In the late 1970s, Daniel Hertzler, editor of the Mennonite weekly Gospel Herald, toured Mennonite congregations throughout the United States and Canada. When he visited one in Clovis, California, a congregant took him to nearby Reedley. Hertzler described the scene outside the car window: “It was fruit blossom time and with a little imagination we could have been led to believe that the Garden of Eden was in the San Joaquin Valley and the forbidden fruit a plum.” Although Hertzler’s trip to California came approximately 130 years after the first Mennonite arrived, his two images of California—paradise and sin—were not new. Boosters and Mennonite settlers in the early twentieth century promoted a mythology of California as both Edenic paradise and forbidden fruit.

Throughout California’s history, people often portrayed it in images crackling with cosmic significance. Turn-of-the-century boosters promoted California as a natural arcadia. Many who made the journey to its utopian promise found their dreams, but others found disappointment or worse. This chapter, sorting through the representations of California in the promotional literature of boosters commonly known to Mennonites
and their own immigrant memoirs, shows the development of Mennonite visions of California and the Mennonites’ place within it. The promises and failures of booster promotion and the refraction of memory through memoirs of those who moved to California—from the North American plains and Russian steppes—illustrates the power California held over Mennonite imaginations.

Hertzler’s binary impression demonstrates how geography helps construct identity. In fact, the Janus-faced reality of California beguiled evangelicals, who saw promise and threat co-mingling there.³ Philosopher José Ortega y Gasset argues that land has powerful symbolic meanings because its significance is predicated on the freedom people have (or some have) to choose where they live. He observes, “It is not simply that the land makes man, but that man elects his land, that is, his landscape, that portion of the planet where he finds his ideal or life-project symbolically prefigured.”⁴ This symbolic relationship extends to religion, where, as historian Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp observes, “Geographic placement is an important factor in understanding religious behaviors and beliefs.”⁵ As Hertzler so clearly illustrated, environment and religion are intimately connected. The Mennonites who came decades before him experienced this existentially as loneliness and spiritually as divine mission.

In a popular survey of Mennonite history, C. Henry Smith notes that the Mennonite Brethren had been largely attracted to California, especially to Fresno, since 1942.⁶ Although the 1940s was a time of tremendous institutional development, California had been a favored destination for Mennonite Brethren long before then. The attraction for Mennonites, as for most everyone else, was prosperity, health, and climate. When these early Mennonite Brethren wrote to denominational newspapers, however, the dominant themes were social isolation, natural abundance, and moral depravity. As Willard Smith argues, the entire western migration of Mennonites in America is about isolation. Scattered Mennonite communities “illustrate[d] the spiritual problems of Mennonites who migrated west to areas where there were no Mennonite churches and little or no prospect of organizing them.”⁷ In the early decades of the twentieth century, Mennonites felt alone in a fecund garden.

Mennonite historians have typically understood Mennonite migrations as a religious response to persecutions or to thwart temptations to compromise core principles, especially pacifism. Once in North America, their westward movement and colonizing efforts were often interpreted
as cultural-religious attempts to maintain traditional communities. The leading American Mennonite historian of the mid-1900s, Harold S. Bender, summarized Mennonite identity: “Perhaps on the whole, however, the members of no religious or social group have seemed so much [as Mennonites] to be pilgrims and strangers on the earth rather than partakers of the life and culture of the men and nations among whom they have lived.”

Bender’s observation was upended in California. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Mennonites moved to California primarily to improve their economic status and physical health; it was not a religious reaction to government policy, threatened principles, or persecution—save one important exception from Russia. Those who came to California often wrote about their experiences and thoughts concerning their new homes in a rhetorical mix of wonder and pain. Before they came, they listened to boosters who promoted California throughout North America as an arcadian garden. Many enjoyed those soothing pitches, and later some suffered the consequences of the hype. However, when Mennonites came, they brought their religion with them and easily mixed their hope for a Christian society with desires for health, sunshine, and prosperity.

**Boosterism: Selling Sunny California**

*Water: The New California Gold*

Companies attempting to lure Mennonites to California typically stressed three points: fabulous weather, agricultural productivity, and ethno-religious community. The Kern County Land Company claimed in an 1895 promotional pamphlet published specifically for Mennonites: “Along the coast the sea breeze softens the climate, therefore, in summer and winter it feels warmer than places with similar latitudes further inland.” With idyllic climate also came health: “The dryness in the summer does not let malaria and related diseases arise, whereas consumption (tuberculosis), rheumatism, and lung illnesses are soon healed under such climatic conditions.”

