

# The von Bergen-Claassen Dowry Chest

by D. Frederick Dyck\*

When the Mennonites of West Prussia and Russia immigrated to the Plains of the United States and Canada in the 1870s, they brought with them their most cherished personal belongings: photographs, handmade linens, letters, artwork, legal documents, journals, family heirlooms. Often times these items were carefully packed for transport into large dowry chests that had been in the family for several generations. Today, in many Mennonite households throughout the Plains states of America and the Prairie provinces of Canada, these dowry chests are prominently displayed objects worthy of great veneration.

The origins of Mennonite dowry chests brought to the Plains of

America and Canada can be traced to the Vistula Delta region of West Prussia, formerly Germany, part of Poland at the end of World War II in 1945. Chests that came from the Russian Mennonite colonies were taken there from West Prussia or, in rare instances, were made by Mennonite craftsmen that copied the Vistula Delta style of dowry chest in Russia.

One dowry chest that came from Mariawohl, South Russia, the Molotschna colony, to the Goessel

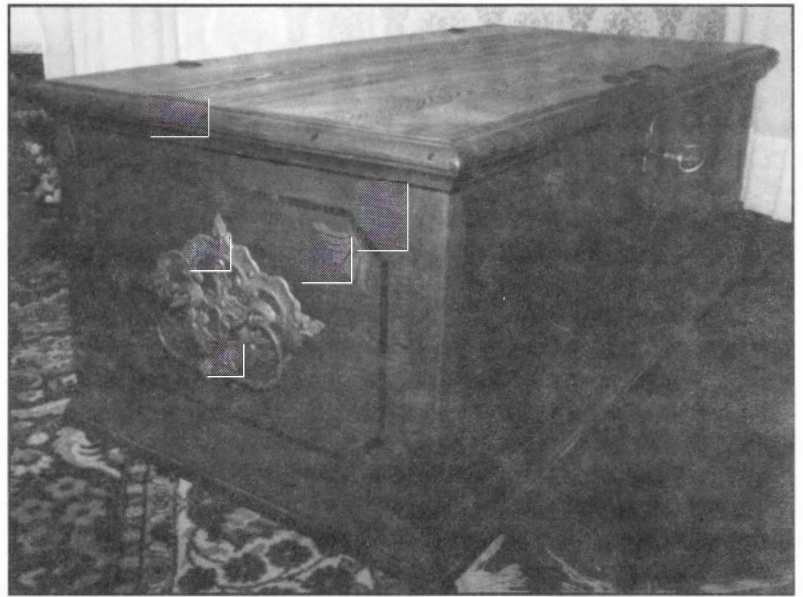
Mennonite community of Kansas, in 1874, is nearly identical to one that came from Ellerwald, West Prussia, to Newton, Kansas, in the early 1880s. Both chests date 1810-1820 and were probably made by the same person in West Prussia.<sup>1</sup> The von Bergen-Claassen dowry chest came from Simonsdorf, West Prussia, to Plum Grove, Kansas, in 1877, but is very similar to inlaid dowry chests of the same period, the late eighteenth century, brought from the Russian colonies to the United States and Canada.

The oldest confirmed Vistula Delta style dowry chests in America and Canada date from the years 1780-1800. Dowry chests had been a northern European tradition for centuries prior to this time frame, but no Vistula Delta chests older than 1780 have been confirmed in North America. It may very well be that some existing dowry chests are older; however, there is no documented proof of this.

The von Bergen-Claassen dowry chest dates from this earlier period. It was made for Justina von Bergen, born

*Justina von Bergen (1780-1853) dowry chest made ca1790 in the Vistula Delta, West Prussia.*

<sup>1</sup> The Jakob Schmidt chest from Mariawohl is shown on p. 119 of *Mennonite Furniture: A Migrant Tradition (1766-1910)* by Reinhild Kauenhoven Janzen and John M. Janzen, (Good Books, 1991). The Peter Berg chest from Ellerwald is shown on p. 173 of *Am Trakt To America* by D. Frederick Dyck (Alice Sitler Dyck, 2000).



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Anna Bergmann Claassen (1838-1917) and Abraham Claassen (1825-1910).

Photo: ca1890, author's collection.

death in 1853, and it remained at the Claassen home in Simonsdorf, West Prussia, until 1876.

Along with many other members of the Heubuden Mennonite congregation, Abraham III with his wife, Anna née Bergmann (1838-1917), and their four children immigrated to America in 1876. At least two, and possibly three, dowry chests traveled with this Claassen family to their ultimate destination of Plum Grove in Butler County, Kansas.

