

Mennonite Youth Society Conference of Mennonites of Canada Saskatchewan Division

By: Homer Janzen

The incentive to start work among the young people of Canada, was given at the 1938 General Conference held in Saskatoon, Sask. At that conference the young people had a special session. Not very many young people were there, but those who came were young in spirit. Nor were there very many Canadians as compared with the American representation. Many problems common to youth organizations were discussed. Up to this time we in Canada had no Provincial or District organization for our young people, only our local Christian Endeavour Societies. After the session, Rev Olin Krehbiel, now of Berne, Indiana, spent quite some time with the Canadians interested in the future of Y.P. work, suggesting to them ways of starting this type of work. He mentioned some of the projects under way among the L.P. of the U.S., like sending out missionaries, assisting some young men to get their education, helping the Swift Current Bible School, etc. Interest was keen for this work, and a start was made: Rev. J.C. Schmidt was elected at this conference as president of the Y.P.'s work in Canada.

Visions of future possibilities, and suggestions and encouragements for this venture, were plentiful, but proved rather hard to put into actual practice. However, much prayer was offered up to God for His help and His continued leading.

The first meeting of the early leaders was held at D. Paetkau's house in Rosthern, Sask. At different occasions, discussions were held with the late Bishop David Toews and a group of our Canadian pastors and Christian Endeavour leaders. Finally, arrangements were made that in 1940 at the Canadian Conference to be held at Waldheim, Sask., a session especially for the Y.P. should be held and that here a committee should be elected and placed in charge of the Y.P. work.

Due to the outbreak of the Second World War, the Conference was cut down to a delegate conference only, and the Y.P.'s work had to be left for another year. But our leaders naturally grew impatient - already two years filled with prayer and anxious waiting had passed and nothing had taken root. So at the beginning of July, 1940, shortly after the Conference, when the D.V.B.S. teacher met for a day of preparation and prayer, they thought it proper to elect a .P.'s committee that same day. Our papers carried an announcement to this effect, but only about a dozen people responded. Nevertheless, the committee was elected. Rev. J.C. Schmidt, president; Rev. P. Schroeder, secretary; and Mr. Henry W. Friesen, vice-president.. Since Rev. P. Schroeder and Rev. I. Epp (then of Swift Current) exchanged places in the Bible Schools of Rosthern and Swift Current, respectively, Rev. I. Epp was asked to take over the work of secretary which Rev. Schroeder laid down. He has held this office to the Society from that time on.

The underlying principle, or idea, with which the committee has operated, is to give our youth a Conference—consciousness, and to realize that no one need look for “far pastures that appear greener,” but that we have everything that any other denomination offers, and more. Our organization is a branch of the Canadian Conference and works in the closest harmony with it. We would like to keep our young people with us to occupy places of service within the boundaries of conference activities. Just like the churches of a province’ form a provincial conference, which said conferences join to form a Canadian conference, so we have local Christian Endeavour Societies and Y.P. groups forming provincial youth organizations, which in turn make up the Canadian Conference Youth Organization. Carried a step farther, we can say that the latter organization is the Canadian District organization of the Y.P.U.

The committee that had been elected, now started work. Prayer for wisdom was again offered up to God. Slowly our projects took form. In 1941, June, our first Y.P.’s retreat was held. The opinion was expressed that it had been a very blessed occasion for all that attended. The Canadian Conference was held in July at Laird, Sask. The whole retreat was discussed. Many encouraging comments were given, but some criticism was also expressed. Especially was there much said against the fact that the Retreat had been conducted in the English language. Even at the next year’s Canadian Conference in Manitoba, the committee was severely attacked because of this. Some asked Rev. J.G. Rempel, our Secretary of the Canadian Conference at that time, in what language Henry Friesen spoke, knowing he came from Russia and that his English was not perfect. Rev. Rempel wittingly replied, “In Hebrew.” Then for some years, both the German and English were used at the Rosthern Retreats, but only English was found practicable at the Swift Current Retreats later on. Another practice that was objected to at the beginning was the campfire service conducted the first evening of the Retreat. When all were gathered around the fire, each one was asked to give his testimony as he placed a piece of firewood on the growing fire. Of late, this practice has been dropped. Such were among the things that caused some objections and hindrances to our youth work yet, the work was not stopped and has proved a great blessing to all who are connected with it in one way or another.

I believe the retreats were one of the projects that helped to a very great extent indeed, to acquaint our Saskatchewan young people with the possibility of, and the future for, such an organization as the Saskatchewan Youth Society. They have given our young people an incentive and a vision which has continually helped the organization to grow in its effectiveness.

