In Their Own Words: Part IV
From the Steppes of Russia to the Prairies of Kansas

by Rev. Jacob B. Epp, translated by Arnold C. Claassen,
and edited and annotated by D. Frederick Dyck*

Jacob Epp's memoir as the fourth installment of this series also marks the fourth phase in the life of the Am Trakt settlement: immigration to America that began with the survivors of the Asian Trek.[1] Having sold their farms and homes at Am Trakt in 1880, the trekkers, upon returning from Central Asia in 1884, seem never to have considered re-establishing themselves at Am Trakt. No doubt the extreme embarrassment at their failure to form a viable, permanent colony in Turkestan played a role in their decision to go to America.

With the Epp family group, the decision to go to America was based primarily on the prospect of enhanced economic opportunity. They had not taken part in the Asian Trek. Although I have been unable to discover any underlying reason (crop failure, economic depression, government pressure, etc.) for emigration from Am Trakt in 1890-93, many families sold their farms and left for America in these years. A goodly percentage of those leaving were young men who had little or no hope of owning their own farms. This is a recurrent theme among Mennonites that began in West Prussia. Mennonite inheritance practices contributed to this situation as much as availability of affordable land.

The emigration from Am Trakt in the early 1890s was not a mass exodus but a steady trickle. Most of these 1890s immigrants settled in Mennonite communities near Newton, Kansas, and Beatrice, Nebraska. One exception was Cornelius Dyck (1835-1893) who went to Woodland in Cowlitz County, Washington, in 1890. Cornelius had been inspired by his brother Johannes D. Dyck's description of the Northwest territory seen when Johannes was en route to the California gold fields in 1849.

Jacob Epp was born Apr. 6, 1874, in the village of Koeppenthal, Am Trakt, Russia, to parents Johann (1835-1922) and Margaretha (1839-1914).[2] From 1880 through 1888, Jacob received his elementary and secondary education at the Mennonite school at Koeppenthal. In 1889, he began working as an assistant clerk (*Gebietsamt*) at the Central Office (*Kreis-Amt*) of Am Trakt's local government. This appears to be a rather exalted position for a 15-year-old and probably reflects Jacob's attention to his education as well as his intelligence. He remained in this position until leaving for America in 1893.

After arrival in America, Jacob settled in Newton, Kansas—home to a large contingent of West Prussian Mennonites as well as Mennonites from the Russian colonies. In Newton he held a variety of jobs while continuing his education at Bethel College. Jacob's early years in Kansas seem to have set a pattern for the rest of his life. A biographical time line of Jacob's life provided by his grandson Ralph Claassen of Whitewater, Kansas, shows that Jacob traveled widely throughout the United States, rarely staying in one place too long, frequently changing jobs, but always furthering his education in a practical sense as well as academically.

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[1] Phase 1, 1853-1860, emigration from West Prussia to Am Trakt begins. Villages of Hahnsau, Koeppenthal, Lindenau, and Fresenheim were established. Phase 2, 1861-1879, firmly establishing the colony, permanent dwellings, functioning church, schools, and local government. Phase 3, 1880-1884, the Asian Trek. After the emigrations of the early 1890s, Am Trakt remained stable until the outbreak of World War I in 1914. When the Russian Revolution began in 1917, Am Trakt slipped into a decline that culminated in the complete destruction of the colony in 1941.

[2] Johann and Margaretha Epp had come to Am Trakt from West Prussia in 1858, and Johann's memoir was Part I of this series, "In Their Own Words." See *MFH*, 25 (2006), pp. 58-68.

Jacob wrote his memoir late in his life, in 1942, three years before his death. It is a testimony to his excellent education as well as his memory and natural gift as a storyteller. Of the many late 19th and early 20th century memoirs by Mennonites I have read over the years, Jacob Epp's is by far the most articulate. Arnold Claassen's excellent translation of this memoir from the original German to English was done in 1974.

- D. Frederick Dyck

Johann Epp (1835-1922), minister at First Mennonite Church, Newton, Kansas, 1893-1922. Johann was the father of Jacob B. Epp.

Why Migrate?

"The grandparents [my parents, Johann Epp and his wife] probably had never seriously considered migrating to America. They had no illusions of a rosy future economically in the area east of the Volga River where the Trakt is located, since it borders on the hot, sandy deserts of Asia. The summer east winds were indicative of that. However, we were able to make a fair livelihood. Above all, we felt quite at home in the small German settlement, consisting of some 10 villages, exercising a certain amount of self-government. Living around us were mostly Germans—perhaps one-half million Volga Germans. There was only one exclusively Russian village in the area, located some four miles from our village. Ours was a comfortable and undisturbed existence, consequently we led a peaceful and quiet life under a strong central government. We enjoyed several advantages. We were subject to no military service at first, but later the alternate Forest Service was instituted. We had our German religious schools with Mennonite teachers, some of whom had received their education in Germany. Later the Russian language was also taught in our schools.

"Our lovely village of Koeppenthal, named after a General von Koeppen whose cooperation had helped materially in the establishment of the first settlement, was beautifully situated in a small valley. A brook ran through the village, with beautiful little woodlands, intermingled with nice farmsteads with garden and orchard plantings. We lived in the center of the village. On one side of the main street were mostly farmsteads, while on the other side were the schoolhouse, the church, and one business

Wedding photo of Jacob B. Epp (1874-1945) and first wife Agnetha "Nettie" Harms (1874-1913), 1905.
Credit: All photographs in this article from *Prussian Roots, Kansas Branches* by John D. Thiesen (Hist. Comm. of First Mennonite Church: Newton, Kans., n.d. known).

establishment, the district office buildings and homes of artisans, day laborers, and small householders. There were about 300 people living in Koeppenthal, composed of some 50 families. The other area villages consisted generally of only from 15 to 25 families. A small park was located between our farmstead and the school and church. Koeppenthal was the midpoint of the entire settlement, with the Central Office (*Kreis-Amt*) and other things which the other villages did not have. As a matter of fact, our Governor, whose capital city was Samara located some 200 miles from Koeppenthal, liked our village so much that every few years he managed to spend several days of his vacation here. He found lodging in our home, which was not only close to the government office but had the added inducement of being one of the nicest and most commodious in the whole village.

"The Governor could speak fluent German (all well-educated Russians had to master both French and German) and was a most congenial person. I was ac-

corded the privilege of shining his boots! We thought our Koeppenthal was really the nicest place on earth. (We had not seen much of the world yet.) Who would even have entertained the thought of immigrating to another place?

"The compulsory Forest Service (*Forstei-Dienst*) presented no problem for our family—as it did for other families—because, being the only son, I was automatically exempt from service. My dissertation *Funfzig Stationen* (Fifty Stations) shows that Grandfather Epp was concerned about preparing me for life in Russia. The girls needed no special training, at least it was not considered necessary at that time. Sister Ida was studying to be a seamstress but was not really robust enough to take this up as a vocation. Our village life had much to offer, peaceful and congenial neighbors, evening religious study periods, evening singing lessons, etc. The youth of the village also had many opportunities to get together socially. What did we lack? Nothing! Later, when we heard about the lonely farm life in America, we wanted no part in it or of it.

