

Carving a Home Out of the Primeval Forest

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For many days preparations had been made in Buenos Aires for the arrival of the majestic SS *Volendam*, the ship which was bringing to the shores of South America a precious cargo consisting of 2303 Mennonite refugees from war-torn Europe. Because it was impossible to transport so many people at once by river boats to their final destination in the Paraguayan Chaco, it was necessary to find some temporary housing and to provide maintenance for them. The massive Immigrant Hotel in Buenos Aires was not available for us. Two days before the estimated date of arrival no place had been found. In the search for a suitable place to shelter our people while they were waiting for transportation no stone was left unturned, and many fervent prayers were sent up for guidance and help. These prayers were answered and the work of our men and women was rewarded. Somehow God put it into the hearts of the military men of Argentina to put at the disposal of the Mennonite refugees a sufficient number of army tents to house them. In a matter of hours a little tent city came into being on some open lots not too far distant from the Immigration Hotel. Arrangements were made with the hotel organization to use their kitchen and dining hall.

When on February 22 1947, the S.S. *Volendam* was maneuvered into position in Puerto Nuevo, all was in readiness. It was a very unusual scene. A small group of North American Mennonites stood on the pier, their voices blending with those of the large chorus of European Mennonites on board the ship in songs of praise and thanksgiving for a safe voyage to the shores of South America.

With the exception of the 298 people who were immediately transferred to the river boat, *Cuidad de Concepcion*, to continue their voyage up to Puerto Casado in Paraguay, all the refugees were disembarked and moved into the little tent city provided for them. This was to be their temporary home for a few weeks at the most. Due to unforeseen conditions, however, these weeks were dragged into months.

On March 7, 1947, the *Cuidad de Concepcion*, having completed the trip to Puerto Casado with the first group of refugees, was loaded for the second time. With 370 on board and Mr. Homer Martin again escorting the group, it started up the river heading for the Chaco.

In the meantime, however, war clouds were gathering on the Paraguayan horizon and the distant rumbling of cannon thunder was faintly heard. By the time the *Cuidad de Concepcion* got as far as Asuncion, the capital city of Paraguay, the war situation was so hot that our refugees were halted and informed that they could not proceed any further.

No provision had been made for an emergency of this kind. To quickly find a place in Asuncion to house these people was not so simple, and to keep them on the ship at a cost of 3,000 pesos per day was impossible. All possibilities were probed and the highest governmental officials contacted. Again God caused the seemingly impossible to come to pass. The officials decided to give an ear to the pleading of our men. Classwork was

temporarily abandoned in the agricultural school near San Lorenzo, about fifteen kilometers distant from Asuncion, and the rooms were placed at the disposal of the Mennonite immigrants. After a two-day stay on the ship in the harbor of Asuncion, our 370 people were disembarked and became the first unit to occupy the later well-known "San Lorenzo Lager." Later additions brought the total number up to 1,200. Here, as in Buenos Aires, it was hoped that their stay would be but a matter of weeks, but due to the prolonged revolution it was much longer. The life and experiences in the "San Lorenzo Lager," as well as in the "Fabril Lager," would make another interesting chapter which must also be omitted for lack of time.

The weeks spent in these camps were weeks of intense feeling and anxiety. There was too much shooting in the city of Asuncion for comfort. One Sunday evening while sitting on the veranda of the "Mennoniten-Heim" we heard a stray bullet crash through the branches of the tall tree in front of the house. Without making many comments we all moved inside. At nights we would move our cots away from windows and doors for fear of stray bullets. On the evening of August 5, the U.S. Embassy sent word that it expected matters to get worse and, therefore, offered to take our women and children across the border to Iguassu Falls, Brazil, for safety by means of the embassy plane. The offer was greatly appreciated, and its acceptance quickly and seriously considered. The women, however, unanimously declared that they would not leave their husbands. Since it was impossible for all of us to leave, we all decided to stay and to trust in God for further protection.

The weeks and months of waiting while the revolution raged on made our people in the camp quite restless. All communications with the Chaco were cut off for six months. This, together with a considerable amount of anti-Chaco propaganda that had spread while on the *Volendam* and continued after landing in Argentina and later in Paraguay, convinced some of our immigrants that they did not want to go to the Chaco to live.

Several land-seeking excursions were undertaken in search of a suitable location to settle. Interest began to concentrate on a tract known as the "Mbopicua Land." A sizable party of representative men from the immigrant group and some from Colonia Friesland together with Brother C. A. DeFehr set out to inspect this land. To reach this area required an overland drive with horse and wagon from Puerto Rosario, a distance of about thirty kilometers. To make a long story short, suffice it to say that the major part of this tract was later purchased and plans completed to establish a new colony there.

