

Old Mennonite culture comes to grips with modern customs

HUMIRA, Mexico (AP) — Pedro Martenz doesn't think of himself as an outcast; he says he is a pioneer.

He sold his Mennonite horse buggy a year ago for 1 million pesos — about \$400. He now owns a 7-ton flatbed truck. He has long since abandoned his sect's traditional denim overalls and straw hat for a pair of jeans and a baseball cap advertising Cargill tractors. And he lives alone, with his wife and two sons, on a tiny farm 100 miles south of the conservative German Mennonite colony where he was born.

"It makes me sad that Mennonites are so closed," Martenz says, speaking Spanish carefully over an evening cup of tea in his adobe farmhouse. "They keep themselves in a very, very closed circle."

Martenz expresses no regrets at leaving the traditional Old Colony Mennonite Church. Speaking softly over the Mexican pop tunes of his 5-year-old son Albuino's cassette player — a strict taboo in conservative Mennonite households — he says he can carry forward his faith in God without the social constraints of the sect. He can proselytize among the Tarahumara Indians who are his new neighbors without being looked down upon.

The reclusive Tarahumaras — themselves a closed society — stop by the homestead of El Menonita Sundays to savor Old World delicacies like Dutch shortbread and German chocolate cake.

Torn between the generations-old forces of tradition and the demands of surviving in a fast-paced, industrialized society, Martenz and his family represent an archetype for growing numbers of German Mennonite colonists living in northern Mexico: a younger generation of liberalized sect members who have broken the "closed circle" of more than 400 years of self-imposed isolation.

Like the plainness of their traditional dress, Mennonite philosophy is painted in the subdued colors of simplicity and humility. Founded in Holland during the religious reformation of the 16th century, the Mennonite faith is a pacifist tradition that renounces all oaths to any ruler.

Indian makes living building bark shelters

Valdajawan Deer slushes through murky Florida swamps, braving alligators and wild hogs, to carry on a family tradition. The swamps provide Deer, a Choctaw Indian and former alligator wrestler, with the trees and palm leaves he needs for his business of building Indian "cheekees," or huts.

Deer and his assistant, Carlos Souto, recently completed their first cheekee in Kentucky, at the home of T.C. Clement. The hut rises from water at the edge of a lake on Clement's property, providing a touch of the tropics on a chilly winter day.

"These things give you a sense of being in a far-off place in your own back yard," Deer says, "and it's cheaper than going to Tahiti."

That's the closest Deer will come to discussing price. Deer and Souto spent about four days on Clement's cheekee, using a machete to strip away bark from cypress logs — a process that keeps the hut's structure from rotting.

Then, using their hands, they meticulously wove the cheekee's roof from nearly 1,800 palm leaves — an art passed down from Deer's great-grandfather.

"It's a bit like putting shingles on the side of a house," Deer says. "You start at the bottom and go to the top."

The business, based in the small panhandle town of Destin, allows Deer to support his wife and three children. He also has three full-time employees and hires some part-time help.

Clement hired Deer to build a cheekee in Henderson after seeing some of Deer's work during an earlier trip to Florida.

Deer has built huts as far away as California and Mexico. Although Clement's cheekee was built in less than a week, Deer has worked on jobs that took months to complete.

Some people, like Clement, want a hut for leisure purposes. Others seek Deer's expertise to build a bar or restaurant.

Souto, Deer's assistant, says the hardest part of the job is wading into the swamps, chopping down trees and carrying them out one by one. The workers have to remain alert for alligators, snakes and other creatures in the swamps.

Deer is teaching his children how to build cheekees in the hope that the art will live on.

"You can put us out in the swamp with a machete," Deer says, "and we can make a living."

man-made institutions.

Its adherents have migrated en masse across Europe, Russia, Canada, the United States and finally Latin America, fleeing military service and tenaciously guarding their old European language and customs. Like the Pennsylvania Amish, reliance on modern technology — excluding tractors, which enhance work — is considered lazy and frivolous.

About half of the estimated 50,000 Mennonites in Mexico live in the state of Chihuahua. Mennonite

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sources there say thousands have auctioned their farms in recent years. Some 200 families have moved to Argentina in the past year alone.

Other destinations for emigration have included a small colony in Seminole, Texas, and the traditional "Old Country" of central Canada. Mennonite church officials report the Seminole community has grown from 650 in the mid-1970s to a current population of about 3,000. In Canada, experts estimate that as many as 10,000 Mennonites have emigrated from Mexico to the province of Ontario in the past five years.

