercise creativity and experience fulfillment in the context of roles that, while confining in some respects, allowed some opportunity for self-expression,” suggests Epp.¹¹⁶ Considering the history of flower culture among women and men on the West Reserve allows us to problematize the multifaceted and changing role played by landscaping efforts, household artistry, and gardening in daily life.

As oral and written histories reveal, alongside evidence of material culture, an analysis of flower culture among Mennonites in Manitoba based solely on attention to leisure activity in rural Canada, is highly limiting. The culture of flowers among Mennonites on the West Reserve is intertwined with gendered memories of Russia, of longing and nostalgia, of attempts to make the Manitoba landscape more familiar, of shifting social and political climates, of disparate women’s and men’s artistic endeavours, and of women’s efforts to carve out a space for themselves wherein visiting, spirituality, beauty, and creativity were nurtured in varied and complex ways. In some cases, flower culture was tied closely to the lives of men, such as in the example of Jacob Reimer’s pressed flower collection, or in men’s observations of particular

¹¹⁴ Epp, *Mennonite Women in Canada*, 227.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 228.

landscapes. However, in the majority of cases, and in very specific and affective ways, flowers are linked to the material cultural lives of Mennonite women and in expressions of Mennonite femininity.

The history of flower culture presents a significant case in the scholarly exploration of the everyday lives and artistic expressions of Mennonites in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Manitoba. Within ordered and patriarchal ethno-religious communities, Manitoban Mennonite women, in particular, challenged and contested their socio-cultural worlds by carving out separate, creative spaces for themselves. As writer Eleanor Chornoboy aptly notes, “The garden of Eden was a utopian environment from which Eve was evicted ... [but] ... surely being evicted was not what Mennonite women considered as they toiled in their gardens.” She continues, “Gardens were the domain of the women in my life. ... I have no memory of my grandfathers or uncles having a place in the garden except to plough it at the end of the season so that the soil would be ready to be seeded in spring.”¹¹⁷ But, as some oral histories have reminded us, flower gardening was not always the preferred task of Mennonite women, despite or perhaps because of its central place in their daily lives and rituals. As Chornoboy notes further, “For some women the garden was a joy. For my one grandmother and for my mom, they would happily live in the garden. For other women, it was a chore they’d gladly do without, but I don’t think they admitted that very easily because that was frowned upon. I think it smacked of laziness.”¹¹⁸ As another woman put it, “If you didn’t have a garden, you weren’t Mennonite!”¹¹⁹ The flower garden was not an economically necessary facet of rural life, unlike the majority of Mennonite men and women’s hand and housework. Rather, work in the flower garden offered

¹¹⁷ Eleanor Chornoboy, email communication with author, 11 February 2016.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Eleanor Chornoboy, email communication with author, 23 February 2016

some women and men creative embellishment to the monotony of everyday life, as did painting housebarn floors, carving flowers into furniture, and documenting the native or cultivated landscape. At the same time, with the advent of twentieth-century reforms, which tied flowers more closely to women's work, morality, and spiritual betterment, flower gardening was also an avenue whereby women performed or contested acceptable versions of rural femininity and colonial modernity¹²⁰ within shifting social, religious, and political climates. Though not all Mennonite women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tended flower gardens or endeavoured to paint or decorate their houses, flower culture for many women has endured to facilitate a separate, creative, spiritual, and social space. For Altona resident Marlene Plett, who left an abusive marriage late in life, the transition away from growing vegetables now that her children are grown and her family is no longer in need of a significant food source, to growing more flowers and decorative plants, has been a spiritual endeavour. In this process, "the garden has transformed into a location for finding spiritual nurture" says Marlene. She explains further, "I have come to recognize the importance of the saying 'Man does not live on bread alone,' and delight in this insight, secure in anticipating ever-renewing hope."¹²¹

¹²⁰ The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group, *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 7. According to the Modern Girl Around the World Reserarch Group, colonial modernity is a "concept that stresses the colonial roots of revolutionary modernization and the markets and civic institutions that linked 'semicolonial' areas ... to the larger capitalist world system." For Mennonite women engaged in flower culture in the middle decades of the twentieth century, this term applies in that they became participants in wider global processes of modernization and capitalist reform.

¹²¹ Marlene Plett, email communication with the author, 21 February 2016.

Chapter Four:
Onnkrüt onn Krüt (Weeds and Herbs)

Plants become weeds when they obstruct our plans, or our tidy maps of the world. If you have no such plans or maps, they can appear as innocents, without stigma or blame.¹

Introduction

Anthropologist Eric Hirsch suggests that the concept of landscape “entails a relationship between the foreground and background of social life,” or an effort to problematize the relationship between what is the background (the pictorial ideal) and what is concrete, the foreground (the countryside itself).² In this chapter I highlight the contested relationship between the foreground and the background of prairie social life and the way they commingled in the middle decades of the twentieth century to reshape the culture of Mennonites in Manitoba and the West Reserve landscape. Insider and outsider discourses are analyzed, together with a general mapping of twentieth-century modernizing reforms in Canadian agriculture and healthcare. The period between increased European migration to the Canadian Prairies in the 1870s and mid-twentieth-century rural reforms was a time of dramatic social and cultural change, particularly with regard to the way the environment was understood and utilized, and the land was constructed and reconstructed. The Mennonite block settlement on Manitoba’s West Reserve illustrates this transformation. As Royden Loewen has noted, the midcentury brought “unprecedented agricultural commercialization, scientific innovation, state intervention, and

¹ Richard Mabey, *Weeds: In Defense of Nature’s Most Unloved Plants* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), 1.

² Eric Hirsch, “Introduction: Landscape: Between Place and Space,” *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space*, eds. Eric Hirsch and Michael O’Hanlon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 2–3.

increased consumption and communication.”³ Indeed, it was a time of social transformation and associated cultural change for Mennonites in rural North America. Their “ethnicity, religious faith, and inherited sets of social relations affected their response to the new economy, just as the technology and science of the mid-century required of them a cultural response.”⁴ That is, they responded to their new circumstances with “an eternal search for meaning and order, for truth and social harmony.”⁵ As pacifists and sectarians, Mennonites on the West Reserve were skeptical of the of the “technical advice of government-funded, university-educated agricultural agents, yet their need to survive in the new economy dictated an integration with these outsiders.”⁶ Though Mennonite culture and faith emphasized a “non-conformist, community centred and egalitarian world view, the lure of consumer products and capitalist enterprise led them variously to yield great change or sharply to contest it.”⁷ While some families “recommitted themselves to a religiously informed antimodernism by migrating to isolated settings” in Mexico and British Honduras, others adapted their lives to suit the new world order.⁸

By drawing attention to the ways the environment was talked about, utilized, and altered by government officials’ recommendations, national farming practices, input by medical professionals and midwives, as well as Mennonite gardeners and farmers within this particular historical context, we begin to see how the landscape itself is both a “product of and a participant

³ Royden Loewen, *Diaspora in the Countryside: Two Mennonite Communities in Mid-20th Century North America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press and Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

in culture,” and how the local is conditioned by global modernities.⁹ And yet, while newspapers, government reports, and new laws regarding noxious weeds and medical care present a particular story of a changed relationship to the landscape, Mennonites themselves have their own memories and everyday experiences of the effects of new farming and medical practices on southern Manitoba’s West Reserve. With an analysis of both official and local (or ethno-religious) conversations about the environment and reforming practices that involved the environment, distinct tensions are revealed between the foregrounded material and the backgrounded, historical sense of place.

In this chapter, I trace the history of adverse outsider perspectives and government-led reforms, which I suggest reshaped Mennonite life in Manitoba. In other words, I work to outline those historical attempts to label Mennonite life, culture, and farming practices as untidy or unclean, which were associated with efforts to improve rural Canada at the turn of the twentieth century. I will introduce the discourses associated with governmental reforms in agriculture (Part I) and healthcare (Part II), and responses to these discourses within Mennonite communities on the West Reserve. In both parts of this chapter I will consider more intricately the multiple and complex ways Canada’s modern ideals altered rural culture and local botanical knowledge within one ethno-religious community. Departing from the discussions in previous chapters of Mennonite efforts to construct a particular place, in this chapter, the distinct knowledge of land and environment honed among Mennonites in Manitoba over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is considered, as is the way their cultural sense of place and their knowledge of the Manitoba environment changed with the onset of modern farming and healthcare.

⁹ Clinton L. Evans, *War on Weeds in the Prairie West* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2002), xiv.

Part I: Weeds

Classifying Weeds

Anglo-Canadian reporters and travellers were keenly interested in Mennonite life in Manitoba. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, the onset of intensive European or non-Indigenous settlement in the prairie provinces generated a tradition of observation and reportage: Canadians were curious about how ethno-religious newcomers lived their lives and often speculated about how they would fare on such an inhospitable landscape. Though many of these reports expressed a positive impression of Mennonites in Manitoba, others focused on the eccentricity of Mennonite life. One of the primary concerns of outside observers was the apparent cleanliness of Mennonite homes and fields. These reporters specifically questioned whether Mennonite yards and crops were weed-infested and whether Mennonites kept tidy, healthy homes. The discussion of weeds and farmland in Canadian immigration agent John. W. Down's 1877 "Report on Colonization" gives some indication of the wider society's thinking about the virtue of a clean crop at the time of Mennonite settlement. The report, which describes the southern Manitoba landscape and offers advice to early settlers about cropland management, suggests that "the land is really like a garden, and it is the fault of the owner if it ever gets dirty again. These lands worked then in any ordinary season would be as clean and free from weeds, and when the wheat stubble is ploughed again in the fall, in as good a state of cultivation as land to be found in any part of the world."¹⁰

¹⁰ J. W. Down, "Report on Colonization in Manitoba" in *Report of the Minister of Agriculture, Canada. Sessional Papers 1877, Paper No. 8*, 67–72 (Toronto, 1876), in *The Outsider's Gaze: Life and Labour on the Mennonite West Reserve, 1874–1922*, eds. Jacob E. Peters, et al (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2015), 25.

Many Anglo-Canadian reporters stressed the fact that Mennonites settled “differently [than] other emigrants,”¹¹ for they lived in crude homes, shared a roof with their animals, burned manure for heat, and their crops were overrun with weeds. As previous chapters have noted, some writers even expressed concern about Mennonite women doing intense manual labour, while other reporters fixated on the unfamiliar culinary habits among Mennonites. In his series of letters entitled *The Letters of Rusticus: Investigations in Manitoba and the North-West for the Benefit of Intending Emigrants*, David Currie, special commissioner of the *Montreal Witness*, fixates on the oddity of Mennonite housing. He wrote that while the Mennonites as a people seemed to be neat and clean, “there is one custom which I think the Mennonites would do well to abandon, that is, the rather common practice of building the stable against the end of the dwelling house.” He continues, “In several cases I found that the wells were situated in the end of the stable next to the kitchen, and although it was carefully boxed over, I fear that the water will become more or less saturated with unwholesome juices.”¹²

Similarly, an article printed in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in May of 1880 describes an interview with a landlord and “frontiersman” from Smuggler’s Point, which later became the bustling border town of Gretna, wherein Mennonites are described as strange in behaviour and culture. Asked whether the Mennonites were “good settlers,” and “how he liked them,” the landlord suggested that while “they’re quiet enough ... and some of ‘em lives pretty white ... they ain’t no good to the country.” He was especially unimpressed with the trend of Mennonite men each paying for their own liquor in his tavern, raising their own “tobacker” and

¹¹ David Currie, *The Letters of Rusticus: Investigations in Manitoba and the North-West for the Benefit of Intending Emigrants, a Series of Letters from the Special Commissioner of the “Montreal Witness”* (Montreal: John Dougall and Son, 1880), 67.

¹² Ibid.

“[living] on black bread and melons.”¹³ The author of the article further facilitates the tavern-keeper’s observations of Mennonites as odd, by describing his own experience in the West Reserve village of Blumenort where he “sat on the steps of the mill, talking with some of the villagers,” who were “eating a water-melon [*sic*], which was passed around from man to man.” The article ends with the author’s observations of a Mennonite man and his house: the immigrant man is described as an “old Russian, puffing away ... at a pipe of the peace-making Indian weed,” and his house is described as a “rude room” with a table at the centre on which a supper of “black bread, melons, and coffee was served.”¹⁴

Other reports focused entirely on the idea of cleanliness in field and house. *The Manitoba Free Press*, for example, ran an article by a correspondent of the Ontario-based *Globe* in 1881, entitled “Our Mennonite Settlers, the Observations of an Outsider,” which claims that Mennonites “do not give a great impression of cleanliness.” He further explains that the Mennonites’ houses are made of “composite material, and that the same roof covers the horses and the chickens and the rest of the family. The houses are mostly thatched with prairie grass, and consequently are very inflatable [*sic*].” The reporter offers a parallel negative analysis of Mennonite fields. He writes that their “crops were fair, but by no means good, the seed used having been of an inferior quality. ... From the first turning no good crops were to be seen, and certainly none of that twenty bushels an acre which it is said can be produced.” He concludes by suggesting that the general impression of Mennonites is that they “have more land than they can

¹³ Henry J van Dyke, “The Red River of the North,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 360/9 (6 May 1880), in *Brothers in Deed: A Scrapbook about Mennonite Immigrants from Russia, 1870–1885*, ed. Clarence Hiebert (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1974), 376, 378.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 378.

cultivate, and that the remainder should be disposed of for actual settlement.”¹⁵ The inference was that Mennonites were ill-equipped to manage their lands.

