

Life of Dr. Cornelius. W. Wiebe

Part 1-Background

Introduction

While I was growing up, Dr. Wiebe was Uncle Knals to me. He was my Dad's brother, just two years younger. My Dad (Peter) and Uncle Knals had a close relationship all their lives, though they were different in nature and occupation. My Dad was a farmer and mechanic. Uncle Knals was a teacher and then a doctor.

*Because I had a fair bit of information about my family background and with input from my siblings, I started writing a family book. In 1995, with help from a computer friend, I self-published "The Oak Tree", the story of the ancestors and descendants of my parents, Peter & Margaretha Wiebe. The background of this story also belongs to my **Uncle Knals**.*
Marjorie Hildebrand

Background

In 1875-78 the Bergthal Colony in the Ukraine immigrated to Canada. Joined in that movement were Bernhard & Cornelia Wiebe with their five youngest children. They traveled from Heuboden, Bergthal Colony in Russia via Danzig, Poland, Germany and finally on the ship, the SS Sardinian, landing in Quebec on July 30, 1876, together with five children, Bernhard 21, **Peter B. 18 (Cornelius' father)**, Anna 15, Helena 13, and Diedrich 9.

To arrive at their destination, they crossed half of the North American continent. Manitoba, a treeless prairie, was to be their next home. The Canadian government had allotted land to the Mennonites east and west of the Red River in the southern part of the province.

Bernhard and Cornelia Wiebe chose to settle just south-west of Rosenfeld, a lovely spot beside Buffalo Creek, an area known as Weidenfeld. The creek was a substantial source of water supply for horses and cattle. They built a log house in the style used by all the Mennonites. The barn for oxen and cattle was attached to the house to facilitate caring for them during harsh winter weather. Three children were still at home with them, Helena, Anna and Diedrich. Peter B. married in 1878 and the couple lived with them, according to the 1881 census.

Young Peter B., son of Bernhard and Cornelia, was a tall, thin likable fellow, not too talkative. He had learned to know and love a young woman while still living in Schoensee on the East Reserve, shortly after coming to Canada.

She was Anna, daughter of Kornelius and stepmother Helena Wiebe. Anna's mother died when Anna was three months old and was brought up by an aunt.

Peter B. married Anna Wiebe, on October 6, 1878. They moved in with Peter's folks, for when the 1881 census was taken they were listed as living with Bernhard and Cornelia Wiebe in Weidenfeld, with two little daughters, Cornelia age 2 and Anna a baby.

Towards the end of the century, Peter B. and Anna decided to build a house for their growing family on the same yard. They would be able to take care of his aging parents. They built a large two storey house of planed wood, facing south. Anna loved flowers and wanted a bay window facing south for her many plants. On the west side there was an open porch and on the east side a closed porch with windows facing south and east. To protect Anna's outside flower beds in summer, Peter B. constructed a pretty lattice fence around the front. A short distance from the house they built a big red barn with a hip roof.

Tragedy struck this young family in February 1888. Cornelia, their oldest daughter, age 8 and Helena, 2, died of diphtheria three days apart. Anna, 6, and Agatha, not quite one, were spared. The following year on June 18, 1889, Maria was born. She died in 1897 from a ruptured appendix and Anna died from

complications in childbirth in 1905 at age 23. By then four sons had joined the family, Peter, **Cornelius**, Henry and Bernhard. Cornelius was born in February 18, 1893.

Parents Bernhard and Cornelia lived with Peter B. and Anna during their last years. Agatha recalls, "Grandmother had paralysis the year I was born and could not cook anymore, so they built an addition to the house and moved in. Breakfast and tea they had in their room but dinner and supper with us." Cornelia died in 1896 and a year later Bernhard passed away. They are buried on the yard.

In the early 1900s Peter B. had a share in the Rat Portage Lumber Co. in Altona, where his brother-in-law Henry M. Klassen had the dealership. Henry was married to Peter B's sister Anna. This partnership gave him access to good wood at a discount price. He was able to sell the farm at a high price and built a solid house for himself and Anna in the town of Altona about 1920. This house stands today on the same spot on 3rd St., still a solid house. They had a small barn for their cow and room for a garden. Flowers were always a big part of the yard.

In 1924 Peter B. suddenly passed away, leaving Anna alone in her lovely new home. She had a congenital problem with her hips that caused her to either walk bent forward or else thrown back. This did not keep her from being active. She enjoyed her garden, both flowers and vegetables. Grandchildren loved to visit and stay overnight. She made them feel special. She was a very kind and loving person.

