

# The Hutterites Facing their fifth century



With their medieval manners and morality, the Hutterites seem miscast in a world taken up with progress, glitter and self-indulgence.

Communal farmers, staunch pacifists and devoutly religious, they've changed little in the 400 years since their namesake Jacob Hutter was burned at the stake in Central Europe.

Now tucked quietly away along the dusty back roads of rural North America, 25,000 world-shy Hutterites pursue 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 Moorhead State University, is 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" (Harper and Row, 1971), is a specialist in communal societies and has spent years interviewing and studying the Hutterites. Born in Russia and educated in Canada and Germany, Peters is considered a leading world authority on Hutterite history and habit.

The Hutterites are one of three surviving Anabaptist (believing in adult baptism) sects that originated in Europe during the 16th century Protestant Reformation, sharing their longevity with the Old Order Amish and the Mennonites.

They pattern their life on the early Christian church, following to the letter the Biblical directive "... all that believed were together, and had all things common" (Acts 2:44). All Hutterites work according to their abilities and receive according to their needs, enjoying economic security from cradle to grave.

Outside of a few isolated monastic orders, Peters said, they're the only communal society in history that's lasted so long and so well.

Despite their cobwebbed visions and traditions, Peters said, the Hutterites have prospered. They have one of the fastest growing populations in the world, nearly doubling every 20 years; and their farmsteads are models of self-reliant productivity.

## Fleeing Persecution

They came to the midwestern plains in the 1870s; 700 of them seeking peace and religious freedom after surviving centuries of persecution in Central Europe.

The first immigrant wave settled in Yankton, S.D., buying 2,500 remote acres with a cash downpayment of \$17,000. They chose the sparsely populated Dakota Territory, Peters said, because it sat apart from the rest of the world, a 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. Disenchanted, and facing 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 Minnesota, Washington and in the Canadian provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

## Dour and Dusty

Their antique way of life keeps the Hutterites insulated from the outside world. But it's also held the group together for nearly half a millennium, setting up a protective wall between them and the trendy 20th century.

Modeling the "meek and quiet spirits" of the apostles, the Hutterites deliberately avoid drawing attention to themselves, Peters said. They dress and speak as their forefathers did in medieval Europe.

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

Imitating 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, Tirolean. English is their third language behind High German, even though all Hutterite colonies have settled in English-speaking North America.

Smoking, television, radio, dancing and jewelry—including wedding rings—are forbidden. Too frivolous, the Hutterites say, and at odds with their solemn puritan commitments. Moderate drinking of alcoholic beverages, however, is accepted.

Although out of style in clothes and customs, the Hutterites are fashionable in farming. Unlike some of their historic cousins in the Mennonite and Amish sects, Peters said, the Hutterites haven't forsaken the technological advances in agriculture. In many cases they've been at the forefront of change.

It was a Hutterite who first put a cab on a tractor. Their farms are run like modern corporations, with stainless steel dairy parlors, mechanized poultry houses and the best of high-horsepowered field equipment.

"We need modern agricultural technology to get along in the world, to eat, to produce, to survive," says Joe Mandel, junior minister at the Forest River colony in Fordville, N.D. "It makes sense, it's practical in our way of life. But we don't need all this crazy music on the radio to survive."

## Temptations

Despite the seductions of the outside world, few Hutterites 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 Toni Waldner, a college

senior in his early 20s: "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 baptized 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 many transgressions.)

Waldner, from the Forest River colony, intends to teach school there after earning his college degree. He and his family left 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 seemed foreign alongside the dark and serious garments of the colony's older men.

"In some colonies," he said, "the men-folks and particularly the younger generation dress more like they do in the outside world."

## Education Scorned

Waldner was allowed to finish his college education, which he started outside the colony, because his fellow Hutterites would prefer one of its own to teach in its schools. Hutterite children are educated at the colony, usually in one-room schoolhouses, by state licensed teachers hired by the colony.

Otherwise, most Hutterite children never go beyond the eighth grade. Higher education, said Peters, is considered dangerous, a disease that can chisel away at the foundations of their simple faith.

The Hutterites oversee their own schools because they believe that public education is too worldly, tempting children with material goals and teaching them to scorn the dignity of manual labor and their simple life.

Children command their future, said Peters, so the Hutterites exercise strict control over them. As Proverbs dictates: "Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not depart from it."

Hutterite children must attend "German" school until they're 15, where they learn traditional hymns, Biblical history and how to read and write German.

Unlike most fundamentalist sects, the Hutterites don't seek converts or send out missionaries, Peters said. Instead they take care of what they already have, replenishing 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 in 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 join adults at work and at the dinner table. (Hutterites don't have kitchens 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

Everyone in the colony learns a trade and all jobs are of equal value—from the colony electrician to the woman who crates 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, for example, rarely have trouble finding work—but also receive a great deal of satisfaction from their jobs.

"Some people feel that the Hutterites work at too leisurely a pace," said Peters. "But you must remember that they don't spend time at the golf course, the corner bar or in front of the television after work. Their job is their recreation and pastime."

Colony women do 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, "Mom had to cook three meals a day for the family, along with tending to the rest of the housework. I really felt sorry for her."

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's either a relative or a neighbor.

## Social Calm

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 only one suicide.

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 doctrine, stern upbringing and devout 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 shunned. He can't talk, work, eat or socialize with the others. "It seems to work much better than our method of segregating lawbreakers in prisons," Peters said.

Because competition is less keen than on the outside, and because of their economic security, the Hutterites seem to enjoy a life more conducive to mental health. 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 the community.

## Division

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 overlap and a sense of community becomes unstuck.

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 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. □