Though California was the second largest state in the Union and the first in produce, and Mennonites were agriculturalists, the final point was social stability and community. The need for fellowship, in a place so far away from the familiar, was not lost on land companies eager to promote California as an open paradise. Thus they claimed that several Mennonite families were already living there in absent-minded bliss (*zerstreut*).
In 1896, other Mennonites made an investigative trip to Southern California and responded in prose sacralizing water and irrigation. They interpreted Southern California’s aridity and need for irrigation through the prophetic writings of Isaiah 41:18 and 43:19. These two biblical passages describe God’s promise to turn the wilderness into a “pool of water and the dry land springs of water,” and, “I [God] will even make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” The ambition of human engineering, called on here to transform arid Southern California, was sacralized by these words of an ancient Hebrew prophet. The visiting Mennonites even observed that providentially the land was flat, “as if intended especially for irrigation.”

Irrigation was not an end but a means, and here it would turn a desert into a garden, where “large colonies of our people can be located.” This idea of transformation through irrigation was not peculiar to Mennonites. Universalist minister Thomas Starr King embraced the powerful myth of “deliverance through irrigation,” earlier in the 1860s, when he described the transformation of desert into a garden as doing God’s work. Nor were these rhetorical flourishes of an earlier time. An article in Mennonite Community, a Mennonite church publication of the 1950s, describes a congregation in Los Angeles accompanied by thirteen photos. One photo features a stream and lush vegetation with the caption, “California is beautiful[,] with artificial watering, the desert becomes lush woodland.” Mennonites enacted their own desert redemption through the tilling of gardens and construction of communities anchored by churches, schools, and socially oriented ministries. The Central Valley was truly a garden, albeit manufactured, and by the 1950s, there was little desert left to see.

Spiritual Teacher for Tourists

Travel diaries, letters to newspapers, and serialized accounts of Mennonites who vacationed in California demonstrate further the grip California’s natural environment held on Mennonite imaginations. Agnes Albrecht Gunden, on a trip from Peoria, Illinois, to Los Angeles, listed the many attractions her and her group visited. Upon reaching Corning, she described the scenery, “Palm trees, orchards of figs, peaches, pears, olives, almonds, and oranges were seen in abundance. Peaches and pears were ripe,” and juxtaposed this garden image with the observation that no organized Mennonite church existed there.
In Southern California, Gunden went up Mount Lowe, took a trolley ride through Los Angeles, visited Long Beach, and went over to Catalina Island. On the way to Catalina Island, she reflected, “It was the nicest scenery we have seen since on our trip or before.” Before her return home, she expressed her gratitude: “We have had a nice stay at Los Angeles and we thank the giver of all good for the privilege of seeing what we have seen and for getting into a good hotel.” For Gunden, California was the apex of sacred natural scenery.18

John Peters standing by his pumping plant at Fairmead, 1913.
Source: Papers of Julius Siemens.
Though nature captivated the senses, Mennonite visitors still considered California a lonely place without much by way of churchly infrastructure. C. Z. Yoder was part of a traveling party from the Midwest to the Pacific Coast in 1908. Yoder serialized his account of the trip in the Gospel Herald that same year. In Corning, he wrote, “Here grow without any winter protection the orange, lemon, fig, palm and eucalyptus trees, the last-named shed its bark annually, but not its leaves. The raisin grapes grow here in abundance and are dried in the sun, as well as other fruit.” As they headed to Dinuba, Yoder observed the isolation experienced by Mennonites living there: “These brethren are here without a resident minister. These congregations appreciate visitors from the same faith in a way that large congregations do not understand.” Along the way, they passed through San Francisco, saw some damage from the 1906 earthquake and fire, and visited “Bro[ther]” D. E. Conrad of the Bay Area, who was “deprived of the privilege of attending services with his brethren in the faith.”

A common Mennonite practice at the time was to visit churches while vacationing. In addition to the stop in Dinuba, Yoder and his party visited Mennonites in Los Angeles and Upland. He observed: “In visiting these brethren and the small congregations on the Pacific coast, having no resident minister, we are again reminded of the great need of workers.” While thinking of the denominational response, he writes, “May the Lord hasten the day when our Churches, conferences and mission Board, will put forth greater efforts to send out laborers in the great harvest field to watch over the shepherd less ones and to see the lost and dying.” Yet landscape was the image of California that Yoder held on to as he departed: “On Sept. 24, [1908], we left our friends at Upland, Calif. In a few hours we miss the beautiful orange groves, the flowers and the evergreen trees, and instead are passing through a barren land for hundreds of miles where water is shipped on the railroad and sold to the consumers. How thankful we should be for the abundant supply of good, refreshing water.”

