

“*Emma jedohne*”: Memories and Old Colony Mennonite Identity

Karen Warkentin, Winnipeg

When Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia are asked why they do things a certain way, the most common response given is ‘*So ha’ wie daut emma jedohne*’ (that is how we have always done it). However, while listening to their stories, it quickly becomes evident that certain past events are highlighted, indicating that they were particularly influential in shaping the Old Colony identity. Yet the question can also be turned around, and asked whether these memories are retold precisely because they fit into the cultural Old Colony identity. The Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia emphasize the needs and identity of the collective over the individual, and as members of the group, individuals recall memories that emphasize their allegiance to the colony. In this article, I suggest a symbiosis between collective memory and cultural identity: individual Mennonites recall events that are part of their collective memory, which in turn influence the formation of the Old Colony Mennonite identity.

The Canadian-descendent, Low German-speaking Old Colony Mennonites of Mexico first settled in isolated, rural colonies in south central Bolivia in 1967. They comprise a continually expanding conservative, anti-modern, ethno-religious group that looks and sounds surprisingly out of place in the Latin American culture of Bolivia. Yet this is their

very identity; they are a migratory people out of place in any nation state. Identity, to use the definition from the *Encyclopaedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, refers to the “qualities of sameness, in that persons may associate themselves, or be associated by others, with groups or categories on the basis of some salient common feature, e.g. ‘ethnic identity,’”¹ and this identity is shaped over time. The Old Colony Mennonites can trace their history through four, and in some cases five or six, countries in three different continents over the past 150 years. Their migrations have allowed them to pursue isolation from national societies and governments, a strategy they have come to believe allows them to maintain their simple, agrarian Anabaptist worlds. Their most visible features are simple, dark clothing for men and women, the use of the Low German language, and overt cultural traits such as an abstinence from electricity, an insistence on steel wheels on their tractors, and horse and buggy as a primary mode of transportation.

A less visible feature of the Old Colony Mennonite world consists of its members’ memories and stories of the past. People can only remember a small portion of their experiences. It is the recollection of certain memories that eventually becomes part of a person’s ‘archival memory,’² a term used by Alice M. Hoffman, an oral historian, and her husband, Howard S. Hoffman, a psychologist. The reiterated memories become the memories that will define the individual and become their identity over time. Archival memory, or the focus on certain memories, is also used in collective memory, which is the basis of a cultural identity. Collective memory is a group’s selective remembrances of the past that appear stable, giving a group its peculiarity and its sense of self. Jan Assmann goes further and defines cultural memory, a collective memory that is rooted in a fixed point in history, as the “collective concept for all knowledge that directs behaviour and experience in the interactive framework of a society.”³ Collective memory, then, gives a group its identity and also informs its culture. It can also give a group its ethnicity, that is, a ‘sense of peoplehood,’⁴ to use Timothy Smith’s term. For the Old Colony Mennonites, it is not only their migrations, but also the ways they have remembered their migrations, that have impacted the formation of their ethnic identity.

The Old Colony Mennonites have shaped their identity around community, making individualism a secondary concern. During interviews I conducted in the colonies of Bolivia, this emphasis on community over individuality quickly became evident.⁵ Few interviewees could remember stories passed on from their parents or grandparents, for example, but most saw themselves living the same lives that their predecessors lived. In order to preserve the Old Colony identity, handed down through generations, Mennonites have been willing to migrate throughout the world. In the process of these migrations,

however, that collective identity has shifted and changed. This paper looks at memories that were formed during the Bolivian Old Colonists' time in previous colonies, including in Mexico, Belize or East Paraguay, as well as in parent colonies established in Bolivia during the 1960s.

The Old Colony Mennonites live in deeply patriarchal agrarian communities, and if there is a variation in their accounts of the past, it often has less to do with expressions of individuality or the particulars of former colonies than with gender. Gender, a "social construct"⁶ "based on perceived differences between sexes,"⁷ shapes the meaning of experiences,⁸ thereby influencing which memories are deemed important to the individual's identity. In his examination of conservative Kleine Gemeinde Mennonite communities in the later 1800s, Royden Loewen argues that the status of both men and women had clear gender divisions and was based on the centrality of the household.⁹ Although the conservative Mennonites lived in patriarchal societies, both genders held authority in different realms. The men worked outside the home, mainly in the fields, and the women retained close ties to the household economy, and "considered their lives complementary to those of their husbands."¹⁰ These gender divisions and characteristics continue, and can be used to examine the Old Colony Mennonite men and women, as well as their memories.

Men

When asked about memories from previous colonies, most of the Mennonite men I interviewed consistently emphasized their connection to the land. Many of these men have migrated multiple times, often in search for land, and this nearly constant migration can be understood as evidence of the Old Colony's larger struggle to maintain its ideal identity as a "People of the Land." Land shortage occurs frequently on Mennonite colonies because of rapid population growth, and colony leaders are often under pressure to buy more land and establish new colonies in order that young Mennonites in particular have the opportunity to start their own farms.

In the early part of the twentieth century, the term *Gemeinschaft* was defined by the German philosopher and sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies as "close emotional ties through face-to-face interactions, common values and attachment to place"¹¹ and social networks based on friends and relatives. Several decades later, Ian McKay used *Gemeinschaft* to describe the term "folk." In *The Quest for the Folk*, McKay defines *Gemeinschaft* as "the ideal type of a society bound together by tradition, custom, and faith, and permanently rooted over generations in small, uncommercialized communities."¹² Although

McKay is describing the rooted communities of Nova Scotia, his and Tönnies' description of *Gemeinschaft* can be used to describe the Old Colony Mennonite communities in Bolivia, which emphasize the local community and refrain from building relationships outside of the Old Colony Mennonite network. One Mennonite man I interviewed remembered his experiences of land shortage precisely in these terms. Peter Knelsen, in his fifties, lived in Manitoba Colony, established in 1993 by the Riva Palacios Colony, itself established in 1967. Knelsen traced his roots through Riva Palacios Colony back to Mexico, where he remembered a severe shortage of land. He explained to me that Old Colony Mennonites were left with few options in such cases, because moving into a nearby city was not an option for them. For Knelsen, the city was a place where the Old Colony Mennonites, especially the young people, would not be able to "stay true" to the Mennonite way. Peter Knelsen described the Old Colony Mennonite agrarian way of life as the means to preserve an Old Colony *Gemeinschaft*.¹³

