

A WESTERN KANSAS MENNONITE SETTLEMENT

by J.W. Fretz

The Mennonite settlement centered in the Meadow Mennonite Church located in the diminishing little hamlet of Mingo which is situated twelve miles southeast of the town of Colby and sixteen miles northwest of Oakey illustrates an interesting phase of the process of peopling the prairies of Kansas. The migration to Thomas County is one of the more recent episodes in a long line of Mennonite settlement efforts and was occasioned by a familiar set of causes. There was overcrowding in the home communities which drove up the price of land so that the poorer families were unable to bid successfully. There was the desire on the part of parents of large families to keep their larger family units intact. There was the spirit of adventure; the lure of cheaper land in new areas and the attractiveness of pioneering on new frontiers. The Thomas County settlement is interesting not because it is unique but because it is typical. A look at the development of this Mennonite settlement yields a clear picture of the experience of many other Mennonite settlements throughout the United States and Canada.

Those who came to Thomas County did not do so in any organized sense or as a part of a mass movement. They came as individual families or in small groups of families. While the settlement did not begin to take shape corporately until the twenties there were individual Mennonites who owned land in Thomas county as early as 1904 and 1907. Most of these owners never lived on the land but had bought it as an investment. The Thomas County settlement took shape early in the twenties. In February of 1920 J. J. Franz, J. R.F. Schmidt, G. G. Pankrata, and Heinrich Schmidt from Goessel, Kansas went to Thomas County to look for land at the invitation of Peter Dahl, a Mennonite who had at the time already purchased land and described it favorably in the *VORWARTS*. These men were favorably impressed and immediately bought a half-section each paying in the neighborhood of \$50 per acre. The combined population of these four families amounted to thirty-five, twenty seven of which were children, indicating an average of seven children per family. This large nucleus immediately attracted families for Goessel and Inman, Kansas areas. After the harvest of 1921 the John P. Franz and Gustave Frey families moved to Thomas County, Heinrich Gaeddert's came soon after. In 1923 the Jacob Richert and the John C. Williems family moved west. By this time the Mennonite group numbered fifty-one people. The steady migration to Thomas County slowly convinced still others to come.

A small Mennonite Brethren congregation was established about this time a little northwest of the General Conference group. This group however later broke up, some returning to their farm homes and some moving the local General Conference church.

Following the original settlement of these families came the gradual development of community organizations. Already in 1920 a regular Sunday school was organized. In 1922 efforts were made to organize a church but no congregation was formed at that time. Subsequent developments delayed organization for fifteen years. In 1926 a second group of newcomers strengthened the earlier group. Frank Goossen, with a family of ten boys, of Hillsboro, Kansas, a member of the Alexanderwhol Mennonite church, investigated Thomas County as a possible place of opportunity for his large family. Frank d. Goossen, his eldest son, bought a quarter section for \$35 an acre in October 1925, and moved on the land in May of 1926. In 1928 his brother William moved to Colby. In 1929 another brother Alvin, Peter J. Franz and another Goossen brother, Abe, joined the settlement. Thus, additional families have kept coming up to the present time, with the exception of the interruption due to the dust storms in the depression years. The steady stream of newcomers to this particular

community includes such families as that of Cornelius Goossen, who came in 1945, Arnold Nickel, also form Goessel, who moved to this community in 1946, George Wiens, from Meade, Kansas who came in 1947, Abe Ratzlaff, from Hillsboro, Jake Koehn from Oklahoma and Marvin Schmidt, form Liberal Kansas all of whom arrived in 1949.

It is interesting to note that not all of those who came to this Mennonite settlement in the earlier years remained. A number of families left the community, most of them perhaps because of the severe conditions during the depression years. Some of these left already in the early twenties. Some had paid too much for land and with the coming of the depression could not meet their obligations. In addition to those coming form Hillsboro, Goessel, and Inman, several also came from Buhler and Elbing, Kansas.

Describing the coming of the various families in only a superficial account of community building. T he labor, the dedication and the sacrifice that these people put into their life efforts is the real story of community building. As indicated from the beginning a Sunday school was organized, and worship services were regularly held. In 1936 a congregation was formally organized with eighteen charger members. In 1938 the vacated Mennonite Brethren church was secured as a place of worship instead of the old Antelope school house. The congregation continued to grow, until in 1952 it had a membership of eighty-two, a gain of forty-two members within the last four years since Walter H. Regier has become its pastor.

The congregation dedicated a new 72 by 32-foot brick church building on November 30, 1952., built at an expenditure of about \$22,000. Members of the congregation contributed most of the labor. The church has a capacity of 240. Besides being equipped with a gas forced-air heating system and a modern kitchen, the building also provides three Sunday School rooms, modern rest rooms, a drinking fountain, two cloak rooms, a mother's room, a minister's study, library, and a choir loft. Another large room in the basement is suitable for receptions.

From this center of spiritual power radiate other activities in the community. It is, however, the center of the community life and the fountain of strength for its members. Practically all of the first settlers who came to Thomas County bought improved land. They had to convert barren places into livable homes. They struggled through difficult and uncertain first years but today they have build well and have prospered. The homes are modern and attractive.

Successful Mennonite settlements are not accidental. The require leadership. Among the outstanding leaders in the Thomas County Mennonite settlement is Frank Goossen. He was the oldest of ten sons and thus the "big brother" all his life. He is still very much that in the Thomas county area. He has helped directly and indirectly to build the Mennonite community by assisting others to secure land and equipment with which to begin. He believes in a diversified farm program and has demonstrated the success of his theory through the years. As a young man he tried the carpenter trade but always wanted to farm. After trying it for two years in Marion County, C.R. Voth persuaded him to come to Thomas county for which he has never been sorry. He purchased a quarter section of unimproved land on which he first built a small "A" house in which he lived for a number of years. He used a wagon body for chicken house. Today he farms more than two sections of land besides his church and community responsibilities. He drew up the plan for the new structure of the Meadow Mennonite Church and served as a member of the building committee until it was completed. As an active community worker, he is a member of the Great Plains Electric Cooperative Association at Colby as well as a member of the local REA Board of Directors

since its organization. He helped organize the Mingo Cooperative Grain Company and the Thomas county Farm Bureau and was also one of the organizers of the local Production Credit Association and of the Mingo Cooperative Oil Company.

In 1950 he received Kansas balanced farming and family living certificate of award sponsored by the Kansas State Chamber of Commerce, Kansas State College of Agriculture and the Colby chamber of Commerce.

The contour of the land in the Thomas county areas is of a gentle, rolling nature. The settlers have made homes out of barren prairies by erecting comfortable houses and surrounding them with gardens, trees, orchards and fences. Land values have risen from \$25 an acre in 1949 to \$100 – \$125 an acre at present. It is estimated by several of the community leaders that the average farm investment represented between \$15,000 and \$220,000 dollars. These men agreed that one could be rich one year and a beggar the next, although most families who came here poor are moderately comfortable at the present time and it is doubtful whether this area will again sink to the dust bowl depression year levels because of the newer methods of farming, the greater population growth in the area giving it more balance and stability and because of the government program of supporting prices.

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