The Hutterites
Facing their fifth century

With their medieval manners and methods, the Hutterites can be said to have been the one world taken up with progress, glitter and self-indulgence. Commercial farmers, staunch pacifists and devoutly religious, they've changed little in the 500 years since their ancestors Jacob Hutter was burned at the stake in Central Europe.

Now almost everywhere along the dusty back roads of rural North America, 55,000 world's Hutterites practice their fundamentalist lifestyle in 240 colonies dotting five midwestern states and three Canadian provinces.

What's amazing about the Hutterites says Dr. Victor Peters, a history professor at the University of Saskatchewan. "All that they've survived so long and adapted so well in a world that's moving so fast."

Peters, author of "All Things Common: The Hutterian Way of Life" (Banper and Bow, 1971), is a specialist in communal societies and has spent years interviewing and studying the Hutterites in Russia and Eastern Europe. Germany, Peters is considered a leading world authority on Hutterite history and habit.

The Hutterites are one of three surviving Anabaptist (believe in adult baptism) sects that originated in Europe during the 16th Century. Like the Amish and the Mennonites, they prefer a simple life. Sharing their longevity with the Old Order Anabaptists and the Mennonites.

The Hutterites migrated to the early Christian church, following the beliefs of the Swiss Hutterers to North America in the 1890's. In 1913, a group of 100 Hutterites moving to Russia and Canada formed the core of the 240 colonies today. They have maintained their life on the early Christian church, following the teachings of the Anabaptist in the 16th Century. In 1913, a group of 100 Hutterites moving to Russia and Canada formed the core of the 240 colonies today. Hutterites live in colonies, sharing their longevity with the Old Order Anabaptist and the Mennonites.

When Hutterites hear the question: "What do you believe that all that believed were together, and had all things common?" (Acts 2:44, All Hutterites work according to their ability and according to their needs, according to economic scarcity from cradle to grave.

Unlike a few other Anabaptist branches, Hutterites are not considered a sect that is moving. They are considered a sect that is moving, and their farmsteads are models of self-reliant productivity.

Fleeing Persecution

They came to the midwestern plains in the late 1700's and 1800's, looking for religious freedom after surviving centuries of persecution in Central Europe.

The first immigrant wave was settling in Corna, 39, 100 remote acres with a cash downpayment of $17,000. They chose the sparsely populated Dakota Territory, Peters, because they believed that was the only place where they thought they would be left alone.

But even in America they found persecution. As conscientious objectors during World War I, the Hutterites were harassed by their neighbors and imprisoned by the government.

Despite the same kind of oppression they suffered in the Old World, all but one of the colonies migrated to Canada. After 1945, when more favorable laws were passed protecting pacifists, some moved back to the United States.

Hutterite colonies are now scattered across the Dakotas, Montana, western Wyoming, and the three westernmost Canadian provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

Dour and Dusty

Their antique way of life keeps the Hutterites insulated from the outside world. Isolated in a group together for nearly half a millennium, setting up a protective wall between them and the frounty-30th century.

Modeling the "scrup and quiet spirits" of the "Christian and Religious" Hutterites deliberately avoid drawing attention to themselves. Peters said. They dress and speak as their ancestors did.

Hutterite clothing styles are hundreds of years out of date: somber, dark, saddened and usually handmade. The women cover themselves with head veils, ankle-length dresses and practical aprons—always plain and dour in color, but recently giving way to quieter styles.

Instituting the primitive Christians, the men grow beards after marriage and the women never cut their hair.

Among themselves, Peters said, they speak a near extinct German dialect. "Incredible. English is their third language behind High German, even though these Hutterite colonies have settled in English-speaking North America."

Seventeen, radio, television, dancing and jewelry—including wedding rings—are forbidden. To the Hutterites, the marriage ceremony is at the center of their religion. The weddings take place at the center of their community. The weddings take place at the center of their community.

Although out of style in clothes and customs, the Hutterites are fashionable in the eyes of their community. They wear clothes that are similar to those worn by the original Hutterites, and their behavior is carefully observed by the community.

It was a Hutterite who first put a cab in a tractor. Their farms are run like modern farms. A road trip or a trip to the Hutterite colony. Their farms are run like modern farms.

We need modern agricultural technology to go on living as we are. to eat, to produce, to survive," says Joe Mandel, who directs the Forest River colony in Fordsville, N.D. "It makes sense, it's practical in our way of life. But we don't want the greed and the crazy music on the radio to interfere with it."

Temperatures

Despite the sedations of the outside world, few Hutterite leave the colony. During their century in North America, Peters said, fewer than 500 have strayed from the faith and nearly all of them have returned.

But some changes seem inevitable. Teenagers hide radios, tape recorders and cigarettes under their beds, some sneak into movies and more seem to be tasting the forbidden fruits of the outside world. Even illegitimate children are cropping up, once unheard of in colony life.

Says Hutterite Tony Waldner, a college senior in his early 30's: "We're in for some hard decisions and adjustments. But we'll stick together and make it."

"Children, not considered members of the church until baptism in their late teens, are given some leeway in their moral behavior. As one Hutterite prayer begins: "I am a little child, my heart is pure."

