

The Henry County Settlement

During the 1840's a number of Amish settled about thirty miles northwest of the West Point community along the border of Jefferson and Henry counties. A few years later several Amish families settled in southeastern Washington County. Although they lived in three counties, for a number of years they were members of the same Amish congregation.

The pioneer Amish immigrant in this area was Joseph Roth of Belfort, France, and later Wayne County, Ohio, who selected a claim in Jefferson County in 1841 and two years later with his family settled on his Iowa farm. The John Graber family, from France and Wayne County, Ohio, settled in the vicinity in 1844, Graber having selected his claim three years earlier. Other members of the Roth and Graber families moved to northeastern Jefferson County before the end of the decade. The Eglys, Klopfensteins, Brechbiels, Redigers, and Hostetlers were members of the community before 1860. The small community in Jefferson County never had an organized church although Deacon Peter Klopfenstein of their own number occasionally preached. It eventually became a part of the Henry County Amish church.

It is not definitely known who the first Amish settler in Henry County was but in 1847 Daniel Conrad of Wayne County, Ohio, purchased 160 acres of land a few miles west of Trenton. In 1849 his cousin Martin Conrad bought 160 acres southwest of the present town of Wayland. John Roth, a brother of Joseph Roth of Jefferson County, bought 320 acres west of Trenton in 1849. In 1850 John Eicher bought land near the present town of Rome. During the next decade families bearing these names settled in the community: Conrad, Hostetler, Eicher, Baughman, Zehr, Bechler, Christner, Roth, Rich, Klopfenstein, Kauffman, Goldsmith, von Gunden, Garrick, Widmer, Wenger.

The first minister to serve in the Henry County Amish community was Elder Joseph Goldsmith who settled south of Trenton, moving here from Lee County in 1855. He resided in the county until his death in 1876.

Soon after the beginning of their settlement around Trenton, the Amish bought land in Marion Township, in southern Washington County. In 1851 Jacob Leichty and Martin Eicher purchased farms in Marion Township. By 1854 or earlier they had been joined by Christian Eicher, Daniel Conrad, Daniel Eicher, Christian Wenger, Christian Conrad, Martin Conrad, Benjamin Eicher, and Christian Sommer. Before 1860 the additional names of Schlatter, Schrock, Brenneman,

Alliman, Graber, Hege, Tschantz, and Wittrig were added to the church community. Most of these families had an Alsace-Lorraine or Swiss background and many spoke French as well as Swiss-German, in contrast to the Pennsylvania or Palatinate German spoken in the other chief Amish community in Iowa — the one in Johnson County.

The first church service in the Henry-Washington County settlement was held in the home of Daniel Conrad by Elder Joseph Goldsmith who was living in Lee County at that time. It was thought that Goldsmith organized a church in the community in 1852 or 1853. Services were held in the homes of members and were alternated between the Henry and Washington County neighborhoods. Little is known about the early history of the community because in contrast to other Amish churches, no records are extant. The *Washington Press* of January 29, 1868, however, stated that the German settlers in Marion Township were "sober and industrious, good neighbors, honest in their dealings, and in their moral and religious deportment are a pattern to the older settlers."

As the two settlements in Henry and Washington counties increased in size, agitation began for the formation of separate church organizations, and apparently two loose organizations were formed with Goldsmith in charge of both. Gold-

smith was assisted in the Trenton church by preacher John von Gunden, and in Marion Township by Joseph Wittrig and Christian Bechler. There were certain differences of opinion between the two groups which led the Marion Township fellowship to call in a church leader from Illinois who organized the congregation as a separate church in the fall of 1862 and ordained Benjamin Eicher to the office of preacher and Samuel Hege to the office of deacon.

Eicher, a school teacher by profession, was to exert a strong influence in this church for many years. To this day it is generally referred to as the Eicher church, and officially it is the Eicher Emmanuel Church. Eicher was more progressive than his Amish fellow ministers and gradually his congregation drew away from the other churches with which it had been associated in conference activities. After 1874 the Eicher church followed an independent course until it affiliated itself with the Middle District Conference of the General Conference Mennonite Church in 1892.

