Life in Pretoria Before The Turmoil

David F. Loewen

Pretoria, Village #14 in the Orenburg settlement, was founded in 1903. Owing to the Mennonites' sympathies with the Afrikaans-speaking Boers, as opposed to 'the English', of South Africa, Pretoria was named after the principal city of the Boers. It consisted of a wide dirt road separating two rows of houses, with approximately 15—17 homes on either side of the street. A public school stood on the north side of the street, in the middle of the village, and a high school stood (die Zentralschule) at the end of the street, on the south side.

Pretoria, located near the Ural Mountains, had a continental climate with hot and dry summers and very cold winters. The region was hilly and the source of many rivers which ended in the Sakmara basin, which is connected to the Volga River. In the spring, the Karaguj was very dangerous as it overflowed its banks, and then flowed into the Gusicha River, which passed Pretoria on the southern boundary, joining the Uran. To the north, flowed the "Obschij Syrt". During the thawing of those rivers, it became dangerous, and many bridges were swept away. The Karaguj quickly dried up and created a swamp between the Gusicha and Obschij Syrt. .

The surrounding vicinity was relatively flat and except for the ones planted by the settlers, the surrounding region was almost treeless. Each farmer had about an acre of land for his buildings and for his garden, with the buildings standing in the centre of the lot with a garden at the front or toward the street, and a garden at the back. In the front garden flowers were usually planted - roses, tulips, lilacs, irises, and poppies. There were also gooseberry and currant bushes as well as rhubarb. Some gardens had apple, crab apple, and hazel nut trees, and a wooden fence was usually erected around the front garden, or at least along the roadside.

Abraham and Maria Loewen, with their four children, arrived here in 1903, coming from Heuboden in the Borozenko Colony. During the 23 years that they lived in Pretoria, nine more children would be added to their family, two of which died as young children. Their first 11 years in Pretoria sharply contrasted with their last 12; the first relatively prosperous and peaceful – the second tumultuous and economically challenging.

By 1920, Pretoria's population stood at 304, divided among 33 families, farming approximately 5500 acres. It had a small store, owned by Peter. P. Dyck, stocked with small amounts of cloth, candy, sugar, coffee, tea, etc., as well as non-food items such as guitars and violins. Purchases could be paid for in cash or with farm produce like butter and eggs. In addition, the village also had a post office.

This is a description of life in Pretoria, as recalled by Loewen family members 60 years later. Tina Loewen and Jacob Loewen, age 10 and 19 respectively, at the time of their last year in Pretoria, provided most of these recollections.

Livelihood

Pretoria was a Mennonite village not unlike any other, with homes along a common street, each with a plot of land for personal gardens and buildings, and further removed from the village, land for growing crops and pastureland. In Pretoria's case, this land was northeast of the village, with each farmer assigned a plot of about 60 ha. There were no fences, only a strip of unplowed land as a divider.

The pastureland was jointly owned. In the morning, during the summer months, after the cows had been milked, they were taken to the main street, where the herdsman gathered the cows, starting from the east end and exiting the village at the west end, taking them to the common pastureland for the day. In the evening, the herdsman returned from the west and as the cows walked along the street, each farmer collected his own cows out of the herd. After feeding and milking, the milk was separated, or just left standing overnight. In the morning, the cream was spooned from the top of the milk. For the most part, the cream was churned and sold, or traded for other food, either in the local store or taken to Orenburg whenever someone went. Orenburg was approximately 70 km south of Pretoria. Abraham Loewen would make that trip only once or twice a year. It would take 3 days to make this trip and usually two or three farmers would travel together, as it was not safe to travel alone because of thieves or wolves. Abraham Loewen supplemented the family income with his trade – blacksmithing. He was, in fact, the village's sole blacksmith.

Butter was also made at the Loewen farm, but it too, like cream, was not intended for personal consumption. Tina Loewen recalls seldom getting butter to spread on their bread, since it was destined for sale. The flour for the bread her mother baked was made from their own grain, ground up in a privately-owned mill owned by Isaak Friesen in the neighbouring village of Karaguj. Tina remembers the times when they did get a taste of these special, delicious treats. When her mother churned butter, and after she had let the buttermilk run out of the homemade churn, the children were given a piece of bread, and with their fingers they would wipe up the little bit of butter left on the churn and spread it on their bread. Normally, their bread was eaten with salt.

