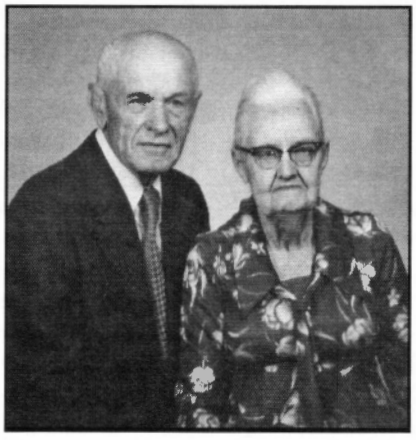
In Their Own Words, Part III

The Heinrich Wiebe Family: Germany, Central Asia, and America

translated and written by Ernest G. Claassen and
edited and annotated by D. Frederick Dyck*

The story of the Heinrich Wiebe family complements Part II of this series[1] by providing additional first person accounts of the Asian Trek (*Asienreise*) of Russian Mennonites into Turkestan 1880-1884.

Family/Mennonite historian and author Ernest G. Claassen (1895-1996) collected several written accounts of the Asian Trek from participants who were relatives of his wife, Justine *née* Wiebe (1898-1990). Collecting these Asian Trek memoirs was part of Ernest's overall goal to provide future generations of his extended family with knowledge of their Mennonite history. In this regard, Ernest was ahead of his time and somewhat of a novelty in the Emmaus Mennonite Church community near Whitewater, Kansas.



Ernest G. Claassen (1895-1996) and his wife Justine Wiebe Claassen (1898-1990). Credit: Edith Claassen Graber.

Ernest's daughter Edith Claassen Graber wrote, "Dad realized that oncoming generations did not know about the interesting details of life in Europe, the immigration and arrival in America. He felt it was important that that history not be lost. In the years between his active farming and his eventual death, in 1996 at age 101, this occupied a great deal of his time. It was not as much national or international history he was interested in, though he did reading in that field as well. It was his urge to record what happened to the families Wiebe, Thierstein, and Claassen that motivated him." [2]

To fulfill this desire to make a record, Ernest enlisted the help of his sister Elsie E. Claassen Claassen (Mrs. Henry Claassen), who in turn recruited other family members to contribute to a proposed family history book. This resulted in the publication of *Abraham Claassen: Vistula to Plum Grove* by Ernest Claassen in 1975.

Abraham Claassen (1825-1910) was Ernest's grandfather and the great-great-grandfather of this writer. Abraham arrived in America in 1876 from the Vistula Delta of West Prussia, the village of Simonsdorf, part of the large Heubuden Mennonite congregation. He eventually settled in Butler County, Kansas, in 1877. [3]

Using Abraham's detailed diary and diaries of our von Bergen ancestors dating to the mid-1700s, Ernest wrote a fascinating family history book with genealogy covering the years 1670-1975. Rare for a privately published book at this time was the inclusion of many old family photographs that had been seen by very few people. When I received my own copy of this book from my mother in 1975, it opened a whole new world to me, placed into context the years of oral family history I had learned up to that time in my life. The old photographs brought to life people I had only been able to imagine.

Supplementing the Claassen family history in *Vistula to Plum Grove* was a section on the Thierstein family of Ernest's mother, Elizabeth Thierstein Claassen (1872-1923). Elizabeth was born in Bowil, Canton Bern, Switzerland, and came to America with her parents and siblings in 1883.

In addition to collecting and writing about family history, Ernest recorded history in a line-a-day diary he began January 1, 1918, and continued until shortly before his death in 1996. Edith Claassen Graber has extracted lines of significance from Ernest's diary amounting to several hundred pages and made printed copies available to the family.

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[1] Jacob Toews, "In Their Own Words: Part II, A Short Sketch Of My Life," Jan. 2007, *MFH*.

[2] Letter (June 2006) to the author from Edith Claassen Graber, St. Louis, Mo.

[3] See "The Von Bergen-Claassen Dowry Chest" for Claassen genealogy, 1670-1927, in the July 2003 *MFH*.

Ernest Claassen's last major contribution to our Mennonite family history was *The Heinrich Wiebe Family*, written in the years 1987-1990 when Ernest was 92-95 years old. As with all of Ernest's previous works, he relied on original source documents that he painstakingly translated from the German script into English. If Ernest had left nothing but his hundreds of pages of translations, his legacy as a Mennonite historian would have been secure. But he did much more by producing three family histories in highly readable context. In *The Heinrich Wiebe Family*, Ernest used the written accounts of the Asian Trek by Herman Jantzen Jr., Jacob Klaassen, and Helena Graeve. Jantzen and Klaassen were from the Am Trakt colony while Graeve was from the Molotschna colony. Being able to read different accounts of the same event gives a diversity of perspective, and each adds details that improve overall knowledge of this historically significant event. All three of these trekkers were relatively young which adds another dimension to their accounts, differing in that respect from the account of Jacob Toews in Part II of "In Their Own Words."

These accounts as part of Ernest Claassen's *The Heinrich Wiebe Family* were originally typed into a manuscript in 1990 and made available to family members. Ernest's daughter Edith Claassen Graber graciously supplied this writer with a copy, and it is with her permission that these accounts are published here.

- D. Frederick Dyck

The Wiebe Family in West Prussia, Germany

"Two hundred years ago in 1785, Heinrich Wiebe, great-grandfather of my wife Justine Wiebe Claassen, was born in Broeskerfelde in West Prussia, Germany. We know little of his life. His second wife was Elizabeth Reimer of Simonsdorf, and it was at this place that he died at the age of 52 years. (Simonsdorf was also the village where my grandfather, Abraham Claassen, lived.)

"After his death, Mrs. Wiebe's bachelor brother, Bernhard Reimer, managed the farm for her. This was in the days of the scythe, cradle, and flail, and there was much hired labor that needed the direction of a manager.

"Of her six children, there was only one boy, Heinrich Wiebe Jr., my wife's grandfather. He is said to have been a man of quiet temperament and was a good farmer. He married Marie Fast. Her diary records simply, 'On February 12, 1855, Heinrich Wiebe was here, and on March 1st we celebrated our engagement.' An engagement was celebrated rather formally in those days, in the bride's home, with members of both families present.

"This was not a long engagement. Quoting from the diary, 'On March 20 we were married, and on March 23rd I entered into our, my new home at Simonsdorf, and five days later there was a break in the levee of the Vistula River, and another on April 1st, causing a terrible flood. We had water 18 inches high in our house.'

"Since they were about five miles from the river, they did not have such raging torrents as there were near to where the water was roaring through the levees. Of that Mrs. Wiebe wrote, 'Many buildings were washed away, and men and animals drowned. No one recalled at other floods that the water rose so high.'

"This was the last great flood of the Vistula. The levees were made higher, and dynamite came into use for breaking up the ice jams that clogged the river. Mrs. Wiebe continues, 'We had no harvest that year, no grain, fodder, or potatoes. All drainage canals were clogged due to the loose soil washed down, and rain continued all summer. We had much milk, and good pasture for the cattle. On the whole our fields were much improved due to the sediment left by this flood and yielded large harvests during the following years. God did not forsake us, and our hope was in Him. So we lived with joys and sorrows until April 9, 1866, when my dear husband died, after an 11-day illness following a stroke. So I remained alone with my children, but God did not forsake me.'

"Two years later Mrs. Wiebe was married a second time to Heinrich Entz, who passed away after five years. She was then helped out by her first husband's uncle, the Bernhard Reimer mentioned earlier.

"In his leisure time, Reimer would tell stories for Mrs. Wiebe's children, as one of them relates: 'He sat in an armchair, his crutch at his side, smoking his long pipe, surrounded by us, and just at the point where the suspense was greatest, the fire in his pipe would go out, and our begging to continue with the story was of no avail. The pipe had to be attended to. Uncle would ask, 'Have you learned to wait?' If we said 'Yes', he would say, 'Well, then wait.' If we said 'No', he would say, 'It's time you learned.'"

