

A picture is worth ...



Ruth Klippenstein, Helen Kehler, and Agatha Hamm paint the storm windows in the Friesen Housebarn (Fall 2004).



Johnny Kehler floods the rink, again. Thanks Johnny.



Winter 2005

Coming events

February 27 -
NHF Annual General Meeting,
4 pm, Community Centre



The rink.

Come & visit

Tours of **Neubergthal - a Mennonite street village** - are available upon request:

- * 1 to 10 people @ \$5 per person, includes coffee
- * 11-25 people @ \$4 per person, includes coffee.

Call ahead to make arrangements

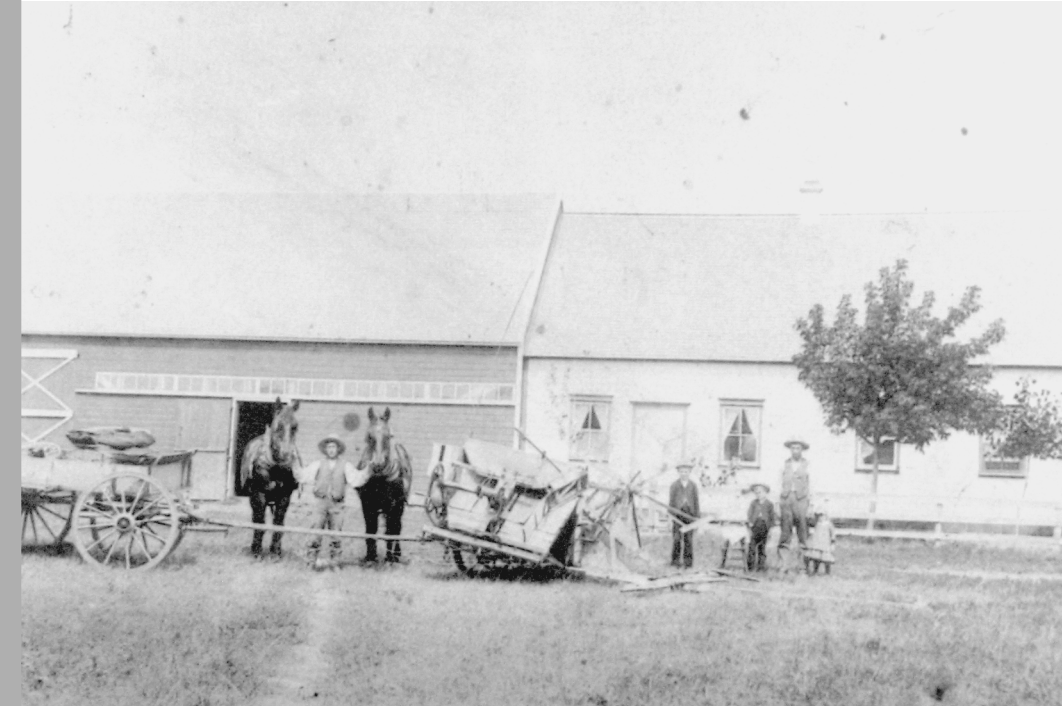
We also take special requests for other types of tours and events. Please call or e-mail us for details on how we can accommodate your group.

Ph. (204) 324 1567 or 324 1612
email: krahnp@borderland.ca

Neubergthal Heritage Foundation

John Giesbrecht
Rose Hildebrand
Frieda Klippenstein
Peter Klippenstein
Wendy Friesen (secretary)
Teresa Hamm (treasurer)
Karen Martens (vice chair)
Margruite Krahn (chair)

Neubergthal Notes



(l-r) Peter, the Russian farm hand, son Jacob, son Bernhard in a high chair, son Peter, Father Jacob Hamm, daughter Helena Hamm .

Helena (Kehler) Hamm

Erin Martens

Helena Kehler, my great-great grandmother, was born in Russia, and immigrated to Canada with her family in 1875 when she was 12 years old. She had only one sister when her father Jacob died. Her mother Eva (Wieler) then married her father's brother, Martin Kehler, after which they had another five children. In Russia Helena's family lived in the Bergthal Colony which was a daughter colony of the Chortizer Colony or the "Old Colony." This was in the Ukraine, then part of southern Russia.

