Later Structures (1885-1900)

Depending upon the care with which they were constructed, and the economic progress of the settler, most of the early house/barn units were replaced within ten years of their construction. The earlier structures were usually dismantled to make room for the new house at the front of the yard lot because this, by tradition, was where a Mennonite house was located. As the necessary time and resources were generally now available, the new house/barn units were large and carefully constructed with close attention given to many of the traditional elements such as floor plan and interior fixtures (Figure 19). Like the earlier units, the house and barn section were often constructed separately.

Figure 19
Isaac Wiens farmstead, Rosebach, 1895. (Winkler, 1982: 25).

While houses built during the 1880s were generally still of log construction, those built during the 1890s featured a light timber frame or sometimes a stacked-lumber system more commonly used in the construction of cribbed grain elevators (Figure 20 and 21).

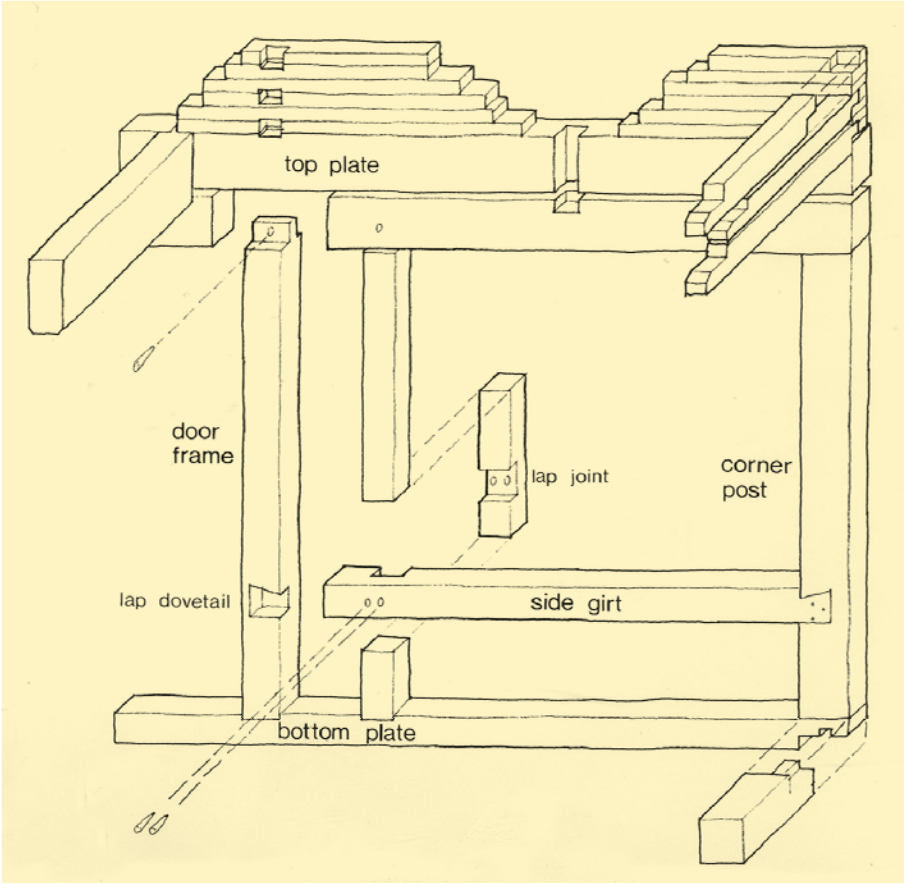

Figure 20

C. Unrau residence, Village of Chortitz: construction details.

Figure 21

Corner detail: crib wall construction.

Wood frame construction was not generally used until after the turn of the century. During this period roofs sheathed with wooden shingles began to replace thatch and, as rapid run-off of rain was no longer critical, this was usually accompanied by a slight lowering of the roof line and slope. Horizontal wood siding, which eliminated the regular repairs necessary to maintain mud-coated walls, became increasingly common as did wooden storm shutters (Figure 22). During the winter months these were often kept closed, especially at night, to help retain the interior heat. These later houses usually featured a multi-roomed floor plan closely based on the traditional Russian model (Figure 23).

Figure 22
Mennonite houses constructed in the MSTW district, before the turn of the century, were characterized by exterior wooden shutters.

