



# Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

## Robert & Myrtle Unruh – *Agra-missionaries*

**R**obert and Myrtle Unruh were the right people in the right place at the right time.” This is how the Mennonites in the Chaco of Paraguay sum up the 33 years of service that the Unruhs gave from 1951 to 1983. Their service has had a permanent impact on all the Mennonite colonies and churches in Paraguay.

The Unruhs came to the Chaco from the United States under the auspices of Mennonite Central Committee. They were graduates of Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas, and had grown up on farms in the Midwest—Robert in Montana and Myrtle in Kansas. Robert had a science degree and Myrtle had a degree in home economics. In the Chaco Robert served as the head of the agricultural experimental station and Myrtle as an expert in the areas of nutrition, family education and home economics.

Visitors to the Chaco today often marvel at the prosperity of the Mennonite settlements in a place once referred to as the “green hell.” Today, in this seemingly inhospitable steppe

in the interior of Paraguay, the 15,000 residents of three Mennonite colonies produce half of Paraguay’s milk and dairy products and 90% of the peanuts for a country of approximately six million people. Thousands of beef cattle feed on well-maintained pastures. The Mennonites who raise beef cattle report with rightful pride that theirs is the tastiest and most nutritious beef in all of Paraguay. This beef is also popular on the world market. Today these agricultural products are the main source of income for the Mennonites in the Chaco.

This was not always the case. In the 1950s the Mennonite colonies in Paraguay experienced extreme poverty and agricultural production was barely enough to sustain their existence. A milking cow produced a mere liter of milk per day, whereas today cows typically produce at least 17 to 18 liters. Robert Unruh wrote in 1984 that in the 1950s it took five to six years to raise a cow to 400 or 500 kilos in the Chaco. Today less than half that time is required. In the 1950s farming



Myrtle and Robert Unruh

was carried out exclusively with horses and manual labor. Today everything is mechanized.

These changes took place largely due to the efforts of Robert and Myrtle Unruh. On the agricultural experimental station set up by Mennonite Central Committee in the Fernheim colony, Robert conducted hundreds of experiments with many different types of grasses for grazing and in the process discovered buffle grass. Originally from Africa, this grass was ideal for the hot, dry Chaco. He imported hundreds of different breeding calves to improve the local milk and beef varieties. He also pioneered developments in many other areas including field crops, fruit trees, vegetables, flowers and decorative bushes. In order to find help for these tasks, Robert worked closely with research institutes around the world. This was also the case in his fight against diseases and insects detrimental to plants and animals.

Myrtle Unruh's contributions and accomplishments lay in teaching high school, planning and building a school of household management (home economics) and working with native Indian women. She developed cooking classes and wrote a cookbook that remains popular to this day. Always a quiet reservoir of strength and ability, Myrtle developed her full potential in Paraguay. Her cousin described her as "a jewel waiting to be uncovered." In order to keep the memory of Myrtle's exemplary service in nutrition and family education alive, a monument

was erected in her memory next to the school of household management after her death.

In all their work, Robert and Myrtle's guiding principle was to help the Mennonites to help themselves so that they in turn could assist others. Their exemplary attitude of Christian service had a positive effect on the churches and their mission as well as on the economic life of the Mennonite colonies. The Unruhs participated fully in the church. Robert sang in the choir, took part in Bible studies and was involved in the missionary settlement projects among the native Indians.

The Mennonites in the Chaco view the Unruhs not just as two Americans who helped the residents adapt to a strange land and climate, but as a sister and a brother in the Lord who gave their all in service to others. Edgar Stoez, who was their Mennonite Central Committee director said, "Bob and Myrtle Unruh deserved the word Christian – Little Christs (Acts 11: 26c). With their humble spirit of selfless service, they exemplified what being a follower of Jesus is all about."

Due to health issues the Unruhs returned to the United States in 1983, earlier than they had anticipated. Myrtle died in 1996 and Robert in 1998.

Shortly after the Unruh's deaths the Paraguayan Mennonite paper, *Mennoblatt*, stated: "Robert and Myrtle Unruh will not be forgotten in the German settlements of the Chaco. They simply belong to us."



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