Abraham III kept a detailed diary of the family's trip from West Prussia to Kansas, and the dowry chests were the subject of a passage in his diary. The passage describes the unloading of the family's belongings from the steamship *Rhein* in New York harbor:

*Our chests arrived in pretty good shape. On my wife's chest the bottom was jarred loose somewhat. On mine [the von Bergen-Claassen chest] the strip on top got a mighty jar, and the ornamental plates on top are dented, although it was bound in a horse blanket and the blue robe and a double canvas cover. The two freight chests show the least damage. On the blue chest a strip was torn loose, and it is no wonder. I was an eyewitness when one fellow set it against the coach that was to go to Kansas. Another moved the cart away, then the first one noticed that the chest did not belong there, and moved it the length of four coaches, stepping it along on the corner in rapid tempo. This really tests a heavily loaded chest.*

Two of the chests described in this passage are known to have survived transport to Kansas, the chest described as "mine" by Abraham Claassen and his wife Anna's dowry chest. On the von Bergen-Claassen dowry chest the brass plates that cover the lock mechanism are badly dented as described in the diary passage.

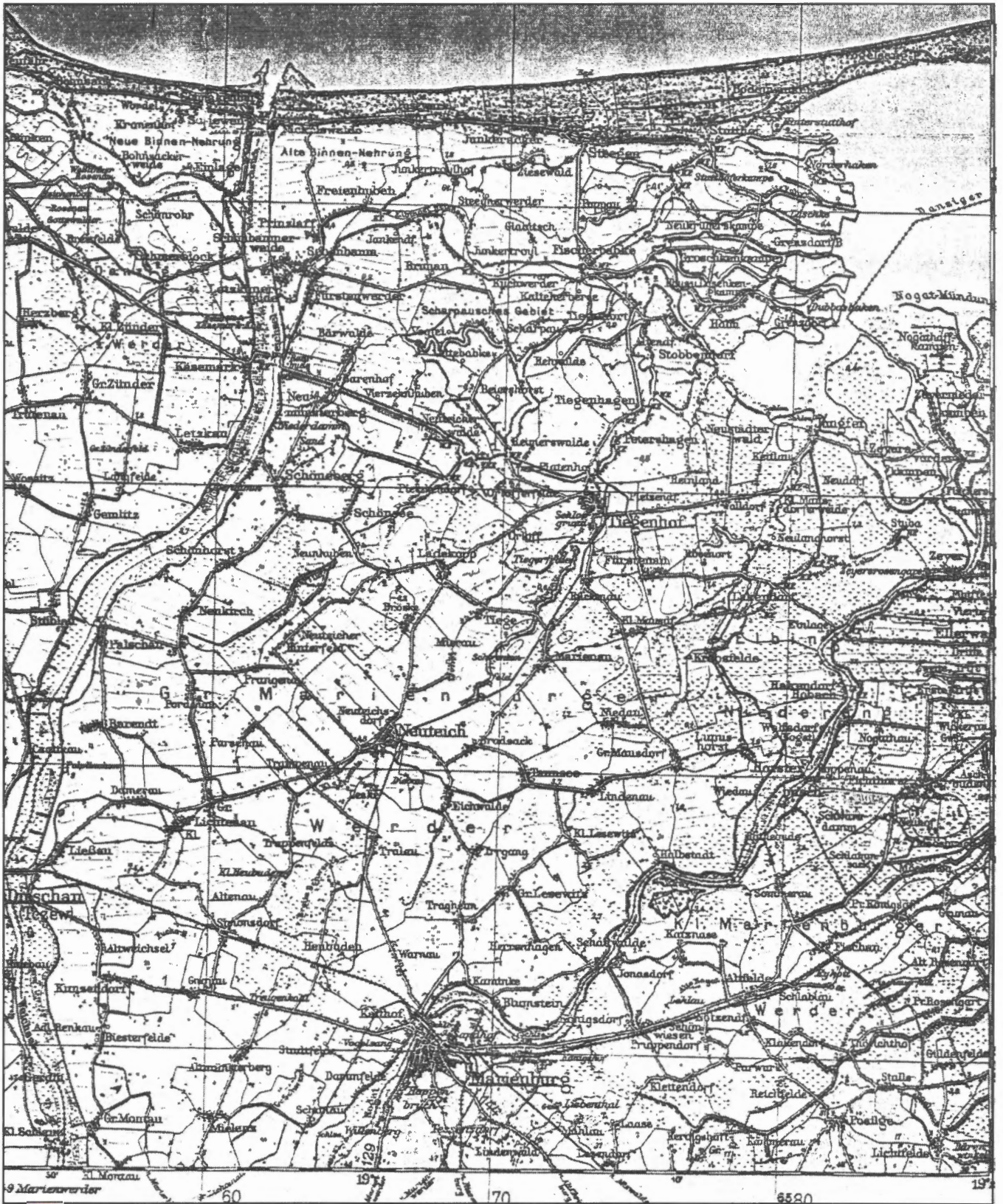
After a six-month stopover in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, the family moved to an existing log cabin in Butler County, Kansas, in January 1877. Abraham was fortunate to have the means to immediately build a nice home on his newly acquired farm near

