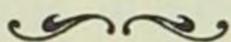


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Mennonites in Mount Pleasant

On Monday evening, July 20, 1874, the citizens of Mount Pleasant held a special meeting to make arrangements for receiving a party of exiled Mennonites who, it was rumored, were soon to visit their city. A committee consisting of P. N. Bowman, P. T. Twinting, E. W. Farwell, R. Eshelman, and D. I. Holcomb was appointed "to make proper arrangements for the reception and entertainment of this worthy and industrious people if they conclude to visit this locality".

A month earlier the Mount Pleasant *Free Press* had reported that inasmuch as a "large number of the people known as Mennonites are about to emigrate from Russia to this country, of whom several thousand will probably settle in Iowa, and some we hope in Henry County, there is considerable curiosity felt concerning their history and doctrines". The *Free Press* then went on to enlighten its readers on the history of the Mennonite church. It was believed at that time that

probably forty thousand of the forty-five thousand Mennonites in southern Russia would come to America during the next few years. Actually eighteen thousand came and settled in compact communities in western Canada, Minnesota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas.

During the reign of Frederick William II, many of the privileges Mennonites had formerly enjoyed in Prussia were curtailed. At the same time Catherine the Great, searching for good farmers to develop the newly acquired lands of southern Russia, extended an invitation in 1776 to Prussian farmers to move to this undeveloped area. During the next few years over six thousand Prussian Mennonites accepted Catherine's invitation.

There in the land of the Czars the Mennonites lived in peace for a century. There they built prosperous communities, free from molestation. There they had their own political institutions and their own schools, in which they taught their German culture, although nearly all of them were Dutch, having migrated to Prussia from Holland many years earlier. But in the 1870's the Russian rulers decided to abolish the privileges Catherine the Great had granted to the Mennonites, and to Russianize all of them. Their schools were to be taken away from them, Russian instead of Ger-

man was to be taught, and military service was to be required of them.

Many of the Russian Mennonites hoped that the rulers would change their policy. Cornelius Jansen, a Mennonite grain merchant serving as Prussian consul at Berdyansk, had no confidence that the Russian plan would be revoked and urged his fellow-churchmen to migrate to America, whereupon the Russian government, wishing to retain these valuable farmers, ordered Jansen to leave the country.

The Jansen family arrived in Quebec in August, 1873. From there Cornelius Jansen and his oldest son, Peter, came to the United States to investigate lands upon which their Russian friends might settle. In Washington they met President Grant, who was much interested in the proposed migration of the Mennonites. Thence they went to visit Mennonite leaders in Indiana and Illinois, and to explore the country beyond the Mississippi. "Early in the spring of 1874," wrote Peter Jansen in his *Memoirs*, "Father and I started out again and landed in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, a nice little town in the southeastern part of the State. Here we found good schools, which was quite an inducement, as Father was anxious for the younger children to study English. We rented a nice little house" and soon moved to Iowa.

Sometime in June, 1874, the Jansen family established their home in Mount Pleasant. Cornelius Jansen, a man of culture, moderate wealth, and wide experience, soon became a well-known and influential individual. It is no cause for wonder that the citizens of Mount Pleasant were anxious to have his friends settle there.

In November of that year Jansen informed the citizens of Mount Pleasant that at least one thousand Mennonite families were preparing to leave Russia the next spring. The *Free Press* reported, "Mr. J. expects several families of the number to locate here, — those possessing means and desiring a delightful home. Among these will be many of his personal friends. We can assure him that to all such our citizens will extend a most cordial welcome. Mr. Jansen says that in all his travels he has met no town he likes better than Mt. Pleasant, no people with whom he is better pleased, and he is glad to return to it after his travels and labors farther west."

The coming of the Russian Mennonites was a matter of interest to many others. The *New York Herald* had reported in July, speaking of the six hundred who had passed through that city, "If these are a fair sample of those who are to follow we may expect the great body of emigrant Mennonites about to come to the United States from

Russia to rival their brethren in Pennsylvania and Maryland and the states of the northwest We have had five or six generations of Mennonites born in this country, and the stock has proved so satisfactory that we cannot but receive the new supply with a special and hearty welcome."

