



# Homespun

## HARMONY

ST. JACOBS, ONTARIO

STORY AND PHOTOS BY  
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**FRESH RURAL AIR** has always afforded me an ample appetite. Partaking in a second helping, it also elicited a demure smile from our bonneted hostess.

Not far from the southern Ontario village of St. Jacobs, a Mennonite meal materialized as a mouth-watering mélange and appeared as the order of the day. Old Order Mennonites to be precise. Murray and Esther Metzger provided a substantial lunch for our group. Actually, they consider their lunchtime 'dinner' since it constitutes hefty homemade helpings. Our typical Mennonite meal consisted of meatloaf, scal-

loped potatoes, peas, coleslaw, stuffing and deviled eggs. A standard offering of three different delectable desserts consisting of fruit, trifle and cake followed the hearty meal.

This amiable encounter was reminiscent of a large family gathering that appeased both my appetite and interest in the Mennonite lifestyle. Of the 1.3 million Mennonites worldwide, 450,000 reside in North America. More than 30,000 in Ontario incorporate twenty groups. Mennonite roots can be traced back to the 16th Century Reformation in Europe. »

The Kissing Bridge, also known as the historic West Montrose covered bridge is close to 200 metres in length and was constructed in 1881.



» Pennsylvania German Mennonites migrated to Canada from the United States after the American War of Independence. One is inspired to admire their healthy, benevolent Christian beliefs.

Following our fine feast, Esther Metzger proudly displayed her hand-sewn quilts. She methodically unfolded the large blanket-sized quilts one-by-one to exhibit their attractive patterns and colorful designs. "Mennonite women are expected to make at least seven quilts starting from the time they turn 14 until their marriage," she told us. This is evidently enough to last a lifetime. A retail store in the nearby village of St. Jacobs features Mennonite quilts for sale.

Along both sides of King Street are several intriguing antique, craft, fashion and food shops that beckon visitors. Century-old structures such as the adjoining Village Silos and The Mill house artisans and local history exhibits.

A Quilt Gallery, pottery, candy makers, original artwork and native gifts, as well as a Maple Syrup Museum and Home Hardware exhibition are all worthwhile for browsing.

The settlement of St. Jacobs was established at this location in 1852 where a saw and grist mill were erected on the Conestoga River.

By 1894 electricity became a practical reality with the village becoming the first community its size to provide surplus electrical power to illuminate streetlights. In 1904, it also became the first in Canada to use water-generated electricity, replacing oil street lamps.

Across the street from The Mill was the Farmers' Inn (1852), constructed by local Mennonite settlers and was a stop on a stage-coach route offering food, shelter and watering troughs for horses. Today, the handsome Benjamin's Restaurant and Inn provides cozy accommodations and an eclectic menu. Mennonite horse and buggies and horse-drawn trolley tours have replaced the stage-coaches of the mid-1800s. We found this hospitable hub a homey haven from which to explore the region.

The original village Home Hardware store along King Street has spawned more than 1000 retail outlets across Canada. To commemorate its 40th anniversary in 2004, Canada Post issued a 49 cent stamp to the prominent independent hardware retailer. Various exhibits at The Mill trace the evolution of both the company and merchandise distributed over the years. Everything from bolts to bedpans and tools to typewriters were sold. Viewing the assorted artifacts, many of which are obsolete



and collectables brought back youthful memories of these household products. “I imagine the local Home Hardware store must have a surplus of green paint since it is a tradition for Old Order Mennonites to paint their roofs green,” I enquired. “Yes,” said Rob Wallace, Home Hardware promotional events manager. “We generally identify “green” with an eco-friendly environment, however, the green colour is actually more symbolic of fertility and growth.”

For palatably pleasing pastry preparations, I decided to seek out the Stone Crock Bakery down the street. Established in 1975, fifty employees of which 80 per cent are Mennonites operate the bakery. They create 35 different specialty cakes and produce more than 67,000 pies and 100,000 tarts annually. The owner mentioned that the most popular pastries are Dutch apple pie and apple fritters. The latter are renown in the village and I proceeded to devour a few of the warm sugary-coated apple delights to confirm this. Consequently, I was in search of a pastry patch to apply (as with the nicotine patch) to curb my further cravings.

Stone Crock Bakery also has a booth at the nearby St. Jacob’s Farmers’ and Flea Market where 600 vendors are available to sell their wares.

Further exploration of King Street brought me to the Hamel Brooms facility. Opening in Waterloo in 1908, it has been situated in St. Jacobs since 1991. The sturdy wooden door opened to a former blacksmith shop. Built in 1864, it is now a successful corn-broom making operation. Entering the premises felt like stepping back in time. Their oldest piece of equipment still in use is a hand sewing vice which dates from 1898. The most modern unit is a half-century old sewing machine. It was interesting to watch the steps involved

in creating a corn broom from scratch. Since Canada does not have a long enough growing season for the particular type of corn (sorghum vulgare) used in broom-making, it is imported from Mexico. With more than 15,000 brooms produced annually, it is reputedly the last manufacturer in Canada to create this style of household corn broom. I was literally swept away by the old-fashioned, yet effective, means by which such an item we often take for granted is made.

Being only 5 miles (8 km) north of St. Jacobs, we ventured out to see the only remaining wooden covered bridge in the province. The West Montrose covered bridge near the town of Elmira is close to 200 feet (60 meters) in length. Also known as the “Kissing Bridge”, this splendid structure is painted with oil residue and brown fireproof paint. Constructed in the same year as the shoot-out at the OK Corral occurred (1881), the covered bridge spans the Grand River and can only accommodate a three ton capacity. One can imagine how the bridge would have been enhanced by an even more bucolic background years ago.

Elmira received recognition in the Guinness Book of World Records for hosting the world’s largest single day maple syrup festival in 2000. An estimated 66,500 people attended the festival which included craft sales, sugar bush tours and a pancake flipping contest.

Mmmm.....flapjacks sound good. I wonder what’s on the Metzgers’ menu today? 🍳

St. Jacobs Tourism: [www.stjacobs.com](http://www.stjacobs.com)  
 Telephone: 1-800-265-3353  
 Visitors Centre: 1-519-664-3518  
 Elmira Maple Syrup Festival  
 Website: [www.elmiramaplesyrup.com](http://www.elmiramaplesyrup.com)

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