

# Origins

## Origins

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Historical Magazine  
of The Archives

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*Origins* is designed to publicize and advance the objectives of The Archives. These goals include the gathering, organization, and study of historical materials produced by the day-to-day activities of the Christian Reformed Church, its institutions, communities, and people.

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*Trash collecting in Chicago.*



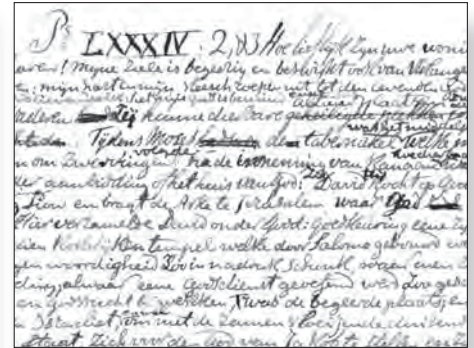
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# from the editor . . .



## This Issue

The current issue contains a variety of articles written by authors most of whom who have previously been published in *Origins*. H.J. Brinks, the founding editor of *Origins*, has a history of the old Dutch neighborhood in Grand Rapids, now called Heartside; Harry Boonstra reviews the complex relationship between the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church; Robert Swierenga reports on the central role of the Bible among nineteenth-century Dutch immigrants; and we present the third installment of Meindert De Jong's autobiography. Larry Vander Leest, a first-time author in *Origins*, describes one summer experience driving for a garbage hauling firm in Chicago.

## Available On-Line

We added the 2010 family information from *Banner* notices to files available via our website (<http://www.calvin.edu/hh/Banner/Banner.htm>) where we currently provide more than 60 thousand citations to *Banner* family information for the years 1985-2010. Since 2007 we have been placing links to digital versions of *Origins* online at [http://www.calvin.edu/hh/origins/Origins\\_Main\\_Page.htm](http://www.calvin.edu/hh/origins/Origins_Main_Page.htm) once the issues are three years old—2005-2008 are now available electronically as PDF files. We have also begun to scan earlier issues into PDF image files, whose image quality is marginal, but the text is very readable. Currently we have links to volumes 1-8 (1983-1990) on our website and will add more as we are able to scan more copies.

## News from the Archives

The H. Evan Runner papers have been processed and the finding aid completed so that the collection is

now open for research. Copies of the inventory have already been sent to scholars in Grand Rapids; McAllen, Texas; and Seoul, South Korea. These individuals will soon be using this collection along with those of Paul Schrottenboer, Peter Steen, and Bernard Zylstra when examining the Christian philosophy of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven.

Fourteen cubic feet of records were added to our collection of Christian school records. The additional material came from schools (primarily Oakdale and Sylvan) closed because of the recent reorganization in Grand Rapids. The collection now totals 85 cubic feet and documents the history of schools from throughout Canada and the United States. We organized and opened for research the records of the Christian Reformed Church's Psalter Hymnal Revision Committee, 1977-1987, as well as the records of Epicenter Community CRC, a discontinued congregation in Bradenton, Florida.

We received the congressional papers (30 cubic feet), 1994-2010, of Vernon Ehlers. Plans call for more material to be transferred from his years in local and state politics. The first research physicist elected to congress, Ehlers represented Michigan's 3rd Congressional District, 1993-2011. Both Ehlers and his congressional predecessor, Paul B. Henry, had been on the faculty of Calvin College and placed their papers in the archives.

Recently received and yet-to-be organized materials include additional records from the CRC's Sesquicentennial Planning Committee, 2000-2007; the research files of H. J. Brinks; records from a variety of college, seminary, and denominational offices.

### Publications

By the time this issue goes to press, Kurt Selles's history of the Christian Reformed Church mission effort in China will be published. Our next project will be the translated and

extensively annotated minutes of the Christian Reformed Church synods, 1857-1881.

### Staff

Richard Harms is the curator of the Archives; Hendrina Van Spronsen is the office coordinator; Wendy Blankespoor is librarian and cataloging archivist; Melanie Vander Wal is department assistant; Dr. Robert Bolt is field agent and assistant archivist. Our student assistant is Jessica Nieboer. Our volunteers include Rev. Dr. Paul Bremer, Mrs. Willene De Groot, Mr. Ed Gerritsen, Mr. Fred Greidanus, Mr. Ralph Haan, Mrs. Helen Meulink, Rev. Gerrit W. Sheeres, Mrs. Janet Sheeres, and Mr. Ralph Veenstra.

### Endowment Fund

Thanks to investment markets that continue to improve and the generosity of many *Origins* subscribers, our endowment fund has a current value of \$469,539. Because of the revenue from this balance our annual

subscription rate remains at \$10, even though \$10 no longer covers the cost for the two mailings a year. We are most grateful to our supporters, many of whom contribute well above the subscription cost. ▀



Richard H. Harms

# In the Bowels of the City, 1990<sup>1</sup>

Larry VanderLeest

“Unit 23—Base here.” The speaker blasted out the words in a scratchy fashion. I grabbed for the finger-worn mike attached to the dash as I blissfully sailed through the stoplights on Randolph. Driving in the Loop at 4:30 a.m. is pure luxury, I was thinking. “If you’ve dropped your empty at 333 Wacker, head to the Mart. You’re after a 20-yarder, in the cave.”



When the Merchandise Mart in Chicago, Illinois, opened in 1930, it was the largest building in the world with 4 million square feet of floor space. As the author notes, providing services (such as trash removal) to such a large structure came with its own logistics. Image courtesy of the author.

“Roger.” I shouted back, eager to affirm that I had heard the message and glad that I, by accident, was heading in the right direction.

A moment of silence from the little black box hanging from the ceiling in my cab.

“Unit 23?”

“Yes, Base?”

“Aren’t you going to ask which slot? . . . Hey, wait a minute . . . you ever been there? Which street are you gonna take?”

“Uh . . . I don’t know. The Mart’s by the river. Can’t miss it. I think I’ll take Wells, I guess.” As soon as the words left my mouth, I knew it wasn’t the right answer. “Why?” I asked the mike, “Which one am I supposed to take?”

Another moment of silence, uncomfortably long.

“Look, 23, you’re not going there in your car, remember. And you’re not going shopping. You been to the cave?”

“To a cave? Yea, sure. I’ve been to some caves. Been to Mammoth Cave, Cave of the Ozarks and . . .”

“Look, Unit 23,” thundered the voice from base, “I’m not in the %\*# mood. I mean the cave, where we keep our containers, under the Merchandise Mart.”

“The what?” I threw my question back into the black piece of plastic in my hand, now sure something was wrong.

“Just as I thought.” . . . a long pause . . . “summer idiot.” . . . another pause and apparently some thinking going on back at base. “You ain’t been there, have you? I wondered if I’d sent you. The other dispatchers haven’t either, apparently.”

By now, I had double-parked on Wells Street as close to the side as I dared without taking off a few car fenders. I put on my flashers and applied the air brake. I had been on the road for thirty minutes—max. Yet, I could tell another adventure was coming and this radio discussion needed my complete attention.

“OK, Base. I’m parked, got pen and paper, and ready for directions.”

A native of Chicago, Larry Vander Leest for thirty years was a teacher and administrator in the Chicago area, as well as “working on the truck” during break periods. He and his wife Kathy own and operate The Bluff, a bed and breakfast on Whidbey Island, Washington.

The crackly voice was hesitant. “You ain’t ever been there . . .” he repeated. The idea seemed hard for the man to digest. “I can’t give you @&\*% directions to that place over the radio. . . .” Another pause . . . more thinking. “Gol’ dang it. I ain’t got anybody else in the area right now, either.” I could almost hear his brain grinding. “Unit 23, I’ll walk you through it; that’s what I’ll do. Head for LaSalle Street, going north. When you’re over the river, get back to me.”

“Ten four, Base.” I gladly jammed the mike back in its cradle, happy to quit this pleasant conversation. Dispatcher Ken didn’t like me—that was obvious. What I ever did to him was a mystery. Heck, we hadn’t seen each other for nine months. But perhaps that was simply it. I was just a part-timer and did not quite qualify in his mind.

This was my third stint for the garbage-hauling firm of BFI (Browning-Ferris Industries). Each season I was learning more of their vast repertoire of stops throughout the metropolitan area. And by my reckoning, this was my twelfth summer on the garbage truck, spread out over some thirty years of being a student, then teacher. Now that I was back in the saddle, I could see that things were changing in this business. I had worked one summer for this same company back in the 1970s when it was known as Hoving & Sons. Since then, it had grown to become a citywide behemoth that employed hundreds. When the Hovings sold out to a conglomerate known as City Disposal Systems, the family members stayed with the company for a time. Now, with the exception of two great-grandsons employed in some suburban office building, no Hoving remained in the business. In fact, it was only through two longtime drivers and a manager that I was able to get this job as vacation help. Their office was eager to oblige when they

realized it was cheaper to employ me at a non-union rate than paying overtime to a regular.

Two years ago (in 1988) this corporation tried to shed its Neanderthal image and words such as *scavenger* and *disposal*; and was absorbed by BFI.<sup>2</sup> Now that they were such a modern corporation, they tried to fool the public into thinking that all the rubbish they picked up was magically recycled into paper, food, and 100 percent oxygen.

Such glory in the garbage-hauling business!

Somewhere along the way, we drivers lost our names as well, it now being policy to call us by our truck number. That, and the fact that we were required to weigh in at the scale before and after every load, record every move in our log books, and were terminated if we were caught keeping any item found in the trash, combined to make this job more onerous.

Sure, I told myself, the trucks now had FM band radios with tape decks; air conditioned cabs, nice paint jobs, and fully synchronized transmissions. And yes, we were all issued crisp uniforms, the old garage had been renovated, and a lunchroom installed. But, I wondered, was I just becoming an old romantic, looking back with a rose-tinted vision of the good old days? It was obvious that the old ways were surely disappearing, and I could sense from several veterans their frustrations as well.

For a few years after the Hoving buyout, many of the trucks still carried the family name on the doors, though in smaller print. Nevertheless, by 1990, the Hoving ticket books, Hoving container decals, and Hoving jackets had long disappeared. Now it was called BFI, as generic a name as one could come up with.

Indeed, from what I could gather, very few of the workers knew the company’s history, let alone had ever

met one of the Hovings. To the men who pulled out of his old buildings on Halsted, Sam Hoving, the old wooden shoe founder of the business, was as remote as George Washington or Abe Lincoln.

Sam (Siert), the firstborn son of Abel Hoving and Trijntje Tillema, immigrants from Loppersum, Groningen, the Netherlands, had worked the streets of Chicago with his team of horses during the second decade of the twentieth century, and had only purchased his first truck, a Diamond Reo, in 1926. His two sons (Abel and Dick) carried on—expanding the business, investing in a larger garage, buying farmland out west for dumping—and were among the first haulers in Chicago to use hydraulic packers. For decades, trucks bearing the name *Sam Hoving & Sons, Scavengers* crawled through the alleys and streets of downtown Chicago. Many buildings displayed the official markers advertising to anyone who might wonder that this stop was the domain of Sam and his family. However, by now all such signs of Hoving & Sons were in the trash heap of the past.

I knew this is the way of Chicago—constantly redoing itself. Like the hated S-Curve on Lake Shore Drive, the odorous Chicago stockyards, or the red lip Magi-Kist billboards, the old businesses, ways, and men were swept aside, buried, and forgotten.

I wasn’t in that category yet, but for the first time, I could sense it coming. Dispatcher Ken was at least ten years my junior. Getting orders from a younger source was unnerving.

