



Monument commemorating the arrival of the Swiss Volhynian Mennonites in 1874. Photo courtesy Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas.

ENACTING *GEMEINDE* IN THE LANGUAGE AND STYLE OF SWISS VOLHYNIAN MENNONITE STORYTELLING

by

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Narrative performance pervades each act in everyday experience. As we tell others about events in our lives and listen to what others say about us, we cast and recast our experience in ways that affirm our individual and relational identities. In recent years, the ways in which telling a story sustains and reshapes social relationships have especially interested me. Because story re-enacts and interprets the past, captures emotion, and expresses value, it is a fundamental mode of human communication. Our ability to understand each other depends on our facility as storytellers.

This article investigates the relationship between storytelling and cultural identity as it emerges in the social interactions among the Swiss Volhynian Mennonites whose ancestors settled in the community of Moundridge, Kansas, in the 1870s. Because they migrated primarily as church congregations and made their living as farmers in isolated rural areas, the Swiss Mennonites have generally remained separate from the various societies in which they lived. Sustained by their Anabaptist Christian beliefs, these Mennonites worked to establish a community of mutually accountable believers that was independent of the social and political structures of mainstream society. In their native language of German, they called this idea of community *Gemeinde*. As a result of living in *Gemeinde*, a distinctive cultural identity has endured among the Swiss Volhynians as evidenced by their ethnic foodways, Schweitzer dialect, and religious orientation.

A careful examination of Swiss Volhynian oral narration reveals that a primary function of narrative performance is to give momentary substance to a continually evolving sense of community. In other words, by affirming community "connectedness," reinforcing community values, and sometimes questioning the norms and expectations of the community, the Swiss Volhynian Mennonites enact *Gemeinde* in their storytelling.

As a third generation descendant of Swiss Volhynian immigrants, I have found that my scholarly interest in interpreting the narrative behaviors of this group has coincided with a personal interest in recapturing what I fear is a disappearing ethnic heritage. Often my role as researcher and my role as community insider have co-existed in a somewhat capricious relationship. As an insider, the more I invest myself in the community, the more I identify with its heritage. As a scholar, the more intentionally analytical I am in response to community behaviors, the more I separate myself from a community whose

members maintain narrative conventions "within the tacit dimension" and have no need to describe those conventions academically.¹

At the same time, there are decided advantages in acting both as researcher and community insider, one of the foremost being the continuity of experience I have within the Swiss Volhynian community. In order for field researchers to broaden their personal frames of reference in the communities they study, they must commit themselves to establish extended personal relationships with their informants.

Though the primary "textual" data for this study were obtained through tape-recorded interviews, the responses elicited and the interpretations offered are derived as much from my intimate association with the Swiss Mennonites as they are from a careful analysis of the interview transcripts. In order to develop a legitimate analysis of oral narrative in everyday experience, my primary data necessarily come from my personal involvement in the everyday experience of Swiss Mennonite culture. The interviews, then, provided a means for following up on personal insights about the performances I have observed in natural environments and for soliciting the help of my informants in describing such performances.

A Historical Sketch of the Swiss Volhynian Mennonites

The Swiss Mennonites migrated to the United States from the province of Volhynia in Polish Russia in the 1870s. The majority of Swiss Mennonites originally came from Canton Bern in Switzerland, where they were persecuted for their Anabaptist beliefs.

In order to escape religious persecution and to seek new agricultural opportunities, the Swiss Mennonites moved from Switzerland to South Germany, and then to the province of Volhynia in Russia. (Actually, the term "Swiss Mennonite" is something of a misnomer since the cultural identity of this group developed during several centuries of experience in Europe and Russia rather than in Switzerland.) In 1861, a Swiss Mennonite congregation was founded in the small town of Kotosufka in Volhynia. However, the passing of the military conscription law during the reign of Czar Alexander required yet another emigration. On August 6, 1874, seventy-eight Swiss Mennonite families (nearly everyone in the village) left Kotosufka for New York. According to Swiss Mennonite historian Solomon Stucky, nineteen families chose to settle in South Dakota, while the remaining fifty-nine settled on the prairies of central Kansas. There the Kotosufka congregation established the Hopefield Church and became some of the most significant founding members of the Moundridge community.

