



**Hutterite Towel,**  
Saskatchewan.

*Embroidered towels from Hutterite colonies frequently depict several alphabets in varied scripts followed by an array of traditional folk motifs, the name of the maker and date of completion. This long towel by thirteen year old Anna Wipf is profusely decorated with stylised birds, trees, hearts and other motifs, as well as twenty-seven alphabets.*

**Sleeping Bench, Manitoba**  
Late nineteenth century

*The Schlafbank or bench-bed, popular in eastern Europe, was made in western Canada by Mennonite and Hutterite settlers into the twentieth century. This example from southern Manitoba retains the original bright orange-red colour, ivory trim around the raised panels and black striping on its vertical splats.*

By the first half of the nineteenth century the Markham Mennonites had resumed making furniture both for themselves and the wider community. It was more ornate and impressive designed to suit new home styles, frequently including large china cupboards, chest of drawers and blanket boxes, which were often paint-grained to resemble wood. Two such makers of the period were John and Jacob Barkey and a generation later, their nephew Samuel Burholder, who often used machine techniques.

#### **A homeland found**

Today the history of Mennonite families in Canada, their furniture and artifacts, is well documented and provides a fascinating record of their lives and customs.

In the early days, whilst many of the Swiss Mennonite families had fled to Pennsylvania, others from Germany settled in Russia, invited by the Czarina Catherine II. This migration began in 1788. As their privileges waned and popular resentment against them grew, the Canadian government invited them to settle on the Prairies. The first families arrived in 1874, some 7750 people. They lived in 25 townships set aside in Manitoba. Between 1922-27, a further 20000 emigrated to Canada. The Russian Mennonites had been farmers, cultivating silk worms and selling silk. They brought with them mulberry seeds as gifts and their original trees can still be found in abundance.

The first furniture was rudimentary to match their earliest homes but by the late 19th and early 20th centuries it gave way to more detailed and intricate work. Basic softwood was used, painted with bright colours - yellow, red and green - often with black mouldings, feet and handles. The pieces were simplified versions of the original heavy Germanic baroque. Often contrasting colour schemes were used on one piece. Corner cupboards, rocking cradles, square tables, chests of drawers, blanket chests and sleeping benches were all to be found in the Mennonite home.

#### **'Fraktur' and other crafts**

The practice of 'Fraktur' or illumination was also widely practiced in Mennonite communities in

both Eastern and Western Canada. Most work consists of the decorative embellishment of religious texts and family documents which combine calligraphic and pictorial elements. They include writing-exercises (Vorschriften), family-registers, prayers (house blessings), spiritual labyrinths, decorated books and book plates, and certain pictorial drawings. In addition to the hand-drawn illuminations, they produced delightful 'Scherenschrutte' - scissor or knife cuttings which were popular in Europe and North America during the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

Another form of home furnishing was the production of embroidered 'show-towels' and samplers, patchwork quilts and woven cloth or rope floor mats and 'runners'. In this way the Mennonite home was given another layer of decoration which sprang from practical needs. 'Show towels' and 'alphabet samplers' were valuable learning tools for study of the scriptures and reading and writing skills. Quilts and floor coverings were an affordable form of soft furnishings.

#### **Hutterite migration**

The Prairie provinces also provided a homeland for other persecuted Anabaptist groups from Europe and Russia, in particular the Hutterites, who can trace their origin as a distinct community to the early 16th century. The community or 'bruderhof' remains to this day at the core of the Hutterite system.

The Hutterites suffered the same forms of persecution as the Mennonites and, like them, they were invited to settle in Russia by Catherine the Great. Eventually they fell foul of military training requirements from which they had previously been exempted. Unable to adhere to the laws of the land in which they had settled, the entire population of 800 Hutterites fled to South Dakota between 1874-1877.

However America's entry into the First World War brought a further dilemma for the pacifist Hutterites and, after an invitation by the Canadian government, the majority of the community moved to Manitoba, Alberta and Saskatchewan between 1918 and 1923.

Hutterites today continue to live in country

