

Rev. Martin Penner (1849-1928), Greenland

Martin Penner (1849-1928) and Aganetha Toews (1854-1928), Greenland, Manitoba: Pioneer Minister, by grandson John G. Penner, Box 92, St. Annes, Manitoba.

Introduction.

When the Russian Mennonites discovered, in the 1870s, that their privilege of military exemption was about to be terminated, there was great consternation, especially among the Kleine Gemeinde. It was an assault, after all, against a basic doctrine, non-resistance; under no circumstances would they take a human life. As negotiations brought no definite concessions, they began to seriously consider emigration, with Canada as their chosen destination. Among them was my grandfather, Martin Penner.

Martin Rempel Penner was born in 1849 in Margenau, Molotschna colony, Ukraine, to Peter Penner (1818-84) and Katherina Rempel (1828-56).

Childhood in Russia.

The home in which young Martin grew up was one of nearly constant change—births as well as deaths. His father had five wives in succession and fathered 25 children, of whom 12 grew to adulthood. Martin's mother was his father's second wife, but when the boy was six, his mother died. Seven weeks later he had a brand new step-mother, 23 year old Elizabeth Harder. Later, two other stepmothers became part of his life.

By the time young Martin left home to marry his bride, his father's family consisted of the following: his father, his father's fourth wife, three children of the first marriage, five (including himself) of the second marriage, four of the third, and a four-day old infant of the fourth union, a total of 15 persons. He had seen his father bury four children and two wives.

On December 11, 1871, at the age of 22, he married a very personable woman, Aganetha B. Toews, daughter of Peter W. Toews "Groti Toews" (1831-1922) and Aganetha K. Barkman (1831-99). She was born in Prangenau, Molotschna Colony, in 1854 but two years later her parents moved to Margenau, where they were neighbours to the Peter Penner family. During the late 1860s both families moved to the village of Rosenfeld, Borosenko, about 20 miles northwest of Nikopol.

Martin and Aganetha farmed their "Wirtschaft" in Rosenfeld for three years. A daughter, Aganetha, was born in 1872, but died in June of the next year. In 1874 they emigrated to Canada together with the rest of the Kleine Gemeinde. Both Martin and Aganetha's fathers, Peter Penner and Peter W. Toews, were designated to look after the arrangements regarding the sale of the village farms in Rosenfeld.

Blumenort, 1874.

Grandfather arrived at Blumenort, Manitoba with the second wave of Kleine Gemeinde immigrants some time in August, 1874. Martin Penner filed a Homestead on NW 34-7-6E on

May 3, 1874, and SW34-7-6E on February 1, 1878, but like all the other villagers they lived on their Wirtschaft in the village. According to contemporary maps they lived on the south side of the street, in the middle, directly across from the school and worship house.



Circa 1926. Mrs. Martin Penner, nee Aganetha B. Toews (1854-1928), Blumenort and later Greenland. Photo courtesy of great-granddaughter Linda Martens, Steinbach.

Besides farming there, he was one of the only two Blumenort farmers who did custom sawing. He lost his forefinger while sawing lumber. As his father owned a steam engine, he may have used this machine to power his sawmill. Father-in-law Peter W. Toews also owned a steam engine, a Watrus.

The early years must have been lonely sometimes as various family members choose to settle elsewhere. On August 12, 1874, Aganetha, Mrs. Martin Penner wrote a letter to her sister-in-law Mrs. Johann Janzen, nee Margaretha Penner, living in Rosenort at the time. In this letter she sends some news from the family in Blumenort but also expresses her heartfelt longing and desire to "have you in our midst"—*Blumenort*, page 55.

A number of journals are extant from the Blumenort area which refer to Martin and Aganetha Penner. The following are some extracts from the journal of Abram F. "Fule" Reimer which refer to the grandparents:

Oct. 18, 1879 - "... Jakob and Martin Penner

returned from Winnipeg at 8 a.m. yesterday morning. They had sold some 20 sheep, young and old, for \$5 each, for a total of \$100.'