October 9, 1780. Justina was the fifth child of Gerhard von Bergen (1741-1790) and Helena née Warkintin (1754-1813). Justina's grandfather, Gerdt von Bergen (1704-1771), was the second elder of the large Heubuden Mennonite congregation near Marienburg, West Prussia.

Justina's dowry chest is made from ash hardwood with inlays of dark and light wood veneers. In common with all Vistula Delta style dowry chests is the till on the left inside of the chest. The hinged lid of the till lifts to access a compartment for storing small items. This till has a false floor that tilts to reveal a hiding place for valuables. Also in common are the basic dimensions of width, 57", height (without skirted, five-legged base), 21", and depth, 27". These dimensions vary only slightly from chest to chest. The forged handles, hinge straps, lock mechanism, sheet metal

handle plates, and brass key escutcheon plate are characteristic of all Vistula Delta dowry chests. As befits a dowry chest of high quality, these metal parts on Justina's chest are elaborate in design, finely finished, plated with high nickel content German silver, and highly engraved.

Justina von Bergen had ample time to fill her dowry chest before she married. It wasn't until she was forty-one years old that she married her first cousin Abraham Claassen II (1771-1857) on December 2, 1821. Abraham's first wife was Sophia née Berckmann (1777-1819). Abraham and Sophia had eleven children, five of whom eventually lived in Rosenort, Molotschna, Russia. It was probably because of Justina's age when she married Abraham that they had only two children, Helena and Abraham III. Abraham III (1825-1910) inherited his mother's dowry chest upon her



*The Vistula Delta area of West Prussia ca1930.*

*The Vistula River is on the left flowing south to north into the Baltic Sea at the top of the map. Courtesy: Adalbert Goertz.*

Plum Grove, Kansas. A local stonemason named Andy Patterson built Abraham a handsome two-story house of locally quarried limestone that was finished in 1878. The von Bergen-Claassen dowry chest remained there until the death of Abraham's wife Anna in 1917.

The move to its next home was a short one for Justina's dowry chest. Abraham and Anna's eldest daughter, Anna Claassen (1862-1949), married Jacob Harder (1849-1937) in 1881. They built a stone house in 1882 one mile from Anna's parents on land the couple bought from Anna's father Abraham. It was to this house that Justina's dowry chest came in 1917. The dowry chest maintained a place of honor in the Harder house for many years but was eventually relegated to an unused second-story bedroom sometime before World War II.

In 1949, Anna Harder née Claassen died. Emma Harder (1888-1988), daughter of Jacob and Anna Harder, inherited the farm, house, and all of its furnishings. Emma remained unmarried throughout her life and lived in the house built by her father nearly all of her 99+ years. In 1959, Emma sold the farm and home to her nephew, Arthur P. Dyck, with the stipulation that she be allowed to live in the house until she died. Through all these years and transactions, Justina's dowry chest waited in the closed-off upstairs bedroom for its return to prominence.

In the summer of 1965, at the age of fifteen, I went to live with my Uncle Arthur Dyck, his wife Aunt Wanda, and my great-aunt "Tante Emma" in the stone house built by my great-grandfather Jacob Harder. Art and Wanda had no children, and I loved living and working on their farm, a natural fit for me. During the winter of 1965/66 I spent many evenings after school getting my first lessons about my Mennonite family history from Tante Emma.

Everything in the house was old—furniture, dishes, linens, quilts, and Emma's large collection of family photographs. One barn loft that had been Jacob Harder's workshop contained a treasure trove of discarded furniture including the second dowry

chest brought to Kansas in January of 1877. This dowry chest was made of soft wood, probably pine.

Reinhild Janzen, co-author of *Mennonite Furniture*, viewed this dowry chest and stated that it was originally finished with a dark red stain to imitate mahogany wood grain. Sometime prior to 1876 it was painted either dark blue or dark green and it was painted a second time in a pale blue, which is its current finish. This chest has the obligatory till made of ash and hand-forged hinges, lock, handles, and handle plates that are black finished. Made before 1850,



*Wedding photo of Anna Claassen (1862-1949) and Jacob Harder II (1849-1937) on February 22, 1881, in Plum Grove, Kansas.*

this dowry chest is believed to have originally belonged to Anna Claassen née Bergmann (1838-1917).

