



# Neubergthal Notes

Spring 2023

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## Preserving Our Voices

The NHF has stepped up efforts to continue collecting memoirs of village life, this time in the form of an interview project. A list of names has been struck of living residents who were part of the village's past. Some still reside here. The goal is to record conversations with them about their memories of their growing-up years, day-to-day pastimes, connections with neighbours, communal activities, their romances and their struggles—to capture the oral history of Neubergthal.

It takes special skills to conduct an interview of this kind, and the NHF board has spent time looking for a candidate to steer the project. We've found an interviewer who, although not a Neubergthal native, has the appropriate credentials and inclination. Jonathan Hildebrand is a PhD student in

History at the University of Manitoba. With a background in History and in Urban Planning, he is currently pursuing research interests in environmental history, immigration, cultural history, and Indigenous-settler issues. His doctoral research includes a focus on waterways and Mennonite settlement in the West Reserve area of southern Manitoba.

NHF is grateful to the Plett Foundation for granting us the financial means to support this important project. We look forward to the day when our growing library includes this collection of recorded stories from the people who lived them. Transcription and publication are in a long-range plan. If you lived in Neubergthal or have specific memories of Neubergthal village life, we'd love to add you to our interview list! Please contact us. *NN*

## Enterprise in Neubergthal

John and Sara Abrams run a beef cattle operation and a melon-and-vegetable farm here, besides working 200 acres of mixed crops. They typically have about 14 head of cattle. John really enjoys working with the animals and is partial to Red Angus. The market garden is located on the east side of the village on a fertile acreage rented from Ray and Marilyn Hamm. Most of that produce—cucumbers, tomatoes, peppers, potatoes, watermelons, cantaloupe, and squash—is shipped fresh to Winnipeg supermarkets several times a week, summer through fall. The produce is available at Altona's Saturday-morning farmers' market. The Abramses, who are originally from Mexico, purchased property in Neubergthal in 1990 and brought up their six children here. Cornie, their son, and Kristin are also raising their family in the village. *NN*



photos by Ray Hamm

# Village Vignette



*On both sides of the village street were rows of high trees with fences in front. People used to sit on these fences and visit with whoever was passing by. I remember as a young girl, my mother not liking me sitting out there with my friends. Maybe we looked lazy. Or maybe people would think we were looking for company from the boys. She used to call me in when she saw me there.*

(Norma Friesen Derksen Giesbrecht, Altona)

- from "Neubergthal Mennonite Street Village: A Photographic Essay," published by Freda Esau Klippenstein in the Journal of Mennonite Studies in 2000

## Mix and Mingle

On December 4, 2022, "Christmas for the Village" took place at the Commons barn. Hosted by Neubergthal's catering committee, the event was a come-and-go from 3:00 until 6:00 pm. This was a chance for village residents, including those living on surrounding farms and in the community of Gnadenfeld just down the road, to celebrate the Season with sweets and hot beverages. Nearly 50 people of all ages attended. This was the first time such a gathering has been organized in Neubergthal in many years.

The planners considered various ideas for activities, but in the end decided to stay true to the "mix and mingle" theme, and guests seemed quite content to just spatsea in the warm, late-afternoon winter light. NN



## Klippenstein House

In the previous issue, we reminded our readers of the revitalization of the house attached to the Commons Barn. At that time, we were waiting for the electricians to get around to our project. We are happy to report that T&T Electrical has completed setting up a new system, which has allowed Harv Ginter Construction to install blow-in spider insulation. The rest of the work is moving apace, and an NHF subcommittee has been struck to oversee the finishing elements of this vintage Mennonite home. Meanwhile, Manitoba Health is in the process of approving the plans for the commercial kitchen, thanks to contractor Wilf Hiebert's input and the food services committee led by Karen Martens. As the project continues, so do our dreams and aspirations for how the house will be purposed, besides as a professional kitchen and a coffee bar. Our fundraising efforts to match the grant we received are ongoing. Please help if you can! NN

## "Darp Days"/Culture Days 2022

Every fall the NHF creates a series of events that highlight the history and culture of the village. Different formats have been used in past years: a day-long program featuring musicians and speakers scattered among different historic buildings; an afternoon of presentations at the Commons, ending with a concert in the barn in the evening; a series of afternoon presentations on successive Saturdays. We've offered different types of meals over the years, from faspas to food trucks to barbecues to soup-and-pie suppers. Whatever the format, the aim is to gather up local resources that will educate and entertain according to Mennonite traditions. At least one plautdietsch (Low German) element is always featured. Recognizing First Nations as the keepers of the land before the European settlers arrived is gradually becoming part of Neubergthal Culture Days.

You may recall that your Fall 2022 issue of Neubergthal Notes

included a poster outlining the plans for October—understanding the art of the Ojibwe ceremonial "shaker" (Jim Nelson); Low German magician/entertainer Ken Sky; a concert by Neubergthal-raised country rock musicians, the Brothers Keep; a panel of speakers addressing the effect of the invasion of Ukraine on the world grain supply. We thought we had a pretty good line-up that would appeal to a wide audience, or a diverse audience. Attendance at the 2022 Culture Days was, unfortunately, less than desirable. October was a beautiful month, weather-wise, and because of late seeding in spring, farmers were still busy on their fields. Families were busy reuniting after being separated by pandemic restrictions.

