

500 Years of Migration

an autobiographical history of Ontario Mennonites

What Happened to Noah Martin's Summer Sausage?

 May 7, 2020November 28, 2024  Rick Martin

Yes, if you go to Sobey's or No Frills or Walmart, you can buy a product called Noah Martin's™ Country Store Summer Sausage. It's made by Heidelberg Foods Ltd of St Jacobs ("in the Mennonite Heartland of Ontario," as their website says), and it tastes like, well, crap. OK, maybe not crap, but not like real Mennonite summer sausage.

Definitely not like the summer sausage that Noah S Martin used to make in his smokehouse in Hawkesville (the *real* heart of Menno country). And that, despite the fact that the Noah Martin's™ brand took its name from Noah S Martin. Until recently, one could also buy *NS Martin* summer sausage from an Old Order guy at the Kitchener farmer's market, at the Wallenstein general store, and at a few other places, but even that didn't taste as good as the stuff we used to get.

So what happened, and why do I care?

Noah S Martin was my grandmother Lovina's first cousin; his father Jacob W was her father John W's (as well as Bishop David W's) brother. Like her, he was raised from an early age in the David Martin Mennonite church. In 1933, he married Rebecca Bowman, two of whose brothers were married to Lovina's sisters. So Noah is family. They lived in the village of Hawkesville.

In 1957, Noah and Rebecca were among the people who, having withdrawn (or been excommunicated) from the David Martin church, started meeting together to form what, in 1962, became the Orthodox Mennonite Church. In 1974, when that church split into two factions, Noah and Rebecca went with the Hoover group (initially led by Anson Hoover).

When the Hoovers broke up in 1986/7, with most of the members returning to the Dave Martins and a few moving to the Gorrie area to rejoin the Elam Martin faction, Noah and Rebecca Martin stayed on in Hawkesville. Rebecca died in 1994 and Noah in 2000; they are buried in the old Orthodox cemetery northwest of Hawkesville.

A few weeks ago, when I visited my mother's cousin, Amos Sherk (minister in the Orthodox church and one-time bishop for the Hoover faction), we got talking about Noah, his family (several of whom are married to siblings of Amos), and his summer sausage. What follows comes from what he told me and what I've been able to dig up elsewhere (any errors are no doubt mine).

In the 1950s, Noah started making summer sausage as a hobby while operating a machine shop and raising his family. In 1962 (the same year the Orthodox church was instituted), he bought a smokehouse in Hawkesville and the hobby turned into his full-time business, in which various of his children worked. He took on a local non-Mennonite to deliver product for him and do other jobs that required a car or truck. That man's son also started hanging around, helping Noah make summer sausage, and he learned all the secrets of the business.

In the early 1990s, Noah (who was now in his 80s) asked his unmarried grand-daughter (and Amos Sherk's niece), Rebecca, to take over the business, using his premises, equipment, and recipe. She called her operation N.S. Martin Processing, in order to distinguish her business from Noah's, but still honour his work and recipe.

When Noah died in 2000, the young guy who used to help him had a small shop called Heidelberg Meats and Deli, and he started making summer sausage under the Noah Martin name, which he had trademarked. When Noah's family complained, the guy said Noah had told him the business would be his when he (Noah) died. The family was highly skeptical.

At some point, the guy changed his business name to Heidelberg Foods, built a large processing plant in St Jacobs, and continued making "Noah Martin's™ summer sausage" (that has a texture and taste nothing like that of Noah Martin's summer sausage). In 2011, he sold the business to Markham-based Jevons Capital, which has since doubled their processing capacity and continues to exploit the Noah Martin name (and the associated Mennonite Heritage).

Back to the year 2000: Being traditional non-resisting Mennonites, Noah's family did not contest the guy's claim to the name in the courts. Instead, Rebecca just went on making summer sausage using the old recipe and the N. S. Martin name. My uncle Don says that, a few months ago, one of Rebecca's sisters told him that she and her dad (Noah's son), Anson Martin, used to travel down from the Rainy River region in northwestern Ontario to help out with the summer sausage operation.

In 2001, Rebecca moved the operation into much larger premises near Atwood and incorporated the business as N.S. Martin Processing Inc. This move may have been the result of new provincial regulations related to processing meat that came into effect that year. And it was either this change in regulations or an earlier one that required changes to the smoking process, which resulted in a slightly less smoky flavour and perhaps a moister product (the summer sausage just isn't *quite* as good as it used to be).

In 2010, thinking that she didn't have the know-how to take the business further, Rebecca sold it to the Ropp family. In order to avoid confusion with Noah Martin's™ summer sausage, the Ropps changed the name to Atwood Heritage Processing Inc, but still use the N. S. Martin recipe to make the sausage. They've also added "spicy" and "garlic" versions, an all-beef version, pepperettes, and various other products to their line.

So, if you're craving some genuine Noah Martin summer sausage, look for the Atwood Heritage brand and stay away from the Noah Martin's™ brand. That's pretty simple, isn't it?



Atwood Heritage “Original” Beef & Pork Summer Sausage

Sources:

Amos Sherk, personal interview, Nov 7, 2020.

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