Conflict and Change in the Hutterite Land Base in North America

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Like many other Europeans, the Hutterites came to North America to escape persecution. They established farming communities, known as colonies, in South Dakota in 1874. High rates of natural increase led to the demand for more land. New colonies, each of 2,000-3,000 acres were established. There were 29 colonies after 50 years of settlement, 247 after a century and there are over 400 today. The economic success of the Hutterites led to complaints from other farmers about continued Hutterite land acquisition. Provincial and state governments in Canada and the United States passed discriminatory legislation. The Hutterites have responded by turning to more intensive use of their land and more profitable activities.

Like many other religious groups, the Hutterite Brethren came to North America in search of religious freedom. In particular, they wanted the right to own blocks of land on which they could live together as a group and maintain their particular way of life. Although it originally appeared that such an opportunity would be granted to them in the United States, hostilities towards the Hutterite colonies forced the group to move to Canada. Here, land ownership again became an issue and the Hutterites were again forced to disperse, some returning to the United States. As the Hutterite population has grown and land has become increasingly difficult to obtain, they have found alternative economic activities that allow them to maintain their colony lifestyle.

A number of case studies have been written about the Hutterite situation in specific locations. This paper reviews these studies with the intent of providing a synthesis, which demonstrates the universality of Hutterite land based conflict. Using interview data collected in the summer of 2000 this paper goes on to discuss how some of the Hutterite colonies have attempted to overcome this problem.

To-day there are 434 Hutterite colonies and over 36,000 members in the Hutterite Brethren. They are divided into three groups called "leuts". The Dariusleut are found in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Montana, Washington and British Columbia. The Lehrerleut live in Alberta, Montana and Saskatchewan. The Schmiedeleut live in Manitoba, North and South Dakota and Minnesota (Radtke, 1971).

Early History

The Hutterite Brethren were organized as a religious group in 1528 in Austerlitz, Moravia as part of the Anabaptist movement. Jacob Hutter, whose name the group adopted, was one of the early leaders and was burned at the stake in 1536 (Hostetler and Huntington, 1980). The early history of the group is one of numerous forced migrations, which created strong bonds of community and a desire to live together as a community. They were allowed to settle in the Ukraine in 1770. Here they established communal farming settlements called colonies.
A century later, the Russian government took steps to assimilate the immigrant population of the Ukraine. Between 1874 and 1877, the Hutterites became part of a general exodus to North America of people of German background. Of the approximately 800 original members, about half took up individual homesteads on the Great Plains and eventually joined with local Mennonites, another Anabaptist group. However, 444 chose to continue to live the communal lifestyle on three agricultural colonies in Bon Homme County, South Dakota (Hostetler and Huntington, 1980).

When a Hutterite colony reaches a population of about 130, the leaders purchase a new block of land and the group is divided in half. This process continues as required to ensure that there is work for every colony member and to minimize the need for a complex managerial system (Radtke, 1971). The new colony is usually close enough to the original colony to allow the older colony to provide support during the first few years of operation. From the 1880s onward, the Hutterites had one of the highest birth rates and one of the lowest death rates in North America, thus they grew quickly, almost completely by natural increase. As the three original colonies continued to subdivide, three separate groups developed, each named after early North American leaders: the Dariusleut, the Lehrerleut, and the Schmiedeleut. The Dariusleut are the most conservative, the Lehrerleut are moderates and the Schmiedeleut are considered the most liberal group (Radtke, 1971).

The Hutterites are pacifists. Uncertain about their exemption from military service, the Spanish-American War led the Hutterites to contact the Canadian government in 1898 and they obtained a promise of military immunity should they decide to migrate north (Janzen, 1990). By 1917 there were 17 colonies in South Dakota and two in Montana. The United States entry into World War I brought the German-speaking, pacifist Hutterites into conflict with their neighbors. Sheep and cattle were stolen from colonies and some members were beaten. In 1918 four young men who refused to serve in the army were sentenced to 37 years in prison. They were sent to Alcatraz and later to Fort Leavenworth. All were tortured and starved and two died (Stephenson, 1991). The Hutterite response was to abandon their colonies and move en masse to Canada, establishing nine colonies in Alberta, and six in Manitoba.

The arrival of over a thousand Hutterites led to a backlash in the provinces and the federal government passed an Act in 1919 prohibiting any further immigration. A change in government in 1922 led to the repeal of the Act but pressure to stop Hutterite immigration continued until the depression (Janzen, 1990). In order to live in colonies rather than on individual homesteads, the Hutterites incorporated themselves as The Church of the Hutterian Brethren. The corporation then purchased the land for the colonies.

