

GROWING FAMILY: DESIGN & DESIRE IN MENNONITE GENEALOGY



Genealogists do not just uncover the past, they have a hand in shaping it. Designing a family tree may seem like a simple act, but it requires choices and reflects deep desires for connection, identity and legitimacy.

What designs are we choosing and what desires are we expressing when we document our family pasts?

1. Janzen Descendants

This unusual chart selects a chosen ancestor, Johann (“Hans”) Janzen (1752-1823) as its starting point. Johann was the first in the family line to immigrate from Prussia (Poland) to south Russia (Ukraine). The first immigrant ancestor to Imperial Russia in the late 18th century is often the chosen starting point for Russian Mennonite family trees.

Johann and his two wives, Maria Bergmann (1758-1808) and Agatha Fast (married 1809, weeks after Maria’s death), occupy a centre circle with Johann and Maria’s children surrounding them. From that point outwards, the diagram becomes visually complex as descendants

increase. Most descendants immigrated to Canada in the 20th century.

Rev. Abraham H. Epp, the chart's creator, is the great-great-grandson of Johann Janzen. The chart connects family members scattered by immigration. Epp would likely have noticed the common phenomenon of *pedigree collapse* while constructing his chart – instances where cousins or other close relatives marry, thus limiting the number of mathematically possible ancestors for each person.

2. **Agatha (Loewen Duerksen) Schmidt**

Agatha Schmidt was 21 when she fled from Gnadenfeld, Ukraine with her mother and sisters, following the retreating German army. The westward evacuation of ethnic Germans on the Great Trek of 1943 included over 15,000 Mennonites. Agatha's first husband, Aron Duerksen, vanished during this time; she never learned his fate. Decades later in Canada, Agatha Schmidt took up writing, painting, and historical and genealogical research to tell the stories of her family and lost community.

Archivist Hannah Little suggests that for genealogists, experiences of violence add additional urgency to the task of telling the stories of family members. The indelible and all too common experience of being undocumented and “adrift in a world of organized others” has also motivated Russian Mennonite refugee genealogy.

3. **Schneider Bible**

Toward the end of the 16th century, the rising middle class in Europe began to take an interest in recording genealogy. Generations of the Mennonite Schneider (Snyder, Snider) family in Switzerland, then later colonial America and Upper Canada, recorded significant family names and dates in the blank first pages of the family Bible.

According to accounts, the Bible languished nearly forgotten in the late 19th century until Ezra Eby “discovered” it in the home of a Schneider descendant. Eby transcribed, reorganized and expanded the original family lists into a series of new pages handwritten in the *fraktur* folk art style and bound into the front of the book. The Bible now began to symbolize the family's renewed interest in its own history; it was featured in local news articles over several decades, and ceremoniously donated to the

Mennonite Archives of Ontario in 1968. It still attracts visits from Schneider descendants.

4. Family Bibles

The Reformation placed the Bible in many homes, but Bibles published specifically for family reading became more common in the 18th century. New, colourful printing techniques in the late 19th century gave publishers the opportunity to market family Bibles that took the celebration of domesticity to lavish new heights. Later 19th century editions, reflecting a prominent social cause of the day, frequently included “temperance pledges.” Some Mennonite couples embraced the family Bible trend, though many purchased them after being married for some years.

5. Mennonite Genealogy Online

Beginning in the 1990s, Mennonites began to organize genealogical databases on the Internet. The California Mennonite Historical Society issued the *Genealogical Registry and Database of Mennonite Ancestry* (GRANDMA) to compile Prussian and Russian Mennonite genealogy. A copy of GRANDMA is available for research in the Milton Good Library. Local genealogist Allan Detweiler created *Ezra Eby Revived* (ezraeby.com) to update the work of Ezra Eby. Both databases rely on volunteer data contributors and contain numerous tools to graphically organize and illustrate genealogical data.

Exhibited here are an Ancestor Circle chart from GRANDMA showing which genealogical lines of a single descendant need more work. The light coloured circles indicate instances of duplicate names due to the marriage of cousins. Each circle/person is assigned a unique identifier, or “GRANDMA number.” The image below is a demonstration of the power of the relationship calculator tool in *Ezra Eby Revived*.