Mennonite historian, Harley J. Stucky, observes that these "Russian Mennonites,"

tried to establish their own unique communities based on common faith, dialect, [and] occupation.... They tried to perpetuate communities similar to those in the old world primarily on the basis of congregational affinity.²

For the Swiss Volhynians in the late 1800s, the church was the community and the community was the church. This was the essence of the *Gemeinde*—the notion that members in the church community were wholly interdependent. Although more than a century in the United States has diminished the sense of *Gemeinde* for the Swiss Volhynians, prevalent traces of this idea remain in the oral culture of the Mennonites in the Moundridge community. Richard Schrag, a retired Mennonite farmer, remembers it this way:

[W]e were conscious of the fact that to misbehave—there may be punishment, and to fall out of favor with the community—the church family—was a real disgrace. And you'd really feel isolated... We were considered, at that time—when I was growing up—we were considered a closed group.³

Although practice of the "Bann" had been abandoned years before, the social exclusion of those who offended the community was still prevalent in Richard's childhood experience. The formal structures of church discipline in Russia had been transformed into an informal system of social isolation and chastisement.



Original Hopewell (*Hoffnungsfeld*) Mennonite Church located west of Moundridge, Kansas. Photo courtesy of Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas.

As a second generation descendant of the Russian immigrants, Richard maintained a strong sense of accountability to community expectations. Richard was one of the thirty-four people from the Moundridge community whom I interviewed for this study, thirty of whom were either first or second generation descendants of the immigrants from Volhynia.⁴ As a result, the perceptions of "community" as they emerge in this study are those of a specific group of older Swiss Mennonites, who range from 60 to 98 years of age.

This particular group of Swiss Mennonites is a transitional group. They learned English as a second language. These people spoke German to their parents and siblings in their childhood homes, but they speak English to their own children. They have seen remarkable changes in farming practices, from the primitive methods of the horse-drawn plow to the modern technology of motorized tractor. Whereas their childhood experience was limited to activities in an isolated rural community, they now have the freedom and mobility that modern forms of transportation provide. Although their experiences with religion, social life, work, education, and family relationships have altered significantly in the course of their lifetimes, they interpret each of these aspects of contemporary life in light of the clearly defined expectations of their youth.

Of the thirty-four people who participated in this project, only eleven were still located on the farm at the time of the interviews. Of the remaining twenty-three, only five had occupations other than farming that had prompted them to live in town. The other eighteen had either retired or semi-retired from farming and moved to town (fourteen moved to Moundridge and one to Newton). Thus, a core of the interview participants has grown up and remained in the Moundridge community.

The Reluctant Storyteller in Swiss Volhynian Culture

I began researching this project in 1986 when I was a doctoral student at Louisiana State University. I was an eager and ashamedly naive field researcher, who was on the hunt for individuals with established reputations as storytellers in the Moundridge community. However, my search was fraught with false leads, disorientation, and a general lack of information. My initial inquiry into the storytelling traditions of the Swiss Mennonites left me feeling that I had misjudged my home community and wondering whether any storytellers still lived there. In the rare instance that individuals were identified by others as good storytellers, the "storytellers" themselves denied the distinction.

Several fundamental assumptions of Swiss Volhynian religion and culture undoubtedly contribute to this reticence to acknowledge participation in a storytelling tradition. As an oral narrator who has been reared in a religious tradition that, according to Solomon Stucky, values the "practical life, stressing the dangers of pride and admonition to lead holy lives,"⁵ has plausible reasons for a bias against storytelling, which is associated with frivolity, self-presentation,

and secularism. In addition, the Kotosufka congregation's migration en masse to America perpetuated the custom of the closed community by enabling the Swiss Volhynians to maintain the congregational self-sufficiency they had practiced for nearly two centuries in Europe and Russia. Although their interdependence as a congregation has dissipated with acculturation to American society, a measure of clannishness of the Swiss Mennonites in Moundridge has endured. Speaking in 1949 at the seventy-fifth year celebration of the Swiss Volhynian migration, R.C. Kauffman, a Mennonite historian, identified the Swiss Mennonites' "most obvious...trait"—that, namely, of a strong in-group feeling—the denominational loyalty and separateness that characterizes us.⁶ Even today, after a century of acculturation to American society, the Swiss Mennonites in Moundridge are often perceived as a clannish people.

With such a strong cultural bias towards separateness, the Swiss Mennonites have maintained a community in which the concern for activities and experiences of those within the group dominates the oral culture of the group. J. O. Schrag, a member of the Moundridge community, characterized the narrow scope of Swiss Mennonite oral narration, when he observed, "[W]e developed a lot of little stories [when we were together with our cousins], but no one—they didn't amount to anything outside of your group" [E:258]. Thus, the storyteller in the Moundridge community cannot be distinguished by his or her vast repertoire of traditional folk tales. Rather, the oral narrator tells personal experience stories, family reminiscences, and stories about unusual community events or personalities. It is not surprising then that Swiss Mennonites consider storytelling—in the traditional sense—as an activity foreign to the Moundridge community.

