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Review of *Hidden Worlds: Revisiting the Mennonite Migrants of the 1870s* By Royden Loewen

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Hidden Worlds: Revisiting the Mennonite Migrants of the 1870s. By Royden Loewen. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2001. Maps, photographs, index. viii + 138 pp. \$22.95.

What Russian Mennonite child has not heard the stories of the massive migration from Russia to the New World? The oft-repeated tales recount how large congregations collectively moved from Russia's steppes to North America's Plains. According to the stories, great-grandparents were in search of religious freedom and good land. They brought turkey-red wheat, recreated their farmland villages, and transformed the Plains into a breadbasket, just as they had transformed Catherine the Great's steppes from a Cossack wilderness into villages and productive farmland. Why revisit this story so ingrained in the collective memory of a people? Even outsider historians, such as John Bodnar in *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (1992), have noted the integrity of annual celebrations that refer to these past events.

Royden Loewen's investigation of the non-institutional history, that is to say the hidden histories of everyday women and men, uncovers new interpretations of the migration story. In many ways, Mennonite patriarchs and matriarchs did recreate Old World living patterns and cultural values on the Plains. Reproducing these communities, however, required adaptations that earlier historians may not have recognized, often because recently collected historical records were not available. Some historians have viewed Mennonites as unrivaled cultural transplanters, able to uproot their community abruptly and replant it elsewhere without disrupting family, community, and

religious continuity. Loewen argues that rather than directly transplanting their village systems and religious beliefs, Mennonites adapted Old World systems to the New World environment, picking and choosing both economic and cultural practices that would best reproduce their communities and values. Instead of challenging earlier work, Loewen's book adds a layer of sophisticated analysis to previous institutional history.

Loewen's careful exegesis of bilateral partible inheritance (where assets were divided in equal portions among all surviving children), women's letters that connected the far-flung Russian Mennonite communities in Canada and the United States, and diaries of pioneers and community planters reveals a self-conscious people who were fully aware of how their collective decisions could affect community stability. For example, Mennonites practiced bilateral partible inheritance for both economic and religious reasons. Loewen shows how economic motivations, often not ascribed to the deeply religious Mennonites, undergirded the community's cultural values from one generation to the next.

Historians of rural women will want to read *Hidden Worlds*. Loewen's continued sensitivity to women's hidden contributions strengthens his analysis throughout the volume and particularly in the chapter devoted to the "worlds of Mennonite immigrant women." Those concerned with ethnic and religious community history will find much to ponder in Loewen's pages.

Loewen continues to produce social and cultural history that by its very existence begs historians of Mennonites and other rural ethno-religious groups to include gender, social theory, and methodologies in their work—approaches that are still far too rare.

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