Beginning anew in a colony was a defining moment for many of the men. Clearing land to make it suitable for agricultural purposes was often remembered as being a difficult time. The interviewees seemed to take pride in their capabilities in starting a new farm. Johan Rempel, a 57 year old man from Cuauhtémoc, Mexico, for example, moved to Shipyard Colony in Belize from Mexico with his family when he was still quite young. The decision to leave Cuauhtémoc for Belize (or British Honduras, as it was then called) was made by his grandparents in 1958, but he remembered that the first years were very difficult for his family – a time of a lot of mud, of impenetrable forest, and hordes of insects, all of which made it difficult to clear the land.¹⁴

Another man also recalled the difficulties in establishing a new farm at a much older age. Daniel Niedorf, age 40, lived in California Colony, an offshoot of Manitoba Colony. In 2009, California was still a young colony, founded just two years earlier. Many inhabitants could trace their migration back through the Manitoba and Riva Palacios Colonies, and earlier from Cuauhtémoc, Mexico. Niedorf's parents had moved from Cuauhtémoc to Riva Palacios Colony in 1970 as part of a later group. When land was made available by Riva Palacios Colony to establish Manitoba Colony, Niedorf was one of the first men to buy land; however, his land was in one of the disputed areas in the colony. Niedorf had gone to start clearing the land when, along with several other Mennonite men, he was arrested and told that the sale of the land had been illegal. The Old Colony Mennonites had paid seven U.S. dollars per hectare for the disputed land, and over the next year lawyers haggled over the land ownership. The end of the dispute resulted in nullifying the previous sale, giving the other party legitimate ownership. The Old Colony Mennonites needed to buy the land again, this time for fifteen

dollars per hectare.¹⁵ Niedorf still seemed angry over being charged twice for the same land.

Land ownership has come to represent the basis of an ideal Old Colony male identity. Several men recalled the struggle to achieve this ideal. Because of constant demand and shortage of land, families often had to migrate through two or three colonies in their lifetime, and some men had to resort to other means of acquiring income in order to support their families. For many of these men, these jobs were seen as temporary and slightly embarrassing stepping stones to becoming "proper" members of the community by purchasing their own land. The word *Ootschoffe* (directly translated: "to work outside") is used to describe any work done outside of the family farm. The term itself evokes the denigration of a Mennonite man's identity, because it implies the inability to support the family through farming. Take, for example, the experience of Johan Wall, a man in his sixties from Manitoba Colony, who has lived in three different colonies during his lifetime. When he lived in Mexico, Wall had to supplement his income by working in a colony store. When the opportunity came to emigrate in 1969, he and his family joined a group from his colony, led by *Omtje* (leader) Bernard Peters to start the new colony, Riva Palacios Colony in Bolivia. Only by joining this migration was Wall able to acquire fifty hectares of land, freeing himself from the necessity of *ootschoffe*.¹⁶ Similarly, Cornelius Loewen, 31, of California Colony, explained that he always saw any jobs other than farming his own land as temporary. When he and his wife lived in the parent Manitoba Colony, he held several jobs. In the mornings he worked as a teacher in one of the schools, and in the afternoons, weekends and holidays, he worked in a colony store. In addition to these jobs, he also did some electrical work, converting appliances to 12 volts, which enabled the Old Colony Mennonites to use appliances with batteries. Loewen did acknowledge that he enjoyed working as a teacher, but he also felt the need to buy his own land, which ultimately prompted his move to California Colony.¹⁷ These men saw land ownership as the ideal Old Colony identity, and they strived to be a part of it at a great cost.

For the Old Colony Mennonite men, farming is the ideal occupation, and there are few options left for men when there is a shortage of land. Their relationship with the land is complex and linked with their religion. In fact, their traditions and interpretations of their history reveal the symbiosis between collective memory and cultural identity, in that their community's traditions clearly structure their desire to work on the land; their history of migration in search of land is both motivated by, and interpreted through, their Old Colony religious beliefs. These stories of past migrations became part of the men's "archival memories" that have formed their individual identity, having

merged with, and emerged through, the cultural Old Colony Mennonite identity and its emphasis on land ownership.

Religion

Old Colony Mennonite identity is rooted in religion. It is through their religion that the Old Colony Mennonites have defined their social borders and it is when these borders were threatened that the Old Colony Mennonites often have migrated to new areas. Most of the men interviewed saw their religion as part of their migration history, and a cause for dispute that pushed many to leave for new countries. When remembering their immediate history, most men saw the need for land as the primary reason for migration, but when looking further back to their parents and grandparents, the men often remembered the religious or cultural reasons that prompted their parents and grandparents to migrate, forming part of the Old Colony Mennonite collective memory.

Ethnic identity is constantly evolving and changing. Kathleen Neils Conzen and David A. Gerber argue that an ethnic identity is “a process of construction or invention which incorporates, adapts, and amplifies pre-existing communal solidarities, cultural attributes, and historical memories.”¹⁸ The Old Colony Mennonites’ collective memory has changed over time. They may trace their roots to the sixteenth century Anabaptism and to Menno Simons, but when asked why they continue their distinctive lifestyle, the Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia rarely mentioned Menno Simons. Instead, they usually replied, “*So ha’ wie daut emma jedohne*” (that is how we have always done it).