"Grandfather Epp had no reason for wanting to make a change. He was respected—at the age of 23 he had been elected Minister—in rank just below the Elder. He was the Orphanage Director (*Weisen-Vorsteher*) for the whole district. In this position he had custody of, and was responsible for, sizable amounts of money. Several times he had been a member of a delegation of envoys sent to confer with the Czar on problems relating to exemption from military service and civil administrative problems. On numerous occasions he had been a delegate from the local congregation to conferences of the Mennonite Church in South Russia. He was in charge of a library for the district as he was not as narrowly Mennonite as many of his contemporaries. He was in contact and communication with numerous Lutheran pastors in the Volga region who had been educated in Germany, well grounded men. In Saratov he attended the clandestine meetings of the 'True Believers' through whose efforts later the gospel was widely spread. Our family enjoyed certain advantages not generally available to all the people. There was another mitigating influence—the grandparents had only been living in Russia 35 years. Thus they had no really valid reason for considering leaving for a foreign land. But, but—a few buts make a difference.

"Our brother-in-law Johannes Wiebe, who eventually became our 'deliverer' from what later became a 'Land of Terror,' looked at the contemporary situation from a somewhat different viewpoint than we did. As a recent newcomer, he really never felt at home in Russia, especially after his widowed mother, his three brothers, an only sister, and an aunt, all left Russia soon after emigrating from near Danzig, Germany, then removed to Khiva in Asia, and, after residing there for four years, migrated to Kansas in North America.[3]

Brother-in-law Wiebe was so much older than the rest of us children that we called him 'Uncle,' and in this narrative I will continue to call him by that title, even though he was not actually our uncle. Soon Uncle Wiebe was, in his thoughts, living in America more than in Russia. Uncle Wiebe and his wife, my oldest sister, lived in the village of Hohendorf, some five miles from Koeppenthal, and almost every Sunday attended church here and visited with us. (Five villages attended the Koeppenthal Church.) On these occasions Uncle Wiebe was always comparing the farming conditions with those in Kansas. According to his information, yields in Kansas were three or four times the Russian crop yields, and wages were as much as 10 times as high as in Russia. The highest salary in our whole area was that of the *Kreis-Schreiber* (District Clerk). Herman Bartsch held this office and received 700 rubles ($350) per year or just under $1.00 per day.

"Two of Uncle Wiebe's brothers in Kansas worked as carpenters in Brainard and were earning $4.00 per day (6 rubles). And a brother-in-law, Henry Toevs of Newton, who only a few years before had been an ordinary day laborer, was now a successful merchant. Such news constituted a miracle, as far as we were concerned. In Russia, by way of comparison, a carpenter received only 50 kopeks (25¢) per day.

"Uncle Wiebe read American newspapers and periodicals, besides carrying on a lively correspondence with brothers and acquaintances. He farmed successfully, but his heart was not really in it. His windmill (wind powered grist and flour mill) brought in additional income. 'But in America everything was so much better' was the thought uppermost in his mind. This made him dissatisfied. He realized that in America he would have to be, simultaneously, both 'boss' and 'hired man,' while in Russia everyone had several man and maid servants, and such cheap labor would not be available in America. All of these advantages he was willing to forgo. 'Only on to America.'

"Military service was not a present problem for him or his sons. Hans (Johannes), Heinrich (Henry)

[3] "Widowed mother" is Maria Fast Wiebe, "his three brothers, and only sister . . ." are Johann, Heinrich, Bernhard Wiebe and Anna Wiebe Toevs. See "In Their Own Words, Part III. The Heinrich Wiebe Family: Germany, Central Asia, America," *MFH* 26 (2007), pp. 104-17.

Bernard, were respectively only 11 years, two years, and two months old. Had he delayed leaving Russian six and one-half years, at which time Hans would have had to enter service, he probably would not have been able to leave.

"There was another problem that caused him recurring concern. This was the danger that German persecution might break out among the Russian natives against the despised *Prussacken* (Prussians). The native Russians were envious of the Germans because, on the whole, they were more prosperous than the Russians. We Germans were independent householders; they were mostly menial servants. They saw our nice farmsteads, often financed with money brought from Prussia, and envied us. As long as the government remained stable, we were in no jeopardy—but only that long. The thought of religious persecution undoubtedly never occurred to Uncle Wiebe. But he was a man of vision. He sympathized with the poor Russian peasants, deliberately oppressed by an autocratic and tyrannical government system. Conversely, he admired the American form of popular government. Freedom and equality were his lodestones! Were it not for him, we probably would have remained in Russia, as did the majority of our neighbors, secure and confident. And later they suffered the same miserable end that was the fate of so many of our countrymen. At the least, we would have suffered indescribable hardships.

"Even if we survived the 1917 revolution and the famine of the early 1920s, it is certain we would have been subject to unspeakable miseries. I believe we have never accorded Uncle Wiebe the proper gratitude due him for what he did for us, even though at the time he had no premonition of how awful the conditions could and would become in Russia. However, he was only the human agent. In the final analysis, it was the hand of the Almighty that led us out of the land.

"Finally Uncle Wiebe made the momentous decision to emigrate to America. In the fall of 1892 he sold his holdings at Hohendorf and moved in and spent the winter with us in Koeppenthal. For our sister 'Justchen' (little Justine), the prospect of being separated from her parental home, probably never to see us again, was a difficult decision to face. She seldom mentioned it in her conversation, but her inner conflicts were easily observable. Uncle Wiebe tried to persuade me and one of my sisters to accompany them to America. It was sister Anna, I believe, who was always brave and adventurous. He probably thought that, if we did accompany them, the rest of the Epp family would soon be persuaded to follow us. It would not have taken much to persuade the two of us to accompany them. But Grandfather Epp felt he could not spare me from the farm, which had been enlarged in recent years directly on my account. He was 58 years old (born in 1835) at the time. There were other considerations, too, so it appeared the Wiebe family would make the trip to America alone. Nevertheless, the discussions became more detailed and exhaustive, and Grandfather began to see that for his children there might be better opportunities in America. He had read American papers and had some correspondence with Elder Toevs of Newton, Kansas, as well as others. As time went on it became increasingly apparent that I probably would not be able to obtain the position of District Clerk (*Kreis-Schreiber*). Johannes Quiring was also trying for this position and was related to the present clerk, Mr. Bartsch, whose son-in-law he presently became.

"Uncle Wiebe had argued to Grandfather Epp that, if I took over the farm and homestead and, in the course of time, had to buy out the interests of the four sisters, it would be virtually impossible for me to get out of debt. Thus I would be farming under a definite handicap. I also was not physically robust at the time. The Mennonite doctors of the area (uneducated) diagnosed me as being consumptive. Sister Ida was also not strong. Hence, a change of climate might be good for both of us. Finally, in America we children might all have a more promising future.