"It's a complicated movement," says a prominent Mennonite from Cuauhtemoc, Chihuahua, who asked not to be named. "Yes, it's true that the prolonged economic crisis here has impacted us.

"But there's a certain amount of sieving going on; the more conserva-

tive who are worried about the dilution effects of modern technology are heading south to, say, Argentina. For many of the more liberalized (Mennonites), economics alone is the motive, and they'll move north, to the United States or Canada."

Some Mennonite experts say that the growing Mennonite mobility is inevitable as the sect's younger generations become exposed to the outside world.

"In 1987 a woman of Mennonite descent won the Miss Chihuahua state beauty contest," says Dr. Dennis Bixler Marquez, a University of Texas at El Paso researcher who has studied Mennonite migratory patterns. "This is about as far out as you can get. It's kind of bizarre."

"(The Mennonites) are going through an internal decay," says Dr. Calvin Redecop, a sociologist and Mennonite expert at Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo, Canada.

"The power of the community to keep people integrated into the society is weakening," he says. "It's going toward a nuclear family system, and the church is losing its ethical and moral sway over these people."

Redecop, the author of a scholarly book on the Mexican Mennonites, adds that economic pressures — mainly the parceling of Mennonite lands through the generations — has contributed to the transformation of Mennonite society.

"Economies aside, I'm sorry to say that the Mennonites' honeymoon in Mexico is over," Redecop says. "Their pacifist traits are irritating the Mexicans, and their desire to maintain their own language and be separate citizens also is a continuing source of abrasion."

In Chihuahua, where the first German-speaking Mennonites arrived from Canada in 1922, some of the more conservative colonists still use horse-drawn carts and shun electricity.

But change has swept in like a steady breeze over the well-tended fields and immaculate dairies. At the train station in Cuauhtemoc, ruddy-

faced Mennonite men in stylish Western wear and blond women with calm, trans-Atlantic stares unload their produce from late-model pickup trucks. Some of the younger male Mennonites — the Martenzes' 28-year-old son, Benjamin, among them — have even waded the Rio Grande into the United States to visit family or search for jobs.

"Almost all of them have changed from buggies to trucks now," a Mexican resident of Cuauhtemoc notes. "Some of them even smoke and drink and take the ladies out dancing. Hell, they're just like us Mexicans."

On the night of his 55th birthday, Martenz is worried, but he tries not to show it. While passing logging trucks cast their beams over his small cow pen and a yardful of farm machinery, he cajoles his wife, Helena, into strumming some German melodies on her autoharp.

But the celebration is shadowed by an uncertain future. They both will be traveling to the United States soon to find work — a further break from tradition that will keep their independent farm in operation.

The rustic homestead tucked among Indian communities in the Sierra Madre Occidental is a far cry from the tidy Mennonite farms that the Martenzes left for good a year ago. Still, the whitewashed adobe house has its unmistakable Mennonite touches: calendars in German, an old piano stored in the common sleeping room, tin kettles whose graceful spouts echo European still life paintings.

The physical accents of change, like a gasoline-powered washing machine, are in plain evidence, too. More subtle are the complex undercurrents of hope and caution that run through conversations in the Martenz household.

"I don't know what I'll do, but I'm sure God's with us," Martenz says of his prospects at a liberal Mennonite community in Seminole. "Maybe I'll work in a diesel mechanics shop. Whatever's the easiest to come back and work at the farm here."

Restaurant owner recalls days of diner's heyday 31 years ago

ALICE (AP) — Dena Dominique started her restaurant business in 1958 when plate lunches cost 85 cents and soda pops sold six for a dollar.

The name of the establishment was Dena's Diner, and it was a beehive of activity.

Like small restaurant owners of the time, Dominique served as cook, waitress and manager on a tight, "shoestring" budget.

"I've always felt customers value people who go out of their way to please them," Dominique said. "I guess I just like people and enjoy my work," she added.

She recalls workers from Halliburton, Heldt Bros. and other oil-field companies who would frequent the restaurant in search of a warm meal, a cup of coffee or just conversation.

"They'd come in night and day," Dominique says. "That has changed, of course."

She says many of her old customers still come to the restaurant to partake of her chicken and dumplings, Mexican cuisine, cinnamon rolls and coconut pies.

The restaurant was rated No. 9 statewide by the *Houston Chronicle* in an article published Feb. 23, 1986. The article hangs on the dining

room wall at the eatery.

It is also home to the "table of knowledge," a group of 10 to 14 retired citizens who gather daily to discuss news events and to reflect on days gone by.