One man acknowledged the evolution of the Old Colony Mennonite identity. George Knelsen of Belice Colony explained the origins of the term “Mennonite,” and acknowledged that the practices of colony parents had taken priority over the teachings of Menno Simons. He explained that the Old Colony Mennonites took their name from a man called Menno Simons, who was a ‘*Predja*’ (preacher) in the Roman Catholic Church. Through studying the Bible, Menno learned a new way. Knelsen explained that the followers of Menno Simons eventually moved to Germany where they learned German, and from Germany they moved to Russia in order to retain their new teachings. With his considerable knowledge of Mennonite history, Knelsen acknowledged that the Old Colony Mennonites’ lifestyle did not date back to the time of Menno or to the time when Mennonites lived in Russia. The church leaders, for example, allowed certain things, such as the herbicide Round Up and basic farming equipment, into the colony that had not existed at the time when the forefathers of the Old Colony Mennonites

lived in Russia. Knelsen remembered that during the time when he lived in Shipyard, a group broke from the colony, seeking a lifestyle that would date further back in time, and more accurately reflect what they believed to be the Mennonites' historical practices. This group built a colony in a heavily forested area in Belize and built roads into the colony that only allowed horse drawn vehicles and prohibited any motorized vehicles.¹⁹

For the Old Colony Mennonites, many ethnic traits have become synonymous with their religious identity. Memories shared by the men indicated the process by which some attributes came to be linked with the Old Colony religious identity. Often, the memories were of stories told to them by their parents or grandparents about the migration from Canada to Mexico. George Knelsen, in Belice Colony, recalled hearing from his parents that the emigrant groups left Canada for Mexico in the 1920s due to changes the government was implementing, including mandatory English education. His mother's family had joined the migration in 1923, but only stayed in Mexico a few months. They returned to Saskatchewan, where they joined other Mennonites who moved to La Crete, in the far north of Alberta, hoping to preserve their distinctive clothing and the German language. They were able to preserve the "old ways" for only a period of time in Alberta, before things "went too far," at which point his family decided to move to British Honduras (later renamed Belize).²⁰

Another aspect apparent in their memories is the importance of community in the Old Colony religion and identity. In Anna Sophia Hedberg's dissertation on the Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia, she argues that Old Colony Mennonites of Nuevo Durango Colony remained within the isolated communities because they believed it was the only way to guarantee their salvation.²¹ To live a faithful life was to abide by the collective identity no matter how costly. Peter Knelsen in Manitoba Colony recalled hearing that a group decision was made in the 1930s in Mexico to prohibit any further changes in the Old Colony Mennonite way of life, effectively stopping the clock. Knelsen remembered hearing that it was at this time that the fractious ruling disallowing rubber tires on tractors occurred. Any Mennonite who disobeyed this rule was considered *onnjehuarsom* (disobedient). Knelsen remembered hearing about Mennonites introducing rubber tires by using tractors as they came from the factory, thereby disobeying the *Ordnung*, or the "religious blueprint for expected behaviour."²² Knelsen concluded that this disobedience eventually caused many Mennonites who wanted to remain true to the Old Colony Mennonite Church to leave Mexico in the 1960s and migrate to Bolivia.²³

To maintain the collective Old Colony identity and attain salvation, the *Ordnung* must be lived by. Members believe that community

stability and eventual eternal salvation are attained by following this 'blueprint.' Several of the Old Colony men recalled times when they felt some of the rules were unnecessary, but noted that they followed the rules because they believe that the community takes precedence over individual desires. In Valle Nuevo Colony, for example, Peter Bergen admitted he did not understand the rule against rubber tires on tractors, but told me he believed that since it was a rule that had been made at one point, the Colonists needed to continue the practice. Personally, he favoured rubber tires but obeyed the rule and continued to use steel wheels. Bergen thought the same way regarding the rule which prohibited the driving of cars. Again, he did not know why the rule was initially made, but he continued the practice.

Another ethno-religious characteristic is found in the order of the Sunday church service. During the Sunday service, singing is done in *langewies*, a liturgical style led by the *Vorsänga*, men appointed by the church to lead the singing. Bergen was aware of other forms of musical styles, such as the *kortewies*, the more "modern" form of hymn singing with a musical score, but he agreed that his church continue to sing *langewies*, that being they had always done it.²⁴

Another man in Valle Nuevo Colony, Franz Rempel, age 56, also highlighted the Old Colony identity based on group priority in his interview, placing the community before individual desires. Rempel originated from Bolivia's Swift Current Colony, but in 1997 helped established Fresnillo Colony with a group directly from Mexico. The small group from Mexico had migrated because of the rubber tire-steel wheel dispute while the Old Colony Mennonites from Swift Current Colony moved to Fresnillo Colony due to land shortage. Rempel shared that he did not understand why the Old Colony Mennonites were not allowed to use rubber tires on their tractors, but he believed that one man could not make a difference in colony practices. As the colony's pharmacy owner, the issue was not particularly contentious for Rempel, as it did not directly affect his income. Since he was not an *Ackerman* (farmer), it was easier for him to keep the Old Colony way.²⁵

The Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia believe the *Ordnung* is what has maintained the *Kontroll* (control) over individual members of the colony and kept the community intact. When individuals challenged the *Ordnung*, control was lost and the community, and salvation, were threatened. Most of the interviewees remembered times when individuals challenged the collective Old Colony Mennonite identity by introducing modern technology, acts that the interviewees considered as sin. A number of the Mennonites who had left for other colonies believed the colonies they left behind to have gone *too wiet* (too far) and having become "worldly," implying they were no longer living as

Christenvolk (People of Christ). Wilhelm Peters, in Oriente Colony, was four years old when his family left Mexico in 1967 and moved to the Riva Palacios Colony near Santa Cruz. He wished that he had been older when they left Mexico, so that he could remember more and would be able to identify with older Mennonites when they talked about their experiences. He thought that his parents left Mexico because things had been going *too wiet* (too far), with people driving cars and using rubber tires on their tractors.²⁶

Immigration was the primary means used to preserve the Old Colony Mennonite identity, but as many migrants discovered, the pressure to modernize followed them into their new colonies. In Rio Verde Colony, East Paraguay, founded by conservative Old Colonists from Mexico, the colony leaders ultimately began to allow members to connect to the national hydro electric grid, even though they continued to prohibit the use of cars. Franz Wiebe, originally from Rio Verde Colony, believed that to drive a car was a sin, a sign of a lack of *Kontroll* (control). It was when Rio Verde Colony became more lax with its control that Wiebe and his wife decided to move to Neuland Colony in Bolivia.²⁷ These men's stories indicate that the Old Colony Mennonite identity was never static and was constantly challenged. Colony leadership was continually pushed as surrounding societies pressured the Old Colony Mennonites to change their identity as a people who resist modernity. The resulting disputes often led to migration as dissenting groups left the modernizing colonies.

