

## BELIZE FACTS AND FIGURES

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### SECTION: PART II: THE PEOPLE OF BELIZE AND THEIR HISTORY/THE MENNONITES

#### The Mennonites and Amish Mennonites

The Mennonites are another cultural group which has found a home in Belize. The Mennonites are descendants of Anabaptist followers of Menno Simmons, a Catholic Priest who left the church and accepted "believer's baptism" around 1536. The Anabaptist faith grew in Europe in the 1700s. Within the Mennonite community, there are a number of different congregations. These include the *Sommorfelder*, *Rheinlander*, *Altkolonier* and *Kleine Gemeinde* denominations. The Mennonites speak *Plattdeutsch* or Low German.

The Mennonites faced many persecutions in Europe for their religious beliefs and were forced to emigrate from their original homeland in Prussia. They moved to Russia and then to Canada and the United States in a quest to maintain their religious beliefs and culture. A group also immigrated to Mexico from Canada.

The Mennonites of Belize immigrated from Quellen Colony in Mexico in 1958. In 1957, the Colonial Government of Belize and the *Altkolonier*, *Sommorfelder* and *Kleine Gemeinde* Mennonites signed a special agreement called a *Privilegium* which gave the Mennonites special privileges in Belize. This *Privilegium* exempts the Mennonites from participation in any Social Security System and permits them to use their own education system. Only the *Altkolonier*, and *Kleine Gemeinde* actually settled in Belize the following year and were followed by the *Rheinlander* congregations. Keeping to their tendency to wander, a number of families have left Belize and have immigrated to Bolivia or back to Canada over the past twenty years.



Figure 1: An Mennonite *matz* bonnet for women and a straw hat used by the men.

The *Altkolonier*, *Rheinlander* and *Kleine Gemeinde* congregations who came to Belize started numerous communities. The *Altkolonier* settled in Shipyard and Little Belize while the *Rheinlander* went to Blue Creek. The *Kleine Gemeinde* developed Spanish Lookout. Today, Spanish Lookout, Blue Creek and Shipyard are the most prosperous Mennonite communities.

The Mennonites purchased the lands for their communities from private land owners. For example, the 18,724 acres of land at Spanish Lookout were purchased from a lady by the name of Ms. Olga Burns at a price of \$100,000.00 British Honduran dollars.

Other communities which were started after the main settlements included Upper Barton Creek, Springfield, Bird Walk and Roseville. These belong to the conservative Old Order Amish/Mennonite Christian Communities. These groups believe that other Mennonites have taken on questionable practices and lifestyles.

There are also Reformed Old Colony communities such as Pine Hill, Green Hills and New Land which are also conservative.

Mennonites are a diverse group based on how they interpret the Bible and their acceptance of technology. They can range from highly technical and globally competitive farmers who use the latest satellite technologies to technology-averse farmers whose religious beliefs limit them to use only horse-drawn carriages and restricting them from using air filled tyres, relying only on iron wheeled tractors.

Traditional Mennonite women use a dark colored dress called a *kleid* and a bonnet called the *matz* while the men use an overall called a *schlobbekson*.

Mennonite foods include *varenyky* which is a dough stuffed with cream cheese. The fried dough is eaten with a creamy gravy. *Varenyky* is a Russian food and *ruchvouch* is a pork sausage.

Mennonites do not promote music but celebrate Christmas, Easter, Pentecost and Ascension Day. Besides the Bible, the Mennonites study the book, The Martyrs Mirror by Thieleman J. van Braght who documents the persecution of the Anabaptists in Europe.