There was also a tendency by migrants and tourists alike to see in California’s natural environment a moral and spiritual teacher. When, for example, Helen Stoesz and her family moved from Minnesota to California in approximately 1920, she reflected on their arrival: “The roses were in full bloom and the tall stately palm trees all helped to make the trip enjoyable. Besides that, we had left Minnesota in a snow storm . . . I still remember how we walked on the sandy beach and watched the ever present sea gulls dashing down when the ocean tide had washed various small
sea life onto the sandy beach; then the sea gulls would have their feed.” Yet she concludes on a pious note: “What a wonderful Lord we have! He takes care of the birds of the air, who do not toil nor need to work for . . . daily food.”

Anna Nissley, from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, took a trip to the coast and wrote three articles of her experience exploring the landscape and reflecting on its meaning. In the Sierra Madre, at Cucamonga Canyon, a bridge of logs Nissley and her friends tried to build across a stream washed away. She concluded, “The thought presented to me, that Satan will take us just as quickly down the current of endless woe if we allow him to lift our feet from the rock.” Likewise, after she took a drink of water, she was reminded “that God was the Giver of all, and the Creator of the surroundings which were very picturesque.”

Nissley made two other trips that year. On one she took the electric car to the summit of Echo Mountain and “realizing the great depth below us almost caused us to shudder, yet perfectly safe, knowing no condemnation resting on our souls. We could sing praises to God for the privilege to behold the beauty of His works.” The Pacific Ocean offered a grand view, an afternoon of hunting seashells, and a visit to Catalina Island; it also reminded Nissley of “the benighted heathen on the other side. And our minds wandered from place to place where our missionaries are stationed.” California was not only a natural paradise, it was a constant reminder of God’s creative power and salvation, and that near the continent’s edge were the heathen. The question of California’s abundance nagged her as she traveled north through the San Joaquin Valley towards Oregon: “We all gazed with great admiration and wondered why the Creator put so much beauty at one place.” It was a marvelous landscape evoking for Mennonite travelers the temptations of Satan, the power of God the creator, and their responsibility for mission.

In some ways, she answered her own question with her pious outpourings of spiritual lessons gleaned from California’s natural world. Nissley was not the only Mennonite to explore California and make such spiritual connections. Frank and Mary Smucker on vacation drew similar conclusions: “A person stands by the seashore and views the mighty ocean and the great mountain peaks [and] it causes us to think more and more of the One who created both the heavens and the earth.” As another tourist observed, next to the Pacific Ocean, “We feel the littleness of our insignificant self,” while God was its creator and controller.
California was both a marvel to behold and an existential puzzle. After crossing the Colorado River into Bagdad, California, Oswald Goering described his first impressions of California in guarded tones: “Mountains, no plants—little vegetation—at places nothing but rocks and sand. Even bare mountains are beautiful as far as forms go but how the few people live is a question.” Goering, arrested by paradise, wrote, “We stopped to look at ocean within 15 feet of water (and then I put my hand in the water, I had my hand in the Pacific Ocean.) . . . trees [were] loaded with oranges.”

The Pacific Ocean was not only an important destination, but also a mystical experience. Through a fusion of evangelical Mennonite biblicism and pietistic emphasis on experiential theologizing, these moments were much more than emotional tourism.

Even when visitors encountered discouraged MC Mennonites, in places like Dinuba, the fecundity of the environment often took precedence in their reporting. S. B. Zook from Hubbard, Oregon, took a trip to Los Angeles and returned through Porterville, Dinuba, and San Francisco. Although the MC Mennonites in Dinuba were “discouraged,” Zook was particularly impressed with the valley’s flatness, and how “with the aid of irrigation system it is made quite productive.” In addition to alfalfa, there were the oranges, peaches, and figs to admire, grown in rich sandy soil in a warm climate. According to Zook, the land surrounding Dinuba was the “greatest . . . in central California for all kinds of fruit growing.”

Los Angeles, Zook effused, was Edenic: “The climate is invigorating, the atmosphere pure and balmy, the fruit trees laden with tropical fruit, and the evergreen shade trees and the flowers of every color are all around us, it truly makes us feel that it is good to be here.” For tourists, as with migrants, California’s environment was a spiritually transformative force.