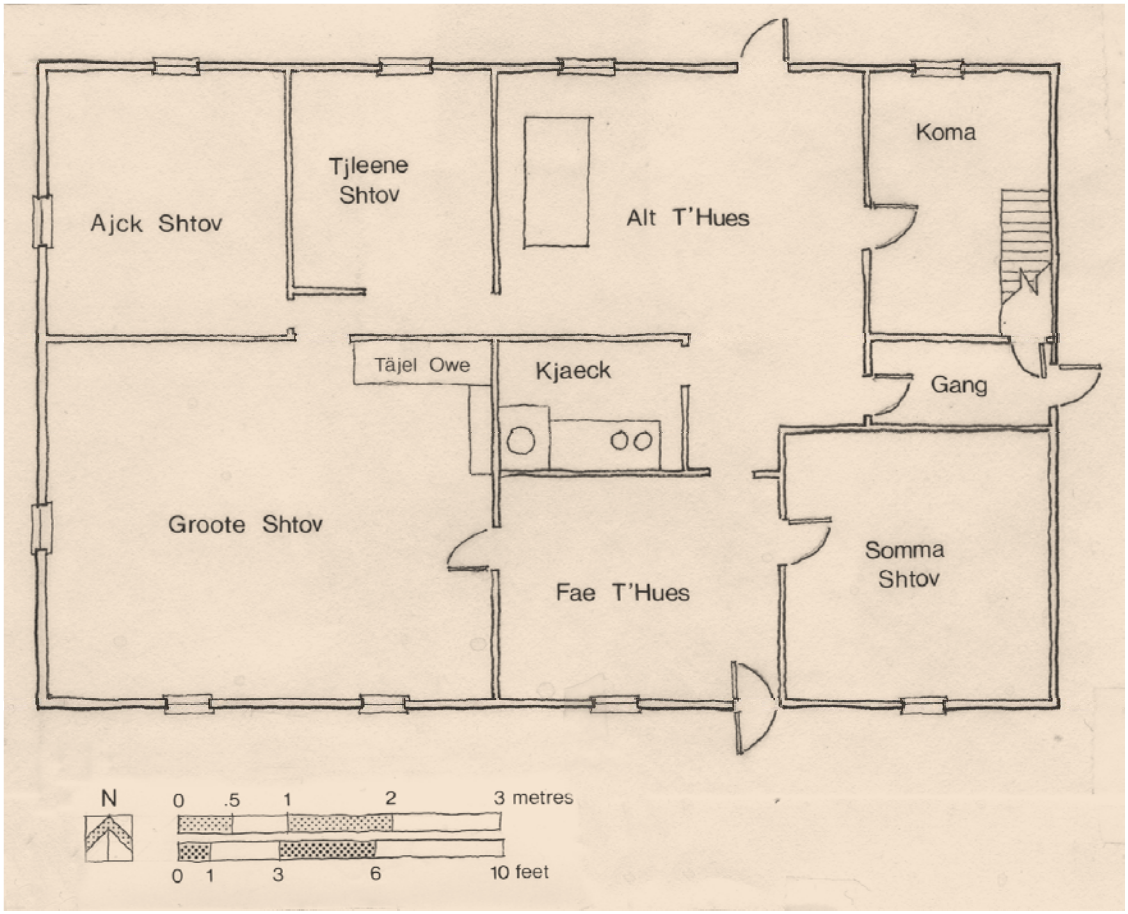

Figure 23
Typical floor plan of a traditional Mennonite house.

The house was divided into two equal parts. In the front half of the house, towards the street, was one or two bedrooms for the girls and smaller children, as well as the parents' room which often doubled as a living room. In the rear half, closer to the barn, was the main kitchen/dining area, a large utility room which often doubled as the boys' bedroom, the pantry where the stairs to the basement were usually located, a small entrance hall in the front of the building and a small cooking room in the centre of the building which opened onto the kitchen/dining area and had two large open windows to let in light. Located between the pantry and utility room was the "Gang" or hallway with doors at either end which separated the main living area of the house from the barn. The staircase to the attic was usually accessed from this passageway.

Above the ceiling of the cooking room, in the attic, a large tapering chimney or "Rajka Koma" was often constructed. This chimney served a double purpose. It not only kept sparks from flying out too quickly and igniting the roof, (this was especially important when thatched roofs were common), but it also could be used as a smokehouse for curing meats. The chimney was usually about two metres square at the bottom. Access to it, for cleaning or inserting meat, was gained through a large metal door. None of the remaining house/barn units in the MSTW district still have either the central cooking room or the smoke chamber above it; the only known house with these features was previously located in the village of Chortitz, and it is now situated in the Mennonite Village Museum in Steinbach (Figure 24). The interior walls of the new homes were initially lined with shiplap, but in later years this was often covered with wainscott panelling and wall paper (Figure 25). The ceiling joists, which were invariably exposed, were usually cut square and the bottom corners bevelled (Figure 26).

Figure 24
Many of the traditional Mennonite houses had smoke chambers built into the chimney above the kitchen area for curing meats.

Figure 25
Interior of one of the better presreved early Mennonite homes as photographed during the 1950s. (Provincial Archives Manitoba)

This simple bevel was actually one of the few decorative features in the largely utilitarian design of the house. Another standard interior fixture was the "Glauss Shaup" or china cabinet built into the walls of the "Groote Shtov" next to the brick heater (Figure 27).