"What follows is taken from the notes of Mrs. Wiebe's daughter Anna Wiebe Toevs: 'After the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, the life in Prussia for the Mennonites changed rapidly. Many worldly ways were adopted, and Mother was much concerned about the welfare of her young children. Often she prayed with the Psalmist, "Out of the depth I have prayed unto Thee, Lord hear my voice. Let thine ears be attentive to my supplications."

'The following years were Mother's hardest. The matter of military service for her sons loomed up on the horizon, and she had to decide whether to stay and accept it, or to emigrate. Her cousin, Johann Janzen, had moved to Russia in 1853, and Mother corresponded with him. His description of this new settlement at the Trakt was exactly what Mother wished for: freedom from military service, absence of liquor and worldly amusements. All of our relatives advised against it; nevertheless she sold her farm, and on November 2, 1876, we left for Russia. Many, many of our church in Heubuden moved to America that year. Only our family went to Russia.'

The Wiebe Family In Russia And Central Asia

"It seems that by the time Mrs. Wiebe left Germany, her oldest son John was already in non-combatant training. Her second son, Henry H. Wiebe, my wife's father, had escaped military training by going to Russia to stay with Mrs. Wiebe's cousin Johann Jantzen in Samara province on the east side of the Volga River.

"Since her second son was in Russia, it seemed logical for Mrs. Wiebe to go there also, with her daughter and her two youngest sons. The daughter, Anna Wiebe Toevs, later wrote, 'As hard as Mother's last years in Germany had been, so pleasant and cordial was the welcome in this new home, for Uncle Jantzen had arranged everything for our coming. A house had been rented upon Mother's request, and furnished. After resting a few weeks at the Jantzen home in Lysanderhoeh, we moved into our new home. Uncle Jantzen took care of all the business for Mother. Henry, who had lived in the Jantzen home before our coming, remained there. Bernhard lived with another cousin of Mother's. So Cornelius and I were the only ones left at home. I attended school nearby. These four years in Russia were an oasis for Mother. Her cousin took us to church and out visiting, and she was very happy.

'When Henry was married (to Maria Jantzen), we moved with him to Koeppental. There I found many friends. We had a reading circle and Bible class each week. I was baptized in the beautiful church in 1879. It was a time of blessing. John too married and bought a farm in Hohendorf. Henry rented a farm, because the question of military service arose again, and there was talk of moving on.'

Henry H. Wiebe (1857-1922) and his first wife, Maria Jantzen Wiebe (1854-1892), with their son John H. Wiebe (1887-1975). During their years on the Asian Trek, Henry and Maria buried five children. Credit: Edith E. Claassen Graber.

"When the Mennonites first moved to Russia, they had been promised eternal freedom from military service. But when Germany adopted universal military training, Russia felt compelled to do the same, but as a concession to the Mennonites, they were exempted for ten years, from 1871 to 1881. During this time they were permitted to emigrate, although the government sought to discourage that.

"There was at this time a group of ten German Mennonite villages here on the Volga valley of Russia. Claas Epp Sr., mayor of a village in Germany, had been one of the leaders in establishing the first of this group of Russian villages. His son Claas Epp Jr. ran for mayor of his village, but lost.

He was nominated for minister in the local church, but failed the election. Seemingly still striving for leadership, he took up the idea of going eastward. He wrote a pamphlet on prophetic interpretation in harmony with this thought. Gradually he gained respect for his views, and the need to escape military service took an Asian turn.

"Trusted Mennonite leaders, in trips to Petersburg, the capital city of Russia, protested (and appealed from) the draft law; they met General Kaufman of Turkestan in mid-Asia. He invited them to settle in his area. This gave the movement a definite focus, and preparations began for the trip. Experience for this was not lacking, as many older people could remember their wagon trip from Germany to Am Trakt, Russia, a generation earlier.

"Henry H. Wiebe, with his wife and two small children born to their marriage, was among those who joined in this first of five treks, or wagon caravans, eastward. His older brother John had taken training before leaving Germany and seemingly was not subject to conscription here. The other members of the family, Mrs. Wiebe, her two younger sons, and daughter, joined the second trek about a month later.

"Also joining in this first trek was Franz Bartsch, another young man with his wife and infant daughter. The plan had been for this first trek to start eastward on July 1, 1880, but the Bartsch baby became seriously ill the evening before and died; the start of the trek was delayed until July 3.

"The wagon master, or leader of the trek, was Herman Jantzen, uncle of Henry H. Wiebe's wife. The driver of the lead wagon was Herman Jantzen Jr., a 14-year-old boy at the time. In later years he wrote a story of the trek and we quote from it here:

'My father was again sent as a delegate to Petersburg where he became acquainted with the then Governor of Turkestan, Baron von Kaufman. After this man had carefully checked many of the details of our situation, he made our representatives the proposal to have them migrate to Turkestan, where he had authority to grant settlers freedom from military service as well as exemption from taxes for 25 years.

'This offer was presented to our congregations and accepted. This was in the fall of 1879. During the coming winter my father sold all his land. Since he was the first to sell, he received a relatively high price.

'Several years prior to these events, my Uncle Claas Epp, my father's brother-in-law, had caused all manner of schism because of his millennial teaching concerning the Second Coming of Christ. Many accused him of spiritual pride. Since I do not wish to go into detail here, I refer the reader to the pamphlet, "Our Migration to Mid-Asia,"

written by Franz Bartsch, a former teacher in our colony. Teacher Bartsch was a dear friend of ours, and, since he had no property, Father placed a new wagon and two horses for his use.'

From Hahnsau to Kaplanbek

"Herman Jantzen Jr. continues: 'On July 3, 1880, we left our beloved home. As our caravan of 10 families in 18 wagons reached the highland above Hahnsau, we all stopped, stepped out of our wagons, and looked back once more into the valley below where our former homes were hidden among the trees. Many tears were shed.

'We (our family) had four wagons with seven horses. The first wagon was the largest, our family wagon, drawn by three horses. This was the lead wagon, and I was the driver. The driver of the second wagon was Jacob, son of Jacob Toews, who came with us because he would have entered the service in the fall. Our other drivers were brothers Gerhard and Bernhard Jantzen. They each drove one horse, which simply followed the wagon ahead.

'Since Father was the accepted leader of our group, our family wagon was invariably in the lead. When we stopped for the night, I turned off the road and we formed a large circle with our wagons. In our wagon there was a hand bell. Exactly by the clock, I had to ring the bell, on Father's orders, whether to wake our people in the morning, indicate time for watering horses, or after breakfast when we were to start again. The bell also rang for the morning and evening devotions, for which we gathered in the wagon circle. We did not travel on Sunday; then we had worship services in the morning and afternoon. There were two ministers in our midst, Wilhelm Penner and Jonas Quiring.

'In Orenburg we rested for several days. Here the horses were shod, the wagons repaired, and supplies bought for the journey ahead. At that time the railroad ended at Orenburg.

'The Orenburger and the Cossacks, because of their great gallantry and valor, played an important role in the affairs of the Russian empire. They were very religious, and one never heard them curse or swear. They never shook hands with those of another faith. For guests they provided their own samovar or tea urn, also glasses, plates, and silverware. They never used these themselves. On the other hand, no foreigner was allowed to touch their personal tableware. They were, however, always friendly and hospitable. From age 17, all men were in the military service, stationed in their home area.

'The Ural River is the boundary between Europe and Asia. In the east, there are many nomadic and thievish tribes of Kirghiz people who must be guarded against. It was the duty of the Cossacks to provide this protection. They were therefore nearly always in the saddle and in uniform. Their woman did the field work.

'Finally we arrived at the last fort, the small town of Irgisen, just before the large desert. Here we could get any and all supplies we needed. Since this was the last town before getting to the 250-mile-wide desert, in which no grass grew, we had to take along enough oats for the horses for the entire distance. We could not load all this in our wagons, so it became necessary to hire a camel caravan to transport the oats. The caravan had to stay right with us all the way. In this manner we hoped to have sufficient supply until we reached Kasalinsk.