J.O. Schrag offers the most in-depth local perspective on the storytelling practices of Swiss Mennonites. A self-acknowledged authority on Swiss Volhynian dialect, Schrag observes, "the South Dakota people," unlike the Moundridge Schweitzers⁷, "have more stories—real stories. You know, like the white woman—*Die weisse Frau*—and several others" [E:256]. By identifying folk legends like *Die weisse Frau* as "real stories," Schrag implies that Schweitzers are likely to associate the term "storytelling" with "fictional narration." This association helps to explain the general lack of recognition of a storytelling tradition in the Schweitzer community. When Schrag observes that "telling stories" is not [the Swiss Mennonites'] long suit," he is apparently referring to traditional folk tales [E:257].

After dismissing the notion of a folk tale tradition in the Moundridge community, Schrag goes on to address what he sees at the heart of Swiss Mennonite narration.

But, there are stories. Sometimes you have to dig a while till you get them out. But there are some stories that have been—especially in their own experiences, you know... So, they created their own stories. [E:257]

Indeed, "creating one's own story" is a primary function of Swiss Volhynian oral narration. Drawing from personal experience, narrators not only can affirm their personal identities in oral narration, they can also adhere to expectations of truthfulness thereby upholding the integrity of narrative discourse.

Thus, the absence of a generally acknowledged forum for sharing stories among the Swiss Volhynians does not necessarily signify the lack of a storytelling tradition. In fact, storytelling is pervasive in Swiss Mennonite culture. In one of the workshop sessions, Ozzie Goering provided a valuable insight into the storytelling practices of the Swiss Volhynians.

I think if you were to tell this group that you would like...to hear us tell stories about Eli Schrag [Ozzie's uncle, who was often the butt of jokes] and about people like that, that you would find a wealth of stories bubbling out that there wouldn't be time for them all. I think where you are right is that due to the perceived humility factor or something, the Swiss do not want to be identified as being the storyteller. But you get a group together and get them started talking, there's stories galore about what all has happened. [2:55-56]⁸

As Goering's comment suggests, for Swiss Mennonites, the "traditional" corpus of narratives includes personal experience stories and community anecdotes rather than standard folk tales, legends, or ballads. Stories of community experiences both preserve the "humility factor" and encourage a widespread participation in narrative interactions.

Expressions of Community in Narrative Language, Style, and Structure

As one who feels strongly that narrative performance involves an intricate relationship among the performer, his or her language, and the diverse components of the performance setting, I am reticent to launch an analysis that isolates the narrative "text" (for lack of a better word) from the other aspects of the performance event. While I recognize the artificial nature of this separation, the very act of writing a performance analysis constrains me to select from many worthy objects of attention in order to focus my discussion. I derive some comfort from Dwight Conquergood's suggestion that those who investigate the "swirling constellation of energies" we call "culture" are less bound to "systematic investigation" than to "experience in social life."⁹ Indeed, determining the exact point entrance into performance analysis may be incidental to the actual decision to enter. No matter where one enters, one cannot fail to see that the interconnected nature of performance, in which individual performers, their language, their relationships, and their culture continually define and reshape each other.

Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of literary discourse supports the notion that language—both written and oral—reflects the lived experience of the individual who uses it.¹⁰ Bakhtin recognizes a pervasive tension in spoken and written discourse between language that is "half someone else's" and half "one's own." Because we are constantly using words that have been appropriated from the experience of others, our speech reveals a complex multiplicity of contexts that reflect our own experience as well as the experience of others. As we bring words together in new combinations, we create new contexts for the interpretation of meaning.

It makes sense to apply Bakhtin's theory of narrative discourse to spoken discourse, since Bakhtin himself derives much of his criticism from an analysis of speech. Thus by examining the linguistic features of an oral narrative, I hope to demonstrate how individual narrators create particular "conceptions of the world." Word choice, style, and narrative technique constitute "contextual overtones" that suggest particular interpretations of a narrator's individual and collective experiences.

The Schweitzer Dialect

On the most fundamental level, the speech patterns of the descendants of Swiss Mennonite immigrants from Volhynia exhibit the tension that Bakhtin identifies in the interplay between several national languages, or polyglossia. As Adina Krehbiel, a member of the Moundridge community, pointed out the Schweitzer dialect "isn't like the [German text]book... We had Polish and Russian and German in our language which is so easy for us" [A:220-221]. The Mennonites' sojourn through South Germany and Polish Russia has obviously contributed to the multilingual nature of their dialect. Victor Goering gave a clear example of the Polish influence on the Schweitzer dialect. He talked about the traditional after-harvest celebration that his family called *objinky*. For years, he assumed that *objinky* was just a family word for the post-harvest event. However, when he and his wife sponsored some Polish trainees, they discovered that the Polish word for harvest festival is *dovzhinky* [M:403]. No doubt, the Swiss Mennonite's experience in Polish Russia fostered an assimilation of Polish nuances in their dialect. In the same manner, after more than a century of experiences in the United States, Swiss Mennonites have incorporated American English into their dialect as well. One often hears "Germanized" pronunciations of English words when listening to the Schweitzer dialect.

