

Historian



Essex-Kent Mennonite Historical Association

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Hours are 9:00 a.m. until 12 noon, Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

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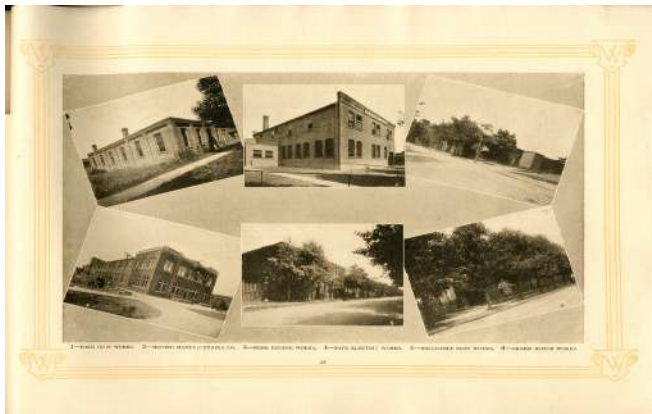
My Story

by Abram Barg

In the fall of 1925 it got too cold in our summer house [in Baden Ontario] and so we moved back in October to Tavistock, not far from Zehrs. We rented a big brick house and with three families moved into this house. We men, four of us, went to cut wood in the bush about 7 miles from our place. So we boarded on the farm where we worked and came home just for Sunday. We had to cut the trees down with a cross-cut saw and split it for stove wood. It took alot of saw pulling but it kept us healthy and warm and we had a good appetite. We had good food at this farm (Eaton). In the brick house where we lived we had 11 children and 8 grownups and we got along because there was no other way.

In March 1926 I took off for Kingsville where my brother John lived. He worked in Windsor at the McCord Radiator shop and I got work at the same place.

So the next step was to get my family down. On March 23, 1926 I got a letter from Mother that she and the children were waiting for me to come home. I rented a house on the Hecnus farm on Division Road (5th Concession). Mother soon followed me with our children and we settled in this house. Soon Uncle David with his family moved in with us. I used to go to Windsor on a streetcar which ran from Leamington to Windsor.



McCord Radiator, Windsor, ON Source: SWODA



Windsor, Essex & Lake Shore Source: EKMHA

The farm belonged to B. Cox, Leamington and Jack Henderson had it rented and lived there in the little house. Mother used to come and hoe tobacco and you children had to play there while she worked. We had some very good friends, Mr. And Mrs. Jacob Funk, living on the Hatch farm on #3 Highway, not far from us. We visited with them often. In the winter. I worked in the tobacco factory, Rock City, in Leamington. I had to walk to work and earned very little for tying scrap tobacco.

Quite often I made only \$2.75 or \$3.00 a week. It was bitter to take but here was no other work. We built a shack and kept a cow and a few chickens in it. So before going to work I had to milk the cow in the morning and at night when I came back. The street-car I mentioned before was passing our house about 15 feet away and stopped at our place so that we could go to Windsor and Leamington. Every Saturday evening we would walk with you children to town and buy our groceries and walk back again. At the Ridge School we usually stopped and sometimes for you we had a chocolate bar.



Ridge School

Source: Facebook

In a way I don't like to write my story any farther as there always was no money and we had to find ways to make it. Mother was very good and deserves a lot of credit. Perhaps she should write her story from now on.

We had enough money to buy the land, the rest we borrowed from Zehrs and Ludlam Lumber (now Bennie Lumber)



Ludlam & Ainslie Hardware Store

Source: Leamington's Heritage 1874-1974

I remember going to Leamington to buy some wooden boxes, breaking them apart and carried them home, to build a chicken house and finish some of the house. Mother had to do the washing all by hand and carry the water from an outside well. Somewhere I earned a wood stove for wages. I think it was the Brown farm east of Leamington. I and some of my friends were cutting the wood on shares. So I went downtown and traded this wood for a used washing machine. I bought an old electric pump (from George Rogalsky), fixed it up and so we had running water in the house. I picked up some old bed frames up in the junk and made some beds for you children. On November 4, 1930 Selma was born in our house on the townline. Dr. Lyon attended.



Dr. Elmer "Kirk" Lyon

Source: Facebook

In 1931, Mother had to go to Windsor for a major operation in the Metropolitan Hospital; operated [on] by Dr. Neil MacDonald, a very good doctor. She came home as Selma was 11 months old. During her absence, Selma was at the home of Mr. And Mrs. Henry Wiens on No. 77 Highway. They took very good care of her. Soon Mother came home from the hospital, we took you three girls to a private hospital on the 3rd Concession (a private home) and you had your tonsils out by Dr. Lyon. Ernest had his tonsils taken out later. As we had so much sickness in our family we had to pay our doctor bills by cleaning Dr. Lyon's office and Mother had to work in the house for Mrs. Lyon. Mother had to walk quite often and it was too much for her but Dr. Lyon thought this was alright.