'While all these preparations were being made, another week had passed. From Orenburg we had now come 360 miles southward. As a result, the weather had become much warmer. This caused considerable hardship for the horses, especially since water was often in short supply. In the course of the route, several children died. In one family, three children died at almost the same time. Without much ceremony they were buried by the wayside.

'And so we went upon our way until we arrived at the worst stretch of 120 miles. Because of the deep, loose sand we had to put extra teams of horses on each wagon in order to keep going. This made for very slow progress. Finally we came to the end of this terrible stretch of road and arrived at the Aral Sea.

'We continued on to Karamachi, on a bumpy road to Fort Perowsk, a larger Sarten town. All the way we had no problem with our horses, since there was an ample supply of water and fuel. The road led along the Syr Darja River, through much scrub forestry in which were many pheasants, foxes, and beautiful deer.

'After we had rested in Fort Perowsk for a day and had done some shopping, our road led us through Fort Dachulusto. Here we rested again to prepare for the crossing of the wild mountain stream, the river Ariss, which gave us much trouble. With the help of some *Dachigiten*, the horseback-riding service of the government, we were all able to make the crossing safely.

'We traveled through Becklarbeck to Akdschan on the Kelles River, where we lodged for the night. At our regular evening worship we sang the song, "Now All the Woods Are Resting" (*Nun Ruhen alle Wälder*). While we were singing, a fine Russian *troika*, a Russian coach drawn by three horses, drove up, and two uniformed gentlemen stepped down. With bare heads they came to our meeting, and took part in the worship. After the service was over, one of them introduced himself, General Baron von Kaufman and Adjutant Major Meiser. They had just come from Petersburg.

'The Baron recognized my father immediately, and greeted him in a very friendly manner and extended us a very hearty welcome to "my" Turkestan. He gave us instructions to leave the Post road and follow the river to Kaplanbek, where we were to have our winter quarters. Then he went on his way.

'Our journey had taken 15 weeks. On the way we had buried 12 children. We arrived at Kaplanbek on the 18th of October 1880. Several weeks later, a second train of 22 families arrived, to whom we could offer ready housing. This group had also had all manner of incidents along the

way, especially since it had become quite cold in the meantime.'

"The first trek, which included Henry H. Wiebe and his wife, had now reached the area for which they had started. They had begun the trip with two small children. Both had died and had been buried in one grave on the way.

[The second group, with Wiebe's mother and her three younger children, came about a month later." For an account of this group, Ernest Claassen translated Jacob Klaassen's memoir and included comments by Anna Wiebe Toews, Henry H. Wiebe's sister.]

Memories of a Journey
by Jacob Klaassen

'In 1870, Russia adopted compulsory military training for all, and many Mennonites from south Russia migrated to America. Our fathers at Am Trakt, however, could not make up their minds to do so. Several delegations were sent to Petersburg (among them my father) to ask if there might not be some small area in the great land of Russia where we might live according to our faith. On one such occasion, they met Governor Kaufman from Taschkent from Turkestan. He invited them to Turkestan where they would be exempt.

'During the summer of 1880, one observed in the villages that on some homesteads wagons for the journey were being built. Our fathers, who had come in wagons from West Prussia only 26 years ago, well remembered how to arrange them conveniently and were giving ideas on some ways to improve them. Hoops were attached to the wagon box; over this came a layer of felt blanket, then a linen cover, and lastly a waxed cloth to make them rain proof. They proved to be warm and waterproof.

'Most of the wagons were large box wagons; some had a door with a window in the rear, where in some cases the nursery had been placed. The large wagons, which had no rear door, had a small compartment where things used regularly at each stop were easily accessible. Usually a bundle of hay was on top of this compartment, in case one could not buy feed at the next stop. There were also several small buggies and one green glass carriage in the procession.

'After all preparations had been completed, the day of departure came. Those forming the caravan gathered at the village of Medemtal. As we journeyed through several villages we stopped for dinner and "Vesper" with relatives to bid them farewell; so it was quite late when we arrived at Medemtal.

'The following day, travel arrangements were perfected as best as they could be. Many came to bid us farewell. On August 13, the whole travel group met here. At 11 a.m. we left. There were 12 families and 29 wagons. A smaller group had left four weeks earlier, and a very much larger group left two weeks later from Molotschna.

'(Anna Toews comments: 'Our family left Koeppental on the 13th and were at Uncle Johann Jantzen's in Lysanderhoeh for dinner. My brother John Wiebe's family with their small daughter came there to bid us farewell. What an eventful day this was we young people hardly realized.')

Jacob Klaassen's story resumes: 'At Gnadendorf we stopped for the first night. A definite procedure was arranged from the start, the wagons forming a circle, so that the last wagon stood in front of the first. In the order in which we had left Medemtal we continued on the entire journey. My uncle, Heinrich Jantzen, was leader, and we could not have chosen a better man. He kept strict order, assisted by his son, and all willingly followed their directions.

'As soon as all wagons were in a circle, the camp began to be lively. The drivers took the horses to drink, at a well or stream, as they found it. Others brought water for cooking, others again built fires, put up tents, etc. The children, happy to be out of the wagons, played and shouted. The larger children had to hunt fuel. Manure flats were usually available; but it was difficult when all fuel was wet. Oats and hay were bought by the load, unloaded in the center of the circle, and then computed to each individually. The camps were very interesting when each family had a fire with steaming samovar (a metal urn used in Russia for making tea). There was some visiting back and forth; the women did want to know what the others were cooking. So it was *gemütlich* and sociable. Of course, for our parents, who had the responsibility, it may not have been quite so *gemütlich.*

'Sunday morning began with rain. It cleared sufficiently, however, that we could have morning and afternoon services. They were conducted in the center of the circle, in the order of church services. A small table served as pulpit, and each brought their own seating or sat on the ground. Between services groups were visiting and entertaining in or near their tents. A choir was organized, and Sunday evenings were spent in singing, led by the Rev. J. K. Penner.

'Many songs were sung to the glory of God, among then the song, "Our Trek Goes through the Desert." The first Sunday evening was particularly beautiful. During evening devotions, however, stray dogs carried away a large piece of meat from one of the tents. We soon learned to leave nothing attractive to dogs when camping near a village.

'Even before we reached Uralsk we met our first camel caravan. Our horses were terrified at first. One horse amused us each time by making a wide semicircle out of the way, but then falling exactly in line even though it had no driver.

'We passed through numerous villages. Some houses in these Russian villages hardly looked like human habitations, and everywhere hogs were running about. One can hardly imagine a Russian village without hogs running everywhere.

'Sunday, September 7, was our first pleasant Sunday and quite warm. In the afternoon we went walking in the city of Orenburg, with its large stores and beautiful display

windows. Orenburg was an important trade center, since all travel and trade to Siberia and mid-Asia passed through this city. The railroad ended here, and travelers went from here by "Post," the designated mail route. Freight was transported on these roads by caravans. We met these "Post" wagons innumerable times. As soon as we heard the bell of the center horse, our whole procession had to make way. This was not always pleasant.

'Halfway between Orenburg and Orsk we passed through a mountainous region, with many beautiful views. The roads were stony, and one of our horses became so lame that we had to sell it. Another family that had three horses before one wagon loaned us one until we reached Orsk. Father bought a horse from a Kirghiz for 50 rubles. We bought food and 8,000 pound of oats. This was loaded on camels, which were to accompany us as far as Karabutak. We were advised to take the caravan road, which was 50 miles shorter. The road was fairly good, and our horses were able to find pasture on the steppes.

'Our camel caravan made an earlier start than we did, but as camels travel slower, we arrived earlier in the evening. It was interesting to observe a camel caravan. Solemnly and reservedly, one camel followed silently upon the other. No hurry. Time is of no importance. We met many camel caravans. The noise and clamor of civilization has not yet reached Asia. One traveled deliberately and serenely. It was also interesting to see a camel caravan in camp. At short stops the loads were not removed. The camels lay down and chewed their cuds with serenity of mind. In the middle of the camp the Kirghiz cook rice and mutton. In between are the little donkeys that furnish the music. The guides used them to ride on. Such a camp is a picture of repose, a contrast to the restlessness of our day.'