The NHF hopes for a robust response to the 2023 Culture Days, and we are already beginning to plan. NN



# NHF Annual General Meeting

On March 14, NHF held its annual general meeting at the Commons barn. Three new board members were introduced. Dan Kehler was raised in the Neubergthal community, is a retired church pastor, and is currently substitute teaching. Paul Krahn is a long-time resident of the village and recently retired from his career as a high-school English teacher. Erika Enns Rodine was raised in Altona and is now the new pastor at the Altona Mennonite Church. Two past board members have returned—Karen Martens, B&B operator and caterer, whose family roots trace back to original Neubergthal settlers; and Shaun Friesen, retired schoolteacher and counselor with Dragon Path Therapy.

Two new part-time employees have been hired: Katie

Saunders, our new administrator, will replace Ray Hamm, who is retiring after over ten years of service to the NHF; Katie lives in Altona and currently holds a position at Blue Sky Opportunities. Kimberley Sawatzky lives in Silberfeld, just south of Neubergthal, and will serve the organization as the events and wedding coordinator. Shawn Parago of Altona is taking over the board's bookkeeping from retiring Harv Heinrichs. The NHF board will now be co-chaired by Susie Fisher and Paul Krahn. Board members continuing their terms are Joe Braun, John Giesbrecht, and Jolanda Friesen. The NHF board is grateful to Ray and Harv for their many years of service to the organization and sorry to see them go, although Ray will always remain a consultant on everything historical when it comes to the village. *NN*



Erika Enns Rodine



Dan Kehler



Paul Krahn



Katie Saunders



Kimberly Sawatzky



Jonathan Hildebrand

## A message from retiring administrator, Ray Hamm

In 1994 Lawrence Klippenstein called to say that some people from Parks Canada were asking for a meeting with people in Neubergthal. That was the beginning of Neubergthal Heritage Foundation (NHF) here in the village.

Parks had Banff and Niagara Falls; there were fur trading posts and military forts but apparently not much for the prairies. According to their criteria, Neubergthal was the best surviving example of early agricultural settlement on the expansive prairies. In 1989, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board designated the whole village of Neubergthal as a National Historic Site. It was amazing for me and for many in the village to think that our ordinary place, our village, our homes, had national historical and architectural significance.

The village meeting took place in the community centre. Parks staff explained the meaning and the significance of this designation and some of the implications, and somewhere in this process villagers were asked if we would accept this designation. With clear understandings about Parks involvement and distance, about private ownership, the designation was accepted.

Before Parks Canada came to Neubergthal, my parental home in the village—a traditional Mennonite housebarn—was a stopping place for visitors and tourists. I remember occasional buses on our yard already in the 1960s. People knew my parents and our place. For the first several years in the 1990s, we and our place were the (forerunner of) NHF. My wife and our family and I had just moved back to my growing-up home in 1989. An early version of Neubergthal Notes was created. I remember riding a bicycle up and down the village road to deliver these to the homes. I scanned hundreds of pictures from family photo collections.



Many different people from Parks Canada came through our place and the village; I was the local connection and guide. Gradually things got more organized. A “village committee” had been in place for a long time; a heritage committee was formed. I wrote a constitution. NHF was incorporated in 1997.

People changed, my job changed. I was not involved for some years. I retired (tried to retire) and, in 2015, I got involved with NHF again—coordinating, solidifying.

As part of the 2009 Jubilee commemoration of the EMMC conference, a drama, *The Mennonite Journey*, was written and performed. Some of the scenes were a church service in a barn (the schien)—our barn—and a family scene near a semlin (sod house). At first the semlin was just going to be a front of gunny sacks, but some people wanted to make it real. Volunteers built a sod house behind our garden. It stood for a few years and even though our home was not on the Neuberghal list of places to visit, many visitors came in those years.

A long time ago, I studied physics and math, not history and religion. It has been a special gift for me to be able to work in this way with my own story, my family story, our stories—village, Mennonite, and more. I am so grateful to all those who have gone before us, and laid the foundations of our present life—congregations and community builders, tree planters and many more. NN

## Tiefedrief 2023



*Elfrieda Neufeld, sisters, and friend perform gospel music at Tiefedrief 2023 at the Commons Barn on April 15.*

Also on the program: Robert Egachie from Roseau River Anishinaabe First Nation spoke about being adopted into a Mennonite, Low-German home and returning to his roots. Carol Kroeker delivered folksy monologues and anecdotes.

## Upcoming events

June 3

### **Sports exhibition opening & Nick of Time**

The NHF Sports Exhibition will be displayed in the Bergthal School. It presents the history of the games villagers have played over the years—hockey in winter and baseball in summer. The exhibition features interpretive panels of pictures and stories, along with original uniforms and equipment to bring things to life.

This opening event will happen on the grounds at the Commons Barn will feature games, a weiner roast, a performance by the cover band *Nick of Time* and time for you to explore the exhibition itself.

Stay tuned for further information. Check the website, look for posters, and listen to the radio for announcements.

### **Low German expression!**

*Mett am ess nijch goot Kjieltje äte.*

**He's not a person to eat noodles with.**

(He's hard to get along with.)

—from *The Windmill Turning* by Victor Carl Friesen