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## BEWARE - Your Sins will Find You Out!

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## RESEARCH PAPER

BEWARE - Your Sins will Find You Out!

by Betty McCormick

The village, surrounded by the seemingly infinite flatlands of central America, is an agricultural community with a population of approximately 1000 people. The town, itself, is 12 blocks square and is laid out with spacious lots and wide, paved streets. The main street is on the west side of the village and is wide also, with stores lining either side of four blocks. It's an impressive town, clean, neat, new but plain. The majority of homes are 20 years old or newer and are ranch-style. The older homes are small two story white frame houses. Yards are well-kept, neat, and nicely, but not extravagantly landscaped. There are few fenced backyards and little privacy in the yards. Home-owners have planted comparatively few trees and it appears to be a younger town than its 100 year history proves it to be. The surrounding land is level and fertile, produces abundantly, and sells for over \$1000 per acre.

The Mennonites' original homeland was in Holland. From there they migrated to Prussia, then to Russia, and lastly they settled here in the United States. They moved to find religious freedom and freedom from conscription. They have been afforded this in the United States. The people came here in 1874, settled on farm land in this area, and later formed the community. Their first houses were built on the inside corners of 4 adjoining quarters of land. There was never any form of communal life, such as families sharing living quarters or eating together. The earliest farm houses were European in style with the house and the barn connected. There are many respected families here who have gained the community's praise for their ability to make money, their thrift, and their participation in church and community affairs. A newcomer could never distinguish the millionaires in the town, and there are many wealthy landowners and businessmen, considering the town's population. Wealth is not obvious in clothing, cars, or houses. Only two men own luxury cars (a Cadillac and a Mark IV), and these within the last five years. According to the people, there are no impressive diamonds or fur coats, or cleaning ladies in the village. Wealth is sometimes out of sight in basements (expensive wood-working equipment), or shown by mobility (attending every State University football game), or used to buy the best and newest farm equipment.

In a Mennonite family, the father is the authority. In fact, the local pastor said, "A family is a Theocracy; the father is like God, and the women and children are the children of God." The father maintains and is totally responsible for providing the family's food, shelter, and material needs. He makes the final decisions in the family concerning all family matters. According to a 36-year old wife and mother in the community, the father takes over decisions concerning the children (when he is at home), including the discipline.

Mothers care for the children when they are small, but at the age of 7 or 8, the young boys are expected to be helping on the family farms. The goal of a man in the Mennonite society is to be successful in business and farming. Indeed most businessmen own farming land.

According to the minister, a man should, "Be accepted as an excellent farmer and follow in the tradition of his father. Save money and buy more land. Aggressiveness in business is looked on with favor." The minister also noted that today's adult generation is not as "stingy" as the older generation. The men enjoy more luxuries, nicer houses, newer cars, more vacations, but the maxims of being excellent farmers and spending money only on essentials and more farm land still hold true. According to the Pastor, "Girls are treated as girls and boys as boys." Fathers are not as close to their daughters as to their sons, but girls share equally in the final inheritance. Fathers do not spend as much time with them since the girls are expected to stay in the house and learn housekeeping and cooking skills. The minister said that women do not work in the fields, but a young matron said that they do work in the fields during the busy times, "getting the crop in through the spring and getting it out in the fall." When the workload is heavy, the man might expect his wife and daughters to help. Household skills are looked upon with great favor, and there is pride taken in the ability to clean, bake, wash, and sew. According to a successful businessman, one of the qualifications for a wife is her ability to be a good housekeeper and cook. She works outside her home only if she needs the money. Virtually every woman in town can bake German Prieshke (fruit-filled pastries) and does so on Saturdays. The role of the woman is to marry a Mennonite from the "right" family so she will be accepted in town, and preferably marry in the church that her parents attend. After she is married, she should become involved in the women's activities in her church and community. She must stay traditional, be thrifty, keep her home neat and clean, stay at home, and be submissive to her husband, father, and the church. Aggressiveness in women is disliked.

Women are treated with respect, consideration, and as though they were equal. The husband is definitely head of the household, but he recognizes his wife's role as equally valid and as necessary as his. In many families, major decisions are discussed with the wife before her husband makes the final decision. The family unit is strong, and important, and permanent to the Mennonite. In the 24 years one businessman has lived in the village, there have been only 10-12 divorces. None of these people remained in the community. A husband and wife's relationship is a working one, and there must be cooperation and singleness of purpose to obtain success in their farming enterprises. These people have farmed during major drouths and depressions in the United States and Europe, and they have recovered from those poor days, but the recollections of them are still paramount in their memories. It no doubt took the working partnership of a man and his wife, among other things, to hold on to their land during those bad times, and this is the attitude that prevails today in marriages. The woman works in her home and helps her husband in the field if and when he needs her help. The husband works in the field or his business and supports his family. Together they participate in church activities and together they raise their children.