Early in July, 1947, an initial group of fifty-six immigrants, equipped with machetes, saws, and axes, as well as with essential camping equipment, entered the newly purchased land and began the gigantic task of carving a home out of the primeval forest. Temporary shelter was found in a few vacant buildings that were purchased with the land. Using these as their headquarters, our immigrants began to lay out the various villages with nothing but an ordinary compass to guide them. Needless to say, this was a very tedious job. The men were convinced that the most productive parts of the land were those covered by forests. Consequently, it was resolved to build the villages on tree-cleared soil. This was a momentous

decision to make, as the forest is very dense and, therefore, very difficult to penetrate. After it had been determined in which direction the village street was to be laid, the men proceeded to cut a narrow path along this line into the heavy timber and underbrush, all interwoven with countless climbing vines, some of the latter being as thick as a man's arm. From this narrow path lateral paths were cut to the places which were to be the building sites of the individual settlers. The cutting of the first long path, which was later widened to become the village street, was the joint obligation of the village group. The same was true of the digging of the village wells.

While thinking of wells, it should be remarked here that digging them was also a very strenuous job. Most of the deep subsoil is either heavy red clay or rock. It had to be cut out with pick and crowbar, and sometimes even with hammer and chisel. One or more wells were dug for each of the twelve villages with an average labor cost of ninety man-days per well.

Individual settlers cleared their building sites. Often they had to crawl on hands and knees from the street path to their building site. The removal of the large trees as well as all the underbrush and climbing vines by means of a limited amount of hand tools was very time-consuming. Many of the trees measured a full meter in diameter. Much time and energy were also spent in walking from headquarters to their place of work in the morning, taking their lunch and drinking water with them, and then returning again in the evening. In many cases this was a four-kilometer walk.

Persistent effort, however, eventually prevailed. In a general way all the families had about the same problems to contend with; so we will describe in short the experiences and labors of one Frau Margareta Enns and her family of two daughters and three sons. Like so many others, it was her sad lot to have her husband, the father of her children, disappear in Russia about ten years ago. Since then she and her children have not received one word from him. They do not know whether he is living in misery somewhere or whether he is dead. What a relief it would be to many of these families to know that their loved ones are dead, rather than to think of them in undescrivable misery!

The two daughters and their oldest brother were in the initial group of fifty-six to arrive on the scene of what was to become Colonia Volendam. Like all others, the location of their building site was determined by drawing lots. Theirs happened to be in the center of village No. 5, later named "Tiefenbrunn." The location having been determined, the brave trio began to clear a spot where the house was to be built. Taking a few hand tools, a noonday lunch, and drinking water with them, they walked from the "Talliere" (headquarters building), a distance of about three kilometers (two miles), each morning to the place which was to become their home. Each day they felled a few trees and cut away the underbrush. As soon as the clearing was large enough, they began with the construction of the house. A tree trunk of proper size and length was set into the ground at each of the four corners of the dwelling. Then a longer one was set in the middle of each end, on top of which was placed a lightweight but strong trunk to serve as ridge pole. In the middle of each side was placed another tree trunk of the same height as the corner posts. Two more long light-

weight tree trunks served as plates on top of the three side-wall posts. Shorter and lighter posts were used as rafters for the roof, and split bamboo sticks as sheeting laths. Tall grass was cut by hand on the campo, properly arranged into small bundles, saturated with mud on one end, and then secured shinglewise on the sheeting laths to complete the roof. The whole framework of the house was hewn into shape and fitted together with nothing but a machete and an ax. Many of these frames do not have a single iron nail in them. The timbers are secured with wooden pegs and the sheeting laths fastened with the thick climbing vines that are so plentiful in the underbrush of the forests.

As soon as the framework and the grass roof were finished Mother Enns and the two smaller boys came to join the faithful trio. As a family they now moved into what was going to be their home. By this time the village well had been completed. Carrying the water from this well with buckets, the Ennses began to make mud bricks and to sun-dry them. These were later fitted in between the pillars of the house frame, thus completing the walls. When I first visited the Enns family in early January, 1948, one end wall and about one half of each side wall were finished in this manner. One corner of this partly finished house served as my bedroom for about one week. To keep out the heat of the sun in daytime, grass mats had been tied together and hung over the openings in the walls that should later become windows. Under my bed, a hen with her chicks spent the nights and other hens laid their eggs in daytime. It was very practical indeed to have the eggs so near to the kitchen! The day I left the Enns family, the girls were mixing mud (by tramping it with their feet) for making more bricks.

