

How Turkey Red Winter Wheat Came to the U.S.

By Herbert F. Friesen



Author Herbert F. Friesen is resident manager at the Inman, Kansas, plant of Buhler Mills, Inc. A descendant of one of the Mennonite families who brought Turkey Red winter wheat from Russia to the U.S. in 1874, he is seen here, with Mrs. Friesen, in the costume he wore for the centennial celebrations of the state of Kansas in 1961. The grandfather of all U.S. hard red winter wheat, Turkey Red can be found in the ancestry of many varieties planted today.

IN 1874, Anna Barkman, eight-year-old daughter of Peter M. and Anna Barkman, lived on a farm near Caslov, a city of Crimea in Russia. The Barkmans belonged to the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren church.

The people of the church thought it was wrong for men to be soldiers. But the ruler of Russia had made a law that Mennonites must be soldiers, the same as other Russians. That is why Mr. Barkman decided to leave the Crimea and move to America. Twenty-three of his neighbors, who

were Mennonites, also said they would go to America with him.

Mr. Barkman told his daughter, Anna, she must pick seed wheat to take to Kansas. "You must pick only the largest grains, which have a reddish gold color and are of good shape," said Mr. Barkman. "If the grains are pale in color, small or soft, throw them aside. Next month we will start for Kansas to make our home there. We should take only the finest of wheat for seed."

It was slow work, picking seed

wheat, for it takes more than 250,000 grains of wheat to fill two gallons and the grains had to be chosen one at a time. For a week, Anna worked every day in the bin, picking out the best wheat until the two jars were filled.

How her father's face lighted up when he saw the wheat! Each grain was well shaped, and of a reddish golden color.

"That is the best wheat in the world," said Mr. Barkman. "You have been very patient to do the work so

well. I have a treat for you."

And he gave Anna a handful of hazel nuts. She felt well paid for her long hours of work; for hazel nuts were a great treat for her.

It was April, 1874, when Anna picked the two gallons of wheat.

Anna married Johann Wohlgemuth following the immigration to Kansas. Her father died in 1904; her mother in 1910.

How It Began

In Switzerland in the early part of the 16th century, there was formulated a religious creed which differed materially from the accepted beliefs of the day. It recognized no authority outside the Bible and the enlightened conscience, limited baptism to the believer, and laid stress on those precepts which vindicate the sanctity of human life and man's word.

Who first advanced the creed is not known. But at Zurich in 1523 a church was established and from there the sect spread rapidly into Holland, Germany and Austria.

Adopters of the faith at first were known as Anabaptists, although they called themselves Täufer (Baptizers). In 1537, however, Menno Simons, an ex-priest from the Dutch province of Friesland, joined with them and assumed leadership as a teacher and organizer. From him was derived the term "Mennonite," by which they have since been known.

Grow Despite Persecution

Bitter opposition was the lot of these converts. Three thousand were martyred in Germany during the first half century; six thousand others fell victims during the first half century of the Netherlands uprising. Nevertheless, they continued to increase in numbers and, under persecution, to extend their sphere of action.

By 1762, when Catherine II ascended the throne of Russia, Mennonites were in nearly all the countries of Central Europe, in Canada, and in the American colonies. The first Mennonite settlement in the U.S. was at Germantown, Pennsylvania, in 1683.

Catherine II, being of German birth, knew the Mennonites of Germany as a class of thrifty and industrious farmers. In 1783, when the Crimean peninsula and a territory along the Black Sea were wrested from Turkey, it occurred to her that the Mennonites would make excellent farmers and colonists in that part of her kingdom. It was further hoped that they would intermingle with the Tartars and native Russians, thereby improving the local citizenry.

Accordingly, she invited Men-



ANNA BARKMAN, at the age of eight, handpicked two jars of Turkey Red wheat at the family farm near Caslov, a Crimean city near the Black Sea in Russia, to bring to Kansas. Anna, later Mrs. Johann Wohlgemuth, was the aunt of Herbert F. Friesen.

nonite immigration, granting land, freedom of worship, exemption from military service, local self-government and control of their schools—these privileges to endure for 100 years. The invitation was accepted by large numbers coming from Germany, Holland, Poland and other mid-European countries.

These immigrants settled on the Dnieper River, in Crimea, east to the Sea of Azof, along the Kuban and the Volga, and in the provinces of Volhynia and Bessarabia. For 100 years they prospered. Odessa and Cherson on the Black Sea, and Berdiansk and Taganrog on the Sea of Azof became famous as grain shipping ports, and the Russian Mennonite wheat fields were a determining factor in the world's markets.

