

## Ethnic Farmers and the “Outside” World: Mennonites in Manitoba and Nebraska, 1874-1900

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### Résumé de l'article

Les historiens ont longtemps cru que la grande prairie canadienne avait été peuplée par deux types de fermiers : le fermier anglo-canadien qui possédait un sens inné du commerce et le paysan ethnique qui, installé à l'écart de la société dominante, gardait ses habitudes du vieux continent. Les établissements composés d'Ukrainiens, d'Allemands catholiques, de Canadiens français, de Doukhobors et de Mennonites, étaient perçus comme des groupuscules ethniques noyés dans un monde canadien. L'hypothèse de travail de cette étude cherche à montrer que les Mennonites, à l'instar de toutes les collectivités rurales, religieuses et immigrantes, n'étaient pas isolés géographiquement et qu'ils ne pratiquaient pas une économie de subsistance. Cette étude démontre en fait que ces colons avaient pour but de maintenir leur caractère ethnique tout en s'enrichissant par des activités commerciales judicieuses et en adaptant leur agriculture à leur nouvel habitat. Cette analyse vient contredire le courant de pensée qui aime croire que seuls les fermiers anglo-canadiens ont pu s'adapter rapidement à leur milieu et que les colons ethniques comme les Mennonites ont conservé leurs habitudes traditionnelles sans y apporter la moindre modification.

Cet article porte sur l'expérience d'un groupe restreint, mais fort représentatif, d'immigrants Mennonites, le « Kleine Gemeinde », qui se sont installés dans la réserve de l'Est au Manitoba et dans le comté de Jefferson, au Nebraska en 1874. Les écrits de ces fermiers et les dossiers que les gouvernements canadien et américain ont conservés sur eux laissent croire que ces fermiers se sont en fait rapidement adaptés à leur nouvel habitat. Les climats nouveaux, les conditions de travail et les marchés les ont forcés à modifier leur choix de récoltes, leurs pratiques agricoles et à se mécaniser à certains degrés. Les fermes de la réserve de l'Est étaient relativement petites et polyvalentes. Au lieu d'entrevoir un simple mode de vie paysan, ces faits tendent à démontrer qu'ils avaient fait des choix éclairés pour s'adapter aux conditions du marché de l'économie rurale primitive du Manitoba. Les changements réalisés par la première génération de fermiers mennonites au Canada reflètent le développement économique du Manitoba. Une comparaison de la réserve de l'Est avec la communauté mennonite du Nebraska indique qu'entre 1874 et 1900, les deux collectivités se sont distinguées de façon significative par leurs pratiques agricoles. Cette distinction confirmait les différences économiques et géographiques entre le Manitoba et le Nebraska. La volonté des Mennonites de s'adapter à leur nouveau milieu et de se mettre en rapport avec les marchés extérieurs à leur propre monde s'est avérée plus importante que leurs habitudes culturelles en agriculture.

# Ethnic Farmers and the “Outside” World: Mennonites in Manitoba and Nebraska, 1874-1900

ROYDEN LOEWEN

## Résumé

*Historians have suggested that two types of farmers settled on the Canadian prairie; one was the commercially oriented Anglo-Canadian farmer, the other was the European ethnic group settler bent on transplanting an “Old World” way of life on the periphery of mainstream society. These latter settlements – comprised of Ukrainians, German-Catholics, French-Canadians, Doukhobors, and Mennonites – have been described as isolated “ethnic islands in a Canadian sea.” This essay, however, argues that even the Mennonites or rural, sectarian, immigrant communities were not dependent on geographical isolation or a transplanted subsistence agriculture. It suggests that their aims were to reproduce their ethnic communities with financial resources derived from a judicious interaction with the marketplace and an adaption of agricultural practices to a new physical environment. It counters the impression that, while Anglo-Canadian farmers adapted quickly to the exigencies of their environments, ethnic farmers like the Mennonites transplanted their traditional ways without change.*

*The essay focuses on the experience of a small but representative Mennonite immigrant group, the “Kleine Gemeinde,” who settled in both the East Reserve, Manitoba, and in Jefferson County, Nebraska in 1874. The writings of these farmers and the parallel Canadian and American public record suggest that these ethnic farmers adapted quickly to their new environments. New climates, labour conditions, and markets brought changes to their crop selections, levels of mechanization, and cultivation practices. The East Reserve farms were relatively small, mixed operations but, it is argued, that rather than suggesting a peasant existence, these facts point to rational market choices in a relatively primitive Manitoba economy. Changes that these Mennonite farmers made during their first generation in Canada reflect the development of Manitoba’s economy. A comparison of East Reserve with its sister settlement in Nebraska indicates that, between 1874 and 1900, the two communities diverged significantly in their farming practices. That divergence reflected differences in the economy and physiography of Manitoba and Nebraska. More important than cultural predispositions in shaping their agriculture was the Mennonites’ willingness to adapt to a new climate and cultivate a sustained relationship with the markets of the “outside world.”*

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perçus comme des groupuscules ethniques noyés dans un monde canadien. L'hypothèse de travail de cette étude cherche à montrer que les Mennonites, à l'instar de toutes les collectivités rurales, religieuses et immigrantes, n'étaient pas isolés géographiquement et qu'ils ne pratiquaient pas une économie de subsistance. Cette étude démontre en fait que ces colons avaient pour but de maintenir leur caractère ethnique tout en s'enrichissant par des activités commerciales judicieuses et en adaptant leur agriculture à leur nouvel habitat. Cette analyse vient contredire le courant de pensée qui aime croire que seuls les fermiers anglo-canadiens ont pu s'adapter rapidement à leur milieu et que les colons ethniques comme les Mennonites ont conservé leurs habitudes traditionnelles sans y apporter la moindre modification.

Cet article porte sur l'expérience d'un groupe restreint, mais fort représentatif, d'immigrants Mennonites, le "Kleine Gemeinde", qui se sont installés dans la réserve de l'Est au Manitoba et dans le comté de Jefferson, au Nebraska en 1874. Les écrits de ces fermiers et les dossiers que les gouvernements canadien et américain ont conservés sur eux laissent croire que ces fermiers se sont en fait rapidement adaptés à leur nouvel habitat. Les climats nouveaux, les conditions de travail et les marchés les ont forcés à modifier leur choix de récoltes, leurs pratiques agricoles et à se mécaniser à certains degrés. Les fermes de la réserve de l'Est étaient relativement petites et polyvalentes. Au lieu d'entrevoir un simple mode de vie paysan, ces faits tendent à démontrer qu'ils avaient fait des choix éclairés pour s'adapter aux conditions du marché de l'économie rurale primitive du Manitoba. Les changements réalisés par la première génération de fermiers mennonites au Canada reflètent le développement économique du Manitoba. Une comparaison de la réserve de l'Est avec la communauté mennonite du Nebraska indique qu'entre 1874 et 1900, les deux collectivités se sont distinguées de façon significative par leurs pratiques agricoles. Cette distinction confirmait les différences économiques et géographiques entre le Manitoba et le Nebraska. La volonté des Mennonites de s'adapter à leur nouveau milieu et de se mettre en rapport avec les marchés extérieurs à leur propre monde s'est avérée plus importante que leurs habitudes culturelles en agriculture.