When I returned to the same place four months later, I was gratified to see what progress had been made. The walls of the house were all filled in and plastered on both sides. The inside walls were nicely whitewashed. Even the mud floor was decorated with whitewash designs all around the edges. The mandioca plants and the kaffir, all very small in January, had grown to a height of six or seven feet. The Ennses had been eating watermelons, beans, and other vegetables out of their own garden and were just then beginning to use their own mandioca plants. The kaffir was ripe and was being used as feed for the horses, hogs, and chickens. More land was being cleared for next season's planting. The family was very happy and contented. Their neighbor lady said to me one day, "Mr. Warkentin, never before have we been as poor as we are now, but we have never been happier."

The immigrants settling in Colonia Volendam were fortunate to have in their group a number of experienced and well-trained schoolteachers. The interest in establishing schools was strong from the very beginning. Even during their stay in the San Lorenzo Lager some form of schoolwork was carried on. A teacher would gather with a group of children under a suitable shade tree to instruct them there. At present five schools are offering an opportunity to all children in the colony to attend. Equipment and supplies are primitive, and the success of the school depends largely on the initiative of the instructor. One of these schools was being taught in the partly vacated "Gemeinschaftshaus." For those of you who may not know what a "Gemeinschaftshaus" is, permit me

to say that in a number of villages they undertook to build one large, long house in common and used this for many families to live in while they constructed their own private house. The middle part of this particular "Haus" had been vacated and was now used as a schoolroom. Each one of the two end rooms was still occupied by immigrants. The partition walls consisted of suspended blankets.

All this pioneer work was, however, not without excitements and dangers. Wild antelope and ostriches are frequently seen on the campos. The rattlesnakes are noted for their size. One evening two large jaguars were seen on the street of village No. 5, apparently looking over the intruders to their domain. Vicious zebu bulls were a constant danger to the new settlers as they had to cross the open campos on foot in going to and coming from work. God, however, held His protecting hand over our people, and they have suffered no serious accidents.

The clearing of the forest and the construction of the houses with the most primitive equipment progressed very slowly, with the result that only small gardens could be planted the first year. We had hoped that the settlers would be self-supporting after December 1, 1948, but it soon became evident that our period of maintenance would have to be extended. We are now planning to keep them on full maintenance until October 1, 1948, then gradually to reduce their allowance for the next six months, and if possible to discontinue it entirely on March 31, 1949. It may be of interest to know that full maintenance as we call it consists of G20.00 (guaranies) per person per month. From this amount G2.00 in Volendam and G3.00 in the Chaco are deducted for general colony expenses and medical aid, thus leaving G17.00 or 18.00 for food. The equivalent of G18.00 is \$6.00 U.S. In other words, full maintenance consists of 20¢ per person per day, and some of our people get by with even less than that. Small as this amount may seem, it is, nevertheless, a sizable amount when you think in terms of 3,500 people. Our food costs for the immigrants are at present \$20,000 per month. The maintenance period could have been shortened if we could have had more equipment and supplies sooner. The lack of barbed wire for fence construction did much to retard production.

To get a modest picture of the accomplishment in Colonia Volendam during the first year, permit me to give you here a few statistics. As of April 1, 1948, they reported the building of 14 community houses and 181 private houses. All of these were built by the colony folks themselves. As of July 1, 1948, they report the colony as owning the following:

307 horses	23 colony-owned wagons
14 cows	19 privately-owned wagons
110 hogs	9 carretas (two-wheeled wagons)
1697 chickens	98 harnesses for horses

They report 243 able-bodied men, ages 16 to 60, and 334 able-bodied women, ages 15 to 50. These 577 workers have carried the heavy load of pioneering Colonia Volendam.

Each of the immigrant groups has had its own joys, excitements, disappointments, and problems. Until now we have been relating some of the

important events in the coming and settlement of the immigrants who came across from Europe on the S.S. *Volendam*. The group which came on the S.S. *General Stuart Heintzelman* had a very pleasant voyage across the Atlantic after experiencing many delays in getting out of Europe. The co-operation among the personnel of this ship, the IRO officials, the immigrants themselves, and Mrs. Elfrieda Dyck, who served as escort, was very good. The food served on board this ship was praised very highly by our people. Arriving in Buenos Aires a little ahead of schedule, they were promptly reloaded onto two river boats and a special train on the International Railroad and sped on their way to Paraguay. Everything was in readiness for them in the colonies, for much preparatory work had been done. Under the able direction of Brother C. A. DeFehr, who was assisted by Brother Vernon Neuschwander, the *Heintzelman* group, commonly known as Immigration Paraguay 481, was quickly organized into ten village groups. Suitable campos were found and measured for the new villages. Well diggers and a few expert builders from the old colonies were hired. Together with these, small groups of the newly arrived immigrants immediately went to work. Wells were dug and the most essential lumber was cut and sawed with several portable sawmills that had been hired from the old colonies. Soon a few initial houses were completed and the first families moved in. Within four months after their arrival in Buenos Aires most of these immigrants were on their own land. The large quantities of barbed wire that we had purchased for them many months before their arrival are on hand now. Land is being cleared of light brush growth and good fences are being built around these clearings. By the time the next planting season is here (September, October, November) they will be all set and ready to go. The No. 481 immigrants came much better equipped than the No. 471 (*Volendam*) folks. All this, together with more intensive organization and better planning, has given them many advantages, and according to present indications they will be on their own maintenance just as soon as the other group. The saving of one year's maintenance for these 860 people amounts to more than \$60,000 U.S. and certainly is an ample reward for all extra efforts put forth to get them settled quickly. It has also done much to keep up the good morale of the group.

