

The Pennsylvania German Folklore



Society of Ontario

PGFSO

Newsletter

EDITOR: LORNE R. SMITH

NUMBER 51 WINTER, 2021

Message from the President

David Reesor Burkholder

Fall greetings to Pennsylvania German Folklore Society of Ontario members and friends.

At the time of this printing our editor Lorne, is in Sunnybrook Hospital recovering from a near fatal all-terrain vehicle rollover near Bobcaygeon. He continues the slow process of regaining his cognitive and physical capabilities. Our prayers are with Lorne as well as Carol, Dave, Don, Ann and their families for Lorne's continuing recovery.



For the most part we've experienced one of the most pleasant and prolonged spells of exceptional fall weather in memory which is going back further every year.

The ever evolving and changing Covid 19 restrictions, openings, closings and health precautions have left us unsure how to move forward on a day to day basis. The fact that at time of writing, almost 90% of Ontario residents have availed themselves of at least one if not two vaccination shots is amazing and they are to be commended. Some have qualified for and received a third booster shot. Vaccinations for children under 12 years is anticipated before Christmas.

A segment of the population are resisting vaccination and continue to be vocal and adamant that this decision is a personal choice and does not pose a threat to the common good / health and safety of the broader community. Our medical community and experts would state otherwise. This continues to be a divisiveness issue amongst family, friends and coworkers. It begs the question of what does "being your brother or sister's keeper" really mean.

As usual this issue contains a number of very interesting articles. We have tribute to a dear, departed and long-time PGFSO member and contributor, George Reesor. His family have provided a personal and informative overview of this modern day pioneer. We miss you George.

COMING EVENTS

THE PENNSYLVANIA GERMAN FOLKLORE SOCIETY OF ONTARIO

The Board regrets that until further notice our public activities will be cancelled. It is hoped that with the easing of COVID 19 restrictions PGFSO may be able to host its AGM in May or June of 2022.

Also included is an engaging piece by Cathy Brydon about the historic Homey Farms Cheese factory in Locust Hill on Markham's east side. It's a little known but intriguing part of our local history. A follow up article on Jordan Museum Grand opening has been contributed by Ruth Smith, a long time and dedicated member of the PGFSO.

Folks, the black walnut trees have produced an amazing quantity of nuts this year. The old timers and the Almanac say that this usually heralds a long, hard winter. Have a blessed Christmas and a safe and prosperous New Year.

Dave Burkholder, PGFSO President

Remembering George Reesor

by Louise (Reesor) Pogue

When I think of my dad, George Reesor, the following thoughts come to mind ... someone who was kind and gentle, but resolute, visionary, and determined to carry out creative projects that he pictured in his mind. He was innovative in finding ways to overcome adversity, especially the challenges of having only one arm (see below). He loved beauty and nature, was awed by the grandiosity of the heavenly stars and by the wonders of the vast variety of birds.

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Interim Editor

David R. Burkholder

email: daveyrb1952@gmail.com

President PGFSO: David Burkholder

VicePresident: Dean Martin

Secretary: Marie Burkholder

Treasurer: David Smith

* Membership: \$20 *

Articles for the PGFSO Newsletter are welcome

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nonite farming family in their home in Scarborough, ON, a welcome companion for his older brother John. Childhood memories included walking 2½ miles daily to Hillside Public School, a one-room schoolhouse. George loved to entertain his children with stories of him and John spending hours playing in the farm bush along with their faithful dog "Sport".

During the mid -1950s, his local Menonite youth friends developed a bond with peers in Mahoning Co., Ohio and before long a special young woman caught his eye. George summoned up the courage to ask Anna Weaver to skate with him on a local pond. While skating, Anna tripped on the ice, resulting in his classic line of "she fell for me"! They were married in May 1957



George and grandson busy in the woodshop

and three children followed: Louise, Ernie, and Dale.

In 1968, George purchased a farm property on McCowan Rd, Stouffville, on which he fulfilled a lifelong dream of building a large pond. This brought enjoyment to his children, grandchildren, friends, and neighbours. Also, it provided almost unlimited opportunities for birdwatching, a life-long interest of his.

