The Legacy of Jacob A. Loewen

Harvey G. Neufeldt

Jacob A. Loewen was a missionary, anthropologist, translator, and writer. As a young boy in a Mennonite village in the USSR, Jacob Loewen could not in his wildest dreams have imagined becoming a missionary in Colombia, a college professor in Kansas, and a translation consultant in South America and Africa. Loewen’s life was fascinatingly mercurial, considering, for example, his family’s escape from the USSR, his earning a Ph.D. degree, the remarkable education he received from native tribes in non-Western societies, and, in his later years, his confrontationally prophetic stance and consequent virtual exclusion from Mennonite Brethren (MB) churches in British Columbia. There were, however, abiding constants in Loewen’s remarkable life, mainly his deep love for the Bible and his firm conviction that the Bible needed to be accessibly translated into as many languages as possible. Loewen asked the question, “God, how would you have said this if you had spoken in our language in the first place?” which was more than an academic question for him—it was his passion.

Early Life and Education

Jacob Loewen was born in 1922 in Orenburg Colony, a Mennonite settlement in Russia near the Ural Mountains, to Jacob and Katherine Quiring Isaac. Jacob Sr. died while Jacob was still an infant. Jacob’s mother then married Abraham Loewen, and together they immigrated to Canada in 1929 as part of the last group allowed to leave the Soviet Union before Stalin closed the borders.

Upon arriving in Canada, the Loewen family lived for three years in Manitoba before moving to British Columbia. While residing near Kronsagt, Manitoba, ten-year-old Jacob had his first conversion experience. He soon discovered, to his and his mother’s disappointment, that the “once and for all” conversion experience advocated by some evangelical Mennonites of that time did not immediately solve all his behavioral problems. In 1934 the Loewen family moved to Yarrow, British Columbia, a village primarily of Russian Mennonite immigrants who had come to Canada during the 1920s. Yarrow left an indelible impression on Jacob. It was a place where he struggled to attain first-class status.

Loewen’s education was heavily influenced by his immigrant experience and his family’s poverty. He dropped out of public school after completing eighth grade and attended Yarrow’s Mennonite Brethren (Elim) Bible School during the late fall and winter months. After graduating from Elim, he enrolled in Chilliwack High School for one year before registering as a conscientious objector in 1942. He worked nights as a conscientious objector in Toronto Western Hospital and attended lectures at the Missionary Medical Training School in the afternoons. In 1945 he married Anne Enns, and together they left for Hillsboro, Kansas, where Loewen attended Tabor College, a Mennonite Brethren liberal arts college.

Loewen graduated from Tabor College in 1947, already set in his ways as an “evangelical soul winner,” confidently proclaiming the superiority of Christianity over other religions. Following graduation, both he and Anne enrolled in the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), held at the University of Oklahoma. Shortly thereafter they prepared to leave for Colombia as missionaries under the auspices of the Mennonite Brethren Board of Missions.

Mennonite Missionary in Colombia

Jacob and Anne Loewen arrived in Colombia believing that they would be MB missionaries for life and that they were called to evangelize the Chocó Indians. Along with fellow missionary David Wirsche they moved in 1948 to Noanamá, at the junction of the San Juan and Becordó Rivers, in order to make contact with the Waunana tribe. Not until his fifth year in Colombia, however, was Loewen finally released from other duties (including supervising the construction of buildings at the mission station) to undertake full-time study of the tribe’s language. This language study became the basis for his master’s thesis at the University of Washington in 1954.

Loewen’s experiences with the native people forced him to “reexamine his assumptions about the superiority” of the Western worldview and the exclusiveness of Christianity. Loewen gradually reached the conclusion that God had been present among the tribe long before the arrival of the Christian missionary. He also began to realize that many biblical truths were communicated in the form of metaphors and that “these kinds of metaphors could be found in a number of cultures.” Most important, he learned that in attempting to communicate God’s Word to the Chocó Indians, the missionary could find valuable contact points in the tribal culture to which the Christian Gospel could be linked. On one occasion, Loewen and Wirsche were invited to attend a Waunana beseeching ceremony held in response to a perceived crisis in the community. Despite their limited knowledge of the language, Loewen and Wirsche felt compelled to give the Waunana a message of hope. Using Waunana myths as contact points, they presented the people with a simple message. Unbeknownst to them, the Waunana who were present at the meeting shared this message with all the tribal families along the river. They