"(Anna Toews: 'My brother and wife, Henry Wiebe's, made this trip four weeks earlier. Their two lovely boys, two and one years old, soon became ill with infant diarrhea and were buried together in one coffin at Karabutak. As we passed through we visited the little grave, which was marked with two small crosses on which their names were inscribed. It was a military cemetery, for Karabutak is a military fort.')"

"Jacob Klassen goes on: 'My parents were able to celebrate their silver wedding anniversary with a few guests and tea. The choir sang for them and were also served tea. It was interesting to see how the camels came near to the tents to listen to the music.

'One of our older members became very ill, and after consultation we decided to send her on to Kasalinsk, as there were no doctors in the desert. However, before we got started, she had improved. God had answered prayer.'

("Anna Toews: 'The patient was our beloved mother. We had two large wagons; Bernhard drove our wagon, and Cornelius the other. Mother and I slept in our wagon, and my brothers in the other. For Mother a very good seat had been prepared with cushions and springs. She had a comfortable bed, but she had a bad rupture, and the truss caused her very great discomfort on the bumpy roads. She always took it off after lying down and put it on before rising, but this day she had dared to take it off because of the pain, and now the hernia was strangulated. Our distress was great. Since no doctor was available in the desert, we all thought, and Mother too, no doubt, that she would leave us. My (later) husband's grandmother massaged her all night hoping to reduce the hernia. The wagon was heated with steaming samovars and the perspiration ran off us and the patient, but in the morning she was improved. Oh the joy! She remained in bed for the remaining six weeks of our trip.')

'On November 19 we reached Taschkent. Here we had to cross a mountain range, and again we had to go in two divisions, as we needed all the horses to haul half of the wagons. The first climb was one and one-half miles and the second was four and one-half miles. It rained and sleeted the whole day, and our rubber boots were hardly adequate. When we arose the next morning, our clothes, wet as they were, were frozen to a lump. Our spirits were low, really below zero. We had hoped to reach our destination today, but failed, and had to spend another Sunday en route. Day dawned late and we postponed services until afternoon. We retired early, and broke camp at 2 a.m. on Monday in order to reach our destination. In order to find Kaplambek, where the group that had preceded us had settled, we had to leave the "Post" road, and, through swamps, canals, bad bridges, and finally through a small river, we were led by a native Kirghiz; but we arrived before sundown, with our friends.

'Kaplambek is 20 miles sideways from Taschkent. We were happy to arrive and were cordially received. At one side of Kaplambek were high mountains, at the other the little river Keles. On the other side of this river agriculture with irrigation continued all the way to Taschkent. The mountains were treeless but covered with grass and provided good pasture for sheep and cattle. It was a beautiful little piece of God's earth.

'Taschkent is a beautiful city. Over the city gate was an irrigation canal, which ran along on top of a high wall and served the many gardens and parks. In February apricots were in bloom. Even the steppes toward Kaplambek were a carpet of colorful flowers, beyond any description.'"

Ernest Claassen: "With the two previous accounts we have followed the first two treks or caravans from the Am Trakt settlements on the Volga River to their interim or temporary destination in the Turkestan area. The third trek is also of interest to us, as it involves a family whose fortunes were closely linked to that of the Wiebes from Turkestan on.

"This third trek was the longest and largest in a total of five. It originated in the Molotschna colony of South Russia and headed northeastward toward the Am Trakt colony hoping to join with a trek from there. But they found that that trek had already left, so they followed it about a month later and suffered more from cold weather.

"The first trek took up to 15 weeks, the third, 18 weeks, because of the greater distance traveled.

"Helena Graeve, later Warkentin, who wrote this story a half century later, was at the time of the trek young and unmarried, a late teenager. We quote her story here.

'Our parents undertook this laborious journey from the village of Kleefeld in South Russia because of compulsory military service. They did this out of love for their children. Farms and homes had to be sold very cheaply. Because of a delay in obtaining passports we started late in the year. There were heart-rending farewells from the loved ones left behind. Then we drove to the village of Waldheim, where we had agreed to meet. Here 65 families gathered. Each one had such of his possessions as could be loaded on a wagon. Everyone walked who was able to do so. Only the old, sick, and small children could always ride.

'Here we spent a day organizing our train. We slept the first night under the blue heavens. It will probably interest the young people to know that rules and order were observed in our wagon train, for 65 wagons formed a long procession. A bell sounded for arising. The horses were quickly cared for, breakfast prepared and eaten. Then the bell sounded for morning devotions, a hymn was sung, and then there was scripture reading and prayer. Then everyone set about loading everything. The bell was sounded for packing, then for hitching up the horses, and again for departure. Each driver was to keep about five paces behind the wagon before him, and no one was to pass another wagon. If a wagon was forced to stop, those behind were required to help with whatever was needed. We had a very dear and wise leader, Uncle Jacob Janzen. All followed and loved him. Whenever we heard a whistle everyone would stop. So we drove from early morning until noon. If possible, we always formed a circle with our wagons when we halted. It was picturesque. Then we prepared and ate our meal, and, simple as it was, how good it tasted. We sat on a blanket on the ground. Then we had to hurry on, for we had a very long journey ahead of us, and we drove until late evening. The first days we were very weary from walking.

'We enjoyed wonderful evenings in God's fresh and free nature. When everything was done, the bell called us to evening devotions, and everyone came. It was quite a gathering, with the many young people and children. After the service, if at all possible, the young people had singing practice. For this they were never too weary, and many a hymn was learned.

'On Saturday afternoons we began looking for a suitable place to spend Sunday. An early halt was made, and the women and girls had a great washday. Walking on dusty toads in the heat, with occasional rain, made plenty of work.

'We had to be through with everything early on Saturday evening, then the children had singing practice. Then came Sunday, truly a day of rest for us. Then, as always, morning devotions, followed by a sermon, afternoons a Bible study or prayer hour. Evenings, there was another service and singing. We also had Sunday school for the children during the day. Sunday was too short, and never boring, for there was often much that was interesting —sometimes a hill to be climbed, and always so many of God's marvels to be seen, so many wildflowers; once a great field of tulips, then one of violets with their lovely fragrance. How often we young girls could bring bouquets to our parents, the old and sick, and what joy this gave them!

'When we climbed mountains there were often such wonderfully beautiful rocks. It was too bad that we could not carry them away with us. Everywhere we saw the great Creator and were often overcome with awe. But what will it be when we meet this great Creator, and have lived from our youth so that we need not fear to meet Him and gaze into His countenance?

'So it went, week after week, up to 18 weeks. During this time we were often reminded that winter was nearing, for we slept on the ground and the nights were already very cool.

'Until now I have mentioned the bright side of our journey. Now I want to tell something of the dark side. It became increasingly colder, down to three degrees above zero Fahrenheit, and we were outside day and night. It came gradually, or we would not have been able to manage.

'Many of us still had to sleep on the ground, for there is little room in a wagon, and in many wagons there were the sick. Walking became difficult because of the snow, which began to fall. Our clothes were often very wet in the evenings, and we would dry them by the cooking coals we put in a pail and hung up in our wagons. Often we would show each other the skin on our hands, cracked by frost and hard water. For those in good health it was bearable, but for the poor little children, the sick and dying, many graves had to be made, and many a tear was sowed on the journey. But each helped the other to the limit of his ability. Here one could learn love, practice love, and really understand the words, "God is love!" For in the prayer meetings everyone could pour out what was in his heart, and young men did not shrink from coming before God, and also the young women; often one recalls the time when they put all their services at the disposal of the Lord and cared for the old parents, even if they were not their own. And when evening came we were all very weary, for we found very poor roads, when it was necessary to hitch up extra horses to the wagons and still we had to help push.

'Funerals were observed so solemnly, with preaching, hymns, and prayer. Then we went on from the fresh grave, but with a pain in the heart!