Excerpt from Life and Descendants

Jacob N. And Maria Driedger

On March 29, 1927, our brother Abe was born. Taking everything into consideration, plus a depression on Canada's doorstep, the whole farm deal [in Newton Station, Manitoba] turned out to be a disaster. The income from the farm was not even enough to begin paying the interest on the farm mortgage. Some families packed up and left, either to go farther west or to go back to Ontario. In the fall, Dad and our uncles were also ready to give up and leave everything behind. They were told of an island, owned by Canada, in Ontario, some 12 miles from the coast of Essex County and the Town of Leamington. To get to this island called Pelee, you had to travel about 18 miles by boat from Leamington which took about 1 hour and 15 to 20 minutes. In 1927, in November, we left by rail to go out back to Ontario.

We came by train in late November to the Leamington area, then by boat on Lake Erie to go to the island, on a very windy day. Most everybody got seasick as we crossed. There were Mennonite people from Russia already on the island at this time.

The depression was being felt all over Canada and things were getting quite troublesome here also. We lived on the east side of Pelee Island for the time being. Through the winter Dad was able to find part-time employment, so we were able to exist.

We also attended school in the middle of the island. It was usually referred to as the Pegg School, named after the existing teacher. Mr. Pegg taught all grades from 1-8.



George Pegg Source: EKMHA

In the spring of 1928, Dad was fortunate to find permanent employment. This was with a fairly well-to-do farmer, a Mr. Ed White. Steady employment at \$50 per month plus a house on his other farm. He had three places on the west side of the island, very close to the lake. Lake Erie at that time had a fairly nice and beautiful beach, also good for swimming. The house we lived in was small, unfinished inside and out, otherwise quite nice. Water for the household was either gathered from the roof of the house or we carried it by pail from the lake. There was no electricity. The only appliance Mother had was a coal and wood stove to cook, bake and also heat the house. During the daytime Mother would use corn cobs instead of wood or coal. This gave quick heat and they were also free.

Dad had no car at this time so we all did quite a bit of walking. Our school was on the north end of the island, about 1 1/2 miles distant from where we lived. We walked every day. Every Saturday forenoon we usually had a session in German. This was held in a private home. Elementary school was very difficult for us at first because we were struggling with the English language. At home we always talked German with our parents.

Sunday morning church services were held in the private home of Mr. and Mrs. Bernhard Konrad. Their farm home had a fairly large combined living and dining room that was being used. This was truly Christian hospitality.

In May of this year, 1928, our father, Jacob N. Driedger, and Mr. Abram Rempel were elected ministers for the Pelee Island Mennonite Congregation. Our Uncle, N. N. Driedger, had already been elected and ordained as minister to serve the congregation. There were also visiting ministers from the mother congregation in Leamington, who came to serve from time to time.

Excerpt from Life and Descendants of Kornelius and Maria Toews

Compiled by Ernie and Carol Taves

July 18, 1924, Kornelius, Mary their four daughters, Anna, Tina, Mary and Margaret and their five sons Neal, Abe, John, Henry and Richard stepped off the ship [Minnedosa] and onto Canadian soil. They were free and they were safe. The years ahead would be filled with struggles, as they learned a new language and a new culture. With God's help and guidance, and their own positive attitude, life would be good again. After passing through immigration and getting medical clearance, the family left by train to Kitchener-Waterloo Ontario where they were met by the Hopps family and taken to their farm near Milverton. The Hopps family would be their hosts for the next few months. They family was split up for that winter. The older brothers and sisters were taken to other farms and homes to do housework or farm labour for room and board. Kornelius was employed cleaning horse stalls and the younger children stayed home or attended school. Their stay in Milverton was only a short eight months.

In the spring of 1925, the family moved to Southern Manitoba to live with their relatives the Wiebes, and after a short search Kornelius found a 480 acre farm for sale near Meadows. Kornelius saw great opportunity here. It had flat fertile soil suitable for large acreages of grain farming just like the farm he had left behind in Russia. It was here that the last child Jacob was born. Jacob was the first Toews to be born in their newly adopted country. Kornelius and Mary now had ten children. The second major change to occur was the changing of the family name from Toews to Taves. A school teacher in Meadows, with a German background, explained that Taves was the English spelling of Toews. The original Toews spelling included an "umlaut" over the O, making the OE sound like an A, and the W in the German language had a "veeh" sound. So the OE became an A and the W became a V and Taves was born. All siblings took on this new name with the exception of the oldest son Neal. Malaria also struck the family that year, but once again by God's grace, all survived and regained their health.

Kornelius found it difficult to keep up the farm payments, support his family and make payments toward the Travel Debt. Relatives from Pelee Island Ontario had notified them about opportunities for farming that existed there. An American landowner, Mr. Cruikshank, had a number of farms on the island and was looking for large families to share-crop large acreages of tobacco. In the spring of 1928, the family moved once again, this time to Southern Ontario.