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then decided as a group to “give God their hand” and “walk on God’s road.” This group conversion challenged the predominantly individualistic conversion emphasis in Loewen’s own evangelical theology.8

**Tabor College, Panama, and Paraguay**

After receiving his Ph.D. from the University of Washington and while waiting for an assignment from the MB Board of Missions, Loewen joined the Tabor College faculty as professor of languages and anthropology. His increased efforts here “to cultivate channels for the Spirit of God’s work” in his life were important for his spiritual development. He applied ideas gained from a lecture by Elton Trueblood “on how to listen to the Spirit of God” and from Theodor Reik’s *Listening with the Third Ear*. Reik explains how in his work he often had “to listen with . . . a kind of radar system to locate the actual problems in his patients.”10

While at Tabor College, Loewen became involved in an important experiment in Panama that would further inform his understanding of missions. By the time he had left Colombia in 1953 to enroll at the University of Washington, the Colombian government had drawn up a new concordat that would effectively assign the indigenous people and their education to the Roman Catholic Church, thereby ending the MB mission to the Indians. When native children were forcibly removed from their homes and placed in Catholic schools, several parents “stole” their children back and fled to Panama, encouraged by reports that Loewen and Wirsche were there. (Loewen had arranged periodic visits to Panama to study the language of the Chocó Indians.) While on a flight to Panama, Loewen and Wirsche met Panama’s minister of education and shared with him their interest in embarking on a literacy project among the native population. Although skeptical about the natives’ ability to learn to read, the minister invited them to conduct the literacy experiment. Loewen’s study of the indigenous people to manage and control their own churches, thereby limiting the paternalistic supervision common in many missionary societies. Loewen resisted attempts by MB Mission Board personnel to impose doctrinal systems and behavioral codes on the indigenous church.2

During his tenure at Tabor College Loewen was asked by the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) to conduct an anthropological study of efforts by Mennonites in Paraguay to resettle native Indians living near three Mennonite settlements in the Gran Chaco: Menno, Fernheim, and Neuland. By 1960 the Mennonites were facing a growing Indian population and its increasing demands for land. The threat of an armed uprising in 1962 by a band of Chulupí near the Neuland Colony, following a drought that had left many of them without work and food, forced the Mennonite Resettlement Board in Paraguay to ask for assistance.13

Loewen’s study embroiled him in interchurch and interracial disputes. The MB Board of Missions, reluctant at first to endorse the study, hoped to separate the land question from any analysis of the predominantly MB mission, Licht den Indianern (Light to the Indians). Such a separation was impossible, however, because the mission had played a leading role in the establishment of Indian settlements, beginning with the settlement near Yalvesanga in 1946. Loewen’s research project exposed the divergent Indian and Euro-Mennonite views on racial politics and the underlying racism within the colonies. The Paraguayan Mennonite settlers were miffed by Loewen’s descriptions of racist policies embedded in their colonies’ institutions and of the discriminatory behaviors of settlers and local governmental officials.14

**Translation Consultant**

Though Loewen found his teaching experience at Tabor College rewarding, he was not content to remain in the ivory tower. So in 1964, when he had the chance to join the American Bible Society (ABS) as a translation consultant for South America, and given the unlikelihood of receiving an appointment by the MB Board of Missions in the near future, Jacob and Anne Loewen “jumped at the opportunity.”15

Before 1970 all ABS translation consultants were recruited by Eugene Nida, a brilliant linguist who had joined ABS in 1943. The translation consultants, many with graduate degrees in linguistics and/or theology, were drawn mainly from former missionaries who had already demonstrated skill and interest in linguistics and translation. As a translation consultant in South America, Loewen worked with translation teams composed largely of expatriate missionaries, including SIL personnel, assisted by native-tongue speakers. Since translation teams often were composed of members drawn from several denominations, the translation consultant had to guard against missionary translators’ incorporating their own doctrinal biases into the text.16