The disputes and migrations contributed to an Old Colony identity founded on land ownership and religious beliefs. Despite the men's reliance on the phrase *So haa wie daut emma jedohne* (that is how we have always done it), their memories reveal the historical process that formed their identity. The Old Colony Mennonites see an identity that has remained unchanged through the years. However, through these oral accounts it becomes apparent that other contributions such as government bylaws, land shortage, and religious disputes have assisted in the formation of the Old Colony Mennonite identity, and I suggest that in the process of this formation, the men have adapted the cultural identity as a basis for their own individual archival memories.

Women

The women I interviewed often highlighted the same themes as the men when recollecting their experiences in different colonies. However, they also talked about other topics that seemed to define their identity specifically as Old Colony Mennonite women. Land shortage and church regulations played a part in shaping their identity, but

family relations, food, and poverty were also discussed by many of the women in the interviews.

Family

Old Colony Mennonites have strong family bonds, including those with parents, siblings, and children. Their memories are influenced by their familial connections and the primacy of these relations. As previously written, the Old Colony Mennonites focus on the group identity and subjugate the individual beneath the communal unity; a subset of this group identity is family relations. Joy Parr writes about the numerous positions held by individuals and how meanings are extrapolated from experiences according to these various positions.²⁸ The women I interviewed often recalled their previous experiences according to the positions they held within their families, whether as daughters, sisters or wives. These relationships played a key part in their oral narratives, for, as Marie-Françoise Chanfrault-Duchet writes, “women’s life stories, unlike men’s, deal not only with the relation between the self and the social sphere, but also, and above all, with woman’s condition and with the collective representations of woman as they have been shaped by the society with which the woman being interviewed must deal.”²⁹

As in many societies, Old Colony parents have considerable influence in the shaping of their children’s identity. As already noted, Old Colony Mennonite communities have often resorted to migration in order to continue their isolation from outside influences. But the women I interviewed especially emphasized how such migrations assured a setting to structure their children’s identity according to the Old Colony identity. Sarah Klassen, age 50, in Valle Nuevo Colony, grew up in Shipyard Colony, Belize. Shipyard Colony bought land in Bolivia to form Belice Colony, but Klassen’s parents decided to leave Shipyard Colony before the colony bought this land, hoping to keep the family intact before their children would try to find land elsewhere. Klassen’s entire family, excluding one married sister, left Shipyard Colony and moved to Swift Current Colony; later her married sister joined the family in Bolivia.³⁰ Frau Abraham Loewen, age 53 in Belice Colony (she identified herself only by her husband’s name), has a similar history. All of her father’s siblings remained in Mexico, while only one of her mother’s sisters, a blind woman who had remained single, joined her family when they migrated to Riva Palacios Colony.³¹ For these women, the parents made decisions to migrate according to their views of what constituted the Old Colony Mennonite identity. Their parents were willing to leave other family members behind as

they sought places that would provide opportunities to continue their Old Colony identity. The memories of these women reveal the role their parents had in shaping their identity. What is notable is that these women did not question their parents' motives, but rather took their parents' motivations to preserve the Old Colony identity as their own.

Older children often followed their parents, causing a chain migration. In Helena Rempel's family, this chain reaction occurred twice. Rempel, age 57, had lived in Mexico until she was six years old, when her grandparents decided to return to Canada after a 30 year sojourn in Mexico. Her parents followed the grandparents, but her family did not return to the Prairies. Instead, they settled close to Aylmer, Ontario, where her parents worked on tobacco and strawberry farms while she attended an elementary school. After nearly three years, her grandparents decided once again to migrate, this time to British Honduras to live in Shipyard Colony. Again, Rempel's parents decided to follow her grandparents, and at the age of nine, in 1961, Helena Rempel moved to Shipyard Colony.³² Rempel did not question her parents for following her grandparents, and it could be assumed that loyalty to family was considered the norm. In Rempel's recollections, her parents followed the older generation, but chain migration can also occur in the other direction. Grandparents, who had established lives, also uprooted themselves and followed their children and grandchildren. Susana Peters, 44, recalled that her grandmother, her only surviving grandparent, joined Peters' family in their migration to Bolivia because she wanted to be with her children.³³

Parents were a leading influence in the women's stories as they remembered their migrations; however, siblings were also part of their social network. Among conservative Mennonites, the role of sister is very important, and often continues to be despite separation by national borders. In her research on her own Mennonite family members, historian Patricia Harms found that her mother and her mother's sisters maintained contact through decades of separation after a sister left Canada for Paraguay. She notes that within the Mennonite female culture, "family and kinship was the primary arena of her social relations while the church and community were secondary."³⁴ These primary social relations were also evident in the recollections of the Old Colony Mennonite women in Bolivia.

Another woman, who identified herself to me as Frau Jakob Schmidt, was originally from the Sommerfeld Colony near Santa Cruz. Mennonites in this colony are not considered part of the Old Colony Mennonite Church, but Sommerfelder Mennonites are still conservative. Sommerfeld Colony borders Swift Current Colony, where Schmidt met and married her Old Colony Mennonite husband. For Schmidt, the transition to a new colony was eased because two of her sisters

had already married into Swift Current Colony. Schmidt recalled her mother bringing her to the Ältesta (bishop) of Sommerfeld Colony and both asking her whether she was certain that she wanted to leave the Sommerfeld Colony. Both of them were worried that she was making a mistake, but Schmidt was certain of her decision to leave Sommerfeld Colony and that moving to Swift Current Colony was what she wanted.³⁵ The Mennonite women's identity was linked to their family relations, and was often listed as one of the motivations for migration. The primacy of family over colonial allegiance showed the importance of these relationships to the women's identity.