Travels to church conferences were also occasions for Mennonites to wax eloquently on California’s wonders. J. C. Mehl, a Mennonite reporter at the 1910 General Conference Pacific District Conference in Upland, observed the “rich delights as we rushed along past lemon and orange groves, through alfalfa fields and walnut orchards—many of these being bordered by rows of palms or acacia trees, or by beds of roses, geraniums, dahlias or other blooming plants.” Mehl’s description of Los Angeles itself focused on water, specifically the once controversial Owens River aqueduct, transporting water hundreds of miles to “Angel City,” diminishing “that deceptive mirage of the desert which has lured many a sun-scourched traveler to a tragic death.” The route through the Tehachapi was “tortuous” and then
“as though being weary of its awful contortions the train shoots out like an arrow into the beautiful San Joaquin valley.” Similarly, on a trip in 1930 from Colorado to California, Dora Shantz Gehman invoked not only natural abundance, but also the Native American presence. She reported on “eating more grapes . . . [seeing] many Indians, goats and cattle—adobe houses,” and in so doing, captured 1930 California in terms of fruit production and Native architecture. These travel narratives covered similar themes as found in early Mennonite reports: natural abundance, exotic newness, wonderful irrigation, and lessons from heaven.

New Ethno-Religious Colonies

In the early twentieth century, companies such as the Rawlings Land Company and Kern County Land Company as well as individuals such as Karl Pohl, of Kerman, California, continued to use such booster tropes of nature, prosperity, and ethno-religious community. The Rawlings Land Company advertised in the *Steinbach Post*, a weekly German-language newspaper serving a primarily Mennonite community in southern Manitoba, Canada. Teasingly the ad asked: “Have you heard of the new German Mennonite settlement in Littlefield, Texas?” Rawlings claimed that “over 50 families from Kansas, Oklahoma, California, North Dakota and Manitoba” had already bought land here both “fertile and flat.”

Karl Pohl—more aggressive in his advertising—used an outline similar to the Kern County Land Company, which underscored nature, production, and community. Attempting to reach the frostbitten Mennonites in southern Manitoba, Pohl spoke of California as having “no winter” and possessing a “sunny climate [which] offers you God’s beautiful nature.” Of course, warm weather was only part of the story. In Kerman a farmer could make with 20 acres in raisins what 640 acres of grain anywhere else could produce. To believe this, one must come and see the “pure land” located “in the heart of the most fertile valley in America, the San Joaquin Valley.” Finally, to make the pitch irresistible, Pohl declared Kerman to be “The new German colony,” where twenty acres of raisins, alfalfa, or fruit could establish a secure home.

Building great and prosperous colonies in California was also a task for Mennonite land promoters. In 1908 Julius Siemens, an enterprising Mennonite land promoter, was corresponding with the California Irrigated Land Company of San Francisco regarding land in Tehama County.
From 1910 to 1911, he promoted land in Los Molinos, Tehama County, in an attempt to create the “greatest Mennonite settlement in California.” He even attempted a second colony in Fairmead, Madera County. Siemens and his partners were so sure of this venture that when two men took a financial loss and pulled out of the deal, all he said was, “The weather here is simply beautiful and I do not see how a man could return to Ritzville [Washington] where no work can be done for several months.” More appropriately, for Siemens, was the response of a delegation from Hillsboro, Kansas. After a tour of the San Joaquin Valley and San Francisco, the delegation wrote a thank-you letter saying California was so impressive that when they stopped in New Mexico they were not enchanted.

In a 1913 promotional pamphlet for his settlement at Fairmead, Siemens answered people’s questions. He described the land as flat and even, like that of the Red River Valley in Canada and North Dakota, or the Molotschna in Russia—all areas of successful Mennonite settlements. The Fairmead colony, he assured them, was in the most beautiful and fruitful part of the San Joaquin Valley, with up to three alfalfa harvests a year. For the farms to succeed, however, each family needed to set up their own irrigation at their own expense, at an estimated cost of ten to fifteen dollars per acre. Siemens advised Mennonites that they would save money if they did it themselves during the winter, when twenty acres could be set up for irrigation.

Siemens assured his audience that twenty Mennonite Brethren and five General Conference families were already settled there, holding religious services. Fairmead was not only beautiful; it was also only three miles from the nearest Mennonite settlement. To underscore the desirability of the soil there, Siemens claimed that many traveled thousands of miles to purchase this land, where water already came from a canal off the Kings River. It was perfect, where the crops were plentiful, the water accessible, and the people living there German speaking.

