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NEWSLETTER

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THE PENNSYLVANIA GERMAN FOLKLORE SOCIETY OF ONTARIO

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"Any group or society that continues in existence for a period of time has a story to tell and it should be told".

The above quote was included in the Forbes magazine several years ago on their page entitled "Quotable Quotes". Then as an afterthought it stated - "Perhaps this explains why the Jewish people have continued as a separate identity down through the centuries. They have consistently reminded the younger generation of their ancient heritage and have kept their story alive to the present time".

Our Society has been active the past forty years nurturing an appreciation for the Pennsylvania German folk culture. Due to the efforts of our founding president, Dr. G. Elmore Reaman, descendants of the Pennsylvania German pioneer folk in Ontario have been reminded of their heritage and challenged to keep that story alive through a program of lectures and publications.

By 1940 many Pennsylvania Germans in Ontario became completely assimilated into the main stream of society with little or no thought or appreciation for their roots. In fact Dr. Reaman had given little thought to his Pennsylvania German heritage until he was introduced to Dr. and Mrs. Arthur Graeff from the Pennsylvania German Folklore Society of Pennsylvania in 1946.

As Dr. Reaman pursued his academic studies he became painfully aware that the Pennsylvania German settlers niche in the history of our province received little recognition from historians. He subsequently authored a book entitled "The Trail of the Black Walnut" which was published by McClelland and Stewart in 1957. In the foreword of this book, Thomas B. Costain, author of historical novels, pays tribute to "a splendid feat of research. Dr. Reaman has not only made the Pennsylvania Germans who came to Ontario .. familiar to us as a class which played a large part in the settling of this province, he has succeeded .. in turning a light on one of the blank spots of Canadian history".

Until reading "The Trail of the Black Walnut", I a fifth generation descendant of ancestors who migrated from Pennsylvania had never read a, sympathetic assessment of my Pennsylvania German folk culture. However, I had been born into a Pennsylvania German family, and always lived in a solid Pennsylvania German community, so by this time in my life I had already formed a few impressions of my people. I have always perceived my people as a God-fearing people – religious but not sanctimonious. They may have had lofty thoughts but their feet were planted firmly on the solid earth of their farms - they faced reality head on. They were frugal spenders but not miserly. They were experts in making one dollar do the work of two and frowned on spending money for that which was unnecessary. Above all, they were good farmers, they were successful in building community and were generally known to live peaceably with their neighbours regardless of race or creed. They rarely, if ever, boasted about their personal achievements. Should anyone indulge in a session of "blowing their own horn" they were sure to be reminded by one of their listeners that "Good wine needs no advertising".

To my amazement, there was a tendency for our people who left their home community to be embarrassed about their Pennsylvania German ancestry and exerted extreme measures to never divulge that fact. They did not hold their heritage in high regard. No doubt the reticence of our people to speak of their accomplishments has been a contributing factor. Also the recorded history of Ontario contained in Public School text books, with an emphasis on the accomplishments of those citizens of another heritage, served to reinforce a Pennsylvania German's inferiority complex.

The pioneering expertise of the Pennsylvania Germans was not extolled in our school history books. Fourth and fifth generation Pennsylvania Germans in Ontario were growing up completely unaware of the "blood, sweat and tears" expended by our pioneering ancestors in laying a solid Foundation for prosperous communities in Ontario.

In striving for modesty, we have neglected to hold up our heritage. As a result name places have been changed i.e. "Jakob Schtettel" became St. Jacobs and our considerable contribution to the growth and character of our communities has not only been ignored but has at times been considered insignificant. The purpose of our society is to revive and keep alive the stories of our people through our publications, the Canadian-German Folklore volumes of which we have twelve to date and our newsletter, which incidentally has never been given a name.

Stories of a people usually reveal the fabric of a people. Since the ancestors of many of the members in our Society descend from a mix of Pennsylvania German Mennonites with Swiss-German backgrounds and few of Dutch ancestry it is obvious that a common denominator, brought these folk together sometime, somewhere. Their ancestors were dissenters in the days of the Protestant Reformation. They opposed the idea of a state church and opted for complete freedom of religion. The Mennonite faith emerged from the Free Church concept. This position threatened the existing social structure and they were considered dangerous. State church leaders, Protestant and Catholic, instigated Civil authorities to punish the dissenters by imprisonment, torture and even death.