My curiosity was piqued by Tante Emma's lessons and my discoveries in the barn loft, so I searched the unused bedroom to see what was there. Under a pile of blankets I discovered Justina von Bergen's dowry chest. I immediately realized that I had found something very special. It was, and still is, the most beautiful piece of furniture I have ever seen. The large brass-handled key was in the lock, and with some difficulty I was able to turn it and unlock the chest. My first im-

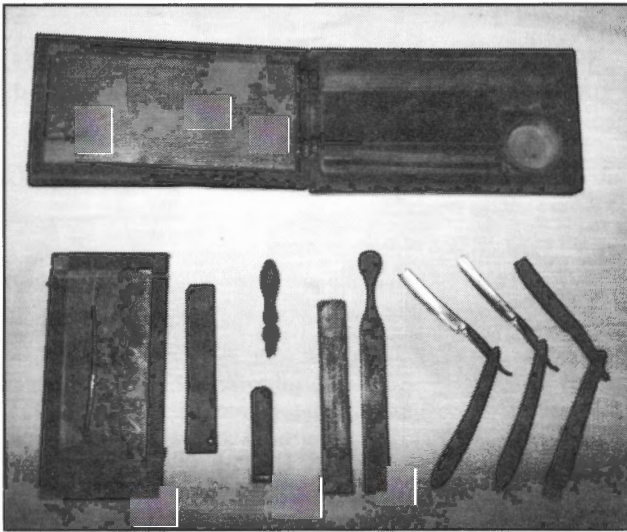
pression of the contents was one of mild disappointment. All that was there were little booklets of various sizes and thickness, and envelopes with letters. It was not the treasure I had expected. However, over the next several months I came to realize that I had indeed found treasure in Justina's dowry chest.

After carefully removing everything from the chest I became intrigued with the till inside the chest. It took a full evening to figure out how to release the cleverly disguised catch that revealed the hidden compartment under the false floor of the till. One object lay there: a small black leather folder tied with a red ribbon. This was the German passport issued to Jacob Harder when he left West Prussia to come to Kansas in 1878. As the only photographs I had seen of my great-grandfather were in black and white, the description in the passport added important details of his height, weight, hair color, and eye color. All the other items in the chest were difficult for me to place in their proper context because everything was written in florid German script. Names and dates were easy to figure out, however.

That several of the small, handmade booklets were journals I was able to ascertain from the many dated entries. The oldest were from the mid-1700s by Justina's father, Gerhard von Bergen. Some of the booklets contained poetry written by my Claassen ancestors in the early 1800s. There were many letters postmarked Marienburg and Danzig, West Prussia, covering a span of years from the 1880s to 1900.

One wooden box contained a complete, fitted, shaving kit of straight razors, mirror, brush, and soap dish. On the ivory handles of the razors were carved the initials "GVB," Gerhard von Bergen.

Over the next couple of years, Justina's dowry chest and its contents were never far from my mind. I visited the chest and pored over the old journals and letters on evenings when I could no longer stay away. As I found additional items in the barns and house that I considered worth saving, I stored them in Justina's chest.



*This old shaving kit was discovered in the dowry chest. It has the Gerhard von Bergen's initials on it and was used ca1760-1770.*

In 1969 I moved back to St. Louis, Missouri, to again live with my parents Herbert and Alice Dyck. Justina's dowry chest remained in the bedroom of Jacob Harder's stone house. In 1970 Tante Emma wrote to my parents and offered Justina's chest for sale at a price that was very reasonable. My parents didn't know what the chest was but took my word that it was something they should buy.

By Christmas of 1970, Justina's chest and much of its contents were at my parents' home in St. Louis. It would remain there for the next seventeen years. In 1985, Justina's chest received a professional cleaning and repair of some loose inlay. It was then given several coats of linseed oil to add moisture to the wood and prevent cracking after being in the dry climate of Kansas for over 100 years.

In 1987, my parents retired and moved to Kansas. Justina's dowry chest went along, making its second arrival in Kansas in 110 years.

Interest in Vistula Delta Mennonite dowry chests and furniture was given a big boost with the publication in 1991 of *Mennonite Furniture: A Migrant Tradition (1766-1910)* by Reinhild Kauenhoven Janzen and John M. Janzen. I received a copy of this book from a cousin, Arthur N. Claassen, and initiated correspondence with the authors regarding the von Bergen-Claassen dowry chest.