Finally, in the few homes where some of the original walls remain, such as the Wiebe house in Hochfeld, the wall separating the "Groote Shtov" from the "Ajck Shtov" features an interesting tongue and groove construction with the uprights possessing the same bevelled edges as the ceiling joists (Figure 28). The large brick heater or "Tajel Owe" located in the centre of the building, was an item of great importance and could be found in most of the dwellings constructed during this period. A portion of it extended into several of the rooms in the front half of the house, and as a result, it acted as an efficient central heating system, (Figure 29).

Though used primarily for heating, it had a return-flu and often a space on top of the fire box which could be used for cooking. Because of its large size and brick construction, it usually kept the house warm even if stoked only twice a day. It was fired from the kitchen and worked equally well with a variety of fuel. During the early years, ample firewood could be obtained from the Pembina hills, but by the 1890s this source ran out and the Mennonites resorted to the use of "Mest sooden", or manure bricks, a type of fuel which they had been used for a time in Russia. To prepare the bricks, moist manure and straw were spread on the ground to a depth of about one foot. Horses were then walked over this until it was well mixed and fairly compact. The mixture was then allowed to dry for a few days, after which it was cut into squares and piled in such a manner that air could circulate through it while the drying process was completed (Figure 30).

Figure 26

Former Heide residence, Village of Hochfeld: interior view showing exposed joists, wainscotting and doorways leading to (left to right) the pantry, the attic and the barn.

Figure 27

The "Glauss Shaup" was a standard interior fixture in most Mennonite homes.

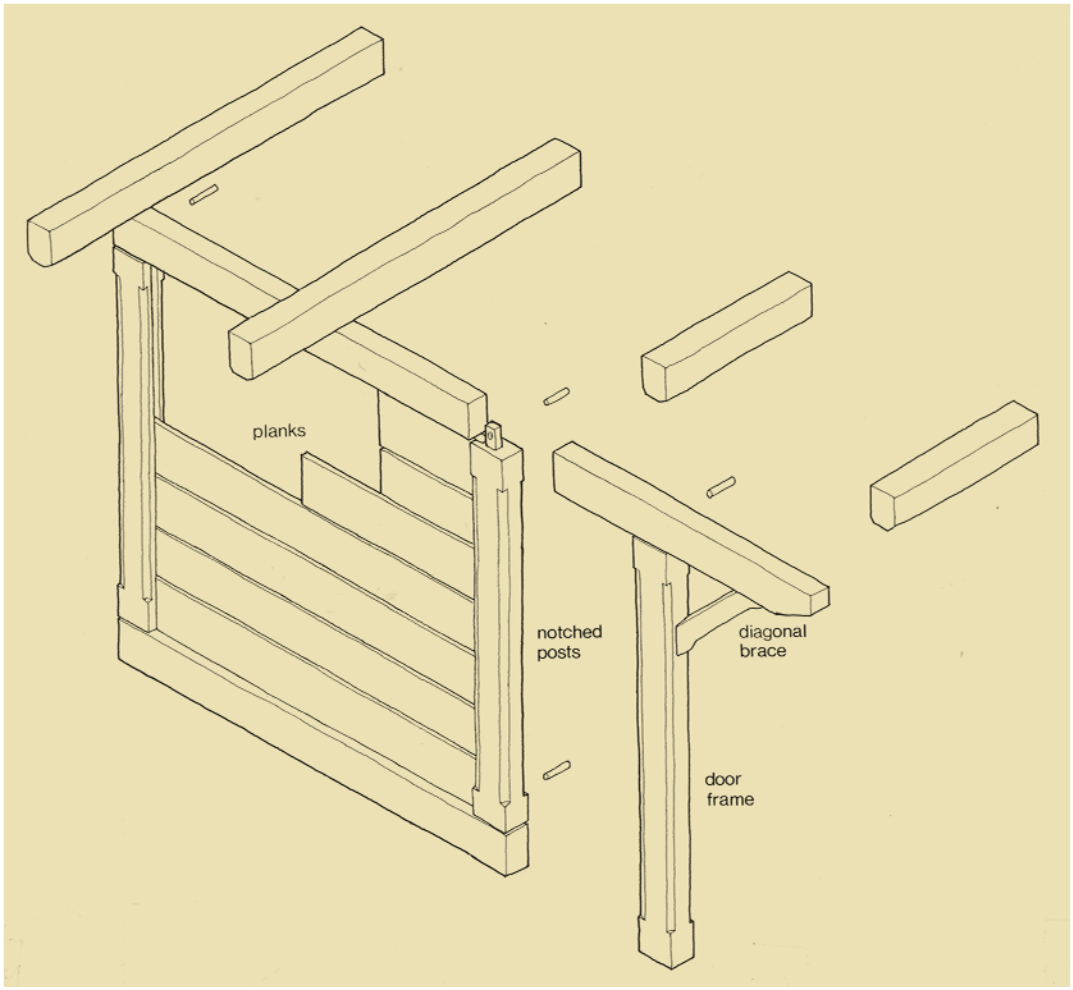

Figure 28

Peter Wiebe residence, Hochfeld: wall construction detail.