In September 1987, an unfortunate farming accident resulted in the loss of George's right arm. Following his recovery, he became a source of incredible inspiration to his family and others with his perseverance and ingenuity in finding ways to do tasks and maintain his beautiful property without his right arm. What to do when there is a pile of firewood to be chopped? Why build a one-handed device for getting the job done, of course! He also built hundreds of intricate decorative birdhouses that would have challenged the skills of most fully able-bodied woodworkers!

George was a man of many talents and active interests. In 1970, while still farming, he enrolled in a liberal arts program at Richmond College, graduating with high standing several years later. He described this educational experience as expanding his world view "from a peep-hole to a picture window." Other lifelong interests included astronomy, archeology, geology, and visiting – he never tired of a good chat with friends, neighbours, and fellow farmers. And oh, how he loved old engines! A yearly highlight for him was cranking up and demonstrating his 1908 Moody single cylinder 16 HP gasoline engine in the antique farm equipment display at the Markham Fair.



One armed wood splitting.

He loved his wife, children, grandchildren and great grandchildren and they loved him in return. He had been the picture of health, usually starting each day with a vigorous walk in the woods. And so it was a complete shock when a hospital admission on July 9, 2021, following recent weight loss, resulted in an eventual diagnosis of end stage cancer. He passed away peacefully at home one month later on August 11th at the age of 86.

George was born October 29, 1933, into a Men-



George & Anna with one of George's amazing "birdhouses".

George lived his strong Christian faith and was involved in many church ministries throughout his life. He was actively interested in Mennonite history, and his family heritage. This led to his involvement with the Pennsylvania German Folklore Society of Ontario and, along with thoroughly enjoying the annual November Folklore dinners and delicious pies served at members' meetings, he enjoyed speaking to groups and telling stories about the history of his ancestors and the evolution of the local Cedar Grove/Markham community.

This interest, along with his love of writing and documenting the past led to his publishing of three books: "Conversations with My Parents" (2006), "Over Mountains and Valleys" (2009), and "Conversations with My Children" (2012). The 2009 publication was the largest and most ambitious of these, representing a compilation and translation (German to English) of letters between Mennonite community members throughout Canada and the U.S. from 1859-1915.

While we as friends, neighbours and family members will miss George very much, he left a positive impact on the community and much behind to remember him by.



Thomas, Dale, George & Clayton @ 8327 Steeles Ave. East, Scarborough, ON

The Homey Cheese Farm at Locust Hill - The Pursuit of Freedom and a Dream

By Catherine McClennan Brydon

They saw it coming.

Adolph Hitler and the Nazi party's anti-Semitic ideology were targeting Jews living in Germany. When Hitler came to power in 1933 the political leadership in Germany focussed its energies on their people. By 1936 the Aryanization of the German economy seemed unstoppable. Jews were banned from all professional jobs which excluded them from teaching, running for political office and leading industry. In July 1937 the Buchenwald concentration camp had opened near the city of Weimar and Jews were being rounded up. Feeling persecuted and fearing for their lives and safety, Jews started leaving Germany and during the first six years of the Nazi dictatorship 300,000 had left for their own protection.

Berliners, Edward David and his friend Hermann Sauer made a tough decision in 1937. As the heads of their families, they were responsible for three generations which included four children. Reluctantly, they decided there was no choice but to leave their German homeland where they were no longer wanted and put down roots elsewhere. Edward, his wife Elizabeth and their daughter Renata left Berlin first and settled in Italy where they could farm. Their son, Theo had died of diphtheria as a young boy so there were just three left in the family. The Sauer family followed - Hermann Sauer and his wife Edith, their three children and Hermann's parents Simon and Emma.



George with his 1908 Moody at Markham Fair



*Homey Farms buildings behind the Reesor Pioneer Cemetery Gate -
Lot14 Conc10, Markham, Painting by Elsie Nighswander*

Renata David remembered the tension between her parents as they realized the threat to their lives as Jews in Germany. "My mother had wanted it (to leave Germany) for a long time and my father wouldn't budge because he said, 'I can't support my family in a strange country.' And my mother said, 'If we don't leave, your family won't be around to be supported.' She was a realist. So, eventually she talked my dad into it."

