



In the last article, we learned about a Spiritual Christian group called the Doukhobors, who were being persecuted in Russia for their religious practices and their refusal to serve in the military. According to the late long-time Manteca resident Nellie Richetta - descendent of two members of the group - in mid-1895 there was a clash between the Cossacks and the Doukhobors, after the Doukhobors burned the weapons they'd been given to show their dedication to pacifism and independence. What follows are the personal experiences of some of the group who came to Manteca, seeking a better life.

Nellie said that her great-grandfather was killed by the Cossacks that night in June 1895 when the guns were burned, and their family and many others had to flee the country. A group including her then-teen-age grandparents, Alex F. and Mary Reibin, went first to Georgia, and then to Turkey. After much world-wide pressure, the Tzar gave permission for the group to leave Russia. Through the fund-raising efforts of Leo Tolstoy and peace-loving Quakers, and with the cooperation of Canada, ships were chartered for over 7500 refugees. How I wish I had thought to ask Nellie about the logistics of moving all those people half-way around the world! After they set sail in 1899, Alex and Mary Reibin were married on board the ship as they traveled to Canada.

Nellie's father, Alex A., was born in Canada, which granted land to the settlers, and allowed the Doukhobors to live communally in small villages - even exempting them from military service. Nellie said that the women would work in the fields, pulling plows themselves - without animals - and clearing the rocky land, while men took paying jobs, often for the railroad. Immigrants found the cold climate hard, and couldn't easily grow the fruits and vegetables they were used to having in Russia. Their culture clashes with Canadians grew, as the pacifism and other practices conflicted with prior settlers, and the sect split into three groups of varying loyalty to their leaders.

Around 1923/24, Nellie's grandparents, Alex F. and Mary Reibin, her father, Alex A., and others decided to go to California, and ended up just southeast of Manteca. They bought 20 acre lots from the Castle family, lining each side of Castle Road from Northland Road about halfway down to French Camp Road. There were 19 or 20 plots in this area belonging to the different families who came here.

After a couple of years, Alex A. returned to Canada, and courted and married Anna Harshenin. By 1927 they had a baby girl, Nellie [Nellie is the translation of 'Nastia,' which is short for Anastasia] and made the big decision to move the little family to America. Nellie told me: "At the time, it was very scary for a young bride to leave all of her family and come to a new country." Nellie was just two months old when they arrived in Manteca to join the Russian immigrants already here.

Nellie said they built a one-room Doukhobor church with a small kitchen on the edge of her father's property. They had Sunday services and funerals there, as well as Russian classes to teach children to read and write in Russian. They sang a cappella for their services; she remembers salt, representing 'the salt of the earth', and bread and water, representing Christ, being set out on a table at funerals

Nellie attended all 8 years of elementary school at the Castle School on French Camp Road, about a mile from her house. She didn't speak any English when she started school, but was proudly reading at grade level by the second grade. Castle was a 2-room schoolhouse, one teacher per room, and all 8 grades were in those two rooms. She notes that they were a multi-lingual school – there were kids who spoke Greek, Russian, Portuguese, Italian, Spanish, and English in that tiny school in the 1930's.

Gradually the little Russian/Canadian colony became smaller as children grew up and often moved away. Part of the Koftinow family moved into town and built both Rancho and Big Boy markets. Gabriel Reibin owned Reibin's Electric Store in Manteca. Nellie married Leo Richetta right after WWII, and in 1948 she [a Canadian] became an American citizen, along with her mother [a Russian] and mother-in-law [an Italian] – they had all studied together. Leo and Nellie raised their children on a ranch just a couple of miles south of the Russian colony.

Antifae, Baturin, Bloudoff, Chernoff, Cheveldave, Dorofeyiff, Gretchen, Kinakin, Koftinoff, Koftinow, Nicholoff, Papoff, Rebalkin, Reibin, Shaloff, Verigin, Voykin, Zurovloff: members of each of these families are buried at East Union Cemetery. Most are clustered near