

## Weaving Doukhobor History

by Lorne Hammond

**Doukhobor farm near Grand Forks, 1947. The building with a row of four windows shows the typical housing style.**

[credit] BCARS D02659

This story begins with a man's suit, made of homespun and handwoven flax in the Doukhobor style. A beautiful symbol of women's labour, we purchased it for the Museum collection thanks to funds from the Friends of the Royal BC Museum. The suit was said to have come from Grand Forks, so I decided to stop in on my way to the Kootenays. And so the unexpected appearance of a suit began my education about the Doukhobors of British Columbia.



Driving out through the rain, I came over a hilltop into a burst of sunshine. To my right, an old abandoned Doukhobor communal farm welcomed me. In Grand Forks, Joan Miller, the Curator of the Boundary Museum, introduced me to Sid Peregoodoff who gave me a tour of Grand Forks. We drove up to meet Peter Gritchen at his Mountain View Museum, housed in a traditional farm house. I learned about places like the Fructova Heritage Centre, the Castlegar Doukhobor Village Museum and a complex and dramatic history involving people such as the Verigin family and the Sons of Freedom. That day I found no answers about the origin of the suit, but I began to sense the depth of Doukhobor spirit and community.

**Friends funds purchased a Doukhobor suit. (jacket, handwoven linen, c. 1910-20)**

RBCM ARTIFACT 997-95.1

At the end of the day I asked Sid for advice on a good restaurant. He said, "Follow me," and I found myself at Christina Lake, eating his mother Anne's homemade bread and borscht at a table set with salt and water. The tall round bread, a shaker of salt and a pitcher of water signified her faith. I discovered that Anne's bread finds its way to many Doukhobor weddings, funerals and celebrations. She began Anne's Russian Bakery after the tragic death of her husband at a dam site at Campbell River. During an evening sharing food and listening to her talk about traditional village customs, I learned about the daily life of the Doukhobor settlers.



Doukhobor historian Koozma Tarasoff has pointed out how difficult it is to define "Doukhobors." They are Russian immigrants, a religious sect, and also adherents to a philosophy of life. Some will not even use the term. "Doukhobor" first appears in a 1785 Russian Orthodox condemnation of the *Dukho-*

*borets* – the "Spirit Wrestlers" who rejected icon worship and highly structured state-supported religion. These people practiced pacifism, humanitarian love and communal life, believing that all people are equal. Their beliefs led to conflict with organized religion and persecution by the Czar, culminating in their refusing military service and publicly burning military arms in 1895. With their leader Peter V. Verigin in Siberian exile and supported by sympathizers like the Quakers and Leo Tolstoy, they prepared to leave Russia to find freedom from human laws.

**Doukhobor women and children of Brilliant, BC, 1911.**

[credit] BCARS D01929

In 1899, some 7,500 men, women and children embarked on two steamships for Canada. Like the Hutterites and the Mennonites, they settled first in Saskatchewan. The federal government agreed to allow their communal land and village system, Russian language schools and pacifist beliefs. Peter Verigin joined them in 1902. However, when Saskatchewan became a province, their status changed. In 1906, oaths were required to own land. By 1907, their communal land system ended – despite community resistance that included the first use of mass nudity to oppose power and injustice. For members of the smaller Sons of Freedom or Freedomite sect, it was clear evidence that the state, any state, was not to be trusted. Others chose to become "independents," taking the oaths and becoming successful prairie farmers, with their own lands and homes.



Verigin decided to start again, further west. In 1908, 6,000 Doukhobors moved to British Columbia to set up 74 new communal villages at Brilliant [former town near Castlegar], Glade and around Grand Forks and Castlegar. The typical farm was a large communal building with a series of smaller out-buildings. They set up a jam factory at Brilliant and built sawmills, flour mills and brickyards. Their way of life, with its emphasis on simplicity, manual labor, communal ownership, and the Russian language was met with discrimination.

**The Sons of Freedom were interned on Piers Island (off of Swartz Bay, Vancouver Island) in 1932.**

[credit] BCARS G00058, 1934.

By now, there were deepening divisions within the Doukhobor community. The following years saw tensions grow. Freedomite confrontations with the government over land, tax and educational issues culminated in 1932 with the mass arrests of protesters, and many children briefly became wards of the state. By the end of the thirties the communal lands were lost in a controversial mortgage dispute, ending the grand experiment.



More became "independents," leaving the communal village system behind but taking along their Doukhobor values.

From 1953 to 1962, Freedomite protests continued and another generation of children became wards of the state because they were not attending school. Many traditional

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Doukhobors, embarrassed by conflicts and sensationalistic reporting, closed ranks around community and religious traditions, preferring a path of peaceful toil and quiet lives lived in praise.

Independents, Freedomites, traditionalists – each group has a rich and complex history, forming part of British Columbia's past and present.

**A trunk full of clothes included items such as men's winter wool socks.**



**Lorne Hammond is a Curator of History at the RBCM.**

**Curator Lorne Hammond with a handwoven rag rug.  
ARTIFACT 997.124.73**



While the story began with a handwoven linen suit, Museum curators hope it will eventually result in a collection fit for an exhibit. To this end, the RBCM is asking various communities to help them develop a collection that preserves and documents BC's rich Doukhobor heritage.

**Robin Patterson, Historical Collections Manager,  
accessions a Doukhobor wooden ladle,  
its end carved like a lily. ARTIFACT 997.124.5**

Recently, outside Castlegar, one family did exactly that. Sid Peregoodoff, fellow-curator Bob Griffin and I were allowed to go through the attics, basements, barns and outbuildings of an "independent" family's farm which was being sold. The RBCM was given over 100 items representing this family's history, including homespun cloth, suits, rugs, embroidery, books, weaving tools and even a traditional homemade sauna or *banya*. Some items go back to the 1920s and others represent the process of acculturation in the 1940s and 1950s.



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