In one respect, however, they were a disappointment to their patron-Empress: They would not amalgamate with Russian or Tartar. Subsequently, their special privileges and increased wealth aroused the jealousy of those from whom they held aloof, and pressure was exerted to bring about a curtailment of privileges.

Privileges Withdrawn

Alexander II, emperor through the latter part of the 19th century, yielded to the pressure. In 1870 he rescinded Catherine's order of military exemption, banned the German language, and assumed control of the schools. But since the 100-year period did not expire until 1883, he granted 10 years

wherein those who would not accept the revocations might emigrate.

No official notice of the change was sent to the Mennonites, however, and they, taking no part in public affairs and reading no newspapers except their own church publications, might have allowed the 10 years to elapse without action, had not Cornelius Jansen, Prussian consul at Berdiansk and one of their faith, made it a point to inform them.

Great dismay was occasioned by the knowledge. They could not change their religion or their customs; their only alternative was to find another country. But where? Jansen advised that they go to America, where there was religious freedom and where many of their faith already resided.

And from America, as soon as the news was made known, came urgent invitations. Friends and relatives wrote of the advantages of this free country. Newspapers carried glowing advertisements. The Santa Fe railroad directed attention to the thousands of acres of low-priced land it was then offering for sale in Kansas.

Decision to Emigrate

Some of the distressed people began immediately to prepare for departure. The majority, however, was cautious. America they had condemned as an asylum for convicts, a catch-all for the off-scourings of other nations. "How can one live in peace amid such people, to say nothing of the native savages?"

But they must go somewhere. So, in the spring of 1873, a delegation of three went to America to find farms. These three men came to Kansas and near Hillsboro bought land for their American homes. They found that the sunshine in Kansas is much like that in the Crimea. That is why they decided to live in Kansas. They wanted to live in a land of sunshine.

Each one of the Mennonites took a little of the best wheat for seed, and in each family the little children picked out the best seed, while the older people did the hard work of packing their things for the journey to Kansas.

The 24 families left the Crimea on May 1. First, they took a boat from Caslov across the Black Sea to Odessa. Then they took a train across Europe to Hamburg in Germany. Then they took a ship to Hull, England, and once more took a train across England to Liverpool. There they took a steamship, City of Brooklyn, for America.

As they were crossing the Atlantic Ocean, Anna thought many times about the two gallon jars of wheat she had picked. Her mother had put

the seed in a trunk with their clothes, so that it would be safe from harm. Anna wondered how the 250,000 grains which she had picked with her own hands liked the journey to America. She did not think they liked it very well because it was so dark in the trunk.

After many days the sailors shouted that they could see land. Anna ran on deck. Far to the west she could see a dark object. It looked like a cloud to her.

"That is America," said Mr. Barkman.

They left the ship in New York and there took a train for Kansas.

How glad the Mennonites were to reach Kansas after their long journey. It took two months to go from the Crimea to Kansas. In May, 1874, the first contingent—about 24 families, led by Bishop Wiebe—embarked. They arrived in New York on July 15 and proceeded to Elkhart, Indiana, where John F. Funk found them shelter in an abandoned factory, while Bishop Wiebe and a committee went to find a suitable place for settlement.

Bishop Wiebe, in a paper "Mennonite Immigration to Kansas," says, "We traveled over Nebraska and Kansas. In Nebraska we were afraid of the deep wells which had to be drilled and cost much money; our people did not have much money and they were used to dug wells, so we decided for Kansas where we found the wells shallow." Perhaps another inducement was the fact that on March 10, 1874, the Kansas legislature passed a law exempting Mennonites and Friends (Quakers) from military service.

Kansas Land Purchased

Continuing, Bishop Wiebe says: "C. B. Schmidt, land agent for the Santa Fe, drove with us all over Kansas as far as Great Bend. On a hot August day we ate our dinner under a tree on Section 13 on the South Cottonwood . . ."

There they purchased 12 sections of land in the western part of Marion County. Agent Schmidt then went to Elkhart to bring on their families, while the committee hurried to get ready for them. Bishop Wiebe himself rented an empty store building in Peabody, bought a stove, a table, two horses and a wagon.