Harvest time was always a time that everyone looked forward to with great anticipation. For the children, watermelon were likely near the top of their list. Watermelons were primarily for eating

fresh, but also for making syrup. In the fall, the ripe watermelons were loaded onto hayracks and taken home. Some were put into barrels for pickling, which was a delicious winter treat. The young boys would enjoy stealing watermelons from neighbours who might have nicer tasting melons than their own. Henry Loewen recalls:

> *"We boys could hardly wait until the watermelons were ripe enough to eat, so we used to cut a hole in one end with a knife, to test the middle of the fruit. This part was called the 'obramche' and was the sweetest part of the melon. If we were caught, our knives were taken away, but then we would flatten some nails and make a little hole in the watermelon to check it out. If it was ripe, we would eat it but if it was still green, we would put back the plug and turn it to the bottom. They would rot anyway, and we got a few spankings for doing it."*

Sunflower seeds were for eating and also for making oil.

Church Life

There was no church building in Pretoria, but the General Conference Mennonites held monthly services in the public school. They did not meet every Sunday because they did not have a minister in their village. Henry recalls that this visiting pastor would often stop in at their home. The Mennonite Brethren Church had a "Versamlungs Haus" (Meeting Place) in Karaguj. And when they did meet, they had no Sunday School.

Children, as a rule, did not attend church. Tina recalls going to Church one Sunday and seeing three men (her father, Abraham Loewen, was one of them) sitting at the front on chairs. They were the "Vorsaenger"[3] (song leaders) as they had no instruments. Some members of the Mennonite Brethren Church lived in Pretoria and taught Sunday School in their homes.

> *"I remember being at Neufeld's home with Jacob Peters as my teacher,"* recalls Tina, *"and we sang Gott ist die Liebe (God is Love) and other songs. We also had Sunday School classes at Euses and at Vogts. Here, the girls were our teachers. One Sunday they took us to Karaguj to their church where we presented a program."*

Holidays

Christmas and Easter were each celebrated for three days. Church services were held on the first day, in the morning, and the remaining days were spent visiting grandparents, uncles, aunts, etc. Christmas dinner was usually fruit 'moos' and ham. When visiting at relatives, the adults would eat first, followed by the children, a practice continued in Canada. The children enjoyed asking the adults, while they were eating, for the plum or apricot pits (in the 'moos'). They would then find a hammer and a board, break the pits, and eat the inside, which they found very delicious (children's appetizers?).

Early Christmas morning the children would get up and look for their plate of goodies at the table, which the parents or older children had prepared the evening before. This was their Christmas gift - a plate of a few nuts, candies, cookies, and a handkerchief. They might also receive one of their toys (a doll) that had disappeared shortly before Christmas, and fixed with either a new wooden head or a new stuffed body and new clothes and new bedding for the cradle, etc.

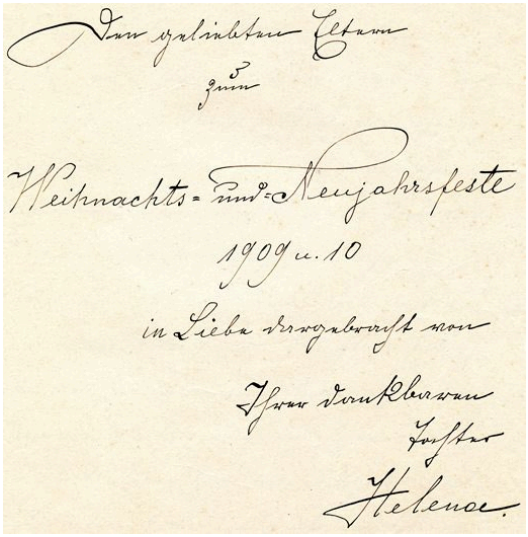
"The first joy we had was in school. We had a beautiful Christmas tree, the only one in the whole village. At home we did not have a tree. In our area there were no forests with spruce or fir trees. To get one for the school, we had to travel to Orenburg, 70 km. away. The majority could not afford this.