Jan. 14, 1880 - "Yesterday Kl. Reimer went to Winnipeg and today seven went, the old and young P. Friesen, J. Reimer and Martin Penner and Peter Toews Sr. They were going to get a steam engine." Jan. 19, 1880 - Martin Penner and brother Peter went to Winnipeg."

Feb. 8, 1880 - Sunday. Yesterday Cor. Penner and Martin Penner each gave a speech." Mar. 21, 1880 - In the afternoon Martin Penner went to Winnipeg with 2 oxen." April 1, 1880 - Yesterday Abr. Penner sold a young ox to Martin Penner."

Martin Penner was also a community man and served on the Blumenort school board in 1888 together with Abraham M. Friesen and Jakob S. Friesen, later known as "Drekka" Friesen.

Greenland, 1891.

In 1891 the family moved from Blumenort to the Greenland area, near Ste. Anne, where Martin had acquired 400 acres on Section 6-8-6. For winter, however, they returned to the relative security of the village, and here son John was born. In the spring of '92 they moved to Greenland to stay. They built a house and barn, attached to each other, in the southeast corner of the northeast quarter and here they lived till they died.

He was an excellent, systematic manager, and I think I have evidence to support my opinion. In his barn and in his "Schmaed" (shop) everything was in perfect order. He developed his homestead into one of the larger farms of the area. On January 1, 1908 someone reported in the *Rundschau* that Martin Penner "has a large farm of 1600 acres of debt-free land, a quarter section for each child, and his own threshing machine"—Loewen, *Family, Church and Market*, page 317.

While perhaps not wealthy, they certainly had no lack. In starting spring fieldwork, Grandfather set the pace for the community. When he started, neighbours knew it was time for them to start.

He was methodical. Even in harvest time, quitting time was quitting time, threatening clouds or not. He said horses needed their rest as well as humans. "What God wants me to have, He will give me. There's no need to worry."

He was generous. In those days farmers from southeastern Manitoba herded their cattle to Winnipeg for slaughter. Grandfather offered, "If you arrive here in the evening, chase your animals into my cattle pen near the barn. Leave them there for night and sleep in our house." As the pen was by the roadside, this was a convenience utilized by some cattlemen.

Their Characters.

Grandfather is remembered as being decisive. He liked order and liked to do things right. These qualities made him a good manager; there was an aura of good husbandry about the farm. There's another aspect to this quality. He expected his grandchildren to be obedient and orderly—to be sent home was not unheard of.

I remember a really pretty field of oats with not a single weed that I could see. After the threshing crew had harvested the field, he thought it might be worthwhile to glean what they had missed. As grandson Johnny was not old enough for the threshing crew, he asked me to do it. But then he saw it wasn't worthwhile and dropped the idea. He wasn't dogmatic. His character was large enough that he could change his mind.

Grandmother was different, but well-suited to be a helpmeet for a leader. She was methodical and exuded an aura of control. Yet a relaxed personality gave her a softness which endeared her to her grandchildren.

This gentle compassion is a quality mentioned now by every grandchild who knew her personally. What else made her popular? Why, the candy dish, of course, always well-stocked! And there might be dimes for them at Christmas! Linden Penner recalls that Grandmother's practice on Sunday mornings was to adorn the table with a bouquet of flowers.

Archie Penner relates that one day his mother (a daughter-in-law) exclaimed, "If there's any person in the world closest to being an angel, that's Mother!" Archie, too, was very fond of her; even on Grandmother's deathbed she greeted the 10 year-old with genuine interest.

Unlike angels, however, Grandmother did make mistakes. One night, related Henry Penner, her rheumatism was so painful that she couldn't sleep. Getting her liniment from the cupboard, she rubbed it into her aching joints. The treatment was so effective she slept till morning. Next morning her colourful body showed that she had massaged herself with orange dye used for colouring butter, not with liniment!