Children are generally obedient to their parents as long as they are living at home. The parents protect their children, and strong discipline is looked upon with favor. According to two sources, the parents protect their children too much. "My son can do no wrong" is in evidence when the town constable arrests a juvenile for speeding and the parent believes the son rather than the constable. Also the school superintendent and principal sometimes have a confrontation with the parents when disciplining their child. During my stay, I noticed neck-length hair on the boys and mini-skirts on the girls, but according to the pastor, when the hair gets "shaggy," the father says to trim it, and the son does so; when the skirt length is too short, the father says to lengthen it, and the daughter does so. The stories told to the children concern the Mennonite heritage and the Bible. Violence is always omitted from any tale, and the warning given repeatedly is, "Beware, your sins will find you out."

Most of the social clubs in the community are within the four churches. There is a hospital auxilliary club; women belong for the purpose of making money for the hospital, performing helpful services for the patients, and to achieve some social prestige. The garden club is popular also. A 76-year old grandmother said, "the Mennonite women grow beautiful flowers and show a great interest in arranging flowers, which is natural since we are originally from Holland." There are a few card clubs and young couple's social clubs, too. The commercial club, or chamber of commerce, is well attended by the men (there are no women members). Their purpose is to "present a picture of the village to

the outside." The remainder of the social organizations are within the churches and include missionary societies, Bible study groups, men's fellowship and study groups. These are regularly attended and seemingly enjoyed by church members and, thereby, the entire community.

Old people are treated with respect by the younger Mennonites. The community has a fine nursing home for their aged. The one-story building is thoughtfully planned to include privacy, a view of the well-kept lawn, and a community room. The old parents rarely or never live in their children's homes. They remain independent to the end of their lives if at all possible. The minister summed the attitude up with, "No one wants to be a burden on another." The grandmother said that in the old days the eldest son would move into the parents large farmhouse, and then build the old people a little house on one of the corners of the farmyard. There they would have their privacy and remain independent, but also they would be close enough to be "looked-in on." She said that "living alone in our own homes is still best and most old people move to town and live." There are 87- and 90-year old women living alone now in town.

In conversations with the Superintendent of the school, I found a high value placed on education by the community. This was verified in all other conversations with a Mennonite. In 1952, the country schools were all consolidated into the village. This was a difficult accomplishment since there were many independent, country schools which were supported by families living within an area. A single, modern building now houses kindergarten through twelfth grade, and a bond issue was passed last year (even though school enrollment decreased) to add on a new cafeteria, a new science lab, and a library. The senior class this year is 32 students, but the classes average 40 students.

The school population is rural; 60% of the students travel to school on a bus, and 80% of the pupils proceed to a higher education which now is predominately trade schools. A few years ago, most parents expected their children to obtain a college diploma, but now they have "become realistic," according to the superintendent. A student is permitted to attend the school of his choice which is usually a trade school. The girls are encouraged to continue their education as well as the boys. Girls usually become nurses or school teachers. There are no girls in the vocational agricultural or shop classes and no boys in the home economics classes. There are fewer job opportunities in the community for young women than for young men. The only jobs open for females are secretarial and nursing. The majority of college-bound attend state schools instead of church-affiliated ones because of the extra expense for private school tuition. The high school provides football and basketball for the boys and recently, volleyball for the girls. There seems to be

an emphasis and a special pleasure placed in music and drama classes. The entire community enjoys the school plays and the band concerts.

According to the superintendent, the parent, in 95% of the cases, cooperates completely with the school. During the November parent-teacher conferences, 100% of the parents came for their elementary school conference and 85% came for the high school individual conference. The superintendent said, "To get a crowd at the school all we have to do is open the doors and turn on the lights." The church and the school complement each other and reinforce the same values that the community holds for its young people, since all but one of the teachers are Mennonite.

The core of this community is the Mennonite church. This religious ethos pervades all aspects of the community except the businesses. There are four churches in the community, each Mennonite, but each slightly different in their doctrine and each competing vigorously against the other for more members. The main church possesses 75% of all the memberships and is called the General Conference Mennonite. The others divide the remaining members and are: Mennonite Brethren, Evangelical Mennonite Brethren, Calvary Bible. The churches have in common a fundamental philosophy of the Bible. Their differences seem to be, first of all, prestige. The "main" families belong to the General Conference church. It is the basis for political power, social prestige, and affirming change. This church interprets the Bible by "the passage and the other churches pick out sentences and words, even." The General Conference Church baptizes by sprinkling the water while the others immerse (one in a nearby river). The Mennonite population reads the Bible daily and memorizes many passages. Often the questions I asked received a Bible passage for the answer. For instance, I wanted to know the approximate age when a boy is considered to be an adult. The grandmother, without pausing, repeated a long Bible passage which explained the answer. All of the churches have injunctions against drinking alcohol, dancing, and, before television, movies. A majority of the women and probably the men attend weekly Bible study classes plus the missionary society and fellowship groups, Wednesday night church, and Sunday morning church. Church activities are popular and well attended; the ministers are socially acceptable at dinner parties, hunting trips, and just "get-togethers." The ministers seem to know a great deal about the individual members of their church, and they are not hesitant to become involved with their problems and successes.