In 1998, Reinhild and John Janzen had traveled to my parents' home to see Justina's dowry chest and

take photographs of it for their collection. In 2000, Reinhild Janzen asked if my parents would agree to have Justina's dowry chest travel to Topeka, Kansas, and be part of an exhibition of Mennonite household art at the Mulvane Art Museum, Washburn University. My parents readily agreed, but on the day that museum staff came to pick up the chest, my mother suddenly felt great anxiety at having Justina's dowry chest taken from her home. Mom said that she knew she would not sleep well until the chest was returned. From August 12 through October 1, 2000, the von Bergen-Claassen dowry chest was on display in Mulvane Art Museum's Mennonite Household Arts Exhibition with Reinhild Janzen as special guest curator.

Thirty-seven years after first seeing Justina von Bergen's dowry chest, I still daydream about the young Mennonite girl that was my great-great-great-grandmother. There are no photographs of Justina but I can picture her in my mind, a composite of my Claassen, Harder, and Dyck grandmothers.

I know that Justina was as awed by her dowry chest's beauty as I was 170 years later. She would draw her hand softly along the grain of the wood, feeling the warmth of it. She would have marveled at the intricacy of the inlaid flowers and the metal parts finished in the richness of German silver and hand engraved with such delicacy. It was probably the first time that Justina had a place to put her

own things and secure them with a lock, much as I did in the winter of 1965/66. When she entered her room it was certainly the first thing she looked at, and surely it made her smile every time she did.

What was the first thing Justina placed in her dowry chest? Her father Gerhard died when Justina was only ten years old. Was his shaving kit the first thing to go into the chest? I like to think it was. Two hundred years later the smell of shaving soap still comes from the box that holds the shaving kit. It is a distinctly masculine smell known to every child that has kissed the face of a freshly shaved father. The memory of her father never faded for Justina for she had his smell under lock and key.

The von Bergen and Claassen genealogy that follows is derived from the journals of Gerhard von Bergen (1741-1790), Gerhard von Bergen (1785-?), Gerhard Claassen (1819-1913), and Abraham Claassen (1825-1910). Additional information came from *Abraham Claassen: Vistula to Plum Grove* by Ernest Claassen (privately printed: 1975), and *Ancestors and Descendants of Abraham Claassen and Anna Bergmann, 1630-2000*, compiled and edited by Agnes Wiebe Harder, Elma Esau, Martha Claassen Wiebe, and Elsie Claassen Claassen (privately printed: 2000).

## Generation I

Isaak Claassen, b. Mar. 14, 1670, Ruckenuau, West Prussia; d. Dec. 15, 1731, West Prussia; m. Nov. 21, 1694, West Prussia, Margaretha Bergmann, b. Oct. 13, 1667, West Prussia; d. Sept. 12, 1736, West Prussia (Her father was Abraham Bergmann b. ca1630.) Children: 8

## Generation II

Maria Claassen, b. Apr. 11, 1704, Grosslichtenau, West Prussia; d. Aug. 20, 1776, Grosslichtenau, West Prussia; m. 1) Michael Regehr, b. Sept. 28, 1699; d. Sept. 3, 1730. Children: 3

II-1 Michael

II-2 Gerhard

II-3 Abraham, b. Sept. 15, 1728; d. Jan. 11, 1791

Maria m. 2) Gerdt von Bergen, b. Jan. 17, 1704, West Prussia; d. Jan. 19, 1771, West Prussia. Gerdt was the second elder of the Heubuden Mennonite congregation from 1741 until his death. Children: # unknown.

- II-4 Margaretha, b. Sept. 22, 1736; d. Dec. 11, 1794; m. Aug. 24, 1764, Cornelius **Regier**, b. Nov. 27, 1742; d. May 20, 1794
- II-5 Gerhard, b. Nov. 23, 1741, Ellerswald, West Prussia; d. Apr. 23, 1790, Lichtenau, West Prussia
- II-6 Maria, b. unk date; d. Aug. 12, 1810

#### Generation IIIA

Gerhard von Bergen, b. Nov. 23, 1741, Ellerswald, West Prussia; d. Apr. 23, 1790, Lichtenau, West Prussia; m. 1) Lena **Mattisen**, b. Dec. 8, 1747; d. Nov. 1, 1772 Children: 4 (all children born at Grosslichtenu, West Prussia)

IIIA-1 Gerdt, b. May 29, 1768; d. Apr. 13, 1822

IIIA-2 Behrend, b. May 26, 1769; d. unk. date

IIIA-3 Elias, b. Sept. 16, 1772; d. unk. date

IIIA-4 Unknown

m. 2) Gertrud **Lewens**, b. May 1, 1754, West Prussia; d. Dec. 22, 1773, West Prussia. Child: 1

IIIA-5 Gertrud, b. Dec. 17, 1773; d. Mar. 17, 1774

m. 3) May 3, 1774, Helena **Warkentin**, b. 1754, West Prussia; d. Feb. 27, 1813, Lichtenau, West Prussia. Children: 11

IIIA-6 Histina, b. Feb. 18, 1775; d. May 9, 1775

IIIA-7 Gerhart, b. Apr. 24, 1776; d. May 8, 1776

IIIA-8 Maricke, b. Dec. 5, 1777; d. Jan. 19, 1778

IIIA-9 Helena, b. May 27, 1779; d. May 19, 1843

IIIA-10 Justina, b. Oct. 8, 1780; d. Sept. 6, 1853 (First owner of the **von Bergen-Claassen** dowry chest.)