Fleeing for their lives to remote areas in central Europe they learned to farm successfully on the poorest of soils. Their farming skills impressed estate owners in the Palatinate whose land had been devastated in the Thirty Years War. Mennonites were invited to farm these lands as tenants but were forbidden by law to own the land and were taxed heavily for limited religious privileges. Their intense longing to own farms and to experience freedom from religious and economic oppression motivated over 2000 of these religious dissenters to join the mass migration of Palatine folk to America in search of economic opportunity. All were responding to the invitation of land agents to come to America where Wm. Penn, an English Quaker proposed to establish a state with perfect liberty of conscience and freedom from oppression.

In this environment our people founded two large successful settlements - Franconia to the north of Philadelphia and Lancaster to the west of Philadelphia. These ambitious and hard working people were soon numbered among the prosperous of the land. Under British rule they became economically and culturally self-sufficient, and until the American War of Independence, experienced no harassment. After the War had been fought on their doorsteps in Eastern Pennsylvania our people became attracted to farming opportunities in Upper Canada, now called Ontario.

Our first large migration of Pennsylvania German Mennonites to Canada came from Bucks County and settled along Twenty Mile Creek (near Vineland) between 1799-1801. The life of a settler in the bush of Upper Canada was demanding. Before crops could be planted in the fertile land, large acreages of primeval forest had to be felled by axe and the stumps were extracted with the use of oxen. Within the first few years of settlement ten families were in danger of losing their properties. Due to ill health and adversity they were unable to meet their financial obligations. Several of their relatives from Bucks County came to the Twenty for a visit. Upon learning of the desperate plight of their kin- folk, the visitors persuaded a delegation of those in distress to return with them to Bucks County in order to make an appeal to those in their home community for financial assistance.

The response of their home community to this appeal was the granting of an "interest-free" loan, repayable at the convenience of the settlers with the understanding that if circumstances did not permit repayment, the loan would be forgiven! Within a few years the entire loan was repaid and a prosperous agricultural community emerged.

This expression of "Mutual Aid" would have been forgotten entirely had it not been told to Jacob Krehbiel, a minister in New York State who visited at The Twenty to attend a church conference in 1831. It was while he was visiting a local minister in this now prosperous community that Krehbiel was told about this act of mutual aid extended to distraught settlers at The Twenty. Krehbiel, formerly a Mennonite minister in Primerhof in Rhenish Bavaria, had recently emigrated to America

and settled among a community of Pennsylvania German settlers east of Buffalo. He recorded this visit to Canada in a letter to his home folk in Europe which was published in Speyer in 1832 and was discovered a century later by Dr. Harold S. Bender, a professor at Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana. It was subsequently re-published in the Mennonite Quarterly Review.

Apparently, this act of compassion was still vivid in the memory of the community at The Twenty some twenty five years after the event but at some point in their history the story was not retold and succeeding generations lost sight of an important event in their Pennsylvania German history. .

Thanks to Bishop Benjamin Eby and Historian Ezra E. Eby, a similar story relating to a financial difficulty experienced by the residents in the Waterloo settlement has been documented. As land in the Niagara settlement became scarce and expensive, arrivals from Pennsylvania German communities established a community along the Grand River on the Beasley Tract, Block 2 Indian Lands. Travelling in groups of three or more families, their Conestoga Wagons loaded with provisions, to start a new life in the frontiers of Upper Canada, they came prepared to put their roots down. They had sold their farms in Pennsylvania and had the monetary resources "the cold hard cash" to buy large tracts of land at attractive prices.

Between July 18 and October 10, 1800, Richard Beasley owner of the Beasley Tract sold over 8,000 acres of land to several Pennsylvania German immigrants for which he received cash in full. However, Beasley was unable to give the settlers clear titles due to an existing mortgage on the tract and furthermore the mortgage agreement did not permit any subdivision of the land before the entire purchase price had been paid. The settlers were in danger of losing their farms. Incoming Pennsylvania German immigrants arriving in Ontario at this time were by-passing the Beasley Tract in favour of unsettled lands in York County, located eighty miles east along the northern shore of Lake Ontario.

In an attempt to raise funds to pay off the mortgage, Beasley entered into an agreement with the Pennsylvania German settlers if they could raise ten thousand pounds to clear the mortgage, Beasley would release his claim to an additional 60,000 acres of undeveloped land to the Pennsylvania Germans and thus give clear title to all lands previously purchased by them.

In the words of Bishop Eby "the settlers turned to their brethren in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania for help, who regarded the matter in such a Christian mind that they came to the conclusion to help their brethren in their calamity, to organize a company to buy about 60,000 acres of land which was enough to clear the whole township of the mortgage". This transaction combined a good business deal with an act of mutual aid. The development of the German Company Tract progressed at a rapid rate as shareholders in the Company or their sons and daughters came to take possession of the fertile lands covered with virgin forest. This settlement became the largest concentration of Pennsylvania Germans outside of Pennsylvania.

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