Harvesting Tobacco – Pelee Island Source: EKMHA

Life on the island was vastly different from life on the prairies. The farm was 250 acres in size. Twenty-five acres were planted in tobacco and the rest into grain crops. All the children worked on the farm as the growing of tobacco was very labour intensive. The younger children went to school on the island under the leadership of Mr. G. Pegg. Kornelius due to the injuries he received during the beatings he endured in Russia, became very restricted in what he was able to do physically on the farm. He relied much on his oldest sons Neal, Abe and John to run the everyday operations of the farm. Mary spent her time making meals and tending to her gardens. Potatoes, apples and a variety of other vegetables were harvested every fall and then placed in an underground pit, lined and covered with straw and then an 18 inch layer of dirt on top to prevent freezing in the winter. Using this method the family had a sufficient supply of staples throughout the winter. Watermelon, cucumbers, crab apples, cherries, jams and many other fruits and vegetables were also canned for use during the winter.

Dear Grandchildren:

On November 16th we finally landed in Quebec City. After the boat tied up at the dock, we were allowed to disembark and step on Canadian soil for the first time. We were then ushered into a big room and before a doctor's commission. We were all examined as to our condition of health. Our family all passed and we could enter a train, that was already waiting for us. Only three families (the Driedgers, the Issak Duecks, the Jacob Kornelsens, and a single girl, Anna Koop) were allowed to go to Ontario, all of the others, much to their disappointment, had to go to Manitoba and maybe even Saskatchewan. We were happy to go to Ontario, as most of our relatives were already there. It took several days until we reached our destination, Waterloo, Ontario. The first day of our journey through Quebec, the countryside looked rather poorly and Canada, the promised land, did not come up to our expectations. Further into Ontario things began to look much better and getting closer to Waterloo, we were quite pleased with our adopted country. Late on Nov. 17 we arrived in Waterloo. When we got off the train, brother Peter, Tante Liese Dick, Onkel and Tante Herman Enns, were there were to welcome us into the new land. It was a moving occasion to see our loved ones again. We were put into cars. Uncle Abe, Tante Manja and myself with Uncle Peter and his boss, Christ Wagler, into one "Automobile" and off we went into the night. Riding [in] a car was a more or less new experience for us and I marvelled at Mr. Wagler's driving skills, finding his way as it seemed to me, through the crowded streets and later through the dark night. We passed through several towns, the last one being New Hamburg. After which he finally turned into his own yard. We got out, were ushered into the house, given something to eat, and then Abe and I were sent upstairs (auf den Speicher). There was no ceiling, the rafters of the roof being right above us. But there were several heavy quilts on the bed. We got into bed, under the covers and soon fell asleep dreaming of "Canada".

Good night and sweet dreams to you all. Love, Opa

Dear Grandchildren:

It was about this time when we received a letter from our father back in the Waterloo area, that brought great excitement to us all. Impossible, but that couldn't be – Father wrote that he had rented a 240 acre farm on an island somewhere in Lake Erie. Now how could he do that, without so much as talking it over with us beforehand. But this shows you how much authority a father had over his children when I was young (23 at the time). We were moving onto an Island in Lake Erie. Thoughts of Robinson Crusoe went through my head - the experiences he had on his Island. The letter stated further that the main crop we were to grow on that island was tobacco. Another shock – what did we know about growing tobacco. We had seen it in cans, in paper packages, in cigarettes, but that was about as far as our knowledge about this weed went. So it gave material for endless speculation and discussion among us. And how big an Island was it? And what about the population, how many? And was there any connection with the mainland? Probably by boat. We had many questions about this island – they would probably have to wait until we could go home – that is where our parents and the girls were. Mr. Zehr paid us our wages \$114.00 each, for all the work we had done there. On the third of April we arrived home. After a hearty welcome from Mom and Dad and siblings we had a chance to have most of our questions answered, although not all of them. Now we had to get ready for our trip to Pelee Island. Mom and Dad had all the plans made ready. Still there was much left to do. Finally on the 6th of April we embarked on the train that would take us to Kingsville.

Love Grandpa

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Enjoying this newsletter? Help make the next one even better! Send submissions to info@ekmha.ca

Upcoming activities at the Heritage Centre

- Travelogues – Coming Fall 2024
Check Facebook for more information.
- Call 519-326-0456 or email info@ekmha.ca for updates.

Support Essex-Kent Mennonite history! Become a member of EKMHA or renew today. Visit www.ekmha.ca/membership to join online or fill out and return the form below.

Name: _____
Address: _____
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Membership Fee (\$15 per person/group) \$ _____ Donation to Heritage Centre (Optional) \$ _____

Would you like to receive email about EKMHA news and events? Yes please No thank you

Are you interested in volunteering 1 hour/month or more? Yes, send me info No thank you

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Memberships valid from January 1st to Dec 31st
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Your support helps EKMHA continue its mission of preserving the histories of the Mennonites of Essex and Kent Counties. Membership costs only **\$15/year** for an individual, church, organization, or business.



UMEI students playing baseball at a school year-end field trip – May 1958 Source: EKMHA