



THE HUTTERITES IN CANADA
“Communitarians Are We”



Canada's agricultural history includes the names of many religious groups that came here hoping to find a place where they could be left to farm and to continue to follow their beliefs.

One of the larger of these groups was the Anabaptists who fled nineteenth-century Europe due to their opposition to war and the requirement that all young able-bodied males be enlisted into military service. When they immigrated to North America many settled and continued to live in close proximity to each other to allow ease of continuance of their religious beliefs. In North America, the Amish and Old Order Mennonites, who both continue to farm with horses, are likely the best known of these sects. For them and many of their peers, being a farmer is of utmost importance in terms of their religious beliefs. Their reading of the Bible suggests farming is a highly honourable pursuit in the eyes of God. Despite generally accepted thought outside these groups, for many of these sects being a successful farmer does not equate with accumulating great personal fortune. In fact for one of these groups, the Hutterites, the amassing of personal fortune is contrary both to their religious beliefs and their farming practices, and living and working communally has always been a basic tenet of their existence.

The term *Hutterites* is derived from the name of the founder of the religion, Jacob Hutter. Like their fellow sixteenth-century Anabaptists, Hutterites believed in a separation of church and state, adult re-

baptism (anabaptism means re-baptism), and pacifism. From the 1500s to the 1700s they moved around Europe to escape persecution from state government and state religion, eventually settling in Ukraine in the mid-1800s. During this period their leaders, and in particular Peter Ridemann, wrote much of the religious music and other hymns that still form the basis for Hutterite worship services today. Gradually they formed into three *leuts*, or groups, based on slightly different religious tenets, each following the doctrine of a different man. *Lehreleut* brethren followed Jakob Wipfer, a teacher; *Dariusleut* followed Darius Walter; and the *Schmeideleut* followed Michael Waldner, a blacksmith. All remained pacifists, all believed in communal living, but they differed on the extent of contact they felt was appropriate with the outside world. Although these differences were not of great significance in the nineteenth century, with the turn of the twenty-first they have become of great importance in decision-making for many colony elders. In fact it was their pacifism, in the midst of Ukraine's militarist tendencies of the 1870s, that prompted their immigration to North America.

Like many other immigrants from eastern Europe, Hutterites were viewed favourably by both government and private developers of agricultural land tracts in North America. They were the epitome of the farm stock necessary to fulfill federal Minister of the Interior Clifford Sifton's dream of building a nation of farmers. When the Hutterites first came to North America in the 1870s, they were drawn to the western Great Plains of the United States, principally because the geography of South Dakota most closely resembled their Moravian homeland.



ca 1898 The first Hutterite Brüderhof in Canada near Diamond City, Manitoba; note the steam-powered grist mill at left.
Glenbow Archives NA-728-3



ca 1898 Communal residences at the Diamond City Hutterite colony Glenbow Archives NA-728-4

Although they had been promised exemption from military service, by 1898 militarist sentiments due to the Spanish American War brought that status into question, leading them to petition the Canadian government whether immunity from military service might be available north of the border. A favourable reply from the federal immigration agent based in Winnipeg led at least one colony to decide to immediately move north to Diamond City, Manitoba. Later, with the



ca 1898 Members of the Diamond City Hutterite colony outside their church Glenbow Archives NA-728-2

commencement of the First World War in 1914, their communal lifestyle, pacifism, and use of German meant Hutterites in the United States were the focus of much patriotic anti-German fervour. In 1918, this, and the severe prison sentences meted out to a number of young males who refused to take up active military duty, caused large numbers of Hutterites to move north to Canada into Alberta and Manitoba. In Canada during the Second World War young male Hutterites joined many other pacifists in Alternative Service Program camps in Canada's National Parks, building facilities and roads. There are now estimated to be four hundred colonies in Canada's three Prairie provinces (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta), British Columbia, and the United States.



ca 2006 Residential facilities on an Alberta Hutterite colony Canada Agriculture Museum

Life on a Brüderhof today remains just as different from mainstream North America as it would have been in the nineteenth century. Although families live together in their own sleeping quarters, they do not live in separate houses, but rather in separate parts of long dormitory structures. Each of the buildings is subdivided to accommodate four to six families. Individual families have separate entrances. The items used to furnish and decorate their quarters are their personal property, but technology such as a television is not part of the



ca 2006 Colony members' names are often found on small signs near the entrance to their residence.
Canada Agriculture Museum

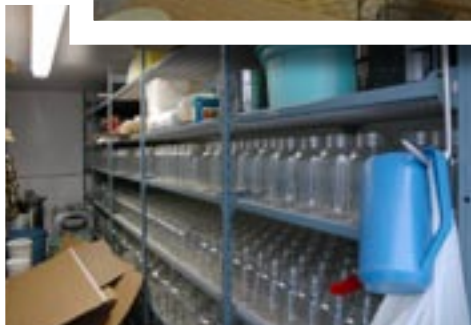
furnishings. On the other hand, on most colonies telephones as well as computers are essential operational tools. Families are responsible for the upkeep of their quarters, and many develop small flowerbeds by their entrance porch.