In all the summers I had driven for Hoving & Sons/City Disposal/BFI, I had never been sent to the lower level of the Merchandise Mart. I gathered that where I was headed now, was not the Mart that most know. I had the gut feeling that I was to go down deep, to its literal foundation. Driving north on LaSalle, over the river, I observed the

massive structure on my left. The Merchandise Mart was a mammoth edifice to commercialism; created by Marshall Field in 1930, purchased later by Kennedy wealth, it was now a showcase of clothes, furniture, and other durable goods.

Crossing over the still dark Chicago River with the lights of the city sparkling on the water's surface, I picked up the mike and called my friend Ken. "Base, this is 23 . . . on LaSalle. Over."

The speaker-box came to life. "Unit 23, listen carefully now. I'm going to talk you through this, right down to the cave. We got three boxes there, ya hear. But don't get the idea that there's a lot of room." Ken's sense of importance was growing by the second. "Rather tight down in the cave; that's why we call it the cave. Got that?"

Sarcasm dripped out of the speaker and landed on the floor next to me. "Yes, Base," I replied, "I'm all ears."

"Turn right on Kinzie and go about a hundred feet. First right you see, turn again. They built a little alleyway under the Mart years ago. That's where you're headed. With me?"

"Right, then another right." I repeated, and hung up the 'phone.'

I turned, lumbered down a block, and turned right again. I said goodbye to the city as I began my descent, the walls of the LaSalle Street Bridge arching over and on either side of me. As I began my trip into this netherworld, I figured I would not see the sky again for a while. The concrete surface underneath my truck had deteriorated to gravel.

A few aging lights on the walls tried to penetrate the gloom, but their efforts failed miserably. My headlights shot dusty beams into the growing gray. *Somewhere down here is a loading area*, I thought to myself. *Can't be that hard to find.*

Soon the wall of concrete on my left opened to indicate a truck dock, and I turned in, grabbing the mike. "Base,

Unit 23. I see the dock on my left. Is that where I'm going?"

"Nah, you got a long ways to go yet. That's for the delivery trucks, the eighteen wheelers, and such. Keeping the dock on your left, head back south, toward the river. You're going to find a little roadway running along the water. Can you see the river up ahead? Over."

The surface below my tires had now deteriorated into dirt mixed with gravel. I was in a dark and down world, heading back in time. The area was rather wide, but with a height of perhaps only fourteen feet. Rows and rows of concrete beams held up the massive ceiling of the cavernous loading dock, each bearing the scars of attacks by trucks over many years. Gouges marked with various colors indicated that drivers had unsuccessfully maneuvered their vehicles around the supports. The thought struck me that a few key beams, hit by an out-of-control truck, could fail, and the Mart, one of the larger structures in the world, would collapse. My truck and I would never be found.

I continued my southerly direction now at a crawl, seeing off in the distance a grayish hue that appeared to be a wall. In a few moments, the barrier in question drew near and I realized it was the river itself. Just as I was convinced my route had hit a dead-end, the track I was following veered again to the left, and dutifully, I turned.

"Unit 23 to Base. I'm heading east again. How far up ahead is this cave?"

"You got a ways to go, 23." He repeated, almost chuckling. "On your



*Because of the significantly reduced traffic levels, the nighttime hours are the easiest to provide service trucks to large cities like Chicago. Image courtesy of the author.*

right is the water, to your left, an old dock that they don't use anymore. Am I correct?"

"Ten-four."

"Getting kind of tight down there, 23?"

"Correcto, Base. I take it there's room to turn around at the end? This would be a long ways to back up."

"You'll have room, 23. You will need to do some maneuvering, but the others do it."

Feeling pressure now from several directions, I continued traveling parallel to and barely two feet above the Chicago River, separated by an old concrete and brick rampart that showed cracks and a few gaping holes. The path I was on—it couldn't be called a road by any stretch—was barely wide enough for my rig to navigate. I plunged ahead, because I knew others had done so, and Dispatcher Ken said to.

On my left, pillars by the score, coated with city grime, and the occasional graffiti. Faintly visible in the gloom of the early morning dawn and almost obscured by the forest of concrete trees, appeared twenty or more loading docks, all worn from age and use, seemingly abandoned by the newer, larger trucks. On my right, the wall of old mortar and stone that kept

the dark Chicago River and me apart. Above, aging iron beams, encrusted with decades of pigeon droppings and remains of nests. I gathered that this was not on the list of must-see sights for the city Bureau of Tourism.

Where was my guiding voice sending me, I wondered? I'm to pick up a container box down here? How would that be possible? I observed that the ceiling had now dwindled to a height of not more than eleven feet. Where would I turn around? How would I raise my hoist? One of the cardinal rules of driving truck is to never get into a position that you can't back out of. Yet here I was, plummeting straight into a hole. For reassurance, I reached for the mike.

Ken must have read my mind, because before I could press the button, "Keep going straight," came squawking out of the box.

I returned the mike to the cradle, feeling admonished for my lack of faith, and kept the truck moving at a slow idle. In the murky distance, another wall was looming larger. My truck and I had become a mole, burrowing further into the under city.

Fifty yards to the wall. The river on my right, ancient columns on my left. Ceiling almost scraping my cab. Thirty yards—I will follow his directions explicitly. I'll just hit the wall at five mph. It won't hurt the truck or me. That'll show him.

Just when I could see no possibility of continuing, there, in the shadows, a cavity appeared on the left side. Four times, when it seemed I was about to hit a dead end, another hole appeared to the right for my truck to wiggle into and an alley to follow. Since I had

left the city lights and open sky, I had done a full 360°. With no recourse but to follow my nose, I swung my truck and, like before, there was just enough room to clear the supports. Someone years ago had planned this route for a truck of this size and not one foot longer.

And there, ten yards distant, illuminated by my headlights, appeared a wall of steel. My progress was finally at an end. I recalled Tom Sawyer and his misadventure in a cavern along the Mississippi. By now I was surrounded by massive wooden beams, more logs than lumber. I pictured the builders of the Mart harvesting these immense old oaks from the ruins of Fort Dearborn and delivering them to this spot. The ceiling of the Mart had dwindled to one foot higher than my cab. A feeling of claustrophobia began to creep upon me. I felt a kinship with the mummies of Egypt.

"Unit 23 to Base." I whispered, so as to not wake the dead. "Can you hear me down here?"

"Loud and clear 23. Did you find the door yet?"



*A typical loading dock where new material is delivered and from which waste is hauled away. In front of the dock to the far left is an enclosed waste container that can be loaded onto a truck. Image courtesy of the author.*

At that precise moment, the wall became a door and began to rise. An ugly, yellow glare fell upon soil that had not seen daylight or rain since construction of the Mart. The wall/door continued its ascent to reveal yet another passageway. In the low light, I detected three well-used Hoving-now-become-BFI roll-off containers. On the concrete landing stood a security guard who had just pushed the magic button. I found myself where no tourists and very few Chicagoans ever get, yet alone know exist. I was duly impressed.

"Base, you're the man . . . I'm here! Hey—how did they know to open the door just when I pulled up?"

"I have one of these new things called a phone, Unit 23. Wonderful invention, the phone." More drips on my floor.

Grudgingly, I had to admit Dispatcher Ken was right. There was room to make a tight turn. Thankful for power steering, I finagled my truck around and began to cable up. Bringing the box up on the rails proved uneventful, with the hoist and the box clearing the ceiling by a full two inches. From the telling gashes in the ceiling supports, it was obvious other drivers weren't as fortunate.

As the guard was signing the ticket, a fellow BFI truck came lumbering in to my little world. His entrance was marked by a swift sure approach and a cloud of dust, the sign of an experienced traveler in this tight confine. This truck and the guy driving it was Unit 17, a vaguely familiar face from past summers, and from appearances, a man in his late fifties. The massive build of his torso and wrinkled gray hair was striking. I figured the driver had a name, but recalling the new company policy, couldn't verify that. He was delivering an empty box to the slot where I had just pulled the full.

We conversed for a short while on the narrowness of our world here and

the right and wrong ways of working in such a small space. I figured he had this cave thing down pat. “It looked like you could do that last turn in your sleep, 17. Been down here many times, I take it?”

“Yea, dey send me to the cave a lot, cuz I’m good at dis place. Yet, I tell ya, man, I always feels da butterflies when I’m down here. Near as I unnerstan, they only send four or five guys.” He laughed a deep chuckle. “You should feel good, 23, dat dey even thinks you can handle it.” He paused and thought a bit. “Hey—man, maybe dis summer dey gonna send you here more and me less.” That seemed to tickle his funny bone, and he let out a good laugh.

“How long you been with City?” I asked.

“Long time, man. I was here way back when dis was called Hoving,” he proudly pointed out. “Dat’s a long time ago!”

“So you knew that BFI used to be Hoving & Sons,” I marveled. “I didn’t think any of the workers here lasted any longer than five years. Did you ever meet John Hoving [brother of Sam – ed.] or his brothers?”

“Hey, 23. Cut me some slack. Dis is my thirty-third year. I’m an old garbio.



Roll-offs (also commonly but erroneously called dumpsters) are rectangular boxes with wheels that allow the containers to be easily pulled off or on to tracks for hauling away waste. Image courtesy of the author.

Seen many guys come and go. I seen the Hovings go as well. I knew the brothers. Abe was okay, sometimes. Me? I got along with Dick the best [Abe and Dick were sons of Sam – ed.]. He hired me, one of the first blacks to work for the company. I always appreciated that.”

“Hey,” I exclaimed, breaking all protocol, “I think I remember you from when I worked for Hovings while in college. What’s your name?”

He looked around. “I’m Arthur, but don’t tell the base I told you that!” and we both laughed.

I shared with him that I had worked for the company one summer back in 1970. It struck us both, then, that we had known each other once before, separated by a span of twenty years. A bond, the tie of age, drew us together.

“Hey, 23.” His aging dark eyes glittered. “I bet you’ll be interested in seeing something over here, something older than bot’ you and me.” And he headed to a far corner of the loading area, motioning that I should follow him.

My curiosity was up, and I followed him warily, “What’s that, Arthur, I mean, 17? What you got over there?” I wondered if he had committed the unpardonable sin and stashed some old brass or copper piping in a hiding place.

He approached the wall nearest the door

and carefully scanned the surface in the dim light of our trucks’ beams. “It’s been years since I last seen it, but I think it’s over here somewhere. . . . I don’t think anybody would take



The hydraulic cylinders on a truck used to raise one end of a roll-off for emptying. Image courtesy of the author.

it down.” He was talking to the old wooden supports as much as to me, scraping the old grime away with his gloves. “Not too many knew it was even here. C’mon now fella . . . where are you?”

Arthur/17 continued rubbing at the age-encrusted walls, as we stood some sixty feet below the city street. Within a minute, however, he turned to me smiling and proudly pointed at a small tin plate bolted to one of the supports.

“Ain’t that something for the museums, 23?”

With several swipes of my glove, I could make out the words *Samuel Hoving, Scavenger—Telephone Olympic 2-5647*.

“There, told you that it was down here somewhere. Dis thing is old, 23.” I did some quick math. “Some fifty years, if it’s a day!”

We looked at each other, then back at the small 4x6-inch metal emblem.

At that moment, time stood still. The rumble of the cars and trucks above us, even at this early hour, was an annoying backdrop. I pictured Sam Hoving bolting that plaque to the wall





A waste transfer station where solid waste is unloaded from smaller volume collection vehicles and reloaded onto larger vehicles for shipment to landfills or other treatment or disposal facilities. Image courtesy of the author.

more than half a century ago as he claimed the massive new Merchandise Mart his territory, hoping to build his company based on its commerce. Hundreds, no, thousands of times he, his sons, and his workers ventured down into the cave to bring forth the

trash and garbage. This trek might have been an arduous journey, but it must have been sweet to their bank account as well. The stop was still making money decades later.