"And so—considering the whole situation—our parents finally decided to migrate to America along with the Wiebes! The whole family would be able to remain together! Grandfather Epp had no close relatives in Russia excepting a niece, Mrs. Dietrich Thiessen, our neighbor, a sister-in-law, Mrs. Isaak Epp, and a couple of cousins. Grandmother Epp had no relatives in Russia at all, having come to this country as an orphan from Germany. For the sake of the children, Grandfather was willing to give up his pleasant sphere of work and activity.

"Right at this time the price of land certainly was not good, and we virtually had to sell out at half price. Another half was lost in the money exchange, two rubles for one dollar. Thus, only approximately one-fourth of our total investment actually came to America, but we were willing to make this necessary sacrifice. The wealthy Kornelius Isaak, our neighbor, was the only person who had the necessary means to buy our property. He dictated the price received, knowing full well that it was worth much more than the actual purchase price. Some 25 years later we sent his family (and also others) food packages several times because

they were starving. We were glad to be able to do that and above all, thankful that neighbor Isaak had bought us out, and we were now in a position of being able to succor them and not have to suffer with them during this awful famine.

"The news of our decision to go to America was received joyfully by the whole Wiebe family. It also precipitated some very real struggles, especially for the two sisters, Ida and Anna, as the notations in their diaries plainly indicated. The intimate friendship between Aunt Ida and Anna Riesen (later Mrs. Herman Bartsch) continues to this day. Regrettably, no letters seem to have been getting through for the past several years. The other two, Anna and the Riesen girl, are united in Heaven.

"Early in February 1893, really serious planning for the trip began. It did not take me long to get ready, as this had been occupying my subconscious mind for some time. Still the thought of leaving home was difficult for all of us. The fact that our decision was removing great weight from our sister's heart helped mitigate any lingering doubts or regrets."

Preparations For the Trip and the Farewell

"The die has been cast—we're going to America!

"Haste was the order of the day. Uncle Wiebe had figured out every detail exactly, including the time they would have to arrive in Kansas in order not to lose a whole year's harvest. Within a month's time, we were ready to leave.

"Grandfather [Johannes Epp] would have liked to have bade farewell to his two brothers, Franz and Herman Epp, and Mrs. Kornelius Wall and their families of Aulie-Ata, Asian Russia, before leaving for 'the other side of the globe,' but this added satisfaction he forbore in order to be able to help take care of the Wiebes' seven children during the passage to America.

"I even began to study English under the tutelage of Herman Bartsch, brother of Johannes Bartsch. Johannes Bartsch brought his family to Newton, Kansas, a year or two after we arrived. They consisted of the artist John Bartsch, St. Louis; Paul Bartsch of Newton; and Sister Helen Bartsch of Bethel Deaconess Hospital in Newton. Johannes' accent and pronunciation of English words was so European that the little I learned was of no practical use to me in America. The two Riesen boys, Jacob, 17, and Heinrich, 15, brothers of the two Riesen girls mentioned earlier, traveled to America with us. Both they and their parents could envision no favorable future for them in Russia. That assured good companionship on the trip for us boys and especially myself. Jacob Riesen drowned at the Alta Mill west of Newton, Kansas, four years after arriving in America. Henry Riesen pastored a number of churches in Oklahoma and later served as public relations director for Bethel College, Newton, Kansas.

"Our faithful old housemaid Liese Lingkowsky, who had been with our parents almost from the time of their marriage, we would have liked to have taken along with us, since she was almost a member of the family. It may not be generally known that our parents [Grandparents Epp] had lost eight children in early infancy. Aunt Wiebe was the oldest child in the Epp family, followed in succession by the eight children that died in infancy, then Sister Ida, myself, Anna, and Augusta. Because of this, such a house and children's maid was a practical necessity in our home.

"Faithful Liese was very dependent on us, and we truly loved her. In spite of the fact that she was lame, and this condition worsened as she grew older, she was a real help to Grandmother with the children, in housework, and in the kitchen. Farther than this she would not venture, except with crutches. She did not attend church with us since she was Roman Catholic and read her prayer book instead. So it was understood that she could not possibly accompany us to America. Our parents supported her from their new home in America as long as she lived. I liked to sit next to her bed, my head on her lap, while she gathered the lice off my scalp, while she told me stories or reminisced about her girlhood in Germany. (It seemed we could never rid ourselves wholly from these vermin!)

"We either had to cross to the west side of the Volga River before the ice became too weak or wait some four to six weeks after the breakup to allow the ice floes to pass before we could be ferried across the river. To wait for the breakup would entail too costly a delay. For then we would arrive in America too late for the spring planting season. Now it looked like the 'power of destiny' had decreed that the Volga breakup should come earlier than usual this year. The farewell parties were over.

"Practically all the furniture had been removed from our house. The rooms, full of memories, were stark and bare and did not seem homelike any more—no livestock left in the barn—it was almost unbearable. Now we were ready to leave. And what if we should have to wait weeks or even months before we could cross the Volga? Perish the thought! In less than a week,

word came that the Volga was frozen over solidly again, and this really meant making haste. The last farewell from our dearest and most intimate friends, on the morning of our departure, was short and heart-rending and defies adequate description. Finally the relentless 'must' helps."

The Wagon Trip to the Railroad

"As we ascended the long rise toward Fresenheim out of our beloved valley, we boys on foot tried to sing a farewell song like *Nun ade, du mein lieb Heimatland* (Now farewell, my beloved homeland). Then one long, last look back at our Koeppenthal. (I shall never forget this moment.) Then—quick decision—the final break is made! Now leaving seemed a little easier.

"Our wagons were some distance ahead of us, and we had to run to catch up. At this point a new thought dominated—'Now we are going out into the wide world, to America.' A new world was unfolding before us, but we saw it only dimly then.

"It would take a full day to make the journey to the banks of the Volga River. The frost soon disappeared, as the day was unseasonably warm. It was a long anxious day! 'How would the Volga be?' was the unspoken thought uppermost in everyone's mind. Arriving at the riverside in the evening, our worst fears were confirmed. 'The authorities are allowing no one to cross any more unless there is a really hard freeze overnight, enough definitely to prevent an early breakup of the ice.' We slept fitfully that night. Would we have to return to our village and take up our abode in the empty rooms with borrowed furniture while we waited until we could ferry across the river? Would we be subjected to the nightmare of prolonged farewells again—and arrive in America too late to plant spring crops and lose a harvest? No! Such thoughts were not even to be entertained! Somehow it would have to be worked out.