A similar criticism, though laced with scorn for the chaotic, came from a report the following year. In 1882, Morden-based barrister J. B. McLaren produced a lengthy study entitled *Picturesque Canada*, in which he comments extensively on the life of Mennonites on the West Reserve. He notes that “the men generally are slow workers,” and also that “a large share of the out-door [*sic*] work falls to a lot of the women, who may be seen harrowing or even ploughing in the fields.” Like other reporters, McLaren also comments on the unclean and chaotic nature of Mennonite homes: “most of their dwellings consist of a timber frame. . . . The ground is their floor. Fowls and other domestic animals have freedom of the house.” What is more, McLaren reports that “at meals all members of the family eat out of one large dish placed in the centre of the table,” and wonders whether such a tradition is “a trace of communism.”¹⁶

Franco-Manitoban Father Jean-Théobald Bitsche made the even more pointed criticism that the apparent Mennonite penchant for disorder was linked to a lack of joyful religiosity. This French- and German-speaking Catholic priest wrote an account of Mennonite arrival in Manitoba entitled “Études Historique sur les Mennonites,” which was issued as a series of articles from 1883 to 1884 in the French-language newspaper, *Le Manitoba*. Writing largely for a French-Catholic and Métis audience, Bitsche’s report is concerned primarily with Mennonite theology and religious life. Yet, Bitsche’s account also expressed interest in the operation of Mennonite households and farms. While “their simple faith and pragmatic approach to life” appears to have

¹⁵ “Our Mennonite Settlers, the observations of an Outsider,” *Manitoba Free Press*, 2 September 1881.

¹⁶ J. B. McLaren, “The North-West,” in *Picturesque Canada: The Country as it was and is* (Toronto: 1882), in *The Outsider’s Gaze: Life and Labour on the Mennonite West Reserve, 1874–1922*, ed. Jacob E. Peters, et al (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2015), 59.

concerned him, his trepidations regarding the lack of cleanliness upheld in Mennonite croplands and in Mennonite households, as well as the overwhelming air of sadness in their villages, worked to negatively differentiate Mennonites from other farmers in the area.¹⁷ Bitsche observed that the floors of Mennonite houses were made of “bare earth,” and that their stoves were usually heated with a mixture of straw and dry manure, “the latter invariably spread[ing] far and wide with an odour often disagreeable to strangers.”¹⁸ As other observers he extended his criticism to Mennonite fields. He noted, for example, that “As farmers they certainly do not deserve being held up as models for nowhere does one find more weeds than in their crops.”¹⁹ And he linked the chaos of both home and field to their faith. In fact, Bitsche found that “the barking of a dog or the crowing of a cock ... are the only things which interrupt the heavy silence” of Mennonite villages in Manitoba. “This sadness,” he explained, “is so much a feature of the Mennonites that even in their dealings with family there is an indefinable feeling of sorrow and fear.” In the article, Bitsche speculates that sadness is “sought in their religious discipline, which views as a great crime anything which resembles gaiety or even the pleasures of life.”²⁰

As the above commentators on Mennonite life in Manitoba suggest, reports about the uncleanliness of Mennonite houses, cropland, and seed grain began to circulate almost as soon as Mennonites arrived in the province. In his seminal study of Mennonite life in Manitoba, sociologist E. K. Francis offers a specific explanation for these general observations from the 1880s. He affirms that Mennonites brought their seed grain with them from New Russia to the

¹⁷ Fr. Jean-Théobald Bitsche, “Études historique sur les Mennonites,” *Le Manitoba*, December 1883–January 1884, in *The Outsider’s Gaze: Life and Labour on the Mennonite West Reserve, 1874–1922*, ed. Jacob E. Peters, et al (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2015), 67.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

East and West Reserves, finding it particularly useful during the initial period of their settlement in the Canadian West. But, a footnote in Francis's book also attests that Mennonites unintentionally transported "the Russian thistle" (most identifiable to the modern eye in its form as the ubiquitous tumbleweed in photographs or videos of the economic depression and Dust Bowl era in the 1930s) in their seed grain, which during the first half of the twentieth century and its associated agricultural reforms became one of the most talked about, loathed, and invasive weeds in North America.²¹ Of course, countless other plant species have been unintentionally introduced into Canada in connection with a long history of colonialism and immigration, meaning that Mennonites are not solely to blame. Weed scientist F. L. Timmons suggests that stinkweed, dandelion, and sow thistle were likely introduced to Canada's prairie provinces by way of "bales of trading and foodstuffs" as early as 1822, whereas leafy spurge was introduced into Canada from Ukraine around 1875.²² Yet, the historical and contemporary sources which link Mennonites to the accidental import of Russian thistle to North America has led to their isolation and abhorrence as the transmitters of this weed from as early as 1885. Multiple sources declare the negative social undertones associated with immigrant and weed culture in North America, in this instance specifically Mennonites and weed culture. A short article in an October 1885 issue of American newspaper the *Bismarck Weekly Tribune*, for example, warns that "the Russian thistle, brought to this country by the Mennonites in their first importation of wheat, is becoming so thickly spread in parts of Dakota [Territory] as to cause serious alarm."²³

²¹ E. K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia: The Mennonites in Manitoba* (Altona, D.W. Friesen & Sons, 1955), 115. See also F. L. Timmons, "A History of Weed Control in the United States and Canada," *Weed Science* 53 (2005): 756.

²² Timmons, "A History of Weed Control," 756.

²³ "The Russian Thistle," *Bismarck Weekly Tribune*, 9 October 1885.

In time, Mennonites in Manitoba faced a rising culture of state-backed weed control. The Dominion of Canada initiated weed research in 1889; by 1894, reports of the arrival of Russian thistle in Manitoba were beginning to surface, while the American belief that Mennonite immigrants from Russia intentionally introduced the weed was becoming more widespread. One of the earliest reports of Russian thistle in Manitoba came from a municipal weed inspector who noted the invasive species on the farm of “one Peter Rhimer [*sic*]” in 1889; this inspector also reported finding large quantities of it on other parts of the Mennonite West Reserve. In an attempt to dissuade prairie agricultural communities from charging Mennonite farmers with the devious import of Russian thistle, James Fletcher, the first Dominion Entomologist and Botanist, commented on “the Russian thistle affair” in a speech in 1899. Fletcher suggested it was the responsibility of *all* farmers to “clean their lands” and prevent the spread of the weed. He complained that while Russian thistle “over-ran [*sic*] the Mennonite farms,” they seemed to think nothing of it, instead feeding it to their pigs as food, as they had done in the “old country.” Partially exonerating them, he noted that as soon as the Mennonites were told it was a noxious weed, “they set to work and got rid of it, and now their farms [are] clean.”²⁴ By 1916, almost all blame for the spread of noxious weeds had diminished, as Fletcher claimed that “the Russian thistle was one of the greatest blessings that ever came to the west” since it “awoke [*sic*] Manitoba up to the question of noxious weeds.”²⁵

The speed with which government officials acted to take control of weed culture in the early 1900s and the associated commercialization of particular chemicals, is especially noted in the agricultural histories of the prairie provinces. Most remarkably, farming methods were

²⁴ *Leader* (Regina), 29 June 1899, 1. See also Evans, *War on Weeds*, 97.

²⁵ *Nor'-West Farmer*, August 1898, 370. See also Evans, *War on Weeds*, 98.

adapted to suit the eradication of popular cereal crop weeds.²⁶ According to historian Clinton L. Evans, Manitoba was considered to be the “dirtiest province in the Dominion” in 1898 due to the rapid spread of immigrant plant species like tumbling mustard, stinkweed, and “the dreaded Russian thistle,” which were all very well suited to the climate and newly turned prairie land. By 1905, however, the “basic elements of modern prairie weed culture were in place,” which meant an increase in governmental insistence on propaganda campaigns, harsh noxious-weed laws, and the education of agricultural populations about new methods in weed control.²⁷

A number of government-initiated educational and advertising methods were employed across agricultural Canada to encourage control of noxious weeds. Not only were weed information booths increasingly common fixtures at turn of the century agricultural fairs across the prairie provinces, but rural Manitoba schools were also asked to include weed identification in their curriculum. Specimens and pamphlets on Russian thistle, for example, were sent to Manitoba schools so that rural children would become familiar with the “plants most hurtful to agriculture.”²⁸ In 1903, James Fletcher reported on the success of these initiatives by writing that he “repeatedly met with farmers [across Manitoba] who have told me that they have been saved hundreds of dollars by their children knowing how to recognize noxious weeds.”²⁹ Adult education about weeds in the area was also provided by way of public meetings. For instance, a series of posters from 1921 held at the Archives of Manitoba, which were printed under the leadership of West Reserve resident Valentine Winkler, Minister of Agriculture, advertises a tour of public meetings about weeds across Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. The posters advertising the tour suggest that the following topics were thoroughly discussed: the “subject of

²⁶ Timmons, “A History of Weed Control,” 748.

²⁷ Evans, *War on Weeds*, 104.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Farmer's Advocate*, 1 October 1903, 895.

noxious weeds and how best to destroy them,” “the noxious weeds act and its enforcement,” “the most suitable methods of cultivation for the eradication of weeds,” and “how to keep roadsides clean.”³⁰ Numerous locations on the West Reserve—such as Morden, Plum Coulee, Winkler, and Lowe Farm—were visited. The Canadian Pacific Railroad hauled a demonstration car and two lecture cars on this six-week tour, which addressed more than fourteen thousand people. By 1921, copper sulfate spraying demonstrations were also being held across the country to encourage the control of annual weeds, which were known to be common in cereal crops.³¹ The archival collection at Morden Research and Development Centre, just outside the western boundary of the West Reserve, also documents the trends and experimentation in weed control on the West Reserve over the course of the early twentieth century. For example, a photograph taken in the summer of 1927 shows a bi-plane dusting a crop of wheat with sulfur, whereas a photograph from 1929 shows a horse-drawn mechanically operated implement also used to dust a crop with sulfur. That same summer, another photograph depicts a group of men steering a horse-drawn sweeping implement to rid what appears to be a wheat field of Russian thistle.³²

³⁰ See for example, “Public Meetings—Weeds—Lowe Farm to Two Creeks, January 16th to 25th,” Agricultural Instruction Posters, 1916–1921, acc. no.: GR8299, finding aid: D92–66, Archives of Manitoba.

³¹ Timmons, “A History of Weed Control,” 751.

³² Morden Research and Development Centre, private collection, 1915–2015.



Figure 4.1: Sweeping Russian thistle, 1929³³

Still, weed science and control were relatively small segments in local and governmental agricultural programs until the early 1950s, and it was not until after World War II that the word “weed” or “weeds” began to appear in college courses or in the vocabulary of extension specialists. With the discovery and commercialization of systemic herbicides like 2, 4-D (an acid that selectively eradicates broad-leafed weeds, but leaves most grasses and cereals unaffected) in the 1940s, weed control advanced quickly as an agricultural science during the first half of the twentieth century. While neither the government nor the pesticide industry created a need for 2, 4-D, they certainly facilitated the swift implementation of this new technology by educating farmers across the country. A number of scientists and scholars have also suggested that as trends towards larger farms and contemporary farm machinery were adopted, and as older harvesting methods such as horse-drawn implements and the stationary threshing machine were no longer in regular use, weed control became of greater concern. The modern-day combine harvester, for example, which eased many of the grain harvest demands by limiting the number

³³ Photograph courtesy of David Wall at the Morden Research and Development Centre.

of people needing to be involved, it nevertheless spread weeds far and wide as it threshed the grain and dispersed the residue throughout the field.³⁴ Thus, a greater need for large-scale weed control became necessary for farmers in the prairie provinces.

According to Evans, the Canadian government played a less active role in the promotion and commercialization of herbicide in western Canada in the decades following the 1950s. But, they continued “to advocate a chemical solution to weed problems through official recommendations, through the enforcement of noxious-weed laws, and through portraying weeds as dangerous enemies against which extreme measures are justified.”³⁵ Farming communities across Canada responded accordingly by adopting modern machinery and methods, yet the effects of changing perspectives on weed science and control also significantly altered the daily lives of rural individuals, and reshaped individual and community interactions with the local environment. Details on the multiplicity of ways Mennonite lives have been impacted by so-called weeds on Manitoba’s West Reserve are offered in the following section, as well as questions of how these interactions changed over the course of the twentieth century.