So anxious were the frontier States to receive them that Kansas, Nebraska, and Minnesota passed laws exempting the Mennonites from military service. The railroads competed with each other in offering inducements to the Mennonites. The Santa Fe and the Missouri & Burlington railroads offered them immigrant houses, reduced freight rates, gifts, passes, and reduced prices of lands. Canada, too, made them flattering offers and many thousands accepted.

Although the people of Mount Pleasant were disappointed that several thousand Mennonites going to Kansas did not stop in Iowa, some of Jansen's friends finally did settle in Mount Pleasant. All of them, however, were his Prussian Mennonite friends instead of his Russian neighbors. Late in the evening of July 3, 1876, during a heavy rain and thunder storm, a large number of Jansen's friends arrived in Mount Pleasant. It must have been very dark at that hour, for Peter Dyck wrote in his diary, "We had arrived in Mt. Pleasant on July 3, in a heavy downpour

of rain. It was also a very dark evening and as we prepared to go into the station with our luggage, I in this heavy darkness while stepping from the train to the platform fell and bruised my shinbone, which two days later caused a sore foot. However, after applying boiled savory and crushed dock, the injury healed after five weeks."

In August thirty-three more Mennonites came to Mount Pleasant and in September eleven others. This brought to a close the Mennonite immigration to that city. There were enough for a small church with ninety-five members and eleven children. At first their Sunday services were held in private homes, but later the auditorium in the courthouse was used.

The Mount Pleasant Mennonite families had decided to settle as a community group and so delegations visited different localities in 1876 searching for a desirable location. The region around Storm Lake, Iowa, and areas in Kansas and Nebraska were examined, but the scouts had difficulty in making a decision. Finally Reverend Peter Dyck, who had been on at least two of these land-exploring trips, grew tired of waiting and bought a farm in Kansas. A few followed him and, with the Prussian friends who had not stopped in Iowa on the way, they organized a Mennonite church near Whitewater, Kansas.

The larger part of the Mount Pleasant delegation, however, settled near Beatrice, Nebraska, the locality favored by Cornelius Jansen and one of their young leaders, Aaron Claassen, who was interested in becoming Jansen's son-in-law. Later Claassen did marry Miss Jansen, the young lady from whose interesting diary some of the notes for this article are taken.

The first moving from Mount Pleasant to Nebraska took place on November 21, 1876. Elder Johann Andreas, Reverend Andreas Penner, J. H. Zimmerman, and some of the older and wealthier families remained through the winter because of the greater comfort found in Mount Pleasant. They, however, went on to Beatrice, Nebraska, in February, 1877.

During the two years the Jansens lived in Mount Pleasant they had many contacts with the community. For a time Peter attended Howe's Academy. His sister Helena attended the Young Ladies' Seminary, studying art under Miss Long from Burlington. A diary kept by daughter Anna reveals that they attended the Presbyterian Sunday School and that several of them taught classes in the Negro Sunday School. In November, 1875, the elder Jansen addressed the Mount Pleasant Conversational Club, relating the history of his people, explaining the cause of their

migration to America, and telling about his expulsion from Russia. So interesting was the address that the *Free Press* printed it in six installments.

The Jansen family was grief stricken, however, when daughter Margaret died. The members of the family remembered for many years how kind the people of Mount Pleasant were to them during the time of their bereavement. The *Free Press* reported that the funeral was largely attended, "our citizens showing much sympathy for the afflicted family". She was buried in Mount Pleasant and members of the family have often visited her grave.

The oldest son, Peter Jansen, later became one of Nebraska's illustrious citizens. He served in the State Senate, was a delegate-at-large to the St. Louis convention which nominated McKinley, and in 1900 was one of the twelve United States commissioners to the Paris World's Fair. He was intimately acquainted with most of the Presidents from Grant to Wilson, especially with McKinley and Taft. At one time he was offered the nomination for Governor of Nebraska but refused it because as Governor he might have been called upon to enforce the death penalty.

MELVIN GINGERICH