The Old Colony Mennonite women found their identity through their relationships within family, while their affiliation to a specific colony took less importance. Ann Sawatsky, in her mid-thirties, was originally from Rio Verde Colony in Paraguay but she married a man from Riva Palacios Colony. She found it very difficult to move to Riva Palacios Colony because she felt the people in the Bolivian colony were different from what she was used to in Paraguay, and she found the *Omm'gang* (socialization) was different.³⁶ Another woman from the Neuland Colony also found it difficult to move to a different colony without her parents. Aganetha Friesen, 41, moved with her husband from the Durango Colony in Paraguay to Rio Verde Colony to join his parents. After living in Rio Verde Colony for some time, she reported that she *bangt sich* (longed) for Durango Colony. However, she eventually got used to living in the new colony.³⁷

Family – first the one the woman was born into, then the family the woman married into – was clearly the basis of the Mennonite women's social network, and their recollections of the past were based on what position other individuals held in the women's family, either immediate or more extended. One of the most frequent questions I received when I arrived at a Mennonite's home was whether I was *Frind'schauft* (a relative). For them, I was not *Dietsch* (the insider term for Mennonite) because of my modern clothes and limited Low German. However, for the Old Colony Mennonite women, it did not matter whether someone was Mennonite, but rather more importantly, whether she was related to them. In Valle Esperanza Colony, established over twenty years ago mainly by Mennonites that migrated directly from Mexico, the widow Sarah Fehr, age 58, remembered an experience that occurred while she still lived in Mexico with her husband. One day, while Fehr and her husband were in a city, they saw another Mennonite couple, distinguishable by their dress. Fehr recalled that her husband was eager to approach the couple and to converse with them – an action that she said was unusual among the Old Colony Mennonites. Fehr remembered that she was hesitant to talk with them since they were *gaunz framd* (total strangers), but her husband persisted. Once they

struck up a conversation with the couple, however, they discovered that the wife was Sarah Fehr's cousin.³⁸ The realization that the couple whom they thought were total strangers was family seemed to make the unusual practice of talking with strangers acceptable.

Listening to their recollections of experiences in previous colonies made it evident just how important these familial connections were to the women I interviewed. These relations have influenced decisions to migrate and have shaped their social networks. The men listed land and religion as the main themes in their collective and individual identities, but for the women, family relations seemed to take precedence over land and religion.

Poverty

Another common theme in the women's recollections was their economic standing and memories of poverty. The book *Märtyrer Spiegel* (*Martyrs Mirror*) was one of several books promoted within the Old Colony Mennonite communities. Published in Dutch in 1660 by Thieleman J. van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror* is a compilation of stories of Christians, mainly Anabaptists, who were martyred for their faith. The Old Colony Mennonites have been taught to value persecution and potentially embrace a difficult life. In his research among the Old Colony Mennonites in Argentina and Bolivia, anthropologist Lorenzo Cañas Bottos finds that there are two paths considered by the Old Colony Mennonites. The first is the broad path, the one taken by many in "the world," and is described as easy and joyful but leading to hell, and the other path, the one taken by the few chosen people and the one Cañas Bottos argues is sought by the Old Colony Mennonites, is narrow and considered painful and difficult, and is the path to salvation.³⁹

The women I interviewed insisted that the Old Colony Mennonites who migrated to Bolivia were often the poor and landless, and were the ones that had struggled to establish themselves in Mexico, Belize, or Paraguay when populations expanded and caused land shortage. Most of the Old Colony Mennonites interviewed for this paper saw their economic plight as significant. To use Joy Parr's view of experiences, meaning often precedes the event.⁴⁰ Perhaps for these Mennonite women, the Old Colony identity associated poverty with spiritual maturity, which would elevate their memories of poverty as a status symbol. Poverty was a common thread in many of the interviews. Increasing population and life on arid land impacted many of the Old Colony Mennonites living in Mexico. Sarah Fehr left Mexico for Bolivia with her husband's family to live in Valle Esperanza Colony primarily because of her family's poverty. She remembered always being poor in Mexico.

She and her husband had opened a store in their Mexican colony, but four or five years later they were forced to close the store because other members in the colony were unable to pay off their debts.⁴¹

Poverty was not left behind in Mexico with the migrations, and several interviewees recalled difficult years after moving to Bolivia. Several women that came from Belize recalled their time there as years of extreme poverty. Marie Knelsen, 51, in Belice, remembered helping her parents with planting in Shipyard Colony. She remembered her family did not have a lot of land and that the land itself was of poor quality.⁴² Greit Bergen, 42, in Oriente Colony, also grew up in Shipyard Colony, Belize. Before her parents moved to Santa Rita Colony, Bolivia when she was nine, she remembered that they had been poor in Shipyard Colony and it was her parents' poverty that prompted their decision to leave Belize for Bolivia. She remembered that people were not able to have a proper dairy in Belize, and believed that it was better for the Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia because they were able to have cows and have a dairy.⁴³