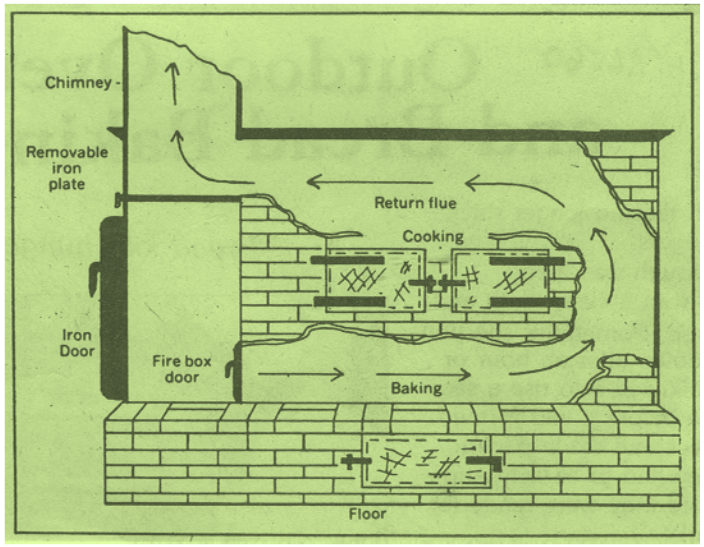

Figure 29

Typical Mennonite brick heater. Most of these units, in the MSTW district, were given an exterior coating of plaster and whitewash. (Reflections on Our Heritage, 1971: 31)

Figure 30

For many years, "Mest Sooden" or manure bricks were a common source of fuel in the MSTW district.

Fuel made in this manner was cheap, odourless and provided a slow but adequate heat. Manure bricks were used till the turn of the century when coal became the standard type of fuel, although during the 1930s and early 1940s they were again used for a time. Only four of these traditional brick heaters are known to still exist in the MSTW district (Figure 31).

The barn section of the house/barn units constructed during this later period was, like the house section, modeled after the designs used in the Russian colonies. It was invariably much larger than the house and, although the size and floor plan varied according to construction date and economic resources of the owner, it usually consisted of three major sections. These were the "Shtaull" or main stable area, the "Sheen" or threshing area and the "Owesied" for grain storage and the raising of poultry and hogs (Figure 32).

As a rule the basic structure was slightly wider than the house, extending approximately half a metre beyond it on each side. The walls and ridge of the roof were also about a metre higher although the slope of the roof was the same as the house. The barn was of timber frame construction and usually sheathed with vertical siding. Like the house section, thatch was the common roofing material during the 1880s and early 1890s, but by the turn of the century wooden shingles and horizontal siding were becoming more common.

Figure 31

Brick heater in the home of H. Ens in the Village of Reinland.

