



Commemorative Event at the old Church in Chortitz

by Ernest N. Braun

In the evening of August 2, 2014, for the first time in over 100 years, there was an ox-cart parked in front of the old Church in Chortitz, now called Randolph in the Rural Municipality of Hanover. The cart symbolized the anniversary of the arrival of the Mennonites in 1874, an arrival that changed the landscape of southeastern Manitoba within months, and has 140 years later resulted in an aggressive agricultural and urban homeland there.

The event was sponsored by the Chortitz Church Heritage Committee, which is chaired by Dr. Corneil Blatz, as the second public event since the Church was designated a Municipal Heritage Site by the Rural Municipality of Hanover earlier this year. It was timed to coincide with the Pioneer Days celebrations at the Mennonite Heritage Village, as a fitting commemoration to honour the pioneers in the oldest church building in the Municipality still on its original site. Rev. Sam Doerksen presided as emcee, music was provided by Karen Peters and an *a cappella* ensemble, and local historian Ernest N. Braun gave a short lecture on why Mennonite pioneers came to Manitoba from Russia (Ukraine) in the 1870s. Afterwards, the committee provided watermelon and *rollkuchen* outside, and people stayed to nibble and visit. About 130 people attended the event.

Lecture summary:

Introduction: Traditionally three reasons have been given for our immigration: loss of military exemption; loss of control over schools/language, and the matter of landlessness (over half of the Mennonites in Russia did not have enough land to make a living from it).

Content: The material presented detailed the background to the *changes in Russia* that resulted in these threats to Mennonite community and faith life:



Ox-cart on loan from Mennonite Heritage Village.

— Photo by Ernest N. Braun

- the loss of the Crimean War in 1856, and the resulting reforms which touched every part of Mennonite life;
- change in intellectual climate in Russia that fueled the drive to a centralized state with one language;

And *changes in the Mennonite world* that conspired to make the future uncertain for Mennonites:

- religious upheaval, as a new individualized faith threatened the traditional community understanding of faith;
- socio-economic change as the Mennonite world became a class society, with one large class being the disenfranchised and landless Mennonites.

A further element was the sudden availability of land in the newly created Province of Manitoba: this occurred at exactly the moment that Mennonites began looking for emigration alternatives.

Conclusion:

It is relatively easy to itemize the reasons for emigration from the turmoil and uncertainty of the context in Russia in the 1870s, but it is not so easy to fully understand at a gut level the sacrifice, the loss, the trauma, as well as the hopes and dreams of this great migration. Today – we honour those ancestors who made the life-changing irrevocable move to a new continent.



Karen Peters and the *a cappella* group

— Photo by Harold Dyck