To press his point, Siemens described the climate as the best in North America, with no winter, in contrast to Siberia, Canada, or the midwestern states. He even made the improbable claim that the summer sea breeze coming out of San Francisco’s Golden Gate moderated Fairmead’s climate. Having addressed the concerns of climate, economics, and ethno-religious community, Siemens ended his promotion with the grand declaration that his settlement in Fairmead would be “die groeszte deutsche Ansiedlung in Kalifornien,” or “the greatest German Settlement in California.”
Despite boosterism, sacred readings of the environment, and the ambitions of Mennonite land promoters, Mennonite desire for westward expansion was met with some disapproval. In 1909 J. M. Brunk, likely from Colorado, criticized westward-migrating Mennonites for alienating other Mennonites with what he saw as materialist expansionism. He described the early twentieth century as a time of “restlessness and dissatisfaction with present locations.” Brunk continued, “While we heartily endorse the idea of evangelization by colonization . . . we feel that the time is here when we should raise our voices against the modern church-destroying
spirit of restlessness and land craze about which we have been hearing so much the past few years.” The destructive spirit Brunk described was found especially among the smaller congregations of the West . . . [who were] ready to respond to any call which may come from some brother who has found a beautiful oasis where he hopes to plant a colony of Mennonites.40

Brunk even called Mennonites hypocrites who were involved in the westward expansion and colonization of the American West, a process contributing to the scattering of Mennonites. It was hypocrisy, he argued, to constantly change location, invoking the “direct leadings of God,” only to move elsewhere after a series of crop failures. The westering phenomena was dismissed by Brunk as foolish: “Experience has proven that it is very unwise for individuals or even families to isolate themselves from all others of like faith, and endeavor to cope with the battles of life on the frontier.” Although Brunk did not explain what the frontier battles were, he insisted that financial reasons should be secondary to religious reasons for moving. He was particularly frustrated by the glowing letters
read back east: “In the midst of our work, letters would come to some of the brethren, painting such glowing financial pictures of distant localities that we found it difficult to keep the pulse of some of the brethren normal even in the midst of our meetings.” Despite the quickened heartbeats of eastern Mennonites, and Brunk’s heavy pronouncements, many Mennonites moved, and some were fleeced because of their California fever.

Scandalized California Fever

Several Mennonite families suffered in what is known as the Henry J. Martens Land Scheme. Henry J. Martens boasted of and sold land in the western states, primarily in California, to Mennonites in the Great Plains. One such farmer described the mood in 1909: “Because of the ongoing unmerciful storm and continuing drought, we have gotten the blues and already have strong symptoms of the California fever... We are reading that Mr. Martens will make another excursion there in September. Then not all our hope will vanish if he gives us an opportunity to go along and the California fever has not left us by then; for now the fever here is very high.” Intoxicated with “California fever,” many were receptive to his sales pitch.

Martens swept through the Midwest, peddling the fifty thousand acres of California land he claimed to own. He regaled Mennonites in Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, and South Dakota with stories of fabulous wealth awaiting those who ventured west. Despite his claims, Martens, it seems, had arranged to purchase 5,120 acres in California, and he exchanged them for farmers’ acres in the Midwest. He brought these families in by train and ensured that they were well treated. It was the beginning of Martensdale.

Martens’s scheme developed to such proportions that some of the Mennonites who moved to Martensdale began meetings—with Martens—to start a Bible college. A college board was formed; Martens donated land and pledged to meet any fiscal shortfall—up to three thousand dollars. The board set March 1, 1910, as their “no later” date by which to begin construction. However, before any construction began, Martensdale collapsed as the scheme became apparent.

After they arrived, Martens gave the Mennonites maps to their land. By Christmas 1909, the newly arrived Mennonites learned they were living on someone else’s property. In many cases, Mennonites had built houses that now needed to be transferred onto wagons as they looked for
a new place to live. A victim of the scandal reported: “Our joy had turned to sorrow—we could not stay here. Every day the little homes were set on wagons and taken to Rosedale or Bakersfield by the owners . . . The land deal was unsatisfactory, so in June we moved the house with all its contents, including the family, to a lot not far from the present Beardsley School, in northern Bakersfield.” In a final blow, the writer noted that because of “much swampland along the Kern River[,] John, Marie, Regina and I contracted Malaria fever. We were compelled to move again.” Indeed, California fever became malarial fever.

Some people later in life reflected on their experiences at Martensdale and used biblical texts to make sense of the disaster. J. P. Nord, for example, cited Psalm 46:1, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble,” and P. P. Elrich cited Numbers 13:17 for what he thought to be an appropriate description of the Mennonite “exodus” to California:
“When Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, he said to them, ‘Go up there unto the Negev; then go up into the hill country.’” 46 As these Mennonite migrants reflected on California, the biblical images are interesting: a place of trouble, the Promised Land, Canaan, relocating from one place to another. The Promised Land of California was Paradise Lost.