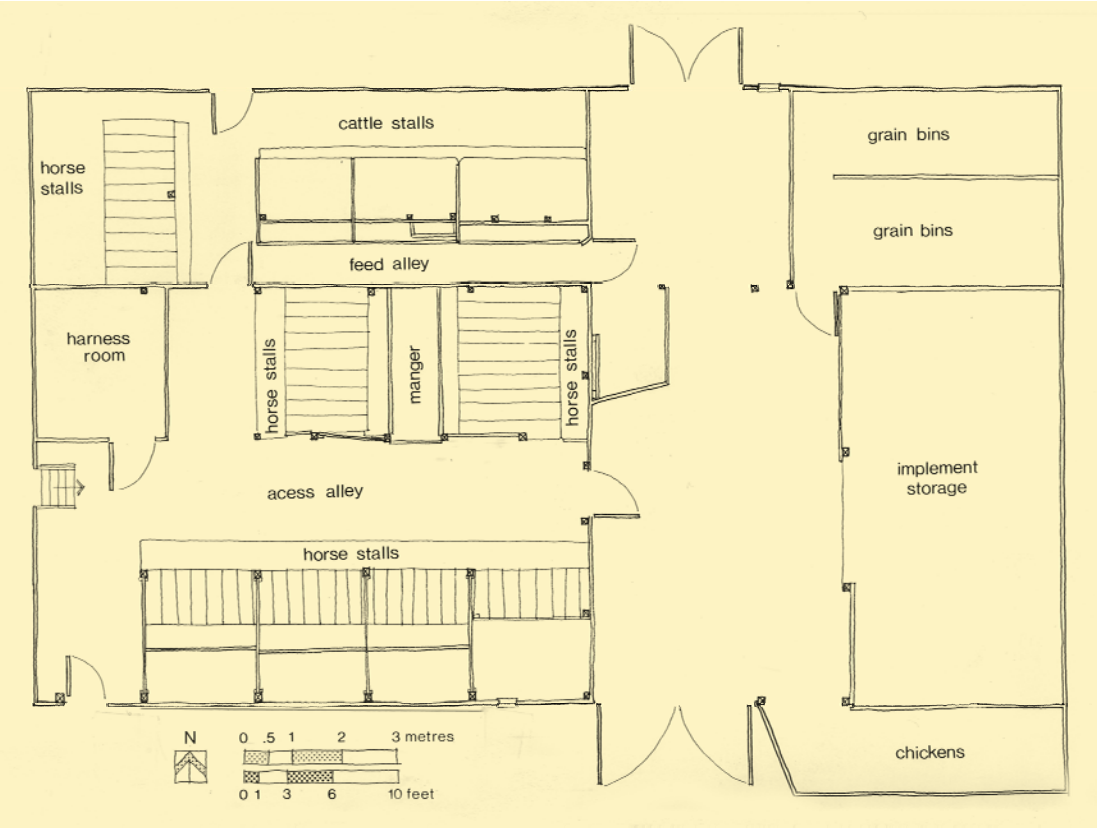

Figure 32
J.F. Ens barn, Village of Reinland, ca. 1885: floor plan. This structure is one of the few well preserved Mennonite barns in the planning district.

The stable area of the barn was always adjacent to the house. The interior arrangement, although varied, usually consisted of a central aisle with doors at both end and stalls along either side; cow stalls along one side and horse stalls along the other. Two additional doors were located along the front and rear walls near the dividing wall between the barn and house. Light for the stable was provided by a row of small windows along the length of the front of the barn just below ceiling level. Because sunlight entered the room from only one side, the stalls located along the opposite wall were often set sideways, so that the animals would not shade themselves while feeding. The majority of the stalls in the Mennonite barns were for horses, which were the main source of farm power until the 1930s. Cows were raised purely for domestic use and only a small number were kept at one time. Another common feature of the stable was a small storeroom such as the one located in the Ens barn in Reinland. This room was commonly used for storing harnesses, hand tools, and miscellaneous small items (Figure 33).

Figure 33
Early handmade tools: a bucksaw, a harness repair vice and a garden rake

The "Sheen" was traditionally the area where the threshing of grain was conducted. It consisted of two sections: a large open area where the threshing floor was located, and an adjacent storage area; the lower level of which was used to store the various types of grain and a loft area above where the straw was stored for use as livestock bedding. This section of the barn was characterized by two large doors which allowed a team and wagon to be driven directly into the area (Figure 34).

Also, because the stable loft or "Behn" was via a small door positioned above the stable windows at the front of the structure.

Although present in many of the barns constructed in the MSTW district, the "Sheen" section soon took on a different function than originally intended. By the time the Mennonites who settled in Manitoba could afford to construct large traditional barns, steam-powered threshing machines were becoming available. As all threshing activities were now conducted outside, the "Sheen" was no longer required and was put to use as an extra storage area for hay and equipment. In the Ens barn, a cutter, wagon, and miscellaneous other items are still being stored in this area, as they were in years past (Figure 35).

Figure 34

Typical "Sheen" doors. The criss-crossing pattern was typical of Mennonite barns in both Prussia and Russia and was found on virtually all traditional style barns in Manitoba.

Figure 35
The "Sheen" area in many Mennonite barns was used to store items such as wagons and cutters.

The "Owesied" was a section created by the continuation of the roof, almost to the ground. As a result, it was often only two or three meters wide. One long continuous "Owesied" section along the rear side of the barn was most common, although occasionally this was divided into two separate sections by a second set of large doors giving access to the "Sheen" and which allowed a wagon to be driven directly through the barn. Also, a number of barns had an additional short "Owesied" on the front of the barn. The primary purpose of the "Owesied" was the storage of livestock feed, seed grain and fuel, as well as housing poultry and hogs. In some cases, however, the slope of the roof on the rear 'Owesied" was reduced, allowing for a much wider space, and in these cases, the portion located adjacent to the stable area was used for extra horse and cattle stalls (Figure 36).

Another common feature of many of the Mennonite barns was the "Sheua". This was a large shed roofed section attached to the far end of the barn and used for machinery storage or as a fowling and calving area (Figure 37).

Apparently, this section was not commonly found on Mennonite barns in Russia, but, by the turn of the century it had become a standard feature of many Mennonite farmyards in the MSTW District.