'So we finally came to Taschkent, where the high official lived, who had invited us to come. As concerned as a father for his children, he had prepared rooms with stoves for us. But now came what was most serious: we could not endure the air in the warm rooms. One after another became ill with typhus fever and many died, among them my 20-year-old brother. That was a great sorrow.

'Here we stayed about eight months but were not idle. All the men who were not ill hauled stones for road-building. The boys carried snow and ice into a great storage cellar. The girls and women did sewing, so we earned something whenever possible. But here, too, many graves were made. Many soldiers came to our services and

funerals, and eternity will reveal what was done for the Lord on this journey, even if only in a small way.'

Ernest Claassen: "With the above, Helene Graeve tells of the arrival at the Taschkent-Kaplambek area of the third caravan from European Russia in 1880. A fourth and fifth caravan were to follow in the summer of 1881. Caravans one and two from the Am Trakt area on the Volga had settled for the winter at Kaplambek while caravan three from Molotschna colony in South Russia mostly went to Taschkent.

"In a display of cooperation, Abraham Peters of Molotschna was chosen to serve the joint group as elder or chief minister. This was sharply criticized by Claas Epp Jr., who was still in Russia and was seeking to control the movement by letters beginning, 'So says the Lord to the church of Kaplambek.' His message now was, 'You have done as Israel did when they demanded a king. The Lord wanted to lead by His spirit, but you have rejected His guidance.'"

"So great was Epp's influence, the Peters' eldership was eventually nullified. But much disunity had been created, and most of the Molotschna group settled separately from the others at Aulie Ata, more than 100 miles east of Taschkent.

"The remainder of the Mennonites, probably those more open to the influence of Claas Epp Jr., were inclined to seek a refuge in the province of Bukhara, southeast of Taschkent. They were influenced in this by Jung-Stilling's novel *Heimweh* (Homesickness), and, although an inquiring delegation reported that Bukhara was not open to settlers, there were those who felt that this was really the 'open door which no one is able to shut' of Rev. 3:8, not even the Khan of Bukhara. If God was calling them to go, why listen to mere men?

"In any event, they could not remain where they were. They needed to find '*Lebensraum*' free from Russian conscription laws, where they could set up their own self-contained colonies, such as they had in Russia.

"So, late in July 1881, a caravan composed mostly of those who came from the Am Trakt colony started southeastward from Taschkent. About a month later they reached Bukhara and camped for the night on the Bukharian soil. They were soon informed that they were not welcome and were escorted back across the border into Russia. They spent some time here but, still in danger of conscription, moved into Bukhara again. Here we let Herman Jantzen resume his story."

'The next morning we were driven back out of the area by colorfully clothed soldiers of Bukhara. They left us in a well-watered valley, which was a "no-man's land" of one kilometer's width and where no one was to bother us.

'Quickly we built sod huts, for winter was at hand. Hardly had we settled by our warm stoves when it began to snow, and it became colder. Then entirely without warning one day the Bukhara soldiers appeared to drive us out. Protests were of no avail. Since Father was our leader, the roof of our hut was the first to be torn off, and all our boxes and chests were loaded on two-wheeled carts, of which they had about 100 with them. They bound me and placed me on top of the loaded carts and drove off toward Serubulak in Russia. We had hardly begun to travel when I became numb with cold. I begged the soldier who was with me to untie me. It was obvious that I could not escape in the deep snow. He ordered a halt, untied me, and allowed me to run beside the wagon until I was out of breath, and of course also warm. Then he stretched out his hand and pulled me up onto his horse beside himself. He threw his long wide fur coat over my head, which covered me completely. I stuck my head out behind his neck so that I could get air, and on the warm horse, under the warm fur, I was not cold anymore. Shortly before dark we reached Serubulak. Soon after this, one cart after another came into the village with our people and belongings. On the order of the Governor we were lodged in the caravansary. The large mosque of the village became our church and a building nearby our school.

'For a while now things were quite peaceful among our older men. Then suddenly the conflict for or against Epp flared again, which led to further divisions. Soon hereafter letters came again from Epp, this time from near the city of Turkestan, where their train had stalled in the snow.

'I recall that at this time our dear teacher and minister, J. Penner, who had kept himself out of the divisions and quarrels, was asked what he really thought of the condition of the church. He arose and gave a very firm lecture against all the controversies and disputing. He also condemned the "letters of prophecy" of Uncle Epp, whose curse and bitter results we could all see. To quote further, "I call on all of you and entreat you: become sober in the Lord. He will reveal the correct truth in time. I would be the dumb dog of Isaiah 56:10 if I were not to warn you with great firmness."

'These were his words as I recall them. But the result was that he was completely misunderstood and had to stand aside. Even though in many ways he was now a bystander, the weekly catechism training and the Bible lessons continued under his direction. Uncle Penner became even dearer and more precious to us young people, which gave him much satisfaction.

'Finally the winter was over; spring came and with it the train of Uncle Epp. Epp now made great effort to bring the different groups and divisions together again. With many he was successful; others doubted the wisdom of the whole matter and drew back. Among those who left the group was Franz Bartsch. He and his wife moved to Taschkent, then to Aulie Ata.

'At this time my father received a letter from General von Dreesch in Samarkand. He informed us that, through Baron Grottenhelm, he had made arrangements for us to settle near the Khiva border, on the Amu Darya River. The place was 100 miles downstream, on the navigable irrigation canal, Lausan. (Note: Lausan was 100 miles downstream from Khiva. Khiva itself lay 600 miles to the north and west of Serubulak where the group was now located.) A delegation was sent to investigate this possibility.

'After the delegation returned, Father was instructed to write General von Dreesch to tell him we were ready to move immediately, there being only one question: "How? For the road that our delegation traveled by horseback is impassable by wagons." After a few weeks we received a reply. "Strike out! At the boundary of Bukhara you will be given an escort of Bukhara soldiers, who will take you safely all through Bukhara to the Amu Darya. There you will find enough boats for your whole group, furnished by Khiva, to continue on the journey. Bon voyage!"

'Forthwith we started on the 700-mile journey with our 60 families and many wagons; I do not recall the number. As we reached the boundary of Bukhara we were met by a troop of 50 uniformed Bukhara soldiers, who greeted us with the friendly words, "Peace be with you!" With them as guides we traveled many days through this fruitful land, through towns and larger market places. Everywhere at the stopping places, preparations had been made in advance for our needs. There was feed for the horses, fruit for all our needs, eggs, milk, rice, flour, mutton and so on. Everything was very cheap.

'So we finally reached the tributary of the Saraf River, which at this place was reduced to several small streams because it delivers its water to numerous irrigation canals until it finally runs into the Kara Kum, the Black Desert. Here our wagon trip ended. The wagons were dismantled and, together with all our possessions, were loaded on camels. We needed 450 of these animals, which were delivered to us in a few days by our escort soldiers. For the women and children they made a sort of sedan, one of which was roped to each side of the camel.

'Now all the men and boys got on the horses and we struck out into the desert, which was about 100 miles wide. During the day the heat was too oppressive for traveling. So we rested during the day, for which naturally the camels had to be unloaded. It was almost impossible to find water anywhere. When the sun set, the camels were loaded, and we went over hill and dale, and over countless sand dunes. Many of the women and children suffered with dysentery. The nights were lit by a large bright comet with a tail halfway across the heavens. It was so bright one could read by its light. Those of us who rode the horses would sing so as not to go to sleep.

'Finally we reached the Amu Darya River where nine large freight boats were waiting for us. The camel drivers left the next morning for their homes.

'Now came the tiring job of having each of us find our own things in the turmoil. This alone took several days, after which we were ready to load everything on the boats. Each family took its place alongside of their own goods; included were the dismantled wagons. The younger as well as some of the older men again mounted their horses, took provisions and cooking utensils, and rode downstream toward Petroalexandrowska. I was also supposed to ride with them; however, since my eyes were badly inflamed, I had to stay on the boat. Slowly and calmly we floated downstream. Each of the boats had seven sailors, besides the captain. At noon we landed to cook the food but we ate on the boats. At night we stopped on some open shore, for the area was covered with deep forests in which there was an abundance of jackals, fox, and hyenas. Those who could, slept on deck. The rest of us slept on the shore. We always kept a large fire to keep the animals away. But they howled and barked all night so that no one slept much. However, we could make up much of the sleep during the day on the boat.