Anna died at age 77 of peritonitis due to an obstructed bowel in 1935. She had been a widow for 11 years. (*I remember **Uncle Knals** come tearing onto the yard to give us the sad tidings. When he saw my Dad outside feeding the pigs, he drove up to him and gave him the sad news. I was five years old at the time.*)

Peter B. and Anna (*my grandparents*) are buried in the south-east corner of the Altona Cemetery.

Excerpts taken from *The Oak Tree*(1995), by Marjorie Hildebrand

His Education

Cornelius was born February 18, 1893 on the farm in Weidenfeld, near Altona. At the time he had two sisters and one brother, Anna, Agatha and Peter. Two more sons would be born to Bernhard and Cornelia, Henry and Bernhard. Anna married young and had three children, but died shortly after the birth of her youngest child, a girl. Agatha left home in 1911 to go into nurses' training in St. Louis, MS.

Dr. Cornelius W. Wiebe who passed away in July of 1999 at the age of 106, and was a long time doctor in Winkler, was my substitute teacher in the spring months of 1921. He earned his way through medical school this way.

One day he took us kids into the basement of the school and let us look at his microscope. He dissected a fly and put the parts under the microscope and showed us how big the legs and feet looked. To me, a kid of eight, the feet looked like huge suction cups. Then he said, "Just look at that! First they go outside and crawl around on the cow dung pile, and then they come in the house and crawl on the butter!" Well, that day when we got home from school, my mother had just finished churning butter, but somehow my appetite for fresh butter had disappeared.

David Penner, Kane, MB

Father, Peter B. valued learning and made sure his children got an education. He helped organize the district school in Weidenfeld at a time when many Manitoba Mennonites preferred the village schools where education was in German. The Wiebe children were taught in English, with German as a second language.

The girls, older than the boys, were sent to Rosenfeld until they got a school closer to home in 1898. In 1890 Peter B. was involved in the establishing the Mennonite Educational Institute, giving young people the opportunity for higher learning. He believed that a good education was important for getting on in the new country. As treasurer of the MEI Society he was a member of the Administration Committee. All of the Wiebe children attended MEI, except son Peter P. who preferred farming to sitting in the school benches.

Cornelius enjoyed school. He finished his high school to the end of Grade 11, partly in Gretna MCI and partly in the Altona MEI. He determined to become a teacher as



Cornelius & Helena Wiebe wedding

a way to serve God. He first took Normal School in Morden (1912-1913) to obtain his third-class certificate in teaching. He then was hired to teach in the village of Schoenthal, near Altona, but found it difficult to deal with the parents who resented modernization. He did not find fulfillment in teaching and eventually decided to go into medicine. From 1914-1920 he struggled at getting his pre-medicine studies completed. In June 1916 he married Helen Groening, whom he had met at the MEI some years previously. In August 1919 their son Leonard was born. Being a husband and father added both pleasure and responsibilities. By fall 1920, Cornelius, at age 27, was ready to enter medical school at the University of Manitoba. The couple had bought a house on Lipton Avenue, a short walk from the medical school on Bannatyne.

Money was always scarce. There were no grants available for students. In summer, they closed the house and moved in with parents. Cornelius hired himself out on a farm or did some teaching. Other than that they lived on savings or small loans from parents. In 1924, at the conclusion of four years of intensive studies, he graduated with honors. On April 23 he was notified that he had been placed at the Royal Alexander Hospital in Edmonton for a year of internship.

His Work

When Cornelius Wiebe and his family moved to Winkler in 1925, the town, with a population of nearly 1000, had a definite Mennonite flavor. He had now finished a year of internship and at age



32 was ready to begin his career as a medical doctor. As was the case in many rural areas in Manitoba, there was no hospital in Winkler, though there was one in Morden, six miles west. Ten years later, in 1936, a hospital was built in Winkler. Today a large medical facility has been built between the two cities, known as Boundary Trails Health Center.

During those early years, before there was a hospital, Dr. Wiebe saw his patients in his clinic, a small room at the back of the drug store, or he had to travel to see his patients. When a woman was expecting the birth of her baby, he was contacted. He had a car, but in the winter often had to resort to hiring someone with a horse and sleigh to get him to his destination. He built his first office in 1937, a building with a waiting room and two examining rooms.

People were helpless when attacked by communicable diseases such as diphtheria, typhoid fever, or flu. He remembered that his two young sisters had died of diphtheria and another one of a ruptured appendix, before he was born. Maybe he could now help to avoid such tragedies. One such time happened to a young daughter of John J. Elias, who writes,

Dr. Wiebe prepares to make a house call.