This is the story of how two families, seeking freedom and safety from oppression, took risks, followed their dreams, and ended up settling on a pioneer Reesor farm at Locust Hill in Markham where they made an exceptional contribution to the local and broader community.

After fleeing Germany, the Sauer and David families stayed in Italy with the hope of operating a farm together. Hermann Sauer's father Simon had been a cattle dealer in Westphalia, Germany and Hermann had a doctorate in agriculture. Edward David's wife, Elizabeth was interested in agriculture and later studied cheese production while exiled in Switzerland. When Italy allied with Germany, the families soon realized that the Italian political situation was unstable. In 1939 they decided to leave and traveled throughout Switzerland while getting their money and documentation together to travel overseas.

The account of how they were able to get their money out of Germany shows their determination and bravery. As the Nazi regime took hold it became illegal for Jews to move about or travel out of Berlin

where Hermann Sauer still lived. According to a family friend, Sauer would take "considerable sums of money" from either his or Edward David's accounts, and travel by train to Switzerland. Before getting off at the border crossing station he placed the money under a seat, and then phoned Edward from the station to tell him the railcar and seat number where the money was hidden. Edward would then go to that location and pick up the cash and Hermann would take the next train back to Berlin.

"Hermann told me that he was constantly on the move in Berlin. He tried to spend the night in a different location every day. Needless to say, the operation was a big success. I don't know how many times they did the money export," said his friend.

The two families had friends in Montreal who encouraged them to leave Italy and come to Canada, in particular, Quebec. The Margo family had been refugees themselves but were well established in Montreal and helped with the immigration process. Farming was a steppingstone to gaining admission to Canada and although the Margo family wanted their friends to settle in Quebec, the families believed Jews were discriminated against more in Quebec than in Ontario.

Daughter Renata David spoke matter-of-factly about Prime Minister Mackenzie King's policies which limited Jewish immigration. "Every country has anti-Semitism. I don't care where it is or what it is, it's everywhere. In the United States, the bigger 'ism' is racism against black people. Everybody chooses their

target.” Her father, Edward had considered settling in the United States but decided against it, believing Canada would be more welcoming.

Once in Canada, Elizabeth David’s command of English and her persistent personality paid off. She travelled by train to Ottawa to speak with immigration officials there and was turned away because she did not have an appointment with a Mr. F.C. Blair.

Elizabeth noticed his secretary had a bad cold and said she knew just the thing to cure it. She left the office and went to the drug store for a cold remedy, came back and gave it to the secretary. She was then given two minutes between appointments to speak with Mr. Blair. A friendship developed and Mr. Blair often hosted her for lunch at his home and kept in touch until her death in 1967.

It is unknown whether this connection helped the families find a farm in Ontario, but find one they did. They looked at many farms in the province and found each better than the one before. “We didn’t know what to think”, Elizabeth told The Stouffville Tribune. Hermann Sauer also went to Ottawa and asked advice from the Minister of Agriculture himself who directed him to the Veteran’s Land Act (VLA) administrators in Toronto. In two days, following the valuable advice of VLA, they found a 200-acre farm that suited their needs. It had a large house big enough for their two families, a water course and rolling, fertile farmland. Records show that in 1939, the year that war was declared against Germany, Hermann Sauer and Edward David bought a farm from David and Elizabeth Graham on Lot 14, Concession 10 in Markham Township.

Lot 14, Concession 10.

This piece of property is significant in the settlement and heritage of Markham. This was the farm that pioneer patriarch, Christian Reesor bought in 1804 when he and his wife Fanny, together with extended family, made the arduous journey in five Conestoga wagons from Pennsylvania to York. The parallels between the Reesors and the Sauer/David families’ story is extraordinary. Both were immigrants looking for good farmland where they could raise their families peacefully and with some degree of prosperity. Both had Germanic roots in Europe; the Rissers/Reesors were expelled from the German part of Switzerland in the 1600s and the Sauer/Davids fled pre-WWII Berlin. Their emigration paths were neither smooth nor direct and included trans-Atlantic crossings by ship – one landing in America and the other in Canada. However, freedom to practice their faith without persecution would bring members of these two family groups to live on the same farm 135 years apart.