6. Ezra Eby’s Community Genealogy

Schoolteacher and printer Ezra Eby interviewed descendants of Mennonite settlers and sought additional information from Pennsylvania to compile his two volume *Biographical History of Waterloo Township*. A eulogist wrote that Eby “seemed to be urged to his work by an irresistible impulse. His wife would sometimes remonstrate with him and say: ‘Ezra, the children and I should get the attention and time you are giving to this history.’ His reply would be: ‘This work must be done, it must be done...’”

Eby's work captured a settler community's relationships at a particular time in its development. Produced a century after the arrival of the first settlers, it described a community persisting in a specific place where kinship ties had time to become deep and complex. It also documented the movement over the course of the century of people out of the area. Perhaps it was this combination of a growing, stable, and intertwined yet mobile community that fueled Eby's conviction at this particular moment that the work "must be done."

7. Shantz Family Tree

Jonas and Hannah Shantz farmed north of Baden on Erb's Road, Wilmot Township. They built the house depicted in the painting in 1860. The artist, Gladys Shantz, was the wife of a Shantz grandson; her work illustrates how genealogists often become major contributors to the genealogical literacy of their spouse's families.

The versatility of trees to represent relationships of ancestors and descendants over time (lineal ties) as well as living relatives (collateral ties) can be an effective way of visualizing family. However, trees can also be compressed or expanded to give a false sense of symmetry and perfection. For example, a bough fashioned to accommodate one sibling with a number of descendants may be bent to cover a gap left by a childless sibling. The tree does not include Mary (Janzen Honsberger) Shantz, the second wife of Jonas, and her eight children to whom Jonas became step-father.

8. Epp Family Tree

This tree, in codex form, traces the descendants of David D. Epp (1781-1843), Maria (Wiens) Epp (1779-1815) and Helena (Martens Thiessen) Epp (1797-1864). All three were born in Prussia and immigrated to south Russia. Maria bore 9 children; 6 died in infancy. Helena had 10 children; 2 died young. The many stunted branches are a sobering reminder of historical rates of infant mortality. Nevertheless, many branches of the tree flourished, and the artist/compiler struggled to accommodate them all.

9. Brenneman Family Tree

Lorraine Roth painted this Jacob and Lydia (Leonard) Brenneman family tree on a window blind in 1947. The tree is corrected from an earlier iteration which had the wrong name for Jacob's wife. It was a surprise to the Brenneman family to learn that Lydia was not Amish Mennonite, but Irish! Compiling this tree started the young Lorraine on a lifelong passion for genealogy that included many research trips to Europe and made her an authority on local family and community history.

10. Steiner Family Tree

Descendants of Daniel Steiner (1747-1811) and Maria Suter migrated from Alsace to Ohio in the 1820s. Ulrich Steiner joined his brothers briefly in Ohio but soon broke with the family pattern by relocating to Wilmot Township, Ontario.

Many of the surnames on this tree can be traced back to the forest settlement of Normanvillars, Alsace, where persecuted Swiss Anabaptists were permitted to settle after 1740. Economic pressure and the uncertainty of continued toleration of their faith led to "America fever" in Normanvillars beginning in 1819; by the late 1830s most had left the settlement.

It is common for Swiss Mennonite family trees to begin with the first immigrant ancestor or parents (most often father) of the first immigrants. Connections to European ancestors and living cousins were usually only rediscovered by traveling genealogists in the 1960s and later.

11. Cressman Family Tree

Having searched far and wide for a "suitable tree," Sybilla (Schweitzer) Bowman, granddaughter of Isaac S. and Barbara (Snyder) Cressman, engaged artist Alson Bauman to collaborate in this design. All 14 children of Isaac Cressman and his two wives (who were also sisters) are represented, including one adopted son.

Their homestead was known as Cressman's Woods, now part of Homer Watson Park along the Grand River. This family tree invokes Psalm 1:3:

They are like trees planted by streams of water
which yield their fruit in its season
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

Immigrant trees like this one celebrate growth and rootedness in a new land. Recently, Canadians have become more aware of how this land was often unjustly taken from Indigenous peoples, adding an unsettling dimension to the pioneer family tree.