"Luckily it froze hard that night. For once in our lives, we welcomed the abrupt change in temperature. Possibly never before or since have we been so jubilant over a good hard freeze. We arose long before daybreak and quickly loaded our belongings into light Russian one-horse sleighs hitched to small ponies and were off—crossing the Volga River! A safe distance had to be maintained between sleighs, and only Grandmother Epp, Aunt Wiebe, and the smallest children were permitted to ride. All the rest had to cross on foot, also some distance from the sleds. Each pedestrian carried a long pole in his hand; in case the ice broke, the pole would span the hole and the person breaking through had a better chance of being rescued out of the icy waters. The ponies hitched to the sleighs were led by strong men with long lead lines to avoid as much as possible the concentration of weight. The sleds were made entirely of wood, made as light as possible, and undoubtedly would have floated with their light loads had they broken through the ice. There were occasional breaks in the ice with small patches of water alongside the pathway we took across the river.

"The Russians leading the ponies were entirely fearless, and this built our confidence. However, we all breathed a sigh of relief when we finally arrived at the west bank. Quickly our belongings were unloaded, and the Russians jumped onto their sleighs and headed for the other shore at a brisk trot. They got back on the other side safe and sound, as we were informed later by letter, courtesy of our neighbors Dietrich Thiessen and Jacob Peters who had helped haul our belongings to the river and across the ice to the west bank and returned to the east bank with the Russian liverymen. They wrote that they were the last party the police authorities permitted to pass back over the Volga that season.

"Sister Ida told me that the Volga River was six miles wide at the point where we crossed it. After these friends, Peters and Thiessen, left us, we had the feeling that now all ties were severed and the thought 'Forward to America' became uppermost in our minds. We hired other wagons to haul our belongings from the west bank of the Volga River to the railroad station."

The Journey from the Volga to the Ocean

"The day spent in Saratov seemed much shorter than the day before we crossed the Volga River. Toward evening we boarded the train. None of us, Grandfather and Uncle Wiebe excepted, had ever ridden on a train. Actually, Aunt Wiebe had, out of curiosity, taken a short train ride once. Many of us had never even seen a train before. Quickly we settled in our seats, and soon we were moving off—into the night. Our greatest satisfaction: the whole family is together and the Lord is with us. Now our journey had really started, and every passing moment brought new experiences.

"The railroad followed a generally northeasterly course through seemingly endless forests of intermingled fir, spruce, and birch trees still in the throes of winter. We were tired, but only the little ones fell asleep. The sights were all too new and interesting. There was too much to see and savor. Finally, one by one, we began to lie down and doze off. It was necessary that one of our party remain awake so that none of our possessions would be stolen.

"Often Uncle Wiebe, the two Riesen boys, and Hans and I would go out and stand on the rear platform of the car (it was terribly hot and stuffy inside) and sing lusty travel or army marching songs, for in our mind's eye we were practically out on the ocean deep already.

"We arrived in Moscow, our first stopping point, in the evening of the second day after leaving Saratov. The hotel where we lodged was several stories high, and the other strange and wonderful sights seemed out of this world. Incidentally, we youngsters were not up on the best etiquette, so the hotel clerks and porters sometimes had to set us straight. We had to stay in Moscow four days, waiting for our identification papers and passports and having them validated by the proper authorities. We utilized this period by viewing this marvelous metropolis, the erstwhile capital of the Czars, and the Kremlin itself.

"No one, if the law were literally and strictly interpreted, could travel from Russia directly to the United States because of the danger of carrying cholera into this country. Thus, in securing our passports, there was to be no hint that our eventual destination was North America and the United States. We were simply going to Germany (which we, in fact, were) for a visit, and no more information than that was even to be breathed to the customs officials. It was quite difficult not to drop some hint or damaging word about the destination because of the small children in our party. We were all full of 'America' and constantly talked about it. How then was it to be drummed into the children all at once that that particular word was taboo and unmentionable? In Moscow, Hans, looking out of the hotel window, happened to see an American-made windmill. Without thinking, he cried out, 'Look! An American windmill!'

"Repeatedly, the officials remarked, 'Going to Germany?' 'With so many children and baggage?' 'Give our regards to America!' Such loose talk was promptly squelched when they felt a coin surreptitiously pressed into their willing palms. It was a well-known and accepted fact that customs officials could be induced to 'look the other way' and not to enforce the regulations too strictly, if the proper palm were greased. Also the laws with respect to cholera never had been strictly enforced, or so we were informed. But we did not dare to state publicly that we were going to America, for then the officials would have to enforce the law.

"In a short time we were aboard the fast German train. Now we could all breathe a sigh of relief and express our thanks to an all-wise Providence. As the train sped over the rails we were almost fearful, having become so used to the slow pace of the Russian trains when compared to the speed of this crack German train.

"Now we had time to remember that my birthday was almost at hand. In Russia my birth date fell on March 25, but from now on it was to be April 6. Twelve days gained or lost? Actually we lost both Good Friday and Easter that year. In Germany the holiday was already past, and in Russia it would have come the following week, according to their 'old' calendar.

"We arrived in Elbing, West Prussia, during the night. Our intention was to stay here one day, to get ready to meet our relatives in Prussia and also rid our bodies of the loathsome lice. When we awoke the next morning and looked out of the hotel window, we saw a new world. Here spring had already arrived. Grass and trees were green, and flowers bloomed everywhere!

"Yes, this was Germany. Entirely new to us, but familiar to Uncle Wiebe, who had left 14 years before. For our parents, who had been gone 35 years, it was still somewhat familiar. Here for the first time in my life I went to the barbershop. The owner was out temporarily, so his good wife shaved us. The next morning we passed through Marienburg, where the Riesen brothers got off the train to be greeted by their uncle Herman Woelk, a half brother to their father. The Wiebes traveled to Simonsdorf, where Uncle Wiebe had grown up, and we continued on the Neuteich to Bergmanns, then later to Tralau, to the Harders, cousins of our grandmother. We stayed here two weeks. We did a lot of visiting and saw the famous Marienburg Castle and other points of interest. We also purchased equipment for our use when we arrived in America. The prices of American manufactured goods were supposed to be quite high and the quality not as good as German tools. What? Not as good as German-made equipment? What heresy!

"Our visit here was quite pleasant for all concerned, I alone excepted. I was ill the entire time we spent in Germany. I had caught a cold on the hot, stuffy Russian train. Because of my physical condition, time passed slowly for me there. The older people suited us fine, and our relatives proved very congenial, but the German Mennonite youth struck us as being entirely too worldly. We Russians were not too spiritual, but here in Prussia anyone who did not dance was a 'square' (*rückständig*) and behind the times. We also had the distinct feeling that the young people looked down on us 'poor Russians.' On our account they soft-pedaled dancing and tried singing songs, but what frightful disharmony!

"The farmsteads were something else again. Everything was strictly modern. Here we also saw the 'modern cows' that had previously been described to us in letters from the (old) Jacob Klaassens. Even our nicest farmsteads in Koeppenthal and Lysanderhoeh suffered by comparison with the best seen here. It was here that we learned that the Busenitz family had left for America only a month previously, and that word had been received that they had arrived safely. The most important bit of news I gleaned from this was that the Busenitz party had not even suffered from seasickness.

"Our visits complete, we continued our journey. Our first stop was in Berlin, to see the wonderful capital city and to make some additional purchases. The others really enjoyed themselves here, too, seeing the famous street 'Unter den Linden,' the various royal castles, and other places and objects of interest. I was indifferent to everything and simply dragged myself along.