Differences in the doctrines of the churches have created factions which operate between the churches. The minister of the Evangelical Memorial Brethren church stated that people in the community speak and interact only with those who belong to their church. He said that if there

were no members of his church present at the smorgaasbord that was held two weeks ago at the high school, he and his wife and children would have sat alone. He attends the village's commercial club because every minister has a place in the club, but before any member will sit by him, all the other chairs are first occupied. Each church "puts on a deeper-life ministry" to present Christ to those who have never accepted him. They go to great trouble and expense to bring speakers to the village and to advertize their presence yet no church members will attend any conferences but their own. "We just do it another way. Those people would never come here. What they put on we could not support." A young person could be rebellious or gain independence from his parents by joining a church other than his parents; families have been split and inheritances lost in this way.

The Mennonite church condones industry, thrift, and the natural reward of making money. They warn against greed, though, and the majority of the people tithe. Church members and extended family members and neighbors are quick to help each other in time of crisis. For instance, one man broke his leg before harvest so his neighbors harvested his crop for him. If a Mennonite's house or barn burns down, his family, neighbors, or fellow-church members will rebuild it for him. In 1959 the business street of the town was moved to the west side of the town. Those businesses who could not afford to re-build were moved with the others and their buildings were paid for by the community business men. The people contribute boxcars of corn every year to CROP and preserve beef to send to their overseas missions. Many young people volunteer for missionary service after high school or college. Eighty percent of the young men choose alternate service to active military duty. The role of conscientious objector is respected in the village, but has created bad will in the little towns surrounding them. The ideal is to promote peace and good will and never to fight, but the bad feelings that exist between churches and often between the villagers and "outsiders" shows a double standard. The churches in the town are strong, influential institutions. Their doctrines are rigid, narrow, and conservative, but they serve as cultural, social, and adult education centers for the community. (The only library in town is in the General Conference Church.) I asked the minister and a businessman who deals with Mennonites if strong, Christian ideals make a Mennonite a particularly honest competitor. Both men responded quickly with, "No, when it comes to money, a Mennonite will compete in the same way as a non-Mennonite." The values the church imparts to the community are: be thrifty, be conservative, be aggressive in business, be plain in appearance, give generously to your church and the community of your money and time, and the Stilleum Land. The Stilleum Land is a Low German phrase which means, "the silent land." It connotes a place where people are safe and close together and nobody can get in to

them, and they do not wish to get out. The Stilleum Land seems to be the core of the ethos of this community. This concept explains the absence of any civil suits and lawyers in the town. If there is a disagreement between two people, the church and the community always settle it without the county officials or outsiders meddling in their private business. No one ever knew a Mennonite who became a lawyer. It helps explain their independence from the county seat. It also contributes to the statements made by a businessman concerning a Mennonite's reluctance to accept social security or buy insurance and his whole-hearted efforts to help a community member in need. The businessman said, "This town doesn't have to cooperate with the county seat and doesn't want to. We give absolute minimal amount to the county seat's promotions. It has a new, terrific hospital, yet we are building on to ours." The businessman remembers the old people taking food with them when they traveled and even today eating meals outside their homes is not popular. He said, "Out of 450 children only 6 receive government sponsored free school lunches." The Mennonite's Stilleum Land protects him from a world that is often threatening. During World War II and the Korean War, for example, the village was publicly criticized by neighboring communities for the conscientious objectors. If the community's values are upheld, one is well-accepted and protected. According to the young matron, "It is surprising how many young people leave the community, but return when it is time to raise their children."

The people are wary of change yet are desiring to improve their community and to create more jobs for their young people. The current issue in the General Conference Church is whether or not women should hold a major office in the church. In 1967, a businessman wanted to expand his manufacturing business and needed more labor, and brought 15-20 families into town. He said, "I changed my mind. We don't need to bring industry to this community. We began hearing lawn mowers on Sunday. People were working on Sunday. Some would even leave town and not pay their bills. We have no interest in this so I then hired only Mennonite labor. It is hard for us to cope with change." The Superintendent said, "We have principles and ideals which we grow up with and we indoctrinate our children with these. Time changes and we compromise and rationalize and water-down our principles. Our high ideals and standards are gone by the board. What extent do you keep compromising? You hope where you are going is okay. I fear we will lose our identity and our reputation of being looked up to."