At the 1941 Laird Conference, (conducted at Laird, Sask.) our Youth Society adopted a Constitution based upon the Constitution of the Y.P.U. of the General Conference. It has been felt that this constitution is not suitable in all its articles, and so it is planned to change it accordingly at the General Conference meeting to be held in B.C. July, 1949. The name originally given this society was, “Youth Organization of the General Conference of Mennonites of Canada. Saskatchewan Division.” This has been changed to “Mennonite Youth Society of the Conference of Mennonites of Canada, Saskatchewan Division.”

The committee grew to consist of five members in short time after the organization of the Society. It contained the following officers: the president, the vice—president, the secretary, the member from the General Conference of Canada, and one member from Southern Saskatchewan. There was also a Southern Branch Committee, of five members, who took charge of the work in the southern part of the province.

In 1946, the committee was still further enlarged in order to get a better representation from the local Christian Endeavour Societies. There are now nine members on it.

As a society of young people, most of our interests centre in the Rosthern Youth Farm since most of our activities and projects are here or seem to be given the incentive from here out. Here it is that our first and largest projects were started.

In 1941 and again in 1942, our first Retreats were held at the Rosthern Dominion Experimental Farm. *Much* was talked about how wonderful it would be to own such a farm for our Retreat grounds and to further benevolent enterprises. Before the close of the Retreat in 1942, the D.V.B.S. workers had made this an object of sincere prayer. Much prayer was offered and correspondence with the Government was started. (The author has read copies of this correspondence and it may be said that in all the correspondence that took place, the questionings and propositions of our organization received the most courteous attention possible from our Government at Ottawa, even to the extent of accepting our comparatively small offers against higher offers from individuals). The contract for the farm is said to have been signed in February, 1944. Some, however, are under the opinion that it was signed in December, 1943. From the correspondence about this purchase, it could almost be intimated that the latter view would be the more correct one, though documents would undoubtedly reveal the real date of this transaction. The last payment of \$5,000.00, was made in the fall of 1946. This completed the payment of the \$20,000.00 purchase price.

The farm consists of 600 acres of land, of which 425 acres is under cultivation with the balance in grass and pasture. For this coming year, 320 more acres of land have been rented. There are 77 cattle and some young stock on the farm. Milk production is about 240 quarts daily, 6 brood sows and 1 boar are kept this year. Also 39 ewes, 1 ram, 6 horses, and 250 chickens are kept. The inventory lists property valued at roughly \$16,000.00 annually, of which \$3,000.00 has gone to pay for mission work. The farm has definitely paid and is a project which has helped to unite the Saskatchewan youth for a common purpose. A number of projects are conducted in connection with the Youth Farm. One of them is the Invalid Home. It has been a project which the older folks have actively supported. Because of it, many have contributed to the Youth Farm who would not have contributed if the project had been for the welfare of the young people only. The home was started in 1944. At the beginning of July, 1944, in connection with a young people's retreat, the Home was dedicated to the service of God. In a few weeks the fifteen available beds were filled. As the work has expanded, more patients have come. At present there are forty-four patients in the Home who are between the ages of twelve and ninety—four years of age. The staff now consists of eighteen persons. The patients pay a monthly charge of 35.00. In 1945, work

was begun on the Annex to the Home, and this part has now been used for several years. The present need of the Home is a glass veranda for those patients who cannot go outside. The Home is now a joint project with the Youth Society and the older people, namely the Conference. It binds old and young together. It is also an excellent place of service for young people, and also now for some of our immigrant brethren and sisters, since there are patients who speak only the Russian. During the summer, some voluntary service from neighboring churches is given. There have also been some helpers from the U.S.A. and other provinces. Last summer there was a group of eight girls from the U.S. who assisted in the work in the Invalid Home, and also two boys from Alberta who helped on the farm.

A second project on the farm is the Children's Home. The start for this work was made in 1947. It is now a two-storey frame building and will house about twelve children, besides the home-parents and also the matron. At present there are fifteen in the home. Miss Mary Koop succeeded Miss Sarah Lehn as Matron in the fall of 194. The home has its problems just as any other home has, but every endeavor is set forth to live up to the name of "The Sunshine Family." The children are taught the rudiments of Christian living, and it is the aim of the workers to lead them to a personal acceptance of the Saviour. The home is financed largely by the constant and generous donations of various churches and individuals.

