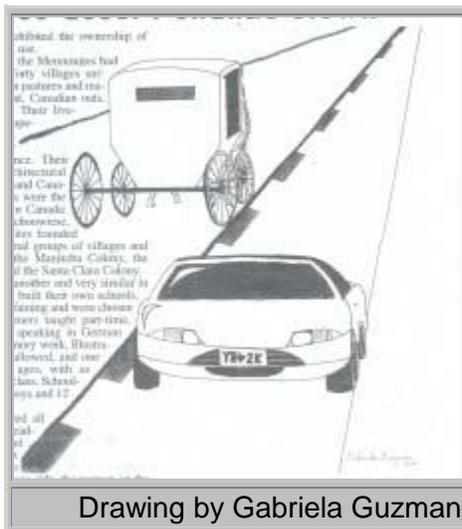


Mennonite Colonies in Mexico Accept Change Slowly

By Maria Macias and Fatima Torres

Change comes slowly for some inhabitants of Chihuahua, Mexico. We're not talking about embracing the newest technology. Only recently have they been allowed to own automobiles. This and other symbols of the modern world have permeated the Mexican colonies of Old World Christians: the Mennonites.

The Mennonites trace their roots to the 16th century Anabaptists, who preached adult baptism. They take their name from Menno Simons, a 16th century Dutch Anabaptist leader. The two most important principles of their faith were living close to the earth and forsaking secular life. The Mennonites emigrated from Prussia during the French Revolution and arrived in Russia in the 1780s after they lost much of their land to exorbitant taxes.



Drawing by Gabriela Guzman

Catherine II of Russia had invited Germans and other Europeans to settle lands vacated by the Turks in southern Russia. She granted a special charter of privileges to the Mennonites including the right to control their own religious, educational and civic affairs. Among the privileges was the guarantee of complete religious independence and exemption from military service for all time. Catherine also granted them permission to brew beer and distill brandy.

The new colonists suffered poverty, disease and death. The promised government assistance of 500 rubles per family was delayed, wood for construction was slow in arriving, and horses were lost or stolen for lack of fences. Nevertheless, in only two decades, 400 Mennonite families had become established in 15 villages. They were farming 89,100 acres of land. In 1866, Russia revoked the Mennonite exemption

from military service and required the Russian language to be taught in all schools.

These and other changes resulted in the Mennonites fleeing to Canada. Again, however, they felt persecuted when the Manitoba Legislature passed laws controlling education and requiring the use of the English language in all schools. The Mennonites considered German an integral part of their religious faith.

Some "progressive" Mennonites accepted the new educational standards and stayed in Canada. This group eventually merged with the more traditional Amish sect, which had long before split from the Mennonites. Other Mennonites sent representatives to find a land of greater freedom, with countries as diverse as North Africa and Australia being considered. **A team of six men explored South America and recommended settling in Mexico.**

The Mexican government desired to settle the barren northern areas of their country with industrious farmers such as the Mennonites. In 1922, at the invitation of President Alvaro Obregón, 20,000 Mennonites left Canada and settled in the state of Chihuahua [see maps

below]. Mexico agreed to sell them land at reasonable prices and level no taxes for 100 years if the Mennonites would produce the bulk of cheese needed for northern Mexico.

President Obregón granted the Mennonites full control of their schools including maintenance of their language, independence of religion in both home and schools and exemption from military service.

Canadian Mennonites began arriving [in Mexico] in 1922, loaded with livestock, farm equipment and household goods, intending to reproduce their industrious farms in Chihuahua as their forefathers had done on the prairies of Canada. They invested large amounts of capital in farming and transformed desolated stretches of sand and cactus into prosperous farms. They maintained well-equipped machine shops, large farm buildings and motorized transportation, although Mennonites prohibited the ownership of automobiles for common use.