Like most Mennonite women, she was a good cook, and always cost-conscious. Grandfather, however, also appreciated good tasty food, and these philosophies occasionally conflicted. Once when she mixed old porridge with fresh porridge for breakfast, he threw the mixture out. Grandfather bought hams at the packers while Grandmother would have preferred home-grown hams, but she gave in to Grandfather and to guests like me and served them food they liked. So if good cooking has brought me to the present age of 86, Grandmother must get some credit.

Grandparents complemented each other very well, both providing strengths the other lacked. Occasionally, when Grandfather became a little emotional, Grandmother provided stability.

I remember one occasion when their children from North Dakota were visiting. When they got on the topic of Christian living, the atmosphere became decidedly tense, and apparently Grandfather decided to say nothing more lest he say too much. Then in one sentence, without rancour, Grandmother said what needed to be said. The

situation was neatly defused.

Grandchildren's Memories.

I remember a row of massive cottonwoods west of the yard, probably planted soon after their arrival in Greenland. In the shelter of these trees were planted trees bearing luscious, tasty plums. (I doubt that plums have improved in taste since my childhood). Their garden produced raspberries to superb taste.

As a child I visited Grandparent's house. I recall its window shutters which kept hot sunshine out, or even hailstones (which can get to be egg-sized in Greenland!) For us children a



Martin Penner sons, circa 1918. Left to right, back row: Jakob M., Cornelius M., John M. and Aaron M.; Sitting: Abram M., Peter M. and Martin M. The photograph may have been taken by Abram Eidse, married to the sister of the Penner brothers. The photograph is courtesy of niece, Mrs. Cornelius P. Doerksen, 1982, Steinbach.

wooden swing stood on a cement pad. And it got used! A great holiday was "schwien-schlacti" (hog-butchering bee).

Grandfather loved horses; his fine distinctively-coloured team showed that care had been lavished on them.

Daughter Agnes with her husband, Cornelius W. Toews, lived in the middle of the section half a mile west of Grandparents. One evening after dark their son Adolph, just a young boy, was sent to tell Grandfather to get the midwife, Mrs. Peter B. "Groti" Toews. Grandfather had a top-buggy and willing horses which always required a tight rein. He was off immediately, and before Adolph was home, Grandfather was already there.

As it was considered improper for young children to occupy the house during birthing, Adolph and his young siblings were sent to Grandparents for night.

The Next Generation.

Grandfather raised seven sons, collectively known as the "M Penners" because they all used a middle initial of "M" after their father's first name. This was a matter of convenience as it

ran counter to prevailing Mennonite custom. Each of his sons became a well-known member of the community, and in his own way bore the stamp of his father.

The sons were: Peter M. Penner—farmer, foster parent; Martin M. Penner—entrepreneur: 1. lumber yard in Steinbach, 2. provided electric power for Steinbach, 3. sawmill (Colenso Lumber), 4. farmer, 5. established sugar factory at Winnipeg; Abram M. Penner—farmer, lumber yard, sash & door factory at Prairie Rose (Landmark); Jacob M. Penner—farmer, share in threshing outfit with his brothers, deacon in Holdemann church; Aron M. Penner—farmer, share in threshing outfit; John M. Penner—carpenter (including lumber sales), farmer, repair shop, minister in the Holdemann church, author and writer; Cornelius M. Penner—farmer, share in threshing outfit, custom brushbreaking, cheese-factory manager, transfer service to Winnipeg, well-known for his generosity towards the needy, spiritual leader.

There were also three daughters: Agnes, wife of Cornelius W. Toews; Katherina, wife of Abram Eidse. Anna, the youngest, married Johann Barkman.

For each of his children, Grandfather bought a quarter of land, but I don't know if it was sold or given to them. When the farm on Section 7-8-6 became available for one of the older sons, Abram and Peter were in Alberta, so Aron, who became my father, got it. Grandfather paid the first tax bill on this farm in 1899. This farm on which I grew up is now owned by his great-granddaughter (our daughter Joyce) and her husband Larry Goossen and has remained in the family for 98 years.