Serving as a translation consultant for South America proved, for the most part, to be a satisfying experience for Loewen. He became immersed in “dynamic equivalent translation,” a concept promoted by ABS. Its goal was to provide readers of Scripture in a contemporary language the same understanding and emotional experience that readers of the original texts might have had. A guiding question was Loewen’s “God, how would you have said it if you had first spoken it in this native language?” Translators needed to move from a more literal word-for-word translation to one that conveyed the equivalent meaning. Loewen observed how difficult such translation often was for expatriate translators. While working with translation teams, he “sought to listen with the ‘third ear’ whenever confronted by a problem in the text.”17

Serving as a translation consultant also launched

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Waunana and Emperá languages and the stories he had collected from tribal elders provided the basis for the two series of graded booklets drawn up by Wirsche. The primers, field tested in the summer of 1959, embedded the Spanish syllabary in the primers so that once the people learned to read in their own language, they could read Spanish as well.11

Loewen’s Panama experiences forced him to rethink his concept of missions, including his concept of indigenous churches and the empowerment of indigenous people. Loewen and Wirsche had learned from their experiences in Panama the limitations of mission stations led by expatriates. Their being present only in Catholic schools, several parents “stole” their children back and fled to Panama, encouraged by reports that Loewen and Wirsche were there. (Loewen had arranged periodic visits to Panama to study the language of the Chocó Indians.) While on a flight to Panama, Loewen and Wirsche met Panama’s minister of education and shared with him their interest in embarking on a literacy project among the native population. Although skeptical about the natives’ ability to learn to read, the minister invited them to conduct the literacy experiment. Loewen’s study of the
Loewen’s publishing career. His articles on numerous topics, including contact points between tribal religions and Christianity, confession, the role of myth in religion, and empowerment of indigenous people, appeared in numerous scholarly, religious, and church periodicals, most notably in Practical Anthropology.

When Loewen requested support to set up several native-tongue translation teams in Latin America, Nida consented, despite initial reservations. Loewen’s report on the experiment at the Bible Society’s 1969 workshop in Spain received enthusiastic support from attendees from the Developing World, but many expatriate missionary translators were unenthusiastic. It may have seemed to them that native translation teams would end the work that the missionaries themselves felt called by God to do.

The United Bible Societies (UBS), organized in 1946 under the leadership of the British and American Bible Societies and given responsibility for Africa, decided that in the matter of training native-tongue speakers, Africa provided a better environment than Latin America. Consequently, in 1970 Loewen was assigned to Central East Africa, with responsibilities in Angola, Zambia, and Rhodesia (later renamed Zimbabwe) and with some advisory roles in South Africa. He reported to the UBS office in London. In 1979 he was transferred to West Africa, with responsibilities in Ghana, Benin, Niger, Upper Volta (later Burkina Faso), and Togo.18

In Africa, Loewen worked to increase the role of local churches in the translation and review process. In the “oral-group reviewing” approach someone would read the text aloud to local church reviewers. If a listener heard something that seemed odd or unnatural, the group would mark the section in question. In this way, even individuals with limited literacy could participate in the translation process, and the church itself could claim at least some ownership of the translation. This approach reinforced Loewen’s belief that God spoke to the whole church and not only to selected experts or ordained individuals.19

Working as a translation consultant presented personal problems for Loewen. Despite the many years he had spent in non-Western countries and his extensive training in anthropology, he experienced extreme culture shock in West Africa. He eventually came to the realization that he himself was still operating as a “colonial missionary.”

Loewen’s last years in Africa were increasingly problematic for him. He was frustrated by what he considered to be increasing bureaucratization within the United Bible Societies. His superiors, in turn, found him difficult to deal with, especially when he expressed strong disagreement with the UBS’s stated translation goals for the 1980s in those African countries assigned to him. In 1984, UBS terminated Loewen’s appointment as translation consultant in West Africa.20

In 1982 Jacob and Anne Loewen relocated from West Africa to Abbotsford, British Columbia, from where Loewen commuted to Africa until his forced retirement. He planned to write and, as needed, serve as a consultant to mission organizations or international service agencies. He also hoped to communicate to churches and friends what people in non-Western cultures had taught him. This, however, became increasingly difficult, especially when he shared with them his conviction that while “Jesus was the way” to salvation, he was not necessarily the only way. After a pastor charged Loewen with heresy, MB provincial leaders cautioned churches against inviting him as a speaker. He and Anne, meanwhile, joined with several other individuals to organize Central Valley Fellowship, a group open to exploring alternative theological ideas. Loewen continued to do some consultant work and research in the area of missions and Anabaptist history. On June 4, 1993, Loewen had a massive stroke that ended his travels and any possibilities of future consultant work. He then turned all of his attention to writing.21