"They're just the greatest bunch of guys you ever saw," Dominique said with a smile. "I know I'm at home when I hear them whisper. . . . There's old Dena! I guess they feel at home here too," she said of the group.

A similar table, located in the restaurant's dining area, also hosts 10 to 12 daily.

Dominique says the restaurant originally employed a staff of about 15. She later leased a building in Alice and operated the business there for several years.

In a bolder move, the former Harlingen native purchased the restaurant's current location, tore down the tourist cabins, and built a new restaurant-cafeteria.

In 1986, she sold the business when her husband Tony, a native of Raine, La., decided to retire after 35 years with Texaco.

Although the decision was a difficult one, Dominique has no regrets.

"We sold the business to Charles Harless," she said. "When he was appointed sheriff, he asked me to man-

Folklorist seeks records of state's early heritage

LEXINGTON, Ky. (AP) — Whether it's in Appalachia or Bluegrass Country, Robert Gates believes there are stories to be found.

And as Kentucky's first official folklorist, he's going to spend a good bit of his time listening for them.

"I'll try to encourage the research, conservation and interpretation of folklore in the state," says Gates, 38.

"We won't try to change it, just document it."

Gates, who has a master's degree in folk studies from Western Kentucky, is working with the blessings of the Kentucky Humanities Council, Kentucky Arts Council and Berea College.

"They all felt so much work is being done in folk studies that it was time to get some programs and projects going," Gates says.

Gates will set up his headquarters at Berea College.

He plans to coordinate efforts and offer technical assistance to individuals and groups studying and promoting folklife.

Gates says it is a misconception that folklife relates only to rural

areas.

"Folklorists are anthropologists or historians of common people who study the traditional culture of a group," he says.

"Anything that's passed down by word of mouth by a group is folklore."

One of his first tasks in Kentucky will be the "Always a River" project sponsored by the humanities councils of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Kentucky.

Gates will help with folklife surveys in counties along the Ohio River.

He plans to set up folklife festivals in various communities.

Gates says he hopes the festivals will create an awareness in the communities and "people can go to these things and see other cultures and how these people have their own lives."

He also will be working with schools, introducing people who can discuss topics relating to folklife.

"We want to understand groups and their history," Gates says.

UNT houses fashion, costume collection

DENTON (AP) — A treasure house of fashion lies hidden away in the Language Building at the University of North Texas.

Myra Walker wants to bring it out into the open.

Walker is the new director of the Texas Fashion Collection, a hoard of clothing and accessories dating from the mid-1800s to the present. She has big plans for the 10,000-piece collection. All she needs is staff and funding.

At the moment, she has no staff — only student workers — and very little funding. Nevertheless, she is involved with several projects.

The largest of these — an exhibit of costumes and fashions by Dallas designer Winn Morton — will open March 31 in Dallas' Trammel Crow Center. Coordinating and staging it has been an almost overwhelming challenge.

"If I ever take a new job, I'm not going to plan anything for the first year," she said. "I'm just going to sit and watch."

On a smaller scale, she is organizing a display of hats by Benjamin Greenfield, who designed in California. She has a student doing research on Greenfield to provide information for the display in the UNT Union.

She is sending a number of pieces which originally came from Neiman-Marcus to the Neiman's stores in California for an exhibit.

And, the Texas Collection will provide the feature exhibit for the 1990 Delta Delta Delta Antique Show and Sale in Dallas.

All these public showings are only part of the picture. Almost for the first time since it came to UNT in 1973, the collection is being used as an educational tool for students and teachers. "That has been a goal of mine, to integrate the collection with the teaching process," she said.

For example, in her history of costume course, Walker brings in period examples of various styles so the students can see them in three-dimension rather than just in drawings.

"We don't really have any examples of actual garments from very early times. But, I still take quite a few garments in . . . If we're talking about a tunic or a Renaissance-type dress I take 20th century garments in and show them how people from the 20th century have used historic things."

With the collection's garments, touching and feeling isn't possible. In fact, you must slip on a pair of white cotton gloves before handling any of the old clothes.

However, Walker is using some

things for textile labs. "Things that are already torn up . . . things that haven't been properly cared for and restored can be used for touching. They can't be shown. Some are even too fragile to be put on a hanger. But you can say, 'Here, touch it. This is what it feels like, and our fabrics today don't feel like this.'"

This new attitude is increasing students' interest in the collection.

