

BELIZE

Belize Mennonites

<http://www.belmopancityonline.com/belize-mennonites.aspx>

Migrating from the Netherlands in 1790, to Prussia, Germany, South Russia, Canada, the United States, and Mexico, the Mennonites finally settled in Belize in 1958. Under agreement with the government they bore all expenses of removal and settling, bringing with them capital amounting to one million dollars. They are exempted from military service; and although they pay all other taxes, they do not partake in any form of compulsory or social welfare schemes.



Initially, some 3,500 Canadian Mennonites arrived in Belize, and today form communities on the upper reaches of the Belize River: Blue Creek on the Mexican border; Shipyard, Indian Creek, Richmond Hill in the Orange Walk District; Spanish Lookout and Barton Creek in the Cayo District; Little Belize in the Corozal District. Comprising 3.6 percent of Belize's population, they have made it a point to have their own school, church, and financial institutions in their various communities. No matter in which region of Belize the Mennonites live and work, they are liked and respected, especially for the true Christian characteristics and helpfulness to others which they willingly display.

As elsewhere, Mennonites in Belize are divided into two streams: The progressive wing, believes the church should be more involved in the world and have incorporated engines and electricity into their lives. The traditional more conservative wing, believes that the modern world including contemporary machinery contaminates their faith.

As a consequence the Mennonites in Blue Creek own vehicles use telephones, listen to radio, and have built and maintain a hydroelectric dam. In contrast the Mennonite communities at Shipyard and Little Belize refrain from using modern farm equipment and drive horse-drawn buggies.

(World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Belize : Mennonites
<http://www.unhcr.org>)

The Mennonites of Canadian origin speak excellent English, although among themselves they use the original Low German. In general though they can be said to be trilingual, since the older generation who were born in Canada speak English, the younger generation who were born in Mexico speak Spanish, and they all speak their own German dialect, or another ancient form of High German.

To set the right balance between interacting with the larger society, while still maintaining their conscientious way of life, is something the Mennonite in Belize see as happening through a closer understanding of how they honor the world. At least two large commercial stores serve the large settlement of Spanish Lookout and other communities; and interestingly enough all members of the community receive a dividend every five years relating to the amount of money they spend in the store.

The Mennonite, with their farming tradition, are well grounded in agriculture, and most Belizeans benefit from the sale of their produce throughout the country. Practicing organic farming, they grow peanut, potato, corn, beans, tomato, watermelon, carrot, papaya, sweet pepper, cabbage, and coriander. They are also involved in cattle and feed farming. Their contribution to food production is great, and a lot of the foodstuff on the store shelves come from their farms. They have established an egg hatchery which supplies Belize with eggs and chickens on a permanent basis. Milk, butter and cheese are also produced. Their personal eating habits, as well as food selection, reflect the Mennonite's origin, as they tend to select the best dishes from each country in which they lived and adopt them as their own specialties.



Seeking to exist in isolated farming colonies without the benefit of much modern technology, the Mennonite are easily identified by their old-fashioned apparel. The women wear long dark dresses with aprons and hats, while the men wear coveralls and checkered shirts.

Shipyard was founded in 1958, the first year of Mennonite migration to Belize. Shipyard covers 17,083 acres, comprising twenty-six local districts, which are called camps. In 2004 the internal Shipyard census mentions 2664 inhabitants. They refrain from using modern farm equipment and drive horse-drawn buggies. On the fields they use tractors with steel

wheels, because rubber tires are forbidden. They also have a strict clothing code, which makes them very visible outside their settlement. . Most still resemble blond German farmers; the men in dark trousers, suspenders, and straw hats and the women in conservative long plaid dresses and bonnets.

Shipyard is an agriculturally based settlement; the land is rather flat and cultivated land alternate with pasture land. The primary crops are sorghum, corn and rice. They also produce tomatoes, melons, cucumbers, sweet peppers and other vegetables. Livestock is also a major source of income, there are also several sawmills that provide lumber for houses and furniture. Carpenters and blacksmiths, several retail stores and two dentists are also part of the settlement.



(Village View Post)

The Mennonite, especially those of Shipyard, are skilled carpenters, and can be seen selling their furniture in Belize City and other urban centers. Those in Blue Creek, for example, have made a name for themselves in building construction countrywide, including roads and bridges.

Varying degrees of acceptance of mechanized vehicles have resulted in traditional groups moving away, and leaving the Progressive group to practice more modern ways of transportation. This is perhaps an offshoot of the Mennonite church which has over the centuries been characterized by numerous splinter groups. It seems as if being a Mennonite has evolved into a culture, since their great faith in God is what influences their dress, work, thought, and interaction with each other.