Loewen the Scholar

From the 1950s, Loewen was a prolific writer; whenever he encountered a situation or problem new to him, he discussed it in a publication. In his publications one sees Loewen the missionary, the anthropologist, the counselor, the storyteller, and the autobiographer. It is fitting that his article “Religion, Drives, and the Place Where It Itches” was selected as the lead article in Culture and Human Values, a collection of papers selected from his many publications in Practical Anthropology. A Chaco Indian, when asked to evaluate the missionaries’ programs in his region, replied, “They are scratching where it doesn’t itch.”22

Undoubtedly, many of Loewen’s publications were motivated by his concern that missionaries and fraternal societies provide a message and assistance that actually scratched where their audience itched. But it also seems that for him publishing was a way to scratch his own itches.

While Loewen’s early writings were primarily those of a missionary or publicist submitting news reports to Mennonite newspapers and magazines, by the mid-1950s he was writing as an anthropologist and a linguist with firsthand missionary experience. His publications appeared in professional journals such as the International Journal of American Linguistics, Bible Translator, Mennonite Quarterly Review, Journal of Church and Society, América Indígena, and especially Practical Anthropology, where his articles became its “backbone” for a time. Underlying many of his publications, and made explicit in “Missionaries and Anthropologists Cooperate in Research,” was the plea for missionaries to use anthropological tools to inform their ministry, since all “missionary and development programs are really programs of cultural change.”23

A trip Loewen took to Paraguay in 1963 for the MCC provided the backdrop to one important set of publications. His analysis of the land-settlement issue appears in his comprehensive report to the MCC and in an abbreviated form in “From Nomadism to Sedentary Agriculture.” The article “The Way to First Class: Revolution or Conversion?” is both intriguing and problematic in that it addresses the issues of power and racism but leaves them unresolved. Loewen’s fascinating discussions of the indigenous concept of the “innermost,” which were published in several articles in the Mennonite Quarterly Review and Practical Anthropology, highlight the need for cross-cultural understanding.24

Colombia and Panama also proved to be laboratories for Loewen to rework his concept of missions. The articles “Good News for the Waunana” and “Bible Stories: Message and Matrix,” as well as his 1969 publications on myths, present the argument that much can be learned by listening to natives’ stories and studying their festivals.25 Loewen challenges a commonly held Christian assumption that syncretism is to be avoided at all costs. It can be detrimental, as he demonstrates in “Shamanism, Illness,
and Power in Toba Church Life,” but it can also be beneficial, as he illustrates in “Confession, Catharsis, and Healing” and “Confession in the Indigenous Church.”

Loewen addressed the basis and character of missionary communication across cultures in a series of seminal articles. Several deal with the concept of reciprocity or the search for equal status between speaker and receptor. Another fundamental concept is sponsorship (the expatriate waiting to be sponsored or invited by members from the native tribe before preaching to them). Implied in reciprocity and sponsorship is the concept of self-exposure, or transparency, as discussed in “Self-Exposure: Bridge to Fellowship.” All of these articles call for a rethinking of the missionary’s role, and urge accepting the role of missionary as catalyst, as argued in “The Church: Indigenous and Ecumenical.”

The Panama experiment is covered extensively in Loewen’s publications and reports to the MB Board of Missions. The most comprehensive account, written some twenty-five years after the initiation of the Panama experiment, is Loewen’s retrospective piece “Developing Moralnets: Twenty-five Years of Culture Change Among the Choco.” It pulls together many of the ideas he had covered in previous articles, such as empowering the indigenous church, the role of the missionary as a catalyst and culture broker sponsored by the receptor community, and the need for reciprocity in missions. This article summarizes his rationale, goals, and personal evaluation of the twenty-five-year commitment he and Wirsche made “to help the Choco Indians of Coastal Colombia and Panama develop a set of values and a social milieu which would make them morally free, socially valuable persons who could function with self-respect both in their own society and in the national society in which they found themselves” (p. 231). In keeping with a belief of Loewen’s that a missionary should serve more as a “spare tire” than as a “driver,” the article focuses on the role of the native church, the Iglesia Evangélica Unida, as a “moralnet.” It should provide a religious and moral base for its members as it helps create a “strong cultural framework . . . for resocializing adults and for socializing the next generation according to the new values” (p. 242).