"Adults, however, as members of the church, are under a strict moral code that doesn't allow for too many transgressions. Waldner, from the Forest River colony, intends to teach school there after earning his college degree. He and his family lived in the colony eight years ago, but returned recently.

"Yes, it's true, our doctrine hasn't changed in hundreds of years. And I don't expect it will. But some aspects of our life are bound to change seeing the world we live in," said Waldner, wearing a bright orange shirt that secreted foreign alongside the dark and serious garments of the community.

"In some colonies," he said, "the men and women are married for many generations and the family is one big extended family."

Education Seared

Waldner was allowed to finish his college education because he was raised outside the colony, because his fellow Hutterites believed he was the only way to save his colony. Hutterite children are educated at the colony, usually in one-room schools, by state-licensed teachers hired by the colony.

Most Hutterite children never go beyond the eighth grade. Higher education, said Peters, is considered dangerous, a disruption that could tear at the foundations of their simple faith.

The Hutterites oversee their own schools but the children believe they're being too narrow. High standards and strict discipline prevent the teachers from being too narrow and the children from being too narrow.

Children command their future, said Peters, so the Hutterites exercise strong control over them. As Proverbs dictates: "Train a child, and you shall be good; and if he is old, he will not depart from it.""Hutterite children must attend "German" school until they're 13, where they learn traditional hymns, Biblical history and how to read and write German. Unlike must fundamentalist sects, the Hutterites don't teach conversions outside and missionaries, Peters said. Instead they take care of what they already have, representing their population with large families, averaging about six children each.

It's true, Peters said, that very little new blood has been injected into the Hutterite line is 400 years. And that's led to the common belief that their lack of missionary spirit has soured the Hutterite bloodline. Although members are allowed to marry relatives as close as first cousins once removed, their population, Peters said, is large enough and healthy enough that the size of their genetic pool isn't really a problem. Some Hutterites adopt children if they can't have their own, and that gives the sect a broader genetic base.

Although Hutterites aren't baptized until their late teens or early 20s, they become "young people" at 15, and can then attend a university and get a job.

Hutterite jobs in their own homes, but eat together in a communal dining room. Men eat on one side of the room, women on the other and children eat together in a separate room.

Working to Survive

Every time a colony learns a trade and all jobs are of equal value—from the colony electrician to the woman who crooks eggs. "If we are to survive," said one colony leader, "then we must all work together."

Peters said that Hutterites are not only good at their work—those few who do leave the colony have trouble finding work—but also receive a great deal of satisfaction from their jobs.

"If you must remember that they don't spend time at the golf course, the bar or in front of the television after work."

Colony women de most of the domestic chores—cooking, sewing, caring for the children and the vegetable garden. In some ways they're more liberated than most women.

"When we moved out of the colony," said young Waldner: "Men had to cook the food for the family, along with tending to the rest of the housework."

He explained that colony women take shifts in making the communal meals and aren't saddled with pots and pans every day.

And there's little trouble finding a babysitter in the colony. Everyone is either a relative or a neighbor.

Social Change

Crime is almost nonexistent among Hutterites. No cases of murder, robbery or other major crimes have been reported in their history on this continent, Peters said.

And they're no oddballs.

Their families are models of stability, with just one divorce and two separations on their 400-year-old records.

Peters attributes the social calm on the colony to the firm discipline, stern upbringing and simple lifestyle of the Hutterites. Social pressure to conform is very strong.

When a member of the colony breaks a rule, the offender is isolated and punished.

Even the handicapped are taken care of, and given responsibilities. Unlike many families today, the Hutterites don't look on their disabled children and elderly as burdens, but as assets and equal partners in their community.

Divisions

Once a colony's population reaches 150—every 20 years at their current population rate—it divides like a biological cell. At 150, Peters said, colony jobs are divided among the community.
When a colony reaches that point, they buy new land and then workers are sent out to build a new community. When ready, members of the colony are separated by family and occupation and then draw lots to see who stays with the old and who moves to the new colony. All assets and debts are equally divided between the two sister colonies.

**Their Future**

The Hutterites are beginning to find their population increase difficult to accommodate, Peters said. Farmland is scarce and expensive. Even though the Hutterites are self-sufficient and productive farmers, they rarely accumulate wealth because of the costs of division. At the Forst River colony, for example, they raise and grow most of their food and spend only about $100 a month in groceries for all 60 people there.

Already some colonies are settling on acreage once thought too small, Peters said, making up for the loss in land by venturing more aggressively into agricultural commerce and industry. Most communal groups seem to fail, Peters said, because they rely on the strength or charisma of a leader, who eventually dies or falls from grace. The Hutterites, however, aren’t powered by a personality, but by a doctrine, tradition and their own history.

As Waldner said, summing up the belief of most Hutterites: “I believe our life is in Christ and the ideals He taught us can best be lived to the fullest extent in a community setting.”

Yet even without the glue of a towering leader or governing body, the 25,000 Hutterites still dress, believe and behave alike even though they’re spread across thousands of miles, two countries and four centuries.

Why? Maybe it’s the willingness of the Hutterites to submerge their personalities in their community and faith, Peters said. As one Hutterite leader put it: “Each grape must be crushed to give strength to the wine. People want to live together and keep to themselves. It won’t work.”

Meanwhile, the Hutterites approach their fifth century together against odds and surroundings that seem almost insurmountable.