Uncle Cornelius, the youngest son, got the home place on Section 6-8-6E. Grandparents built a new house while the younger family moved into the old house. Years later, this old house was moved to Kleefeld when C.M. Penners built their own new house which stands there today.

Each of the children was able to borrow \$900 from Grandparents and the interest from these loans provided a living for them. Loan principal up to \$900 which was outstanding when Grandparents died would be forgiven. Any amount over \$900 was to be repaid to the estate.

Grandfather owned a threshing outfit with a Case steam engine and wooden threshing machine until he was nearly 70 years old. One night in the early 20s the outfit came home late and was parked on the road overnight. When Grandfather woke the next morning, the thresher was gone, leaving only a smoking black hulk on the road. I remember seeing it from our house a mile away. A spark may have slipped through the spark screen on the steam engine and landed on the thresher. Whatever the cause of the fire, Grandfather's threshing days were over.

His Devotion.

Grandfather was a devout man and in his youth a member of the Kleine Gemeinde. But in 1874, when his orderly nature first encountered the primitive conditions of Manitoba's open prairie, his faith in God's leading was severely tested.

He remarked later, "If it wasn't for my faith, I would have turned back the next day."

After about six years in Canada, Bishop Peter Toews invited John Holdemann to conduct revival meetings among the Kleine Gemeinde. These meetings were conducted in various homes. During this time Grandfather had a conversion experience and on December 18, 1881 was baptized into the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite by Bishop John Holdemann. After this period of revival, Grandfather's brother-in-law, John B. Toews, wrote about the fervency of the working of the Spirit among them. The group experienced what Jesus commanded: "By this shall all men know what ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). In the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite they had gained what they longed for, an organic unity.

The new church had a vote for leadership, and on January 10, 1882, only weeks after his baptism, Grandfather was ordained to the ministry.

It was a working church. Ministers would customarily travel and visit the congregations. There they would preach, visit members' homes, encourage, admonish, and generally oversee church affairs. In all this Grandfather was active. His obituary stated, years later, that he served "in frailty" and "with no lack of trials and unpleasant experiences" but "God gave him the victory".

What He Believed.

Though not a prolific writer, he brought his concerns in articles published in the church organ, the "Botschafter der Wahrheit". It's evident he had insight into human nature. He neither excuses himself nor does he gloss over the problems. Two articles were found (there may be more) in the "Botschafter".

In a 1921 article Grandfather writes about the need for responsibility, both financially and spiritually. He writes: "In my youth the Holy Spirit reminded me that when I wasn't faithful there was no promise of salvation. Later, when one got into difficulty and had to borrow money, there was always that admonishing voice, that we should be faithful in the smallest things. 'If therefore ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?'"

Continuing in the same vein, he addresses the spiritual sphere: "It takes an earnest struggle and conflict to be fruitful with the pound entrusted to us...We are no longer under the schoolmaster (Galatians 3)...Now the Holy Spirit disciplines God's children and leads them into all truth. This grace does not come automatically, but requires a violent effort...It pleases the devil to cause schisms, so that each one can go to whatever pleases him...Faithfulness—this holds water and this has value with God and with people." Here we see the themes of self-denial, of obedience to rules being supplanted by following the Spirit's leading, and of actively seeking the Lord's will.

"God's Wonders" is an article written in 1928, in which the life of John the Baptist is discussed. Various aspects of his life are listed

as "wonders". Then follows the baptism of Jesus, which, he writes, was only a preparation, for the church was only established on the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was given.

He writes: "All born-again children of God must be baptized as members of the body of Christ. 'He that believeth not shall be damned.' His thought was that salvation is attained not by baptism but by the indwelling Holy Spirit. After baptism the church disciplines those within, though not those without. He pleads, "Shouldn't we take the faith more seriously?"