According to a summary by Blodwen Davies writ-

ten in 1950 for The Reesor Family in Canada, Christian Reesor’s father, Peter Risser, was born about the time that the Mennonites were forced out of Switzerland early in the 18th century. He and four brothers emigrated to Pennsylvania to join the Quakers in their search for freedom and peace. As Mennonites, the Rissers were Anabaptists who practiced baptism as voluntary mature believers (not as infants) and did not support the state churches of Europe which were Roman Catholic, Reformed and Lutheran.

When Christian Reesor acquired the farm on the 10th Concession, a small amount of clearing had been done. The first task was to erect a primitive shelter before winter which was replaced later by a log cabin. Tragedy struck the Reesor family in 1806 when Christian Sr. was killed by a falling tree whilst clearing the land. Sadly, he was the first of 15 family members to be buried on the farm in a family plot now known as the Reesor Pioneer Cemetery. After his father died, Christian Jr. built the large stone house on the property that overlooks the graves of so many who have gone before. In 2000, Reesor descendants erected impressive stone and iron gates at the Pioneer Cemetery entrance which now faces Reesor Road, named in the family’s honour.

Homey Farms

Hermann Sauer explained in a Stouffville Tribune story from 1950 that they named the farm Homey Farm as a “compliment” to Christian Reesor. “We think the name fits,” said Sauer. “Never have we experienced such friendliness, such co-operation and kindness as amongst our neighbours in Markham Township.”

When the Sauers and the Davids purchased the farm in 1939 they had big dreams which came with a big price tag. Their plan was to have 60 quality cattle and 1,000 chickens. Here is how Renata David remembers the early months on the farm:

“We brought just enough money for the down payment and to last for a couple of months. My father was getting very worried because if we didn’t get a dairy contract, we wouldn’t survive. And I remember he passed that concern onto me. My mother, ever the optimist said, ‘Well, of course we’ll get a dairy contract.’ My mother was extremely upbeat. But then, my father had lost so much more. My father had lost a thriving business. He was not a country person. He didn’t really like living in the country at all and was less optimistic. But then, we did get a dairy contract and then we knew we were going to be okay.”

Hermann Sauer’s father, who accompanied him from Germany, had been a cattle dealer and had an uncanny eye for good cows. He and Hermann purchased their herd on a car trip around Ontario and

among the Holsteins they purchased, was the Leslie Cow, purchased from Col. Leslie, who in her first year produced the most milk in her age group in all of Ontario. Her son Bill sired all subsequent cows in their big Leslie cattle family. By 1941 a Holstein named Alluviadale Sylvia Dewdrop owned by Edward David and Hermann Sauer was first in a class of 64 cows for producing 22,237 pounds of milk containing 808 pounds of fat in a year. Another prize winner was a cow named Ann Pontiac Hemlock from the same herd producing 703 pounds of fat from 18, 173 pounds of milk.

The entrepreneurs obviously hit the road running and produced healthy yields in just two years. According to their Montreal friend's son Peter Margo, "the monies needed to build and equip the farm must have been very considerable. The barn was equipped with the latest milk machines and the prefabricated aluminum chicken house was also built. Besides the cows, there were pigs and a few sheep. The farm needed machinery and horses. I do not know if ... any of these came with the farm. But early on there was a very complete inventory of machinery, a tractor, and wagons. The farm produced oats, wheat, and hay."

Margo also remembered "the milk truck that came every week-day morning to pick up all the cans of milk which were carefully kept in the milk house in the very cold water from the artesian well. One can was always kept aside for the 'Kosher' milk truck that came too."

The partners' experience with chickens was not as smooth. In 1940 the new owners erected a modern chicken house but needed a reliable supply of water. Renata David recalled an elderly man arriving one day carrying a cherry tree branch to determine where the well diggers should dig. (Water divining was common in rural areas and only certain people had the talent. This man may have been Ben Diller.) "The older family members were skeptical and totally disbelieving, when he discovered that water could be had if a well digger was engaged, and the water would be found next to the house. A well digger soon arrived with his motorized drill and set to work at the location that the diviner had found. As the mound of earth and stones grew ever larger, the older family members mumbled that this operation was completely futile. There would be no water. This was a complete waste of money! But the well digger never stopped. Even after darkness set in, the rumble of the drill rent the night silence. The family went to bed and was convinced that there would be no water," Renata recalled. "While they were fast asleep, at a depth of 128 feet, the drill uncovered an artesian river. The water sprouted up like a geyser, and the basement of the house was flooded before the well digger was able to cap the flow of water. Now, the farm had all the water that could be

consumed by the animals and family. Cool water, rich in minerals, tasty and pure. The river flowed underground to the next neighbour who soon was drinking the same water." There was more than enough for the cows, chickens, pigs, horses and to water the gardens and service the household.