IIIA-11 Maria, b. Feb. 3, 1782; d. Mar. 7, 1782

IIIA-12 Hans, b. Nov. 18, 1783; d. Dec. 3, 1783

IIIA-13 Gerhard, b. July 16, 1785; d. unk. date (Gerhard left a partial journal so he lived to adulthood.)

IIIA-14 Hans, b. Jan. 12, 1787; d. Mar. 27, 1787

IIIA-15 Catrina, b. Feb. 14, 1789; d. Mar. 14, 1789

IIIA-16 Margaretha, b. Jan. 2, 1791; d. Apr. 3, 1791

#### Generation IIIB

Maria von Bergen, b. unk. date; d. Aug. 12, 1810, Lichtenau, West Prussia; m. Abraham Claassen, I, b. Aug. 20, 1717, West Prussia; d. Nov. 11, 1775, Lichtenau, West Prussia. Children: 2

IIIB-1 Agnetha, b. Aug. 17, 1768, d. unk. date

m. Abraham Claassen, b. Sept. 14, 1767; d. unk. date

IIIB-2 Abraham II, b. Sept. 2, 1771, Lichtenau, West Prussia; d. July 7, 1857, Simonsdorf, West Prussia

#### Generation IV

Abraham Claassen II, b. Sept. 2, 1771, Lichtenau, West Prussia; d. July 7, 1857, Simonsdorf, West Prussia; m. 1) Apr. 12, 1796, Sophia **Berckmann**, b. Feb. 23, 1777, West Prussia; d. Oct. 19, 1819, Simonsdorf, West Prussia. Children: 11 (all children born at Simonsdorf, West Prussia)

IV-1 Elisabeth, b. May 9, 1797; d. Oct. 4, 1854, Rosenort, Molotschna, Russia; m. Gerhard **Deleske**, b. 1802

IV-2 Maria, b. Nov. 5, 1798; d. July 6, 1864, Rosenort, Molotschna, Russia; m. 1) Cornelius **Penner**; 2) David **Warkentin**

V-3 Justina, b. Feb. 11, 1800; d. Oct. 18, 1843, Rosenort, Molotschna, Russia; m. Peter **Warkentin**

IV-4 Sophia, b. Sept. 1, 1801; d. Sept. 29, 1849, Rosenort, Molotschna, Russia; m. Peter **Quiring**

IV-5 Jacob, b. Jan. 9, 1804; d. Nov. 28, 1831

IV-6 Johann, b. Nov. 3, 1805; d. Feb. 6, 1830

IV-7 Abraham, b. Oct. 13, 1808; d. Nov. 19, 1808

IV-8 Aganetha, b. Dec. 14, 1809; d. Apr. 23, 1833

IV-9 Margaretha, b. Dec. 10, 1812; d. Oct. 10, 1876, Rosenort, Molotschna; m. Johann **Teichgraeb**, d. Oct. 11, 1876

IV-10 Abraham, b. Apr. 23, 1815; d. Mar. 26, 1822

IV-11 Gerhard, b. Apr. 2, 1819; d. Jan. 13, 1913, Newton, Kan.; m. 1) Aug. 12, 1881, Aganetha **Mandler**, b. Aug. 20, 1836, West Prussia; d. Kan.

m. 2) Sara **Schulz**, July 30, 1885, Beatrice, Neb.; b. Jan. 14, 1844, West Prussia; d. Jan. 13, 1908, Newton, Kan.;

m. 2) Dec. 2, 1821, Justina von Bergen, b. Oct. 9, 1780, Lichtenau, West Prussia; d. Sept. 6, 1853, Simonsdorf, West Prussia (There is, in effect, a double direct lineage with the marriage of Abraham Claassen II and Justina von Bergen because they were first cousins.) Children: 2

IV-12 Helena, b. Apr. 30, 1823, Simonsdorf, West Prussia; d. 1897; m. Aug. 27, 1850, Aron **Klaassen**, b. May 28, 1826; d. June 18, 1891. Children: 8 Johann, Justine, Helena,

Anna, Aron, Abraham, Marie, Elise

IV-13 Abraham III b. July 18, 1825, Simonsdorf, West Prussia; d. Dec. 7, 1910, Whitewater, Kan.