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Prairie historiography has often noted the existence of two types of settler. One type was the Anglo-Canadian farmer who migrated westward individually or with his family to make a profit from commercial wheat growing or land speculation or both. The other type was the immigrant, the ethnic group settler, who came to the west from Europe to transplant an "Old World" way of life on the periphery of mainstream society. Standard accounts of Prairie history separate these peasant immigrants who strove for cultural survival from petits bourgeois farmers who served the exigencies of King Wheat.<sup>1</sup> It

1. Recent general works which make this distinction include: Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto, 1985), 242 and 301; Robert C. Brown and Ramsay Cook, *Canada: A Nation Transformed, 1896-1921* (Toronto, 1974), 79. For a standard work that describes the economic outlook of the Prairie farmer, see C.B. MacPherson, *Democracy in Alberta: Social Credit and the Party System* (1953; rep. Toronto, 1977), 225ff. For recent, in-depth studies that describe the lifegoals of the Anglo-Canadian Prairie settler in terms such as these, see Paul Voisey, *Vulcan: The Making of a Prairie Community* (Toronto, 1988); Lyle Dick, *Farmers 'Making Good': The Development of Abernethy District, Sas-*

was as if the symmetrical Prairie landscape, comprised of vast fields of wheat, railroad towns, and Victorian farmyards, was interrupted by colourful, ethnic communities undergirded by subsistence farms and featuring buildings of distinct architecture; these communities were, in the words of W.L. Morton, "ethnic islands in a Canadian sea."<sup>2</sup>

While the settlements of Ukrainians, German-Catholics, French-Canadians, and Doukhobors have often been described in these terms, those of the Mennonites have especially been described as isolated, transplanted "Old World" communities.<sup>3</sup> C.A. Dawson noted in 1936 that Prairie Mennonites lived in sectarian communities whose leaders "employ[ed] devices which... isolate[d] their brethren more completely from contacts with outsiders."<sup>4</sup> Themes of isolation have pervaded subsequent Mennonite historiography. In 1955 E.K. Francis asserted that the Mennonites had come to Canada from Russia to seek a "place which seemed remote enough... to give hope that... the world could henceforth be avoided with greater success."<sup>5</sup> Geographer John Warkentin's 1960 study of Manitoba Mennonite farm settlements suggested that "perhaps nowhere in North America has a peasant culture from Europe been so completely re-established."<sup>6</sup> Warkentin proceeded to describe the Mennonite's exclusive reserves, their open field system and "street villages," and the fact that they became "inured to a subsistence scale of living."<sup>7</sup> In the views of these writers Mennonite farmers cultivated their sense of peoplehood by avoiding the "outside world."<sup>8</sup>

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*katchewan 1880-1920* (Ottawa, 1989); Donald Loveridge, "The Garden of Manitoba: The Settlement and Agricultural Development of the Rock Lake District and the Municipality, 1878-1902," PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1986. These works also separate the Anglo-Canadian commercial wheat farmer from the more-isolated European group settler. Voisey notes that "[i]nstead of searching for new opportunities, like so many Vulcan-area settlers, [communal religious groups] came to preserve a way of life under pressure back home." (252).

2. W.L. Morton, *Manitoba: A History* (Toronto, 1957), 159.
3. C.A. Dawson, *Group Settlement: Ethnic Communities in Western Canada* (Toronto, 1936); Hansgeorg Schlichtman, "Ethnic Themes in Geographical Research in Western Canada," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 9 (1977): 9-41; George Woodcock and Ivan Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors* (Toronto, 1977); Heinz Lehmann, *Das Deutschtum in Westkanada* (Berlin, 1939); Vladimir Kaye and Francis Swyripa, "Settlement and Colonization," *A Heritage in Transition: Essays in the History of Ukrainians in Canada*, ed. M. Lupul (Ottawa, 1982), 32-58. Two recent works on Ukrainian farmers which seem to chart a new course by emphasizing adaptations to modern economies and new environments include John Lehr, "'The Peculiar People': Ukrainian Settlement of Marginal Lands in Southeastern Manitoba," *Building Beyond the Homestead*, ed. D. Jones and I. MacPherson (Calgary, 1985), 29-38; Stella Hryniuk, "A Peasant Society in Transition: Ukrainian Peasants in Five East Galician Counties, 1880-1900," PhD diss., University of Manitoba, 1985.
4. Dawson, *Group Settlement*, 96.
5. E.K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia* (Altona, MB, 1955), 75.
6. John Warkentin, "Mennonite Settlements in Southern Manitoba," PhD diss., York University, iii.
7. *Ibid.*, 183.
8. For more recent expressions of this view point, see Frank Epp, *Mennonites in Canada* (Toronto, 1974), 209ff; Leo Driedger, *Mennonite Identity in Conflict* (New York, 1988), 119.

This view, that a strong sense of ethnicity is dependent on geographical isolation or an avoidance of the "outside world," has increasingly been challenged by scholars of minority groups, who see the focus of ethnicity, not on descriptive cultural traits upheld by geographical isolation, but on the social phenomenon and ascriptive bonds that encouraged the development of ethnicity. Frederick Barth, for example, has argued that in most instances the immigrant or ethnic group's social "boundaries persist despite a flow of personnel across them."<sup>9</sup> In Barth's view, ethnicity is dependent on the community's ability to adapt its aims to its changing environment.<sup>10</sup> Agricultural historians have similarly questioned the static, descriptive approach to the study of ethnic farm communities. In Canada, John Herd Thompson has recently suggested an agenda for ethnic farm research by asking "how many of the observable [ethnic] differences were the result of 'cultural heritage' and how many...[the result of] the physical environment... [and available] capital...."<sup>11</sup> In the United States, Kathleen Conzen has criticized rural historians for the fact that they "seldom venture beyond a description of immigrant settlement patterns to a consideration of the resulting adaptive processes...."<sup>12</sup> Both historians have, thus, argued that an understanding of the nature of the social and ideological make-up of the ethnic rural community must take into account the adaptations it made to its new environment and understand that those changes were often made to ensure the continuity of what community members considered to be the "essence of ethnicity."

This essay argues that even the Mennonite farmers of the most solidaristic, closed, ascetic immigrant communities adapted quickly to their new economic and physical environments and made sweeping changes, especially to their agricultural practices, during the first generation after immigration. It counters the impression that, while Anglo-Canadian farmers adapted quickly to the exigencies of their environments, ethnic farmers like the Mennonites transplanted their traditional ways without change. Indeed, it will be argued that conservative ethnic farmers changed traditional farming practices in order to realize deeper cultural aims. Those aims were not so much to maintain an isolated existence within the confines of Old World "street villages" as it was to maintain social networks upon which their sense of peoplehood was based. Those social arrangements included the family and its commitment to establishing a second generation on land of its own, the Mennonite congregation and the value it placed on an "institutionally complete" community, and a socially differentiated hierarchy in which

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9. Frederick Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Oslo, 1969), 9 and 10.
  10. A similar view seems to undergird the work of Jean R. Burnet and Howard Palmer, *Coming Canadians: An Introduction to a History of Canada's Peoples* (Ottawa, 1988). They suggest that, as immigrants to Canada "have met the challenges of its geography and its society [t]hey have neither conformed entirely to an established pattern nor fused... into wholly new models." (9)
  11. John Herd Thompson, "Writing About Agriculture," *Writing About Canada*, ed. John Schultz (Toronto, 1990), 107.
  12. Kathleen Conzen, "Historical Approaches to the Study of Rural Ethnic Communities," *Ethnicity on the Great Plains*, ed. Frederick Luebke (Lincoln, 1980), 1. For an analysis of the adaptation of one ethnic group, see Conzen, "Peasant Pioneers: Generational Succession Among German Farmers in Frontier Minnesota," *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation*, eds. S. Hahn and J. Prude (Chapel Hill, NC, 1985), 259-92.

economically successful farmers provided political leadership within the community. The dynamics of these internal social arrangements are, of course, a study in and of themselves. Space limitations dictate that the focus of this essay will be on the process of the Mennonites' agricultural adaptations.<sup>13</sup>

A study of a small conservative Mennonite farm community that migrated from southern Russia to North America in 1874 provides the opportunity to recreate a detailed picture of ethnic agricultural adaptation. While census and tax records provide useful quantitative data, extant diaries and letters of community members describe the strategies behind certain agricultural changes. In addition, the fact that members of this group settled in both the Canadian Prairie and the American Midwest, two distinct environments, provides a deeper perspective into those strategies. Such a comparative approach can suggest, for instance, which changes were made to meet market and environment factors and which practices reflected cultural predispositions.