One of the main projects, however, that has concerned the young people of Saskatchewan directly, has been the annual Retreats held at the Farm. As has already been previously stated, our first Retreat was held in 1941. From that time on, even though there has been some opposition to our practices, the Retreats have been an annual highlight to many a young person. It was here that many dedicated themselves to the service of Christ. Under such capable leadership as Missionary Marvin Dirks, Evangelist J. Esau, Rev. Paul Shelly, Rev. Wedel, etc., (to mention only a few of the outside speakers, besides our own local men like Rev. Schmidt, Rev. I. Epp, Mr. H. Friesen, etc.) many a life of sinfulness had a "monkey-wrench" thrown into it and changed. Usually these Retreats closed with a song festival or a program on the closing Sunday. However, the evangelistic messages of the days stressed personal commitment to Christ, and many went away serving a new Master.

From these Retreats, the D.V.B.S. teachers were sent out. This work was started in 1937 with one school and one teacher. It has been seen that this work is important, and so the work has grown. Last year we had 4 teachers going out from Rosthern to teach in 39 different schools, and 23 teachers going out from Swift Current to teach in 12 other schools. This work was given over to the Youth Society by the Conference in 1942. The work has been fruitful. Many children have accepted Christ. This is truly a place of service for our Christian young people. Travelling expenses and some money for literature and gifts for the children, is paid to each teacher. The schools last a week with all—day instruction, or two weeks with half—day instruction, as the local group desires. There is quite a lot of demand for D.V.B.S. teachers, and there are many young people who would find opportunity for such service as this if only they sought it. Out-of—the—way and neglected places among our people, especially those in the northern part of the province, should be a challenge to our Christian young people.

Our Youth Society has taken it upon itself to regularly support workers in a few of the neglected areas of Saskatchewan. Partial support is given to Rev. I. Epp of Grace Mennonite Mission in Prince Albert. Rev. Epp works as mission worker here, is the editor-in-chief of the Y.P. Messenger, and is in charge of the Sunday-morning broadcast, "Wings of the Morning." Support is also given to Miss Erna Dyck, who works in the Mayfair and Pleasant Hill suburbs of Saskatoon, among the Old Colony Mennonites and others there. This work has been carried on very successfully in the various homes for some years now. However, a church building has been very badly needed. Quite recently a building, 44 by 28 ft., equipped with benches, organ, pulpit, and all other necessary equipment, was given the Youth Society for this mission. It will be moved to Saskatoon this summer (1949). A second church building has been donated for this mission also, to the church in Saskatoon of which Rev. J.J. Thiessen is the pastor. This is definitely an answer to prayer and God's working in our midst. Mission work of this nature should receive our most earnest prayers and attention, since this people are spiritually very under-privileged and greatly need the Gospel.

In 1946, during the summer, Ernest Harder of Paraguay and Professor Walter Houmann of Bethel College, were touring our various churches. The purpose of these youth rallies was to bind our youth of Canada and the United States closer together, to interest people in the Foreign Student Fund which helped Ernest through school, and also to interest our youth for good church music. These youth rallies were a success. They have not been continued, however. It still remains an avenue through which we may appeal and reach our youth.

Some of our latest mission work in the northern part of the province, has been to our Indian friends just north of Rosthern. It was felt that these people have been neglected far too long and that as Christians we have an obligation towards them. The burden for these people was especially felt by Mr. and Mrs. Bill

Zacharias. They approached the Youth Society, who in turn sought and gave support to this venture. In 1948, house visitation work began in the Indian Reserve north of Rosthern. Much prayer and preparation had gone before, and there were open ears for the Gospel. The work at first progressed almost unhindered. Then one day, the chief, who had been influenced by the Catholics who have a strong mission here also, ordered our workers to leave his people alone and not try to change their religion. This was a hard blow, and the work was interrupted for a few weeks, but after a while, the house visitation was continued. This mission shows a prospect of future success. May God continue to lead even here, not only to this reserve, but also to the other sixty- seven reserves in Saskatchewan which hold an Indian population of some twenty-thousand souls. They are ready for the Gospel; who will go and bring it to them?

