

Music at West Abbotsford

David F Loewen

[Music](#) played an important part in the life of Mennonite churches, including West Abbotsford. At the center was the church choir. Within two years of West Abbotsford's founding, Jacob Regier formed and directed the first church choir. From that time forward, choir music was a staple of worship experience. Those choirs included senior choirs, junior choirs, and in later years, the "Gelegenheits Chor" (translates as "Occasional Choir", these were Seniors of the congregation). The children's choirs were also very active, especially on special occasions such as Christmas and Mother's Day.

Notable conductors of these choirs over the years were George Wiebe, Henry Wiebe, Peter Derksen, Jake Tilitzky, Abe Tilitzky, Jake Olfert, Erna Tilitzky & Susan Hiebert.

George Wiebe's assessment of the trademarks of music at West Abbotsford was: "a strong sense of mission and commitment; regular, faithful attendance at rehearsals and most of many functions".

In earlier years, only baptized believers were allowed to sing in the Senior Choir on a regular basis. This choir sang, not only on Sunday mornings, but also at special events such as weddings. Sometimes these special events occurred at an inconvenient time. Hyperbolically, George Wiebe commented that choir members could be summoned from the strawberry fields in early summer to sing at a wedding, and as the choir conductor's hands were raised to direct, one could see the strawberry juice running down his hands.

When George Wiebe left to attend college in Winnipeg, his younger brother, Henry, took over as conductor, and even though some doubted that he could fill George's shoes, those doubts were soon laid to rest. Henry led the choir for the next 22 years, longer than anyone else. For many years, Friday evenings were reserved for choir practices that lasted at least two hours.

During the 1950s, West Abbotsford choirs and special groups travelled to Vancouver Island and the Okanagan communities of Oliver and Kelowna to serve Mennonite church communities. In addition to the choir programs, several special groups provided significant and meaningful service through music. In the late 1940s and 1950s, the "Messengers of Peace" were a regular feature in a radio ministry. The team of singers and speakers served on two stations – one in Bellingham, in Washington State, and the other in Chilliwack.

A special event experienced by congregations across Canada, from the 1940s to the 1960s, was the "[Saengerfest](#)" (Song Fest). Notable musicians were invited to rehearse and prepare a mass choir, composed of singers from local churches, for a concert. These were always well-attended and appreciated. Young choir members were inspired through these opportunities, especially by such as [K.H. Neufeld](#) and [Ben Horch](#). Some members of this congregation were encouraged to make music their vocation, because of these inspiring experiences. On one occasion, George Wiebe, at the age of 21, was asked to lead a mass choir at West Abbotsford. He recalled: "I still

remember my thrill (and fear) of directing a mass choir of about 100 singers in my first attempt at Bach's chorale, 'Wachet auf ruft uns die Stimme' (Awake, the voice is calling us)."

Other special church groups included "Reflections", a 1970s women's octet; Chapel Strings, a group of Senior women who entertained on their guitars, balalaikas, and other stringed instruments during the 1980s. Several of these groups made recordings.

When asked to recall his years at West Abbotsford, George Wiebe offered the following:

"Personally, the musical experiences during my stay at West Abbotsford were some of the most significant influences in shaping my spiritual life, my personal and social life, as well as my future vocation." [George Wiebe](#) taught music and conducted choirs at Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg from 1954 to 1991.

Sources: Living Stones: A History of West Abbotsford Mennonite Church, 1936-1986
Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online (GAMEO)

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1

Peter Derksen, Peter Unger, Jake Rempel, David P Wiebe,
John Letkeman, David Sawatzky, Dave Wiebe, Ed Rempel
Linda Elias, Helen Letkeman, Tina Heinrichs, Melita Derksen,
Mrs. Nick Dyck, Annie Unger, Elsie Elias, Margaret Rempel, Anita Friesen, Mary Tilitzky, Erna Derksen, Peter P Penner

2

Identifiable individuals in this photo are:
Henry Wiebe, Frank Sawatzky, Frank H Epp, Peter Derksen, Dave Wiebe, Abe Buhler, Jake Tilitzky, George Wiebe.
Anna Epp, Agnes Dueck, Martha Krueger, Helena Schroeder

3

____, _____, Peter Derksen, Jake Tilitzky, Bill Wiebe, Henry Wiebe, Anna Epp, Helen Letkeman, Melita Derksen.
Seated: Martin Loewen (driver, my father).

5

John Wiebe, Henry Wiebe, Bill Wiebe, Dave Wiebe, Susan Enns, Mary Derksen, Peter Derksen

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George Wiebe, _____, _____, Anna Epp, Jake Tilitzky, Erna Derksen, Henry Wiebe, Melita Derksen, Bill Wiebe, Helen Letkeman, Rev. Heinrich H. Neufeld

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Henry Wiebe, John Wiebe, Bill Wiebe, Menno Wiebe

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Brothers, George, Dave, Art, & Henry Wiebe



1 Church Choir, 1946; Peter Penner - Director



5 Messengers of Peace Radio Team, 1951



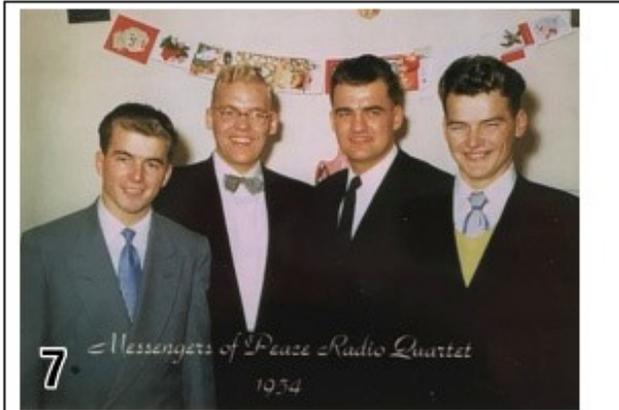
2 Sr. Choir, ca. 1950



6 Messengers of Peace Radio Team, late 1940s.



3 Mixed Octet on Road Trip to Oliver, BC, 1951
Driver - Martin Loewen (my father, seated)



4 Children's Choir practice, ca. 1958



Wiebe brothers gifted the congregation for many years with their musical abilities.

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