I soon said goodbye to my reacquainted friend and,

minutes later, found myself in the glow of the newly risen sun on LaSalle Street. I was feeling good about myself now, for I was a veteran of the cave and figured I wouldn't mind taking that trip again. I grabbed for the mike, "Unit 23 to base. Coming in with the

box from the left slot. Found it with no problem. Got out of there without scraping my head on the ceiling as well."

I thought a second; then added, "Hey, I like the cave, Base. Wouldn't mind going there in the future."

"Base to 23. Yea, well, forget about it. Haven't you read the papers? They're doing a major renovation at the Mart, starting this summer. In a week or two, that whole area going be all torn up and cleaned out. Everything down there going into the landfill. About time, too. Nothing but worthless old stuff."

"Ten-four, Base." 3

#### Endnotes

1. This is based on a chapter from Vander Leest's book, *Garbio: Stories of Chicago, Its Garbage and the Dutchmen Who Picked It Up*.

2. In 1999 BFI was sold to Allied Waste Industries, which in 2008 was purchased by Republic Services, Inc.



A roll-off being emptied at a dumping facility. Image courtesy of the author.

# Heartside Neighborhood, 1850–2000

## 150 Years

H. J. Brinks

### Introduction

The Heartside neighborhood, a rectangular segment of downtown Grand Rapids, did not receive this name until the 1960s, but the area had already been developed a century earlier. Its first identity stemmed from commercial activity on the Grand River's east bank—docks, riverboats, and lumber mills attracted a boisterous and transient work force. Railroad tracks split the area in the 1860s, making the terrain east of the tracks a more

appealing residential area than that to the west extending to the riverbank. Along Ionia, Spring, and Division streets, between Fulton on the north and Wealthy to the south, Dutch immigrants clustered and, after 1850, defined the neighborhood with their inexpensive housing, native language, church, school, and several retail outlets.

After the Union Railroad Depot was built on Ionia Street in 1870 the



*H. J. Brinks is an emeritus professor of history at Calvin College, former curator of the Archives, and founding editor of Origins. He has written extensively about the Dutch in North America, including Dutch American Voices published in 1995.*

*A 1947 image of the central section of Grand Rapids from the north, with the Heartside Neighborhood outlined in the top left quadrant. Image courtesy of the Archives, Calvin College.*

residential neighborhood began to change. Warehousing, brokerage, and cartage businesses fed upon the opportunities created by railroad traffic, which increased rapidly as furniture making began to dominate the regional economy. Increasingly railroad workers and dock and warehouse employees occupied the walk-up flats, while hotels began to cater to sales people associated with the furniture business. Tenements provided low-cost housing for several immigrant groups, including African Americans. Consequently the Dutch gradually began to move southward from the area. Symbolic of this trend, the original Dutch Reformed church building on Ionia was moved five blocks to the corner of Goodrich and Finney, where it was remodeled as a tenement house.

For about ninety years, 1871-1961, Heartside was a commercial sector which housed a work force linked to railroads and the distribution of freight. By the 1890s that business sector expanded sufficiently to require a new and larger Union Station, together with a massive train shed. Because a great portion of Heartside's work force was male, single, and mobile, hotel rooms, boarding houses, and apartment buildings flourished. In 1890 the city supported forty hotels with a capacity of 3,000. Most of these accommodations were strung out along Division Avenue south of Fulton. Meanwhile the space between Division Avenue and the Union Station filled with warehouses, brokerage houses, garages, and light industry.

In 1960 the Union Station and its steel-girder train shed were dismantled to make space for the US 131 expressway exit ramp. Spawned by the growing interstate highway system, the volume of truck transport cut deeply into railway freight traffic and bypassed downtown warehouses

in favor of direct deliveries and less expensive warehousing on the edges of the city. Consequently many of Heartside's commercial buildings were under used or began to stand empty. Neglect and decay followed. Heartside hotels began to serve economically strapped pensioners, migrant laborers, and people disadvantaged by physical and mental illnesses. Urban renewal compounded social distress in Heartside by shifting

displaced residents from the renewed city center to South Division Avenue which offered inexpensive accommodations for a desperately poor populace.<sup>1</sup>

Since then, and especially during the last two decades, a number of agencies have combined their efforts to improve Heartside's physical and social environment. Dwelling Place Incorporated has been exceptionally effective in renovating and managing

## Gerald Ladwig Remembers

H.J. Brinks

*In a 1997 interview with H. J. Brinks, Gerald Ladwig, who attended Catholic Central High, which, with St. Andrew's Cathedral, is located in Heartside's southeastern quadrant, remembers the area well. He walked its streets during his high school years, 1945-1949, worked on the railroad docks, and lived in two of its hotels for brief periods.*

The Cody Hotel stood at the southwest corner of Division Avenue and Fulton Street. One entered the basement of the billiard room from Fulton Street. As I recall the room had between ten and twelve Brunswick pool tables. They were the standard 4' by 9' size, and appeared to be late nineteenth-century models. The click of the ivory cue ball hitting the object ball was to this sixteen-year-old boy a mesmerizing attraction.

One door south of the Cody Hotel was a popular watering hole named Wes Ramey's Sports Bar. The owner, Wes Ramey, died in 1996 but during the twenties and thirties Wes Ramey was an outstanding professional boxer in the welter-weight division. The fact that he was never a world champion had more to do with politics than with his boxing ability.

He set up a boxing ring in the bar's basement where aspiring amateur and professional boxers could sharpen their skills. One of Ramey's more famous boxers, Pete Meade, was a young, raw-boned farmer from Truman, Arkansas, who was once ranked in the top ten of the middleweight division.

In 1957 the Milner Hotel group bought the Cody, razed it, and sold the property to the city. Parking Ramp 2 stood on that location for years until it was razed several years ago, recently a structure with commercial space at ground level and parking above was constructed. A transplanted Canadian named Snook bought some of the pool equipment from the Cody Hotel and opened another billiard room named Chinnick's on the second floor of the Zondervan bookstore. Snook's billiard room attracted many of the best players in the Grand Rapids area including its world reigning three-cushion champion, Harold Worst.

Directly across the street from Wes Ramey's bar was the Herald Square

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The area of Oakes and Ionia in front of the Union Railroad Station early in the twentieth century was originally a Dutch neighborhood in Grand Rapids. Image courtesy of the Archives, Calvin College.

about five hundred rooms and apartments. The remodeled Herkimer Hotel is a showcase of that effort. Private agencies—Heartside Ministries, In the Image Clothing, God's Kitchen, the Dégagé Coffee House, the Guiding Light, and Mel Trotter missions—have joined the long-standing Salvation Army and Goodwill Industries to serve the neediest segment of Heartside's residents.

### **Ethnic Enclave 1850–1900**

That neighborhood has always attracted the least opulent segments of Grand Rapids people. Its first inhabitants were riverboat hands, shipyard workers, blacksmiths, and warehouse workers who spent short periods of time and nearly all of their wages in the taverns and rooming houses of the quarter. Dutch immigrants, many on welfare in the Netherlands, replaced these workers and by 1876 Heartside

was the nerve center of the fledgling Christian Reformed Church (CRC). Its landmark edifice, Spring Street Christian Reformed Church, stood on what is now number 57 Commerce Street.<sup>2</sup> In 1876 the denomination's theological students gathered in the upper rooms of the Dutch-language school on number 43 Williams Street while the CRC weekly Dutch-language periodical *De Wachter* was headquartered at 42 Commerce Street. These institutions were surrounded and supported by a large cluster of Dutch immigrants, the first distinct ethnic enclave in Grand Rapids.<sup>3</sup>

Netherlanders had begun settling in the area during the 1850s because it offered unskilled jobs, low-cost housing, and ready access both to work places and retail stores. By 1857, when the first congregation organized and built a \$3,000 structure on Ionia Street, it attracted about fifty charter-

member families. The 1860 census counted seventy-four households in or near the current boundaries of Heartside. During the congregation's first decade, Dutch Christian Reformed immigrants worshiped in a plain rectangular wood structure on the northwest corner of Ionia and Weston streets, a site now shaded by the Van Andel Arena.

In 1867 the congregation erected a new sanctuary on 57 Commerce Street where the first pastor, Rev. Wilhelmus Van Leeuwen, laid the cornerstone. The structure was ample, with a seating capacity of 1,300 and it was ornamented with a clock tower and raised pulpit modeled after Reformed church architecture in the Netherlands. In 1887 membership peaked at 1,800 but in 1910, with only 500 members, the congregation decided to relocate to Bates Street. Its parishioners had moved elsewhere and *Polk's Grand Rapids City Directory* in 1910 records only fourteen Dutch householders on Commerce and Williams streets—once the vital core of the ethnic enclave.

During its vigorous heyday Heartside's Dutch enclave supported an array of ethnically linked businesses—Steketee and Kim (dry goods); Brink's Grocery; Van Driele's Flour, Feed, and Grain; along with a wooden shoe outlet. These and other aspects of the community are evident in the correspondence of Marten Jacobus Schoonbeek who arrived there in 1873. Marten's seven-member household, together with four other families, could find no housing on their Saturday-morning arrival and spent their first two nights in a barn.

On Monday, an acquaintance from the province of Groningen, Geert Stel, offered his basement as temporary quarters for the Schoonbeeks at number 46 Commerce Street. Within a few weeks the family relocated to one of Piet Otte's apartments, just two doors

away from Geert Stel's home. Schoonbeek wrote,

Piet Otte and his wife are Hollanders. In fact most people around here are Hollanders. . . . Geert Stel has been in Grand Rapids for about three years. He was in debt when he came but he now has his own house and another which has two rental flats. He told me that he receives rental of \$4.50 per month for them.<sup>4</sup>

For his flat Schoonbeek paid Piet Otte \$2.00 monthly, but within ninety days Schoonbeek was building a new home at 36 Logan Street SE. The lot, purchased from Jacobus De Jong, stood two doors east of Division Avenue on the fringe of the city. Marten wrote,

We have a fine house built entirely of wood, but wood is cheap here, \$14.00 for one thousand linear board feet. One side of the house is decorated with eight windows that have eight panes. Each window costs \$1.80 and they are well made.<sup>5</sup>

Two months later Marten added, "We have come to the point here where our lot must be fenced to enclose the garden . . . cows roam wherever there are no fences."

Schoonbeek's one-time neighbor on Commerce, Willem Hendrik De Lange, also arrived in 1873, and provided a description of the area and his apartment,

There are many factories, large stores, and other expensive buildings here. The many wooden houses are well planned. Currently I live on the second floor of such a house and pay rent of \$2.00 per month. It consists of two main rooms and two side rooms without windows [bedrooms?] and several closets. It stands directly across from my school.<sup>6</sup>

De Lange taught in the Williams Street Dutch-language school sponsored by the Spring Street CRC. Of this he reports,

I am required to teach the children well enough so they can read and write Dutch. They learn other subjects in the English [public] schools.<sup>7</sup> I teach from Monday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. The prospects are good because people can live well here on \$10.00 per week. So I opened the school with about one

hundred students on August 11, 1873, one day after my forty-eighth birthday. . . . It was rather lively here at first and I doubted that I could hold out, but now, after eight weeks, I am getting used to it. Still, these Yankees are uncivilized rascals and not easy to control.<sup>8</sup>

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Restaurant. It was a very popular eatery in the Heartside area. Nothing fancy, just good food at a reasonable price; its customers included workers from both local newspapers. Dodds record shop occupies the spot where the Herald Square Restaurant stood.