#### Generation V

Abraham Claassen III, b. July 18, 1825, Simonsdorf, West Prussia; d. Dec. 7, 1910, Whitewater, Kan.; m. July 21, 1857, Simonsdorf, West Prussia, Anna Bergmann, b. May 2, 1838, West Prussia; d. Oct. 10, 1917, Whitewater, Kan. (Abraham inherited the von Bergen-Claassen chest from his mother, Justina, and became the second owner.) Children: 11.

V-1 Helene, b. June 21, 1859; d. Nov. 25, 1872, Simonsdorf, West Prussia (Helene is known in the family as the "Mennonite Mona Lisa.")

V-2 Johann, b. Oct. 18, 1860; d. May 21, 1861, Simonsdorf, West Prussia

V-3 Anna, b. June 24, 1862, Simonsdorf, West Prussia; d. Sept. 18, 1949, Independence, Kan.; bu. Whitewater, Kan.

V-4 John H., b. Feb. 16, 1864, Simonsdorf, West Prussia; d. May 9, 1927, Whitewater, Kan.

m. Dec. 30, 1890, Elizabeth **Thierstein**, b. Nov. 27, 1872, Bowil, Canton Bern, Switzerland; d. Feb. 9, 1923, Whitewater, Kan.

V-5 Maria, b. June 2, 1865; d. Aug. 4, 1865, Simonsdorf, West Prussia

V-6 Maria, b. June 2, 1866; d. Jan. 4, 1873, Simonsdorf, West Prussia

V-7 Abraham N., b. Dec. 18, 1867, Simonsdorf, West Prussia; d. Nov. 7, 1948, Whitewater, Kan.; m. Lena **Blaser**, Mar. 1, 1906, Whitewater, Kan.; b. Mar. 13, 1886, Whitewater, Kan.; d. June 18, 1946, Whitewater, Kan.

V-8 Justine, b. May 1, 1870, Simonsdorf, West Prussia; d. July 11, 1951, McAllen, Tex.;

m. Nov. 7, 1895, Whitewater, Kan., John **Entz**, b. Aug. 28, 1868, Simonsdorf, West Prussia; d. Apr. 30, 1937, McAllen, Tex.

V-9 Gerhard, b. May 24, 1872; d. Aug. 18, 1872, Simonsdorf, West Prussia

V-10 Son, unnamed, stillborn, b. Jan. 26, 1877; d. Jan. 26, 1877, Peabody, Kan.

V-11 Helene, b. Oct. 21, 1878, Plum Grove, KS, USA; d. Apr. 23, 1968, Whitewater, Kan.

m. Feb. 7, 1907, Whitewater, Kan., John J. **Kopper**, b. Apr. 1, 1883, Aulie Ata, Turkestan, Russia; d. May 30, 1962, Whitewater, Kan.

#### Generation VI

Anna Claassen, b. June 24, 1862, Simonsdorf, West Prussia; d. Sept. 18, 1949, Independence, Kan.; bu. Emmaus Church, Whitewater, Kan. (Anna inherited the von Bergen-Claassen chest from

her parents, Abraham and Anna née Bergmann, in 1917 and became the third-generation owner.); m. Feb. 22, 1881, Whitewater, Kan., Jacob **Harder**, b. Jan. 28, 1849, Neumuensterberg, West Prussia; d. Jan. 28, 1937, Whitewater, Kan. Children: 13. Children 6 and 7 were twins, Bertha and Emma, b. Dec. 22, 1888, Whitewater, Kan. Emma died Aug. 11, 1988, Newton, Kan. Emma Harder inherited the von Bergen-Claassen dowry chest from her mother, Anna, in 1949 and

became the fourth-generation owner. Emma sold the chest to Herbert and Alice **Dyck** in 1970. Emma's nephew, Herbert, is the son of Jacob J. Dyck (1881-1954) and Marie née Harder (1884-1973), who is Emma's older sister. Herbert, b. Oct. 20, 1927, Whitewater, Kan.; m. Nov. 28, 1948, Whitewater, Kan., Alice **Sitler**, b. Sept. 11, 1929, Frankfort, Kan. Herbert is Justina von Bergen's great-great-grandson, the fifth-generation owner of the dowry chest.