A final, yet important, characteristic of most Mennonite barns was the "Braunt Lada", or fire ladder, and the "Booshoake", or fire-hook, both of which were used for removing bags of grain from a burning loft or for pulling down a burning wall or roof (Figure 38).

Figure 36
Hiede barn, Village of Hochfeld. A number of barns in the MSTW villages had wide "Owesied" sections, part of which acted as a second stable area.

Figure 37
P.A. Rempel barn, Village of Neuenburg. Although not part of the traditional barn design, a rear "Sheua" section was often added to the barns in the MSTW district.

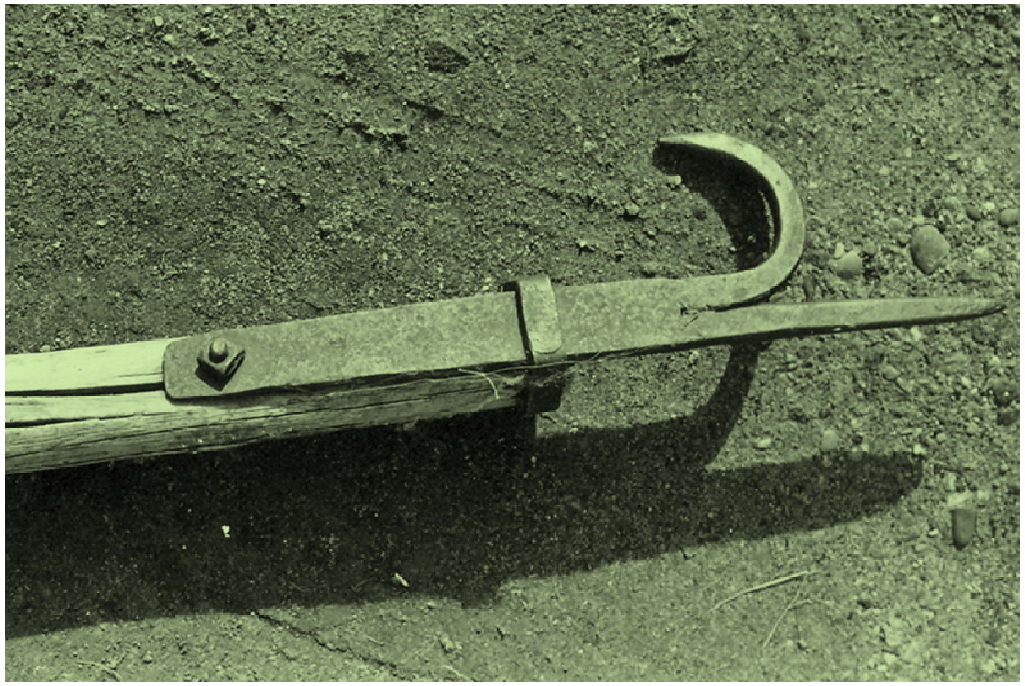

Figure 38
Detail of a hand-forged "Booshoake" or fire hook. This once common item was used for pulling down burning buildings and, thus, preventing fires from spreading to neighbouring structures.

These items were a strict requirement of the Mennonite fire-insurance program during the early years of settlement, and they were usually hung on the front wall of the barn, either above the row of stable windows, or on the wall of the front "Owesied".

In addition to its exterior appearance, the traditional Mennonite barn was distinguished by its heavy post-and-beam interior framework. Although some of the mortise-and-tenon joinery was similar to that used in southern Ontario style barns, the design of the framework clearly reflects the northern European roots of Mennonite building techniques (Figure 39).