Polyglossia abounds in Swiss Mennonite oral narrative. The Schweitzer dialect occurs most often in passages of reported speech. However, narrators generally translate the Schweitzer dialect into American English in order to accommodate the unfortunate ignorance of their interviewer. As a third generation descendant of the Volhynian immigrants, I understand very little of the Schweitzer vernacular. As if to underscore the accuracy of the rendering—in

effect to demonstrate the "truthfulness" of the narrative—storytellers maintain the Schweitzer dialect when they recount bits of speech that originated as Schweitzer phrases.

Often when storytellers render reported speech in dialect, the quoted passage has a special intensity or significance to the event being described. Notice, for instance, William Juhnke's fervent plea to his neighbor for help with the runaway horses.

[Val Krehbiel] saw that my horses were running. And...I yelled, "*Stop mei Geil! Stop mei Geil!*" ["Stop my horses! Stop my horses!"] ... He couldn't stop them. [C:245]

In the face of an apparently life-threatening situation, the young William called out in desperation. At this point in the story, a measure of intensity appropriate to the impending danger accompanies the verbal command and the shift into dialect highlights the urgency of the moment for the narrator.

Swiss Mennonite storytellers also use the Schweitzer dialect to highlight the punch line of a story. Richard Bauman suggests that although some stories have a primary focus on events, in anecdotes that make use of quoted speech, the primary focus is the dialogue—"the conversational encounter that culminates in a punch line."¹¹ Especially for the older Swiss Volhynian storytellers, memorable conversational encounters are those in which the dialect is used to poke fun at someone. J.O. Schrag laughed about fellow Schweitzer Fred Grundman, who finally managed to start his dilapidated car after repeated efforts and then triumphantly exclaimed "*Entlich uf hoch!*" ["Finally I'm on high!"] [E:260]. Ellen Schrag and Erwin Goering told stories about Andy Unruh, a stuttering Low German farm hand. Their stories also achieve their humor by quoting Andy's lines in German [N:457-459; I:323].

The humor of a punch line spoken in dialect is sometimes elusive when the phrase or sentence is translated into English. J.O. Schrag told a story about a member of the Hopefield Church choir, John Strauss, who was "the butt of a lot of stories..."

He couldn't sing very well but then, he would try it. Well, we had a cantata. And at the dress rehearsal...John Strauss wasn't there. So at the time for the rendition he was there. Now then he walked up and said, "Where do I sit?" And at that time Ed P. Goering was still alive... and Ed P. said, "*Das wees nurre der Gott und der Neuenschwander.*" Now, Neuenschwander was our preacher. "Only God and Neuenschwander know where you're going to sit!" [E:259]

On the surface the literal translation of Mr. Goering's comment seems marginally humorous at best. Yet, the oral narrator chuckled heartily when he finished the

telling. Of course, some of the humor arises from knowing the people involved in the incident, but the oral narrator's direct quotation indicates an interest as well in the specific phraseology of the comment. I assume that part of what makes the punch line funny is the fact that it is stated in dialect. Typically Schweitzers enjoy the special finesse that the Schweitzer dialect lends to the spoken word, and they acknowledge that funny statements frequently lose their humor when translated into English.

The Swiss Mennonites' appreciation of the distinct character of the German language is demonstrated in a reluctance among storytellers to offer English translations of reported speech without acknowledging that the quotations were originally spoken in German. Notice Delbert Goering's account of a challenge to the *Bücher Beer*, a traveling book salesman who depended on his customers for food and shelter.

Somebody asked him once about going where you're not invited. And he said in German, "They didn't ask me not to come." [B:228]

The narrator identified the language of the original statement even though the quotation was in English. Richard Schrag made a similar acknowledgement in his story about trying to refuse gracefully wine from his wife's grandfather.

So I thought, "...maybe I can wiggle out of it because of my stomach trouble." So I said, "Well, I don't want to [drink wine] on account of my stomach." He said, "The Apostle Paul"—he said it in German—"The Apostle Paul told Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach's sake." And I was stuck. [F:270]

In this case the narrator made a false start, interrupting himself to acknowledge that the original language of the quotation, almost as if he failed to recognize the inadequacy of the translation until he uttered it aloud. Both narrators reveal a reticence to delete completely the influences of the German language on the oral culture of their people.

In Richard's example there is a further indication that for previous generations of Swiss Mennonites the German language was vested with religious authority. Prior to World War I, the Mennonite churches in Moundridge used German for Sunday morning worship services. Although their education in American schools had fostered the general adoption of English for communication in the home and at the work site, Swiss Volhynians continued to worship, pray, and read the Bible in German. Therefore, the grandfather's quotation from the Bible would naturally have been spoken in German rather than English. Richard's need to acknowledge the German original no doubt arises from a keen awareness of the significance in earlier years of using German in all forms of religious discourse.