Remembering Weeds

Evans argues that weeds are “unintentional allies” in the colonization of the Canadian West, and are thus not merely products of culture, but are also active participants in culture.³⁶ Across specific times, places, and cultures, identifying certain plants as weeds depended largely upon who was involved in labeling plants as such, and for what purposes. Between the time of Mennonite settlement in Manitoba and the commercialization of chemical weed control

³⁴ David Wall, interview with the author, 19 July 2016.

³⁵ Evans, *War on Weeds*, 176.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

following World War II, methods of weed control and definitions of what constituted a weed changed dramatically. While at times Mennonites were blamed for the introduction of specific weeds, or looked down upon for their untidy farming habits, they themselves disparaged weeds, even making distinct connections between weeds and poor character, or immorality. Indeed, weeds are culturally created by the act of distinguishing certain plant species as undesirable for the purposes of agriculture and even more so when large-scale farming success became of greater concern, following World War II.

But, weeds also feature prominently in memories of day-to-day life among many Mennonites who grew up on the West Reserve during first half of the twentieth century. While accounts from as early as 1898 simply indicate concern with the look of the landscape and the presence of particular weeds, later descriptions of weeds and weeding connected Mennonite individuals spiritually to their environment. Still others describe the task of weeding and the cleanliness of a garden, farmyard, or crop to be associated with good moral character, thereby showcasing hard work and dedication to a particular and increasingly popular twentieth-century ethic of environmental stewardship.

Settler Mennonite accounts of weeds on the prairies document a deeply entrenched concern with the look and quality of the landscape, informed perhaps by a hope that the land was fruitful for settlement, or with an attitude that saw the Manitoba landscape as lacking in its largely uncultivated state. These accounts do not offer the moral or hygienic perspectives popularized by most society agricultural reforms of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s. One West Reserve farmer who disparaged weeds was Isaac E. Loewen of Hochstadt, who, after migrating to Jansen, Nebraska in 1891, decided to return to Manitoba with his family. Loewen's account of the journey by mule train was published in the 14 June 1899 edition of the *Menmonitische*

Rundschau (a German-language Mennonite periodical that catered to readers in the US prairies and Manitoba, especially between the years of its founding in 1879 as *the Nebraska Ansiedler*, and about 1920 when it evolved into a Mennonite Brethren church periodical), and it documents his observations of the presence of Russian thistle along the way. Loewen outlines the time spent visiting with acquaintances on his journey, the costs associated with the journey, and offers gratitude to those who hosted his family. He also notes the look and quality of the landscapes through which he and his family travelled. Though Loewen describes specific regions as “well settled” and seemingly productive in agriculture, he also notes that “in the northern part of Nebraska we saw large fields covered with the so called Russian thistle (*Kurrei*) as tall as a man’s head. These weeds are found throughout South Dakota and about 100 miles into North Dakota. Farther north we saw no trace of these plants.”³⁷ Whereas Loewen’s observations of weeds offer commentary on the landscape, later narratives of weeds are more scathing. In the early 1930s, for example, the land around the village of Rosengart was severely overrun by another species of thistle: the sow thistle. During these years, there were also continuous infestations of grasshoppers that consumed entire crops and left many farmers destitute. Despite these hardships, a number of Mennonite farmers labeled the presence of grasshoppers as “a blessing,” for while the grasshoppers devoured rope crops such hemp they also devoured the dreaded thistle, leaving the cropland “clean.”³⁸

Many decades later, discourses more frequently equate weed-free landscapes with cultural purity and a moral imperative. More importantly, these discourses invoke Eric Hirsh’s proposal that landscapes are places where a complex and ever-changing relationship between

³⁷ Isaac E. Loewen, “From Nebraska to Manitoba by Mule,” trans. Henry Fast, *Mennonitische Rundschau* 14 June 1899, in *Preservings* 16 (2000): 104–5.

³⁸ J. C. Fehr, “Rosengart: Grasshoppers were a blessing,” *Red River Valley Echo*, 5 December 1984.

pictorial ideal and the countryside itself are worked out in a variety of cultural attitudes and behaviours.³⁹ In her 2004 oral history interviews, Tracy Ruta Fuchs found many Mennonite men and women who relayed specific memories of weeds and weeding from their childhoods during the 1940s and '50s; these individuals often spoke about weeding as a laborious task, and implied the moral and social importance of keeping attractive yards and gardens. Rose Wiebe, for example, remembers her family and all of her family's neighbours keeping their gardens "completely clean." There were "absolutely no weeds," and thus the garden was "always open to take visitors through." Rose also remembers that the task of weeding commonly belonged to the older children in a family; everything was "hoed by hand" and the soil was "kept black." After weeding, the garden and orchard would be raked, "to smooth it so it was, you know, it was attractive."⁴⁰ Weed-free areas were equated with inherent beauty, an aesthetic rooted in traditions of morality and hard work. Anne Giesbrecht remembers having to "pick all the wild mustard from [her] mother's garden," in the 1930s and 1940s, which was a painstaking job,⁴¹ whereas Chris Peters, as noted in chapter 3, has humorous memories of her father, who was colour-blind, accidentally weeding all the flowers out of her mother's beds on numerous occasions,⁴² indicating that only a physical limitation might thwart attempts at creating weed-free environments. Norma Giesbrecht, from Neubergthal, recalls how her mother often implemented the chore of weeding the yard and garden as a consequence for idleness or boredom. "My mother was a [bit of a]sergeant major, she didn't believe in idleness, so standing by the door in the back

³⁹ Eric Hirsch, "Introduction: Landscape: Between Place and Space," *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space*, eds. Eric Hirsch and Michael O'Hanlon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 3.

⁴⁰ Rose Wiebe, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 27 October 2004, MHV, Beauty and Sustenance research files.

⁴¹ Anne Giesbrecht, interview with the author, 25 June 2015.

⁴² Chris Peters, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 23 November 2004, MHV, Beauty and Sustenance research files.

there in summertime, looking kind of bored, was a very dangerous thing ... that didn't last long because I knew I was pulling weeds in the garden."⁴³

Personal documents also allude to weeds. In her memoir, West Reserve resident Rose Marion Hildebrand, despite a pacifist upbringing, similarly invokes the increasingly popular mid-twentieth-century images of a battlefield when describing the efforts by which her family's neighbour kept her yard "clean." Rose writes: "In summer she was always busy doing something. At noon she faithfully took a nap, but other than that her hoe was never far away. She waged a war on weeds and she won. Her gardens were kept under control."⁴⁴ Other memories link this war on weeds with ingenuity, though still indicating the importance of keeping clean gardens and crops. Anne Bartel recalls her father using the native perennial weed foxtail barley, or *Sääjel'grauss*—"the grass that has the white end"—to rid his potato patch of potato beetles. "He would take a whole handful of that, tie it together ... and then he would dip that into water and spray [or swat] the potatoes."⁴⁵ In this case, the battle was against pests and weeds were the weapons of choice.

After chemicals were introduced for crop weed control during the 1950s, Mennonite memories about weeds and ways of speaking about them changed. Some Mennonites, like Susie Unger, recall distinct vicissitudes in their surrounding environments. Susie, who grew up in a

⁴³ Norma Giesbrecht, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 21 October 2004, MHV, Beauty and Sustenance research files.

⁴⁴ Rose Marion Hildebrand, *More Precious than Gold: Our Heritage* (self-published memoir, date unknown), 38.

⁴⁵ Anne Bartel, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 13 October 2004, MHV, Beauty and Sustenance research files. See also Gerald A. Mulligan, *Common Weeds of Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, Ltd., 1978), 21. Mulligan suggests that the "structures enclosing the seed" on foxtail barley "have sharp bristles that can cause serious injury to mouths or skin of livestock." Whether or not the microscopic serrated structure of the foxtail bristles negatively affected the potato beetles remains a question, though it is not without reason to believe Anne Bartel's father might have used the foxtail to his advantage in this way.

Mennonite family on a farm near Whitewater, Manitoba, has clear memories of weeds and weeding, as well as the landscape during the Great Depression, and the effects of pesticide commercialization and herbicide use in southern Manitoba. Some of the most poignant imagery in her self-published memoir is centered on the Dirty Thirties, which Susie describes as “lean and trying times” for the community. Susie writes, “For eight long years, dry searing winds eroded the topsoil leaving it in ditches and drifts which covered the fence posts. It filled the ditches and invaded the house.” She recalls further, “Only Russian thistle grew in abundance and when dry, rolled across the prairie sowing seeds for further destruction.”⁴⁶ During the worst years of the drought and economic depression, Susie remembers farmers in their area commonly living on the “returns they got from the fertilizer plant for the carloads of bones they managed to harvest.” She continues, “We children also went along our pastures to hunt up all the animal bones we could find and had made up a huge pile by the barn.”⁴⁷

Yet, unlike the reflections above, Susie’s is also in part a nostalgic deliberation on the beauty of particular weeds and the loss of a specific landscape once chemicals for weed control were introduced to the area. For example, Susie writes of the dandelions, or “dear common flower that [grew] beside the way ... fringing the dusty road with harmless gold,” sometimes growing over two feet tall near her family’s vegetable garden.⁴⁸ Susie also suggests that before the 1940s, many native fruit trees grew in the brushes and forested area around their farm—chokecherries, pincherries, cranberries, plums, and saskatoons were all harvested and eaten by

⁴⁶ Susie Unger, *A Time to Remember* (Unpublished Memoir: date unknown), 49. See also Evans, *War on Weeds*, xi. Evans suggests that North American efforts to eradicate weeds have dramatically affected the environment. The combination of drought and over-tillage, the primary weed control method of the 1930s, was the leading cause of the Dust Bowl era, which Susie Unger refers to in her memoir.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

the Unger family. Yet, once herbicide and insecticide sprays were commonly used on farms in the area, Susie remembers the saskatoon bushes near the farms and roadsides being completely “wiped out.” Accordingly, she and her siblings would be required to take the horse and buggy down into the Turtle Mountains, where the herbicide sprays had been less damaging, so as to pick berries for their winter preserves.⁴⁹

For other West Reserve residents, the topic of weeds leads to bittersweet discourse about the years of hoeing sugar beets in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s. Eleanor Chornoboy has written extensively on the topic; in her West Reserve-based book, *Faspa with Jast*, the experiences of numerous community members are relayed in stories of her family members. As Chornoboy explains, during and following World War II, sugar beets became a viable crop for southern Manitoba growers. Farmers initially hauled their beets across the border to North Dakota to be processed at the American Sugar Beet Factory. Eventually, the Manitoba Sugar Beet Company opened in Winnipeg, which meant that West Reserve farmers were able to haul their beets to local railway sidings for train transport to the city. Because “many seedlings sprung out of the earliest multi-germ seeds,” beet weeders were required to thin out the rows, “leaving one beet from each bunch to grow to maturity.” If they could manage the work, farm families hoed their own beet fields with special hand tools created for the arduous task. These tools, which were typically fashioned out of a twelve-inch handle and the “triangular tines” of a swather blade, became a necessity. If beet crops were very large, farmers were in need of additional people to hoe their beets. Beet gangs, as they became known, eventually expanded to about “forty teenage and adult beet weeders,” and individuals were paid between forty and eighty cents per hour for their work. A beet weeder’s day typically began at seven o’clock in the morning and ended

⁴⁹ Ibid.

around six o'clock in the evening; each individual was required to bring the food and water they would need for a full day on the field. As Chornoboy declares, "sometimes that pesky *Schwaun 'sobel*, wild millet, green foxtail, and *willa Howa*, wild oats, insisted on staying plugged into the ground and required additional elbow grease to clean the fields," but still beet gangs were an effective farming method until "the development of the monogerm seed" and the introduction of applicable chemicals.⁵⁰ Despite the laborious nature of this work, many West Reserve residents recall weeding sugar beets as a central part of their rural youth. The task of weeding was done with friends, which meant it was also a time of socializing and independence.