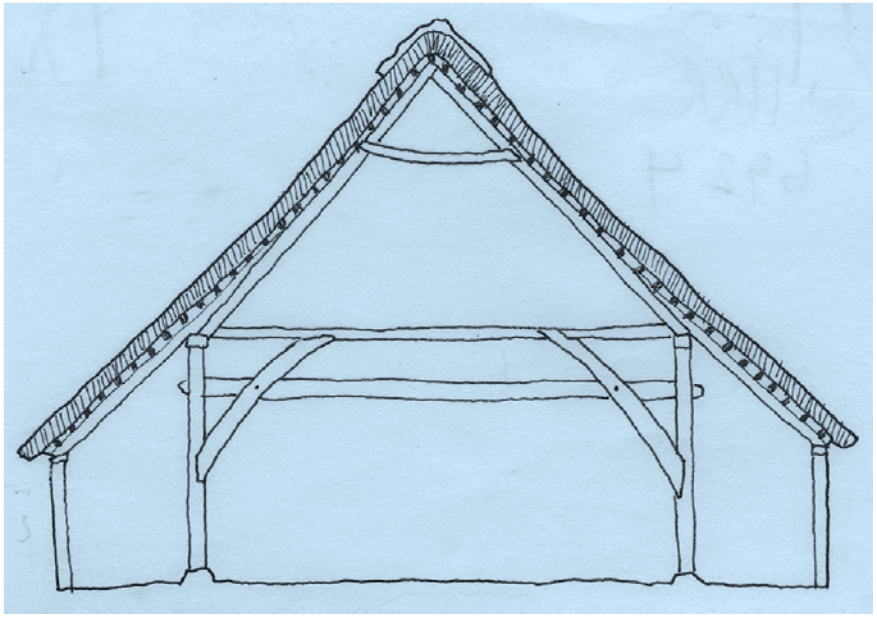

Figure 39
Section from a medieval Danish barn. During the seventeenth century Mennonites in the Polish and Prussian colonies adopted framing methods commonly used in Denmark and other northern European countries. This same method of framing was used extensively in later colonies in Russia and Manitoba. (T. Faber, A History of Danish Architecture.)

Each set of posts and connecting beams which traversed the width of the barn was commonly known as a bent. Each bent was assembled on the ground and raised into place, much like strut rafters are today. Typically each bent in the Mennonite style of barn consisted of 200 x 200 mm (8" x 8") posts which extended from a large sill beam at ground level to the height of the exterior wall, which was usually about three metres high. Similar sized beams, which acted as ceiling joists, were connected to each set of posts about one metre from the top. These connections were supported by diagonal sway braces. After all of the bents were raised into position, they were secured by a plate beam which spanned the full length of the structure, and acted as a seat for the rafters which were raised last (Figure 40).

Depending upon their location within the structure, additional posts and beams were added to this basic bent design. In the stable, approximately every fourth bent had an extra joist or tie-beam connected to the top plate. Invariably, these were strengthened with a continuation of the lower sway brace. After the bents were raised, connecting beams were also positioned beneath the joists along either side of the central valley and supported by posts at various locations (Figure 41).

A third tie-beam was often added to the bents which were located at the ends of the structure as well as those on either side of the "Sheen" alley. These bents also had additional posts and beams positioned below the main joints to act as a frame for wall boards and doors (Figure 42).

Standard mortise and tenon notches were used at all the perpendicular joints while an unusual type of formed lap-notch was used in all the diagonal joints (Figure 43).

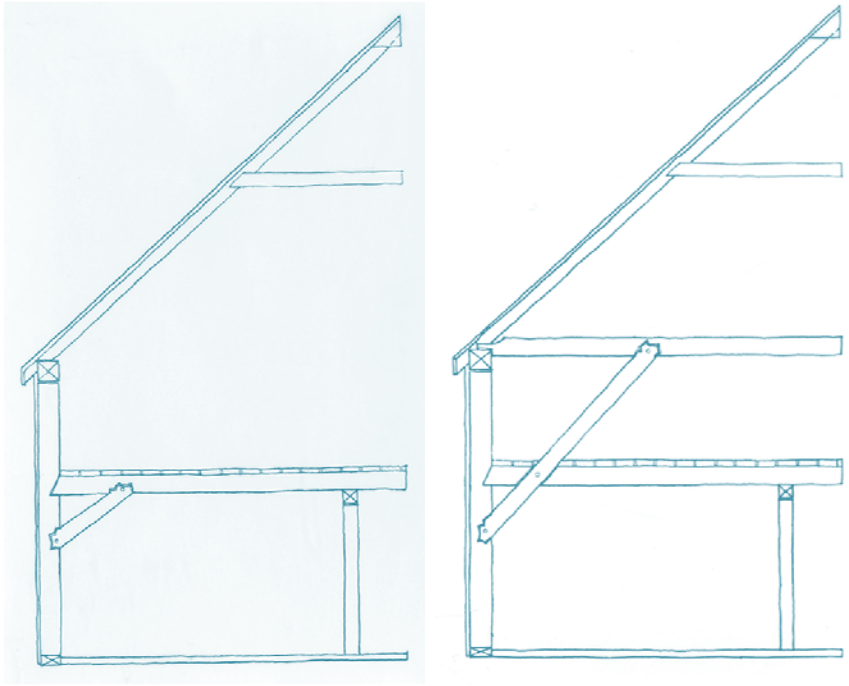

Figure 40
Standard bent design commonly found in the stable section of ost Mennonite barns.

Figure 41

J.F. Ens barn, Village of Reinland: barn bent.