"From Berlin we continued by train to Bremen where we would board ship. Two days were spent in Bremen. There were many details to be attended to in preparation for our sea voyage. All of us had to be vaccinated. Grandfather Epp would have liked to have looked up the beloved author Otto Funcke and did try to, but he failed to find him home."

The Ocean Voyage

"To save money, we rode third class, below deck, with the lowest class of people. However, we could not complain. The food was plain but nutritious. As soon as the passengers began to 'feed the fish,' Uncle Wiebe, the two Riesen boys, and I elected to get out on deck in the fresh air as much as possible. We would take our food out with us and consume it there. This was the first rule for prevention of seasickness. There we sang ballads, lusty sailor songs, and other farewell and travel songs. We had special permission from the sailors to remain on deck when, because of the stormy weather, most of the passengers returned to their cabins. As time went on, my 'brave' companions deserted me one by one until I was the only one who remained on deck. I never failed to thank the Lord daily for these mercies He accorded me on the journey.

"One thing that probably most of us remember about the voyage was the daily, even hourly chant of an Austrian steward, such as 'Herring with celery salad.' That a storm was brewing became apparent to us on the third day out from Bremen, when we observed that the sailors were battening down everything that was loose on the ship. In spite of the crew's precautions, during the night objects began moving back and forth, so that, by morning, many had trouble finding their possessions. At one instant Grandmother Epp had little Bernard on her lap and was sitting on a trunk, the next instant they were in the same position against the opposite wall. Everything movable had to be tied down. We even had to tie ourselves in our berths, if we wanted to sleep. Since sleep was fleeting under these circumstances, many of us spent over half the nights on deck, braving the winds and the rough weather, albeit always well bundled against the elements. Finally, as the others disappeared below, I had no company at all. Those were long, melancholy nights, but they had to be borne to prevent becoming sick. The sailors encouraged me in this after they became aware of my condition.

"The brisk weather stimulated our appetites. I ate like the proverbial 'thresher,' consuming my portion and as much as I could hold of what the others in our party did not eat. Twice each day the steward made the rounds, announcing, 'Milk for sucklings, and oatmeal and porridge for children.' Then I would reply, 'Here are two,' and would point to Henry and little Bernard, who were generally nearby. This little ruse assured a double portion for me because the baby Bernard refused the milk and Henry refused both the milk and porridge, so I got it. That was healthy for me.

"There is another incident that is quite vivid in my memory: Uncle Wiebe, the Riesens, and Johannes and I were out on deck during a storm in which the waves broke over the deck continually. We were standing on deck, and waves came from one side and swept over the deck. We youngsters were agile and jumped onto the bridge. Uncle Wiebe stumbled and fell, and the wave washed him across the deck and back again. Had he not quickly grabbed the bulkhead railing, he could easily have been swept overboard.

"The continual bellowing of the foghorn is another sound we will not soon forget. For two days we traveled in heavy fog, and it sounded at short intervals, both day and night. That we might collide with another vessel in mid-ocean was an alarming and worrisome prospect which the foghorn's continual sounding brought to our minds."

From New York to Newton

"On Ascension Day, May 10, 1893, during the afternoon, we sighted land. Hurrah! America! The sea was as calm as mirrored glass, the sun warm, and the weather ideal! The storm was forgotten—now we were

First Santa Fe Railroad station in Newton, Kansas, ca1872. Mennonites arriving from West Prussia and Russia were met at the station by Minister Peter Claassen.

in America!! In a short time, the skyline of the city of cities appeared before us, New York, with its many skyscrapers. We had to remain on the ship overnight. The night was starlit, and stretching before and almost all around us was the harbor with its many ships and boats with their multi-colored lights, which cast their rays across each other.

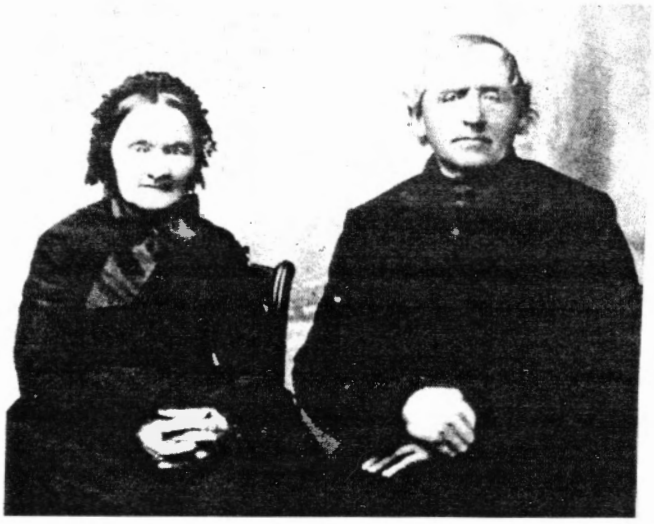
"Also to be seen were the lights that represented the more than a million population complex that was New York, Brooklyn, Jersey City, etc. This was indeed an impressive sight for us farmers from a Russian village who had seen only one lone streetlight in the city of Saratov, Russia. This panoramic scene was almost beyond our limited comprehension. To us it seemed not only as if we were entering a New World, but that this was really a 'New Earth.' We felt almost as though we had been transformed! If only our Koeppenthal village friends could see this sight! How could we describe this scene to them with pen and ink? If we just could return to Russia soon and given them at first hand a detailed description of the sights we were seeing!

"Everything appeared newer and stranger to us here in America than the sights we had seen in Germany. In Germany we could understand the spoken language and, therefore, what was going on around us. Here we were soon rubbing elbows with people from every continent. Particularly intriguing were the colored stevedores and porters. At first we were almost frightened by their black faces and white eyeballs. But their demeanor was so ingratiating, their approach so friendly and disarming, that we were immediately drawn to them. We would have liked to communicate with them by mouth, but that was impossible.

"We saw few beauties of nature on the train trip to Chicago. In this respect, Germany excelled the United States. Our course took us through a lot of brush and forests, and here and there we saw isolated farmsteads. These farms did not compare favorably with our lovely Russian villages. Were we going to have to live on such isolated farms? We had burned our bridges behind us, so there was no returning! There was only one thing for us to do—adapt ourselves to the American system and American customs. The one overriding thought always encouraged us, 'At least we [the Epp/Wiebe family] will all be together.'

"Even the cities along our route seemed laid out in much the same pattern—to us they appeared monotonously alike. And everyone spoke only English—everything so strange—it was almost oppressive. I was not particularly impressed with what I saw. I also had the feeling that the indifferent Americans were not only not impressed by us, but they also were not even interested in us as strangers. Of course, when we would get to Newton, Kansas, and among German Mennonites of a kindred spirit, things would be different.