The ethnic farmers under study were members of the Mennonite "Kleine Gemeinde." Literally meaning "small congregation," the Kleine Gemeinde numbered only about nine hundred souls in 1874.<sup>14</sup> Despite its size, however, the Kleine Gemeinde's experience in Russia as a group espousing religious asceticism, nonresistance, and separation from worldly society had made it a representative Mennonite group. Its experience in the Molochnaia and Borosenko Colonies, whence it had migrated in search of new sources of farmland, was based on the central social role of the family. Its members worked either as craftsmen or export-oriented wheat producers in a highly differentiated society, facts which also made the Kleine Gemeinde representative in the economic sense. Furthermore, in 1874 when the Kleine Gemeinde emigrated from Russia to avoid its new military service and local government laws, it did so in the company of sixteen thousand other conservative Mennonites.

Unlike most other Mennonite groups, however, the Kleine Gemeinde settled in both the United States and Canada. The Manitoba and Nebraska communities did share many characteristics. Both, for example, were founded on land blocs. In Manitoba, ninety Kleine Gemeinde families settled in the East Reserve, an eight-township land bloc some thirty-five miles southeast of Winnipeg. In Nebraska, sixty families settled in Cub Creek township, a land bloc purchased from a regional railroad company; Cub Creek lay in Jefferson County, some sixty miles southwest of Lincoln, the state capital. Both Cub Creek and the East Reserve also featured reestablished villages, common pastures, long strips of arable land, and house/barn architecture. Both, too, saw the reestablishment of "institutionally complete" communities that included German private schools, fire insurance agencies, and strong sectarian leadership.

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13. For a discussion of the internal social dynamics of the Mennonite communities under study, see my thesis, "Family, Church and Market: A History of a Mennonite Community Transplanted from Russia to Canada and the United States, 1850-1930," PhD diss., University of Manitoba, 1990, 176ff and 241ff.

14. For a church history of the Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites, see Delbert Plett, *The Golden Years: The Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde in Russia, 1812-1849* (Steinbach, MB, 1985); *Storm and Triumph: The Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde, 1850-1874* (Steinbach, MB, 1986).

However, the physical and economic environments of the two communities differed from each other and from the environment they had left in the Borosenko Colony in southern Russia. Manitoba's climate, for example, was colder and its landscape more wooded and less arable than were Borosenko's; Nebraska's landscape and temperature resembled the light rolling lands and moderate climate of the Borosenko Colony, but Nebraska received three times the rainfall. There were important economic differences as well. The East Reserve was situated in a province that was just beginning to develop an integrated economy and an agricultural export market; indeed, the main demand for agricultural products in Manitoba during the 1870s came from the urban residents in nearby Winnipeg.<sup>15</sup> Cub Creek, on the other hand, was located in the heart of a highly developed section of the American Midwest, close to railroads, service centres, and processing plants that served export markets.<sup>16</sup>

The agricultural practices of the Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites during their first generation in North America tell of an immigrant farming people constantly adapting to these new economic and physical realities. Shortly after arrival, the size and degree of commercialization of the Nebraska and Manitoba farms diverged to reflect differences in soil fertility and the sophistication of regional economies. Despite differences in the East Reserve and Cub Creek farms, however, the aims of the farmers were similar. Subsistence was not an objective of the small East Reserve farmers. "One can live here as well, if not better, than in the United States," wrote one East Reserve farmer in 1885. "The land is cheaper and the grain can be sold for as much money; in fact youths 18 years and over receive 160 acres here free of charge...."<sup>17</sup> Nor was capital accumulation the aim of the larger Cub Creek farms: "Russia was a better place for the wealthy and the aggressive," wrote one farmer in 1875, "but for the farmer who wishes to support his family [Nebraska] is better for one can readily attain this level of support with 80 acres."<sup>18</sup> Both farmers perceived themselves as household commodity producers, meeting the needs of their families within their ethnic communities.

## ii

The story of agriculture in Manitoba's East Reserve between 1874 and 1900 is one of mixed farming. Diaries kept by Manitoba farmers detail carefully the various activities geared to self-sufficiency. They tell of the hog butchering bees, the potato plantings, and the yields of eggs and milk. Mixed farming, the guarantee of self-sufficiency, was not, however, the bulwark of a Mennonite strategy to remain separated from the world; rather it was the East Reserve farmer's initial point of entry into the marketplace. Each fall and winter farmers made regular three-day round-trips to Winnipeg to sell a wide assortment of products to an urban population. In a typical letter, dated December 1886, one East Reserve farmer noted that "the night lodging on the way to the city is filled

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15. Gerald Friesen, "Imports and Exports in the Manitoba Economy, 1870-1890," *Manitoba History* 16 (1988): 31-41.
  16. Martyn Bowden, "Changes in Land Use in Jefferson County, Nebraska, 1857-1957," MA thesis, University of Nebraska, 1959; James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1955).
  17. "Gruenfeld," *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 25 March 1885.
  18. John K. Loewen Papers, in possession of C.J. Loewen family, Giroux, Manitoba [henceforth, JKL], Jacob Klassen to Heinrich Ratzlaff, 10 January 1875.

with Mennonites who are in the process of taking every conceivable farm product to the market where they try to make as much money as possible."<sup>19</sup>

Five different diaries from the early 1880s confirm the inclination of farmers to capitalize on the proximity to a growing metropolitan centre. These diaries, kept by both poor and well-to-do farmers and those from both the parkland and the prairie sections of reserve, demonstrate that the commercial production of table foods was a general East Reserve practice. Farmer Abram R. Friesen, who cultivated only sixteen acres in parkland near Steinbach, noted in a representative entry of September 1883 that "I travelled to Winnipeg where I sold... products: 20 hens for \$6.00, one pail of butter for \$4.00, 9½ dozen eggs at 27 cents for \$2.57, two pails of sauerkraut for 40 cents, two bushels potatoes at 50 cents for \$1.00."<sup>20</sup> Diary entries for farmers from the wealthier prairie region around Blumenort in the northern part of the East Reserve are strikingly similar. One elderly villager noted in his September 1880 diary that his married sons, Abram and Peter Reimer, who cultivated a combined acreage of about one hundred acres, left for Winnipeg at 5 AM one day with a variety of products. According to the diary, "Peter's sleigh carried 60 dozen eggs, 20 pails of onions, and 160 pounds of butter [while] Abram's sleigh carried 10 pails of onions, 30 dozen eggs, 80 pounds of butter and 12 pounds of sauerkraut...." These early diaries indicate that such shipments of table foods to Winnipeg during the first decade in Manitoba accounted for more than half of an average East Reserve household's annual income of three hundred dollars.<sup>21</sup>

Mixed farming, thus, was not a Mennonite strategy to remain separated from the "outside world." Rather the Mennonites' tendency to ignore commercial wheat production reflected adaptations to a number of regional economic and physical conditions. First, regional markets demanded mixed products and the East Reserve's relative prox-

19. "Gruenfeld," *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 8 December 1886.