For Altona-based market vegetable gardener Joe Braun, the topic of weeds and weeding also conjures distinct memories. Joe's mother, who experienced food shortages in Russia and who always relayed stories of her father storing extra potatoes in the basement, accordingly kept a very large and well-weeded garden. For Joe's mother, weeding was associated with necessity, sustenance, and sustainability. "All of us," explained Joe, "including my dad, who always had many other things to do, had to be there to help dig the potatoes, weed, and water if rains had been scarce. The idea of running out of pantry larder [*sizc*] scared her to no end." Joe also clearly remembers "digging up quack grass with a potato fork behind the summer kitchen in thirty-degrees-Celsius temperatures, and Mom muttering that doing this godforsaken job was due to us humans having sinned, as the bible apparently tells us. I'll never forget the anger and vengeance she took out on these quack roots." Yet, after Joe married and left his mother's house, the task of weeding took on a more positive spiritual quality:

Weeding a tree row on our farmyard was a spiritual Sunday morning affair. The plain mystery of a tree trunk, branch, or leaf, has always made me stop and ponder the pure

⁵⁰ Eleanor Chornoboy, *Faspa with Jast: A Snack of Mennonite Stories told by Family and Guests* (Winnipeg: Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing, 2007), 119–125.

complexity of how a plain tree grows. We humans can design [the] most complicated objects, dream up theories of cosmic waves, and form weird ways of relating to each other, but try to duplicate growing a tree artificially with human hands, and we can't even do that. Just thinking of the wonder of putting a seed in the ground and fifty days later picking an edible cucumber, is enough to make my mind go into a trance.⁵¹

Likewise, for Elizabeth Falk, weeding the garden has at times offered a venue for retreat and pondering the complexities of family life on a multigenerational farmyard. In other circumstances, weeding has represented her effort to reclaim the space that once belonged to a loved one. Elizabeth recalls her fiancé bringing her a bouquet of blossoms from the garden that belonged to his grandmother, a garden she salvaged after their marriage when she lived on the farmyard belonging to her in-laws. Elizabeth “managed to reclaim this sheltered space from the weeds running rampant there.” For Elizabeth, keeping this garden clean was an act of love and care—an effort to cultivate romantic feelings and respect. Yet, despite her best efforts, she encountered resistance from family members who claimed that “*Oma* [grandmother] had always let the garden go to weed and it was feared, perhaps justifiably so, that [she] would do the same.” But keeping a weed-free garden was difficult. As Elizabeth continued, “If the men should have to come and do the cultivating, it would be hard [for them] to access that location [with a tractor], I was told.” Thus she became the object of suspicion. She speculates that “unprocessed feelings remained in the family about this feisty old *Oma* ...” of which Elizabeth often felt she was the “object.” It all proved a little more than daunting. “So much of my life is like that,” she said, with “stuff growing all over the place [and] very little control over how to shape and tend

⁵¹ Joe Braun, email communication with the author, 14 February 2016.

and cultivate my garden.”⁵² For Elizabeth, Joe, and others, memories of weeds indicate that social life and spirituality imprint upon and reshape the landscapes we inhabit.

For older West Reserve residents like Grant and Leona Nickel and Joe and Lois Braun, who have all lived and worked on conventional grain farms, a group conversation about weeds also revealed some hearsay about the acceptance of commercial chemicals for weed control in the 1950s and '60s. All four suggested that weed-free fields and yards have, for as long as they can remember, been the mark of a hard-working individual, and thus a better farmer all around. Joe believes that competition between farming neighbours coincided with concern with not appearing to be a lazy farmer. Both, suggested Joe, were among the major reasons herbicides were adopted by Mennonites in the West Reserve. Lois similarly suggests that there remains a “crazy desire” to get rid of unwanted species in the West Reserve.

Leona contextualized Joe and Lois’s comments by suggesting that Mennonites have always taken great pride in their farmyards and fields, and thus weeds have long been of concern. She also suggested, however, that common memories of clean fields and yards is likely informed in large part by nostalgia and the sense that things were more beautiful “back then.” Leona is critical of the significant changes on the West Reserve landscape since the advent of weed chemical and modern farming practices. She especially rues the disappearance of ingredients her mother used in making soup out of a weed that grew in the ditch—*Loddejk* (sour dock)—which later became hard to find due to chemical weed control efforts. Leona is also nostalgic for the old days, when women guarded against weeds by using natural methods, such as planting rhubarb all the way around their gardens to help keep out quack grass. Joe and Grant, on the other hand, recall with nostalgia how cultivating once was the most common method of control, until the

⁵² Elizabeth Falk, email communication with the author, 14 February 2016.

crop was too high. Chemical farming in part robbed them of agency, yet as Grant recalls, starting to spray his fields with 2, 4-D to control wild mustard and another herbicide, Carbine, to control wild oats, “was just what we did.” Apprehension about the use of chemicals exists with a significant amount of remorse and regret despite each of the four community members recalling hoeing beets by hand, for it was not the most pleasurable task.⁵³

Individual memories among Mennonites about weeds and weeding on the West Reserve may highlight the complex place of insider and outsider perspectives on weeds on the Canadian Prairies in the years surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. But, community-wide changes, as documented by governmental and news reports, tell a different story about the culture of weeds and weed control. The poster advertisements from the Department of Agriculture’s 1921 weed education tour, noted earlier in this chapter, indicate that government officials hosted meetings to educate farmers about weeds and weed control in Mennonite communities on the East and West Reserves. The Dominion of Canada’s Department of Agriculture prepared several dozen small vials of “economic and weed seeds,” intended “for the use of Seed Merchants and Agricultural Institutions, as a means of assisting in the identification of seeds of useful and noxious plants.” These are contained in a leather case in the collection at the Mennonite Heritage Village Museum archives, which suggests that Mennonite farmers in Manitoba were made privy to early, nation-wide conversations on noxious weeds and therefore joined in the war against weeds.⁵⁴ Throughout the 1940s, the commercialization of chemicals for weed and pest control coincided with countless articles and advertisements in the *Altona Echo*, which stressed the need for farmers to adopt new agricultural methods and thereby participate in

⁵³ Joe Braun, Lois Braun, Grant Nickel, and Leona Nickel, interview with the author, 15 October 2016.

⁵⁴ Dominion of Canada, Department of Agriculture Reference Collection of Economic and Weed Seeds, MHV, acc. no. 1966.7000.349a-w4.

controlling weeds and eradicating insects from cropland. This indicates clearly the swiftness with which West Reserve farmers were introduced to and adopted new methods of weed control recommended by the government.

In February 1948, for example, the arrival of an adaptable and easy-to-use “weed killer” was announced in an article. The reporter suggests that the “ester formulation” of 2, 4-D, which is the article’s primary focus, has been “recommended for use in Western Canada” and was “recently placed on the market by Canadian Industries Limited.” The chemical “is considered the safest weed killer” for lawns and small crop areas, or more sensitive crops, such as flax and corn. Moreover, it is “more convenient to prepare than sodium salt,” and is thus also “favored in certain localities for controlling the weeds in wheat, oats and mixed grains.” But 2,4-D did more than clean fields. It is also noted that the chemical is “highly effective in eradicating brush from power-line right-of-ways, roadsides, permanent pastures and other areas where brush is a nuisance.”⁵⁵ Two advertisements, also published in the spring of 1948, stress the rapidity with which Altona businesses entered the market to supply famers with the increasingly “necessary” chemicals. One ad suggests that farmers will be able to “free” their fields of weeds with the all-new, tractor-mounted ASCO weed control sprayer, “used and proven by Canadian farmers,” available at A. B. Klassen’s store in Altona. The second advertisement for Naugatuck Weed Bane, or the “safest, surest formulation of 2, 4-D for killing mustard and all broad leaved [*sic*] weeds,” offers hope to farmers in their battle against the swift arrival of farming season: “weeds: be prepared to kill them as the season is almost upon you!” The advertisement suggests weeds

⁵⁵ “Weed Killer to Come in Three Forms,” *Altona Echo*, 2 February 1948, 2.

can be eradicated with the product “Naugatuck Weed Bane; at only \$9.50 per gallon, it assured that ‘harvesting is simplified and dockage reduced.’”⁵⁶

By 1953, the *Echo* put these ads into a national and even international context. One article, entitled “Ten Points for Sound Farming,” outlines a recommended program for “more efficient farming” in the context of a “changing farm picture throughout the world.” Besides promoting the use of fertilizer, good seed, and modern methods of efficient production to “obtain the highest returns per acre and per man,” the article also recommends that Canadian farmers “use approved methods and materials to fight crop and livestock insects, diseases and parasites, household insects, rodents, weeds and other pests.”⁵⁷ Not only was science at the beck and call of the farmer, it was also sanctioned by the state and its scientists. Another article from the same issue outlines the results of a survey conducted in the Pembina Valley by the Manitoba Weeds Commission together with a number of regional grain companies, including the United Grain Growers, Line Elevator’s Farm Service, and Manitoba Pool Elevators that demonstrated eager farmer participation in these campaigns. The findings of the survey were that weeds were still considered a serious problem in Manitoba grain farming, and farmers rated wild oats to be the weed of greatest concern, next to wild mustard, green foxtail, Canada thistle, wild buckwheat, and sow thistle.

Significantly, chemicals even promised to address the problem of modern technology, a common concern among Mennonite farmers trying to reconcile religious beliefs of non-conformity with new methods in farming. Furthermore, the use of the modern combine was considered by many of the farmers surveyed to be a contributing factor to the “spread of weeds”

⁵⁶ “Free your Fields of Weeds,” *Altona Echo*, 7 April 1948, 5; “Weed Control,” *Altona Echo*, 26 May 1948, 4.

⁵⁷ “Ten Points for Sound Farming,” *Altona Echo*, 13 May 1953, 5.

in the Pembina Valley. Though the “most popular method of combatting the wild oats menace was to delay seeding and so destroy one or two growths of wild oats by tillage, ... the percentage of farmers who used 2, 4-D was considerably higher than anticipated.”⁵⁸ In June of 1953, an article outlined the benefits of using 2, 4-D over successive years. The reporter writes, “The results of spraying with 2, 4-D to date indicate that the practice is efficient and profitable.” The article also suggests that “in 1952 practically no weeds were found in the fields that were sprayed in previous years. The use of 2, 4-D chemical herbicide over a period of several years on the same field is effective in gradually reducing the number of susceptible weeds as mustard, lambs’ quarters, pigweed and stinkweed.”⁵⁹ Later in June of 1953, an article was published indicating that chemical weed killers are also effective in the “maintenance of vigorous pastures.” The reporter suggests that overgrazing is often the cause of a marked increase of perennial weeds and brush. Accordingly, “spraying with 2, 4-D will materially aid the grass in recovering its vigour ... and will effectively control such weeds as pasture sage, goatsbeard, dandelions, golden rods, and gumweed,” while spraying with 1, 4, 5-T will help control wild roses, willows, and Western snowberry.”⁶⁰

While efforts to define, control, and eradicate weeds were based on changing ideas about agriculture, weeds and weediness also began to inform new perspectives on the relationship between humans and their environment and the agricultural successes of particular groups of people. Mennonite farmers certainly entered the changing world of modern agricultural practices, and their adoption of chemical weed control can be traced by way of local newspapers.

⁵⁸ “Survey of Red River Valley Air Farmer’s Weed Problems,” *Altona Echo*, 13 May 1953, 5.

⁵⁹ “The Effect of 2,4-D on Crop Yield Under Field Scale Conditions,” *Altona Echo*, 17 June 1953, 11.

⁶⁰ “The Control of Weeds and Brush in Pastures by the use of Chemicals,” *Altona Echo*, 24 June 1953, 4.

Oral history and community memory reveal more intricate details: though farmers themselves adopted new methods of weed control, the language and perspectives about weeds among Mennonite men and women also changed, and the overarching ethno-cultural relationship with the local landscape. Prior to the introduction of chemical weed control, Mennonite farmers and gardeners managed weeds by hand, and even utilized certain invasive plant species as feed for their livestock or as tools in other regards. After the arrival of chemicalized agriculture, specifically 2, 4-D, language surrounding weeds and weed control turned to that of winning a war, and clean yards and fields came to be associated with hard-working, upstanding rural Canadian citizens.

Part II: Herbs

Home Remedies and Substitutes

As with the commercialization of chemicals for weed control among farmers, Mennonite knowledge of herbs, spices, and substitutes also reshaped by the arc of modernity. Until the mid-twentieth century, traditions surrounding health and wellness among Mennonites on the West Reserve were dependent in part on familiarity with herbs, remedies, and recipes that were shared orally among community members. A historically expressed awareness of what grew in the local environment, what therein could be foraged, and which herbs and spices in the kitchen garden were of medicinal use, indicates that Mennonites cultivated a distinctive botanical culture and interacted with their local environment in culturally informed ways. During more trying economic times, such as the initial years of settlement and the Great Depression, sustenance and survival also sometimes depended upon knowing what in the local environment could be used to

substitute for food, medicines, and animal feed that were not readily accessible or could not be grown for a variety of reasons. Recipes, oral histories, newspaper articles, as well as secondary sources, together highlight a variety of remedial and botanical knowledge, which circulated among Mennonites in Manitoba. Once commercial medications and the professionalization of medical care became commonplace, and an array of herbs and spices from around the world became readily accessible in stores, Mennonite dependency on traditional knowledge about the relationship between health, wellness, and their local environment began to fade.