Just beyond the intersection of Division and Weston on the west side of the street stood the Show Bar. In its heyday the Show Bar was one of Grand Rapids' better night clubs. It featured a revolving bar inside a standard bar and on weekends live music with well-known musicians. I was there when they hosted the famous Dixieland trumpeter Muggsy Spanier.

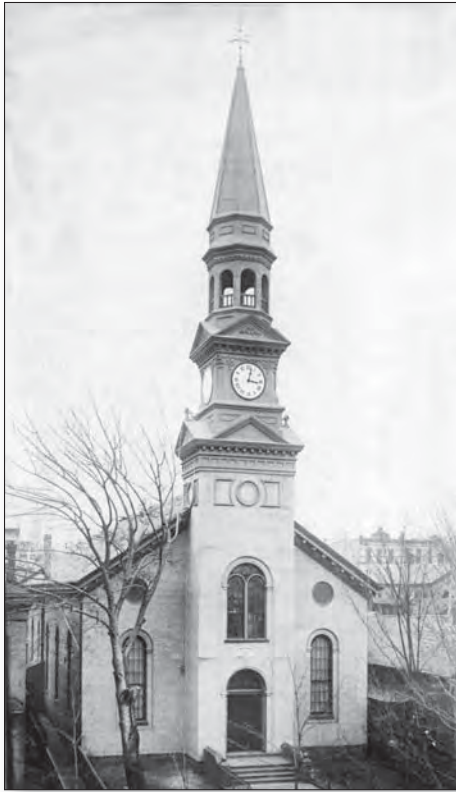
The middle thirties brought a young man named Tommy Brann to the Heartside area and he decided to open up a combination stag bar and restaurant. The business prospered. People who ate at the original restaurant testify they had some of the best steaks in town. There are now over a half dozen Brann restaurants in the Grand Rapids and Holland area. Some years ago the original Brann's restaurant closed its doors. The place reopened under new management and calls itself the Cell, which caters to gays and lesbians. Across the street from the Cell, the Promenade caters to male homosexuals.

About a block and a half south of the Show Bar on the same side of the street was Oscar Sear's Red Mill. The Red Mill, like the Show Bar, featured live music on weekends, and the word on the street was that on the second floor of the bar there was a bookmaking operation.

The Herkimer Hotel, at 323 South Division, has recently been completely refurbished. The original Herkimer Hotel was built in the latter part of the nineteenth century, during the high tide of a local temperance movement so that the management decided to have no bar in the hotel, but that feature was temporary. Ultimately the building housed a bar, barbershop, billiard room, and a newspaper stand on the street level. A card room behind the newsstand was rumored to attract big-stake players. It was said that any person who wished to wager on football, baseball, basketball, horseracing, or boxing could be accommodated at the Herkimer.

In 1971 I lived on the third floor of the Herkimer, and paid \$10 per week. The room was small, clean and sparse, with a single bed, small closet, and a desk set. There was no in-room plumbing; the bathroom and the shower were located at the end of the hallway. The management discouraged the use of electric hot plates to prevent fires.

In 1972 I moved from the Herkimer Hotel to the Carlton Hotel, which was located on the southeast corner of Division Avenue and Weston Street. The rooms at the Carlton Hotel were larger and cleaner than the Herkimer Hotel, but the rent was \$12 per week.☞



The Greek Revival First Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids featured a clock in the tower as was the case with many churches in the Netherlands. Image courtesy of the Archives, Calvin College.

De Lange was accidentally killed in 1874, two years before the CRC's first crop of theological students began to meet on the second floor of the Wil-



Members of First Christian Reformed Church began this Christian day school on Williams Street. From 1875 until 1894 the second floor was home to the Theological School later to become Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary. Image courtesy of the Archives, Calvin College.

liams Street school, quarters which served the seminary until 1892, when a new structure was completed on the corner of Franklin and Madison streets. Grade school education persisted in the old structure until 1905, when enrollment dropped to about sixty students. The Salvation Army purchased the building in 1907 to establish an Industrial School and Home.

The Spring Street congregation did not relocate into its new Bates Street sanctuary until 1912, but by then little remained of the old Dutch enclave's shops, homes, and apartments. Warehouses, factories, and cartage firms dominated the area. The Union Depot, completed in 1870, conveniently transported newly arriving immigrants to the doorstep of their enclave, but the station also transformed the local economy by facilitating the distribution of goods from both farms and factories. Ultimately all the region's houses were razed to make room for commercial buildings, and by 1904 a new and larger Union Station, together with a train shed, built a decade earlier, indicated the rapid growth of railroad related businesses in Heartside.

The various uses put to the once-hallowed Spring Street sanctuary reflect the area's transformation. The Ryskamps, Division Avenue meat processors, removed the pews, and scrapped the high pulpit and clock tower to make space for horses, delivery wagons, and eventually trucks. In 1931,

during the Great Depression, the city acquired the building for use as the City Social Center, to house homeless, unmarried men.<sup>9</sup> The venerable structure was razed in 1956 with the *Grand Rapids Press* reporting, with a tone of nostalgia, the following:

#### *Old Church Comes Down*

Demolition of the former Spring Street Christian Reformed Church at 57 Commerce Avenue SW removed a historic landmark which was once the place of worship of the first Christian Reformed Church on this continent and the mother church of all the Christian Reformed churches in this area. The picture at left, showing the almost classic beauty of the old structure, was made from an enlarged reproduction of an old photograph, prepared by Benjamin Hertel, whose father was an elder in the church, and who was baptized and catechized by one of its pastors. The congregation is now known as First Christian Reformed Church and its church is at Bates Street and Henry Avenue SE.<sup>10</sup>

#### **Commerce and Railroads 1870–1960**

Heartside's commercial flowering is easily demonstrated by the expansion of its railroad traffic between 1870 and 1920. The first trains, in 1858, which linked the city to Detroit and Chicago via Kalamazoo, were joined in rapid succession by tracks going north to Mackinaw City (1870), the Gulf of Mexico (1882), more directly to Chicago in 1899, and to New York in 1903. Both freight and passenger service tied Grand Rapids to every significant market. In 1890 six railroad lines were running out of the Union rail yard in ten different directions—one train every ten minutes. Rail passenger traffic peaked in 1918 when seventy-six trains arrived and departed in a single day to serve up to 12,000 patrons.<sup>11</sup>

The city's reputation as the world's furniture capital depended on the railroads which defined Heartside's

character. Today the Furniture Manufacturing Association's warehouse on Ionia Street stands as the lone survivor of more than seventy warehouses that lined the street in 1890. Commerce Street, a short block to the east, was, by 1911, given over entirely to manufacturing, cartage, and brokerage.

The products of over thirty furniture factories, thirty-seven lumber and planing mills, and five plaster mines were all funneled through Heartside. In addition, wholesale goods from candy to horse collars were packaged and shipped to retail markets in Western Michigan, the city's economic hinterland from Benton Harbor to Traverse City. Without forklifts and conveyor belts every item (chairs, tables, planks, barrels and crates) was moved by hand. Loading and unloading, packing and unpacking required hundreds of workers and most of them lived in or near Heartside.

The vigorous nexus of retail trade and housing which Heartside residents experienced during the commercial heydays is evident from a review of goods and services provided on South Division Avenue. On the first full block south of Fulton, from Weston to Oakes Street, fourteen second-story rooming facilities and two hotels served both regular and transient clients in 1910. A jeweler, clothier, barber, dyer, toiletry, and laundry tended the block's sartorial and cosmetic demands. Three restaurants, four saloons, with a grocer and several butchers provided food and drink. A cigar store, two pharmacies, and a bicycle shop filled other street-level shops.

Upper-level tenants, including the clients of two hotels, could acquire every ordinary necessity within easy reach. Their coming and going amid clanging streetcars, clapping horses, and clattering wagon wheels created what must have been an engagingly vital environment—a panorama that

persisted southward to Wealthy Street.

There on Heartside's southern fringe, the history of virtually any building suggests the area's general character. On the northwest corner of Wealthy and Division a remodeled structure, used currently by Catholic Secondary Schools, served first as the City Trust and Savings Bank. Other tenant space served a dentist, physician, and pharmacist. A Railroad Pension Company joined them in the 1950s when railroading was giving way to truck transport. Following the pattern of most South Division Avenue buildings, the bank's upper floors (numbers 343-360) contained apartments. In this instance, number 359<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> provided egress to several Mayflower Apartment tenants from 1923-1944. Thereafter the complex was remodeled to include nineteen units. Doubtless, post-war housing shortages contributed to this expansion.

The Schuchardt Building, a few doors north of the Savings Bank, has been refurbished by Dwelling Place Incorporated, but the structure opened originally as Louis Schuchardt's butchery. The family operated from that address (number 339) for twenty-seven years (1890-1917). Following alteration, another long-term tenant was Joseph Cavagnaro's Confectionery (1900-1915). Street-level businesses which succeeded the butcher shop included a grocery (1923-1934), a tailor, a photo business (1941-1948), and finally Nyburg's Plumbing and Heating—a business unrelated to street-level traffic. By then Heartside's character had changed radically.

South Division's transition, from fully-occupied retail units and living quarters to drab low-profile storage businesses, vacant apartments and diminished services, occurred gradually. For example, the McGurrian Building (numbers 41-43) on South Division remained fully occupied until 1949 with four street-level shops and

furnished rooms upstairs. Thereafter both the shops and apartments were frequently vacant. One business, renting pinball machines and other games, has persisted over the last twenty-five years; but it has nearly no walk-in trade. Its neighbor, the Show Bar, became Papa Joe's Lounge and finally TJ's Tap, which survived until about 1990. Several tenants rented rooms in the upper level until 1996 when fire left the rooms uninhabitable. The structure's future is clearly bleak. Neighboring buildings have experienced a similar transition. Suppliers for barbers, bars, and restaurants were already replacing retail outlets by 1950, and thirty years later a majority of street-level stores stood empty, their windows darkened by paint and plywood.

Heartside's dim if not dark age, 1960-1990, stemmed partly from structural changes in the general economy. One obvious factor, the growth of interstate highway trucking, combined with the automation of dock work, drastically reduced the work force on the Ionia Street docks. Trucks replaced significant segments of railroad traffic while forklifts and conveyor belts altered warehousing. Storage buildings and brokerage services became increasingly unnecessary when forklifts and conveyor belts transferred goods from boxcars to trucks and then to each retailer's back door.

Concurrently the once active semi-annual furniture shows, which regularly brought hundreds to Grand Rapids, the self-acclaimed Furniture Capital of the World, attracted fewer buyers. During the 1950s business travelers moved from trains to airplanes and the large Chicago Furniture Mart provided a more attractive venue for viewing and buying furniture than the smaller exhibitions of Grand Rapids. Consequently passenger rail traffic and the need for

hotels in downtown Grand Rapids declined.<sup>12</sup>

Nothing symbolizes this transition more vividly than the 1960 demolition of the Union Station and its adjacent train shed which was replaced by an exit ramp from the interstate highway system. Passenger trains gave way to automobiles, boxcars to trucks; downtown hotels could not compete with motels which clustered conveniently around Eisenhower's proud achievement—the interstate highway system.