Christmas Eve was the most important for us younger ones. We received presents from Santa Claus (Grandfather Frost). We would receive walnuts, cookies, dates or dry figs, candies, and sugar candies. It would make a nice full bag. We also received similar presents from our aunt (Driediger family - my mother's sister, Margaretha, who lived in our village). On the second day of Christmas, the Driediger and Loewen families usually gathered at the Eitzens (father of my mother and Margaretha Driediger). They lived in Suworowka, 3 km. from us. As a result, each one of us had three bags of sweets, which was very much appreciated. This we enjoyed twice a year - at Christmas and at New Year. During the following months we were not spoiled with candies and sweets. That is why we were so excited at Christmas and at New Year's."

Easter was less festive and exciting for the children, but nonetheless, it was still an important religious holiday and family time. They had 'moos' (fruit soup) and ham and decorated 'paska' (Easter bread). They also had coloured Easter eggs. About 10 days before Easter, wheat kernels would be placed in a plate filled with dirt, and at Easter it would be about five or six inches high. The coloured eggs were then placed among the green wheat. Pentecost was another church holiday when baptisms were usually held. May 1st was a government holiday, and the schools had outings on this day. The children would go to the pastureland and play games, since they had no parks. (Jacob Loewen

Activities

Daily life for children was generally unstructured, and often, they were expected to find their own "entertainment". There wasn't much for them to do in the winter, except perhaps go for sleigh rides. In the spring they could visit the fields to play or pick flowers, which grew wild in the surrounding countryside. Tina remembers picking different coloured tulips on the hillside in the spring, and they would also go to the pastureland looking for "Sauerrumph", or sorel.



Helena's Christmas & New Year's card, made for her parents in 1909.

"We would gather the sorel leaves in our aprons and take it home for mother to cook 'moos' or soup."

Children might also be called upon to help with the calves. Once the weather was nice, the young children and some adults would take the young calves to the pasture, where the younger children had to form a circle and hold hands. The calves were then put inside this circle and loosened from the rope. If one of the children let go of another's hand, the calves would escape. The older children then had to round up the strays and bring them back into the circle. Once the calves were trained to stay in a group (this took a few days), they were turned over to a herdsman, who took them to the pasture for the day.

In the fall the children would go into the grain fields to glean after the grain had been cut and hauled home for threshing. We would pick up individual ears of grain, put them into a sack and take them home, where we would then beat the sack with a stick to separate the kernels from the straw. The grain would then be placed on a canvas to allow the wind to blow the chaff away. Later in the fall, a Russian peddler would arrive on a horse-drawn, two-wheeled cart full of apples. He would drive along the village calling "apples for sale". We children were then allowed to take the grain we had gleaned and exchange it for apples. We were allowed to have one apple (was that ever a treasure!) and the rest were turned over to mother who would use them to bake something for us – either 'platz', 'pereshki', or fritters."
(Tina Loewen)

Jacob Loewen describes life as very monotonous before school came to the village.

During those years we played a lot, and since our parents and the older brothers and sisters were occupied with farm work, we younger ones were on our own. There was one unwritten rule - children had to take care of each other. For the 1 to 3 year-olds, the older 4 to 6 year-olds were responsible. And woe to anyone of the older children who neglected to take adequate care of the younger children. I was punished only once by my mother because Daniel was crying in the cradle because he was wet and I had not changed his diapers, and Mary had fallen into the mud and dirtied herself. To learn responsibility for others was drilled into us in our younger years. I must say that I appreciated this. My gifting as a teacher helped me. To illustrate, our young neighbour lady, who had a baby, often treated me like one of her children. Since her child did not want to sleep in the afternoon without me, I would tell him different fables and he would fall asleep. For this I would be given some pastry, which we never received at home. Furthermore, this gave me a chance to forego the afternoon nap, which I did not like.