Our Youth Society has also not been backward in its publication work. The Saskatchewan youth paper, Saskatchewan Mennonite Youth had its origin in 1945, appearing for the first time at the Conference in Eigenheim. It was greeted with great enthusiasm by those who saw it. Even the

delegates from other provinces were quick to realize the great possibilities of such a paper for their youth, naturally on a provincial basis. At first it was published quarterly, but since June, 1947, it has appeared monthly. The subscription fee was kept low (at 50 cents per year) to enable many to become readers. It has never been self-supporting, but has been considered by the youth organization as an important binding link, and deficits have been covered from the mission treasury. Our records do not show the number of subscribers in any period of its publication, but it can safely be estimated that there was a high of some two-hundred subscribers. Very appreciative comments have been received from readers at different times, and it is felt that the publication has filled a very definite need among our young people. It has helped to unite our youth by keeping them informed on various activities of the local groups and also of the organization as a whole. However, since the publishing of the Y.P. Messenger, the Canadian Conference youth journal, the interest for and in the provincial paper has been slowly but definitely dropping. The subscribers' list has dwindled down to a mere one hundred. And at the latest business meeting, April 2, it was decided to discontinue Saskatchewan Mennonite Youth in favour of the Conference publication. This discontinuance is no reflection upon the value of the paper, but is the evidence that the paper has outlived its usefulness and has done a pioneering job in youth publications. It has been the means of starting a similar paper in Ontario, and another one in Alberta, and also the Conference paper, for whose sake our Saskatchewan paper is now retreating. The last issue was of March, 1949.

Our radio ministry is among our latest projects. It had been on the hearts of several of our young people and youth leaders for about two years. For some reason or other no one seemed to take the thing in hand. At the Ministers' Conference in October, 1947, Rev. I. Epp was asked to investigate the possibilities of this project. This he gladly did and reported back to the ministers at the Ministers' Course given in the Rosthern Bible School in March, 1948. They were very pleased with the results of the investigation and asked that Rev. Epp go ahead with the project. Knowing that the young People would be unanimously in favour of such an undertaking, and having the encouragement of the ministers also, the work was undergirded by prayer and the Lord graciously opened up the way so that we could go on the air for the first time on October 24, 1947. Every Sunday, with the exception of one when due to circumstances beyond control the program could not be brought, the broadcast has gone out. Many appreciative letters have been received. The program has a few items in the German language, either the Scripture, prayer and about two songs, or a poem and a few chorales, or the message. On the whole it is in the English language though. The broadcast covers a territory bounded by such points as Pierceland (northwest of Meadow Lake) Erwood (close to the northern boundary of Sask-Man.), Parkview, Blumenhof (south of Swift Current), and New Brigden, Alta. Anywhere in between these points the program is enjoyed by those who know about it and care enough to get up at seven o'clock in the morning to tune in.

Financially, the broadcast has fared satisfactorily. The cost per broadcast has been \$23.94 so far, but after May, 1949, the price will go down to \$22.68 and we will get a refund on all programs thus far. The program is appreciated by many, especially by those of the far north who have no regular church services. How long they will continue depends entirely upon the participation of

the listeners. This is an activity where we all may take an active share in by supporting it, not only by financial means, but also by our prayers that God may bless this work. It is also a place where our young people may serve. During the past months, some groups from places like Rosthern Junior College, Rosthern Bible School, a group from the Farm, from Waldheim, Herschel, and others, have come to partake in the program by either coming to the studios in person, or by having records of songs made and sending them to Rev. Epp, who is in charge of the programs. May we diligently continue to support this worthy undertaking with our prayers and earnest giving towards it. We can be assured that it is helping to build God's Kingdom.

Turning to southern Saskatchewan, there is a project of which our young people in the south can justly be proud. For them the activities at Elim Gospel Beach are the highlights of the year.

In the late thirties, under the ministry of Micholai Bannmann, our people of southern Saskatchewan were spiritually revived. As a result of this revival a Bible school was opened in the city of Swift Current in the year 1937. Even though we had a Bible School in Rosthern, it was felt that another should be started in the south. It has formed the nucleus of the spiritual life of our southern youth. However, Bible School in winter was not enough, so some activities for the summer were started. Children's camps, young people's retreats, and D.V.B.S. were introduced. There was still the problem of suitable grounds for these enterprises. For several years various places, either by the Swift Current Creek, the Saskatchewan River, or the other suitable places in the district were rented. These places presented a definite problem in that they were only temporary and involved extra expense and labour in always setting up and again tearing down and moving the equipment for each retreat. The young people soon saw that a permanent campsite was needed.

Several possibilities opened to them after much prayer and waiting on the Lord. The first was to buy a farm; it had a beautiful grove of trees and a fine stream running through it, but the farm was to be bought as a block. The second proposition was to buy an established summer resort known as Iverson Beach at the north end of Lac Felletier. This is a clear water lake in a deep valley about twenty-six miles south-west of Swift Current.