When jobs evaporated, the most able and skilled workers moved elsewhere. Employment decreased across the whole spectrum: railroad workers, dock workers, and warehouse employees. Remaining jobs were poorly paid and frequently intermittent. Unavoidably, then, apartments and furnished rooms became vacant and with the loss of their clients, retailers could no longer sustain themselves. Heartside became a depressed area attractive primarily to those who could not afford better accommodations.

Some local hotels survived by renting to low-income pensioners, truckers, and some remaining dock workers so that, in 1966, only two of the city's



*The Harris storefront on South Division today still reflects the period when the Heartside Neighborhood was slowly decaying. Image courtesy of Richard H. Harms.*

twelve hotels were listed as adequate for transient guests in the *Red Book* registry. Six were occupied by permanent residents. Until Dwelling Place Incorporated acquired and renovated them for low-income housing in 1989, the Brunswick, Kenwood, and Carlton hotels had become typical skid row flop houses. The Herkimer served truckers for the most part and the

Cody, renowned for its billiard players, was razed in 1958 to erect a parking ramp.<sup>13</sup>

### **Urban Blight and Renaissance 1960–2000**

Although it was an unintended consequence, urban renewal dispersed a wave of newcomers to the Heartside neighborhood, when about forty acres of the old city core was demolished in 1959. Residents from both the lower Monroe and Bridge Street skid row filtered into South Division Avenue's cheap motels, rooming houses, vacant warehouses, and railroad docks. Sixty-three percent of Bridge Street's exiles took up residence in Heartside.

A careful profile of the neighborhood in 1975 indicates that only 20 percent of the populace were teetotalers and a growing number of new residents were recently discharged from mental hospitals. Ronald Vander Kooi's research report counted only 537 permanent Heartside residents, of whom the vast majority were white, older (50+) males. Unemployment stood at 80 percent among them, but they all earned social security and/



*Since 1895 the Herkimer Hotel has been part of what is now known as the Heartside Neighborhood. Now transformed into apartments, the ground floor features a "trendy café." Image courtesy of Richard H. Harms.*





*Guiding Light Mission is a nondenominational Christian organization that provides substance abuse counseling, employment assistance, and mentorship programs. It also provides meals during the day and beds at night for the homeless. Image courtesy of Richard H. Harms.*

or private pensions. Their income, \$1,800 to \$4,200 annually, sustained life patterns that were substandard in every category—housing, food, clothing, and leisure time.<sup>14</sup>

Beginning in the 1960s, and in swelling numbers during the 1970s and 80s, mental health patients were released from dungeon-like state institutions to live more normally in neighborhood mental health care centers. Over a thirty-year period nearly a half million of the nation's mental health hospital beds were emptied, but the promised aftercare and neighborhood care centers were not adequately funded so that the poorest of the liberated patients drifted into low-income neighborhoods across the nation. In Grand Rapids, Heartside acquired a significant concentration of these exceptionally visible people.

Robert Bell, a mentally disabled Vietnam War veteran, moved to Heartside in 1978 and has vivid memories of that experience. He wrote,

Much had changed in the downtown I remembered from the 1960s when, as a teenager, we used to go downtown from Wayland. It was a big deal. We enjoyed the museum, John Ball Park, the zoo, and sitting in popcorn-scented theaters. We discovered the cafeteria connected to the Milner/

Oakway Hotel. It was reserved for residents and guests but by asking someone to say that you were his or her guest you could get a big meal at low cost.

When I moved to Heartside after the war, Division Avenue had three hotels where the Dwelling Place is now located. They were a pretty good deal for

low income people. I lived in the Brunswick for two seasons in 1980 after I found out I could get financial help from the Veterans' Trust Fund office downtown. The Elite restaurant helped me too because it honored Vets' Fund meal tickets.

I liked all the oak trim in the Brunswick and the skylight which brightened an oval space containing the stairways leading to my little room (number 26) on the third floor. Nearby restaurants were fun and it was a challenge to see how many kinds of food you could try on a \$10.00 blood plasma payment or on money earned in other ways. We could not cook in

our rooms because the Brunswick people had previously had fires from cooking.

During a time in 1978 when I was homeless, I had a short streak of good luck when I found a way to enter the Pantlind Hotel while it was being renovated. I slept free for about two weeks and after the restaurants closed I ate some gourmet leftovers—lobster, steak, shrimp cocktail and all the beer and wine I could want. When I became too conspicuous I left and returned to Heartside where I had been sleeping in my car. That, however, was soon stolen, along with my clothing, books, records, and chess set. Later, I saw the chess set in the pawn shop but could do nothing to get it back. Fortunately, David Hansen and some friends gave me a place to stay until I qualified for Veterans' Fund support.<sup>15</sup>

Efforts to reinvigorate the Heartside neighborhood stemmed partly from the Grand Rapids City Commission's decision to identify the area as a historic district in 1979. The National Register of Historic Places recognized that designation in 1982 and the city renewed its support in 1984.



*Part of the renewing of the Heartside Neighborhood is this large mural by Richard Haas of scenes of the city's lumber and furniture making industries. Image courtesy of Richard H. Harms.*

Consequently the preservation of historic buildings has been encouraged while at the same time Dwelling Place Incorporated has carried on an aggressive program of building acquisition and renovation. Since 1989, under Dennis Sturtevant's direction, Dwelling Place has renovated eight major buildings including the multi-million dollar reconstruction of the Herkimer Hotel. Dwelling Place provides rent-subsidized housing for about half of Heartside's 1,400 residents.

Those costly renovation projects are funded largely from private sources—investors buying low-income and historic rehabilitation tax credits. Public housing grants are also used frequently to fund gaps in financing. In addition, several foundations—the Wege, the Grand Rapids and the Steelcase—together with other local benefactors, have provided funding which enabled Dwelling Place to qualify for low-interest public loans as well as local bank loans. These investments have spurred the restoration of several street-level businesses—a grocery store, bank, deli, sign company, cafe, barber, laundromat, and flower shop among them. For a portion of Heartside the plywood is down and once again attractive display windows look out on Division Avenue.

In the late 1980s and early 90s, when homelessness became a national crisis and peaked in Grand Rapids at about 1,800, Heartside's social service agencies responded vigorously and elicited widespread support from local churches and private donors. The plight of the homeless focused attention on Heartside's existing agencies and brought several new ventures to birth.<sup>16</sup> Office space and social services together with professional and volunteer personnel grew rapidly. For

example, Goodwill Industries enlarged its employment programs, while in 1989 Faith Incorporated launched a successful job training and employment service.<sup>17</sup>

From quarters leased in many instances from Dwelling Place a number of social, medical, and religious agencies provide food, clothing, medical assistance and hospitality to needy people. While nearly every Heartside resident is poor, many also suffer from chronic mental diseases, physical disabilities, alcoholism, and other addictive disorders. Some are elderly and feeble, while a significant contingent of disabled war veterans and unskilled workers also make Heartside their home. It has become a rather cohesive neighborhood in which many of the residents know each other and meet regularly at one of several religious gatherings, at In the Image while shopping for clothing, or at meal times and during social hours in places like Heartside Ministry, God's Kitchen, Dégagé Ministries, the Mel Trotter Mission, and the Guiding Light Mission.

Dwelling Place, in conjunction with a wide spectrum of institutions, has improved Heartside's appearance and living conditions, but the future of these achievements may be jeopardized by vigorous commercial activity on the area's northwestern fringe. There, the Van Anandel Arena now occupies the street corners and lots where Dutch Reformed immigrants first worshiped and steam locomotives blackened every window with soot. The arena's neighboring streets and windows have begun to sparkle recently as gentrification attracts a middle-class clientele to Grand Rapids' "Old Town." Some of Heartside's less affluent residents and the region's so-

cial service agencies fear that the Old Town renaissance could displace them and push them out of the neighborhood they regard as their home.

Jaye Beeler's 17 August 1997 *Grand Rapids Press* article "Ionia Avenue Comeback" records the opening of the Sierra Room, a new high-end restaurant, and the continuing success of several other ventures which have benefited from the Van Anandel Arena. Since its opening more than a million patrons have passed through the arena's gates and many of them have re-circulated through adjacent bars, restaurants, and art galleries. Meanwhile, upscale loft apartments have attracted permanent residents to long-vacated buildings on Ionia Street. While surveying the whole region from his rooftop deck one local investor declared, "There is tremendous opportunity here." He did not indicate that his vision incorporated Heartside's current populace, but there are some developments that auger well for cooperation between the arena's commercial nexus and the community associated with Dwelling Place Incorporated. Already more than two hundred Heartsiders have found jobs at the arena and in its neighboring restaurants. Like the baggage handlers and dock workers of 1900, the maintenance workers, waiters, and dishwashers of today may find stable employment, and an increasingly attractive setting in Heartside.

The Van Anandel Arena has been an unquestionable success with positive economic ripples radiating in all directions. The "Van," given the ethnic source of its nickname, indicates without dispute that the Dutch are back on Ionia Street—not as needy immigrants but as robust employers. 3

### Endnotes

1. See: Ronald C. Vander Kooi, *A Profile of the Partial Skid Rows of Grand Rapids* (Calvin College Social Research Center: Grand Rapids, MI, 1975).
2. Commerce Street was Spring Street until 1912.
3. See Gordon Vanderstel's, *The Dutch of Grand Rapids, 1848-1900* (University Microfilm: Ann Arbor, MI, 1983).
4. M.J. Schoonbeek to his son, 1 June 1873, Dutch Immigrant Papers Collection, Archives, Calvin College, box 60, folder 13.
5. Ibid.
6. W.H. De Lange to H. Houck, 4 October 1873, Dutch Immigrant Papers Collection, Archives, Calvin College, box 16, folder 34.
7. In 1884 the South Division Street School on the corner of Bartlett and Division stood where the Guiding Light Mission stands now. The school, with a 700-student capacity, was the largest in Grand Rapids.
8. W.H. De Lange to H. Houck, 4 October 1873, Dutch Immigrant Papers Collection, Archives, Calvin College, box 16, folder 34.
9. Reflecting on the congregation's history that year, *Banner* editor Henry

J. Kuiper wrote, "The pictures herewith represent the old Spring Street church building, for many years the home of the mother church of Grand Rapids. When, in the days of Rev. P. Ekster, the First Church, as it is now called, moved to a better neighborhood, the Spring Street property was sold. Being in the very heart of the city it should have been kept for church purposes, but the Grand Rapids churches did not realize how convenient it would be to have a building downtown for public religious gatherings. So the erstwhile dignified church edifice was shorn of its steeple and converted into a garage. The present owners are the Ryskamp brothers, meat dealers, who in the present unemployment emergency have donated the use of the building to the city for charitable purposes. It is now a municipal clubhouse for homeless and jobless men. During the winter months about six hundred men were fed every day and sleeping accommodations were provided for one hundred and forty-five men. Editor's note to "Our Historic Churches," *Banner*, 25 September 1931, 839.

10. Photo caption, *Grand Rapids Press*, 15 September 1956; clipping in

- First Grand Rapids CRC Collection, Archives, Calvin College, box 1, folder 1.
11. Z. Z. Lydens, ed., *The Story of Grand Rapids* (Kregel Publications: Grand Rapids, 1967) 126-129.
  12. See: Gordon Olson, *A Grand Rapids Sampler* (Grand Rapids Historical Commission: Grand Rapids, MI, 1992); James Van Vulpen, *Grand Rapids Then and Now* (Grand Rapids Historical Commission: Grand Rapids, 1996); and Gordon Olson, *Grand Rapids, a City Renewed* (Grand Rapids Historical Commission: Grand Rapids, 1996).
  13. Lydens, ed., *The Story of Grand Rapids*, 230-237.
  14. See Vander Kooi, *A Profile of the Partial Skid Rows of Grand Rapids*.
  15. Recollections of Robert M. Bell, recorded by author in 1997.
  16. Jerry Wilson, *The Plight of the Poor: A Shelter Report* (unpublished research for the Grand Rapids Area Center for Ecumenism, 1987).
  17. *Dwelling Place News* (Grand Rapids, MI, October, 1989). *Heartside Historic District Expansion Committee Report*, May 1995. *Wall Street Journal*, 3 June 1987.

