

# Pawnee Rock Mennonites: Background

BY ABE J. UNRUH

SOME of the Mennonites of the Pawnee Rock community trace their origin to Holland. The common family names such as Dirks, Jantz, and others which we find among them, give evidence of this. When we read in the *Martyrs' Mirror* of events which took place over four hundred years ago, we find that hundreds of pious people by these names died a martyr's death for the same faith and loyalty to God which caused them to flee from country to country in order to find a place to worship God and keep His commandments as they understood the teachings of their Saviour.

In 1874, when the mass immigration to America took place, we find some of these people living in Polish-Russia. A group of them had moved and settled in the southwest corner of the province of Kiev in 1783, forming the village of Michalin. They came from Graudenz, East Prussia. At the turn of the century (1799-1800) part of this group moved about ninety miles to the northwest, settling in the province of Volhynia, near the city of Ostrog, where together with another group which came from Sabara, they formed the village of Karolswalde, where a church was established in 1801.

Since the route taken by hundreds of Mennonite families the following years, as they moved from East Prussia to South Russia, led through the city of Ostrog, it is quite possible that some of these immigrants joined the colony near Ostrog where new villages were formed. By 1874, when the great immigration took place, this colony of Mennonites consisted of about four hundred fifty families, living in eight villages, in two congregations—that of Karolswalde, with five villages, and Antonovka, with three villages. From this settlement some three hundred families joined the immigration to America in 1874.

In Polish-Russia, most of these people lived on Crown lands. The improvements belonged to them, but they paid a yearly rental on each 50-acre farm, to the

Crown of approximately fifty cents on a dollar. Not all of them were fortunate to operate a farm, about half the colonists making their living from some other source. They followed various trades, such as linen-weavers, cabinet builders, blacksmiths, stonemasons, bricklayers and others.

Wages were very low. Skilled labor netted from twenty-five cents to thirty-five cents per day. There were also opportunities for men-servants and maid-servants to hire out by the year to the more well-to-do farmers. Men-servants received their board and six dollars per year, while maid-servants received three dollars per year. Their work included feeding the cattle, milking the cows, and helping with field work during busy seasons. All grain was cut with the scythe, then tied into bundles by hand. The men and boys would swing the scythe from early to late, while the women would bind the grain in bundles and shock it. After the grain was cut, it was stored in sheds till winter then it was threshed by means of beating it out by hand with a flail, or by the more efficient method by rolling a corrugated threshing stone over it.

All children had the opportunity to go to school, but these school days were often of short duration. As soon as the boys and girls were old enough to help along with providing for the family, their school days ended. The boys had to help along with farm work or go with the father to the forest to help cut boards. The daughters were usually placed at the spinning wheel, spinning flax from early till late to supply the weaver. Every one in the family was kept busy the year round, idle days were unknown.

It was not until 1871 that rumors reached the villages that the privileges granted the Mennonites were recalled which would place the Mennonites into the military ranks of Russia. At first very little attention was paid to these rumors, but as these reports were repeated from time to time, it was finally decided to



Tobias Unruh, elder of the Karolswalde Mennonites.

send a delegation to St. Petersburg to ascertain the facts.

Tobias Unruh from these villages was chosen to accompany Jacob Stucky of the Swiss Mennonites who lived about seventy miles west of Karolswalde. These two visited St. Petersburg in 1871. After repeated interviews with government officials they failed to learn anything certain about the matter. Upon nearing their local city of Ostrog on their return journey they met a group of government officials; from these they learned

Tobias Smith (Schmidt), father of Daniel T. Smith.



that a new decree was in effect which recalled their former privileges, but gave them ten years time to leave if they were unwilling to submit to this new ruling. If they failed to leave within this ten-year period, then they waived all their rights to emigrate.

In the spring of 1873, the Mennonite settlements of South Russia sent delegates to investigate conditions and land in America. The Mennonites from near Ostrog chose Tobias Unruh to accompany this party. After touring the United States and Canada during the summer months, he returned September 10 that fall. Upon his return he did not find it necessary to call a meeting to give a report of his trip. In a letter written in October that year, he states he had not been home an hour till the house was filled to capacity, all being anxious to hear of their prospects in America. Nevertheless, during the next few weeks, he gave a report in all villages. After they heard the report of the wonderful opportunities America had to offer, the vast stretches of land available, and the kind reception given by the American brethren, Unruh writes in a letter of December 9 that in Volhynia, nearly everyone wants to emigrate but poverty was hampering many. Later, in a letter of January 2, 1874 he states that people are disposing of their property whenever they can at a very cheap price. They are applying for their passports and are planning to sail for America in the early part of March.

It was already late in summer 1874, and although application for passports had been made early in spring, they did not arrive until October. The first to leave was a group of some forty families from the village of Karolswalde. They left their village under the leadership of Abraham Siebert October 24, 1874 and embarked the steamship *City of London* of the Inman Line, at Hamburg, on November 3.

On November 17 they landed in New York. Continuing their journey west they arrived in Newton, Kansas, November 24. After staying here for several days the largest part of this group left for Pawnee Rock and Great Bend where they spent their first winter in box cars furnished by the Santa Fe Railroad Company.

Pawnee Rock, 1901. In pioneer days Indians hid here.