'After nine or ten days without incident, we finally came to Petroalexandrowska. From afar off we could see a *troika* (three-horse carriage) and beside it several persons dressed in white. It was the general, Baron Grottenhelm, with his wife and half-grown children, who all greeted us warmly in German. Father and the other two delegates were received with warm handshakes. Our riders had also arrived.

'The Baron advised that, since this was the last settlement of Europeans and therefore the last business place, we should buy what building materials we would need. On the Lausan in the virgin forest, we would not be able to buy these things. We followed this advice, and everyone bought doors, windows, hinges, and nails, etc. Then we loaded our ships and sailed another 100 miles downstream until we got to the Lausan canal. Over this distance also, the riders followed through the undergrowth of the forests along the shore after us.

'As soon as the ships were unloaded and the sailors paid, we began to look for a proper location for the settlement. On both sides of the Lausan were high dikes behind which we now cleared the forest of undergrowth to make room for buildings. After laying out a straight village street, each family built a home on either side. These were sod huts, although there was plenty of wood for more permanent buildings. Lumber and cane for roofs were in abundance, and there was plenty of wood for fuel. It had gotten quite cold in the meantime. So it was not long until we all sat inside by a warm stove. The barns for the horses were built of cane, and soon they too had a roof over their heads. The feed for the horses, alfafa hay, was brought to us by the Uzbeks, who lived about three miles upstream. They also brought food stuff such as flour, rice, oil, chickens, eggs, etc. Everything was very cheap. From the other side of the stream fishermen brought us wonderful fish. A sturgeon a yard long cost only 25 kopeks (about 12.5 cents).

'For us the winter passed in a rather calm manner, only that the howl of animals often disturbed us at night. Even a tiger was often heard nearby. He finally got to be so brave as to take a walk down the village street one night. However, he never attacked either persons or horses.'"

Ernest Claassen: "Herman Jantzen, first cousin once removed of John H. Wiebe (1887-1975), has told the story of the eventful trip of 700 miles from Serubulak in Russia to Lausan in the province of Khiva. The five caravans from Russia had now divided into two distinct groups. About 80 families had settled in four villages at Aulie Ata, more than 100 miles northeast of Taschkent. The remainder had

Henry H. Wiebe (1857-1922) with son John H. Wiebe (1887-1975), ca1895. Credit: Edith E. Claassen Graber.

now reached Khiva, some 600 miles west of Taschkent. They built a village on the marshy flats near the river, which they called Lausan, the local name for the irrigation canal. The Wiebes were with this group. Herman Jantzen describes their situation:

'About three miles downstream lived the Jamuden, also called the Turkmen, who grazed their herds of sheep, camels, and horses on the large forest-free pastures. They are a nomadic, thievish folk who live in tents. They are never unarmed, carrying Russian repeating rifles as well as a dagger in the belt. Since they could not be trusted, we had, by order of the government, a small group of soldiers with three officers who lived in tents nearby.

'The winter was very cold so that the mile-wide Amu Darya froze over solid. The flow of the stream is toward the north, where it flows into the Aral Sea. When the spring thaw came, the river was stopped by the piles of ice, so that it overflowed its banks. As we got out of our beds the next morning we stood almost knee-deep in water. We could not remain where we had settled, so we moved a mile inland onto a hill and built a new settlement.

'However, we did not remain as one settlement. About 20 families who opposed Uncle Epp, among whom were Jacob Toews, Johann and Heinrich Jantzen, and our dear pastor J. Penner, and others, moved about three miles farther away and built on another hill.

'The native Jamuden often rode through our village without ever taking anything that belonged to us, so the small troop and the three officers were withdrawn. But now the Jamuden started to steal. They had noticed that we did not have guns. In the lower village where the other 20 families lived, things remained quiet. They had hired two Cossacks as guards.

'One night in bright moonlight three Jamuden thieves appeared in our yard. We three brothers, Gerhard, Bernhard and I, had, without Father's knowledge, made some spears and were standing at the window of our bedroom. As they rode into our yard they gave three warning shots. Two of them dismounted and forced their way into our barn where our seven horses were kept. They led the horses out of the barn, while a third one with gun ready rode up and down past our window. We yelled loudly and stormed into the entry of the house. As we came to the outside door Father stepped into our way with a stern warning as follows: "Are not you ashamed to resist evil in this way? Because of the principle of non-resistance, our people have left one country after another until we have come here with such difficulty. It becomes necessary for us to be what we have always claimed to be, and you want to deny the faith of your fathers by striking one blow! Back to bed! As long as God lives, Who also sees the theft of our horses, He will not let you starve, even without the horses." With tears, though with inner rebellion, we went back to bed, but Father had passed his non-resistance exam. That the battle within him had been intense, he and Mother came to realize much later.

'One day an officer of the Cossacks came into our yard where I happened to be. He asked whether the village elder lived here. As I answered in the affirmative, he observed me carefully and asked, "Boy, are you ill? You seem so pale and thin." I answered, "How can one look different when one hardly sleeps at night and then works in the fields in the heat of the day?" Just then Father came out of the house. After a short greeting, the officer said, "I hear that you are allowing the Jamuden to rob you. Did not you report this to the Khan at Khiva?" Father answered, "According to the word of God, we cannot do that. We do not resist with force." The Cossack officer replied, "But God has provided governments to protect the righteous. How can we protect you if you do not report to us? I will send you people who will protect you."

'Perhaps a week later, there came a troop of Khiva soldiers, headed by a well-dressed gentleman. Sternly he asked my father whether he was leader of the village. Then he had his fine tent set up in our yard. It was furnished with beautiful carpets. A separate tent was put up for his kitchen. He invited Father, and me as interpreter, into his tent. We were invited to be seated. Bread, sweets, and tea were served on a cloth. Again he scolded us for not reporting robberies to the government.

'In the meantime Mother had baked some *Rollkuchen* and prepared some tea, so she invited us into the house in order to offer our hospitality. In the house the officer stepped to Mother's serving table, on which stood a beautiful canister. After viewing himself in the cover he asked who had made this box. Father informed him that his

brother-in-law had made it as a birthday present.

'How could the man fasten the glass to the box in such a clever way? One can see no seam or crack, as though it was fastened in one place. Even the color of the wood can be seen through the glass." After a pause he added, "Are there more men among you who can do this work?" Father said there were, and the officer continued, "His majesty, the Khan, was in Petersburg and saw a large parquet that was covered with glass in this manner. Now he would like very much to have such a parquet. I would like to discuss this with your master craftsmen."

'Thereupon Father asked some of our cabinetmakers to come, and he presented them to the officer. The officer pointed to the box and asked, "Which one of you made that?" My Uncle Gerhard Esau stepped forward and said, "I did." He was asked to explain how he had fastened the glass to the wood. He explained that this was not really glass but a liquid, a varnish. First the wood is polished to a very smooth surface, then the liquid is rubbed on with wax balls. In this way, the wood becomes mirror-like.

'As a result two of our masters were designated to ride to Khiva with them and show the box to the Khan. I was to accompany them as an interpreter.

'The following morning I rode with them to Khiva, about 100 miles distant. On the third day we arrived and were presented to the Khan, with our precious box. He admired it very much and obviously liked it. The next morning we were shown to the palace of the Khan, where the latter personally showed us a large, newly built hall, but the floor was missing. He wished to have a parquet floor laid, with inlaid stars of dark and light wood. This would have to be dry enough and then polished or glazed.

'Our craftsmen promised to complete the task if the Khan would furnish the dark and light wood. The varnish would have to be brought from Petroalexandrowska. He agreed to all this, and then asked how long it would take to complete the work. Our men with ten helpers set the time at six months. After agreeing with all these conditions the Khan added, "Your whole village of 40 families will be brought to Ak-Metchet (a village near the city of Khiva) into a large park. Here you can build houses and lead a peaceful life; for there are no robbers here."'