Mennonites of my generation have become more indifferent toward the German language. The spiritual aura that once surrounded German has all but vanished. Ellen Kling recalled a conversation that provides a good example of the Schweitzer's shifting attitudes toward the German language.

...Joe said that those older people were convinced that in heaven German would be the only language spoken. And then they started to laugh and Donald [Ellen's brother] said, "Yes, but do you remember, Sis...that Dad agreed for a while. But then he said, 'No, that can't be. Because there aren't enough cuss words in German.'" [J:339]

Certainly the remark by Ellen's father, Dan Waltner, typifies his feisty nature. At the same time, the comment debunks the idea that the German language is sanctified in some way. It also reveals the absurdity of ascribing morality to particular words in any language. After all, if the language in heaven includes a healthy proportion of cuss words, then we ought not to be offended by a little swearing here on earth.

A joke that has circulated in Mennonite circles reflects the diminishing influence of the German language among contemporary Swiss Mennonites. The joke tells of an old Mennonite minister who argued vehemently that God spoke in German. In order to prove the fact, the minister pointed to the passage in his German Bible where God says to Adam, "*Adam, wo bist du?*" While the joke attests to the reverence with which the German language has been viewed, it affirms a new attitude of enlightenment by showing the obvious absurdity of the minister's argument. His veneration of the German language inhibited the minister's intellectual progress, just as adherence to old world customs stood in the way of material progress for the descendants of Swiss Volhynian immigrants. Stephen Stern's research into the function of ethnic folklore suggests that American born ethnics often use dialect jokes to distinguish themselves from their "backward" predecessors.¹² In the same manner, the joke about the Mennonite minister helps the progressive Mennonite to ease the embarrassment about his or her backward ancestors and disparages the exalted position of the German language. For the "new" generation of Swiss Mennonites, knowledge of German is more novelty than necessity.

In addition to instances of Schweitzer German dialect, typically German grammatical structures bear witness to the impact of the Swiss-German culture on Schweitzer oral narration. Even when no German is spoken, narrators often use characteristic sentence structure of the Schweitzer grammar in crafting their oral narrations. For instance, the adverb "already" generally indicates a time expectation within which an event occurs or fails to occur. When a person says, "I thought you had already finished that," she is saying that she had expected the task to be finished "by this time." However, Swiss Germans frequently use the word for more than its "adverbial" function.

Used as its German translation "*schon*," "already" can give emphasis or indicate urgency. In describing the style of humor of Dan Waltner, a community prankster, Adina Krehbiel commented, "He'd say things...[that were]so dumb that it was for sure that it's not true already" [A:225]. To the ear of a native speaker of American English, the use of "already" seems strange in the previous sentence. The comparative time expectation that the adverb suggests cannot be applied in the sentence. Adina's awareness of Dan's humorous intent really has very little to do with the time when he made the "dumb" comment. In this case, the adverb emphasizes the level of absurdity in Mr. Waltner's comment.

Even when "already" can be properly construed as a verb modifier, it often indicates a special urgency. Children who are reluctant to end their play at the end of an evening's visit in someone else's home often hear the command from impatient parents, "Let's go already!" William Juhnke used the adverb in a similar manner as he commented on his experience with the runaway horses, "I was wondering whether I'd run off the world already someplace"[C:245]. Here the adverb emphasizes the excessive distance traveled in the seemingly endless jaunt with the runaway horses.

Although the play between the two languages is most frequently illustrated by the juxtaposition of German and English phrases, some instances of language play involving double meanings do occur. Dan W. Goering remembered that he was teased as a child for wishing it would be more *hell* [bright] outside on dreary days.¹³ He and Erwin C. Goering tell differing versions of a story about a Mennonite farmer who asks a neighboring "English" woman for a *Kisse* [pillow] for his sore buttocks.

In Dan's version the protagonist was supposedly one of Andy J. Goering's relatives in South Dakota who was clearing a field of stones with a stone sled [H:304], and in Erwin's the main character was an Eden-Hopefield Mennonite who was hauling hogs to Halstead with a lumber wagon [N:451-453]. Both accounts develop in a similar fashion. After several hours of riding, the metal seat of the wagon or sled became irritating to the Mennonite farmer. So he decided to stop at a roadside farmhouse and ask for a pillow to ease his sore buttocks. When he called at the door, an English lady answered. And suddenly the farmer panicked, not able to remember the English word for pillow. He said, "Excuse me miss, but I wonder if you could give me a *Kisse*." From her shocked response, the farmer could tell that he had made a grave error. So he added, "Oh no, no, no. Not a *Kisse* here [pointing to lips]. A *Kisse* there [pointing to buttocks]."