12. *EWZ* Naturalization Files

For refugees of the 1940s, genealogical literacy was a requirement. When Soviet Mennonites arrived in German territory after the Great Trek in 1943, they applied for naturalization through the government's *Einwandererzentralstelle* (EWZ or Immigration Center). The naturalization of Mennonite refugees as German citizens often required them to complete brief life stories and genealogical charts that established their German ethnicity—and not incidentally, their non-Jewishness.

Captured by the United States Army the EWZ records, which contained the files of some 2.9 million ethnic Germans, were placed in the Berlin Document Center. Since then, Russian Mennonites have actively participated in the common genealogical pursuit of transforming institutional and state records into personal ones. The large and ongoing project to extract and digitize Mennonite family records from the EWZ naturalization files is one of the most notable examples of this effort. Mennonite genealogical pursuits are about more than gleaning dates and names. Here, records created by a repressive regime are repurposed for the reconstruction of a family's past.

13. Unwritten Genealogies: Objects of Memory & Hope

Family memory not only exists in written genealogies, but in heirlooms and rituals. Over the centuries, families have used objects and anniversaries to grow and sustain a culture of memory. Historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich writes: “when a young woman stitched her initials on linens, she claimed an identity as mistress of a household and joint partner in an economic enterprise.”

14. **John Brubacher Birth Certificate**

Pennsylvania Germans' most colorful contribution to genealogy was the *fraktur* family register, drawn freehand or entered into preprinted broadsides. These celebrations of the family record could be seen as an expression of the religious freedom that Mennonites and other small sects found in the new world. Far from persecution and the corresponding need for secrecy that had been their lot in Europe, families could proudly display their relationships and hopes for the future.

This printed birth and baptismal broadside is enhanced by hand colouring and illustration. The child at the centre, John Brubacher (1793-1875), probably purchased the certificate himself about the time he moved to Canada. Note that John's mother, Susannah Erb, is called "Erbin" (the feminized form or "Erb" in German).

These certificates catered largely to German Lutheran and Reformed congregants and thus had to be modified to reflect the fact that Mennonites did not practice infant baptism. In this case, the preprinted phrase "was baptized with the name" was crossed out and replaced with "he was called Johannes Brubacher." This certificate illustrates the mingling of traditional folk symbols with a growing emphasis on symbols of national piety, such as the American eagle.

15. ***Liber Chronicarum* Descendant Lines**

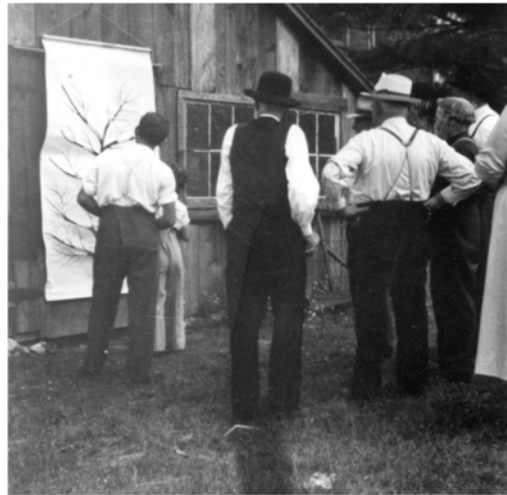
The family tree took centuries to become the genealogical representation of choice in Western society. Representations from the Middle Ages followed the Roman tradition of placing illustrious ancestors at the top of a chart or illustration (the place of most reverence and chronological distance) to which their descendants below were connected by lines, vines, or garlands. (An exception is the Biblical "Jesse Tree" which places Jesus above his ancestors.)

In order for the tree to flourish as a genealogical image, the placing of illustrious ancestors had to be reversed. By the end of the sixteenth century, the aristocracy and even the emerging middle class were using the tree to represent the upward progress of their families.

Most everybody knows what it feels like to be unsettled by a remnant, a fragment of the past: something that is so replete with memory and meaning that we almost cannot bear the absence of which it so eloquently speaks....

So either we deny the sentiments it engenders or else we find other ways of coping with its presence...

- Michael Ann Holly, *The Melancholy Art*



Growing Family: Design & Desire in Mennonite Genealogy
Mennonite Archives of Ontario exhibit, 2019-2021
Curator: Laureen Harder-Gissing
uwaterloo.ca/grebel/growingfamily