"Even Chicago failed to thrill or impress us. The fact that our drive through the city was not through the center of town but on streets with smoke-darkened



Peter Claassen, first minister of the Newton Mennonite congregation with his wife Anna nee Andres. Peter was ordained in 1857 at the Heubuden Church in West Prussia and served First Mennonite Church of Newton from 1878 until his death in 1901.

business buildings and tenement-like dwellings, may have influenced my impressions. The central business district with its skyscrapers we saw only from some distance. It mays also be that we were reacting on the basis of the terrific impression New York had made on us and were echoing the feelings of Rev. Jacob Kroeker of Germany when he said, 'I've seen St. Petersburg, Moscow, Berlin, and Paris, but now I've seen THE CITY, New York and, when I get back, I will tell my friends, 'When I compare New York with the finest European metropolises, then I have to say they are just villages by comparison.'

"We should have visited the Chicago 'World's Columbian Exposition' which was in progress in 1893, commemorating the 60th anniversary of Chicago's incorporation as a town. Chicago was celebrating this anniversary with the largest, most complete World's Fair that had been held anywhere up until that time. We were travel-weary and anxious to get on and arrive at our final destination.

"Finally we arrived in Kansas. Florence was the last town marked on the map we had received from Whitewater and Newton. Our one-way tickets registered Florence as our final destination. Here we intended to get off and clean up before continuing on to Newton and meeting our friends in America.

"This preparation was taken because of the ever-present lice. They were a real trial to us, and that is why I find myself continually harping on them. If our American friends discovered that we were 'lousy,' it would have been simply too humiliating. In Florence, only a short distance east of the railroad depot, was the railroad bridge over the Cottonwood River. One by one, each of us crawled down to the water under the bridge, disrobed and shook the vermin from our clothing and picked the lice out of our hair and off our scalps. Just one more observation and I will drop the subject. The first night we spent in Brainard in Heinrich Wiebe's empty house. In the morning we put on a new set of clothes, rolled our discarded clothing up and stuffed it into a sack, and, wonder of wonders, never again have I found one single louse in my clothes. In a week's time the louse population on all of us disappeared entirely. That was a blessed relief for all of us."

Life in Newton

"The first Sunday in Newton stands out clearly in my memory, particularly the Sunday School at First Mennonite Church. Sunday School was new to us. As several individual class instructors took up their teaching duties and began discussing the lesson—all classes were together in the main auditorium of the church—and spoke louder and louder to make themselves heard over the bedlam caused by the propinquity of the classes, it was impossible for me to think, let alone follow the discussion. 'What in the world is this?' I thought. This is like the Jewish School (*Juden Schule*). I could scarcely refrain from laughing out loud. My Koeppenthal buddies should have heard this. Seriously, I felt like running out of the building.

"For a long time after that, I refused to attend Sunday school, my first experience having been so revolting. I soon became acquainted with a neighbor, Dietrich Brucks, and struck up a friendship, as I saw in him a kindred spirit. Later he became rather moody and difficult. In Christian Endeavor he could deliver some of the finest themes, almost like a preacher. I often visited with him in evenings. He was a Sunday school teacher of the young men, and he finally induced me to begin attending the class which had been removed to the balcony and was thus away from the confusion of noise in the main auditorium.

"The worship services were fine, very similar to our morning worship services in Koeppenthal. Contributing to this, no doubt, was the fact that Elder Reverend Toevs [4] had been our pastor in Russia, and, for that reason, we felt at home in the worship service.

[4] See "In Their Own Words, Part II. A Short Sketch Of My Life by Jacob Toews (1838-1922)," *MFH* 26 (2007), pp. 34-49.

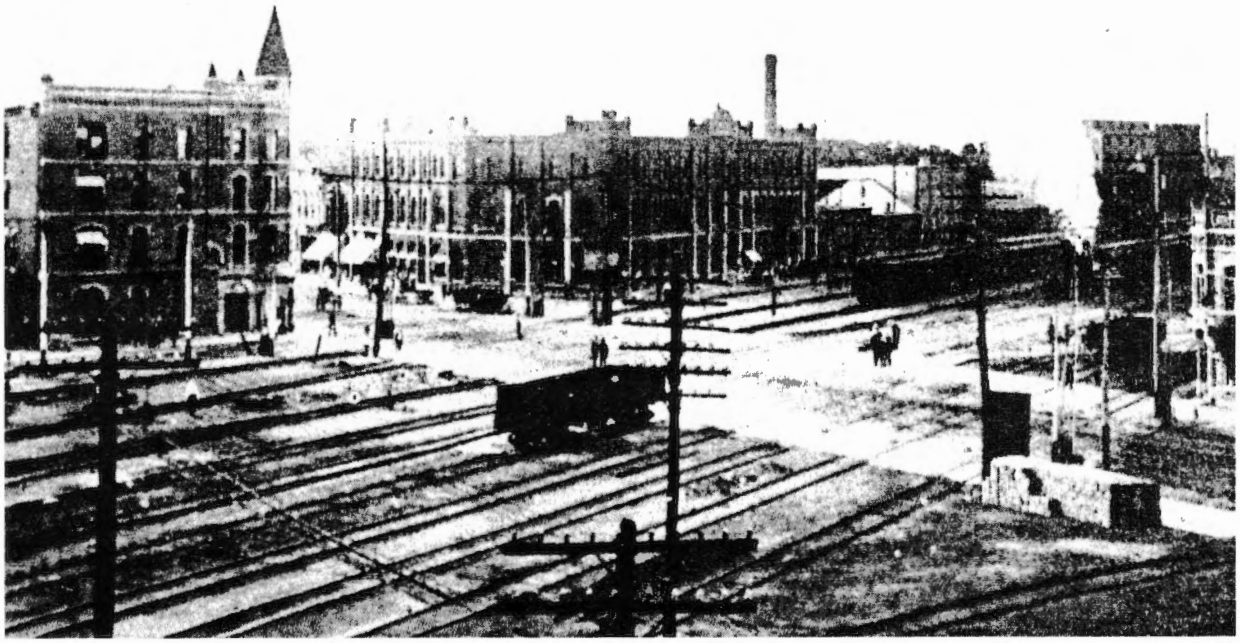
Main Street, Newton, Kansas, 1880. Newton was less than a decade old at the time of this photograph. It began as a "wild and wicked" cow town when the Santa Fe Railroad reached this point on the famed Chisholm Trail.

"The Christian Endeavor programs interested us. That the young people could write and deliver such good, biblical themes was a constant source of amazement to us. And the fine music, choirs, quartets, and duets were wonderful. We felt these things were beyond us. We found out that many were attending either high school, the seminary at Halstead, Kansas, or later even Bethel College in Newton. We only had a common school education.

"The first afternoon we visited at Henry Toevs's. A number of young people were there. John Fisguth, Paul Wiebe, Gustav Toevs, and Peter Penner were the names of a few of them. My first impressions of the different individuals varied. To begin with, they used so many unfamiliar new words like, 'Yu bet yu,' 'shure,' 'schmart,' 'verdollt,' 'tot gegangen,' and other strange phases in practically every sentence uttered. And the greetings 'ha-de-duh,' and 'gut-bei' conveyed no meaning to me, as I considered these expressions almost silly. And we were supposed to talk like this too? I thought of my Koeppenthal friends and acquaintances. A good thing they were not here. But, as time went

From 1878 to 1881, Newton Mennonites held Sunday services in this building—then a Baptist Church located in the second block of West Fifth Street. It is now located on East Twelfth Street.