These forms of play between English and the Schweitzer dialect typify the way bilingualism contributes to language play in other immigrant cultures. Rosan Jordan, who had studied Mexican-American immigrants in the southwestern United States, observes that "the power to play with both languages suggests the power to control both cultures and hence to deal effectively with one's biculturalism."¹⁴ Although Jordan's study involves groups that have migrated

more recently than the Swiss Mennonites, her premise that bilingual language play demonstrates a tension between cultures has significant applications in the study of Swiss Mennonite oral culture.

A fundamental tension arises in Swiss Mennonite stories in the play between languages. The prevalence of the dialect and of "Germanized" English expressions in their stories, demonstrates the Swiss Volhynians' enduring awareness of their status as an immigrant culture. Their dialect affirms the Schweitzers' identification with their Russian ancestors and reveals an abiding level of separation from American society. At the same time, their facility in American English attests to the Swiss Mennonites' unapologetic participation in the current of contemporary American society. Like Jordan's Mexican-American immigrants, Swiss Volhynians in Moundridge demonstrate their command of both languages in their word play, and thus bring about a "subliminal merging" of two cultures.¹⁵ However, the interplay of languages in Swiss Mennonite oral discourse reflects a different tension than that of the Mexican-Americans in Jordan's study.

The need for a "psychological reconciliation of opposites"¹⁶ is less intense among Swiss Mennonites. Of course, this need has diminished in part because of the reduced tension between the Swiss Volhynian and American cultures after more than a century of assimilation. However, Swiss Mennonites differ from other immigrant cultures on a more fundamental level. After their immigration in 1874, a primary goal for Swiss Mennonites was to remain separate from American culture rather than to assimilate into it. They established their own congregational community in the hopes of maintaining the lifestyle they had established in Kotosufka. In a sense Swiss Mennonites have assimilated in spite of themselves. Indeed, their oral discourse reflects an abiding preference for separateness over integration. And at the same time it demonstrates a need to renegotiate *Gemeinde* in the context of newly evolving cultural assumptions in their identity as native born United States citizens.

The polyglot in the Swiss Mennonites' oral culture indicates the variety of cultural influences that have shaped Swiss Volhynian experience. Though predominantly German, the Schweitzer dialect also utilizes words from Poland, Russia, and the United States. Because of this unique mingling of national languages, the dialect is difficult to decipher for any group other than the Swiss Volhynians. Thus, unlike numerous other immigrant groups, the term "bicultural" is really inadequate to characterize the heritage of the Swiss Volhynians. Indeed, their oral discourse reflects a multi-cultural experience. Ironically, the multi-cultural nature of their dialect functions to limit, rather than to broaden the base of their communication. When Swiss Volhynians speak in the "mother tongue," they can be understood fully only by other Swiss Volhynians. The dialect affirms their distinctive cultural identity and enables Swiss Mennonites to perpetuate a sense of separateness from the American mainstream.



Swiss Volhynian Mennonites on steps of Eden Mennonite Church west of Moundridge.
 Photo courtesy Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas.

Minimalist Style and Insider's Code

Another distinguishing feature of Swiss Mennonite oral discourse is the noticeable minimalism that pervades these narratives. Stories are seldom embellished with careful descriptive phrases. With a few exceptions, storytellers recount incidents in brief statements, sometimes using only two or three short sentences to tell a story. Perhaps this practice is in keeping with the values of truthfulness and modesty: better to err on the side of sparseness than to embellish and run the risk of wavering from the absolute truth.

Often the storyteller uses specific names, especially in discussing family members, without explaining the relationship of the narrator to the person named. Adina Krehbiel remembered Dan Waltner's storytelling antics, suggesting that he spoke "like Carl does a little bit, too" [A:225]. She did not mention that

Carl Waltner was a nephew of hers who is at best distantly related to Dan Waltner. William Juhnke referred to the owners of the Alta Mill, saying simply that the mill was run by "Ransom Stucky's father and uncles" [C:234]. Jacob Goering talked about Gilbert and Victor working in the field without mentioning that they were his sons [D:254]. Swiss Mennonite stories are full of these unexplained references that reveal an insider's code in the use of language—a kind of "Schweitzer Shorthand." These storytellers assume (sometimes mistakenly) that I know these family relationships, since I am a community insider. Again, these stories evoke *Gemeinde* by assuming a relationship with the listener that depends on the shared knowledge of family and community members.

