

2 to protect their country in military service. In 1787 all Mennonites were forbidden to enlarge their holdings of property or develop new enterprises in Prussia. This was intended to transfer a larger number of Mennonites to the wage earner class. For a time, the Mennonite who owned real estate, as well as the male heir, was exempt from military service. By placing a heavy real estate tax on the Mennonites it was felt they could not acquire as substantial possessions as those who were willing to join military service.

In 1787 Empress Catherine II of Russia offered broad religious and educational freedom to prospective colonists as well as the promise of perpetual exemption from military service. Mennonites had a reputation of being industrious and successful farmers and Empress Catherine II was eager to have them settle on her vast barren lands. This encouraged the beginning of two major settlements, Chortitza, west of the Dnieper River, and Molotschna, which straddled the Molotschna River. Chortitza was established between 1788 and 1796, and Molotschna during the early years of the 1800's. By mid-nineteenth century these colonies were quite affluent and because of shortage of land had established numerous new settlements in the Ukraine and elsewhere in Russia. The Molotschna colony is where our ancestors settled. They lived in self-contained Mennonite communities.

Villages usually consisted of fifteen to thirty households. When the Mennonites first settled in Molotschna grain farming on the barren steppes of the Ukraine was not possible on a large scale. Some new settlers raised livestock, particularly sheep and produced a lot of wool for market. They also crossed the gray Kalmuk cattle with East Frisian cattle they had brought in. This produced the German Red Cow which became one of the more successful herds in the Ukraine. They also bred good draft horses which eventually helped them concentrate on grain farming when European market demands encouraged greater production. Thousands of fruit trees and shade trees were planted. Silk was also an important industry at the time. Mulberry trees had been planted and the silkworms thrived on the plentiful mulberry leaves.

In 1814, Klaas Reimer, our great-great-great grandfather, established the Kleine Gemeinde Church, meaning "little church", at Molotschna because he was perturbed at the low morals of the Mennonites there. They had been without a minister for all the years they had been in Molotschna. The Kleine Gemeinde stood for honesty, simple dress, and forbade drinking, smoking, card playing and the use of musical instruments in church. Klaas Reimer died in 1837 and Abraham Friesen succeeded Klaas Reimer on April 3, 1838 as minister of the Kleine Gemeinde who exercised strict discipline and practiced honesty. After Abraham Friesen died on July 1, 1849, Johann Friesen became the elder. Another Abraham Friesen became his co-minister. He was excommunicated in 1868 because of differences of opinion as to whether members from other congregations should be received into the church without church letters. Johann Friesen ignored the excommunication but was perhaps this dissent which influenced the group that eventually migrated to America and followed Abraham Friesen to Jefferson County, Nebraska.

The Russian government, in 1870, broke the covenant made by Empress Catherine which allowed the Mennonites to have military exemption. They did eventually offer alternative service in forestry to the Mennonites but many felt this would compromise their beliefs and should be avoided. Many of the Mennonites were required by the government to haul provisions to their soldiers at various fortresses. When the call from the government came they were required to go and often the horse and wagon trip in the cold winters lasted a month or more with the families anxiously wondering when, or if, they would return.

This stimulated serious talk of migration and Cornelius Jansen and his family were evicted from Russia because they were accused by the government of encouraging emigration. Russia did not want to lose the prosperous Mennonites who were such hard-working

people. The Jansens came to America and visited various possible sites for settlement including Canada, Nebraska and Kansas. Thus, in 1874, approximately 40-60 families, all Kleine Gemeinde, settled in Jefferson County, Nebraska together with their leader, Abraham L. Friesen. At the same time another group of Kleine Gemeinde followed Elder Peter Toews to Canada. The town of Jansen was later established and named after Peter Jansen, son of Cornelius Jansen. Names common in this settlement near Jansen were Friesen, Reimer, Barkman, Thiessen, Harms, Rempel, Wiens, Fast, Isaac and others.

The average price of land in Nebraska in 1874 was \$3.75 an acre. These immigrants settled in well organized clusters or villages within the larger settlement similar to their villages in Russia. The usual farm was one mile long and perhaps 1/4-mile wide. The width might be smaller or greater but the length was always one mile. The road between these groups of farms was called Russian Lane.

The immigrants immediately set about raising sheep as they had on the steppes of the Ukraine but they soon found the prairie grass was not nourishing enough. In time this brought about the breeding of the Merino sheep which thrived well. They also raised flocks of geese, ducks, and chickens having them under the care of a goose herder during the day just as they had in Russia. Silk industry was attempted and many mulberry trees were planted because in Russia the silkworms had thrived on mulberry leaves for food and the industry had been good. However, it wasn't good here partly because Japan imported silk at a lower cost than the Russian Mennonites could afford to produce it.

As time went on various other Mennonite congregations were established among this Kleine Gemeinde congregation. There were the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren, Krimmer Mennonite Brethren, and the Mennonite Brethren. It is possible that this factor and the cost of land spiraling toward \$200 an acre plus the shortage of land as the families grew and married that influenced the move of the Kleine Gemeinde to Meade, Kansas. In 1897 nine families had moved to Montana looking for more room to establish a new settlement but they all returned the same year. Some families tried eastern Colorado but they also returned. However, in 1906-8, the group of Kleine Gemeinde moved to Meade and the Kleine Gemeinde group in Jansen, Nebraska became extinct.

At first, the Kleine Gemeinde group met in homes in Meade but in 1909 the church was built south of Meade. Ministers were elected by the members of the congregation.

The Mennonites who settled in Meade County made an arrangement with the state which allowed them to have private schools which were taught in German. These private schools soon failed because of finances since they were expected to pay taxes for the public school as well. A compromise was worked out where parents sent their children to their own German schools for several months and then to a few months of English school each year. German in the public school was discontinued during World War I but the church then established its own private German school.

Religious training had been a very important part of German schools and when they were discontinued the Sunday School was started. At first, Sunday School was just considered for children and was held in the afternoon while parents sat and visited. Because of the distance many had to travel, it was changed to the morning and the preaching service was cut from two hours to one hour to allow an hour for Sunday School. To begin with, the Sunday School was more for the purpose of teaching the German language than for Bible Study. A Fiebel (primer) was used for teaching the younger children. Later adults also joined in the Sunday School with classes for all ages. Sometime in the 1930's quarterlies with much emphasis on Biblical teaching, came into use for the Sunday School.

In February of 1941 there was a leadership conflict and the Kleine Gemeinde Church disbanded. Some of the leaders were intent on enforcing very rigid rules of discipline to