Times when women were forced to break their prescribed gender roles in order to supplement a family's income were remembered as particularly abnormal periods. Helena Rempel, age 60, grew up in Shipyard Colony, in the British Honduras, and remembered that many people had to go *ootschoffe* (work outside the farms) because most members of the colony owned small parcels of land, which were insufficient to support their families.⁴⁴ Sarah Klassen, age 50, also grew up in Shipyard Colony, Belize, and she remembered growing up in poverty. To supplement her family's income, members of her family made mattresses to sell to the *Ein'heimijche* (local people), drying straw outside and sewing the mattresses with material they bought. Looking back at her life, Klassen commented, "*Ick haa aul ne schwoaret Läwe hinja mie*" (I already have a difficult life behind me).⁴⁵ Christina Niedorf, 38, in California Colony, sewed a lot of clothing for other families after marrying her husband Daniel. They lived with his mother in Riva Palacios Colony because they did not have any land. Niedorf continued her sewing after they moved to Manitoba Colony because her family was only able to afford a small parcel of land.⁴⁶ Marie Reimer, age 27, also used her domestic skills to supplement her family's income by sewing for others while she and her husband lived in Manitoba Colony. Reimer and her husband also had only a small portion of land, and she sewed while her husband worked for others clearing land.⁴⁷ Marie Loewen, age 29, also had to generate a monetary income for the family; as a young unmarried woman she had done so by working outside her home when she lived in Riva Palacios Colony. When she was in her late teens, she worked for other people within the church, doing odd jobs such as cleaning.⁴⁸

The women I interviewed described their poverty by their inability to finance their migration. To raise enough money to enable them to migrate, several women had to work outside the home with their families, often on fruit or vegetable farms. Anna Banman, a 75 year old widow, was eager to share her family's history and the difficulties they had faced through their migrations. She recalled hearing that her grandparents had joined the larger migration from Canada to Mexico in the 1920s, but her parents, newlyweds at the time, were unable to afford the move. Her parents stayed behind to work and save money. Later, in 1930, her parents joined her grandparents in Mexico.⁴⁹ Sarah Fehr, in Valle Esperanza Colony, spoke about her own experiences when she and her husband believed they would have better opportunities in Bolivia. However, they did not have enough equity to finance their emigration, and in order to leave Mexico, Fehr and her family worked on a cucumber farm in Mexico for eight weeks before emigrating.⁵⁰

Poverty was also remembered by these women as a crucial element in the first settlement years. On many yards there were several buildings; one was considered the main residence, but there was often a much smaller, older building. This older building was often the first residence occupied by the family after moving into a new colony. When asked about important events in their lives, many of the Mennonite women recalled migrating to a new colony and experiencing many difficulties in the first years. There seems to be a sense of pride in recalling those difficult years, and the women speak laudingly of their men cutting into the forest. These recollections may be influenced by *Martyrs Mirror* and its idealism of suffering; in this sense, the memories of the Old Colony Mennonite women, which revealed a sense of pride in their and their husbands' agency, contradicted the Anabaptist tradition of *Gelassenheit*, which Donald Kraybill defines as "yieldedness, surrender, submission, humility, calmness."⁵¹ Their pride also stemmed from the sense of accomplishment when they compared the older buildings with their current, much larger, residences.

The women described the first years after they migrated to a new colony as *eenfach* (simple). Ann Banman in Valle Esperanza Colony remembered stories from her grandparents of when their parents migrated to Canada from Russia, stories that had significantly strayed from historical fact over time. As Banman recalled the story, her great-grandparents had left Europe during a war in 1850, an impression she had even though her ancestors would have migrated in the 1870s at a time when Russia was not at war. She recalled that the migration from Russia had represented a difficult time for them and it seemed like they were not able to leave, but eventually an opportunity opened up and through the help of the Canadian government, which offered each Mennonite family a house and a horse upon arrival in Canada

(also a factual error, as the government granted land, but not a house and horse). Banman recollected hearing that the beginning was very simple for her grandparents in Canada, but eventually they were able to build bigger houses.⁵² That Banman remembered her grandparents' exodus from Russia in a time of war, rather than at a time of peace, implied that, for Banman, migration was a result of persecution, rather than an economic choice.

Other women remembered their own experiences when they were young and their families left Mexico to settle in the first colonies established in Bolivia. Susana Peters, 44, in Valle Nuevo Colony, moved to Swift Current Colony from Mexico with her family when she was young, and she remembered it was very difficult for her parents in the new colony. Her father, especially, did not want to stay in Bolivia and had planned on moving back to Mexico, but her mother was more *motig* (courageous) and insisted on staying in Bolivia. Peters remembered her mother saying that they had made this major transition to Bolivia and therefore they should stay. Peters seemed to find this ironic, since her mother had since passed away and her father continued to live in Bolivia.⁵³

Some women recalled that their families only remained in the new colony because of the authority of the church. "Suse" Knelsen, 53, of Manitoba Colony, remembered moving to Riva Palacios Colony from Mexico with her family. They had to sell everything when her family left Mexico, which added to the strain of starting new in Bolivia. Knelsen remembered that her mother wanted to go back to Mexico because things in Riva Palacios Colony were *too schwoa* (too difficult). Her parents had decided to move back to Mexico but the colony *Ältesta* (bishop) found out and forbade them from going back. Knelsen recalled that her mother did not enjoy living in Bolivia and that it was difficult to start a new colony, mostly because of the unbroken bush land.⁵⁴

Other women credit the diligence of the Old Colony Mennonites for changing their economic status. "Suse" Rempel, 53, recalled that upon settling in Bolivia the bush was so thick that they could not use a *Kruper* (bulldozer). Instead they had to use axes and cleared the land by hand. Rempel credited the hard work put in by the Old Colony Mennonites for transforming the Bolivian landscape. She remembered when the Old Colony Mennonites first arrived in Bolivia no one planted soybeans or corn, and that the *Dietsche* (Mennonites) were the only ones that farmed the land. Now she looked around the area and saw that the colonies were surrounded by soybean and corn farms. Rempel saw the change and thought the Old Colony Mennonites were very *fruchtboa* (fruitful) since there were now many Mennonites in the area.⁵⁵

The women's memories of frontier life highlighted their poverty. I would suggest that the Old Colony identity that links hardship with

spiritual maturity may have influenced and enhanced these memories. However, the women's memories also emphasized the Old Colony Mennonites' fortitude and ability to overcome poverty. The emphasis on their own agency seems to contradict the image proposed by the *Martyrs Mirror*. Their experiences of establishing homes in new colonies seemed to change their Old Colony identity to include the ability to succeed and rise in economic status.