## Täufer Families in Steffisburg

by J. Virgil Miller\*

One of the first communities in Switzerland with the most Amish was Steffisburg—a short distance north of Thun, now a suburb. Here there were Kauffmans, some of whom were Anabaptist ministers, as well as Joders, Königs (sometimes spelled Küng in Switzerland), Gerbers, and Blancks. Since the *Täufer* community was small, there was much intermarriage.

Fortunately, the parish books for Steffisburg include many references to *Täufer*, and this adds much to our knowledge of their identity. Unfortunately, they are mentioned only if there was some irregularity, such as the father being out of the country or the child being taken from his parents because they were Anabaptists. But often there is a notation that the parents were Anabaptists:

1. In 1673 **Rosina**, dau. of **Jacob Kauffman** and **Barbara Jost**, was baptized. Witnesses were **Michael Kauffman**, an Anabaptist, Rosina Frankhuser, and Cathrina Joder.

2. In 1684 **Christian**, son of **Uli Ösch**, an exiled Anabaptist who was living in Alsace at Salm, was baptized. Uli's wife was **Elsbeth Bichsel**. Uli came secretly home to his wife.

3. In 1684 a child was baptized: **Peter**, son of **Christian Gerber** and **Barbara Fahrni**, both Anabaptists. They were in Markirch (German for Ste. Marie-aux-Mines), Alsace, in February 1674. Barbara's sister **Anna**, who was with them at the urging of the mother, traveled there and was influenced by the *Täufer*. They came back to Canton Bern for a rest and the women requested that the child be baptized.

4. In 1687 a child **Christian**, son of **Christian Joder** and **Barbara Gerber**, was baptized. Note says that the parents were Anabaptists. In 1685 **Peter Joder** was baptized; same parents.

5. In 1689 **Catharina**, dau. of **Hans Küng**, nailmaker of Heimberg, brought a child to be baptized. **Hans Kauffman**, his brother-in-law, had left the country and did things that made him suspected of being an Anabaptist. Küng or König's wife was **Christina Kauffman**.

6. In 1690 the *Landvogt* of Trachselwald was asked if *Täufer* **Jost Joder** and wife **Christina Blanck** from Steffisburg were,

as reported, staying in Schangnau (a town further into the mountains), and if they had taken property there. As soon as it was confirmed, the *Täufer-Kammer* wished a report to be made (*Ratsmanual* 222/15).

7. In 1690 **Barbara**, dau. of **Christian Blanck**, heretic Anabaptist, son of **Hans Blanck**, the elder of Reidenau, who gave the child to be baptized. Christian's wife was **Anna Joder**. Witnesses were Hans Rupp, Verena Kauffman, and Barbara Güngerich.

8. In 1691 **Hans**, son of **Adam Bürki** and **Anna Bachman**, was baptized. The parents were said to be in Wallis and suspected Anabaptists.

9. In 1691 **Anna**, dau. of **Nicholas Gerber** and wife of *Täufer* faith, was baptized.

10. In 1691 **Peter**, son of **Hans Köng**, an Anabaptist, was baptized. The mother was **Christina Kauffman**, also Anabaptist; the child was brought up by the mother. Witnesses were Peter Gnagi, Christian Kauffman, and Hans Weber.

11. In 1692 Anabaptist parents **Peter Im Hoof** and **Barbara Gerber**, living *auf dem Linden*, had a child baptized, brought to the pastor by Michael Im Hoof.

12. In 1693 **Samuel Köng**, an Anabaptist, and his wife **Anna Gnägi** had a dau., **Barbara**, baptized. They had hidden her for ten months but now wished to baptize her. Peter Gnägi reported it. Witnesses were Cathrin Joder and Barbara Rohrer.

13. In 1693 **Christian**, son of **Isaac Kauffman**, an Anabaptist, and **Elsbeth Margelt**, was baptized. Witnesses were Hans Friedrich, Christian Moser, and Catharina Stutz. Other children were Anna, b. 1680; Isaak, b. 1685; Jacob, b. 1687; Elsbeth, b. 1690; and Hans, b. 1696. A note says that Isaac had been exiled from the land.

14. In 1698 **Peter**, son of **Nicholas Olthaus** and **Madle Müller**, Anabaptist, of Ste. [Marie?] was baptized.

15. *Täufer* **Hans Rupp** and **Catryn Joder** from the Steffisburg jurisdiction left the country. For property they took with them, they had to pay a tax of five percent (*Thun Abrechnung*).

\*Excerpted from *Both Sides of the Ocean: Amish Mennonites from Switzerland to America* which is sold for \$24.50 plus \$3.25 shipping from Masthof. The *Täufer* notations listed here are from the Swiss State Archives at Bern; local records taken from the *Gemeindeamt* vital records, and from notations on compilations of Joder family records by the late Karl Joder of Germany.