In a few short years, the Mennonites had built a series of some forty villages surrounded by fields of green pastures and major crops including wheat, Canadian oats, beans, corn and apples. Their livestock were considered superior to native stock, easily recognizable by their sleek, well-fed appearance. Their villages reflected architectural styles existing in Russia and Canada, and the village names were the same as they had used in Canada, Rosenort, Steinback, Schonwiese, and so on. **The Mennonites founded independent congregational groups of villages and formed three colonies: the Manitoba Colony, the Swift Current Colony and the Santa Clara Colony.**

Located close to one another and very similar in appearance, the colonies built their own schools. Teachers had no formal training and were chosen on their orthodoxy. Farmers taught part-time, reading only the Bible, speaking in German and teaching by rote memory work. Illustrative materials were not allowed, and one instructor schooled all ages, with as many as 75 students per class. Schooling ended at age 13 for boys and 12 for girls.

The Mennonites banned all outside entertainment, reading the Bible faithfully and interpreting it literally. At the meeting house, men of a congregation sat on one side, the women on the other, and they took pleasure from intoning long hymns sung without musical accompaniment. Meeting houses were all alike: plain, oblong wooden buildings, presided over by an elder authorized to fulfill all religious functions. Several ministers and a deacon or two assisted the elder, who was unsalaried and chosen from the laity without special training. Therefore, he was usually selected from among the wealthy owners of large farms.

A Mennonite could lose church membership for breaking specific rules, even for not wearing proper clothes. When members deviated too much from orthodox beliefs, they were simply excommunicated. Home life was always strong and though Mennonites married young, their union was for life. Divorce did not exist. In rare circumstances, a couple ceased living together but such incidents were considered tragedies and neither party remarried. In the early 1920s, it was not unusual for Mennonites to have 10 or more children in the typical home. The father provided for the family as head of the home and conducted family worship. Integrity, morality and rectitude characterized Mennonite homes.

Women were serious homemakers, supporting their husbands in the production of the still famous Mennonite cheese, and every woman did her own baking, sewing and canning. They taught their children the ways of God, which included providing the labor for their own families and also for families with infants. They avoided unnecessary frivolities in their homes, and houses contained minimal furniture, appliances and conveniences. Mennonites also avoided

public electricity, radios, televisions and other comforts. The family remained the most important institution and Mennonites discouraged their children from marrying non-Mennonites.

In the 1930s, the new socialist Mexican government overrode the promises former President Obregón made to the Mennonite delegation in 1921. Mexico demanded that native Mexican teachers replace Mennonite ones. Mexican bandits took advantage of Mennonite pacifism, frequently breaking into their homes or attacking them on roads to market. Bandits killed several Mennonites in these encounters, forcing the religious colonies to consider yet another migration. Fortunately, President Cardenas in 1936 restored their earlier privileges and added police protection against banditry. Mennonite schools reopened, robbery and assaults ceased, and the Mennonites decided to continue living in Mexico.

Over the years the Mennonites have slowly accepted some changes in their lifestyle. Most have accepted the automobile and have adopted Mexican and North American architecture rather than older European styles. Their schools are fully accredited by Mexico, and teachers are college trained either in North America or Mexico. The curriculum is more extensive, including English, Spanish and geography; schools are in session longer; women as well as men are allowed to teach; and teaching is now a full-time occupation. However, criteria that determine church membership among Chihuahua Mennonites remain strict: only the children of Mennonite parents can become members and they must obey church tenets to remain in the church.

Mennonites now speak Spanish as well as German and live side by side with the Tarahumara Indians.

Today about 50,000 Mennonites live near the city of Cuauhtémoc, 65 miles west of the capital city of Chihuahua. They are still known for their fine cheese and grains. Although the more conservative Mennonites still strongly resist change and drive their horses and buggies to market, it appears that there is a chink in the armor of Mennonite fundamentalist belief. It will be harder and harder for this isolated religious enclave to remain traditional.

SOURCE: http://www.epcc.edu/nwlibrary/borderlands/19_mennonites.htm

SEE MAPS OF CHIHUAHUA ON NEXT PAGES