Food

Another part of the Old Colony Mennonite women's identity is their role as the provider of physical sustenance. Marlene Epp's study on the role of food with the Mennonite refugees from Russia in the early twentieth century suggests that food has historically embodied religious connotations for Mennonite women. *Zwieback*, a type of bun, was a mainstay on the Mennonite table in Russia and continues to this day in Bolivia. Epp suggests that the *Zwieback*, as a form of bread, acquired several symbolic connotations among Mennonites, including concepts such as the "Bread of Life," the body of Christ, and the communion table. Not surprisingly, the women interviewed referenced food in their recollections of experiences in previous colonies.

Food is a key physical characteristic of ethnic culture and the Mennonite women were no exception in creating food that represented the Old Colony Mennonite identity in Bolivia. It was in the kitchen that there was evidence of past migrations, but few women remembered the origins of the many dishes they cooked. Migration also had an effect on their dishes and several women remembered having to adjust their recipes accordingly. Leona Sawatsky, age 28, was a single woman who lived most of her life in Valle Esperanza Colony, but she remembered her mother saying she used to use different fruit powders, such as Jello or gelatine, when she baked cakes and pies in Mexico. When her mother moved with her family to Bolivia, these ingredients were not available and the Mennonite women had to learn to make them from scratch, but Sawatsky did not go into detail how her mother changed her recipes.⁵⁶ "Suse" Knelsen, in Manitoba Colony, saw differences in the general food consumption between Mexico and Bolivia. In Mexico, both the Old Colony Mennonites and the Mexicans ate more corn and tortillas, while in Bolivia the general population, including the Old Colony Mennonites, ate more rice and potatoes.⁵⁷ These women had noticed the impact of migration on their Mennonite identity as it was represented in their dishes. They had to adjust according to available resources and their ethnic traits reflected their surroundings.

Food scarcity threatened the Old Colony Mennonite women's identity as they struggled to feed their families and some women remembered food shortages as one of the main reasons for migrating. Sarah Klassen, in Valle Nuevo Colony, remembered that the food was *too knaup* (too scarce) for her entire family in Belize. Klassen thought that her life in Bolivia was better because there was enough food.⁵⁸ Leona Reimer, in Neuland Colony, remembered her time in Rio Verde Colony, Paraguay with fondness in respect to food supply. In Paraguay, the Old Colony Mennonites had been able to grow good fruit, such as mangoes and pineapples, because the soil was good for growing fruit. Reimer seemed disappointed with the quality of land in Neuland Colony because she thought that she would not be able to replicate the garden she had in Rio Verde Colony.⁵⁹ Katharina Wolf, age 62, also in Neuland Colony, remembered that the settlement years in Rio Verde Colony were good precisely because her family was able to have a source of nourishment. Her family had a cow, which enabled them to sell milk to the colony's cheese factory, and thereby established a source of income. Her family was also able to grow a garden, which guaranteed them fresh vegetables.⁶⁰ For these Mennonite women, food was part of their ethnic identity and their recollections revealed how migration through different colonies and countries impacted their dishes.

In all of the women's recollections – of family, poverty and food – it became evident that the Old Colony Mennonite identity was not static but shaped and influenced by historical events. For most of the women, their family was an integral part of their identity and social network, which had influenced the decision to migrate, as they followed parents or children into new colonies. Recollections of poverty revealed another aspect of their Bolivian Mennonite Old Colony identity: in seeming contradiction to the *Martyr's Mirror's* emphasis on embracing poverty, they seemed to be proud of their agency to succeed in new colonies. The women's memories of food showed the impact of migration through different countries on this physical characteristic of the Old Colony ethnicity.

Conclusion

The common refrain '*So ha' wie daut emma jedohne*' (that is how we have always done it) was often given as an explanation for the distinctive lifestyle of the Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia. The Old Colony Mennonites see their history in almost static terms; their surroundings might change but their identity remained the same. In listening to individual recollections of the migrations that eventually brought the Old Colony Mennonites to their current colonies, however, it became

apparent that there were certain events that shaped and influenced their current identity. The men emphasized land and religion, and the struggles that pertained to maintaining the ideal male Mennonite identity. For the women, family often took priority over religious or colonial affiliation, and poverty was seen as something to be overcome. Memories from previous colonies, and from the migration to the present colony of residence, revealed a dynamic Bolivian Old Colony Mennonite identity. At the same time, similarities in stories between individual recollections imply a collective Old Colony memory. The repeated themes in memories – the need for land, obedience to the *Ordnung*, familial loyalty, the rise out of poverty, and food – indicate that the cultural identity of the Old Colony members impacted their own archival memories.

Notes

- ¹ Reginald Byron, "Identity," *Encyclopaedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*, ed. Alan Barnard and Jonathan Spencer (New York: Routledge, 2002), 441.
- ² Alice M. Hoffman and Howard S. Hoffman, "Reliability and Validity in Oral History: The Case of Memory," in *Memory and History: Essays on Recalling and Interpreting Experience*, ed. Jaelyn Jeffrey and Glenace Edwall (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 1994), 125.
- ³ Jan Assmann, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity." *New German Critique* 65 (1995):126.
- ⁴ Timothy Smith, "Religion and Ethnicity in America." *The American Historical Review* 83, no. 5 (Dec 1978): 1155
- ⁵ The interviews were conducted in the spring and summer of 2009 in seven colonies in south-east Bolivia, and were done in the Low German dialect (*Plautdietsch*) of the Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia. The colonies selected were Manitoba, California, Belice, Oriente, Valle Nuevo, Valle Esperanza and Neuland.
- ⁶ Elisabeth Prügl, *The Global Construction of Gender: Home-Based Work in the Political Economy of the 20th Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 14.
- ⁷ Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (Dec 1986): 1067.
- ⁸ Joy Parr, "Gender History and Historical Practice." *The Canadian Historical Review* 96, no. 3 (Sept 1995): 364.
- ⁹ Royden Loewen, "'The Children, the Cows, My Dear Man and My Sister': The Transplanted Lives of Mennonite Farm Women, 1874-1900." *Canadian Historical Review* 73, no. 8 (1992): 348.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 369.
- ¹¹ "Gemeinschaft," in *Globalization: Key Concepts*, ed. Annabelle Mooney and Betsy Evans (New York: Routledge, 2007), 100 (Taylor and Francis, 2009, accessed 2 April 2010).
- ¹² Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), 12.
- ¹³ Peter Kneslen, Interview by author, written notes, Manitoba Colony, Campo 319, 18 May 2009.