# “When I Was a Kid,” part III

*This my childhood autobiography must be dedicated to the beloved wife of my old age—Gwendolyn De Jong*

Meindert De Jong, with Judith Hartzell<sup>1</sup>

## First Cars and First Planes

I only too well remember the first automobile I ever saw—it all but scared the young life out of me. I was crossing the village square on my slow way to Grandfather’s, and there, turning out of the road below the dike came the enormous, terrifying, dreadful thing. Fast as I could, I fled back to Johanna-Jantje’s grocery store, the last building on Peppermint Street, with its windowless brick wall, and plastered myself against the wall, too terrified to run inside. I liked Johanna-Jantje and loved watching her manipulate her abacus on which, fast as lightning, she’d often add our grocery bill for me to bring my mother.

When the horrible machine had stopped its roaring and stood still, my heart began beating again. The driver got out and went into the public inn—no doubt for a snort of brandy or a quick beer.

In moments, a crowd of women gathered (the men being either at sea or at work in the fields), all women except for an old fisherman. Now I too dared to go back to the silent machine. The old fisherman knowledgeably pointed to the two big brass headlights and said, “Ladies, now that’s where the power lies.” And the women all nodded as if they knew it all that time. I marveled how they could all know such mysterious things.

But at that moment the driver came out of the inn, and all the knowledgeable people fled pell-mell—I with

them—and again I plastered myself hard against Johanna-Jantje’s store and must have all but put a dent in its brick wall.

I saw an airplane once too, in 1913, the year before we left the Netherlands. One day a small gray plane, piloted by two Germans, went down in the sea outside our village. Fortunately the tide was out, so the two men could pull the light thing to the dike, and the villagers, who had gathered to watch something so unusual, helped to drag it up the dike. It stood atop the dike for two days. The sight of it was so unusual that school—which was usually never dismissed for anything—was let out. The teacher evidently thought that seeing a plane would be more educational than anything we’d see in our books.

Then at last a mechanic came from Leeuwarden and worked on it for a whole day. Finally the propeller started to whirl and, almost immediately after, the plane, with its two pilots, ascended from our dike into the sky, and flew in the direction of England.

The plane incident happened about a year before we left the Netherlands in 1914. We left in June, barely in time; the war broke out right behind us. Everyone in Wierum was sure war was coming.

## Master Pelican

Wierum always had two sets of people who could be amiable to each other—like on skating days—or hostile.

*Meindert De Jong (1906-1991) was an award-winning author (the first American to win the Hans Christian Andersen Medal) of twenty-seven children’s books. Judith Hartzell is a professional writer now living in Greenville, South Carolina, who became a friend and co-writer with De Jong when they both lived in southwestern Michigan.*

Basically the division was between the old-school-old-church people, who included most of the fisher folk and some farmers, and our school and church people. We were the Re-reformed church, which had splintered apart from the old church some years before in a quarrel over doctrine.

Our church people believed that our Christianity was more pure than the “worldly” Reformed people. For instance, they allowed dancing, which we considered sinful. And they were lax about observing the Sabbath, at least to our eyes. When the ice was good, their pastor would dismiss Sunday afternoon services saying, “This God-given ice is not to be missed!”

But we would never skate on the Sabbath. We observed it strictly as a day of rest.

Besides us Reformed-type Christians, there were in Wierum only a handful of others, a few Lutherans and a few atheistic Socialists. Fights between groups of children were always between the public school kids and us private school kids. But after Master Pelican<sup>2</sup> came to be the Christian school headmaster, the fighting came to include the whole village. We split into two warring camps.

He seemed odd from the beginning, but at first it was exciting. He dressed flamboyantly and urged everyone to

live intense lives, full of “gusto.” We northern Frisians were too drab, colorless, and staid, he said, implying that where he came from, the southern province of North Brabant, life was lived far more enjoyably.

At his request, the school board ordered the main school room to be painted apricot, trimmed in turquoise. The other school-rooms were painted bright blues and yellows. Pictures of the Dutch navy and action scenes from battles were hung to replace old lithographs showing representative trades, which Pelican considered too tame.

All this time he was making friends of the fisher folk and farmers whose children attended public school. He liked to fish and he let himself be entertained in fisher folk homes. Man-to-man friendship between a lowly fisherman and a lordly



schoolmaster was something new in Wierum.

For some reason, in school Pelican singled out David as a special pet and even made a call on Mother to discuss her eldest child.

“You don’t understand David, Mrs. De Jong,” he said. “You can’t. You’re too pallid yourself, but your son David is a jewel.”

Perhaps this is when my parents began to wonder about the teacher’s sanity.

It was by that time already evident in the schoolroom that something was wrong with him. He seemed unwilling or unable to keep any order in class, and eventually even to remain in class himself; he put David in charge and gave him a big club “to split the skulls” of any trouble-makers.

Then one day he brought his three dogs to school and seated one of them, a drooling, big-headed bulldog, beside David. The headmaster had been, for weeks, encouraging David to draw, telling him he had a genius for art, but the dog drooled all over the drawings.

After a couple of days of this, David



*On the left is the house of the schoolmaster and on the right the minister. As De Jong notes these neighbors were antagonists in the riot that required the Dutch military to quell. Image courtesy of the Archives, Calvin College.*

told Mother and Father what was happening and was amazed at the result. They withdrew him from school and sent him to stay with relatives in a nearby village.

I still attended school, of course; I was in a lower grade, not in the headmaster's class.

About this time Pelican's wife and newly-born son<sup>3</sup> were found wandering in the fields early one morning, because he had beaten her and then locked her out of the house. The Christian school parents understood that the headmaster was mentally ill; but the fisher folk and farmers refused to believe it. Pelican insisted that the pastor<sup>4</sup> of our church, his next door neighbor, had abducted his wife, and they preferred to believe him. Pelican didn't act crazy around the ordinary villagers. On the contrary, he especially befriended them. They couldn't believe ill of anyone who accepted their hospitality, ate their food, and praised their children.

Our school board decided to have the headmaster taken away to a mental hospital in another village, but the fishermen and farmers simply wouldn't permit it. They chased our lone policeman out of Wierum and conspired to keep the horse-drawn ambulance, which would carry the schoolmaster away, from entering the village.

Here's how they did it: while the men were working, the farmers' wives and fishwives kept a vigil from their houses, and if any one of them saw police authorities or an ambulance approaching Wierum, she would run to the bridge over the canal—the highest spot outside the village—and blow a trumpet. On hearing this, all the men would come running from their fields or boat-tending to act as bodyguards for the headmaster.

It finally came to a pitched battle in Wierum. Twenty mounted policemen were sent from Ternaard, the capital



*The four De Jong brothers (right to left): David, Raymond (Remeren), Meindert, and Neil (Corneil). Image courtesy of the Archives, Calvin College.*

of our district, and quartered in our village. Night after night there were battles in the streets. The farmers and fishermen used pitchforks and scythes against the police, who defended themselves with sabers. Nobody was killed, but some were hurt. We children and all of us from the church had to leave our beds and sleep in our attics, for stones were hurled through our windows in the nighttime and often landed in our downstairs living room closet beds. There was no school for weeks, nor could we play in the streets even in daytime.

For safety our pastor sent his children away during this dangerous time. They stayed with friends in the country, though he and his wife continued to live in town, and he kept up with his duties of visiting the sick. He was a gentle but courageous man.

The schoolmaster, in his insanity, had settled on harming the pastor, so there was a chance that his allies, the farmers and fisher folk, might attack him too.

The preacher, however, was perfectly safe, visiting the sick even at night. The superstitious fisher folk said they'd seen an angel walking on his right side and an angel on his left. No

one dared to touch him—they silently faded away at his approach.

Somehow the pastor's youngest child, barely out of babyhood, who had been sent to friends in the country, wandered into a shallow pond on his host's farm and drowned in a foot or so of water. To show how high the feelings had run, when the little coffin was brought down the

main street of Wierum, the people lined up to see it pass by, and one old fisherwoman shrilled out: "Here now comes the pastor's present!" Her own son slapped her across the mouth and shoved her into the house.

People appeared in a different light in those dire days, even to us children. The church organist became a hero—almost like an American cowboy. A mob had ganged up outside his house with big rocks to break his windows. He stood his ground in the middle of his parlor, pulled a pistol out of his pocket and shot right straight through the window glass—fortunately just above the crowd. Nobody was hurt, but the crowd scattered pell-mell and never molested him again.

Once they came to our house while my father was away. We had a pistol too, for the government had issued them to all householders who stood with the preacher against the mob. I didn't know about the gun: I was only seven years old, but when the crowd began yelling at Mother, she calmly opened the door and told them we had a pistol and that we had been told by the authorities to shoot any troublemakers, "not in the feet but in the head." We three boys were astonished

by her courage, and the crowd swiftly melted away. Afterwards Mother took us up to the attic, where the pistol had been hidden, showed it to us, and especially warned Rem never to touch it, for it was loaded. Then, for safety's sake, she hid it in a new secret place. She never had to use it.

Finally, one day at mid-morning two horse-drawn ambulances raced into the village at top speed. While the fisher folk surrounded the decoy ambulance, the other one rammed to a stop at the schoolmaster's house. The authorities then grabbed him, bundled him into the ambulance, and raced away at the same wild speed they'd come.<sup>5</sup>

With that, Wierum's rebellion sputtered out, but some of the ring-leaders were put in the big jail in Leeuwarden, Friesland's capital. Our neighbors on either side both went to jail. Little Aage was one of them; he had gotten a split nose from the saber of one of the police. They all returned much later, very thin and very pale and subdued—and they weren't heroes anymore.

School began again when peace was restored, even though it was a long time before a new headmaster could be hired. Dave had already turned twelve, and was therefore an adult. He had outgrown the little local school. Father wanted to send him to Dokkum for further study, because it was evident to both Mother and Father that Dave had superior ability. The dream was that he might become an architect, because of his drawing and math skills. But to study in Dokkum would mean that Dave had to ride his bicycle seven miles to school and seven miles home every day. He was overcoming the weakness caused by his chronic digestive problem, but he didn't have the strength yet for that ordeal.

So Dave began to work as an apprentice to Father in the building

business, a job he didn't like much. It was all he could do.

During the worst of the fighting, Father had been forced to stay at home all the time, as had we all. It was tough on Father, but even tougher on Rem, seeing that the Pelican problem happened in summer—Rem's favorite time to be outdoors.

Father's business was ruined for the time, and probably that was what finally convinced him that we must move away. He and Mother had been considering emigrating for a long time, though we learned this only through hints. It was to be either America or South Africa for us.

### Adventures on Ice

The winter after Master Pelican left us, we had wonderful ice. This was fortunate, for the village needed something to promote harmony and healing, and an ice holiday was made to order.

Father and Mother decided that Dave and Rem were strong enough skaters now to travel down the canals to visit "ice relatives," people in Ternaard, Hantum, or even as far away as Dokkum who were somehow related to the family.

And so one fine day they were off, skating grandly away in a little tandem line, led by Father, then Mother, then Dave, and Rem. Skating families always arranged themselves in this fashion, tallest down to shortest.