Ernest Claassen: "This was a welcome solution for the problems of some of those who had been troubled by thieving. It also influenced others toward moving nearer the Khan's protection. Still others had been corresponding with American friends and were beginning to consider a possible move to America. The thieving became worse and break-ins began to occur, and finally a young man was killed in one.

"By this time, their situation had become intolerable. On April 16, 1884, after one and one-half years at Lausan, 38 families moved south from there into the interior of Khiva. The next day, the remaining 24 families started northward toward Orenburg, where they had passed on their way to Asia four years earlier. This would be the first step on their way to America. Among these were the Graeve family and the family of Rev. Jacob Toews, who were the great-grandparents of Kenneth and Herman Toevs. (Note: The spelling of this name changes from Toews to Toevs at the discretion of family members. In German a "w" is pronounced as a "v" so Toews is pronounced "Taves" in English.) The Wiebe family was included, with the exception of Henry H. Wiebe, who seems to have delayed in Asia for another year, possibly until his wife's family came over.

"This trip to Orenburg was the last of their long journeys by wagon. The 24 families went with 17 wagons. Their supplies had been sent northward down the Amu Darya River toward the Aral Sea to Kongrad by boat. There, 106 miles downstream, they were not immediately able to get camels for further transport and had to wait a week. Then they started north on the west side of the Aral Sea, which they were now completely encircling. They hired a guide and started up what was really only a camel path, encountering swampy ground and sand.

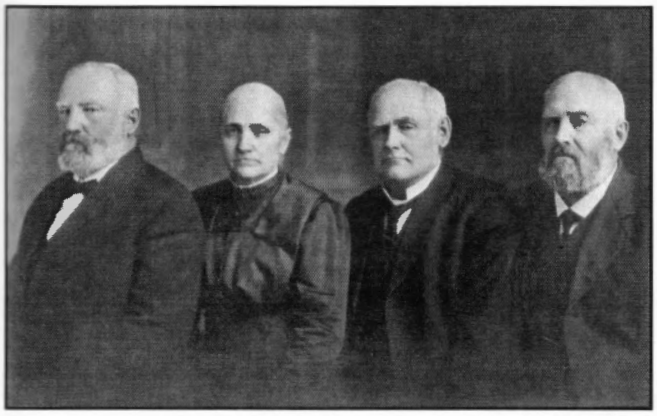
"They started up the rugged Ust Urt plateau, 600 feet above the Aral Sea. They used horses in relays, as they had often done earlier. Women and children walked, men pushed, and carried rocks to put behind the wheels when the horses stopped.

"After many adventures with bad roads and lack of water, they had reached Karakamysch by May 30, still 250 miles from Orenburg. Here Jacob Toews and J.K. Penner borrowed a buggy and hurried ahead to Orenburg to begin the process of getting passports to America. They completed the trip of 822 miles from Lausan, Khiva, to Orenburg, Russia, in 53 days."

The Trip to America

Ernest Claassen used the memoir of Anna Wiebe Toevs to bring the story of the Asian Trek to its conclusion for the Wiebe family. Anna wrote: "In Orenburg, where we had to wait so long for our passports, my brother John came and took Mother to Hohendorf (Am Trakt), to visit and rest up before going to America. My husband's parents also visited with their relatives. My husband was delegated to sell our travel wagons at Samara. Since we were already on the way, we, with our small daughter, went to Hohendorf to visit with Mother, John, and his family for a few weeks. By the time we received our passports, it was September 1884. Then followed a sad farewell, particularly for Mother who said farewell for this life. When John and his family came to America nine years later, Mother had already passed on a year and a half before.

"When we again met our traveling companions who had also visited with relatives, we discovered that some of the children had smallpox. They had been bundled so that the authorities did not observe it. So our little daughter Maria, 14 months old, was exposed to smallpox. We had a week's wait at Bremen, Germany, but the first night at sea our baby became ill. We were taken to the ship's hospital. Mother came with us into quarantine, and she and my



Children of Maria Fast Wiebe in 1917, left to right: Johannes Wiebe, Anna Wiebe Toevs, Henry H. Wiebe, and Bernhard Wiebe. Anna, Henry, and Bernhard accompanied their mother on the Asian Trek, 1880-1884. Credit: Edith E. Claassen Graber.

husband took care of the little patient, as neither of them was troubled by seasickness. I was dreadfully ill myself until we entered New York Harbor on the ninth day. Then I took my baby into my arms but she was already dying, and a short time later she passed away. That was a bitter cup for us young parents. Mother was our only support. My husband's parents were not permitted to come to us, but Papa sent a note, 'Your beloved little Maria is with her great friend in heaven.'

"We were taken ashore in a small boat with the little body, and there we were isolated for three days. We were landed on a small island in the harbor opposite the Brooklyn Bridge. There we were, separated from all the world in a strange land, our traveling companions being permitted to go on. We could not understand one word of the English language but had very good care. After three days we were put, together with the little casket, on board a ship. We disembarked at the Immigrant House, while the ship, bearing the body of our little darling, went on. We were told that they buried her on an island, where such as died of communicable diseases were laid to rest. Such was our reception in the New World.

Wedding picture, January 1898, of Heinrich/Henry H. Wiebe and Maria Janzen Epp Wiebe, widow and widower.

The wedding couple in 1898 with his son, John H. Wiebe, and her daughters, Anna (top) and Mary Epp.

"Alone we traveled on. After three days we arrived at Newton, Kansas, where we were met by dear friends, and also again met my husband's parents. The following day we were taken to Bergmans' at Whitewater, Kansas, where we were united with Bernard, Cornelius, and their families. Brother Henry and family came one year later."

Three of the four daughters born to Heinrich and Maria Wiebe photograph of 1904: Margaret (died at age seven), Lilli (Mrs. B.G. Harder) and Justine (Mrs. Ernest G. Claassen).

Conclusion to *The Heinrich Weibe Family* by Ernest Claassen: "Anna Wiebe Toevs has told of the coming of most of the Wiebes to America in 1884. Her mother, Mrs. Wiebe, had been well-to-do before starting on the Asian Trek, but, due to helping less fortunate people during four years of wandering, she had only $1200 left on arriving in America. This she loaned to her children, Bernhard, Cornelius, and Anna, who had traveled with her.

"Her remaining son Henry and his wife Maria came a year later in 1885. The last of Henry and Maria's children died in Asia when they were already on the way to America. Here four more children were born to them, of which only John, the oldest, lived to maturity.

"In 1892, after six years in America, Henry's first wife, Maria Jantzen Wiebe, died. Henry and five-year-old John were left alone, but found a home with his brother Cornelius, and his family.

"After five years as a widower, Henry found another life's companion in Maria Jantzen Epp, the widow of Peter Epp, who had two small daughters, Maria and Anna. They had a wedding picture taken of their combined family, and it is interesting to note that they have placed her daughters, Maria and Anna, beside their new father, while his son, John, stands near his new mother. Thus, these three became 'ours' by whole-hearted adoption. They were joined by four more daughters, 'ours' in the physical sense. Of these only Justine and Elise grew to maturity.