When that was done he was assailed by fears: The heat was intense, and the high winds seared everything. The year before grasshoppers had destroyed all crops. He wondered if they should be able to make a living. The members of his group were not rich in worldly goods. They had no provisions, no shelter, no implement.

Some were old and sick, and winter was near.

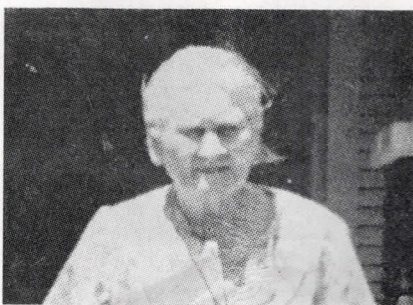
Overcome with his responsibilities, he sat on the doorstep of his hotel in Peabody and wept. But his landlady, Mrs. August Seybold, pointed to some stones nearby: "Do you see those stones? They are sometimes entirely under water; it can rain very hard here, and it soon will rain. Oh, Mr. Wiebe, be of good cheer; such people as you will make their living!"

At midnight on Saturday, Aug. 9, the party arrived from Elkhart. Johann Fast, Wilhelm Ewart, John Rotsloff, Mrs. Peter Funk (of Bruderthal community) and those who had come the year before were at the station with teams and conveyances. Little Abraham Harder, the only one of the many children awake when the train stopped, looked through the window and saw Johann Fast. "There's Grandpa!" he shouted. "I see Grandpa!"

Living Was Hard

On Sunday, the 10th, they went on the land, 14 miles northeast of Peabody. Bishop Wiebe continues: "I had loaded some lumber and utensils, and my family on top. So, we rode in the deep grass to the little stake that marked the spot I had chosen . . . My wife asked me, 'Why do you stop?' I said, 'We are to live here.' She began to weep. Several families moved into Mr. Funk's barn, where soon after old mother Abraham Cornelson died—the first dead body of our people in America."

Some turned their wagon boxes upside down and slept under them until more permanent facilities could be provided. Said Bishop Wiebe: "We built light board shanties, dug wells, and in three weeks it began to rain. We rented some plowed ground from English speaking neighbors who lived in Sections 12 and 14. Seed wheat was 70 cents in price, corn was \$1.25; potatoes were \$2 a bushel."



MRS. G. D. FRIESEN, mother of Herbert Friesen, was the first child of Mennonite parentage born on U.S. soil after the first contingent of emigrants came from Russia in 1874. She was a sister-in-law of Anna Barkman Wohlgenuth.

The Anna Earkman seed wheat was seeded with other wheat this fall of 1874.

At the end of five years Mennonite women no longer had cause to weep over their situation in Kansas—not that they ever spent much time in weeping for they "toiled in the heat of the day" along with their men.

In June of 1875, Mr. Barkman cut the wheat with a sickle and he threshed it with a big stone, which he rolled across the wheat straw to beat the grain out of the wheat heads. The neighbors who had lived a long time in Kansas, laughed at him because he threshed with a stone. They thought he was funny. He spoke German and they spoke English and they could not understand anything he said.

But when he had finished threshing his wheat it was his turn to laugh for he had more wheat than his Kansas neighbors. The other Mennonites had good crops of wheat, too. But the other Kansas neighbors did not have good crops of wheat.

"Why do the Mennonites have good wheat when we have such poor wheat?" they asked. It was that way every year. The Mennonites always had much wheat in their fields, but the other people did not have much wheat. Also, the wheat the Mennonites raised was the best wheat. It made the best bread.

Turkey Red Spreads

At last, the neighbors came to the Mennonites and bought seed from them. After that they had good wheat, too. Soon the news spread all over Kansas that the Mennonites had a new kind of wheat, which grew well in the Kansas sunshine, and which made better flour any other kind of wheat. Nearly all the farmers in Kansas bought some of the seed.

The kind of wheat the Mennonites brought from Russia is called Turkey Red Wheat. They call it Turkey because it first grew in a little valley in Turkey where the Mennonites got it. They call it Red because it has a reddish golden color.

Before the Mennonites brought Turkey Red wheat to America, the Kansas farmers did not grow much wheat. Now, Kansas is one of the greatest of all wheat-growing states. The people of other states come to Kansas to buy flour for bread and biscuit baking. They say: "Kansas grows the best wheat in the world."

Do you think they would say that if Anna Barkman and her neighbors had not picked the very finest seed from the wheat bins in the Crimea when they came to America?

This wheat is the grandfather of all U.S. hard winter wheats. «