- ¹⁴ Johan Rempel, Interview by author, written notes, Belice Colony, Campo 60, 30 May 2009.
- ¹⁵ Daniel Niedorf, Interview by author, written notes, California Colony, Campo 334, 22 May 2009.
- ¹⁶ Johan Wall, Interview by author, written notes, Manitoba Colony, Campo 315, 20 May 2009.
- ¹⁷ Cornelius Loewen, Interview by author, written notes, California Colony, Campo 342, 23 May 2009.
- ¹⁸ Kathleen Neils Conze and David A. Gerber, "The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the U.S.A." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 12, no. 1 (1992): 4.
- ¹⁹ George Knelsen, Interview by author, written notes, Belice Colony, Campo 60, 1 June 2009.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Anna Sophia Hedberg, *Outside the World: Cohesion and Deviation among Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia* (Stockholm, Sweden: Elanders Gotab, 2007), 145.
- ²² Donald Kraybill, *Old Order Amish: Their Enduring Way of Life* (Baltimore, MA: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 8.
- ²³ Peter Knelsen, Interview, Manitoba.
- ²⁴ Peter Bergen, Interview, Valle Nuevo.
- ²⁵ Franz Rempel, Interview by author, written notes, Valle Nuevo Colony, Campo 102, 16 June 2009.
- ²⁶ Wilhelm Peters, Interview by author, written notes, Oriente Colony, Campo 1, 10 June 2009.
- ²⁷ Franz Wiebe, Interview, Neuland.
- ²⁸ Joy Parr, "Gender History and Historical Practice." *The Canadian Historical Review* 96, no. 3 (Sept 1995): 364.
- ²⁹ Marie-Fançoise Chanfrault-Duchet, "Narrative Structures, Social Models, and Symbolic Representation in the Life Story," in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991), 78.
- ³⁰ Sarah Klassen, Interview by author, written notes, Valle Nuevo Colony, Campo 104, 16 June 2009.
- ³¹ Frau Abraham Loewen, Interview by author, written notes, Belice Colony, Campo 53, 2 June 2009.
- ³² Helena Rempel, Interview by author, written notes, Belice Colony, Campo 60, 30 May 2009.
- ³³ Susana Peters, Interview by author, written notes, Valle Nuevo 109, 17 June 2009.
- ³⁴ Patricia Harms, "'Gott es hiea uck': Gender and Identity in an Immigrant Family from Paraguay." *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 22 (2004): 48.
- ³⁵ Frau Jakob Schmidt, Interview by author, written notes, Valle Nuevo Colony, Campo 102, 16 June 2009.
- ³⁶ Ann Sawatsky, Interview by author, written notes, Neuland Colony, Campo 3, 29 June 2009.
- ³⁷ Aganetha Friesen, Interview by author, written notes, Neuland Colony, Campo 3, 30 June 2009.
- ³⁸ Sarah Fehr, Interview by author, written notes, Valle Esperanza Colony, Campo 224, 25 June 2009.
- ³⁹ Lorenzo Cañas Bottos, *Old Colony Mennonites in Argentina and Bolivia: Nation Making, Religious Conflict and Imaginations of the Future* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill BV, 2008), 42.
- ⁴⁰ Joy Parr, "Gender History and Historical Practice", 364.
- ⁴¹ Sarah Fehr, Interview, Valle Esperanza.
- ⁴² Marie Knelsen, Interview, Belice.
- ⁴³ Griet Bergen, Interview by author, written notes, Oriente Colony, Campo 2, 11 June 2009.

- 44 Helena Rempel, Interview by author, written notes, Belice Colony, Campo 60, 30 May 2009.
- 45 Sarah Klassen, Interview by author, written notes, Belice Colony, Campo 104, 16 June 2009.
- 46 Christina Niedorf, Interview by author, written notes, California Colony, Campo 334, 23 May 2009.
- 47 Marie Reimer, Interview by author, written notes, California Colony, Campo 341, 23 May 2009.
- 48 Marie Loewen, Interview by author, written notes, California Colony, Campo 342, 23 May 2009.
- 49 Anna Banman, Interview by author, written notes, Valle Esperanza Colony, Campo 210, 23, June 2009.
- 50 Sarah Fehr, Interview, Valle Esperanza.
- 51 Donald B. Kraybill and James P. Hurd, *Horse-and-Buggy Mennonites: Hoofbeats of Humility in a Postmodern World* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2007), 27.
- 52 Ann Banman, Interview, Valle Esperanza.
- 53 Susanna Peters, Interview by author, written notes, Valle Nuevo Colony, Campo 109, 17 June 2009.
- 54 "Suse" Knelsen, Interview, Manitoba.
- 55 "Suse" Rempel, Interview by author, written notes, Valle Nuevo 102, 16 June 2009.
- 56 Leona Sawatsky, Interview by author, written notes, Valle Esperanza Colony, Campo 210, 24 June 2009.
- 57 "Suse" Knelsen, Interview, Manitoba.
- 58 Sarah Klassen, Interview, Valle Nuevo.
- 59 Leona Reimer, Interview by author, written notes. Neuland Colony, Campo 3, 29 June 2009.
- 60 Katharina Wolf, Interview by author, written notes, Neuland Colony, Campo 3, 30 June 2009.