Abram Loewen, one of the oldest in the family, remembers that chores and school were the focus of his young years. Stomping the straw and manure to make 'bricks' to heat the oven, raiding the watermelon patch with friends, and walking miles, carrying butter to sell in a nearby Russian village. There were two sloughs nearby where people would go to swim or take their horses to swim and get cleaned. Sometimes they swam in the Gussicha River where the water was shallow, which Tina remembers doing. They had no bathing suits and of course, "*girls and boys would never go swimming the same time*".

Abram, who loved to read, enjoyed any books having to do with the American Indian. One told of a brave going swimming at midnight in the river. This so gripped him that one moonlit, summer night he crept out of the house, walked the mile or so to the river and went swimming. It didn't really meet expectations—it was merely spooky, and he didn't stay long. His love of swimming and reading, however, remained strong throughout his life.

Clothing

For clothing, children had only the bare essentials. For the Loewen children, that meant only two changes of clothing.

> *"I remember one day it rained and I fell into a puddle of water. I had to change into my winter dress, which was wooly and sharp, so it was itchy. I cried myself to sleep on a pile of hay in the barn. When I awoke, the sun was shining, and the dress had dried." (Tina Loewen)*

The Loewen children didn't own a pair of shoes until they left for Canada. In the summer they were always barefoot and in the winter they had high boots (Buhr-Stiefeln) made from wool, or they wore slippers (Pantoffeln). These slippers were made with wooden soles and a strip of leather or cloth at the top over the front part of the foot. These wooden slippers would also be used as skates in the winter when there was ice. For head covering in the winter, the girls had a large square scarf (Tuch) which they used to cover their head and also to cover shoulders and body, as they had no coat or sweater. The boys had caps, a jacket, and high boots.

Diet

Breakfasts consisted of bread, milk, prips (grain, roasted and ground) and coffee. Other meals were noodle soup, 'kloesse' (large noodles) with sausage or ham, borscht, bean soup, gooseberry 'moos', hot milk with noodles, scrambled or cooked eggs, fried potatoes, crackling, homemade sausage, beef roast, hamburger, mutton, pork, chicken, ducks, and geese.

Butchering pigs or beef was a time of community, which usually occurred in late fall. Two or three families would usually join together early in the morning. Two or three pigs were butchered, scalded, and cleaned, and the meat was sorted. Some was used for sausage; some for hamburger; and some for ham. The sausages were made the same day and also smoked overnight. Meat requiring to be smoked was hung above the furnace, in the chimney. Liver sausage was also made. The hams were salted and left for a certain number of days and then smoked. They also made head cheese and rendered the lard.

When work was done, they served a big supper to all those neighbours who had helped. A few days later they would do the same thing at one of the other homes. This meat had to last for almost a year, or at least as long as they could store it. They had no refrigerators and so the shed became the best place to store it. Once winter set in, it would not thaw until spring.