20. Evangelical Mennonite Conference Archives, Steinbach, Manitoba [henceforth EMCA], Box 4 and 29, Abram R. Friesen, diary 1870-1873, 1876-1884, entry for 18 September 1883.

21. For other examples of the East Reserve household economy, see EMCA, Johann L. Dueck, Diary, 1881-1882, 1886-1894, tr. John Wohlgemuth; Gerhard Kornelson, Diary, 1882-1900, in possession of Dave K. Schellenberg, Steinbach, Manitoba; Mennonite Heritage Village Archives, Steinbach, Manitoba, Cornelius Loewen, Diary, 1863-1892, unfiled. In 1883, Gerhard Kornelson, a poorer farmer who cultivated only nineteen acres on his farm in a wooded section near Steinbach, had a total income of \$157.03. While \$98.75 of this was derived from grain sales, \$32.00 came from the sale of chickens, \$4.16 from eggs, \$3.30 from vegetable sales, and \$3.30 from the sale of leather. Wealthier farmers in Steinbach and Gruenfeld followed similar strategies. In 1883, Cornelius Loewen, who cultivated forty acres, sold 267 of his 794 bushels of wheat and oats for an income of \$150.00. Loewen also marketed thirty-two bags of potatoes, fifty-seven chickens, three quarters of a cow, pig leather, and 193 dozen eggs, mostly in Winnipeg, for an additional income of \$236.90. Johann Dueck of Gruenfeld, who cultivated forty acres in 1882, marketed a similar mix of products. Between August 1882 and August 1883, he sold \$167.46 of grain to Winnipeg grain dealers but also \$89.09 of potatoes and vegetables, \$56.34 of butter, and \$29.40 of poultry products in Winnipeg. His grain sales thus accounted for less than half of his total income of \$342.29 for that year.



imity to Winnipeg meant that table foods could be sold. A frontier town of only five thousand in 1875, Winnipeg had doubled in size even before the coming of the trans-continental railway in 1882 and reached twenty-five thousand by 1891.<sup>22</sup> It thus offered a large and ready market for table foods. Secondly, Manitoba's grain export economy contrasted sharply to that in southern Russia; Borosenko Colony had been only twenty miles from a Dnieper River port that provided easy access via Odessa and the Black Sea to the international wheat market in England. In Manitoba there was little export of wheat until the completion of the railroad link to Lake Superior in 1882 and this coincided with a time of low grain prices. Mennonite farmers who had prospered on the high international wheat prices during the 1860s in Russia had to adjust to a time of low prices that coincided with their immigration to North America. In fact, global wheat prices plummeted during the very year that Mennonite farmers harvested their last crop in Russia, 1873 and, although having gained in strength at the end of the decade they plummeted once again in 1880. Peter Unger, an East Reserve farmer, noted in his memoirs that during the 1880s "harvests were by and large good... [but] the prices were poor and the grain which we had to haul to Winnipeg sometimes gave us only 35 cents a bushel."<sup>23</sup> In comparison, the prices of eggs and butter were very stable, hovering around twenty cents a dozen and twenty cents a pound respectively throughout these years.

The dependence of Mennonite farmers on a household labour pool was a third factor that encouraged the production of table foods. In Russia large numbers of itinerant Ukrainian peasants and migrant German Lutheran workers had been regularly employed to cut, tie, stack, and thresh the wheat.<sup>24</sup> Similar labour sources were hard to secure in Canada. In fact, records indicate that the wages of workers who migrated with their Mennonite employers in 1874 more than doubled during the year of migration.<sup>25</sup> In land-rich North America, workers could be elevated to landowners overnight. In this event family farms began to depend to a much greater extent on household labour and the products of the domestic sphere. Deeply rooted gender roles dictated that women and children milked the cows, fed the chickens, gathered the eggs, worked the vegetable garden, and produced the butter and sauerkraut. It was these products that accounted for the farmers' initial entry into the market economy. The men, now without large numbers of workers, were forced to work smaller fields and produce smaller grain surpluses.

During the 1880s and 1890s, as transportation links improved and as farm mechanization overcame chronic labour shortages, East Reserve farmers did increase their

22. Morton, *Manitoba*, 194; Canada Census, 1891, copy in Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Winnipeg.

23. EMCA, Steinbach, Peter F. Unger, "Denkschrift, 1930."

24. See Loewen, *Diary*; A.R. Friesen, *Diary*; EMCA, Box 10 and 14, Abram F. Reimer, *Diary*, 1870-1873, 1879-1886.

25. The diaries of Cornelius Loewen and A.R. Friesen indicate that, while they paid day labourers forty kopecks, or thirty cents, a day in Russia, they were required to pay between seventy cents and a dollar a day for similar labour in Canada. The same sources indicate that annual wages for live-in workers increased from thirty rubles, or \$22.50, a year in 1873 in Russia to around sixty dollars a year in 1878 in Canada.

average cultivated acreage — from 20.4 acres in 1883 to 54.1 acres in 1898. During the same period farmers' diaries indicate that the percentage of the annual wheat production that was marketed in Winnipeg increased sharply too. Between 1877 and 1880, for example, only about 20 per cent of the total crop was marketed in Winnipeg.<sup>26</sup> In the 1880s and 1890s, however, this figure rose to more than 80 per cent of the total wheat crop.<sup>27</sup> In 1887, for example, Cornelius Loewen of Steinbach, who was cultivating fifty-seven acres, sold 397 of his 464 bushels of wheat. Of this quantity, he sold 245 bushels to grain purchasers in Winnipeg and 152 to the Reimer-Barkman flour mill in Steinbach. In the same year, Gerhard Kornelson of Steinbach, who was cultivating only sixteen acres, marketed 214 of his 238 bushels of wheat, with 167.5 bushels going to grain dealers in Winnipeg, forty-six bushels to the flour mill in Steinbach and his neighbours, and twenty-four bushels to his own household.<sup>28</sup>

The East Reserve farmers' commitment to producing grain for the marketplace, however, is not told entirely by the percentages of wheat marketed. One of the early adaptations that farmers made to the Manitoba economy was to shift from wheat to oat production. Although early cropping records from farmers like Abram Reimer of Blumenort, who harvested thirty acres of wheat, seven acres of barley, and fourteen acres of oats in 1879, indicate a certain cultural predisposition to wheat, records from the 1880s and 1890s reveal a new tendency to raise oats.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, J.J. Cahoe, an Anglo-Canadian neighbour who custom-threshed for East Reserve Mennonites, reported in 1881 that he had harvested 12,338 bushels of oats compared to only 8,732 bushels of wheat.<sup>30</sup> Personal diaries from average-sized East Reserve farms substantiate this preference for oat production. Cornelius Loewen of Steinbach, for instance, derived 48 per cent of his total field crop production from oats and only 37 per cent from wheat between 1881 and 1887; Abram M. Friesen of Blumenort, who cultivated seventy-five acres in

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26. A.R. Friesen, *Diary*; Loewen, *Diary*, 8 January 1877 and November 8, 1878. During these years, Loewen marketed 24 per cent of his crop and Friesen 15 per cent. Because Loewen farmed in the parkland of Gruenfeld and Friesen was a schoolteacher, it is possible that the combined acreage of the Loewen and Friesen farms was below average for East Reserve farmers and thus the figure of 20 per cent may also be low.
27. Rural Municipality of Hanover, Steinbach, Manitoba (henceforth RMH), *Municipal Tax Rolls*, 7-6E, 6-6E, 5-6E, 1883, 1887, 1898, 1906. By 1884, at least three farmers were cultivating more than ninety acres and, by 1906, twenty-four of the 132 farmers in three East Reserve village districts were cultivating more than one hundred acres.
28. Loewen, *Diary*; Kornelson, *Diary*; Peter B. Friesen, *Account Book*, 1890-1920, in possession of Albert Friesen, Kleefeld, Manitoba; Abram M. Friesen, *Diary*, 1882-1906, in possession of Henry Friesen, Greenland, Manitoba. The record of Blumenort farmers is similar. Here Peter Friesen, who cultivated only about thirty acres in 1892, sold his entire yield, 136 bushels of wheat, in three transactions within a month of the harvest. During the same year, Abram M. Friesen, who cultivated about fifty cultivated acres, threshed 332 bushels of wheat and over the course of that winter hauled 233.5 bushels of it to Winnipeg in seven trips. In total, these four farmers marketed 83.9 per cent of their wheat — a figure which indicates a much-greater degree of market integration than previous historians have suggested. Warkentin, "Mennonite Settlements," 262.
29. EMCA, Abram Reimer, *Diary*, 16 May 1879.
30. Warkentin, "Mennonite Settlements," 555.