PARENTS: Married Oct. 6, 1877

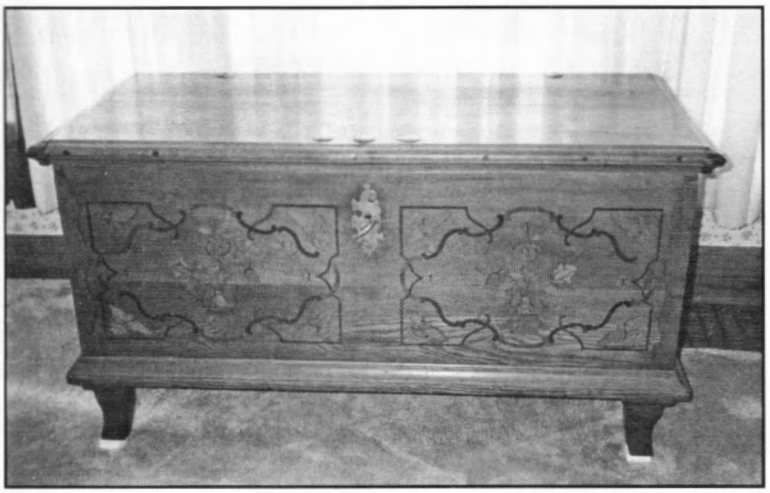
Heinrich H. Wiebe	**Maria *née* Jantzen**
Born July 15, 1857	Born Sept. 7, 1854
Simonsdorf, West Prussia	Daughter of Jacob Jantzen and Renate Dyck
Son of Heinrich Wiebe and Maria *née* Fast	Died Apr. 22, 1892
Died Mar. 20, 1922	
CHILDREN:	
Jacob	July 10, 1878-Sept. 23, 1880, Karabutak
Heinrich	July 18, 1879-Sept. 23, 1880, Karabutak
Johannes	Mar. 17, 1882-June 15, 1882, Serabulak
Heinrich	Jan. 27,1884-July 18, 1884, Ak Wedsichit
Marie	Mar. 3, 1885-July 24, 1885, Orenburg
*John H. Wiebe, "Uncle John"	Jan. 19, 1887-Mar. 23, 1975, Emmaus
Bernhard	Apr. 10, 1888-Aug. 14, 1888, Emmaus
Gustav	Apr. 19, 1890-Aug. 26, 1890, Emmaus
Catharina Maria	Apr. 6, 1892-Oct. 7, 1892, Emmaus

PARENTS: Married June 9, 1887

Peter Epp	**Maria *née* Janzen**
Born May 14, 1825	Born Nov. 14, 1863
Vierzehn Hufen, West Prussia	Fuerstenau, West Prussia
Son of Elias Epp and Gertrude Harder	Daughter of Johann Janzen and Maria *née* Dueck
Died Nov. 11, 1895	Died Sept. 14, 1915
CHILDREN:	
*Maria, "Aunt Mary"	Feb. 27, 1888-Sept. 21, 1956
Gertrude	Jan. 24, 1889-Sept. 3, 1889
*Anna, "Aunt Anna"	Feb. 3, 1891-Aug. 15, 1968
Helene	Feb. 7, 1892-Aug. 15, 1892
Catharina	July 12, 1895-Sept. 3, 1895

PARENTS: Married Jan. 20, 1898

Heinrich H. Wiebe	**Maria *née* Janzen** (formerly Mrs. Peter Epp)
Born July 15, 1857	Born Nov. 14, 1863
Simonsdorf, West Prussia	Fuerstenau, West Prussia
Son of Heinrich Wiebe and Maria *née* Fast	Daughter of Johann Janzen and Maria *née* Dueck
Died Mar. 20, 1922	Died Sept. 14, 1915
CHILDREN:	
Justine	Dec. 1, 1898-Nov. 2, 1990
Margaretha	Dec. 28, 1899-Oct. 30, 1907
*Elise, "Lilli"	Feb. 5, 1901-Apr. 8, 1996
Magdalene	Oct. 14, 1904-Aug. 22, 1905



West Prussian, Vistula Delta-style, Mennonite dowry chest made ca1790 and originally owned by Justina von Bergen (1780-1853)—now in the author's collection.

"It has remained for me, who joined the family in later years, to write its history." Thank you, Ernest Claassen.

Silent Witness to the Asian Trek

Dowry chests were an integral part of Mennonite culture in West Prussia, Germany, with many fine examples existing from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. When West Prussian Mennonites immigrated to Russia beginning in 1789, they took their highly prized dowry chests with them. But once they settled in colonies in Russia, dowry chests gradually began to disappear as part of the Russian Mennonite tradition. This was largely due to a lack of craftsmen capable of producing these high quality pieces of furniture.

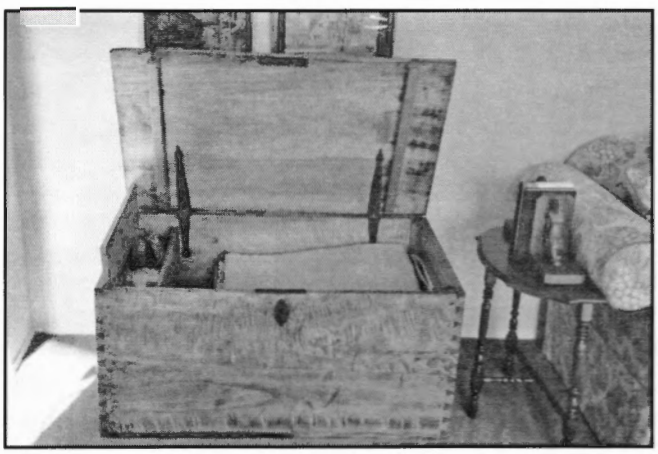
Dowry chests made in Russian Mennonite colonies are extremely rare, and very few documented examples exist. Nearly all of the dowry chests brought by Russian Mennonites to North America were originally made in West Prussia. The earliest dowry chests date from ca1780 for chests taken to Chortitza, the "Old Colony;" to 1820 for chests taken to Molotschna; and perhaps as late as 1850 for chests taken to Am Trakt.

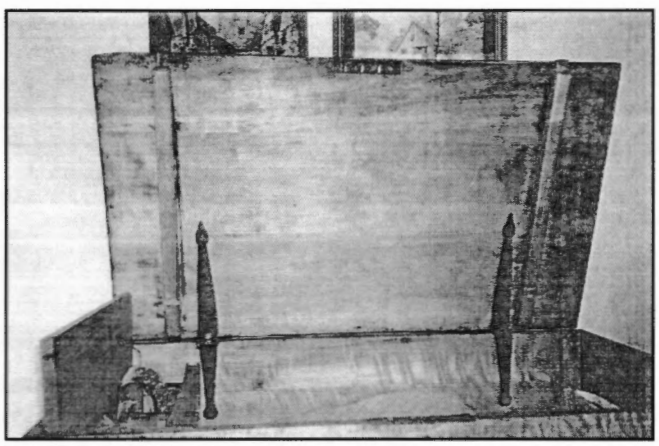
An example of an early West Prussian Mennonite dowry chest is the Justina von Bergen (1780-1853) chest pictured on the left. Also on this page is the Wiebe dowry chest, a rare example of a Mennonite dowry chest made in Russia. The immediate identifying characteristic that defines this as a chest made in Russia is the highly figured Russian birch wood. By comparison, the von Bergen chest is made of ash.

Justina Wiebe Claassen (1898-1990) wrote about the Asian Trek in a March 1975 *Mennonite Life* article: "Since they had to move several times during four years, they could not farm successfully and had to turn to other occupations. Some of the women became seamstresses. My father (Henry H. Wiebe) did cabinet work. I still have a chest made of Russian birch dating from that time. He also made a desk for a native ruler, who was especially pleased with a secret compartment that was built into the desk." This "native ruler" may have been the Khan of Khiva who had Mennonite craftsmen install a parquet floor in his palace at Khiva.

If the dowry chest were made at about the same time, it would date to ca1882-1883. At some point a coat of black paint intentionally hid the beauty of this chest. This was likely done once the Wiebe family decided to leave Central Asia and immigrate to America. A finely crafted chest with beautiful wood was an invitation to theft, but a black wooden box attracted little attention. From Khiva near the Aral Sea in Asia, the chest traveled by horse-drawn wagon and camel caravan to Orenburg, Russia. From there it rode by train to Bremen, Germany, and thence by ship to New York City. Then it traveled by train again to Newton, Kansas, before finally settling in rural Whitewater, Kansas.

Henry Wiebe's daughter Justina eventually inherited the chest and stripped off the black paint to show off the beautiful wood once again. Today the chest is much loved by its current owner, Edith E. Claassen Graber, Henry H. Wiebe's granddaughter.





Wiebe dowry chest made by Henry H. Wiebe ca1882-1883 while on the Asian Trek. Credit: Edith E. Claassen Graber.