Daily life centres around the other communal structures on the colony. The three daily meals are taken communally in a large dining hall, which is subdivided into three separate areas. A large industrial kitchen capable of cooking sufficient food for two hundred people in one sitting is positioned close to the food storage facilities, which are necessary to keep

ca 2006 Dining hall on an Alberta Hutterite colony
Canada Agriculture Museum



ca 2006 A walk-in food pantry on an Alberta Hutterite colony
Canada Agriculture Museum



the colony supplied with basics such as flour and sugar and for the storage of the hundreds of jars of preserves made from produce grown or gathered by colony members. Walk-in freezers are used to store perishable foodstuffs such as meat and fowl. There are two dining halls, one for adults and another for children. For the children, the eating of meals together emphasizes the communal nature of all aspects of life on a colony. In the adult



ca 1970 The "potato patch" of a Saskatchewan Hutterite colony's garden

Copyright Daniel Kazimierski, Saskatchewan Archives R-D1611



ca 1970 Children's dining table on a Saskatchewan Hutterite colony

Copyright Daniel Kazimierski, Saskatchewan Archives R-D1612-3

dining hall, seating is split into one area for men, another for women. Each features long rows of tables at which colony members gather for meals, discussion, and colony meetings. The children's dining hall is supervised by the colony's German teacher who is also one of its religious leaders.



ca 1970 Hutterite children head off to the school on their Saskatchewan colony.

Copyright Daniel Kazimierski, Saskatchewan Archives R-D1609-7

Starting at age six, Hutterite children attend the provincially regulated public elementary school situated on the colony, in addition to taking German and religious instruction in the colony's church. At age fifteen, among the more traditional colonies, formal education ends, and as young adults they assume full-time duties on the colony. On some Schmeideleut colonies young men can leave the colony to attend high school and community colleges, particularly for training in trades that would be useful on a colony, such as plumbing and carpentry. Since 1994, some have gone to Brandon University in Manitoba to become accredited as a school teacher. When they reach the age of twenty they are baptized and are then seen as brothers and sisters of the adult colony members. Although young Hutterites are comfortable writing and speaking in both English and German, the latter remains the language of daily communication. They speak *Hutterisch*, a vernacular German of Tyrolean origin, but religious music is sung in the High German in which it was written.

Religion and regular church attendance are fundamental to Hutterite life. The two persons wielding the most influence on a colony are its minister and the colony boss. Families go to church at the

close of the day as well attend regular services twice on Sundays. The church found on all colonies plays a central role in its affairs. They are simple unadorned structures, filled with chairs or pews, with a pulpit at the front. Singing religious choral music and hymns is an important means of drawing the community together. Because the music is drawn from texts dating back hundreds of years, it also serves to reinforce the Hutterite tradition of communal history. If a person breaks a colony rule, they are required to stand before the assembled colony members in the church to explain their actions. If the situation warrants, the offender may be subjected to a period of shunning—they would not be allowed to attend church or eat their meals with fellow colony members. If a colony member decides to leave it is understood that unless they are willing to acknowledge the error of their ways in front of the colony members, and to openly repent, it will be a permanent departure.

Colonies have a kindergarten building where children between three and six years of age are supervised by an older female colony member who may no longer be capable of handling more arduous

ca 2006 Kindergarten building on an Alberta Hutterite colony

Canada Agriculture Museum

ca 1960 Afternoon nap on the "sleeping bench" in the kindergarten of an Alberta Hutterite colony

Glenbow Archives NA-1752-61



ca 1970 Older members assume tasks such as caring for the young children, as in this Saskatchewan colony's kindergarten

Copyright Daniel Kazimierski, Saskatchewan Archives R-D1612-2



tasks. Hutterite tradition suggests they originated kindergartens in the 1560s, well before those of 1830s Germany. At the end of the day, the children gather to eat together before heading home with their parents.

As members advance in age they can continue to play an important part in colony life for as long as they feel comfortable doing so. They also continue to occupy their regular quarters in one of the colony's housing structures. When age or illness prevents them from living independently, they are assisted in their daily lives by younger relatives and other colony members.

ca 1970 A Hutterite couple on a Saskatchewan colony; the man's beard signifies that he has married.