The Mennonite Youth Society, with headquarters at Rosthern, appointed a subsidiary board of directors to handle this project, the chairman of this board being also a member of the official Youth Society committee. The board decided to buy the Iverson Beach rather than the large farm. Money to the amount of \$3,000.00 had already been donated to this project before negotiations with the Iverson family were begun. After a few months, terms were made. The original price of \$16,000.00 was reduced to \$10,000.00 plus taking over a debt of \$2,500.00 against the buildings. The terms were \$5,000.00 cash and the rest on time. The final payment was made in the fall of 1947. The contract was signed in the early part of 1945.

Three hundred and twenty acres of land, the main building, used for an auditorium, restaurant and kitchen, 38x80 feet, was the main article of the purchase. The restaurant and kitchen were complete with all necessary equipment. Besides this there were also included in the contract,

seven cabins complete with equipment such as beds, chairs, tables, oil stove, etc.; two cabins could be used for winter living. Five boats, a boat-house, some swimming suits, a shop building, a little storehouse with ice-cream coolers, a large ice house, and a few farm buildings were also in the contract.

The management of the Beach is as follows: a board of directors is responsible to the Youth Society. For the busy season this board hires a business manager. The board is also responsible for the raising of money for the project as a whole. This is done by voluntary donations and borrowing if necessary.

The manager is responsible for the operating expenses. These expenses are met by an annual rental fee from private cabin owners; rentals from cabins to visitors; rentals from boats and swimming suits; and sales of refreshments, groceries, fishing supplies, motor oils, etc. This is not enough, and many people contribute freely of their produce, finances or freewill labour in erecting and keeping the Beach property and buildings in top condition. The pasture land is rented out to stock owners and brings some revenue.

Elim Gospel Beach serves people in all walks of life. Cars from Texas, California, Illinois, Prince Rupert (on the Pacific) and other far-away places, have been registered. Community groups hold their annual picnics here.

Organized activities start about the middle of June. Special speakers and singers are engaged. The first few weeks of the season, Bible study and worship services are held each day in the forenoons, with evangelistic meetings beginning at 7:30 P.M. daily. Sunday School, worship services and evening services are held every Sunday. The first missionary conference was held for one week in 1946.

At the children's camp and the young people's retreats the features are classes in Bible, missions, crafts, and singing. Afternoons are spent in recreation on the lake or in ball games, etc. The evenings feature evangelistic services.

Sunday School conventions and similar church groups have their annual meetings there. The full program comes to a close the first week in August. Only a few linger on until sometime in September.

The young people, in purchasing this beach, have felt that here is a place where they can make a real contribution to society and to the Kingdom of God. Ownership and responsibility help to develop a strong character. By making the grounds available to all those who desire to come there, the young people may more fully carry out the great commission of preaching "the Gospel to every creature."

Elim Gospel Beach offers a place where one may withdraw from the cares of this world and quietly rest amid the beauties of nature. It proclaims that "the Son of Man is come to seek and to

save that which was lost;” every member of the staff must live out this testimony among those who come to the Beach. It also proclaims the unity of the Godhead and the unity of believers to Christ. The Beach provides a place of recreation under Christian supervision, and diligently seeks to establish a spirit of good will among all men.

Highlights of the activities of the Beach have been such experiences as those when many have accepted Christ as their Savior, at some of the services or in personal consultation. Testimony periods have always been inspiring. One evening some years ago, Professor Walter H. Hohmann, of Bethel College, led a group of one hundred singers to the lake shore, placing a group of fifty singers on one side of the lake and another fifty singers on the other side, and then they sang across the lake in relays. At another evening, about fifty young people dedicated their lives to Christ and another eight dedicated their lives to foreign mission service.

To partake of the blessings at this Beach has been inspiring to many young people. Many of the students of the Swift Current Bible School and young people of local churches, have found a channel for practical service here. From here many D.V.B.S. teachers have gone out to labour among the children of outlying districts. Many lost souls have been won to the Lord. Truly, it pays to have this project, for the worth of the salvation of even one soul is beyond human comprehension.

Such is briefly the story of the development of the Young People’s work in Saskatchewan. There may be phases of this work that have not been mentioned in this narrative, and yet should have received our attention; also there are many of the leaders and workers of our Society that have not been recorded here. But it is not the purpose of this paper to honor any such leader in this field — all honor is due to God, and with Him we leave the rewarding for the labor done among our Young People’s groups. Firmly rooted in Christ, we continue our work for His ultimate glory.

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