1898, received only 33 per cent of his crop in the form of wheat but 50 per cent in oats during the 1890s.<sup>31</sup>

The reasons for the shift to oats vary. One factor was the market demand for this feedgrain. Historians sometimes determine the level of market integration by the ratio of wheat to oats or corn on a given farm or district; that is, wheat represents a cash crop and oats and corn are perceived to be animal feed for domestic use.<sup>32</sup> In the East Reserve, however, oats seem to have represented a cash crop. Indeed, the price for oats during these years was relatively high, remaining within 30 per cent of wheat prices and at times equalling them. In 1882, for example, farmers reported receiving between ninety-five and ninety-eight cents per bushel for wheat and between fifty-five and sixty-five cents for oats. Given the fact that oat yields were often double those of wheat, the shift to oats reflected a rational market judgement. The demand for oats came from the burgeoning city of Winnipeg and its growing horse population which, by 1891, had reached more than two thousand animals.<sup>33</sup> East Reserve farmers eagerly met this demand. During the height of the Riel Rebellion in 1885, one East Reserve farmer noted in a letter to a Mennonite newspaper that "we are not much affected by the unrest in the Northwest except for the fact that the price of oats has reached an exceedingly high price of 65 cents a bushel." His counsel was simple: "he who has common sense will take note and feed his cattle [not oats, but] clover or mashed wheat."<sup>34</sup>

Mennonite farmers also readily adapted their agricultural practices to Manitoba's humid continental climate. In the semiarid steppes of southern Russia, farmers had hauled their wheat with small-wheeled freight wagons over hard, dusty roads to the riverports. In contrast, the East Reserve was separated from Winnipeg by large areas of low-lying, swampy land. Corduroy roads and gravel ridges provided a poor alternative to smooth dry roads. Farmers who had brought their Russian wagons with them to Manitoba quickly realized their mistake and began relying on winter sleigh trails to market their grain.<sup>35</sup> In April 1888, one farmer wrote a Mennonite newspaper telling of the importance of the snow trail: "Yesterday I came from Winnipeg where I got flax seed and a harrow; the trail was so good that one team of horses could pull 4000 pounds.... It seems, however, that the trail will not last long... which is unfortunate for all those who have not yet finished their hauling...."<sup>36</sup>

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31. Loewen, *Diary*; A.M. Friesen, *Diary*. Loewen's average annual production during these years included 388 bushels of wheat, 497 of oats, and 156 of barley. Friesen's annual average production for the four years in the 1880s included 272 bushels of wheat, 297 bushels of oats, and 94 bushels of barley. During the 1890s these figures were 286 bushels of wheat, 867 of oats, and 151 of barley.
  32. Jon Gjerde, *From Peasants to Farmers: The Migration from Balestrand, Norway to the Upper Middle West* (Cambridge, MS, 1985), 177; Paul Voisey, *Vulcan: The Making of a Prairie Community* (Toronto, 1988), 99.
  33. Canada Census, 1891, "Agricultural Schedule."
  34. *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 10 June 1885.
  35. Johan W. Dueck, "History and Events of Earlier Times, 1904," *History and Events*, ed. and tr. Delbert Plett (Steinbach, MB, 1983), 102.
  36. *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 25 April 1888.

Another adaptation to Manitoba's climate was the introduction of fall ploughing in an attempt to improve the tilth of the heavy clay soils and to facilitate the downward leaching of excess moisture. This was a practice that Mennonites had avoided in southern Russia, where moisture preservation was a major concern. Geographer John Warkentin has asserted that the Manitoba Mennonites' "grain growing methods became extremely backward" especially because they ploughed their fields carelessly and usually only in springtime. Evidence from farmers' own diaries does not support this notion of a stymied transplanted practice; indeed, it seems that fall ploughing was emphasized.<sup>37</sup> In 1881 farmer Johan Dueck of Gruenfeld began his ploughing on 15 September, only two days after finishing the family's threshing and a day after bringing in the last of the straw. By 16 October, Dueck and his family had ploughed their four fields, measuring fourteen, ten, five, and two acres, and begun reploughing land they had broken over the course of the summer. Dueck continued ploughing until 9 November when he noted "can't plough any more."<sup>38</sup> Early adaptations of this nature ensured that farmers produced marketable surpluses by the early 1880s.

Adaptations to the shortage of labour in Manitoba were also required to produce grain for the marketplace. A greater reliance on family labour was one strategy; farm mechanization, despite tariffs of 17.5 per cent, was another. During their first fall in Manitoba in 1874, farmers began purchasing grass mowers that they had ignored in Russia; after the first years of crop failures, they also began purchasing threshing machines. According to one early account, threshing stones, the main method of grain separation in Russia, were never used in the East Reserve; instead, farmers first hired Anglo-Canadian custom-threshers and then, in 1878, began acquiring their own threshing machines, powered either by treadmills or portable steam engines and owned either cooperatively or privately.<sup>39</sup> By 1883 there were ten threshing machines in the three East Reserve village districts, one for every ten farmers. During the 1880s and 1890s self binders, seeder drills, and traction steam engines followed. Each agricultural innovation, with its promise to increase production, was readily accepted.

Changing grain marketing strategies were a further testimony to the Mennonite farmers' determination to enter the Canadian marketplace. The coming of the Manitoba and Southeast Railroad near the northern and eastern edges of the East Reserve in 1898 meant that snow trails and sleighs were no longer the main link to the marketplace.

37. Warkentin, "Mennonite Settlements," 183 and 192.

38. Dueck, Diary. Other examples of fall ploughing include the following: Gerhard Kornelson of Steinbach began his ploughing on 15 October in 1884 after putting on "sharp plough bottoms" (see Kornelson, Diary); in the same year, Abram Friesen of Blumenort began ploughing on 11 October and continued it on the 15th after purchasing new shares from the Steinbach blacksmith (see A.M. Friesen, Diary). Also see Johann G. Barkman, *The Diary of Johan G. Barkman, 1858-1937*, tr. and ed. Waldon Barkman (Steinbach, 1988), 108 for a reference to December ploughing in 1878 and Loewen, Diary, for references to November ploughing in 1880.

39. Johan R. Dueck, "Mitteilungen aus dem Pionierleben," *Das 60 Jaehrige Jubilaeum der Mennonitischen Einwanderung in Manitoba*, ed. K.J.B. Reimer, (Steinbach, 1935), 17-24.

