

Who Are the Low German-Speaking Mennonites?

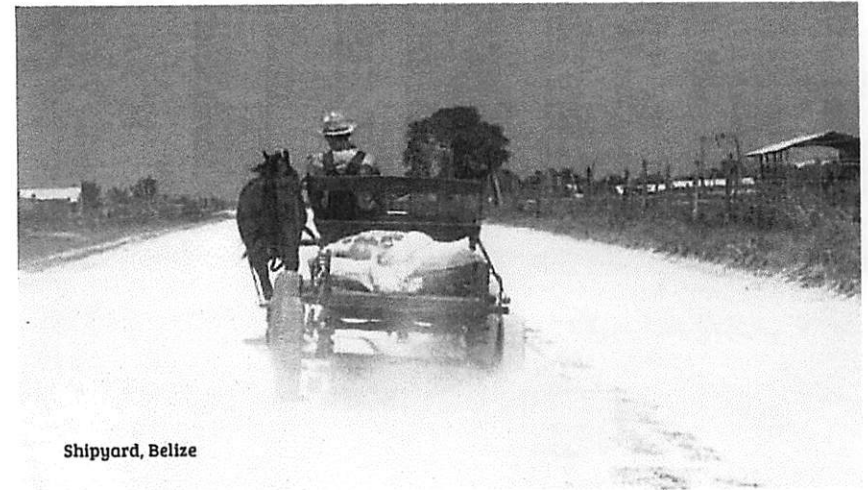
Low German-speaking (LGS) Mennonites are a conservative religious group that migrated from Eastern Europe to Canada, as well as other countries including Mexico, Bolivia, Belize, Paraguay and Argentina.

They adhere to religious principles based upon a literal interpretation of the Bible. They are sometimes referred to as "Kanadier" Mennonites (signifying the Canadian migration) or "Mexican" Mennonites but many prefer to be called "Low German-speaking Mennonites." They speak *Plautdietsch*, a variation of High German that varies from one locale to another.

Sometimes the term "conserver" is used to include the Kanadier descendants in Canada and also those who have subsequently emigrated from other countries. Regardless, they are all part of the Anabaptist groups that emphasize adult baptism, pacifism and literal interpretation of the Bible. They originated from

the Old Colony Mennonites who had settled in Canada in the 1880s but left in the 1920s to set up a new home in Mexico. Those who left wanted to retain a lifestyle that followed their interpretation of the Bible, which emphasized a physical and spiritual separation from the world and from those in the world who were deemed to be non-Christian.

The LGS community represent a range of religious values and perspectives from conservative to more liberal. Some of the LGS Mennonites in Mexico, Belize and Bolivia live without electricity, relying on horse-drawn carts. Members of the more conservative groups will not always accept conveniences such as radios or computers. For some individuals



Shipyard, Belize

there is a belief that using such equipment will negatively influence their relationship with God and threaten them as a group. Their style of dress also sets them apart from others; the women wear kerchiefs and homemade modest dresses whereas the men dress in overalls or jeans and shirts with cowboy hats. Within their families, set traditional roles mean that the women are responsible for the domestic work, including cooking and cleaning, and the men work in the fields or within their business. Religious practices are an important part of their lives, with Sundays and the yearly religious holidays strictly maintained. Religious points of view are obtained from the ministers who preach according to their interpretation of the Bible.

The LGS Mennonites who emigrated from Canada moved primarily to Mexico, Belize, Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia and Uruguay. In

these locations, they work predominantly in the agricultural sector. They have had invested many years and hard work to have a successful life in these countries. For example, they had to learn about different soil and weather conditions to grow their crops, and they have had to learn to negotiate with members of the larger community to export their products. Even though it has been hard work, they have been successful in each country where they reside. In the Cuauhtémoc area of Chihuahua, Mexico, they grow apples and prepare cheeses, whereas in Belize they predominantly raise chickens which they sell and export to various islands in the Caribbean.

LGS Mennonites are returning to Canada for a variety of reasons. For some, there are more economic opportunities here and for others, the difficulties within the churches have led to their departure from Latin America. In recent years

the ongoing violence within Mexico related to the drug wars have also prompted their migration.

In Canada, the LGS Mennonites primarily live in Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario and Nova Scotia. In total, there are approximately 80,000 LGS Mennonites in Canada. Most of the LGS Mennonites in the USA live in Kansas, Texas and Oklahoma.

Returning to Canada has meant a number of adjustments and changes for this group. In Manitoba, they are returning to a historical and social context with which they are familiar. For example, the original villages in southern Manitoba (e.g., Choritz, Reinland, Schoenwiese) remain largely intact, providing a connection to their history and the unique way that the villages were designed in Europe and then transposed to a Canadian context. For examples houses were designed to be attached to the barn allowing for easy access to the animals particularly when the weather was inclement.



Cheese factory, Mexico

In Alberta, there are no examples of village structure that represents this historical context. Instead, the LGS Mennonites often live in small towns (particularly if the men work as long-distance truck drivers, welders or mechanics) or on land owned by a feedlot operator for whom they work. If they have done well, they might have purchased their own land.

There is a range of beliefs and lifestyles among the LGS Mennonites that live in Canada but it would be inappropriate to generalize within the groups and from one group to another. For those who are more conservative, their children are usually home schooled within a Christian curriculum because there are concerns about mingling with non-Mennonite and non-Christian groups, as well as about children being exposed to a curriculum that includes topics such as human sexuality or the scientific explanation for the creation of the world. However, those LGS Mennonites who move to Canada from southern locales have a limited education, and thus are not well prepared



House and barn attached, Mennonite Heritage Village, Steinbach, Manitoba

to assist their children succeed in the home schooling process. In some areas of southern Alberta, special education programs have been developed to assist the LGS Mennonite children succeed academically. For example, some rural schools that would have closed have since become schools exclusively for LGS Mennonite children, allowing them to receive assistance with their educations from qualified teachers while ensuring that the school remains a viable part of the community.

There are LGS Mennonites who are more liberal and take part in mainstream society and use modern conveniences. This group may allow their children to go to school with non-Mennonite children, and do not object to continuing their schooling beyond junior high or high school. The married, baptized women may decide to no longer wear their kerchief, and they may allow their children to wear other

clothing styles beyond the usual home-made simple skirt and blouse. For some of these individuals and families, they take the risk of being thought of as "too modern." They may find themselves separated from their fellow LGS Mennonites as a result.

In many cases, there is limited interaction between LGS Mennonites who are conservative and those who are liberal. Differences in opinion about how to act and live can divide friends and families.