In the 1920s some of the Hutterites returned to South Dakota and were able to buy back their old colonies, which had been held in trust by the state government. During the 1930s when other farmers were going bankrupt, the Hutterites continued to prosper and many municipalities, short on tax dollars, welcomed them in. The Hutterites met with less resistance during World War II. They were allowed to enter the Forestry Service and do road construction instead of joining the military in both Canada and the United States (Flint, 1975).

**Post-War Restrictions**
Continued growth of Hutterite colonies after the depression led to a new type of discrimination in the form of legislative controls on their activities. In 1942 the Alberta government passed the Land Sales Prohibition Act, which prohibited the sale or lease of land to Hutterites. The federal government protested and the Act was reworded in 1944 and continued in force until 1947 when the Communal Property Act replaced it. Under this legislation existing colonies could not expand either by buying or leasing land and new colonies had to be at least 40 miles away from existing colonies and could not be over 6,400 acres. As a result, the Hutterites were forced to move into newly opened farmland in northern Alberta or to leave the province. New colonies were established in Montana, Washington and Saskatchewan (Flint, 1975). Alberta’s restrictions were slightly modified in 1951 but the Hutterites were still short of land.

The passing of restrictive laws in Alberta led to the establishment of ten colonies in Montana between 1945 and 1951 (Radtke, 1971). These included eight large ranches of over 12,000 acres. As it became increasingly difficult to acquire new land, the Hutterites increased the intensity of use on their holdings. There were 21 colonies in Montana by 1971. A study of Hutterite activities completed in that year, showed that most of the hostility was with respect to economic issues and was unfounded. Hutterites were accused of buying and selling from wholesalers rather than local retailers thus hurting the local economy and gaining unfair price advantages over other farmers. The study concluded that the Hutterites were only taking advantage of economies of scale available to any other large-scale farm operation. Further, as they still buy some things locally, the fact that they increase the population density in rural areas, probably compensates for less local buying per person. Indeed, since the Hutterites pay full property taxes but tend to demand fewer public services, it allows other residents to be provided with better services. Ill feelings towards Hutterites tended to increase as one moved further away from the colonies, not closer to them. Most neighbors saw them as peaceful and helpful to their rural neighborhood (Peters, 1975).

Other Hutterites moved from Alberta into neighboring Saskatchewan (Map 1). Here, the corporation owns all colony land. Discrimination was again via legislation. Individual farmers could lease Crown land from the Department of Agriculture, but it would not allow the Hutterites to lease Crown land because they did not qualify as single-family enterprises. As a result, the Hutterites had to buy their land and became the largest private landowners in the regions where they farmed. Dryland colonies ranged from 6,000 to 15,000 acres. As in Montana, the economic and social stability of the colonies became the prime source of resentment (Bennett, 1967).
The Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities petitioned the provincial government in 1956 to restrict the size and location of colonies but the government response was one of moderation. In 1958 the Lehrerleut agreed to voluntarily discuss expansion projects with the government. The Dariusleut agreed to this in 1963 under threat of legislation (Janzen, 1990). The rules set a maximum size of 10,000 acres and a minimum distance of 35 miles between colonies. Government delays in taking action tended to drive land prices up, so in 1968 the Hutterites refused to renew the agreement (Janzen, 1990).

South Dakota passed legislation prohibiting the incorporation of further Hutterite colonies in 1955 and the Supreme Court upheld this in 1958 (Flint, 1975). In 1957, in order to avoid potential legislated restrictions to the expansion of colonies in Manitoba, the Hutterites informally agreed with the Union of Manitoba Municipalities to limit their land holdings to 5,120 acres per colony and to limit the number of colonies to a maximum of two per rural municipality (county) and to site them at least ten miles apart (Paulson, 1998).

Modern Alternatives

After a change of government in 1971, the Manitoba legislature accepted a report by the Manitoba Human Rights Commission that the informal agreement of 1957 was discriminatory and the government released the Hutterites from the need to adhere to it. While some municipalities have continued to call for restrictions on Hutterite expansion, such motions have never obtained a majority vote (Janzen, 1990).

A change in government in Alberta in 1973 also led the legislature to pass a new Human Rights Act and declare the Communal Property Act of 1947 abolished. Some 300 angry protesters marched on the legislature and letters of hate, abuse and concern about land being taken over by “foreigners” went to legislators and media outlets (Flint, 1975). The government stood by its decision.