Farmers' activities hinted at a new approach to grain marketing. The changing experience of Blumenort's Abram Friesen was typical. His diary for 1893 recorded seven trips to Winnipeg where he sold the family's oats and wheat in small lots to grain buyers. In the years after the coming of the 1898 railroad, the Friesens typically spent a week in September hauling their entire lot of marketable grain to a flat warehouse near the railroad station in Ste. Anne, only four miles from their farm. In a two-day period later that month, they would move the grain from the warehouse to their designated producer railroad car.<sup>40</sup> Shorter hauling distances, larger sale units, cost-cutting transportation measures, and contracts for grain deliveries at preset prices had become regular practices for East Reserve farmers by the turn of the century.

As the century came to a close, the East Reserve farmers made one of their most important adaptations to Manitoba's economy. This was a shift from butter to cheese production. No doubt the strain placed on the household labour pool, the continued search for marketable farm produce, and the rise of a local merchant class directed farmers to this new practice. Between 1889 and 1893, a single *Kleine Gemeinde* family built five cheese factories in five different villages on the East Reserve. Farmers seem to have readily accepted the new factories; one observer in Steinbach noted that the reason for this acceptance in his village was that the factory was "paying 65 cents a pound for the milk [which] the people say is a third more than they make if they make butter and only half the work."<sup>41</sup>

The new market for fluid milk freed women from the tedium of butter churning but, ironically, it resulted in more work for them as milkers. Tax records indicate that, just as cultivated acres per household increased from twenty-one to fifty-four during these years, the number of dairy cattle per household increased from 3.1 to 8.2.<sup>42</sup> Shortly after the turn of the century, forty-one of the 132 *Kleine Gemeinde* farm households in the East Reserve had dairy herds of ten or more cows and at least three of the farms had herds of more than twenty cows. The support for the cheese factories was especially apparent in the parkland areas of the reserve like Gruenfeld, where the number of cows per household rose from 3.5 in 1887 to 6.9 just four years after the coming of the cheese factories. The area which had suffered most from the lack of good land was now playing catch-up with more prosperous village districts in the prairie regions of the reserve. Commensurate with these increases were a number of innovations: barbed wire fencing replaced the common pasture and village herdsman; deep wells financed with mortgages on farm land replaced village reliance on creeks and hand-dug wells; pure-bred Holstein stock bolstered traditional breeding practices.<sup>43</sup>

During their first generation in Manitoba, then, *Kleine Gemeinde* Mennonite farmers cultivated a sustained relationship with the wider market economy. The fact that

40. A.M. Friesen, *Diary*, September 1905.

41. EMCA, Klaas R. Reimer Papers, Klaas R. Reimer to Johann Willms, 1 March 1890.

42. Tax Rolls, 1883 and 1906.

43. Warkentin, "Mennonite Settlements," 202; Klaas J.B. Reimer, "Historical Sketches of Steinbach and District Pioneers," *Reflections on Our Heritage*, ed. A. Warkentin (Steinbach, n.d.), 49; *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 13 February 1889; Unger, "Denkschrift," 3.

their farms remained relatively small and did not engage in mono-crop wheat production should not suggest that they sought to remain separated from the marketplace. Their farms did commercialize at a much slower pace than those in other parts of Western Canada or in Nebraska where their relatives lived. Yet the efforts the East Reserve farmers employed to deliver their products to market, the innovations they accepted to increase their production, the steadily growing size of their operations, and the readiness to capitalize on railroad facilities and cheese factories when they became available point to a commitment to enter the marketplace and produce surpluses. It was surpluses of this nature that provided the means to reproduce their ethnic communities and farm households.

## iii

A further demonstration of the value system underlying the agricultural activities of the conservative Kleine Gemeinde Mennonite communities in the East Reserve in Manitoba is the experience of their cousins in Cub Creek township, Jefferson County, Nebraska. The advantages of comparing a single people bound together by religious ideology, historical experience, and kinship, but residing in two different environments, are obvious. If it is true that the agricultural practices of immigrant farmers more often reflect adaptations to new economic and physical environments than the degree of priority placed on retention of cultural traits, then one could expect that the actual farming practices of members of the Nebraska and Manitoba communities — identical cultures in different environments — would differ sharply. It is important to note that the separation of the Nebraska and Manitoba Kleine Gemeinde Mennonites occurred in the aftermath of considerable debate in Russia about which location, Manitoba or Nebraska, offered the better opportunities to replicate traditional institutions, establish a household economy, and reestablish kinship links.<sup>44</sup> Both groups seemed equally committed to the replication of an ascetic sectarian community based on the family farm.<sup>45</sup>

Like their counterparts in Manitoba, the Kleine Gemeinde farmers in Cub Creek, Jefferson County transplanted their family farms and set out simultaneously to meet family consumption requirements and to participate in a market economy. This led the Nebraskans to engage initially in mixed farming just as did their Manitoba counterparts. An agricultural census taken in 1880, only six years after settlement, indicates that the average Mennonite household in Cub Creek was producing thirty bushels of potatoes, 110 dozen eggs, and 252 pounds of butter per household.<sup>46</sup> Diaries and letters even

44. Gustav Reimer and G.R. Gaeddert, *Exiled by the Czar: Cornelius Jansen and the Great Mennonite Migration, 1874* (Newton, KS, 1956).

45. Religious histories of the Kleine Gemeinde indicate that both sectors were equally committed to an ascetic lifestyle, sectarian leadership, agriculture as the only true Christian vocation, a solidaristic community, and the transplantation of the family farm. See Henry Fast, "The Kleine Gemeinde in the United States, 1874-1943," *Profile of the Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde*, ed. D. Plett (Steinbach, 1988), 87-140; Daniel Bartel, *The Emmanuel Mennonite Church of Meade, Kansas* (Meade, KS, 1975); Daniel Klassen, "Kleine Gemeinde Church at Meade, Kansas," research paper, Bethel College, 1948; Paul Miller, "The Story of Jansen [Cub Creek] Churches," *Mennonite Life* (1955): 37-40.

46. U.S. Census, Nebraska, Jefferson County, Cub Creek Precinct, Agricultural Production, 1880.

indicate that farmers marketed some of this table food alongside their grain during these early years. In one 1881 letter, a Cub Creek farm wife, Maria Kornelson Enns, noted that "on Monday we drove to [Fairbury, Nebraska] as we had a little wheat, and some eggs and some butter; for the wheat we got 60 cents/bushel, for the butter 10 cents a pound and for the eggs eight cents a dozen."<sup>47</sup>

Mixed farming of this nature, however, soon gave way to more-specialized commodity production. Because the Nebraskans had access to a more fully developed transportation network than did their Manitoba counterparts, they moved into grain farming more aggressively. The ninety-seven acres cultivated per Cub Creek household in 1880 contrasts sharply to the twenty-one cultivated per household in the East Reserve in 1883. However, like the Manitobans, the Nebraskans attempted to transplant crops with which they were familiar. One farmer, Cornelius Friesen, noted in 1878 that he had seeded thirty-four of his forty acres to wheat and the rest to a combination of rye and barley, the main feedgrains of Borosenko Colony in Russia. Quantitative data supports the farmers' initial preference for wheat production. While neighbouring townships in Jefferson County were planting equal proportions of wheat and corn in 1877, the farmers in Cub Creek, two-thirds of whom were Mennonites, were putting a total of 4500 acres to wheat and only 1500 acres to corn.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the coming of the Mennonites corresponded with a sharp rise in barley and rye production and an increase of apple orchards and mulberry bushes in the county.<sup>49</sup> Fruit growing was a common practice in southern Russia and leaves from the mulberry bush were vegetation required to raise silkworms, a practice that the colony-level agricultural society in Russia had advocated since the 1840s.