In these reports and letters—from early settlers, tourists, church correspondents, concerned readers, and victims—one set of Edenic images was counteracted with a dim view of American expansion. If the boosters and promoters lured many Mennonites from winter windchill to winter sea breeze, concerned readers such as J. M. Brunk saw something altogether different at work. In what appears to be a recalling of the biblical prophecy that in the last days people will move about freely, quickly, and often (Daniel 12:4), Brunk reminds his readers that destruction lies nearby. By taking an active role in the westward march across the North American continent—to the disregard of spiritual maturity that comes with stable settlement—their excited march was a harbinger of church destruction, absorbing lost battles endemic to frontier life, and hypocrisy. Those who actually migrated to California, however, were unambiguous in their desires, and when a few wrote their memoirs later in life, many kept the florid flourishes—even if tempered by time.

The Promised Land: End of a Westward Journey

Mennonite journeys to California were numerous and varied. Although some migrated from Russia to California via New York and Mexico, with one coming to Reedley from Mexico by taxi, 47 most are stories of immigration cast in exodus or eschatological imagery. John J. Gerbrandt, in his concise narrative of packing the car and driving west, bathes it in natural imagery and biblical symbolism. When the Gerbrandts arrived in South Dakota from Manitoba, after a delay due to car trouble, he recalled, “We had so much hoped that we would be farther along to the land of eternal summer by this time.” 48 California as the land of “eternal summer,” or the land without winter, was a powerful image not only for the Mennonites in Manitoba, as illustrated earlier in the advertisements land companies and boosters used, but for many other years later.

Throughout Gerbrandt’s memoir, the excitement of moving westward was captured by the repeated use of phrases like “turned west,” “faces were turned west,” “point of no return,” and “determined to continue
Their excitement grew the nearer they came to California, “as we headed west to lower elevations with expectations of reaching our ‘Promised Land’, our spirits rose. . . . closer and closer we came to the Promised Land.” Finally the great day came, when they crossed the border into Needles, California, and “oh how we all rejoiced when finally we entered this ‘Land of Milk and Honey’ with all the oranges and grapes we had heard about!” They rejoiced in the belief that God had brought them to Reedley, on Thanksgiving Day, in 1922. It was an adventure filled with optimism and hope in what the Promised Land of California could be. Though Gerbrandt combined an excited reading of the exodus motif with an important national feast day, not all Mennonite accounts were so extravagant.

Most memoirs from Kansas and Oklahoma primarily described agri-
cultural activity, climate, and the business scene in Reedley. As one recounted, “After they [male family members who took a trip to California] returned from their trip, all we heard for days, especially from my father, Daniel T. Eymann, was about the wonders of California and its marvelous climate.”51 Climate as a motivator was common, as clear in the explanation given by Marie Eymann-Marlar, an early Mennonite settler in Reedley, for their decision to move: “Having spent many years in the rigors of Kansas climate, my parents spent several weeks during the winter in various cities in California,” and that was all they needed to be convinced.52

Regina Becker, whose family came from Oklahoma in 1909, wrote a family history in 1974. Taking the long view, she opens with a fifteen-page account of church, Anabaptist, and American Mennonite history. The chapter “California Fever 1912–1918” describes why several of her relatives sold their homesteads and moved to California: “[On] April 11, 1912 Uncle Frank wrote a letter from El Modena, Calif. praising the comfortable weather—not too hot, not too cold. No wind storms, little weather damage ‘that beats Oklahoma.’”53

Carl Pankratz was seventeen in 1937 when he and his family left their farm in Oklahoma for better luck in California. After years of drought and grasshoppers, the dust bowl finally became too much, and the Pankratz family pulled up and moved. In Reedley young Carl Pankratz worked digging ditches for irrigation pipelines, pruning fruit trees, toiling in packing sheds, and picking cotton near Firebaugh. In just a few years during that terrible decade, the Pankratzes went from growing cotton in Oklahoma to picking it in California.54

The 1930s did, however, shape Carl’s religious outlook for life. After the Great Depression and World War II passed, Carl and his brother, Abe Pankratz, struck out on their own and purchased fifty acres to grow primarily sweet potatoes. After marrying, Carl sold his interest, and he and his wife, Mildred, settled in Reedley, where he took up carpentry and house building. Mildred raised up to 4,000 chickens after they purchased a cotton farm and chicken ranch, pushing Carl’s carpentry to the side. Over the decades of the 1950s to the 1980s, they were heavily involved with the Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS), an interdenominational Mennonite agency to assist those caught in mostly natural disasters. Late in life, Carl attributed his interest in working for MDS, including in its top levels of administration in California, to his participation in the dust bowl migration of the 1930s.55
Despite the preponderance of affection given to California climate and geography, weather was the least of concerns for Mennonites elsewhere in the world who came to California.