Loewen’s writings after 1970 turn increasingly to issues of translation, the role of native-tongue speakers in the translation
process, and why one should take cross-cultural perspectives seriously in seeking to understand the Bible. Many of these ideas are briefly summarized in “My Pilgrimage in Missions” and are dealt with in more detail in The Bible in Cross-Cultural Perspective and Educating Tiger.

Loewen turned to autobiography to scratch the itch brought on by his stroke in 1993. First there was I’ve Had a Stroke. Then, pondering the question of what might give meaning to his post-stroke years, he found the answer in writing. God, he believed, had called him to write three “testimonies”: one to his grandchildren (Educating Tiger), one to fellow missionaries and Christians (The Bible in Cross-Cultural Perspective), and one to the MB Church (Only the Sword of the Spirit). In the meantime he published two other autobiographical pieces, “My Pilgrimage in Mission” and “My Personal Pilgrimage Toward Peace.”

Educating Tiger seeks to trace Loewen’s “intellectual and spiritual development” (p. 2). With its poststroke perspective, it traces his struggles to relearn and rethink several key concepts as they relate to Christian life and missions. He deals with topics such as conversion, the Spirit of God, sharing the faith, truth, prayer, mission service, culture and religion, his personal journey toward Anabaptism, and, finally, life’s unfinished business. In many cases he begins with the incomplete answers he received in his early education and then describes the insights he learned from others, including non-Western Christians. While encouraging North American evangelicals, including the MB Church, to give up their ethnocentric views, he does not use the MB Church as a whipping boy. Perhaps most controversial is his conviction that religions other than Christianity also contain truth and can be redemptive (p. 153). He describes the broadening of his understanding of missions from one of “saving souls” to one that shows a “concern for the whole person” and his understanding of the missionary changing from that of a “dyed-in-the-wool nondenominational soul winner” to that of a catalyst (p. 179).

One underlying theme of The Bible in Cross-Cultural Perspective is the need to read the Bible with multicultural lenses. In his earlier publication, “Pastoral, Evangelistic, and Missionary Discourse” (1987), Loewen had discussed three different forms of speech or religious communication: pastoral (the speaker and receptor share similar worldviews and religious assumptions); evangelistic (the speaker and receptor share a similar worldview but do not agree on key religious premises); and missionary (the speaker and receptor share agreement on neither worldview nor religious premises). Viewed in this light, The Bible in Cross-Cultural Perspective functions in part as a missionary and evangelistic discourse as Loewen attempts to explore the worldviews and religious premises of biblical writers and thereby help unlock some of the Bible’s meanings for Western readers.

Loewen traces differing conceptions of the universe, the after-life, and the spirit world as recorded over time in the Jewish and
The book is a letter written to a church the authors love but from which they feel themselves to be increasingly estranged.

soul-winning evangelicalism to a discovery of an Anabaptist vision (i.e., a life of discipleship that takes seriously Menno Simon’s “swordless lifestyle”) (p. 10). There is no vindictiveness in this book; rather, it is a letter written to a church the authors love but from which they feel themselves to be increasingly estranged.

Only the Sword is not easy to describe. On the surface, the first sections appear to be a history of the Anabaptist/Mennonite movement, tracing aspects of its development from the time of Menno Simons to the present. The book discusses the origins, growth, and subsequent decline of the Anabaptist vision in the various Anabaptist/Mennonite communities in Europe and North America. The historical chapters, especially those dealing with western and northern Europe, North America, and Russia, are at best a compilation of brief outlines based on material drawn from other published sources and supplemented by heavily value-laden summaries or conclusions. Whether the focus is on Mennonites in the Netherlands, Prussia, Russia, or North America, the analysis is the same. In each case, as Mennonites achieved first-class economic, social, and political status, they compromised many of their core Anabaptist values and practices.