Mr. and Mrs. Peter M. Penner (nee Maria Friesen) with son David F. Penner in 1904. They were the parents and grandparents of many of the Landmark Penners such as Wilmer, the famous Low German dramatist and Wes, founder of Powerland Computers. The Peter M. Penner family was one of the first to settle in the Prairie Rose/Landmark district. Maria Friesen was the niece to the well-known Jakob S. "Drekka" Friesen, Steinbach. Photo courtesy of Reflections on our Heritage, page 343.

Old Age.

As always Grandfather planned ahead, even in his prayers. He knew that the death of one of a couple always creates difficulties for the surviving spouse, and he wanted to spare his wife this hardship. Martin Barkman, then a lad of nine, recalls that frequently in family prayers he implored His Lord that she would go before he did. This bold prayer was uttered although Grandmother was spryly bustling around, while Grandfather was so sickly he spoke only in whispers and could barely walk, merely shuffling his feet.

In early 1928, however, Grandmother's health began to fail, and she needed heavy care. Several sons, including my father, took turns staying at their home for night. There were, in fact, a few private nursing homes in Winnipeg which could have helped her, but none nearby. Actually, placing her in a nursing home, though almost standard practice today, was not even considered then. She breathed her last on June 26, 1928, reaching the age of 74, Grandfather's selfless prayer had been answered.

They had been married for the remarkable

period of 57 years. But now Grandfather needed a home and a caregiver. As my parents had a brand new house with ample room, they volunteered to take him in.

In summer Grandfather had an auction sale. The summer of '28 was a rainy one, and the auction day was a showery one. When the fourth shower of the day hit, the auction got soaked.

The weeks went by. In July one day as I stood on the landing of the stairway I saw Grandfather leave his upstairs room. He walked through the door too close to the doorframe, and stumbled and fell. That fall and more falls in following weeks caused him great suffering.

One evening, after Grandfather visited his son Martin, the latter remarked, "Father is worn out." The day after, August 6, 1928, he went to meet his Lord, having outlived his wife by only 38 days.

Their Legacy.

Grandfather had frequently expressed a concern that too much money was being spent on expensive tombstones. Accordingly, the couple was buried side by side in the Greenland Church cemetery (present church location) with a simple concrete pad marking each grave. Around the two graves a chain was hung from short steel posts.

In those graves lie two stalwarts of the faith. Their influence has been far-reaching—in the church, in the neighbourhood, and in their posterity.

Grandfather spoke for himself of these events in words penned not long before he died: "We, my wife and I, have nearly completed our pilgrimage, and are old and weak-physically, that is. Spiritually we rejoice in God's grace, by which we have become His inheritance in the faith" (Botschafter, Feb. 15, 1928).

Descendants:

Aganetha and Martin Penner have many well-known descendants in the Steinbach area in the present-day. Children: 1) Agnes Toews Penner—Randy Wohlgenuth, Landmark Agro; 2) Peter M. Penner—Dr. Archie Penner, formerly Steinbach Bible School; Doris Penner, *Carillon News*; 3) Martin M. Penner—George T. Penner, formerly Penner Insurance and Travel, Steinbach; Linden Penner; 5) Jakob M. Penner—Rennie Wiebe, farmer, Greenland; Kathryn, Mrs. Jonas Toews; 6) Aron M. Penner—John G. Penner, the author, Bob Schinkel, Steinbach real estate broker; Ray Friesen, hog farmer; Jac G. Penner, formerly "Jac G. Penner gravel"; 7) John M. Penner—Margaret Penner Toews, widely published poet, Nielburg, Saskatchewan; 8) Cornelius M. Penner—Ed P. Penner, Whitemouth; 9) Anna Penner, Mrs. Johann Barkman—son Alfred P. Barkman was the pastor of the Steinbach Church of God in Christ, Mennonite for many years.

Sources:

Roy Loewen, *Blumenort*, 669 pages.
C. W. Friesen, *Peter Penner Genealogy*, 284 pages.
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