The Promised Land: The End of a Journey for Soviet Refugees

During the winters of the 1920s, Mennonites crossed the frozen Amur River on the border of Manchuria and the eastern Soviet Union, fleeing Communist oppression for American freedom via Harbin, China. Aided by J. J. Isaac, a physician in Harbin, they contacted Mennonite relief agencies in the United States and in Europe. Between two and three hundred Mennonites were granted admission to the United States, and they settled mostly in California. Those who did not go to California went to Washington, Paraguay, or Brazil.

Peter C. Hiebert, through the inter-Mennonite relief agency, the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), appealed to President Herbert Hoover to help bring over the Harbin Mennonites. Hoover agreed to bring the three hundred Mennonites to America in small groups month by month. They arrived at San Francisco, and while MCC was responsible for logistics upon their arrival, Hiebert suggested they write a thank-you letter to Hoover. Over the course of a year, the Mennonites who arrived in California settled mostly in Reedley, where they "adjusted to the American way of life and became prosperous." Twenty-five years later, the Harbin Mennonites held a reunion in Dinuba and honored Hiebert.

Several survivors and descendants of the Harbin refugees wrote memoirs. H. P. Isaak wrote of his family’s adventure in Our Life Story and Escape (1976). Isaak’s family received permission in 1930 to travel to "the glorious Beulah land of America." When "the day and hour had come where we also would leave for the beloved land where gold and honey flowed," on April 4, 1930, they boarded a ship for San Francisco. It was "like a dream, as also the fact that we were actually on our way to the ‘Promised Land,’ the United States; where the people tell no lies, no one steals, and none are poor!" Isaak’s infectious optimism was soon dampened. He was nearly deported from Angel Island, the immigration-processing center near San Francisco, and later tricked out of his fruit-picking wages. His youthful enthusiasm now tempered later in life, he wrote: "We also believed that the American dollar was worth more than a gold dollar, that the President
of the United States [Herbert Hoover] must be like unto the angels, that on some streets the surface was covered with gold, and that all one had to do was to bend down and pick it up. We had some grandiose preconceptions and I believed them all.”60 Other Harbin migrants wrote less apocalyptically about what America and by extension California meant symbolically, but the metaphors of exodus and the Promised Land remained.

Herb Neufeld’s family history, for example, describes the flight from Russia to America, “the land of freedom and peace,” to escape the oppressive government policies of post-1917 Revolution Russia. Once in Harbin, in winter 1929, Herb’s father, Jacob, recalled that his brother had a daughter, Elisabeth Neufeld, in either Shafter or Reedley. Jacob wrote letters to both Mennonite Brethren churches hoping to find her to ask for a travel loan. Elisabeth Neufeld, from Shafter, received one of the letters in time and raised money for their passage to America.61
In September 1930, with travel documents and money received, they gladly set sail for America: “Even though they were unable to get much food, they knew they could endure anything, now that they were leaving for America!” Herb further exclaimed: “As the ship sailed into San Francisco Bay, Jake and Corney stood on the deck and took in all the marvelous sights: the beautiful bay with ocean liners and cargo ships, the islands—Angel Island, Treasure Island and Alcatraz—all resting in the middle of glistening blue water . . . They marveled at the scene before them and thought it was the most beautiful sight they had ever seen. This was America!”

They docked at Angel Island. After some confusion regarding their country of origin, and facing possible deportation to Russia because they had left without permission, their sponsors from Shafter intervened. While in custody, the Neufelds were permitted to stay together as a family, and they were fed large meals and given beds and blankets. Helena (Herb’s mother) reacted “sternly” to the immigration official when informed of their likely deportation to Russia. Only after this confrontation did their sponsoring relatives from Shafter arrive. The family wrote a letter to President Hoover and believed he personally responded, despite a lack of any evidence, for in only one week they were granted admission.

There are conflicting stories of their gaining admission. In another account, the family made a request to the Department of Immigration. When the commissioner could not act on their request, senators Hiram Johnson and Samuel Shortridge were petitioned for assistance. One of the senators sent a telegram to Washington, as did Representative H. Barbour of Fresno, and the matter was cleared up after a bond for one thousand dollars was posted. Nonetheless, the Neufelds arrived in Shafter on November 1, 1930, and immediately gave thanks to God: “Now they were finally safe and free from oppression, thanks to the wonderful people in Shafter and the generosity of the government of the United States and the president.” Mennonites in Shafter gave them furniture, clothes, food, and jobs for the men. The family soon took English lessons at the local elementary school. Three months after their arrival, Helena gave birth to a son named Herbert, after the president.

