



“Would Drown Old and Very Young as Tax Protest”

That was the headline of an article printed 100 years ago today, February 23, 1922, in a Bakersfield newspaper! In this article, Peter Verigin, head of the Russian religious sect known as Doukhobors, confirmed his suggestion that the children of their Canadian colony under age ten, together with the old and infirm, be drowned as a protest against alleged exorbitant taxation. His followers were to be encouraged to abandon their farms, liquidate their property, and wander the earth, preaching and living as a vagrant working class – presumably leaving behind anyone who couldn't keep up.

M. Koftinoff, head of the sect in British Columbia, admitted that “the proposal to drown the young, old, and infirm probably would meet with objection on the part of the women members of the colony.” I think that was a very reasonable assumption – the plan was never carried out. The Christian Community of Universal Brotherhood, as the Doukhobors called themselves, said they had built \$150,000 worth of roads and paid a similar amount in taxes, but received little in return. Needless to say, there were culture clashes with other Canadians, and the Doukhobors split into three groups, with varying loyalty to their leaders and new government.

This relates to Manteca because there are dozens of Russian immigrants interred at East Union Cemetery, some of whom still have descendants in the area. The immigrants were members of the Doukhor faith, a Spiritual Christian religious group of Russian origin. Because they not only rejected the Russian Orthodox faith but were pacifists, they were targets of Czarist Russia, and about 9000 Doukhobors were forcibly resettled from across Russia to an area that is now southern Ukraine. In a show of resistance to the compulsory Russian military service, a group of Doukhobors in 1895 burned the guns they had been given; Cossacks arrived, beating and arresting them, and causing much violence and damage.

Oddly enough, the famous Russian writer Leo Tolstoy then came to the rescue. After writing ‘*War and Peace*’ and ‘*Anna Karenina*,’ Tolstoy went through a spiritual crisis, denounced the privilege and wealth of his social class, and embraced the simple rural life of peasants. He knew of the persecuted Doukhobors and their lifestyle: they also rejected militarism and church ritual in favor of finding God in their hearts, and he called them “people of the 25th century.” In 1898, he decided to help finance their mass emigration, away from the persecutions of the Russian church and state.

Worldwide attention was focused on the plight of the Doukhobors, and Canada agreed to allow many of the refugees to emigrate. Funds for ship passage were donated by the Quakers and Leo Tolstoy, who donated proceeds from the novel ‘*Resurrection*’ and other sources, and personally raised half of the money needed for about 7500 Russian Doukhobors to go to Saskatchewan in 1899.

This is where the local story picks up – in 2018, I was able to speak with my life-long friend and neighbor Nellie (Reibin) Richetta, and what follows next week in Part Two will be the experiences of her family and friends, as they pursued a new life that led them all the way from Russia to Manteca.