The coming of the S.S. *Charlton Monarch* group, known as Immigration Paraguay 482, presents a somewhat different picture. In contrast to the wonderful voyage the No. 471 and No. 481 folks had in crossing the Atlantic, theirs was a difficult one. The ship chartered by the IRO for their transportation was the S.S. *Prince David*. Our people were scheduled to sail on about April 1. After having been processed and ordered to the port of embarkation, their first disappointment was the information that a last-minute checkup had disclosed some defects in the boilers of the ship, and that they would be delayed at least two weeks while the *Prince David* was being repaired in dry dock. Upon coming out of dry dock, the ship was rechristened the S.S. *Charlton Monarch*. According to later experiences and in the opinion of our immigrants this was a misnomer. Our people named the vessel "das Gefaess," "Charlatan," a Russian term, meaning indifferent or good-for-nothing. Their voyage is a long chapter, never to be forgotten. Suffice it to say here that after sailing only from Bremerhaven

to Rotterdam the engineers walked off the job and failed to return. New engineers had to be flown in from England to take charge, causing a four-day delay. Throughout the entire voyage delays and stopovers were all too frequent and too lengthy, sometimes as much as a whole week at one place. Finally the mechanism gave out altogether, and the ship with its crew (which was intoxicated much of the time) and the priceless cargo of our 758 Mennonites with their faithful escort, Sister Elfrieda Dyck, were floating helplessly about on the high seas. This continued for three full days. Refrigeration was cut off and the food soon spoiled. The water pumps stopped working, and the women had to dip ocean water with their buckets and carry it to the few sanitary facilities still in working order. The light plant was also out of commission; so our people were in the dark much of the time. To make matters still worse during these three days, a heavy storm sprang up and threw the helpless ship about in a most merciless way. The radio sender was so weak that a call for help could not be sent very far. As an answer to prayer, God caused another ship to pass by near our distressed *Charlatan* and recognize its plight. They were, however, in the center of such a storm that the rescue ship was afraid to come near the *Charlton Monarch* at night. Finally in the morning it entered the storm and agreed to tow the disabled ship into port at Recife (Pernambuco). Here our people were stranded for fully three weeks. Pretense was made at making repairs, but nothing was accomplished. Neither the ship nor the crew was seaworthy.

Finally the IRO decided that our people had suffered enough on this voyage and should be taken by plane from Recife directly to Asuncion, Paraguay. Now things began to happen. We who had been impatiently waiting at Buenos Aires for more than a month, hurried back to Asuncion. Arriving there, we were informed that three plane-loads of immigrants had come through from Recife and were on their way to the colonies. Exactly one week after the first plane with immigrants had left Recife, the seventeenth arrived in Asuncion, bringing a total of 762 precious souls to us. To explain the discrepancy in our figures, we must report the birth of four babies en route. On Thursday, July 15, just ten days after the first plane had left Recife, the final group of 190 immigrants embarked in Asuncion on their way to the Chaco. I personally had the rare privilege to accompany one of the groups sailing on the *Iris* from Asuncion to Puerto Casado. Those days of fellowship with our brothers and sisters gave me great joy and will be long remembered. Arriving at Puerto Casado, we saw Brother C. A. DeFehr standing on the pier, ready to take charge from there on. Early the next morning they all boarded the "Chaco Express" and headed for Kilometer 145, the most popular station on the Casado Railroad. Here a colony committee took over and arranged the transportation for the final lap of the trek. The last 100 kilometers had to be made by horse- or oxen-drawn wagons.

Brother C. A. DeFehr accompanied the last group of 190 immigrants directly into the colony. Here he is continuing the desperate race against time to get the folks established on their own land in time to plant so that they also may, by the help of God, have a harvest in early 1949.

[Slightly condensed]



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