An article published in the 27 July 1898 edition of *Die Mennonitische Rundschau* about “The Influence of Vegetables on Health,” offers a glimpse into some of the beliefs and practices surrounding health, medicine, and herbal remedies that Mennonite immigrants in Manitoba might have upheld in the late nineteenth century. More pointedly, the article provides greater context for understanding the remedies and gardening traditions recalled in oral history interviews with Mennonite residents of Manitoba, below. The article suggests that many readers at the time maintained the custom of eating a “stewed fruit”, one flavoured with nine herbs collected from local surroundings, some of which were later deemed invasive weeds by the Department of Agriculture. The herbs listed include watercress, veronica (or speedwell), lady’s mantle, nettle, yarrow, dandelion, and sorrel. Many of these herbs were available on the native Manitoba landscape, while others were introduced by way of Mennonite landscaping practices. The article also suggests that leafy green plants, such as spinach, dandelion, asparagus, and celery help to “clean the blood,” “calm the nervous system,” and “heal rheumatism or neuralgia.” The liver, too, benefits from eating tomatoes, while consuming beets stimulates the appetite. Lettuce and cucumbers provide an overall cooling effect on the body. Whereas garlic, suggests the article, “posses[es] excellent medicinal virtues ” by “[stimulating] blood circulation and

[increasing] the elimination of saliva and stomach juices.” Onions, too, are “an exceptional remedy for weakened condition[s] of the digestive system.”⁶¹ The entire garden was heralded as a medical chest.

Other traditions surrounding health and wellness among Mennonite immigrants in Manitoba are outlined in an essay by farm householder Tina Peters in a local history volume entitled *Mennonite Memories*. Not only does Peters emphasize the importance that was placed on locally sourced and homegrown herbs in the maintenance of settler health, but she also highlights the autonomous nature of nineteenth-century Mennonite health and healing practices. According to Peters, many Mennonite women on the West Reserve “made a practice out of drying and sorting leaves and blossoms of various plants, to be used in the making of health drinks or soothing lotions.”⁶² While the most popular leaves and flowers used for these purposes were from chamomile and lilac plants, some women also collected the leaves of parsley and lovage (a white-flowered plant of the parsley family) to produce a tonic or tincture for purifying the blood or the treatment of skin irritations. Chamomile was especially popular for its soothing effect on a baby’s skin, while lilac blossom tea was a considered a “reliable remedy” to treat bladder infections. In some households, goose fat was mixed with turpentine to form a rub for bronchial ailments. Pastes made out of onions cooked in milk and thickened with rye flour were used as a cream for the chest to treat pneumonia, a flaxseed gel became a poultice to treat boils, and a hot, roasted onion was applied to boils.⁶³

⁶¹ “Einfluss der Gemüse auf die Gesundheit,” trans. Elizabeth Falk, *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 27 July 1898, 2.

⁶² Tina Peters, “Remedies,” *Mennonite Memories: Settling in Western Canada*, Lawrence Klippenstein, ed.. (Winnipeg: Centennial Publications, 1977), 246.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

Similar remedies appear in the creative non-fiction work by local physician, Rhinehart Friesen, the account of his family's story of migration to Manitoba in 1874. While Friesen describes the common tragedy of illness and death that occurred on the ships bringing Mennonites from Europe to North America, his work also indicates which remedial traditions might have been transferred from New Russia to Manitoba. As Friesen suggests, illnesses were often accidentally induced and treated with the few things Mennonites had on hand during their long journey. The story of one baby girl's ill health indicates that the infant's condition was compromised by the family's staple travel fare—roasted bread dunked in coffee, which was “hardly a suitable long-time diet for an infant.” Because professional medical care was not available on the journey, the girl's mother resorted to feeding her daughter pre-chewed food, or *Keifkje*, as her condition weakened. Friesen also suggests that the girl's mother “tried such folk remedies as she thought might be beneficial.” Among these “folk remedies” was the brewing of a tea made from lilac blossoms (which was believed to aid with stomach troubles) and ground coffee beans (which were thought to assist in the reduction of diarrhea). Unfortunately, neither remedy cured the baby girl—she died and was buried upon the family's arrival in Manitoba.⁶⁴

The early years of settlement offered little relief for Mennonites who were commonly plagued with health concerns, premature death, drought, floods, and insects. Crops and garden produce did not offer remedial sustenance, and certain foods the Mennonites depended upon in Russia were not readily available, thus substitutions for coffee, animal feed, and common kitchen herbs were often sought within the local surroundings. Letters, diaries, memoirs, and oral histories from Mennonites on the West Reserve who lived throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries suggest, for example, that *Priips* was a common replacement for coffee

⁶⁴ Rhinehart Friesen, *A Mennonite Odyssey* (Winnipeg, Hyperion Press, 1988), 38.

in Mennonite households, and was made by boiling barley in buttermilk, then roasted in the oven, ground, and steeped in hot water.⁶⁵ The diary of Peter Hamm associates *Prips* with trying times. On 14 August 1874, upon his arrival on the East Reserve and prior to his move to Neubergthal in the West Reserve, Hamm wrote of his days-long walk to Winnipeg to fetch food and supplies for his family. While he was able to purchase potatoes and flour (which he suggests was of very poor quality), as well as lard and bacon, the family was forced to rely on simple fare of *Prips* and bread for breakfasts.⁶⁶ Jakob Fehr's recollections similarly indicate that *Prips* was a frequent substitute for coffee among poorer families who settled in the West Reserve village of Reinland. According to Fehr, "We, or my parents, were not of the very poorest. I have witnessed that the poorest help themselves with rye bread and barley '*Prips*' for coffee to which they then add bread, salt and onions. This was the breakfast menu."⁶⁷ Maria Klassen, whose family settled on the West Reserve in the late 1870s and whose childhood home was the "stopping place for travellers along the Post Road between Morden and Emerson," recalls that "the place was constantly astir with someone brewing *Prips* (coffee)" for their numerous overnight guests.⁶⁸ Klassen's memoir indicates that the family did not have the means to provide coffee for their many visitors. In Halbstadt resident Jake Rempel's memory, the very idea of drinking the undesirable *Prips* caused conflict for his grandparents during the Great Depression. According to Rempel, his grandfather's suggestion that the family drink *Prips* instead of buying coffee—so as

⁶⁵ Mary Loewen, soup and prips recipe, private collection.

⁶⁶ Hildebrand, *More Precious than Gold*, 32.

⁶⁷ Jakob Fehr, "Jakob Fehr (1859–1952) Journal," trans. Peter Zacharias, *Preservings* 6 (2000): 16.

⁶⁸ Maria Klassen, "Moving to the West Reserve," in *Mennonite Memories: Settling in Western Canada*, eds. Lawrence Klippenstein and Julius G. Toews (Winnipeg: Centennial Publications, 1977): 70.

to save money—incited a retort from his grandmother, who believed that if her husband could afford to smoke tobacco, the family could afford to have coffee.⁶⁹

Fuchs's 2004 oral history interviews with Mennonites in Manitoba also point to many of the common medicinal uses of the herbs and local plants noted in the above sources, along with some other unique recipes. Tobacco mixed with warm water, for example, was used as a poultice for cuts and sores. Soothing teas for the relief of gas, diarrhea, vomiting, or fever were made from chamomile blossoms, peppermint leaves, and lilac blossoms, while chamomile and lilac flowers were also applied as poultices to aid in healing external sores, boils, and bruises. Helen Peters remembers her mother and grandmother gathering and then drying chamomile blossoms in paper boxes or between layers of newspaper in the housebarn attic to be used medicinally throughout the winter.⁷⁰ Sarah Klassen's mother "never had any chamomile," yet, like Audrey Toews's mother, used raspberry juice to treat fever or nausea.⁷¹ Liz Toews remembers her mother making tea out of parsley to cure bladder infections: "if anybody had a bladder infection, she should boil parsley and drink that ... it does wonders for your water works."⁷²

In other households, ground flax mixed with water was sometimes used to make a cooling gel for boils, onion juice was used to treat nosebleeds, and a mustard plaster was commonly spread over the chest to help treat respiratory infections like pneumonia.⁷³ Chris Peters told Fuchs that her mother often mixed mustard seed with water and oatmeal to form the paste to help cure a chest cold, or to "draw out the impurities." Bettie Hiebert confirmed this

⁶⁹ Jake Rempel, email communication with the author, 10 November 2014.

⁷⁰ Helen Peters, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 20 October 2004, MHV, Beauty and Sustenance research files.

⁷¹ Sarah Klassen, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 19 November 2004, MHV, Beauty and Sustenance research files.

⁷² Bettie Hiebert, Chris Peters, Audrey Toews, and Liz Toews, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 23 November 2004, MHV, Beauty and Sustenance research files.

⁷³ "Home remedies." MHV, Beauty and Sustenance research files, MHV.

same remedy was used in her childhood home. She remembers being sick in bed with this paste on her chest, but that it burned the skin if it was left on too long.⁷⁴ Though George Neufeld recalls several herbs in his mother's garden—among them summer savoury, parsley, and dill—he does not recall her employing them medicinally. Rather, Neufeld's mother used pre-chewed rye bread with butter as a poultice to treat boils, and unpasteurized, soured cream which was used to soothe other skin infections.⁷⁵ In a group interview with Fuchs, Bettie Hiebert relayed the story of her farmyard neighbours eating raw garlic “all winter.” She continued, “Chew them. Yes, keep away the illness and all the other people; I think that's why they didn't get sick—nobody went near them!”⁷⁶ Each of these women intricately linked health to their interpretation of the natural world.

In *Faspa with Jast*, writer Eleanor Chornoboy dedicates an entire chapter to stories of East and West Reserve healers and some of the most commonly used remedies throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s. Not only did Mennonite health and healing traditions put Mennonite individuals into contact with Indigenous peoples, but they also relied on word of mouth to access news of good healthcare practitioners in the area. Chornoboy discusses, for example, the tale of a Mrs. Russell, an Indigenous woman who was often called upon by Mennonites for her renowned cancer treatments, and also relays the story of a Dr. Hiebert from the town of Winkler who “applied a powerful poultice to the lump on [a woman's] abdomen,” and cured her of a malignant tumor.⁷⁷ Chornoboy also notes popular home remedies: weak ankles, for example, were treated with a drink made from chamomile flower blossoms that were boiled in water, or

⁷⁴ Hiebert, Peters, Toews, and Toews interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 23 November 2004.

⁷⁵ George Neufeld and Roland Sawatzky, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 2 November 2004, MHV, Beauty and Sustenance research files.

⁷⁶ Hiebert, Peters, Toews, and Toews interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 23 November 2004.

⁷⁷ Chornoboy, *Faspa with Jast*, 155–9.

with a foot-soaking solution infused with dill; oncoming colds were treated by eating a baked onion or drinking hot milk with sugar, ginger, and garlic; pneumonia and other lung conditions were assigned a plaster of equal parts flour and dry mustard mixed and applied to the chest could help relieve phlegm and congestion.⁷⁸

Trying times provoked other creative uses of the local environment. Editors of the Silberfeld community history book, for example, tell the story about the “Cornelius Voth family” during their first, “tough” years on the West Reserve. To fight hunger, the eldest boys devised an imaginative hunting plan by placing some “precious grain on the ground” over which they spread some horsehair, which in turn entangled sparrows that came for the grain. The boys then caught the sparrows and brought them home to their mother, who “prepared some very tasty gravy for their potatoes.”⁷⁹ Rumours of more extreme curative measures also surfaced during Fuchs’s oral history interviews. For instance, a few women recalled skunk fat as a treatment for more serious or “festering” sores, and Norma Giesbrecht in Neubergthal remembers having an East Reserve aunt who boiled the crown of poppies and used the tea to induce sleep among her many children.⁸⁰ Sharon Friesen also recalled her father saying that his parents commonly wrapped sugar in a cloth, dipped it in rye, and used it to soothe the crying infants in his family—“they had a whack of kids,” she explained.⁸¹

In her article, “Goose Grease and Turpentine,” which explores the women’s pages of farm magazines often containing medical recipes that were offered and utilized by rural women between 1900 and 1920, historian Nora Lewis finds that Canadian farm women commonly

⁷⁸ Ibid., 167–9.

⁷⁹ Mary Loewen and Benno Loewen, *Silberfeld 1878–2008: One Hundred and Thirty Years of Change* (Rosenort, 2012), 24.

⁸⁰ Norma Giesbrecht and Sharon Friesen, interview by Tracy Ruta Fuchs, 21 October 2004, MHV, Beauty and Sustenance research files.

