

## **A Brief History of the Doukhobors in B.C.**

The origin of the Doukhobors dates back to the 1600s and 1700s in Russia, when a number of Christian religious sects began to form. The name "Doukhobor" means "spirit wrestlers." People outside the sect felt that the Doukhobors "wrestled against the Holy Spirit in the Church", while the Doukhobor elders maintained that they "they wrestled with and for the Spirit of God." Their motto was "Toil and a Peaceful Life", and it was reflected in their simple ways, communal living, and hard work.

Frequently persecuted for their religious, social, and political beliefs, the situation came to a head under Tsar Nicholas II, who demanded an oath of allegiance from all his subjects. The Doukhobors, lead by Peter Vasilievich Verigin, refused. In an act of defiance in 1895, they refused to serve in the military and burned all of their weapons. This lead to even more repression. Starting in 1898 and 1899 they began to leave Russia. Many sought refuge in Canada and initially settled in Saskatchewan.

At first, life was very difficult, requiring long days of back breaking toil, but the community soon prospered. The Doukhobors were not interested in owning their own individual plots of land. Instead the community would own the land collectively. Unfortunately for Doukhobors, the Canadian Government introduced changes to the homesteading regulations requiring individuals to claim title and to pledge an oath of allegiance to the Crown. This forced the Doukhobors to move yet again during the years of 1908 to 1912. This time they moved to the West Kootenays in British Columbia, with all of the land they occupied held under Peter Verigin's name.

During the next 30 years Doukhobors developed large communal enterprises under the umbrella of the Christian Community of Universal Brotherhood situated at Brilliant. Fruits and vegetables were grown on the land. Members lived in communal villages. Commercial and industrial enterprises such as jams, jellies, and honey factories were established.

As the community prospered, two splinter groups broke away from the general population, one the "edinolichniki" or "Independents" who wanted to live separately and live more materialistic lives, and the "svobodniki" the "Sons of Freedom" who wanted a return to more traditional values, and were willing to use both civil disobedience and violence to achieve their goals. Peter 'Lordly' Verigin, the leader of all of the Doukhobor groups, was killed in a rail car bombing in 1924.

The stock market crash of 1929, and the Great Depression of the 1930s, also affected the Doukhobor community. They had borrowed money to finance land purchases and development, however like many others, the depression lead to bankruptcy for the community. Foreclosures and eviction notices were in the process of being issued, when in 1940 the British Columbia government stepped in and paid off the debts, but acquired the land, improvements, and assets in the process. The Doukhobors were allowed to stay on the land, and pay a small rent, but it signaled the end of the Christian Community of Universal Brotherhood and its extensive commercial ventures.

The Doukhobor community still remained, but it had become greatly disorganized. The radical Sons of Freedom resorted to escalating levels of violence to achieve their desire to live in their own ways, without interference. One form of protest involved the Sons of Freedom burning several schools in a dispute with the government over education. This prompted the provincial government to take stern measures to restore the peace. From 1953 to 1959, children were removed from the community and forced to attend school. In 1960, a number of arsonists were convicted and jailed.

Since the 1960's violent Doukhobor protests declined. The Community began to purchase back the land they had originally owned. Peace and respect was restored within the Doukhobor community, neighbouring communities and B.C. society in general. Many Doukhobors still live in the West Kootenay area, and continue to work in B.C. to protect and preserve their religion, language, and way of life.