As a postscript to the chicken operation, fire broke out in the chicken brooder in January 1946 and 1,000 chickens were destroyed. The egg business had allowed the farming partners to sell eggs directly to supermarkets in Toronto. Elizabeth David oversaw the brooder house and the birthing of chicks. Her daughter Renata collected the eggs and her sister-in-law examined and graded them under a light in a process called candling.

Homey Farm Cheese

Just five years after establishing a prize-winning herd of Holstein cattle, the farm began to make their own cheese. The loss of the chicken house combined with optimal milk production and Elizabeth's love and knowledge of cheese-making resulted in the production of quality Swiss and European cheeses at Homey Farms. In 1946 the partners hired, at considerable expense, an outstanding Swiss cheese maker named Frauenknecht to visit the farm and advise them. He was followed by Walter Joss and Erich Bruhin who were skilled Swiss cheese makers. Soon the milk produced by their own 60 cows was not enough and the farm placed an advertisement locally:

Milk Wanted – Steady or Occasional Shipment

Jack Bielby picked up whole milk from Murray Reesor, Albert Reesor, Roy Penny and others and delivered it to Homey Farms. His daughter Laura remembers tasting samples of cheese at the farm when she went with her dad on deliveries.

At the beginning of the operation, they imported bacterial cultures from Switzerland but later arranged with a bacteriologist at the University of Guelph to replicate and store it for them. The entire operation - cheese kitchen, curing rooms, each with its own thermostatically controlled temperature, and packing rooms were in the basement of the old Christian Reesor house. Each cheese was packaged in separate rooms which were sprayed with disinfectant to ensure that "alien bacteria" did not get in and spoil a batch.

Homey Farms' first cheese was Camembert which they described as a "temperamental" cheese. If it is not consumed and continues to ripen it is not palatable. Homey Farms would pick up unsold Camembert from retailers and take the loss rather than sell less than perfect cheese. The Homey Farms Camembert was

made in smaller rounds so that the velvety crust encased the entire pat of cheese and was more flavourful. The second cheese they produced was a bland Alpine known as Bel-Swiss. It was made in 10-inch wheels, soaked in brine for 12 hours and then set to cure before being cut into pieces for sale. A stronger Nippy Old Vienna, similar to Limburger, was sold in 4-ounce blocks. In September 1950 they brought to market the cheese that had made Switzerland famous. It was an eyeletted Emmentaler which they called Swiss Cheese because Emmentaler was patented. This cheese was made in 50-pound wheels as well as in bricks and loaves. The whey from the process was made into butter for bakeries and the excess fed to pigs and chickens.

The partners discovered that working through agents was unsatisfactory, so the marketing and sales of Homey Farms cheese was done by Elizabeth David. She drove across the province to chain stores (Loblaws being one), hotels and retailers taking cheese orders. She began with Toronto as the prime market and then expanded her territory from Windsor to Ottawa. Homey Farms experienced healthy sales in the Kitchener area, perhaps because of its German roots and Ottawa where there was a more international population. Homey Cheese was served after dinner in the Chateau Laurier Hotel in Ottawa in the 1950s.

Edward David fell ill and died in 1949 at the height of the cheese operation. Hermann Sauer, the immigrant with the agricultural degree and Edward's widow, Elizabeth, the keen cheesemaker, continued the business after his death and their children had grown and left the farm. In 1954 Hermann and Elizabeth married. Hermann's first wife, Edith came with the family from Germany but stayed in New York and they divorced soon after. In an interview in The Stouffville Tribune in December 1950 (where most of the details about the cheese operation originated) Elizabeth David said with a cheerful smile, "Our cheese-making is partly a hobby - partly an obsession!"