⁸¹ Ibid.

depended upon those materials readily available to them—“the contents of their cupboards, pantries, and gardens”—to treat a wide variety of their family members’ illnesses.⁸² Similarly, for Mennonites in the Canadian prairie West, gathering and preparing medicines enabled Mennonite women to have a particular interaction with, knowledge of, and curation of the land and local environment.⁸³ The evidence above, from oral and community histories, also communicates a specific relationship between Mennonites and the land on which they settled in Manitoba. Not only were Mennonite farmyards and gardens constructed in ways that were meant to accommodate their household traditions surrounding food and medicine, but their knowledge of what was locally available (in wooded areas or along waterways, for example) also required years of observation, trial and error in distinct locales, as well as a tradition of oral culture, whereby recipes were passed down through the community by women. Further, as demonstrated in chapter 1, this dependence on traditions of herb gardening required Mennonite immigrants to bring particular varieties of seeds with them from New Russia, as well as certain foodways and medicinal traditions.

Yet, recent research gathered by curators at the Mennonite Heritage Village and exhibited in 2015 on early kitchen traditions also indicates that many Mennonite immigrants purchased the herbs and spices that they could not grow, and were thus tapped into a larger world market of commodity and exchange than many of the stories about pioneer life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century otherwise indicate. That is, memories of migration and settler hardship are influenced significantly by the hegemony of the rural ideal, or stories of familial resourcefulness and the overarching influence of individual contributions to the household

⁸² Norah L. Lewis, “Goose Grease and Turpentine: Mother Treats the Family’s Illnesses,” *Prairie Forum* 15/1 (1990): 67.

⁸³ Beauty and Sustenance research files (Steinbach, MHV: 2007).

economy. Nevertheless, the above sources also point to the impact of a modernizing world and a changing relationship between Mennonites and their environment and their botanical culture. In the mid-decades of the twentieth century, once commercial medicines, medical professionals, and a readily accessible supply of culinary ingredients became commonplace, Mennonites on the West Reserve experienced a fading reliance on traditional knowledge of the herbs, medicines, and suitable culinary replacements. This story of a modernizing rural culture, loss of intimacy with the land, and the decline of botanical knowledge, closely follows that of the introduction of commercial chemicals to help rid farmlands of weeds as outlined above. The medicalization or professionalization of healthcare, discussed below, further influenced the changes in the relationship between Mennonites and their local environment alongside the modernizing reforms of the twentieth century.

Bonesetters, Herbalists, and Midwives

The above discourses outline the fact that everyday efforts in health and healing among Mennonites on the West Reserve, during the years surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, varied according to oral tradition and village or household customs. This largely decentralized form of holistic healthcare was also dependent on intimate knowledge about what grew in an individual's local environment, the medicinal value of particular garden plants, herbs or weeds, and oftentimes, years of experience treating loved ones with remedies that were fashioned out of indigenous plants and cultivated herbs. Yet, as Winnipeg archivist Conrad Stoesz and others have demonstrated by way of extensive research on the work of lay doctors, midwives, and the application of folk remedies on the West Reserve, community health experts were also called upon in the events of birth, death, disease, and in more perilous cases such as unwanted

pregnancies. Until the first quarter of the twentieth century and prior to the infiltration of government regulations regarding medical licensing and healthcare standards, bonesetters, herbalists, and midwives played important roles in the culture of health and healing within immigrant, ethnic, and Indigenous communities in Manitoba. Historian Marlene Epp suggests that rural Mennonites “afforded a certain legitimacy to women in vocational roles as midwives, chiropractors, and undertakers, for instance. . . . Women’s domestic vocations as healers and midwives were among their most important roles.”⁸⁴ Accordingly, almost every village and school district on the West Reserve boasted a local healthcare expert.⁸⁵ While some of these community healers had formalized medical training, others learned by way of informal apprenticeship and many years of hands-on experience. A close analysis of handwritten midwifery texts, oral histories, and community memories suggests that Mennonite midwives and lay doctors were valued not only for their unique acquaintance with life and death, but also for their intimate knowledge of the ingredients that could be locally sourced, and thus their relationship with the local botanical environment.

As the following summaries of Mennonite midwives attest, Mennonite medical experts continually “gleaned knowledge and expertise from the environment around them,” and in so doing developed distinct knowledge about the complexities of life and death. Medical knowledge, recipes, and botanical remedies were passed on from generation to generation, which further sustained Mennonite ethno-religious tenets about separation from the world. As Conrad Stoesz further demonstrates, by designating “untrained but knowledgeable women”⁸⁶ as

⁸⁴ Marlene Epp, *Mennonite Women in Canada: A History* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2008), 40.

⁸⁵ Dawson, *Group Settlement*, 14.

⁸⁶ Conrad Stoesz, “‘For Women when their Monthly Period does not Occur’: Mennonite Midwives and the Control of Fertility,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 34 (2016): 106, 116. See

community midwives or doctors, the community could largely avoid outside medical care. Yet, as Kirsten Burnett has pointed out in her work on health and healing traditions in Alberta, and as the brief story of Mrs. Russell reveals, Indigenous women's expertise in midwifery and knowledge of medicinal plants "was essential to the well-being of both their own people and the newcomers who were settling in western Canada in increasing numbers."⁸⁷ Burnett also suggests, however, that while Indigenous peoples and Mennonites would have encountered each other, and "for a brief time, participated together in an informal system of healing and nursing care that drew on both traditions and centered on shared domestic concerns relating to childbirth and general childhood and family illnesses," the formal structures of Western medicine eventually dominated such arrangements.⁸⁸ Indeed, the years surrounding the turn of the twentieth century saw increased concern about the standardization of medical care from provincial authorities, as modernization, or commercialization and medicalization came to Manitoba.⁸⁹ By 1925, the Mennonite block settlements in Manitoba, as well as numerous other ethnic and Indigenous communities, had witnessed a significant decline in the practice of midwifery in a context of a gendered medicalization of healthcare.⁹⁰ But another important yet overlooked result of this decline in midwifery was the diminution of a specialized, intergenerational knowledge about medicinal offerings of the land and environment in which Mennonites lived.

Midwife and herbalist Maria Heinrichs, who settled in Halbstadt with her husband and their six children around 1880, offered her expertise not only in her home village and

also Conrad Stoesz, "Midwives in the Mennonite West Reserve of Manitoba," *Manitoba History* 75 (Summer 2014): 13–24.

⁸⁷ Kristin Burnett, *Talking Medicine: Women's Healing Work and Colonial Contact in Southern Alberta, 1880–1930* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010), 3.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Hans Werner and Jennifer Waito, "'One of Our Own': Ethnicity Politics and the Medicalization of Childbirth in Manitoba," *Manitoba History* 58 (2008): 5.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

surrounding area, but as far away as Pembina, North Dakota, until her death in 1912. According to the Halbstadt village history book, an American doctor named Harris would often call upon Maria's expertise when he had a difficult case, a practice he began after visiting Maria's garden, which he saw to be full of "medicine."⁹¹ Similarly, the daughter of midwife Mrs. Hendricks in Gretna, who provided birthing assistance and healthcare despite the presence of a doctor's office in town, recalls how her mother used herbal remedies to treat her patients. On this basis, Mrs. Hendricks fulfilled a demanding community role, bringing "thousands of babies into this world," and performing this task "until she was old." Her reputation extended "even into the States" and often "she would go across the border" or "they would come up and pick her up." At the foundation of this reputation was her knowledge of herbs. Katherine recalls her mother using dill seeds to make a strong tea for curing an infant's cramps, and that she "carried a little brown sack [of herbs and seeds] when she went out on her trips." The sack held a mystique; Katherine remembers being "forbidden to open the satchel and of course, it was a mystery as to what was in that satchel." One day, explains Katherine, "curiosity got the best of me and I opened it up. ... there [were] ... all kinds of herbs tied up in little bits of white cloths and some remedies in little bottles."⁹²

Katharina Thiessen (1842–1915), an even more well-known West Reserve medical practitioner, also relied on herbal medicine. In fact, she was locally famous for having been prosecuted by Anglo-Canadian doctors in Morden and the College of Physicians and Surgeons for practicing "folk" and herbal medicine without a license in 1895 during provincial efforts to medicalize childbirth and standardize healthcare. Thiessen would eventually be acquitted and

⁹¹ Dave Sawatzky, ed. *Halbstadt Heritage, 1879–2005* (Altona: Halbstadt Heritage Book Committee, 2005), 1, 32.

⁹² Gerhard F. G. Enns, *Gretna: Window on the Northwest* (Altona: D. W. Friesen and Sons Ltd., 1987), 254.

was fined fifty dollars for “practicing medicine without being registered with the Medical Association, plus court costs.” She was also barred from charging for her services; ironically Thiessen was forced instead to “depend on the goodwill of the patient, that they would compensate her with a free gift.”⁹³ Thiessen’s story has been told by Hans Werner and Jennifer Waito, who argue that within the context of the medicalization of childbirth in late nineteenth-century Canada, licensed doctors wanted to stop midwifery and lay doctors from treating patients for their own personal gain. This idea is supported by a report in a July 1895 issue of *Die Mennonitische Rundschau* that asserted that “one is left to believe that it was nothing but jealousy for reporting her.”⁹⁴

But this is not the sum of Thiessen’s story. Having travelled in 1860 from Russia to Germany to study midwifery, chiropractic, and naturopathic medicine, she would establish a practice that she would later transplant from New Russia to Kansas, and from there to Manitoba when she and her family settled near the West Reserve village of Schanzenfeld in 1885. According to one of her distant relatives, “the health of the villagers was greatly improved by Dr. Thiessen.”⁹⁵ Not only did she speak Low German, but her formal training and years of hands-on experience also ensured she was trusted by her patients.⁹⁶ And that trust was based in large part on her knowledge of herbal remedies, as well as treating cancer and other diseases with salves and poultices.⁹⁷ Thiessen’s medical notebooks contain hundreds of recipes for remedies, most of

⁹³ “Canada. Manitoba,” *Die Mennonitische Rundschau*, 3 July 1895.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Shirley Bergen, “Dr. Katherina Born Thiessen: A Woman Who Made a Difference” *Mennonite Historian* 23/3 (September 1997): 3.

⁹⁶ Werner and Waito, “One of Our Own,” 2. See also John Dyck, “Hoffnungsfeld: Community and Phenomenon” in *Church, Family and Village: Essays on Mennonite Life on the West Reserve*, ed. Adolph Ens, Jacob E. Peters, and Otto Hamm (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2001), 191–212.

⁹⁷ Bergen, “Dr. Katherina Born Thiessen,” 4.

which call for ingredients that might have been grown in Thiessen's own garden, or collected from ditches and hedges close to her home. Like the midwives noted above, Thiessen's medical knowledge was based at least in part on an intimate relationship with the landscape in her vicinity. Herbs and plants such as raspberries, chokecherries, currants, oats, barley, asparagus, licorice root, mulberry fruit and leaves, hawthorn, peppermint, poppy seeds, and chamomile played significant roles in her medicinal recipes and thus also in her care of Mennonite women and men in West Reserve communities.⁹⁸

Paralleling the reliance on herbal medicine among West Reserve women were Katherina Hiebert and Anna Toews on the East Reserve. The recipes belonging to these women not only reveal an intimate knowledge of their local environment, but their histories tie them closely to Indigenous communities. A family history indicates that Katherina Hiebert, who was nineteen when she emigrated from New Russia in 1874, was the first midwife to immigrant Mennonite women in the East Reserve. Her work also brought her into contact with English, French, and Indigenous women in the area. She served and learned from women in her own community, while also apprenticing with non-Mennonite women. She spent an extended period of time in the presence of Ojibway healer Elizabeth Russell, mentioned above, who not only cured Hiebert of breast cancer, but also shared a number of medicinal recipes with the Mennonite midwife. These recipes prized local ingredients like wormwood and chokecherries.⁹⁹ Hiebert in turn used these recipes in the treatment of her own patients.

According to her granddaughter's testimony, upon her arrival in Manitoba and despite her husband's expressed loneliness in the "wild, mosquito infested prairie," Katherina Hiebert

⁹⁸ Katharina Thiessen notebooks, Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives, acc. no., 5028: 4–8.

⁹⁹ Regina Doerksen Neufeld, "Katherina Hiebert (1855-1910): Midwife," *Preservings* 10 (1997): 14. See also *Manitoba Free Press* 19 July (1924).

“was thrilled with each bush, shrub [and] weed she discovered. She experimented and cooked up her own herbs for medicines. ... She roamed the woods and meadows, collecting herbs— Swedish bitters, chamomile, and thyme. She tried different recipes (some handed [down to] her by an Indian squaw).”¹⁰⁰ While we know very little about Elizabeth Russell, we do know that she was born on the White Earth Ojibway Reserve in Minnesota, and spent sixty years as a traditional health practitioner in the area. Her father, Chief Little Thunder, was reported to have also been a renowned practitioner of traditional medicine. Because she specialized in curing cancer with treatments and poultices “made from herbs of the Turtle Mountain District,” she became known locally as “the cancer wizard.” Like the case of Mennonite midwife Katharina Thiessen, the Winnipeg Medical Association sought to put an end to Elizabeth Russell’s medical practice on account of the fact that she was treating patients without a license, and took her to court. After receiving conformation from a number of her patients (including Hudson’s Bay Company officials, clergymen, a local judge, and several Winnipeg businessmen) who attested to her expert medical care, Russell was released. Katherina Hiebert’s medical knowledge increased when she practiced alongside Elizabeth Russell. Though she also began ordering medical books from Germany and the United States, these modern practices were seamlessly interwoven with her knowledge of the immediate environment.