Storytellers typically use "Schweitzer Shorthand" to orient the listener to the people or places that the story involves. In some instances, efforts to ensure that I know exactly to whom an incident happened or exactly where it occurred supersedes the storyteller's account of the event itself. For example, William Juhnke interrupted the first line of "Uncle Wesley's Hay Story" to ask his wife about the man with whom his uncle was working [C:248]. William was not satisfied with simply identifying the man as "a Wedel." Instead he wanted to know, "Now, which Wedel was that?" Only after his wife identified the man as "John Wedel's older brother," could William proceed with his story. When he finished the story, William added that his Uncle Wesley was the brother to my grandfather.

For some storytellers, this process of making connections errs on the side of obsessive and the "shorthand" turns to "longhand." In a story about a Mennonite farmer who was tarred and feathered for refusing to buy war bonds, Art Goering tried to relate the man's name to his contemporary descendants.

Of course, you take this John Schrag, better known as *Krike Hannes* [Creek John]. You know who I'm talking about. John Schrag, he was Dan and Herman's father, and Pete and Jack, the Schrag boys, you know. There's only three living now, I guess. Pete and Herman and Adam. *Ja*, the three out of nine boys. *Ja*, their father—who, incidentally, was direct uncle to my mother. Mrs. Schrag and my mother's mother were sisters. So, my mother and the Schrag's were first cousins. But, uh, John Schrag, he was actually tarred and feathered during that time. [K:349]

After establishing what he evidently perceived to be a necessary link, he resumed the story, which took only two sentences to tell. In this case the storyteller not only makes an association for the listener, he also demonstrates his own relationship to the protagonist of the story. In so doing, he virtually eclipses the story itself. Swiss Mennonites easily become preoccupied with digressions. In fact, the "Mennonite Game" (as this activity of making associations has been

affectionately labelled) is a commonly acknowledged form of verbal play for Swiss Mennonites in Moundridge as well as for ethnic Mennonites across the country.

While Swiss Mennonites shift into the association game, their verbal activity regularly delays or even replaces narration in their oral interactions. Notice how Erwin Goering nearly loses track of the story about his father's desire to go to school in the following example. Notice also, how naturally I fall into the pattern of making associations.

E: He didn't want to be a farmer. He wanted to go into business. Well, when they grew up, the oldest two were daughters. And then there were five boys. Something like that. Mrs. P. S. Krehbiel, Peter D.'s folks. Pete lives with Frieda—Frieda Epp.

J: He was my uncle. [His first wife, now deceased, was my mother's sister.]

E: *Ja*. Okay. Sure, sure. Okay. Uh, um—what was my point, now? You shook me when you said he was your uncle. I should have known that. [N:442]

Erwin very much wanted to provide a connection for me with the P.S. Krehbiel family. When I provided an obvious association, Erwin chided himself for his failure to do so. His dismay at having missed the connection was evident as he struggled to regain the narrative line. As Erwin's story and many others demonstrate, the association game is a typical pattern in Swiss Mennonite oral style.

Code words other than specific names of people or family relationships also indicate an in-group relationship. Mennonites in Moundridge often speak a few words or phrases to refer to stories that "everyone" knows. A person may recite a catch phrase as a substitute for telling the story thus demonstrating the story's relevance to a similar situation. J.O. Schrag recalls the origin of the phrase "*grümm Strück vereiss*" ["grim broken rope"].

...what would that mean to anyone else? Well, it happened that Victor Goering was visiting Uncle Dan's and somehow we fooled around with a rope in the barn. He was involved where he was irritated, he was grim. He was angry about it. [Laughs] And the rope broke, see? Well, so we would just say, "*grümm Strück vereiss*," and that was our story. We knew what was going on. [E:259]

Often families share a broad repertoire of such phrases. An actual telling of the story surrounding the phrase's origin seldom occurs within the closed context of the family. Instead, Swiss Mennonites tell these stories to people outside the

family who may hear family members use the phrase with each other but are unfamiliar with the context surrounding it.

The microstructure of "Schweitzer Shorthand" is perhaps the most prevalent example of Swiss Mennonite narrative distinctiveness. This narrative component, which I call "linking," functions to orient the listener to the time, place, and characters in the story in a special way; it links the listener with the characters in the story and with the narrative community. For example, Art Goering told about seeing a Swiss German play that explored the theme of agricultural progress. After a brief comment that introduced the story frame ("I recall that the Swiss gave a play to that effect"), Art began linking.

A: I don't know whether you heard [the play] or not.

J: No.

A: Phil Waltner was in on—. Of course, Phil died young, you know. Waldo Waltner's oldest brother. And in the play...[K:355]

In one sense, linking clauses set the scene for the story, but they do so in a special way. Linking attempts to connect the teller and listener by demonstrating shared knowledge of community relational structure. The narrator asserts a community relationship in his assumption that the listener either knows the characters in the story personally or knows someone from the characters' families. Thus, linking invokes peoplehood, by highlighting the inter-relationship of speaker and listener within the context of shared experience.