When another skating family hove into view, Father and Mother greeted them and exchanged news. Our De Jong tandem could and did outskate almost any other family group. Father was reputed to be the fastest skater in Wierum. It was only reputation though, never demonstrated fact. The

ice races, held on a great roped off ice rink near Wierum, were outside the limits of our Christian faith. Such competition was a temptation to sin, my parents said, and they refused to participate.

It was to get away from the ice races that Father and Mother took Dave and Rem to Dokkum that last winter in Friesland. On the way they met



*Already in the late eighteenth century there were reports of ice skaters visiting all eleven cities of Friesland on one day. In 1890 Dutch athlete Pim Mulier suggested an organized tour of the eleven cities. Because Dutch winters are not always cold enough for the water on the nearly 200 kilometer course to freeze, that race has been held only fifteen times during the twentieth century, the first in 1909.*

and skated for a while with Mother's sister from Nes, Tante Grietje, and her husband and children.

"Your father seems to have hundreds of relatives," Mother said later to the boys. "I suppose I haven't more than forty."

"But," she added, "mine are poorer." By that she meant her relatives should be paid special attention, since they couldn't go visiting any old time they wished.

At Dokkum Mother and Father left

the boys and the ice, visiting relatives too old or infirm to skate. Dave and Rem had a great time with some cousins. Instead of tipping the ice sweepers with the half pennies Father had provided for that purpose, the boys bought treats to eat. So their main game was outskating the sweepers' thrown brooms.

All this I learned the night after their big trip. Knillis and I weren't strong enough for such a far journey; Dokkum was seven miles away. So we spent the day with Grandfather and *Muoike* (Frisian for aunt). This didn't bother Knillis at all. He was barely three. But I was greatly offended at being left behind.

"Never mind," Father said. "You and I will skate together to the New Church's Pipe."

It sounded wonderful. I didn't know what it was—the "New Church's Pipe"—but I sounded the name over and over in my mind and excitedly imagined skating that far, just Father and me.

But first Father was going to skate the "Eleven-Cities Tour," about a hundred-mile excursion, with stopovers at all eleven of Friesland's ancient cities. This was a distance event which only the best skaters of the province could attempt.

The winter before, Father had skated alone the twenty-four miles to Groningen and back, just before the thaw set in, and he had come back over dangerous, cracking ice. But this was against his usual policy. He believed no married, family man should go adventuring off over the canals alone.

He always told us the story of how, years before, he had once skated to Leeuwarden alone—over ice so dangerous it was full of holes and cracks. He was the only one upon it, racing to get home, when he passed under a bridge and was hailed by a beautiful young woman.

"If you can still skate on that ice, then so can I," she said. "May I accompany you?"

They skated together several miles, with Father in the lead. The athletic young woman behind Father pushed him so fast, he was amazed. Recklessly over holes they couldn't see until they were upon them they skimmed—right over their tops.

The young woman left Father when they got to her hometown, but first he asked whom he'd had the honor of skating with. When she said her name, he realized she was the all-time women's champion skater of Friesland.

"Will you enter Friesland's skating competition with me next winter as my partner?" she had sweetly questioned.

"But no, boys, I withstood that temptation."

It was his standard, solemn concluding line.

Again this year Father skated off on the Eleven-Cities Tour, as a distance skater, not a speed competitor.

"The day after I return," he promised me, "I will take you to the New Church's Pipe."

But when I woke up that promised morning, a thaw had set in, and the ice holiday was finished for the year.

### Going to America!

Hoop rolling was in style, so it must have been late spring and dry weather, since marbles were always in style in the wetness of late winter. In Wierum we kids spanked our hoops ahead of us with a stout stick, and since the streets were cobbled and the roads graveled, and there were ditches on both sides of the road, and then still the canal threatened, spanking hoops was much more adventurous than later in America. There we pushed hoops with sticks which had cross-pieces nailed to their ends. That seemed to us dead tame, if not actually girlish.

Anyway, Rem and I were spanking our hoops down the road that ran alongside the canal, when mine left the road and uncertainly wobbled to the canal and, with a dismaying kerplunk, sank from sight. Rem instructed me to stay at the spot where I thought my hoop had gone down, while he ran home for a rake to dredge it up from the muddy canal bottom.

Face down over the edge of the canal, Rem and I were fishing with the rake for my hoop when Dave came running and, long before he reached us, yelled out, "We're going to America! We're going to America!"

Rem must have thought we'd be going that moment because he jumped up, pulled up the rake, and said to me, "You don't need that hoop if we're going to America."

Suddenly he added, "Hey, but neither do I." And he threw his hoop in the canal after mine.

In fine excitement we three raced home to go to America, only to find that adults needed time to prepare—pack, sell the house and household goods—and that it would be weeks, maybe months before we could emigrate.

It must have dampened our excitement a bit over going to America, but not by much. What did we know about America? Also not much, although it was common knowledge among the kids of Wierum that there was a man in New York City, John D. Rockefeller by name, who was the petroleum king of America—whatever that meant. But he was so hated by the New York Indians that he had to ride around in an armored vehicle that had only small windows in it the size of glass fruit-jar tops—so he could only look out with one eye. Even so the Indians along New York's streets, with their bows and arrows, tried to shoot John D.'s one eye out.

Why the New York Indians hated the petroleum king we didn't know.



But, like all kids, we didn't let facts get in the way of imagination.

When at last, a month or so later, we got to Rotterdam to board our ship, *New Amsterdam*,<sup>6</sup> what should get in our way but a parade for a couple of queens in a carriage. It was followed at intervals by bands

and important men in formal formations. We could see the funnel of our ship over the roofs. Sadly it had only one funnel, while the catalog we'd paged through for weeks, showed that *Rotterdam*<sup>7</sup> had two. Why two funnels on our going-to-America ship seemed more important than two queens in a carriage with a parade following them, I don't know, but my two big brothers plotted and I was sternly instructed to run through one of the open spaces in the parade. Then Rem and Dave would chase after me as if they were trying to catch me, and then Dad and Mother with little Knillis would willy-nilly have to follow, and that way we'd get across to our going-to-America ship.

It worked, although my Father, with two heavy suitcases to carry, and Mother, having to hold Knillis by the hand as she scuttled after my laden father, both made it with difficulty. However, we all made it safely to our one-funnel ship. Later onboard ship Father told us he'd fully expected to be arrested for disrespect to two queens. But who cared about that now? Anyway, America didn't have any queens—not even one—only kings of things, like John D. Rockefeller, the petroleum king.

Why did my parents pick America, and especially Grand Rapids, Michi-



*In 1905 Nieuw Amsterdam was the first of four vessels to carry this name for the Holland America Line. The De Jong family sailed on Nieuw Amsterdam when emigrating to the United States. Image courtesy of the Archives, Calvin College.*

gan, to move to? We never knew. But we did find out later that Father had given our destination careful consideration; ever since the schoolmaster incident he had been gathering information about America and South Africa.

He had Aunt Sjooke's Wisconsin<sup>8</sup> letters to tell him about America, plus the reports of occasional Dutch travelers who'd been there, or said they had. About South Africa Father heard from General Louis Botha, the South African general who fought against the British in the Boer War. Representing the Dutch settlers, he (Botha was descended from Dutch people) had fought bravely but lost to a more powerful English army. The Boer War ended in 1892, and after that General Botha visited Holland to try to create goodwill between the Dutch and the English—he was a great statesman as well as a good general.

When Botha visited near us once, Father traveled to hear him and to question him afterwards about his native country, of which Botha spoke glowingly. It wasn't his fault we didn't move there. I really don't know what made my parents decide on Michigan as the right spot for us to grow up. They didn't share their counsels with us boys—they held no summit meetings.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout his adult years, Father had been forced to serve in the Dutch Army. When we moved to America he was still doing that, and he was already thirty-eight.<sup>10</sup> He always returned grumbling about the injustice of compulsory military service for a man in business with a family to support; he wished something better for his four sons. This was one reason he decided to leave the Netherlands.

He also wanted more opportunities for his boys than Wierum could offer. Only one son would be able to follow Father into the building business—probably Rem, since David had no aptitude for that kind of work. There was no future in the Netherlands for David, who excelled as a student, or for young Knillis and me. In Wierum we three most likely would have to be hired out as farmhands. That was about all the opportunity that awaited us there. So thank goodness it was to be America for us.

### The Leave-Taking

Leaving Wierum was a difficult experience for my family, but less painful than Mother's sister Sjooke's leave-taking. We learned from their experience.

Sjooke, her husband Ulke (Uilke), and their five children<sup>11</sup> had left Wierum for Wisconsin two years before in broad daylight. At high noon the carriage and horses arrived to take them to Leeuwarden,<sup>12</sup> some eighteen miles away, to catch the train. Their leaving caused a near uproar.

The whole village gathered around the carriage in front of our house, so that it couldn't move. My deaf and dumb Uncle Meindert had to beat the crowd back with a big stick to keep them from entering the carriage for a last tearful good-bye. The family was bound for America, which, according to the sobbing fisherwomen, was "a living burial."

So when we too left for America,

to start by carriage to the train station in Leeuwarden, we chose the middle of the night for our exodus. Even so a crowd gathered to bewail our “living burial” and once again my deaf and dumb uncle had to stave-drive them off.

Since Mother’s oldest sister was already in America and her two other sisters lived in other towns, Grandfather and *Muoike* were as much as grandchildless when we left for America. It must have been a terrible blow for them—all that young life gone from them forever, for there was no possibility of our ever coming back to visit. America was too costly and far away; money in those poverty days far too scarce. There were no international telephones then as far as we knew—nor did it matter. We couldn’t have afforded them. We’d unfortunately arrived in the US in a depression. So all there was from then on were occasional scribbled letters which inevitably began with the standard first line, “We are well, and hope the same of you.”

The last Wierumer we saw in our leave-taking was a village hero. In those days almost nobody could swim. If a fisherman, by some accident, fell from his boat into deep water, he drowned. But our driver was one of three out of about a thousand who could swim, and when he did it, about two or three times a year on the hottest evenings, it was a public event. The other two swimmers discreetly did their swimming from a boat, far out of sight. But he had no swim suit and swam naked right by the dike.

When our driver decided it was the right night for a swim, a crowd—both men and women—would gather behind him as he made his way up to the dike walk. Then he’d walk somberly down the seaside of the dike and, suddenly, with a loud whoop of excitement, shed his clothes, and run, covered for privacy only by his cupped

hands, to hastily plunge into the cold North Sea.

Where he swam the water wasn’t over his head, and we never could see, from the water’s commotion, whether he was really swimming or just splashing. After about ten minutes of frantic activity, he would whoop again, emerge and run back up the dike and rip into his clothes.

He was the unusual character who ushered us away from our native village on the first leg of our ten-day journey.

### **Immigrants**

People always want to know how an immigrant feels when he arrives in America, and especially if he is thrilled by his first sight of the Statue of Liberty. I remember her hardly at all. The awful thing I remember is crowded Ellis Island, where we had to go through customs. Even though we had traveled to America on the ship as third-class poor people, I didn’t realize we were one of the huddled masses until Ellis Island made us so. We were herded through customs much like cattle were in Chicago slaughter houses. Immigrants were pouring in from every European country, and Ellis Island was a madhouse.

And, of course, immigrants always bring the wrong things with them. My parents brought their prized feather bed, neatly packed in one of the great wooden boxes my father had built.