My great-great grandmother and her extended family were all descendants of the Mennonites who had migrated to Russia in 1788. At that time Catherine the Great had promised them religious freedom. Not only were free to worship as they wished, but they were allowed to practice the three central principles of the Mennonite faith: baptism upon the confession of faith, non-resistance, and separation of church and state.

The Bergthal Colony was made up of many street villages, with tree-lined streets, fruit trees and very fertile soil. The long journey to the New World began with my great-great-grandmother's family selling most of their possessions and taking only what they could load onto the wagons that took them to the train station. They traveled by train across Europe, by ship to Hull, England, then again by train across England. In Liverpool they boarded a ship for Canada. They had brought "reeshje," which is much like melba toast, to eat on the ship. They landed in Quebec

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and once again boarded a train, this time for Manitoba. In Manitoba they settled on the East Reserve for a few years, but found it difficult to farm on the stony soil. When land became available on the West Reserve they settled in Neubergthal. This move took place in November. The weather was cold and rainy and Helena was required to herd the cattle across the Red River and to their new home. There were no trees in the West Reserve at that time — only tall grass prairie.

It was in Neubergthal that my great-great grandmother met and married Jacob Hamm on July 5, 1883. He was such a successful farmer that people called him "Wheat King." Jacob and Helena Hamm went on to have eight children, one of whom died in infancy. Those who survived were Jacob, Peter, Helena, Bernhard, Eva, Martin and John. The family worked hard to make a living. The gardens were the central source of food, and much of the produce was preserved for the winter.

Helena's husband Jacob died in 1935. In those days, funerals were held in the homes, and funeral invitations were sent out to surrounding neighbours. The funeral invitation was a form letter with the names listed. It was hand-delivered to the first name, and then each person passed it on to the next name on the list. And so the announcement would make its way through the community.

Jacob had provided well for Helena in what became twenty years of widowhood. After her husband's death, Helena continued to live in the house and kept up with all of her own gardening, cooking, canning, sewing and other daily chores. She hosted the first church in the village, and the summer services were held in her "sheen," the storage area in the back of the barn. A week of Summer Bible School was also held in the "sheen." The children just loved this. Helena was a remarkable woman. Being a widow she left the "Sommerfelder" church and joined the "Rudnerveider" church (now the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Church.). In the winter she hosted the church in her home. All the services were in German. Quite often Helena would host the itinerant preachers, who came with horse and buggy or sleigh. They needed meals and a place for the horses during their stay in the village, and Helena was always willing to serve. She was a Godly woman with a strong faith which she passed on to her children and grandchildren. She read her Bible faithfully and was especially interested in the book of Revelation.

Helena is remembered as a remarkable woman — small in stature, big in courage and faith. She was brave and not easily influenced by public opinion. She was a fussy housekeeper and enjoyed cooking. In summer she made delicious crepes with garden fresh raspberries, which she often served to her grandchildren. She was a well-informed woman, reading the newspapers and keeping up with current events in the world.

Helena enjoyed good health until her later years, when she had some bouts with dizzy spells. She lived in her home and took care of the yard and garden until she was ninety years old. Then she moved in with her son Bernhard and his wife Susan (Ray's parents on what is now Ray and Marilyn's yard). Helena lived out her last four months there and died on October 31, 1955. Some of her last words were, "My Saviour lives within."

Visitors to Neuberghthal marvel over its traditional features — the single village street, the long shelterbelts of towering

cottonwoods, the fruit, vegetable and flower gardens, and the eight intact housebarns. These distinctive features are what drew the attention of the National Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada.

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the village features still evident and had a “unique sense of place” as they put it. But from a Parks Canada viewpoint, why is this a story of national significance? Mennonites are often cited as the first immigrant group to successfully settle on the

letters of the Mennonite Archives and of the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society (the Mennonite Historian and Heritage Postings.) As well, it was featured in an article in Canadian Geographic, and two television specials — one by Good

A sense of place

Frieda Klippenstein

The National Historic Sites program recognizes certain people, places and events as of national historic significance. It has been in place since 1919, and today there are over 800 national historic sites in the country, most marked by bronze plaques, some developed into historic parks owned and run by Parks Canada (such as Lower Fort Garry, Fort Langley, Batoche, Motherwell Homestead to name just a few). The decisions are made by the Board in Ottawa, which receives submissions and recommendations from all over the country. In 1984, this Board decided that the agricultural settlement of the Canadian prairies was a theme that needed to be commemorated, and that the way to do this was to recognize some of the unique ways that various different people settled on the land — Mormons, the Metis people, Ukrainians, and Mennonites. Already in 1989 the deci-

wide open prairies of Western Canada, at the time when this was considered impossible because of the distance from water and timber. On these vast flat lands, quite like the steppes of Russia, the Mennonites carved out a “place” for themselves, using survival strategies and a settlement pattern developed over centuries in northern Europe and Russia.