One night when our oldest daughter Shirley was about 11 years old, she came into our bedroom and complained of great pain in her lower abdomen. We immediately took her to the hospital. When we reported to the nurse, she phoned Dr. Wiebe and he was there in 15 minutes. After a few questions and probing Shirley's stomach, he said it was acute appendicitis and would require an immediate operation. Staff at once went into action and at two o'clock in the morning the doctor removed Shirley's appendix. He told us it was ready to burst and had we come half an hour later her life would have been in great danger, since peritonitis might have set in.

Dr. Wiebe realized he needed to educate people in private and public health. Habits and practices were such that caused contagious diseases to run unchecked. In 1928 the town council appointed him as public health officer. He worked hard to teach women to take care of themselves during pregnancy as well as after the birth of their baby. He started an immunization program in the schools which took some time for all the families to accept. Another barrier difficult to overcome was the negative attitude towards entering the Morden Hospital. One reason was the distance and the second one the language, since many Mennonites spoke only Low German. Slowly this resistance was overcome, until in 1936 Winkler had its own hospital.

Dr. Wiebe made it his concern to oversee the health and welfare of the new baby. He would look in to check on the mother and baby on the third day after birth. Because of poor diets, mothers

often could breast-feed their infants for only a few months. He taught them to sterilize the baby bottles and prepare a safe milk formula. This special attention helped to save lives.

In the 30s and 40s both Dr. Wiebe and Dr. Menzies from Morden noticed many people we troubled with goiters, an enlarged thyroid gland, which was because of a lack of iodine. Iodized salt was not readily available, so both doctors asked the stores to carry it. Once that became a constant use in the homes the problem with goiters disappeared.

By the honest recognition and confession of our human sameness, we can participate in the case of Jesus who came, not to the powerful but to the powerless, not to be different but to be the same, not to take away our pain, but to share it. Through this participation we can open our hearts to each other and form a caring community.

One frustrating problem was trying to educate people about communicable diseases and the need to be quarantined. Measles and diphtheria took heavy death tolls before strict measures were taken to quarantine families who were sick. In 1930 a typhoid epidemic swept through the community, illustrating how one careless individual could cause widespread infection. The red quarantine sign was looked up as an inconvenience and a shame.

In his memoirs, Dr. Wiebe writes, "The above mentioned problems and conditions faced the medical beginner in Winkler. One great advantage was that I was one of them, i.e. a Mennonite and the only Mennonite Doctor in Southern Manitoba. It was really quite an asset".

In 1952, after 27 years as doctor in Winkler, a severe epidemic of polio broke out in this area. He had never experienced something like it and felt helpless and frustrated. It seemed to affect mostly children, however young people also succumbed to it. Some died, others recovered. The most severe cases were transferred to Winnipeg hospitals and placed in iron lungs.

As soon as immunization became available, Dr. Wiebe began a program of immunization in the school in town and later also in rural schools. By the 1960s there was vaccine for diphtheria, typhoid, measles, mumps rubella and polio. At first many parents refused to have their children vaccinated. Dr. Wiebe enlisted the teachers to help in explaining the benefits of immunization. With time the resistance disappeared.



Trachoma was a peculiar disease among the Mennonites. They had brought it with them from Russia. The Canadian Public Health Journal in May 1932 published an article, "The Trachoma Problem". It was noted that fully 10% of the Winkler and surrounding area was infected. The treatment at that time was painful. It was not till the advent of sulfa drugs after World War II that this disease disappeared.



In 1936 Bethel Hospital was built. Dr. Wiebe was very instrumental in having it built. He saw the need to have women come in to have their babies. Many had large families and he kept mother and baby in for ten days, so the mother could have a good rest and someone could take care of her. Home would have many demands on her again. It is estimated he delivered 6000 babies.

Because he saw children intellectually challenged when visiting the homes to deliver a baby, he was concerned for these needy children. Morden already had an Association for Retarded Children (ARC) in 1953 and in 1958 one was organized in Winkler, fulfilling Dr. Wiebe's vision to help children in the Winkler area who were in dire need to be challenged intellectually.

Dr Wiebe visiting a hospital patient. 1

On February 26, 1956 the Winkler Bergthaler Church celebrated Dr. Wiebe's 63rd birthday and 30 years of community service. In 1972 Winkler honored him as family physician and surgeon for 47 years.

In 1977 his wife Helena died, after 61 years of marriage. His youngest son had passed away in 1971. He retired in 1978 after 53 years practicing medicine in Winkler. He was very lonely and on December 2, 1978 married Ann Zacharias.