Transportation

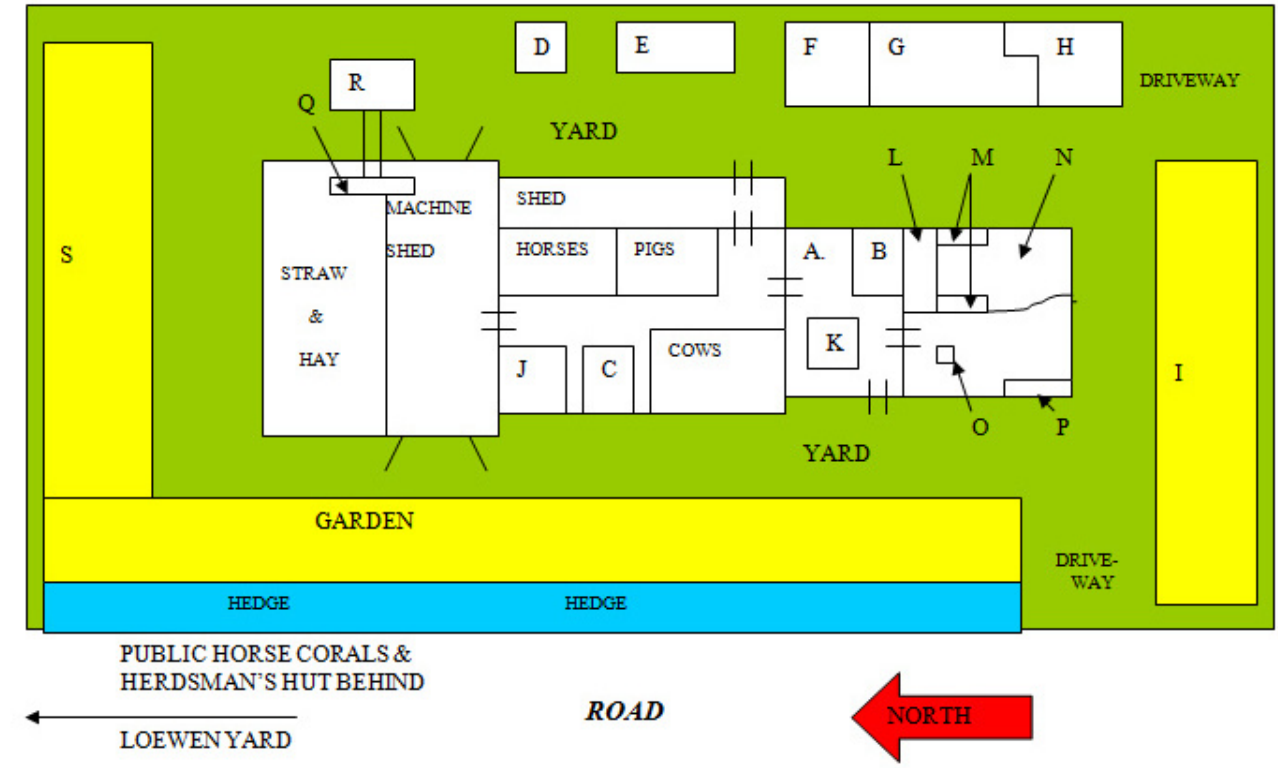
During the winter, travel was by horse-drawn sled. The seat in the sled was built high enough so that the small children could be put underneath. A fur coat was put under the seat for the children to sit or lie on. They were then covered up with fur skins to keep them warm. The parents sat in the seat and of course the passengers under the seat couldn't see a thing, but at least they were warm and could accompany their parents on visits. In the summer, they traveled by horse and wagon, or they walked, but very little long-distance travelling was done.

In the spring, when the snow would melt quickly, the homemade, wooden bridge across the Gussicha would often wash away. This was the bridge that connected Pretoria with the villages to the

north, and in particular, Suworowka, where Maria Loewen's parents lived. Almost every year, the farmers had to make a new dike and a new bridge.

The years 1914/1915 marked the end of a relatively prosperous and peaceful sojourn of 11 years in Pretoria, a turning point in the life of the Loewens, and the beginning of a period of 12 difficult years, culminating in their emigration. The Great War would consume Europe for the next four years. Maria Loewen's mother died in 1914 and her father and 9-year old son the following year. Shortly thereafter, their homeland would be thrown into turmoil through revolution, civil war, famine, and disease, at the end of which, two more sons would be forever separated from them. In 1926, Abraham and Maria Loewen emigrated to Canada, both leaving all their siblings and one son behind.

A.J. LOEWEN HOME IN PRETORIA



KEY:

A – PANTRY	B – STOVE	C – WELL	D – OUTHOUSE
E – WOODPILE	F – SUMMER KITCHEN	G – BLACKSMITH SHOP	
H – BOY'S ROOM	I – FRONT GARDEN	J – SHEEP PEN	K – TABLE
L – PARENTS' BED	M – GIRLS' BEDS	N – LIVING ROOM	O – TRAP DOOR
P – BOY'S BED	Q - THRESHING MACHINE	R – HORSE POWER	
S – BACK GARDEN			

NOTE: *The above description is based on Tina Loewen's recollection from the time she was a 10-yr. old girl growing up there. The drawing is not drawn to scale.*