First building of First Mennonite Church in Newton, Kansas, dedicated on Pentecost 1881.



Newton's Main Street crossing the Santa Fe Railroad ca1900. View is towards the northeast.

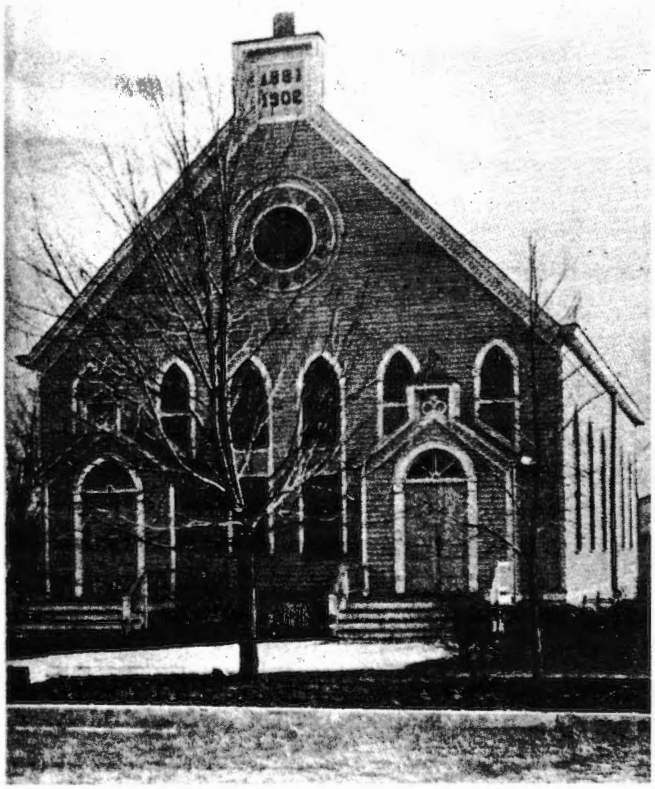
on, we became accustomed to Newton youth and their ways.

"We found the Henry Toevs family with whom we often visited very congenial, since we had like interests. As time went on, this circle of congenial friends and acquaintances continued to grow. That we had some difficulty in adjusting to and finding our proper niche in community life no doubt stemmed from our own attitudes rather than from the customs and attitudes of the other people.

"There were several food items foreign to us, to which we had to become accustomed. Some of these were bananas, tomatoes, canned salmon, corn-on-the-cob, peaches, apricots, and of course 'Pei,' a strictly American delicacy indeed.

"We had a great deal of respect for the vaunted power of 'cyclones' (tornadoes). In one letter to Russia, we recounted faithfully the damage a cyclone had inflicted. The reply we received was revealing: 'You Americans exaggerate so much, we cannot believe half of what you write.'

"The first few weeks I had no job. I immediately began to try to learn English, tutored in the evenings by a high school teacher, Tangeman by name, who was German. Then one day a new acquaintance, Franz Dyck (former Koeppenthaler) took me out to an English farmer to apply for a job, so that I might learn American farm practices and, at the same time, learn the English language. At that time I intended to become a farmer. I secured the job. But almost immediately a certain Heinrich Albrecht (formally from Russia) offered me a job he had had working in a store owned by a Mr. Ramseyer who needed a German handyman-clerk. Albrechts moved to California, and I got the position. I could board at home, as homesickness still bothered

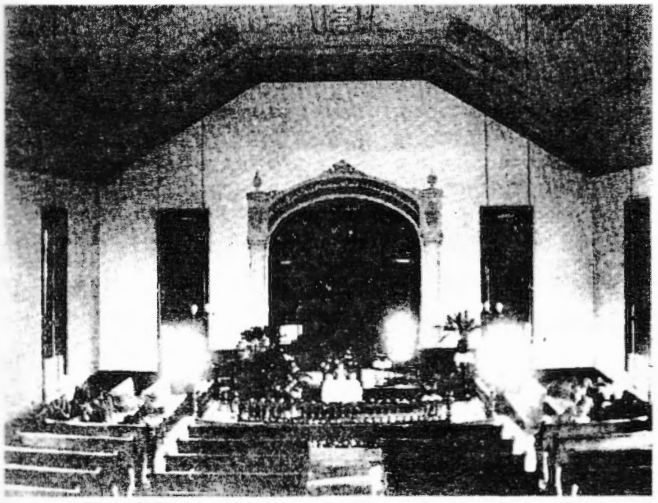


First Mennonite Church building was remodeled and enlarged in 1902. Women used the east/left entrance, men the west/right entrance, and they sat separately on their respective sides of the sanctuary.

me. And there would be an opportunity to learn English here also, probably more than on the farm. Also I could continue my evening classes. The stipend was two dollars per week, less board. Little enough, but we related everything to Russian money and wages, and on that basis it was a good wage. And if my work proved satisfactory, there was the promise of a raise after 30 days. By Christmas my weekly paycheck had advanced to six dollars. One dollar or two rubles per day! Within six months I was drawing as high wages as District Clerk Herman Bartsch back in Koeppenthal, and his was the highest salary obtainable in the whole district.

"You may be sure this information was detailed back to our friends in the home village. Did we also recount that I was really only a busboy in present-day vernacular? Oh no, I was a merchandise salesman, which allowed for free play in their imagination. And that kind of salary! Now in Russia when you became an apprentice, you paid a fee for the training period. And in America you got paid such astronomical wages even while learning! And this was America! I was on the road to influence and wealth! Yes, the drive for the 'Almighty Dollar' had already subtly enmeshed me. But the Almighty could curb and direct here, too—to Him be the praise!

"We intended to buy a farm and go into farming. But the United States was in the throes of a financial 'panic' in 1893, and relatively hard times continued until 1896. Farmers were in distress, wanted to sell out, and many went to Oklahoma Territory to take up 'free' homesteads as parts of the territory had been opened up for settlement. Grandfather Epp said, 'Others want to sell out, and we want to buy. We will wait and see how the situation develops.'



Interior of First Mennonite Church in 1908.

Jacob B. Epp and wife Nettie in 1905, just before leaving Newton for the Hopi Indian reservation in Arizona. They were the first missionaries from First Mennonite Church.

"We were negotiating to buy a farm one and one-half miles east of Newton. It would have been a good time to buy. The Wiebes had bought a farm south of Brainard, Kansas, at a price that seemed quite attractive.

"As time went on and we became aware of the many other opportunities presenting themselves in this country, we became more and more satisfied with our existence here. Soon after New Year's business became so bad that Ramseyer found it necessary to dismiss several of his clerks, me among them.