Carol Mitchell, administrative assistant of the Center for Marketing and Design, noted, "An increasing number of students are requesting internships in the collection — mostly unpaid — because they're becoming aware of the knowledge to be gained from working there."

Walker's background is in art. She received her master's degree from Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. Her interest in

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fashion and costume stems from an internship at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. She worked in the costume museum under Stella Blum, whom she calls her mentor.

After the internship, she moved back into the art world, working in a Dallas gallery.

She applied to UNT for a gallery director's job, but after one look at her credentials, university officials steered her to the fashion collection. She also is on the faculty, teaching a design course as well as history of costume.

"One of my goals is to have permanent exhibition space," Walker says. "It's got to be a part of the future. We would like to be sort of the F.I.T. of the South," she said, referring to the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. It is one of the leading fashion schools in the country and has a large fashion museum.

Despite the frustrations, and occasional setbacks, Walker says she is enjoying the work. "This is not a job with no place to go. It has all kinds of potential."

Schoolchildren learn mining with muffins

CONCORD, Ky. (AP) — How do you teach fourth-graders the difference between strip-mining and tunnel mining?

You let them mine for blueberries in a blueberry muffin, of course.

"It really gave them an understanding of the subject when they saw that if they took too much off their muffin, it was harder to reclaim or put their muffin back together," says Concord Elementary teacher Pam Estes.

Natalie Cougl, 9, who built a model of a strip mine for extra credit, enjoyed mining for blueberries. "And the muffins were good, too," she says.

Concord was one of 15 schools in Kentucky to receive grants from the state Department of Education and

the Kentucky Energy Cabinet to develop curricula on energy and how it affects our lives. The project is considered a unit of science for grades three through six.

To receive the grant, which paid for resource materials, each school had to have an industry sponsor. Martin Marietta sponsored Concord.

Becky Massey, a third-grade teacher and the project coordinator, says students have to realize that their comfort today depends on energy.

"We hope by the time they leave this elementary school they have a better overall knowledge of energy and how important it is," she says.

Students say that goal has already been met.

Radios link missionaries, families

MIDLAND (AP) — An amateur radio organization, Blessings for Obedience, may be the only link among some missionaries and their families in the states.

"It is a support ministry for Christian missionaries to get in contact with their families or support ministries for supplies and needs," said Kelly Coleman of the group of Midland and Odessa ham radio operators.

Communication with families is done through phone patches. Someone is reached on a ham radio and asked to make a phone call in his area. Then radio and phone are connected and the call is made.

Coleman, a Midland oil investor, said the ultimate goal of Blessings for Obedience is to give missionaries easy access to stateside communications.

The network, which meets from 3 to 5 p.m. CST on Sundays and 8 to 9 p.m. Tuesdays, has an average of 50 listeners who check in.

Listeners are from Honduras, Mexico, Canada, Venezuela, Germany and many states. Coleman offers listeners the opportunity to voice their prayers and ask for sup-

port or get in touch with their families in the states.

"It's like having church around the world in a radio shack," Coleman said.

Coleman began the ham radio group with five members about three years ago when he met Don Matthews, who was interested in missionary work.

Coleman went with Matthews to Jamaica in 1985 on a Youth With a Mission trip. While in Jamaica, he tried to find a way to contact his family in the states. He found a ham radio but had some problems placing a call. "Sometimes you could get through to the states, sometimes you couldn't," he said.

That started their dream for Christian missionary radio in West Texas. But the two knew nothing about ham radio and its capability of reaching all areas of the world. Once the equipment was donated and purchased and their licenses in hand, the radio network began.

Coleman said some local ham radio listeners wanted to know how they could get involved, so the ham radio school evolved.

Now, before the Tuesday radio

shows, students hit the theory and rule books and the Morse code keys to study for their ham operator licenses.

Steve Buckley joined the radio class because he works with Comunidad Alabare, a Spanish mission in Midland. Buckley said he was attracted to ham radio because of his need to contact Mexico for the people he helps.

Brad Cox, a school teacher, helps Coleman teach the class. He's been on a ham radio since he was 13 and had wanted to get involved in the ham radio ministry.

When Hurricane Gilbert hit Jamaica in October 1988, Blessings for Obedience brought the first relief, 80 tons of goods that the Permian Basin donated, Coleman said.

Cox was sent to Jamaica with the supplies, including a radio to transmit to the states.

Blessings for Obedience would like to continue that kind of work, Coleman said. Help with radio equipment and supplies is needed.

Coleman recently received a call from a man in Russia requesting a Russian Bible, which the ministry sent.