Problems have continued in Saskatchewan. In 1977, a Hutterite colony purchased land but was refused a building permit based on a local by-law which prohibited
commercial buildings and more than two dwellings on a quarter section. The case went to trial and the Court ruled that the by-law had been passed to discriminate against the Hutterites and was therefore void. A similar case in 1983 was also decided in favor of the Hutterites (Janzen, 1990).

Since 1970 the birth rate among Hutterites has fallen and the demand for new colonies has been eased. The Schmiedeleut are the largest group and in 1992 split with the formation of a group known as the Committee Hutterites. The following comments are based on informal interviews with members of the Schmiedeleut, conducted while working with them during the summer of 2000.

The modernization of agriculture has greatly reduced the number of farm laborers needed on a colony. In order to create jobs, colonies have shifted to more intensive farming such as raising hogs under contract to packing plants. The introduction of new technology has led to an increase in the number of professional tradesmen on the colonies. Electricians, mechanics, plumbers and carpenters with college educations have replaced the old blacksmith. This allows the colony to continue to be self-sufficient but has posed problems as other farm laborers sometimes complain that the technicians are not performing their fair share of the work.

Other colonies have converted their barns into factories. Crystal Springs Hog Equipment in St. Agathe, Manitoba began modifying hog feeder equipment to suit their own operations in 1982. Two years later they designed their own feeders and turned a barn into a factory. They sold the feeders to other colonies and were soon having a hard time keeping up with demand. They bought new automated equipment and built a new building. They discovered that parts could be made faster than they could be assembled so the colony contracted out the assembly process to six other colonies. The latest CAD-CAM equipment with laser metal cutters and robotic welders has replaced hand built equipment. They now sell equipment through agents to Australia, Argentina, Chile, China, Malaysia, Korea and Germany.

Other colonies are involved in stainless steel fabrications, molding plastic and computerized parts machining. The Baker Colony near MacGregor, Manitoba manufactures ventilation equipment for livestock buildings and has sales over $5 million annually including sales to the United States, Poland, Korea and other parts of Asia. Furniture manufacturing, custom windows and doors, metal cladding, storage tanks, marble cabinetry, heating pads, cleaning agents and soft drink bottles are among other commercial operations. The manufacturing colonies often employ workers from other colonies as a workforce or as subcontractors.

These changes have been beneficial to the Hutterites as they have created jobs for the residents of the colonies and thus allowed them to continue their colony-based lifestyle. However, financial success, particularly in depressed rural areas, has continued to create a barrier between the colonies and the surrounding population. The degree to which this is expressed in open hostility has decreased since the post-war period, but has not been eliminated.

**Conclusion**
The Hutterites are an example of a group that came to North America to seek freedom from discrimination. From an original base of just over 400 people they have grown to over 36,000 primarily by natural increase. This population increase created a demand for land on which they could carry out their communal agricultural way of life (Table 1).

Table 1. Hutterite Population and Colony Growth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th># Colonies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1874</td>
<td>444</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>3000</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>8542</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>16931</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>23000</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>36000</td>
<td>434</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Their colony lifestyle and religious beliefs, which included pacifism and maintaining the German language, led to open hostility during the First World War. This led to the dispersion of the group from South Dakota into Canada. In Canada, legislative restrictions on their land needs caused further dispersal in both Canada and the United States during the 1950s and 60s.

Although a number of books have been written about the details of their treatment in specific locations, few point out the similarities from place to place. A general hostility towards the Hutterites developed during the depression and continued in the post-War period because of their economic growth and success at a time when other farmers were going out of business and small towns were in decline because of the loss of rural customers. These events were the result of social and technological changes in North American society and had nothing to do with the Hutterites. However, the unique way of life of the Hutterites made them easy targets for unhappy rural residents.

Since 1970 two factors have allowed the Hutterites to continue to exist without further significant increases in their land needs. First, the population growth rate of the Hutterites has slowed. Secondly, they have moved into intensive farming and manufacturing to support their colonies. Continued success with these new economic ventures has however allowed hostility towards the Hutterites to continue. The degree to which these feelings are expressed in acts of discrimination has significantly decreased, probably more as a result of further changes in North American society than changes in
the Hutterites. The Hutterites continue to have success in maintaining their unique land based lifestyle on both sides of the forty-ninth parallel.

References Cited