"The following summer I again tried to get a job as a clerk but without success. Uncle Wiebe offered me a job in the harvest, which I accepted. This was healthier for me. And, due to Uncle Wiebe's good offices, I secured a job on the threshing crew of Messrs. Henry and Cornelius Wiebe. After the threshing season these brothers kept busy by following the carpenter trade. That summer I earned a total of $75 (150 rubles) in a comparatively short time. Naturally Koeppenthal was informed of this.

Timeline of Jacob B. Epp's Life

Provided by his Grandson Ralph A. Claassen

April 6, 1874 - Born Koeppenthal village, Am Trakt Colony on the Volga, Russia

1880-1887 - Elementary education

1887-1888 - Secondary education

1889-1892 - Assistant Clerk (*Gebietsamt*)

March 1893 - Came to America at age 19

1894-1897 - Bethel Academy, Newton, Kansas

1898-1900 - Bethel College, Newton, Kansas

1896-1899 - Taught at parochial (German) school in Newton, Kansas (3 summers)

1897-1898 - Taught at English-German Mennonite District School, Winkler, Manitoba, Canada

1900-1901 - Taught at Indian Mission School, Cantonment, Oklahoma

September 1901-August 1903 - Missionary to the Hopi Indians, Oraibi, Arizona

September 1903-May 1905 - Union Missionary Training Institute, New York

June 29, 1905 - Married Agnetha Harms (b. March 18, 1874) Grace Hill Mennonite Church, Kansas

1905-1912 - Missionary at Oraibi, Arizona

1912-1913 - Los Angeles, California, where Agnetha Harms Epp died November 2, 1913

1913-1919 - Meno, Oklahoma, at the Bible Academy

April 2, 1914 - Married Johanna von Steen, Beatrice, Nebraska

May 1919-September 1921 - Pastor, First Mennonite Church, Pretty Prairie, Kansas

1921-1922 - Editor of *Der Herald* at Newton, Kansas

1922-1927 - Oklahoma Bible Academy, Meno, Oklahoma

1927-1929 - Teacher, Hesston College, Hesston, Kansas

1928-1929 - Pastor, Hoffnungsfeld Mennonite Church, Moundridge, Kansas

1929-1930 - Fort Worth, Texas, involved in Bible correspondence courses

1930-1931 - Los Angeles, California

1931-1933 - Fort Worth, Texas

1933-1935 - Pastor, Saron Mennonite Church, Orienta, Oklahoma

1935-1938 - Pastor, First Mennonite Church, Beatrice, Nebraska. Also in Chicago, Illinois, while wife Helen von Steen Epp attended Moody Bible Institute

1940-1941 - Pastor, Hoffnungsfeld Mennonite Church, Moundridge, Kansas

1941-1944 - Lincoln, Nebraska, working with son Theodore at "Back to the Bible" broadcast

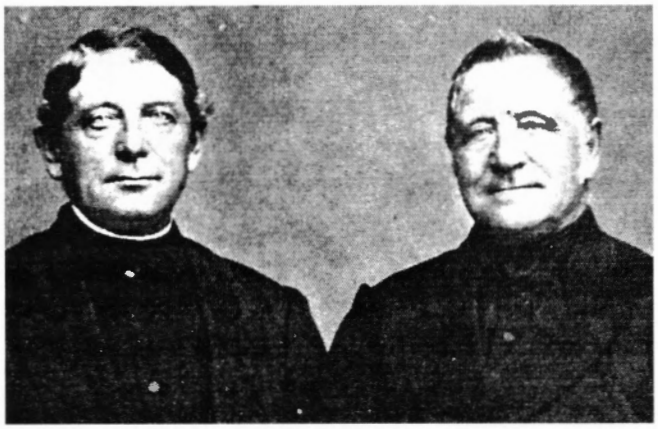
December 22, 1945 - Died Newton, Kansas

"Because I was unable to secure a job as a store clerk in early September, I had no choice so enrolled in Bethel College for a second time. The previous winter I had been encouraged to enroll at Bethel by an acquaintance at First Mennonite Church. Now I was no longer in the lower classes. In German classes I was above average, and in English I was able to hold my own with the others. Also, the daily six-mile walk from our residence on First Street to the Bethel campus and back again was good for my health. Dr. Haury, our physician, did not want to allow me to go back to a clerical job on that account.

"After a second year at Bethel College, I again tried to secure some kind of position in business but without success, so I took a job with the Wiebe brothers' threshing crew again. The next fall it was back to Bethel College again. There was nothing else to do. The fourth summer (1896) Professor H.D. Penner prevailed on me to teach a two-month Daily Vacation Bible School at First Mennonite Church in Newton. The emolument was enough to take me through the final year at Bethel College. I was paying board and room at home and did not have to pay any tuition, attending on a scholarship financed by Herman Suderman of Goldschar. Goldschar was the local designation for the Suderman-Claassen section, three miles east of Newton.

"As time elapsed my interest in farming diminished. Father also lost interest in this direction, since it seemed that we would run into the same situation here in the states that we had in Russia. If we bought a farm and the girls would want their share of the estate paid out to them in cash and I would have to assume the indebtedness, I might never be able to get out of debt. It was also becoming increasingly apparent that the good Lord did not want me to go into business. In addition, the well-loved Professor C.H. Wedel was having an ever-increasing influence on my life. Actually, the subject was never openly discussed between us, but I was tremendously interested in his teaching career and felt he was also interested in my career. Professor Wedel had become my ideal, and I decided to emulate him and become a Bible teacher, although I did not aspire to a position as exalted as that he held. I taught Vacation Bible School for two more terms in Newton. The instructors offered to enroll me in the 'Evangelists Course' in Bethel College. If I did enroll, it was implied that I would become a preacher. This I was not ready to promise, at least I had no desire to become pastor of a congregation.

"After graduation I received a number of tempting offers, both for teaching and also offers to go into



Leonhard Sudermann (left) and his older brother Abraham Sudermann (right) both served the church during its early years—Leonhard as visiting Elder and Abraham as Misnister, 1880-1902.

business. The Canadian school offered me $1,000 and later raised the offer to $1,800 per year if I would teach in high school. Later I received an offer from a college to head its German department at a much higher salary. If I accepted, they would also give me an honorary degree. But I had covenanted to become a Bible teacher, and I stuck with my promise. I took these various offers as being tests sent by God to see whether I would stand firm or deviate from my original intentions.

"When I wrote my Russian friends about these offers, they could not understand why I did not accept one of them. In Aulie-Ata they seemed to understand my motives betster. In Manitoba they pointed out to me that each year's salary would almost buy a farm. I figured out that in Russia one year's salary earned here would suffice to buy not only a whole farmstead but also all the equipment and livestock necessary to operate it. In a few years, by investing my money in Russian property, I would have accumulated a large estate, and my fortune 'would have been made.'

"The above were my first impressions of America, followed by what also actually happened to me. It took seven years here in America to find my avocation and make it my vocation."

- Jacob B. Epp