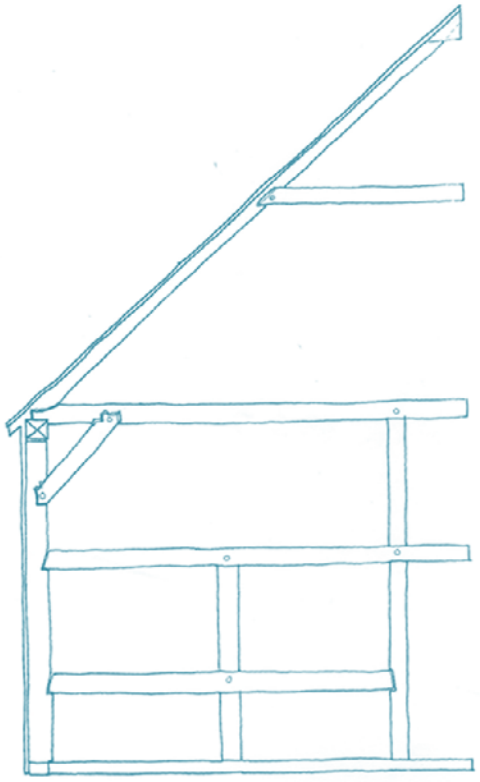

Figure 42

J.F. Ens barn, Village of Reinland: barn bent

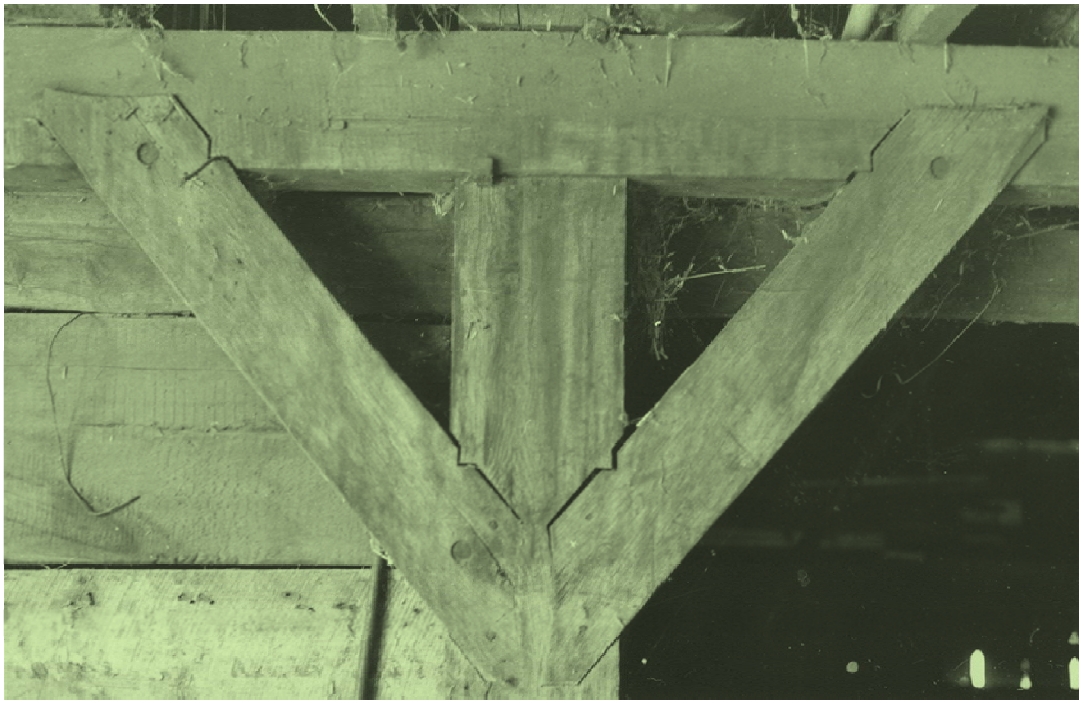

Figure 43
The sway braces in most Mennonite barns featured an unusual lap notch.

This type of notch, in Manitoba, appears to be exclusive to structures of Mennonite origin, and was no doubt transplanted from Europe as was the entire barn design. All the major joints were secured with wooden pegs. Like the more conventional mortise and tenon joints, the Mennonite lap joints were usually expertly cut and fitted. Examples were found where even a paper-clip could not be forced into the joint seam.

Unlike the southern Ontario style barns in the MSTW district, bents in the Mennonite barns were positioned quite close together, usually one and a half metres apart, and as a result, as many as twenty individual bents were used in the construction of a typical Mennonite barn, as opposed to four to six bents in a typical southern Ontario style barn.

Construction of the “Owesied” sections of the barn was much less complicated. The outside wall of the "Owesied" consisted of 125 mm posts or 50 x 150 mm (2" x 6") studs which rested on a sill beam at one metre intervals. They were joined by a top plate of two 50 x 150s, and the distance from this wall to the main barn wall was simply spanned by 50 x 200 mm rafters. Most of the connections in the "Owesied" were nailed.

During the early years of the traditional period, the barns were usually sided with vertical board and batten planks and the roofs sheathed with grass thatch. Foundations were usually loose fieldstone and the floors simply dirt or loose planks. By the late 1890s, however, horizontal drop siding and wooden shingles were increasingly being used as sheathing material as well as concrete for foundations and floors.