With the growth in membership of this congregation a second church was organized in Wayland in 1900, and the two congregations were usually referred to as "the Eicher churches," although they were united under one minister until 1927, when two organizations were formed. Since that time each has had its own pastor. In 1950 a considerable number of members withdrew from

the Eicher Emmanuel Church to form the non-Mennonite fundamentalist congregation — Fern Cliff Free Evangelical Church. In 1959 the membership of the Eicher church was 121, with H. E. Nunemaker serving as pastor. The Wayland Mennonite Church had 336 members in the same year, with Loris Habegger as pastor.

During the mid-nineteenth century American Amish gradually came to be divided into the conservative and progressive camps. A series of Amish ministers' conferences held yearly between 1862 and 1878 failed to reconcile their differences. The conservatives came to be known as the Old Order Amish Mennonites and the progressives as the Amish Mennonites. The churches in Johnson County leaned toward the conservative side while those in Henry-Washington county were inclined to be progressive. Thus the term Old Order Amish was never applied to the Amish of the latter area.

The church in the Trenton area of Henry County, however, was not as progressive as the Eicher church and consequently as was stated above these two congregations drifted apart. Under the sound leadership of Goldsmith's successors in the office of elder or bishop, the Henry County church has experienced a steady growth, maintaining its basic Mennonite doctrines but making adaptations of its practices to fit new conditions. Joseph Schlegel served as elder from 1868 to 1879, Se-

bastian Gerig from 1879-1916, Simon Gingerich from 1916-57, and Vernon Gerig since 1953.

Up to 1871 the Trenton congregation had worshipped in the homes of its members, but in that year a church was built about one and one-half miles southeast of Marshall, now Wayland. Because it was built near the Sugar Creek, it was long known as the Sugar Creek Amish Mennonite Church. After the Western District Amish Mennonite Conference, to which Sugar Creek belonged, was merged with the Mennonite Conferences of the "Old" Mennonites in the area west of the Mississippi in 1921, the term Amish was dropped from the name of the Sugar Creek church.

Because the membership became too large for the meetinghouse, the Sugar Creek congregation in 1949 built a second church (Bethel) three and one-half miles north of Wayland. In 1959 the membership of Sugar Creek was 409 and of Bethel 159. A few years ago the two churches built a fellowship center on the grounds of the Sugar Creek church. This is used for young people's gatherings, family reunions, Sunday school classes, and other activities. More recently two additional churches have been organized by the members of the Bethel and Sugar Creek congregations. These are Eureka, south of Washington, which has 32 members, and Pleasant View, in Mt. Pleasant, which had 29 members in 1959. The total membership of these four congregations, all stem-

ming from the old Sugar Creek church, was 619.

Although these four churches and the two "Eicher" churches of the community belong to two branches of Mennonites, there has been considerable intermarriage between their members and a growing cooperation. The Mennonite Central Committee represents both groups and a number of relief goods projects are carried on jointly. Mennonite Disaster Service of Southeast Iowa and Northeast Missouri is an inter-Mennonite agency representing all Mennonite groups in these regions. This agency is organized to send a corps of workers into areas where storms, floods, or fires have brought disaster and suffering.

Among the persons widely known in Mennonite circles who spent their early years in the Henry County settlement are the brothers C. L. and J. D. Graber, sons of Daniel Graber, who was for many years a preacher in the Sugar Creek Mennonite Church. C. L. Graber was a long-time business manager of Goshen College and has participated in Mennonite foreign relief projects in the Middle East, the Philippines, China, Europe, Puerto Rico, and Paraguay. J. D. Graber served many years as a Mennonite missionary in central India and is now the executive secretary of the Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities. Dr. Olive Wyse of Wayland has served on the Goshen College faculty since 1926.

MELVIN GINGERICH