Like their Manitoba cousins, however, the Nebraska farmers soon deemphasized wheat production. Farm censuses reflect this shift. In the five years after 1880, Cub Creek farmers reduced their wheat acreage from 49.9 per cent of cropland to only 19.1 per cent. During the same period they increased their corn production from 8.5 per cent of cropland to 51.4 per cent.<sup>50</sup> Letters and diaries indicate that corn would continue to be the dominant crop not only in the good years of the early 1880s, but also during the economically difficult years between 1887 and 1898.<sup>51</sup>

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47. Gerhard Kornelson Papers [henceforth GKK], in possession of Dave Schellenberg, Steinbach, Manitoba, Maria Enns to Gerhard Kornelson, May 1881.

48. Martyn Bowden, "Changes in Land Use in Jefferson County, 81.

49. *Ibid.*, 82.

50. In 1880 each Cub Creek Mennonite household had an average of 48.5 acres of wheat, 6.6 acres in barley, 7.5 acres in corn, 6.3 acres in oats, and 1.9 acres in rye, leaving twenty-six acres in summerfallow and seeded grasslands. In 1885, these figures had changed to indicate that the sixty-six Cub Creek farmers had only 17.7 acres of wheat but 43.9 acres of corn. In addition, they raised 3.8 acres of rye, 10.8 acres of oats, and 2.7 acres in barley and had 14.3 acres in improved grassland or summerfallow.

51. In June 1893, farmer Jacob Friesen wrote his relatives in Manitoba and reported that his farm had forty acres in corn, thirty in wheat, and fifteen in oats; see JKL, Jacob Friesen to Johann Janzen, 12 June 1893. See also "Jefferson County," *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 1 August 1900, 1 January 1903, 7 January 1903.

The reasons for the shift to corn were complex. One historical geographer, Martyn Bowden, has argued that one clue to the general rise in corn production throughout Jefferson County was that it coincided with the influx of American "settlers from the east" who planted the "crop with which they were well acquainted. . . ."<sup>52</sup> This argument reflects a generation of study of ethnocultural scholars who associate cropping patterns with the farmers' cultural background. In his study of Prince Edward Island in 1957, for example, Andrew Hill Clark correlated oats with the English, potatoes and swine with the Irish, and horses with the Acadians.<sup>53</sup> In a more recent article on immigrant farmers in California, Theodore Saloutos correlated wheat production with Germans, rice with Japanese, grapes with Italians, dairies with Portuguese, and figs with Armenians.<sup>54</sup> Other scholars have noted how the phenomenon of "cultural rebound" explained the resurgence of traditionally grown crops after a period of rapid adaptation.<sup>55</sup>

Unlike their American neighbours, however, the Mennonites had no "cultural predisposition" to corn. Letters from Cub Creek farmers indicate that Mennonites adopted this American crop for climatic and economic reasons. Southern Russia's semi-arid climate had proven highly adaptable to wheat production; eastern Nebraska, however, received annual precipitation of more than thirty inches of rainfall, a condition in which corn flourished and wheat suffered moisture-related diseases. Between 1879 and 1881, for example, wheat yields in Jefferson County averaged only 8.3 bushels per acre, considerably less than the approximately fifteen bushels an acre in Manitoba's East Reserve at this time.<sup>56</sup> As early as 1880, Mennonite farmers in Nebraska were reporting bumper crops of corn. In a letter to his relatives in Manitoba in 1879, farmer Jacob Enns wrote that he had received 1440 bushels from thirty-one acres of corn, or forty-six bushels an acre.<sup>57</sup>

The structure of the household labour pool represented a second reason for the shift to corn production. In February 1884 Jacob Enns's wife, Maria, wrote her parents in Manitoba to say that "I cannot complain much about having to struggle in material things although we have had to work very hard [with the corn] and now we have to plough so quickly to get everything done."<sup>58</sup> Clearly the work referred to was the tedious winter task of corn husking, but the fact was that it was the kind of work that, extended over a long period of time, could be completed with labour from the whole family.

Corn production was associated with a second major adaptation made by the Mennonites, namely cattle production. The location of the large Union Stockyards in Omaha, Nebraska, just one hundred miles from Cub Creek, signalled the importance of the

52. Bowden, "Jefferson County," 107.

53. Andrew Hill Clark, *Three Centuries on the Island* (Toronto, 1959).

54. Theodore Saloutos, "The Immigrant in Pacific Coast Agriculture, 1880-1940," *Agriculture History* 49 (1975): 182-201.

55. Terry Jordan, *German Seed in Texas Soil* (Austin, 1966), 3; Gjerde, *From Peasants to Farmers*, 187.

56. Percentage derived from figures quoted by Bowden, "Jefferson County," 110.

57. GKK, Jacob Enns to Kornelson, 19 January 1880.

58. *Ibid.*, Enns to Kornelson, 4 February 1884.



feedlot industry in the eastern part of the state.<sup>59</sup> While Cub Creek farmers capitalized on the demand for corn as feedgrain for cattle producers, they turned to cattle production themselves. In May 1883, one observer noted that "it seems more and more that the Russian Mennonites are taking on the ways of American farmers in that they are raising not only grain but cattle and an increasing number have their own herds."<sup>60</sup> Indeed, cattle represented a new path for the Mennonite farmers. They had had extensive experience with sheep ranging in Russia and tried to reintroduce the practice into Nebraska. By 1881, however, there were reports that the continued influx of settlers had ended the free ranging of sheep and made raising them unprofitable.<sup>61</sup> Census records illustrate the shift to cattle and hog production. Between 1880 and 1885, for example, the number of cattle and calves per Mennonite household in Cub Creek increased from 10.3 to 19.4. The concentration on meat production carried on throughout this time. Reports of large-scale cattle and hog exports from Cub Creek were common; typical was a Cub Creek newspaper report of May 1900 that noted "six carloads of fattened beef were shipped from here to St. Joseph [Iowa] yesterday."<sup>62</sup> So were letters telling how individual farmers were selling three and four railroad carloads of beef and hogs at a time.<sup>63</sup>

When farmers reflected on the shift from their traditional practice of sheep raising to cattle production, they also emphasized the fact that it complemented corn production. In 1884, when corn dropped to twenty-six cents a bushel, farmers consoled themselves with the fact that corn was still a good thing: as one farmer noted, "cobs are used as fuel and stocks are eaten by the cattle which are released onto the fields after harvest."<sup>64</sup> Another farmer wrote his relatives in Manitoba to explain this practice; we simply "have the cattle on the land all winter... and are making as little work as possible."<sup>65</sup> Corn also complemented meat production in that it was an animal feed. It was common wisdom in Nebraska that farmers "cannot raise too much corn." "It may be worth five cents," wrote one state official, "but transmuted to beef, pork or mutton it will always pay the husbandman a handsome... return."<sup>66</sup> Corn, like oats in Manitoba, thus represented, not a move to subsistence farming or some kind of "cultural rebound," but an adaptation to local market and climatic conditions.

Encouraging the Cub Creek farmers to make these adaptations was the highly developed economy of Nebraska with its inexpensive technology and elaborate transportation network. Unlike their counterparts in the East Reserve, who gained railroad access only in 1898, the Cub Creek farmers were located only six miles from a railroad upon their arrival in 1874. In 1886, the Rock Island line crossed Cub Creek and this led to the establishment of the elevator town of Jansen in the very heart of the Mennonite settlement. This railroad also provided a direct link with the Union Stockyards in Omaha.

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59. Olson, *Nebraska*, 201.

60. *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 1 May 1883.

61. Fast, "Kleine Gemeinde in U.S.," 55.

62. *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 30 May 1900.

63. *Ibid.*, 6 May 1903, 11 November 1903, 23 December 1903.

64. *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 15 February 1884.