Copyright Daniel Kazimierski, Saskatchewan Archives R-D1613

ca 1970 These young Hutterite girls' clothing would likely have been sewn by the Saskatchewan colony's seamstress.

Copyright Daniel Kazimierski, Saskatchewan Archives R-D1614-2

Because the colony is the centre of Hutterite life, most social interaction occurs with one's fellow colony members or with the members of other colonies. Trips off the colony into the local "English" community are for business or medical reasons only, not to socialize. The frequent interaction between colonies serves both practical and social purposes: multi-colony gatherings and religious

services provide a forum for elders to discuss matters of mutual concern, and, an opportunity for the younger set to look over the crowd for someone they might wish to marry. Upon marriage it is most common for the wife to move to the husband's colony. Although many colonies are open to accepting "English" (a term used to describe all non-Hutterites) members, most agree the change from individualism to communal life poses too great a challenge for such a marriage to have much success.

Although Hutterites do not hold personal property, colonies do pay municipal and school taxes based on the assessment of their land, and federal taxes based on an estimation of the value of their communal goods. Like their fellow Canadians, Hutterites have Social Insurance Numbers, draw on the Family Allowance and Old Age Pension systems, and use the services of hospitals.

All three groups of Hutterian Brethren have a similar style of dress. Although there is some slight variation among the three leuts, they dress conservatively,



choosing mostly dark colours for outerwear. Clothing is meant to be functional rather than an expression of self or pride. Women and girls wear ankle length dresses, blouses, and kerchiefs, while men and boys wear shirts, dark coloured caps, and pants, which are often held up by suspenders. Once a Hutterite man marries, he begins to wear a beard. Much of the clothing, in particular the dresses and shirts, are produced by colony seamstresses. In a concession to practicality, most younger Hutterites wear plain white athletic shoes, except for when work requires that they wear safety or rubber boots.

ca 2006 All colony members are expected to participate in large tasks. These adults on an Alberta Hutterite colony are plucking geese and sorting the feathers for later use in filling duvets.

Canada Agriculture Museum



ca 2006 An Alberta Hutterite colony's members stop for a communal meal midway through a day of goose slaughtering.

Canada Agriculture Museum



All colony work is carried out communally, some tasks on the basis of gender, and others upon need. If a colony raises geese, all colony members participate when it is time for the birds to be slaughtered. An announcement is made in the dining hall well in advance to ensure there are no conflicts with other colony-

wide activities. Each member has a specific job, from the teenage children gathering the birds to be killed, to older, more experienced, adults eviscerating them prior to storage in the colony's walk-in freezers. Often during work sessions involving a large cross-section of a colony, religious music will be sung a capella in German to buoy the spirits of tired workers.

ca 1950 This industrial scale washing machine was made in the Alberta Hutterite colony's machine shop.

Glenbow Archives NA-1752-35



ca 1950 A well equipped machine shop, such as this on an Alberta Hutterite colony, is necessary for repairs to their farm equipment.

Glenbow Archives NA-1752-30

Although each of the colonies operates as a separate entity, frequently they engage in inter-colony trade. If a particular colony produces a consumer good, the other colonies will look to it as their supplier of first choice. A colony with a large, well-equipped, woodworking shop commonly supplies the tables, benches, and chairs for other colonies. All operate on the principle that only those goods surplus to the needs of the colony or other Hutterites are sold in the off-colony market.



ca 2006 Chairs such as this, manufactured in an Alberta Hutterite colony's woodworking shop, would be used in members' residences.

Canada Agriculture Museum



ca 2006 Equipment such as this mechanical pea-sheller, designed and built by members of an Alberta Hutterite colony, has been made available for other colonies across western Canada.

Canada Agriculture Museum

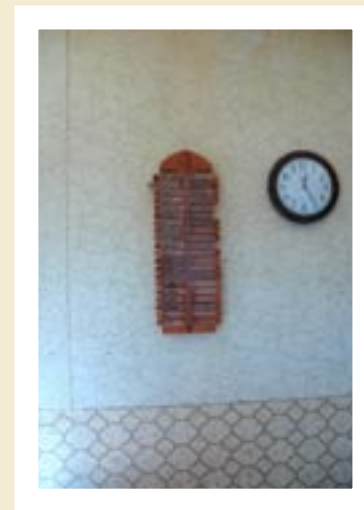
An operation entailing close to 125 persons is far from simple and requires a great degree of organization. Each colony is headed by an elected male known as the "colony boss." Through his experience and maturity, this person has gained the members' confidence in his abilities to capably oversee the colony's affairs. He does not work alone, as each of the colony's operations comes under the purview of an experienced person, known as a "boss." These bosses are expected to work together to co-ordinate use of

the colony's physical resources, such as tractors, and most importantly, its human resources. Through on-colony experience and mentoring, or through correspondence courses, the bosses are expected to be aware of all current information for their area of responsibility.

