

Mennonite Vaccinations - 1809 and 1814

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Introduction

Measles has surged in North America in 2025. Until now we all understood that measles had been contained through the disciplined application of vaccinations. Yet, it appears there are communities of people who have not protected their children. Some reports suggest the epicenter of the outbreak lies among certain Old Colony Mennonite groups, descendants of the Dutch Mennonites who left Russia to settle in Canada in the nineteenth century. Are these Old Colony communities adhering to traditional values handed down over the centuries?

Investigation

The term "Old Colony" refers to the original Mennonite settlement in Ukraine, established by immigrants from Prussia in 1789 at the invitation of Catharine the Great. The Chortitza settlement, being the first settlement, has been referred to as the Old Colony by writers and historians ever since. In modern usage the term Old Colony imparts the notion of old-fashioned, conservative, out-dated attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. Some descendent communities have chosen to live in more secluded, self-reliant ways. However, they are the minority of such descendants.

What is the tradition of Netherlandic Mennonites pertaining to scientific enlightenment and specifically the adoption of vaccinations for community well being? A pair of smallpox vaccination lists for the Chortitza settlement in the years 1809 and 1814 provide a trove of helpful information to answer this question [1].

I am a descendant of fourteen Chortitza families who had vaccination age children in the years 1809 and 1814. I searched for these families in the lists, and I found twelve [2]. The two missing families are explained below.

The families on the lists:

#1 Dietrich Rempel and his wife Helena Wiebe of Rosenthal [5th great grandparents] vaccinated four children in 1809.

#2 David Redekopp and his wife Katharina Wieler of Rosenthal [4th great grandparents] vaccinated two children in 1814.

#3 Cornelius Sawatsky and his wife Margaretha Klassen of Rosenthal [5th great grandparents] vaccinated one child in 1814.

#4 Bernhard Krahn and his wife Maria of Burwalde [4th great grandparents] vaccinated two children in 1809.

#5 Jacob de Veer and his wife Maria Peters of Neuendorf [5th great grandparents] vaccinated two children in 1809.

#6 Peter Regehr and his wife Maria of Neuendorf [5th great grandparents] vaccinated one child in 1809.

#7 Susanna Klassen and her second husband Johann Neudorf of Neuendorf [Susanna is my 5th great grandmother] vaccinated three children in 1809.

#8 Maria Bueckert and her second husband Jacob Peters of Nieder Chortitza [Maria is my 4th great grandmother] vaccinated two children in 1809.

#9 Johann Peters and his wife Maria Bergen of Schoenhorst [5th great grandparents] vaccinated two children in 1809.

#10 Johann Wolf and his wife Anna Peters of Schoenhorst [4th great grandparents] vaccinated two children in 1809. Interestingly, Anna was a daughter of Johann Peters #9 above.

#11 Cornelius Hiebert and his wife Anna Nickel of Schoenhorst [4th great grandparents] vaccinated three children in 1809.

#12 Margaretha Klassen and her second husband Heinrich Funk of Schoenhorst [Margaretha is my 5th great grandmother] vaccinated three children in 1809.

Two families were not on the list for either 1809 or 1814.

#13 Gerhard Penner and his wife Anna of Chortitza village [4th great grandparents] are not on either list. The preface to the 1809 list says it is incomplete and contains very few residents of Chortitza. The preface to the 1814 list says it primarily contains children up to age 3. Gerhard and Anna had older children.

#14 David Falk and his wife Maria Bartsch of Schoenwiese [5th great grandparents] are not on either list. The preface to the 1809 list says it is incomplete and does not contain residents of Schoenwiese. The preface to the 1814 lists says it is also incomplete and contains very few residents of Schoenwiese.

Conclusion

This small and unscientific sample of Mennonite attitudes to contemporary health science indicates that, at least among my ancestors, vaccines were treated as an important preventative of disease. This comes as no surprise because there is ample evidence in Netherlandic Mennonite history of the community embracing science, innovation and technology to improve their welfare. This appears to be the Netherlandic Mennonite tradition.

Notes

[1] The 1809 list is found at: <https://mgr.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/1809.htm>; the 1814 list is found at: <https://mgr.mennonitegenealogy.com/russia/1814.htm>.

[2] GMOL numbers: #1 Dietrich Rempel: 153054; #2 David Redekopp: 266153; #3 Cornelius Sawatsky: 173150; #4 Bernhard Krahn: 173606; #5 Jacob de Veer: 196514; #6 Peter Regehr: 106569; #7 Susanna Klassen: 174364; #8 Maria Bueckert: 198118; #9 Johann Peters: 198942; #10 Johann Wolf: 227282; #11 Cornelius Hiebert: 198431; #12 Margaretha Klassen: 44759.