

# **Dutch Mennonite Historical Genealogy**

## **Isaac "Fisher" Fast - the Hermit of Gabriel's Crossing**

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At a bend in the South Saskatchewan River near MacDowell, Saskatchewan, Gabriel Dumont, the famous Metis military commander and ally of Louis Riel, operated a ferry service in the 1870s. A hundred years later a truss bridge was built to replace the ferry. For 50 years in the intervening period, from 1910, the site of Gabriel's Crossing was the home of a lone inhabitant by the name of Isaac Fast.

Isaac, the brother of my great-grandfather, Jacob, was born in 1884 in the Russian Mennonite settlement of Chortitza, in the village of Rosenthal. He was the second son with that name, an earlier boy having been born in 1882 and dying later that year. He led a lifestyle seldom experienced by people today. His family knew him as Fisher Fast because he spent so much of his free time fishing on the shore of the South Saskatchewan River and selling what he caught. He was well known and quite famous in the Rosthern and Laird areas where his relatives lived. He gained greater notoriety in 1960 when the Saskatoon Star Phoenix featured his life in an entertaining column written by their reporter, Wayne MacDonald. MacDonald dubbed him The Hermit of Gabriel's Ferry.

Isaac had migrated to Canada with his parents Johann Fast and Helena Epp and his seven brothers in 1892. As a young man he worked the farm on the Prairies with his father and brothers. At the age of 26 he cast off the farming lifestyle in favor of a drastic change. He moved his belongings to a cave on the riverbank adjacent to Gabriel's Ferry and spent the next 50 years there, hunting, trapping, fishing, and picking berries. His home was an earthen hovel

with a wooden front wall, and he managed to keep it sufficiently dry and warm that he was able to winter there for decades until he grew very old.



*Fisher Fast (on the right) with his nephew Armin Fast standing by the wooden facade of his riverbank cave, around 1960.*

In 1918 he married Edith Unrau, a local girl sixteen years his junior, attracted to his wilderness lifestyle. Unfortunately, Edith was not as hardy as Isaac and died after only a few months, following a prolonged period of chronic

coughing, symptomatic of diseases such as tuberculosis. Her illness was never diagnosed. Isaac never remarried and had no children.

MacDonald chronicles Isaac's difficulties with government agents concerned with his illegal practices of fishing with a two-hook line and operating a fish retailing business without a commercial license. Isaac was not wealthy, but he found the money to travel three times to the Mount Wilson Observatory in California to view the universe from that unique perspective.

Bureaucracy and old age caught up with Isaac in 1961 and he moved to a retirement home in Winkler, MB. He lived there until his death four years later.

#### Sources

Most of the information about Isaac originates in family anecdotes. Chuck Fast, a great-nephew of Isaac, provided the photograph and permission to use it. Some of the details about his marriage and his problems with government authorities were recorded in Wayne MacDonald's column, "Fifty Years Along the River" published in the Saskatoon Star Phoenix, 3 August 1960.

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