Anna Toews, the other well-known midwife of the East Reserve, also relied on herbal medicine. Living just north of the East Reserve, not far from the Métis settlements of Ste. Anne and Richer, she delivered close to one thousand babies over two generations. Her handwritten medical notebooks, deemed “living texts”¹⁰¹ by Conrad Stoesz, just like those belonging to West Reserve midwife Katharina Thiessen, depict a careful record of the recipes and remedies for the

¹⁰⁰ Neufeld, “Katherina Hiebert,” 14; *Manitoba Free Press* 19 July 1924.

¹⁰¹ Stoesz, “Mennonite Midwives and the Control of Fertility,” 106.

ailments she treated during her many years of service. As Stoesz further suggests, Toews's notebook also shares "common elements and purposes with centuries old European recipes, which suggest common practices across time and cultures."¹⁰² A number of Toews's recipes list the use of popular botanical and household ingredients such as linden flowers, chamomile flowers, dill, peppermint, honey, and eggs, which were likely sourced from Anna's own garden or from her local surroundings.¹⁰³ A photograph of Toews, standing beside her "warm beds" in 1913—which were used for starting and sheltering her medicinal plants—points further to her botanical knowledge and the curation of her environment to support her practice.¹⁰⁴

Finally, the account of another well-known Mennonite medical practitioner, Franz F. Enns, suggests an indelible link to the Russian homeland, but one that became enmeshed with modern medicine. After his arrival on the East Reserve in 1918, until his death in 1940, Enns's portable medicine chest, which was given to him during the early years of the Terek Mennonite Settlement in Russia (approximately 1901), was later brought with him to Manitoba, and accompanied him throughout his medical career. The contents of the chest, now in the archival collection at the Mennonite Heritage Village Museum in Steinbach, and its associated medical manuscripts and administration records indicate not only that Enns prescribed medicines which were devised by using a long list of common herbs, but also that his services were frequently relied upon by community members well into the twentieth century, when licensed medical practitioners and standardized medical testing and treatment were increasingly the norm throughout the prairie provinces. In addition to the commercially sourced medicines in the chest, there are a number of homemade remedies. Enns's children recall their father making "ample use

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Anna Toews remedy book, MHV, acc. no. 2003.18.1a-d.

¹⁰⁴ Tracy Ruta Fuchs, *Beauty and Sustenance: A History of Mennonite Gardens and Orchards in Russia and Manitoba* (Steinbach: MHV Historical Series, 2007), 30.

of herbs, which he collected and prepared himself,” both in Russia and in Manitoba. Many of the vials contain residue from what may have been locally sourced herbs, such as ergot (rye fungus), rhubarb, poison ivy, hops, prairie crocus, foxglove, witch hazel, St. John’s wort, and chamomile.

According to some scholars, the medicalization of healthcare and the licensing of doctors were considered “intrusion[s] of ‘English’ society on a domain they firmly believed to be within the bounds of community, family and religion.”¹⁰⁵ Though many Mennonite midwives and lay doctors remained active in their communities well into the twentieth century, the authority of a modernizing medical regime eventually saw the reliance on midwives and lay doctors significantly decrease in Mennonite communities, particularly when licensed Mennonite physicians began setting up practices in West Reserve towns and villages. One of the most tangible results of this phase of modernization was a decrease in intergenerational knowledge about traditional healing and healthcare, thus a diminished relationship between Mennonite individuals and health practitioners and the peoples, lands or environments from whom and where they gleaned their medicinal knowledge and ingredients. Oral histories and handwritten texts, which attested to knowledge of folk remedies and the health benefits of particular garden herbs and native plants, nonetheless indicate the presence of traditional knowledge about health and healing in Mennonite communities throughout the West Reserve. West Reserve resident Anne Giesbrecht, for example, recalls that tobacco smoke was often blown into children’s ears to help heal inner ear infections, while Anne Zacharias recalls her mother telling her that chokecherries were “good for the blood.” The analysis earlier in this chapter of popular local knowledge about home remedies and substitutes when sustenance was required during more trying times, certainly points to a lasting, though changed institution of traditional health and

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 9–10.

healing in everyday life among Mennonites in southern Manitoba in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Conclusion

While many non-Mennonite reporters delighted in Mennonite flower gardens or expressed awe with regard to the number of trees planted by Mennonites during their first years of settlement, not all were charmed by the bucolic or horticultural eccentricities of Mennonite life in Manitoba. Less than a decade after the first Mennonites from imperial Russia began to settle on the West Reserve, numerous reports described Mennonites as strange and unkempt in both household and farmyard. In sum, these reports communicated what they believed to be the “shadow side”¹⁰⁶ of rural and immigrant life in Canada; they distinguished between the familiar order of white, Victorian, urban life, and the shabby nature of the ethnic farm and ethno-religious village. In time, outside efforts at differentiating between what belonged and what did not—on the landscape, or in cultural practice—contributed to the changing perception of place and environment among Mennonites, particularly in the first few decades of the twentieth century. National and provincial governments aimed to streamline agricultural practices and professionalize methods in healthcare across the country and in so doing, dramatically altered the daily lives of individuals in ethnic, ethno-religious, immigrant, and Indigenous communities. For many Mennonites on Manitoba’s West Reserve, these modernizing reforms of the early 1900s were accompanied by a move away from holistic and community-centered healthcare and agrarian, household-based farming practices. It was a pattern reflected by historian Jeffery Taylor’s argument that in their effort to reform and modernize Manitoba’s agricultural

¹⁰⁶ Shaun Friesen, interview with the author, 10 February 2015.

production, state officials reshaped the ways in which rural Manitobans understood their own agrarian life, identity, and society.¹⁰⁷

Yet, in keeping with Taylor's belief that a study of prairie rurality should at least in part consider the "interpositions between materiality and identity," I concur with his suggestion that "an appreciation of [the] space between materiality and identity is crucial" for a more nuanced understanding of "the voices of individual historical subjects."¹⁰⁸ As government officials began to stress the harms of things like noxious weeds and folk medicine, and as Canadians voiced a particular culture of tidiness in both yard and household, Mennonite culture on the West Reserve witnessed a major shift in its everyday relationship to place and the local environment. As Eric Hirsch has argued, the landscape itself became the harbour of complex tensions between the background and the foreground of social life. That is, twentieth-century idealizations about nature and rurality, and the realities of the landscape itself commingled to complicate Mennonite relationships with the local environment. As this chapter has demonstrated, diaries, recipes, oral histories, German- and English-language newspapers, and memoirs together highlight the varied ways knowledge and discourses about herbs and weeds in the field, brush, and garden were shaped and reshaped in rural Mennonite communities according to the changing and sometimes conflicting perspectives on the relationship between humans and the environment in the early twentieth century.

¹⁰⁷ David Monod, "Down on the Farm: Reading Jeffery Taylor's 'Fashioning Farmers: Ideology, Agricultural Knowledge and the Manitoba Farm Movement,'" *Manitoba History* 32 (1996), accessed 9 November 2016, http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/32/downonthefarm.shtml.

¹⁰⁸ Jeffery Taylor, *Fashioning Farmers: Ideology, Agricultural Knowledge and the Manitoba Farm Movement, 1890–1925* (University of Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1994), 3.

Conclusion

Whatever we remember, and the manner in which we remember, we get a different past, a different sense of place, and a different landscape every time.¹

In 1875, following a difficult first year on the prairies, Mennonite immigrants on Manitoba's East Reserve petitioned the Canadian government for another block of reserved land in the province. The steady influx of Mennonite immigrants from imperial Russia, along with some negative experiences and features of the landscape—such as flooding, stones, and an invasion of crop-devouring grasshoppers which led to disappointing agricultural yields—inspired the request for more (and more agriculturally viable) land. In question was a large, partially surveyed tract of prairie adjacent to the international border, between Manitoba's Red River and the escarpment, which numerous other settlers had disregarded due the region's absence of water and the land's want of trees.

With some hesitation, the Mennonites accepted this section of prairie for their new block settlement, which later became known as the West Reserve, based on the same privileges offered by the Canadian government as when they settled on the East Reserve. In exchange for their efforts to transform Manitoba's landscape into agricultural land, thus contributing to Canada's rising grain economy, Mennonites in Manitoba were promised military exemption, freedom of religion, and the right to operate their own schools. Mennonites in Manitoba were also permitted to pool their lands and settle in single-street agricultural villages according to their long-held ethno-cultural traditions and architectural patterns, rather than settling on individual quarter sections. The first Mennonites to settle on the West Reserve in 1875 came directly from Russia,

¹ Christopher Tilley, "Introduction: Identity, Place, Landscape and Heritage." *Journal of Material Culture* 11/1 (2006): 25.

and selected land in the southwestern part of the reserve due to its proximity to trees and water provided by the nearby Pembina River, and the fertile and well-drained soils. By 1880, nearly four hundred Mennonite families from the East Reserve had also relocated to the West Reserve. Despite the challenge of adequate access to wood and water, Mennonites in both the western and eastern townships of the West Reserve quickly converted the tallgrass prairie into productive agricultural land over the course of a few years. Mennonites also established numerous farm villages across the West Reserve, complete with trees, kitchen gardens, fruit orchards, and hay fields, all of which were structured according to the village layout and botanical customs, and which reflected their settlements in Russia.

During the 1870s and 1880s, the reserve system in Manitoba was honed within a contested colonial context. Throughout the new prairie province, and following an extensive grid survey of much of the land, colonization reserves were set aside for select European immigrants, as the province sought to transform its far-reaching and sparsely populated rural corners into productive agricultural lands, linked by civilized urban spaces. Delay tactics and the grid survey impeded Métis farming in the area. At the same time, other Indigenous peoples across the region were allocated tracts of land on which they were permitted to relocate their communities. Indigenous reserves often shared their borders with colonization reserves, and all reserves were subject to varying levels of governmental surveillance in the hopes of assimilating all peoples into sophisticated, English-speaking Canadian citizens. Nonetheless, while the reserve system generally granted European immigrants like the Mennonites the autonomy to construct their agricultural lives and communities according to inherited ethnic and religious customs, Indigenous peoples underwent severe social dislocation as they were denied access to their

traditional lifeways, forced to adapt to new cultural modes and were subject to social experimentation.

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many curious onlookers and Canadian officials celebrated the East and West Reserves in Manitoba. Mennonites were sometimes thought to be strange for their settlement patterns, but also backward due to their holistic healthcare practices and unknowing introduction of invasive weeds like Russian thistle into the province. Mennonites nonetheless were quick to adapt to suggested reform, and were considered in many ways to be ideal immigrants. In geographer John Warkentin's words, their reserves thus "represented successful endeavors in settling the Great Plains, [or] lands recognized as difficult ... to [other] potential agriculturalists at the time of the Mennonites' arrival."² But, it was not just the Mennonites' agricultural endeavours that intrigued their hosts and critics. Newspaper reporters, photographers, and visitors frequently commented on the charm and beauty of Mennonite villages on the West Reserve—all were impressed with the swiftness with which this so-called empty space was transformed into treed and flowered, self-sufficient, European-style farming communities.

As historian Lyle Dick has suggested, landscapes are documents, which can serve as clues into our collective history.³ In this dissertation, I have tried to demonstrate similarly that tracing the landscaping practices among Mennonites in Manitoba during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offers an important lens into Mennonite history and culture on the

² John Warkentin, "Going on Foot: Revisiting the Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 18 (2000): 76.

³ Lyle Dick and Ron Frohwerk. "Introduction to a special issue on Horticulture." *Manitoba History* 31 (1996), accessed 31 March 2017, http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/31/introduction.shtml.

Canadian Prairies. Mennonite immigrants from Russia to Manitoba in the 1870s had a distinct relationship with horticulture, and this relationship symbolized a particular vision of, if not a longing for home. The relationship between Mennonites on the West Reserve and the landscape has worked to sustain a sort of intergenerational nostalgia, which at once justifies belonging on the prairies, claims the Mennonite ethic of self-sufficiency, and encourages the local perspective that sees the inauguration of prairie history as the arrival of Mennonite ancestors who broke the land for garden and field, in the process, making something out of nothing. By adopting a nostalgic view, Mennonites have made stories about processes of homemaking in a new and fraught environment more meaningful. Yet these stories and their related material culture also work to camouflage Mennonites' active participation in a nation-wide, modern, settler-colonial project. With those stories and culture they placed their landscaping efforts at the centre of the settlement of the Canadian Prairies, and Indigenous settlement and farming in the area is obscured from collective memory.