Not all Mennonites who fled Soviet oppression at this time came via Harbin. Arthur Rempel, likely no relation to the Neufeld family above, like other memoirists began his family history with the sixteenth-century radical reformation in Holland but focused on events in the twentieth
century, conflating religious and historical genealogies. In 1922, in Gnadenfeld, Ukraine, Arthur’s uncle Wilhelm and aunt Margaret Neufeld, from Reedley, came bringing food to help the family, who were caught in famine. That fall the Rempels left for America. “As we reached the western Atlantic... Soon we sighted land, and not much later, land flanked us on both sides as we glided up Long Island Sound and ended our sea voyage when the skyscrapers of New York reached up toward the sky before our eyes. We had reached America!” The Neufeld family cleared Ellis Island, took a Southern Pacific train to California, and arrived in Reedley in February 1923. Arthur’s relatives lent them a cottage on their farm, where he noticed the “arid subtropical climate of the San Joaquin Valley.” The palm, eucalyptus, lemon, and orange trees growing alongside the magnolias were all new to him.

Contrasting Immigrant Visions

The trope of suffering in the migration stories of coming to California permeated the psychic foundation of Mennonite presence in California. Mennonites came because of economic dislocation, religious persecution, dust bowl drought, and physical illness. They came by train from the Great Plains and Midwest, car from Canada, hired taxi from Mexico City, in sleds over frozen Russian rivers, through the Russian refugee haven of Harbin, China, just ahead of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, and across oceans with hearts full of hope for a new life in America and anxiety for not having exit visas.

Even the cover art used by the two groups of Mennonite migrants for their memoirs reveals significantly different understandings of their journeys. Herb Neufeld’s memoir has a red outline of a man running against a black background, which gives a bold impression to the subtitle of the book, Escape from Communist Russia. Other titles, such as Escape to Freedom, with the Golden Gate Bridge superimposed onto an American Flag on the cover, or From Despair to Deliverance, with a cover depicting a dark green-gray dense forest giving way to a light blue-white mountain vista, or John Block’s eschatological laden Escape: Siberia to California—The 65 Year Providential Journey of Our Family, all come with symbols of spiritualized place identity. Mennonites from the Great Plains spoke more to an image of rugged individualism with titles such as Water from the Well: The Recollections of a Former Plowboy; Auernheimer’s Memories of a Farm Boy; Becker’s,
A Bundle of Living: Recollections of a Shafter Pioneer; the autobiography JB: The Autobiography of a Twentieth-Century Mennonite Pilgrim; and Hofer’s, Accepting the Challenge: The Autobiography of David L. Hofer. Where the original covers exist, they are usually photographs of the author; Auernheimer’s uses four photographs of highlights of his life. It should be noted that J. B. Toews was part of the Soviet refugee story in his coming to America, and as many Mennonites did, he lived a life of frequent migratory moves, eventually coming to California from the Midwest, where he had become a Mennonite Brethren leader.

Both sets incorporate biblical imagery in describing California. Soviet refugees, who moved from politically oppressive and economically depressed situations to a prosperous and safe country, employed an apocalyptic narrative of providence and destiny. Midwestern and Canadian prairie migrants, who moved to California on account of climate and depressed farming conditions—but favorable political contexts—used a narrative reflective of the Hebraic exodus story of suffering, migration, and deliverance. The difference between the two exodus-type accounts is the apocalyptic tone of the Soviet refugee Mennonites, reflective of the arduous, even desperate, conditions of their migratory experience. The borrowing of the Hebraic exodus story by North American Mennonites was significant for their emphasis on prosperity and appropriating that biblical story as a rhetorical device to sacralize hard economic realities and a fertile Promised Land.

Mennonite historian Harold S. Bender’s description of the Mennonites wandering the earth in search of a home and not partaking of the culture of nations never applied in California. With the exception of a few hundred Harbin refugees, Mennonites moved to California for economic and climatic reasons. Boosters and migrants alike interpreted California and the process of migrating there through an array of religious images denoting an early strategy of becoming part of California society. Attempting to make sense of their experiences as migrants and new residents, these images mixed various Christian and California visions of a natural utopia, mystical journey, and spiritual teacher. They linked their visions of California to providence and freedom. As we will see in the next chapter, these same migrants soon published images of California as a dystopic society. Mennonites in the early decades of twentieth-century California found an Edenic garden. Like Hertzler in the 1970s, they also found paradise to be both soothing and harrowing.