The frequency with which linking occurs in Swiss Volhynian narrative discourse indicates the fundamental nature of this structural component in Swiss Mennonite narrative form. In many Schweitzer stories, connecting the listener with the characters and relationships in the story is as vitally important as demonstrating the story's "point." In fact, sometimes linking becomes the primary goal as it did in Art Goering's *Krike Hannes* story. Though others may view these structures as digressions, Swiss Mennonites deem them as central.

The fact that linking often delays or even replaces narrative activity in Swiss Mennonite oral discourse reveals the abundant appeal of this formal structure among Swiss Mennonites. It is one of the most apparent distinguishing components of Swiss Volhynian narrative texts. One can easily identify the similarities between the micro-structure of linking and the macro-structure of Swiss Mennonite socio-cultural experience. In fact, Swiss Mennonite community is founded on a system of linkages. Community members inter-connect in ways that establish a collective system of interaction, which is at the same time mutually understood and individually meaningful.

Indeed Swiss Volhynian oral narration reflects the inevitability of contextual overtones within story texts. The storyteller's participation in community life is apparent in the preponderance of dialect, which promotes an in-group identity. The minimalist style of narration, which frequently utilizes Schweitzer shorthand

and insiders' code words, demonstrates a concern for the economy and integrity of speech. The predominance of community anecdotes, family reminiscences, and personal experience stories demonstrates an overriding interest in life within the fairly limited scope of community experience.

Clearly the linguistic structure of Swiss Mennonite oral narratives has been shaped by community experience. In addition to reflecting a broad spectrum of community concerns, structural elements function to locate story action within a mutually understood context of people and places. Thus, even an analysis that focuses specifically on "textual" considerations of Swiss Mennonite oral narrative reveals that narrative structures function both to recall and to evoke the essence of Swiss Volhynian *Gemeinde*.

NOTES

1. Sandra Dolby Stahl, *Literary Folkloristics and the Personal Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 7.
2. Harley J. Stucky, *A Century of Russian Mennonite History* (North Newton: n.p., 1974), p. 33.
3. Richard Schrag, interview by author, in John McCabe-Juhnke, "Narrative and Everyday Experience: Performance Process in the Storytelling of the Swiss Volhynian Mennonites," Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 1990, 2:279. Subsequent references will be bracketed in the text. Citations will include the appendix letter and the page number from the dissertation. For example, the citation [F:279] indicates that Richard Schrag's comment above is transcribed in appendix F on page 279. The dissertation manuscript and tape recordings are held in the Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas.
4. The other four included three spouses of Swiss Volhynians from other German Mennonite ancestry and one descendant from the Swiss Palatinate group that migrated to Kansas from Iowa in 1874.
5. Solomon Stueky, *The Heritage of the Swiss Volhynian Mennonites* (Waterloo: Conrad Press, 1981), p. 101.
6. R.C. Kauffman, "A Critical Evaluation of Ourselves (The Swiss Mennonites)," in *Addresses and other items of interest connected with the Seventy-fifth Anniversary Services of the Swiss Mennonites (Schweitzer Mennoniten)*, ed. Harley J. Stueky (North Newton: n.p., 1950), p. 54.
7. The term "Schweitzer," derived from the German word *Schweizer* [Swiss], is used by both community insiders and members of other German Mennonite groups to refer to the Swiss Volhynian people.
8. The designation, [2:55-56], is used to indicate material drawn from the transcriptions of the Storytelling Workshops I conducted in the Spring of 1993. The arabic numeral before the colon indicates the workshop number (1:3-11-1993, 2: 3-18-1993, 3: 3-25-1993, 4: 4-1-1993) and the numbers after the colon indicate the page numbers of the transcription. The tape recordings and transcriptions of the storytelling workshops are held in the Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas.

9. Dwight Conquergood, "Performing Cultures: Ethnography, Epistemology, and Ethics," in *Miteinander Sprechen und Handeln: Festschrift für Helmut Geissner*, ed. Edith Slembek (Frankfurt: Scriptor, 1986), p. 58.
10. M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trs. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), p. 293.
11. Richard Bauman, *Story, Performance, and Event*, Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture, No. 10 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 74.
12. Steven Stern, "Ethnic Folklore and the Folklore of Ethnicity," *Western Folklore*, 36 (1977), p. 23.
13. This he told me in a conversation after the formal interview with his wife, Erma.
14. Rosan A. Jordan, "Tension and Speech Play in Mexican-American Folklore," in *And Other Neighbory Names: Social Process and Cultural Image in Texas Folklore*, ed. Roger D. Abrahams and Richard Bauman (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 260.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 263.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 263.