In evaluating this book, one needs to keep in mind the kind of discourse employed by the authors. To a large extent it serves an evangelistic function (as described in Loewen’s 1987 article “Pastoral, Evangelistic, and Missionary Discourse”—to convert a constituency that has greatly compromised the Anabaptist vision, to challenge it to accept a life of discipleship that includes a nonresistant lifestyle. Loewen and Prieb do not seek to portray their stance as neutral; value-laden assertions occur throughout the book. All definitions of concepts, including their definition of the Anabaptist vision, contain both a descriptive and an evaluative component. Loewen’s and Prieb’s discussion of Menno Simons’s vision, from which they derive twelve “distinctives” that serve as a measuring stick for a life restricted to the sword of the Spirit, is no exception.

The bulk of the discussion is devoted to Mennonites in Russia and North America. In Russia, Mennonites “underwent a breathtakingly sudden shift from a people in pilgrimage, seeking religious freedom and basic human rights, to a stratified class society with economic, political and religious power vested in a privileged minority that controlled both church and state” (p. 98). The authors assert that despite Pietism’s positive influences, with its emphasis on a personal emotional experience, it “proved to be a big temptation to Anabaptist Mennonites to switch from discipleship and community to make their religion primarily inward, personal and individualistic” (p. 120). In addition, the Pietist and Baptist influence brought with it a military orientation that many Mennonites were not able to ignore. The emergence of the Selbstschutz (armed self-defense) units within the Mennonite community in reaction to Russian post-revolutionary violence marked the end of four centuries of continued avoidance of military participation.

Most of the discussion of North American Mennonites concerns their views on citizenship and property, social class and wealth, the interpretation of Scripture, church structure, and the Mennonites’ vulnerability to outside influences (p. 144). Using British Columbian Mennonites as a case study, the authors analyze the loss of the focused canon (one that “placed primary emphasis on Christ’s teachings” (p. x)) and the inroads of dispensationalism, evangelicalism/fundamentalism, and modernity. In addition they discuss power abuses resulting from the rise of professional, paid clergy and members’ accommodations to the commonly accepted business practices of society.

After completing the three testimonies, and with his time running out, Loewen organized the Yarrow Research Committee in 1998. This committee is now in the process of publishing a series of books, based in part on material Loewen had collected over the past decade. The Yarrow project helped Loewen address his need to come to terms with a community and a church that had, on occasion, been reluctant to accord him first-class status. In his perceptive review of Richard King’s study of the school at Mopass, Loewen makes a comment that is perhaps more self-revealing than originally intended: “Regardless of how remote the missionary may feel toward the setting of his origin, it is there that he desires to get recognition.”

During Loewen’s last years, his health deteriorated to the point where he could no longer write or even read. He died on January 27, 2006, survived by his wife, Anne, and their four children—Glady, Joyce, Sharon, and Bill—as well as six grandchildren and two step-grandchildren. Throughout his life as a missionary, anthropologist, and linguist, many found him to be an original and exciting thinker and practitioner. His appeal to missionaries to use anthropological tools and insights to inform their work, his commitment to empowering indigenous peoples long before it became established practice in many mission programs, and his efforts to include native tribal churches in the translation process are all part of his legacy. This legacy was recognized by the Association of Anabaptist Missiologists, which selected Jacob and Anne Loewen as one of three Anabaptist missiologist couples and individuals for special recognition at their meeting in Winnipeg in 2007. But Loewen was also a source of controversy.
and an irritant to his superiors in the Bible societies and the Mennonite Brethren Church. His controversial and confrontational presence makes him something of an enigma, especially in the context of his pilgrimage toward peace. If one could ask him about that reputation today, he might well shrug his shoulders and reply, “God and I are still working on that!”

Notes


3. Loewen interview, August 2–3, 1996.


14. H. R. Wiens to Jacob A. Loewen, August 19, 1963, JLP, box 4, folder Paraguay; Loewen interviews, July 31 and August 1, 1996; Jacob A. Loewen, *Paraguay Report* (preliminary draft), JLP, box 5; Jacob A. Loewen, “The Way to First Class: Revolution or Conversion?,” in *CHV*, pp. 91–107; Calvin Redekop, taped interview by author, Abbotsford, B.C., May 9, 1998; Frieda Kaethler to Jacob Loewen, August 17, 1972, JLP, box 11, folder K-Misc. To the credit of the Mennonites in Paraguay, it should be noted that of all land settlement projects undertaken by religious institutions in the Paraguayan Chaco prior to 1960, theirs was the most successful.


17. Loewen interview, December 27, 1996.


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Works About Jacob A. Loewen

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