Many colonies include crop and livestock operations, and each operation has a person responsible for its management—such as goose boss, field boss, or shop boss—in addition to keeping the colony boss and colony members informed. Responsibilities include everything from the management of the equipment repair shop to planting and harvesting. The person in charge of the livestock operation must be knowledgeable about not only animal care, but also federal and provincial food safety regulations.

ca 2006 This Hutterite colony situated on the Alberta side of the Crowsnest Pass includes large scale poultry, dairy, and hog operations.

Canada Agriculture Museum



ca 2006 This duty roster posted in the kitchen of this Alberta Hutterite colony helps the women keep track of their cooking responsibilities.

Canada Agriculture Museum

Food preparation and laundry are also handled communally, with female colony members alternately signing a duty roster to serve in those facilities. For the person in charge of keeping the colony clothed, knowledge of both reasonable prices for fabric, as well as each colony member's clothing and size requirements, is at the forefront. The colony's book-keeper uses automated accounting programs designed for farm operations to aid with financial management.

Mentoring plays an essential role in the development of the skills needed to operate a colony. If a particular boss at a colony is recognized as having great expertise, young people from other colonies are sent to learn those skills through practical experience. Decisions made by the bosses have a direct impact on the viability of the colony and the members' livelihoods. Once a colony passes a population of one hundred and fifty persons, the elders begin to look for land upon which to establish a new colony. They must also ensure there will be the mix of both experienced as well as younger members necessary for the successful operation of the new colony. Usually members draw lots to decide who will leave the existing colony to establish the new one.

ca 1960 This Alberta Hutterite colony was early to adopt field technology, such as the swather.

Glenbow Archives NA-5093-1155



ca 2006 This Alberta Hutterite colony has made a lucrative arrangement to lease some of their land for a wind farm. Canada Agriculture Museum

The workforce available on a colony permits large scale farming. It is common for a colony to farm in excess of eight thousand acres, or to operate a thousand-sow hog operation. Hutterites do not shun modern farm technology, in fact, if it can aid efficiency or productivity, it is embraced. It is common for colonies to own several large four-wheel-drive tractors and an equal number of combines. Given that this equipment costs more than two hundred thousand dollars a piece, in simple financial terms it is clear that Hutterites have made a major investment in technology. In southwestern Alberta, where wind energy is a growing business, a colony ideally situated to take advantage of the new technology has negotiated valuable leases with the companies developing the wind farms. Like many other Canadian farmers, some Hutterite colonies have decided to grow genetically engineered crops such as canola and soy beans.

In terms of visible measures of success, Hutterite colonies are very profitable operations. In terms of finances, colonies aim to operate debt free, with new equipment being purchased in cash. Frequently when a family farm comes up for sale, local Hutterites are willing and capable of paying the asking price, and this has occasionally brought them into conflict with their neighbours who feel they have no chance of competing for farm land when it comes onto the open market. In response, some provinces have either placed a limit on colony acreage or on the minimum proximity between colonies. Although like any other farmers Hutterites do at times have to deal with natural hazards such as drought or too much rainfall at the wrong time of year, unlike farmers in the outside community, a colony's sheer size, and the fact that it produces much of its own food, provides a small cushion on which to rely in bad

years. If a colony is hit by a major disaster, they can expect financial and human resource assistance will be offered by other colonies.

Due to tight profit margins for agricultural commodities and the technological expertise they have developed, some Hutterite colonies have taken up retail manufacture and sales, from equipment to furnish and operate hog barns, heating systems for greenhouses (including pressure vessels, as well as outdoor heaters that burn organic waste such as sawdust and corn cobs), to the production of blow-moulded plastic pop bottles. Hutterite goose down duvets are currently sold in upscale home furnishing boutiques in many Canadian cities.

Since their arrival in Canada in the late nineteenth century, the Hutterian Brethren have had a major impact on the technological and social fabric of western Canada. Many of the innovations

that were initially created for use on one of their colonies have since found their way into the mainstream of agricultural technology and are now being produced for a much wider market. The tenets of the communal system of agriculture have witnessed individual colonies coming to the assistance of their brethren on colonies across western Canada. So too have colony members immediately offered valuable assistance to their non-Hutterite farming neighbours when they have been faced by illness or natural disaster. Concern for the less fortunate of the world has meant Hutterite colonies have long been major contributors to domestic aid organizations such as the Canadian Foodgrains Bank. History shows that Hutterites will continue to adopt the most modern agricultural equipment and practices as they focus on maintaining profitable farming operations, but it is equally the case that those developments will need to occur within their Brüderhof system of communal agriculture.

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