The death of Edward David is a reminder that the Sauer/Davids were Jewish immigrants living in Markham during a time when Markham residents were either Protestant or Roman Catholic. These two families could not go to synagogue in their community and when Hermann's father Simon died in 1942, the question of burial arose. Under Jewish tradition, burial should occur within 24 hours of death. The family asked if a burial presided over by a rabbi could be arranged in a cemetery in the Village of Markham. Their request was denied. Homey Farms was very close to Locust Hill United Church, so the same request was made of their board. Locust Hill United Church Cemetery Board agreed to allow Simon's burial with a rabbi officiating. Subsequent family

members, except Elizabeth, are interred in the very western row of the old cemetery under the cedar trees.

In 1960 the Sauers stopped operating the cheese business after 11 years and employing 20 people. Three years prior, the farm equipment was auctioned, and the western portion of the farm rented to Lloyd and Peter Reesor while the eastern part was rented to Jack Pike. In 1966 household furniture, appliances dishes, tools and farm-barn equipment were auctioned and the following year the farm was sold to the Banford partnership.

By this time Elizabeth's health was failing and in 1967 she died of a heart condition. Elizabeth and Hermann had retired to a house near the library in Unionville about three years before she died. Her daughter Renata recalled, "My mother died before him (her step-father Hermann) and he was devastated. He was a shattered individual." Hermann died in 1970 aged 75 and is buried at Locust Hill Cemetery (United Church) under the cedars but not beside Elizabeth.

Update on Lot 14, Conc. 10, 9035 Reesor Road

Dr. Hermann Sauer, his wife Elizabeth and her daughter Renata Block sold the farm to the partnership of James E. Banford, Arthur H. Banford and James H. Banford in 1967.

A series of investors owned the property until 1971 when it was expropriated by the Ontario Government as part of the planned city to be built beside the Pickering Airport. The owner became the Ontario Realty Corporation which rented the house and land to tenants.

The property now is part of the Rouge National Urban Park.

Sources

Interview in 1999 with Renata (David) Block conducted by Lorne R. Smith with Donna Houghton in Markham, ON

Email correspondence between Peter Margo of Montreal and Lorne R. Smith

Interview in 2021 with Laura (Bielby) Campbell conducted by Catherine Brydon

Township Produces Natural Cheese by Lyn and Richard Harrington in The Stouffville Tribune, December 29, 1950, page 6

The Trail Through the Centuries by Blodwen Davies pages 5 - 10 from The Reesor Family in Canada - Genealogical and Historical Records 1804 - 1950

The Reesor Journey to Markham by Paul H. Burkholder pages 3 - 6 from The Reesor Family in Canada - Genealogical and Historical Records 1804 - 2000

Jordan Museum

At Last!!

Town of Lincoln's MUSEUM AND CULTURAL CENTRE: Home of the Jordan Historical Museum of the Twenty, is located in the village of Jordan, Ontario, which is located in the east end of the Town of Lincoln. The Jordan Historical Museum of the Twenty was founded in 1953, the same year as the Chapter of the Twenty, PGFSO came into being.

Construction began on this new museum facility in 2017 which was officially opened on 1 October 2021, after 20 years of planning by the community. The mandate of this museum is:

to serve the cultural life of the community by acquiring, conserving, studying, contributing, assembling and exhibiting a collection of artifacts of historical significance for the instruction and enjoyment of the community".

With this in mind, the Chapter of the Twenty donated \$21,000 for the preservation and display of the collection of Fraktur from Pennsylvania German families who pioneered this area of Lincoln. There is a room designated to the display of this Fraktur.

The Chapter of the Twenty also wanted to honour the Pennsylvania German Mennonite families who settled this area. There is now a black granite stone which is engraved with the memorial to these pioneers which is mounted on a trestle stone from the 1860s railway that crossed the Twenty. This monument now resides in front of the Fry House.

Ruth M. Smith
November 11, 2021



Town of Lincoln Museum & Cultural Centre



Joan Romagnoli, Ruth Smith, Danny Barber stone cutter, Elfreda Weier & Ray Konkle



Stone honouring Pennsylvania German Mennonite Settlers in the area.