The work of developing Neuberghthal village into a national historic site that conserves its nationally recognized heritage resources and communicates their significance to a wider public began in earnest around 1994. It started with a lot of research and information gathering, including a village survey and mapping project, a photo inventory of all the buildings, an oral history project, a fence study, a tree study, and condition assessments on two of the housebarns. A settlement history and an

Earth Productions and the other by Dragonfly Productions.

It is interesting that the commemoration of Neuberghthal was initiated by the Federal Government, rather than being brought forward by the community itself. But the village has taken on the challenge of being a National Historic Site, welcoming the growing number of visitors coming by in cars or descending from tour buses. An important job of the Neuberghthal Heritage Foundation committee is applying for grants from the government and other entities to start on the daunting task of stabilizing and restoring the Friesen housebarn. It's just the beginning however, and there are precious other resources that desperately need attention. More individuals and agencies need to catch the vision of this lovely place in order to help fund these restorations while it's still possible to do so.



The interior of the old Hamm house.

Doing good work

Margruite Krahn

This past October I spent a couple of weeks taking down rotted boards and painting a fungal preservative onto the timbers of the oldest “house” in the village, the H.F. Hamm granary. On several occasions I questioned what I was doing, but when Brian (H.F. Hamm's son) stopped by to reminisce about the old building and tell stories, I knew that what I was doing was important.

We seem to recall memories better with visual cues. A physical structure, a picture, and landscape all help us to remember. The stories and sense of place that result from walking through a barn, or climbing a tree planted by a great grandparent, carry more weight than if you read a book.

Whenever I drive down Highway 52 heading into Steinbach, a place my parents once again call home, I look north to Randolph (Chortitz) and see the White church with the black roof and wonder where exactly my grandparents farmed and my dad grew up. I don't know where the land is because there none of their buildings are standing now. I never knew my grandpa and I only saw my grandma at family gatherings. A few more miles down the highway I pass the yard my mother grew up on. As a young girl, I recall seeing the large, white, two story house. I've never stepped onto that land, and I never knew my grandparents. I wonder, as I drive by, did my grandpa plant any of the oak trees standing on that yard, which now belongs to Dr. Paul Peters. I wonder too, where my grandpa played hockey and baseball.

I fear that because time has become money, we have sacrificed the art of craftsmanship for speed and efficiency. In the H.F. Hamm house you see fine attention to detail. The notchwork, beveled window frames, and handsawn timbers illustrate this attention. Go into any building sixty years old or older and you will see the pride taken by the builder and the owner. One of the lessons that I have to learn as Paul and I restore and develop our barn, is to slow down, do good work, and be willing to wait until it can be done right. I too, am tempted by quick and easy solutions, but there is little of the craftsmans in the plastic we put in and around our houses.

Though I did not grow up in Neuberghthal and I cannot claim these people as my relatives, I love this place, because Neuberghthal represents what I never had. I confess that I am on a mission to encourage you to see the value in this place. A place brings to life stories and gives us a sense of memory and rootedness. My children know three of their grandparents, but they have no other connection to place. Neuberghthal will be, as it is for me, their place, their adopted home.

NHF update

- The H.F. Hamm House has received Municipal status, which means the NHF can apply for provincial grants for restoration.

- The NHF is presently working closely with Culture, Heritage, & Tourism on a new grant initiative.

- The Committee is working hard to seek out larger grants in order to begin work on the barn portion of the Friesen Housebarn, H.F. Hamm House, & the Herdsman's House.

Comings and goings

The **Diefenbaker Canada Centre** in Saskatoon has asked that the **Neuberghthal - Village Life Exhibition**, which is in its last week at the Mennonite Heritage Village (Steinbach). The plan is for a Summer 2005 opening in Saskatoon.