Mennonite landscaping practices were based in part on their long-established customs surrounding gardening and horticulture. Memoirs, diaries, newspapers, and the stories told by contemporary West Reserve residents often relay efforts of the immigrant generation to reproduce gardening and landscaping traditions from Russia by bringing vegetable and flower seeds and even trees with them to Manitoba. These sources also reveal that some families worked to further maintain gardening traditions in Manitoba by passing vegetable seeds down through the generations, thereby encouraging the regrowth of particular, cherished vegetable and flower varieties, all suggesting a nostalgia for the homeland. Historians from Oscar Handlin to Frances Swyripa and Ronald Reese have argued, there is no way of knowing how deeply European immigrants in North America were assailed by nostalgia for their old homelands. Still,

as Reese writes, “homesteading in familiar looking settings, building houses of traditional European type, and naming features, towns and villages after places or people in the homeland,” were certainly signs of such nostalgia.⁴ For the Mennonites on the West Reserve, seed saving, seed transfer, tree planting, and gardening were necessary acts of survival, particularly during the early years of settlement. Yet, primary and secondary sources have shown that landscaping among Mennonite settlers on the West Reserve was also an emotional act. Planting trees that would eventually shelter the farmyard, and planting gardens with seeds from Russia provided both comfort and familiarity to Mennonite immigrants. Today, West Reserve residents are emotionally tied to this prairie place in the act of remembering the landscaping efforts of the immigrant generation. Individual and community memory fuses legendary tales from the Mennonite immigrant generation of the 1870s with particular vegetable and tree species on the West Reserve landscape. These “storied landscapes,”⁵ to invoke Swyripa’s phrase, point to a sense of material heritage among Mennonites in Manitoba, as well as an imagined history of connectedness to the land. West Reserve residents today often view trees, flowers, and vegetable seeds as symbolic features of Mennonite heritage on the West Reserve, producing a feeling of connectedness to both the people who planted them and the prairie landscape.

Mennonite horticultural traditions on the West Reserve in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also point to one ethno-religious group’s efforts to grapple with shifting social, political, and cultural climates in Canada. Tracing the relationship between Mennonites on the West Reserve and flower culture between 1876 and 1950, for example, points to some of the complex ways in which new understandings of gender, work, beauty, modernity, and leisure

⁴ Ronald Rees, *New and Naked Land: Making the Prairies Home* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1988), 88.

⁵ See Frances Swyripa, *Storied Landscapes: Ethno-Religious Identity and the Canadian Prairies* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2010).

were worked out in Mennonite locales. As in the case of seeds and trees, flowers were central to early Mennonite efforts in remembering and recreating a sense of home among men and women on the West Reserve. With the turn of the twentieth century, however, social reforms in Canada began to associate flower gardening with women's work and femininity, and beautiful landscapes to personal or moral betterment. Some Mennonites adopted this language of reform, and flower gardening became an avenue whereby Mennonite women could perform these modern versions of rural femininity. Yet, for Mennonite women and men on the West Reserve who lived within patriarchal communities, flower culture also challenged their traditional cultural worlds. The flower garden was certainly not a necessary feature of farm life, but an opportunity to mitigate the hardships of rural immigrant life. Twentieth-century rural reforms also had an effect on Mennonite farming and healthcare traditions, and in turn on Mennonite relationships to the West Reserve landscape. As the Canadian government began to stress the ills of noxious weeds and as national leaders promoted a culture of tidiness in yard and household, Mennonites began to adopt new methods of weed control, reshaping the ways they managed and used the land. And, as the Canadian government began to oppose localized practices, Mennonites on the West Reserve began to rely less on local botanical knowledge and the practice of using garden herbs for health and healing.

A focus on the relationship between Mennonites and the West Reserve landscape, and the complex myths and memories therein, offers a new historical angle on the politics of immigration and resettlement in an ethno-religious context. What is more, an emphasis on Mennonite botanical culture challenges us to consider the multiplicity of ways the landscape is both a product of and a participant in Canadian cultural history. However, as Simon Schama has argued, acknowledging the central place of myth, the habits of place-making, and the ambiguous

nature of memory in discourses about a particular landscape also point to the fact that landscapes cannot always be simply interpreted. Schama writes that humans have constructed “places of delight—scenery as sedative, topography so arranged to feast the eye.” But also that “those eyes ... are seldom clarified of the promptings of memory. And the memories are not all of pastoral picnics.”⁶ In other words, landscaping traditions among Mennonites on the West Reserve connect the history of their settlement activities directly to the larger Canadian colonial project of transforming native land into what they believed was a more hospitable and productive environment. What is more, in their nostalgic search for rootedness, Mennonites on the West Reserve have imagined their landscaping efforts to be at the centre of the prairie’s genesis. Stories about settlement are therefore narrated in a way that assumes the empty prairie space was redeemed by Mennonite horticultural efforts. In colonial spaces like the West Reserve, Mennonite immigrants worked affectively to reshape the prairie landscape into something more civilized, or more European. By planting trees, vegetables, and flowers, and by responding to governmental calls for rural reforms in weed management and folk medicine, Mennonites claimed Indigenous space as their own, and imposed upon the landscape a particular, ordered aesthetic. Mennonite landscaping traditions sought to eliminate that which they considered disagreeable, and exhibit they considered disagreeable, and exhibited what they measured as beautiful. It is only by looking closely at the land itself, and the history of its botanical features, that this history on the West Reserve can be brought most fully to life.

In a song called “Creeping Charlie,” after the weed, Altona-based musician Paul Bergman offers a semi-apocalyptic imagining of the West Reserve, wherein he raises questions central to Mennonite history and the construction of landscapes in prairie Canada. Bergman

⁶ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 18.

sings:

It was all just tall grass
a couple centuries ago
there were travelling Natives
tracking the buffalo
My forefathers came here
and they broke all this land
they made nature do the bidding
for modern man

They built their houses and their churches
and their schools and their sheds and their barns
They planted their fields
with wheat and oats and corn
The soil was fertile
and they took all they could
they thought they had God's blessing
they thought God was good

Well, the New World order
spread like a prairie fire
They hung the telephone poles
like clothes from the telephone wires
First came the gravel
then the ties then the railroad tracks
and then came the highways
now they're starting to crack

When it's all creeping Charlie
and redroot pigweed
and the grass grows back

and it all goes to seed
and our story's over
and we have had our day
and all that's left is the wind
what will it say?⁷

As Bergman's song reveals, botanical culture and the continued presence of Mennonites in the area formerly known as the West Reserve gives the region a "firm identity."⁸ In high summer especially, when the canola and sunflower fields are in full yellow bloom, when the waxy leaves on cottonwood trees envelop farmyards in welcoming shade, when large kitchen gardens with perfectly straight rows thrive in the hot sun on farm and town yards, and when local seasonal fruits (watermelon, chokecherries, saskatoons, and raspberries) are ripe and abundantly available, the West Reserve landscape conveys a strong sense of place, particularly among those who have for generations called this area home. As historical geographer John Warkentin has suggested, "the paths [of this place] speak the language of the *darpa* [villages] and of the landscape of the *struckfoarma* [bush farmers or yeoman]."⁹

If we look closely at the landscape, at Mennonite botanical culture, and at discourses related to both, a new historical angle on the life of Mennonites on the West Reserve emerges. Though Schama has similarly argued that "the whole world can be revealed in our backyard if only we give it our proper attention,"¹⁰ Bergman, and others also reminds us that "the backyard ... is the garden of the Western landscape imagination: the little fertile space in which our culture

⁷ Paul Bergman, "Creeping Charlie," *Anthropology* (Canada: Paul Bergman, 2016).

⁸ Warkentin, "Going on Foot, 79.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, 577.

has envisioned its woods, waters, and rocks, and where the wildest myths have insinuated themselves into the lie of our land.”¹¹

For Mennonites on the West Reserve, then, the land is central in a culture of both remembering and rendering the past intelligible.¹² Employing the construct of Tilly, the efforts to narrate the West Reserve landscape (including its trees, flowers, herbs, and weeds) among Mennonites “assimilate historical events and processes into local understandings of the world, which serve to make [this] world appear self-evident and obvious.”¹³ At the same time, however, Mennonite history on the West Reserve communicates the affective power of place, despite complex global processes, by suggesting that people’s individual and collective identities are rooted in the specificities of landscapes and in material botanical references to the past. Yet, landscapes are also constantly in a process of becoming as they are reworked, contested, and imagined by communities and individuals in varying socio-political contexts.¹⁴ If Bergman’s and Schama’s words are taken to heart, and close attention is paid to what the landscape or the wind suggests, the history of Mennonite settlement on the West Reserve is not a straightforward narrative of colonial or agricultural success, but rather an imaginative and complex intermingling of myth and memory which seeks to make sense of a contested and tumultuous reality.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Tilly, Introduction, 25.

¹³ Ibid., 25.

¹⁴ Ibid., 7-8.

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Appendix I



UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

Department of History

Letter of Information/Consent for Participants in a Project Entitled:

*Seeds from the Steppe:
Mennonites, Horticulture, and the Construction of Landscapes
on Manitoba's West Reserve, 1870-1950*

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about, and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask.

Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

Purpose of the Study:

You have been invited to participate in a research study about the connections between immigration, land, emotion, what it means to be Mennonite in western Canada. In this study, I hope to investigate how Mennonites expressed emotion as they moved from place to place, and built their communities. I also hope to investigate whether being Mennonite, like you, has been shaped by particular relationships, botanical culture, and emotions.

Procedures Involved in the Research:

During an open-ended interview, which will occur in a mutually agreed upon location, I will ask you questions about your Mennonite background, your memory of migration stories told by your parents and/or grandparents, your of memory specific emotions your family history, and your response to such. I anticipate that this interview will take at least one to two hours, depending on your availability. It may also be the case that further meetings will need to be scheduled, depending on your availability and willingness. With your permission, I will take notes and digitally record our interview.

Potential Benefits:

Your participation in this study will help fill a gap in our understanding of Mennonite and family history. I believe that my research will make emotional expressions and affective relationships central to our understanding of Mennonite community history in Canada.

Potential Harms, Risks, or Discomforts:

It is unlikely that any harm or discomfort will arise with this study. Should you feel uncomfortable with any of the questions posed throughout this interview, you may skip over the particular question, or stop the interview. If you wish, I will provide a list of local counselors or mental health professionals will be provided, for your convenience.

Confidentiality:

I can ensure that written and recorded information from this study will be kept private, available only to my supervisors and me, unless you give permission for it to be archived for future generations of researchers. Your interview responses and demographic information will be used only for research purposes. If you wish, I will use pseudonyms in my report to protect your identity. Identifying information can also be removed from the recorded interview, if you wish to have it stored anonymously in an archive.

Participation:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the interview at any time. Should you choose, simply contact me in person, by email or telephone, by September 2016 and all related information will be destroyed and alternative participants will be recruited. You do not need to provide an explanation of your withdrawal. While your participation in this study will provide welcome information, this study is not dependent on your particular participation. You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

Information about the Study Results:

As per your request, a summary and/or a copy of the full report of the study's results can be provided upon completion of my dissertation (2017). Two public community events will also be scheduled whereby a presentation will be offered on the results of my study. You will be notified of these events. Should you wish not to attend either of these events, a summary of the project will be available online (Website TBD), which you may access at your convenience.

Questions about this Study:

If you have questions or require more information about the study itself, please contact me, Susan Fisher, by telephone or by email. All research conducted over the course of my PhD program is in affiliation with the University of Manitoba.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and /or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

The University of Manitoba Research Ethics Board(s) and a representative(s) of the University of Manitoba Research Quality Management / Assurance office may also require access to your research records for safety and quality assurance purposes.

This research has been approved by the Joint-Faculty Research Ethics Board. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Coordinator (HEC). A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

1. I agree that the interview can be documented by way of my note taking and digital recording.

YES
 NO

2. Would you like to receive a summary of the study's findings and notified of future public presentations on this work?

YES, Please send it to this email or mailing address:
 NO, I do not want to receive a summary of the study's results.

3. Would you like to receive a copy of the full report, upon its publication?

YES, Please send it to this email address or to this mailing address:
 NO, I do not wish to receive a full report.

4. Please use a pseudonym when referring to me in your report.

YES
 NO, I prefer to be identified. Please refer to me as _____

5. I agree that both written and recorded transcripts of this interview can be deposited in an institutional archive for future researchers.

YES
 NO

6. Please strip these transcripts of all identifiable information.

YES
 NO

7. I agree to be contacted about a follow-up interview and understand that I can always decline the request.

YES
 NO

Participant's Signature _____ Date _____

Researcher's Signature _____ Date _____