65. JKL, Jacob Klassen to Johann Janzen, n.d. [ca. 1886].

66. Quoted in Olson, *Nebraska*, 198.

By 1888, there were 117.3 miles of railway in the sixteen-township Jefferson County compared to only six miles of rail in the eight-township East Reserve.

Farmers were equally quick to take advantage of low-priced farm equipment and high-quality draft animals. Farmers expressed no hesitation in acquiring the latest technology even for crops they had not traditionally grown. In 1885, after one Cub Creek farmer reported that a number of his neighbours had purchased corn planters, he reasoned that as "the motto for Nebraska is 'Corn is King' ... the best methods for planting and cultivation must be employed."<sup>67</sup> This acquisitive spirit was reflected in the capital Cub Creek farmers invested in farm equipment. Between 1880 and 1885, for instance, Cub Creek farmers increased the value of machinery per household from \$163 to \$200. In contrast the average farmer in the wealthiest of the East Reserve village districts, Blumenort, was assessed only \$130 for equipment in the 1884 municipal tax roll.<sup>68</sup> The Nebraskans also introduced innovations such as the threshing machine, self binder, and traction steam engine earlier than their Manitoba brethren. In 1883, the year that the first self binders appeared on the East Reserve, one Cub Creek farmer wrote that "most of the grain [here] is cut with the self binder."<sup>69</sup> By 1890 the threshing of stooks, which necessitated the use of a traction steam engine, was also a common practice. In 1891, a Manitoba farmer who had just relocated to Cub Creek complained in a letter that his decision to haul his stooks to his farmyard and stack them, as was the common practice in Manitoba, had caused him to miss an opportunity for an early harvest; the farmer complained that he would "have to 'quickly wait' for neighbour Buller when he once again threshes in the neighbourhood, which may well be another 14 days."<sup>70</sup>

The economic gap between Manitoba and Nebraska farmers is also evident in the speed with which oxen were exchanged for horses as the main source of draft power. Indeed, in the very first year of settlement in 1874, when only an occasional Manitoba farmer reported the purchase of a horse, the first thirty-six Mennonite farmers of Cub Creek purchased fifty-three horses and eighty-seven oxen, bringing the average number of horses per household to 1.5.<sup>71</sup> Ten years later the number of horses owned by Cub Creek Mennonites had increased to three hundred while the number of oxen had fallen to three. In fact, the average number of horses per household in 1885 was 4.6, almost identical to that for the farm households in the prosperous Molochnaia colony in Russia at the same time, and twice that of Kleine Gemeinde farmers in Manitoba.<sup>72</sup>

Perhaps the most obvious sign of the difference in farm commercialization in Manitoba and Nebraska came toward the end of the first generation, during the economically

67. *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 20 May 1885.

68. Tax Rolls, 7-6E, 1884.

69. *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 15 August 1883. By 1891, farmer Heinrich Ratzlaff of Cub Creek could report that "since Harms and Wiebe have each bought a binder everyone has his own." JKL, Heinrich Ratzlaff to Cornelius Ratzlaff, 4 July 1891.

70. GKK, Isaac Loewen to Cornelius Loewen, 15 August 1891.

71. *Beatrice Express*, 10 September 1874.

72. U.S. Agricultural Census, 1885; Tax Rolls, 1884; David Rempel, "The Mennonite Colonies in New Russia: A Study of their Settlement and Economic Development from 1789-1914," PhD diss., Stanford University, 1933), 256.

volatile 1890s. Unlike the Manitoba farms, which slowly increased in both the number of cultivated acres and the size of livestock herds throughout this period, the Nebraskans who had ridden the economic boom of the late 1870s, began facing severe economic problems. These included high land prices, fragmenting land holdings, poor yields, low commodity prices, and high interest rates. One important indicator of the degree of integration with the "outside" marketplace was that, by 1900, 64 per cent of the Cub Creek farms had mortgages on their properties, compared to only 13 per cent of the farms in the Blumenort district of the East Reserve. Letters from Nebraska began bearing notes of pessimism, impending bankruptcy, and indebtedness not found in letters from Manitoba.<sup>73</sup> It was only the resurgence of the international grain trade at the turn of the century, and the willingness of almost half of Cub Creek farmers to relocate on cheaper lands in western Kansas shortly after the turn of the century, that ensured the continued agrarian existence of the Kleine Gemeinde descendants in the United States.

iv

The Kleine Gemeinde Mennonite farms in the East Reserve in Manitoba and Cub Creek Township in Nebraska contrasted sharply, but they were contrasts not so much in the values and lifegoals of farm families as in the adaptations to their respective environments. Members of both communities changed their agricultural practices to ensure the continuity of what they considered to be the "essence of life." In Cub Creek, Mennonite farmers, who had emphasized wheat production in the 1870s, adapted to their climate and changing market forces to grow corn and raise cattle during the 1880s and 1890s. In the East Reserve, farmers also deemphasized wheat and engaged in the production of table foods. During the 1880s and 1890s, they began focusing on commercial oat production and dairy farming. Accompanying these changes were new agricultural and marketing practices that included fall ploughing, barbed wire fencing, and the use of producer cars.

Each move came as a response to changes in the dialectic between their traditional goals and the marketplace. Manitoba transportation networks were less developed, machinery more costly, and the environment less inviting than in Nebraska, but farmers in Manitoba were as intent on marketing their produce during this period as were their Nebraska counterparts. The Nebraska farms may have been more commercialized, but the farms relied on household labour and pursued strategies to ensure generational succession and the maintenance of old social boundaries.

Cultural continuity cannot be measured by the degree to which farming practices from Russia were transplanted to Manitoba and Nebraska. "Cultural rebound," a common theme in American rural historiography that depicts a return to Old World crops after an initial period of settlement, was not a factor in these Mennonite communities.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, in both the Manitoba and Nebraska communities, Mennonite farmers first concentrated on wheat, which they had grown in Russia, and then shifted to feedgrains

73. JKL, Cornelius and Maria Friesen to Johann Janzens, 16 March 1896; Friesen to Janzens, 24 November 1896.

74. For a discussion of this phenomenon, see John Rice, "The Role of Culture and Community in Frontier Prairie Farming," *Journal of Historical Geography* 3 (1977): 165.

which in Manitoba could be sold as a cash crop and in Nebraska could complement feedlot livestock raising. Geographer Martyn Bowden has argued that the switch to corn in Jefferson County reflected the cultural background of the majority of farmers; John Warkentin has argued that oat production in the East Reserve reflected the subsistence agriculture of an isolated Old World peasant community. Letters and diaries from the farmers themselves would, however, suggest that corn and oats had little to do with cultural maintenance. Farmers in both communities were quite intent on having market forces determine their agricultural practices. Feedgrains reflected an adjustment to the marketplace, not a rejection of it.

Mennonite entry into a market economy, however, was made from within the confines of an ethnic, sectarian community. It was made possible by the family that was self-sufficient in labour and consumption and achieved without significantly altering Old World spatial arrangements. Moreover, participation with the market economy ensured the realization of traditional goals. Indeed, the financial resources required to maintain a high degree of "institutional completeness," acquire new land sources for the second generation of agrarian Mennonites, and transplant an established social hierarchy dictated an integration with the marketplace. The "ethnic islands" that dotted the plains of the Canadian and American grasslands may often have been highly visible and may have seemed to have been on the periphery of mainstream society. The fact was, however, that the Mennonite farm was intricately tied to the "outside" world. What held these communities together were their internal social networks and ascriptive bonds. Geographical and social isolation or a static replication of traditional farming practices were not essential elements in their pursuit of cultural continuity. Indeed, changes in farm practices were often the guarantee of the survival of established values and social structures.