An official from the Immigration Service, a big naked-to-the-waist brute, came with a long, naked knife and ripped our feather bed open end to end. So my first vivid memory of America was not of Miss Liberty, but of my mother sitting, weeping, among the fluttering feathers and goose down, and in all those tears sewing up those bed-long gashes with needle and thread.

Shortly before going to the train which was to carry us from New York

to Grand Rapids, Michigan, Father had bought lunches for us all—cold food in packed paper packages. He gave each of us one to carry, but Rem’s lunch parcel broke, and his one orange fell out and rolled far away. He chased after it, but just then the great iron gates opened, and the rest of the family had to proceed to the train area. As they walked through, the heavy metal gates slammed shut between us and Rem, busy chasing the rolling orange.

He stood there, bellowing his loudest while clutching his broken box of food and lone orange. They opened the gates just exactly enough to let him through.

The most impressive sight I remember in America was our first black man, to us kids ten times more impressive than the Statue of Liberty. We had stopped at a railway station during the night, and I, happening to wake up, saw him standing all alone on the night-empty platform. I shook both my big brothers awake in my excitement, and we three sat and gaped at the wonder of him as long as the train stood there. To us he was beautiful.

On the other hand, I still have nightmares from another nighttime train stop on that journey. Having to go to the toilet, I woke up Father. Since the lavatory was already occupied, he and I went to the train door and waited until the train stopped. Then, we being way out in wilderness country, I climbed down. Suddenly the train started up. Father, who had fortunately followed me only part-way down the high train steps, grabbed me by the back of my collar and hauled me bodily back on board. And that is still my self-repeating nightmare: without one word of English, I am lost in that endless wilderness of wide-open, uncultivated, night-black space. In Friesland every square foot of land had been tidily occupied.



Meindert (Mick) and his younger brother Neil in front of the family's fourth home on Robey Place. Image courtesy of the Archives, Calvin College.

Our first days in Grand Rapids my brothers and I—Grand Rapids being a hilly town—spent our time racing toward high-terraced lawns in the forlorn hope that at last we'd found a dike in this new country, for behind the dike would be the sea. Fortunately we did find the railroad depot and the double tracks with the trains and their mighty locomotives. We had never lived nearer than eighteen miles from a railroad in Friesland, and we contentedly played along the tracks day after day, putting little boxes and cans on the rails and watching the great turning wheels crush them. The locomotives seemed almost as mighty as the sea. In a few weeks the railroad games began boring us, but they'd been our solace for the loss of our dike and a whole sea.

We'd landed in Grand Rapids in June during the great summer vacation of endless length, we who'd only been used to a meager week for the Queen's

birthday and one around Christmas, which were spent, it seemed, mostly in church-going instead of school-going. Ah, the endless days of that first summer vacation, and the awesome heat, utterly new to us who'd lived by the cold North Sea. To escape the burning sun, we happily found in downtown Grand Rapids the five-and-ten-cent store. Amazingly, you could just walk in and nobody asked you to buy anything. You even dared play stealthily with the toys on display. Then if tired of one, you could adventure in two more five-and-dimes—what a wealth! All these were somewhat rewards for the loss of our

native town.

The most astounding of our new American finds was chewing gum. You could chew and chew all day and by nightfall it still was there! A neighbor boy gave us one stick, which we three older boys divided equally. Then, when night came, we stuck our gum outside on the kitchen window sill. Unfortunately, the next day the very first before-breakfast-morning one of us—Rem—swallowed his sliver of gum. Were we scared! We rushed to Mother, who assured us he would not die from the swallowed gum. It was such a relief we never questioned where Mother had gotten to know so much about gum, but she proved right. Rem lived.

### **Freyling Place**

Our first months in America were a nightmare. In Holland we had never known what it was to be poor, but we found out in Grand Rapids with a

vengeance. We didn't know, but we'd arrived in a depression. For weeks Father found no work. He would walk around the city and look for a house under construction, then ask the foreman for a job. This automatically limited him to Dutch-supervised construction jobs, since he knew no English. Although that was a limitation, it was not too serious, because much of the house-building business in Grand Rapids then was conducted by the Dutch. Some banks in Dutch neighborhoods even posted signs on their windows in Dutch.

In the meantime, for weeks, we barely survived. Mother bought day-old bread and skim milk. We subsisted on that. She would try to make it a bit more interesting by flavoring the milk with chocolate one day and tea the next, but that was all she could afford to do. We actually hated to go home for lunch.

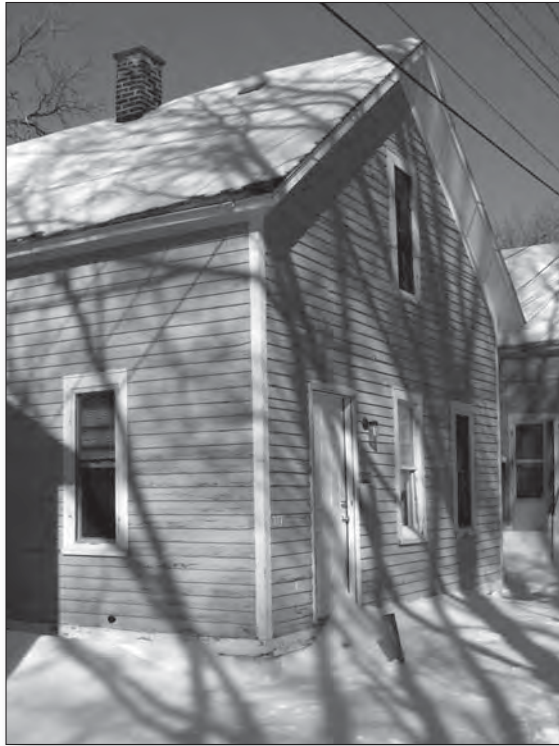
Probably the greatest single shock we got on arriving was at our first lodging, on Freyling Place, one of several alleys in a poor section of the city. Mr. Vander Wal, the Dutch-American who had paid our passage over, found a small house for us on this forlorn alley. It had no water. None at all. Not even a well or a cistern in the backyard. We were a family of six and not one drop of water!

We arrived exhausted and discouraged from our long journey, and Father thought a cup of tea might cheer Mother up. So his first action in America had to be to go down the alley, house to house, begging for water. And all the neighbors—all Christian Reformed, members of the church we would later join—turned him down until half way down the alley finally the only non-Christian Reformed neighbor said, "There's my well. Use it as much as you need to!"

This was in June 1914, and we stayed in that miserable house through the full blast of summer's heat.

The other disgusting thing about it was the backyard, which stank from two sources, an outdoor privy (we had had only indoor toilets in Wierum), and an enormous “Tree of Heaven.” This mis-named plant gave off a stench worse than the alley’s privies.

We had a walkway along the side of the house where grew a row of “Snow-on-the-Mountain” flowers. They must have been part weed. Otherwise I don’t know how they survived in that heat without water. They became to us the most horrible flower on earth, and seemed to fit right in with the hot stench of our backyard tree. They remain to me a symbol of that misery house



(top right) When the De Jongs arrived in Grand Rapids they lived on Freyling, one of three narrow, one-lane streets (the others are Robey Place and Donald Place) on the city’s near southeast side. Image courtesy of Richard H. Harms.

The house at 317 Freyling Place still stands almost 97 years after the De Jongs briefly lived there. Although it has new windows and a door, the house was vacant in February 2011. Image courtesy of Richard H. Harms.

on the alley that hot summer.

We didn’t stay in the Freyling Place house very long, but the next house on the next alley we graduated to, Donald Place, wasn’t much better. You could look through cracks in the living room floorboards and see the stagnant water

he was our landlord, and we couldn’t complain about the wretched house he’d furnished us. At least it had water, in places too much—but the problem here was heat. A little wood-burning stove had to be stoked continually with wood, and all we had to feed

it were the rotten stumps from Mr. Vander Wal’s farm, which was located in a muck swamp. He had hired Rem to work for him; together they drove to the farm in early morning. Then in payment for Rem’s day of labor, Mr. Vander Wal drove him home at night with sodden swamp stumps and some vegetables. Rem’s job then still was to chop up those tough stumps with an axe for our fuel. During this difficult time Rem was so worn from his day-long labor that he had no energy left for mischief or fun.

The people who had mistreated us in the beginning eventually apologized when we acquired enough money to have some standing. Our immigrant “greenness” was fading a bit, thus making us acceptable. It seems some immigrants can be at ease in a new country only when they are disparaging the latest newcomers.

We didn’t know any Americans then—that is, people whose families had been over here more than two or three generations. Each immigrant group stuck to itself in those days—the Dutch, the Polish, the Germans, and the Irish—all had their ghettos in Grand Rapids. Our ghetto was solidly religious Dutch.

For our railroad transportation to Grand Rapids from New York, we were in debt to a shirttail relative.<sup>13</sup> (That means somebody so distantly related you can’t remember exactly how it works.) This skinflint benefited from our helplessness. He brought all his old junk from his house and sold it to us. My parents felt too beholden to him to object. Mother even thought she had to buy an old bearskin coat, no doubt inherited from his grandmother. It went on our bill. Once they brought over an organ so huge and ornate it took six men to get it into our little house. We had to buy that too. Dave played it for several years; he taught himself and played mostly hymns. For a long time it seemed we

would never climb out from under the burden of debt our Dutch peers loaded on us.

It is pathetic to be at the bottom of things. Hopeless. I don't know how my parents endured it. In Friesland they had been a respected family in Wierum—Large Beppe was like royalty in that village—and suddenly we were zero.

The First World War closed things off behind us. We were about the last emigrants, and the last and poorest were, of course, at the bottom of the social ladder. So we stayed on the bottom longer than we would have if other poor Dutchmen had followed us over. Then we too, in superiority, could have lorded it over the new “green” ones.<sup>3</sup>



The De Jongs' second American house, 302 Donald Place, was on the vacant lot (just past the house in the center of the image) that now has a small community garden in the summer. Image courtesy of Richard H. Harms.

#### Editor's Endnotes

1. De Jong and Hartzell met after he had retired from writing and became her writing mentor.

2. The schoolmaster's name was Gijsbert Pellicaan (also spelled Pellikaan), born 1 December 1885 in De Werken en Sleeuwijk, North Brabant, Netherlands; died 4 June 1941, Coeverden, Drenthe, Netherlands. He married Femmiëna Fokkelina Kloosterman, 22 June 1911, in Emmen, Drenthe, just after taking the headmaster position in Wierum. Pellicaan and Kloosterman divorced in 1919; [www.genlias.nl](http://www.genlias.nl). He was appointed headmaster in April 1911 to begin the school term in May that year having taught in Werkendam, North Brabant.

3. Johannes Christoffel Pellicaan, born 14 June 1912.

4. Rev. H. van Dijk.

5. Only episodes of Pellicaan's life after Wierum have been found. His second son, Pieter, was born on 16 November 1914, in Woudichem, North Brabant, the village east of Pellicaan's

place of birth. In 1921 he was teaching in Sappemeer, Groningen, where he had married Jantje Lutjes on 5 February 1919; they divorced 8 June 1928.

6. In the original De Jong writes the ship's name in English, but its name was *Nieuw Amsterdam*.

7. In the original De Jong here calls the ship “New Rotterdam” but its name was *Rotterdam*, which did have two funnels; *Nieuw Amsterdam*, on which they sailed, had one funnel. Presumably the young boys confused the two ships.

8. Meindert's mother's oldest sister Sieuke (pronounced Sjo-ke) had married Uilke Stiemsma in 1889; they with their children immigrated in 1911 to Columbia County, Wisconsin.

9. According to the records at Ellis Island, the fare for the family was paid by Heine Vander Wal, listed as a cousin from Grand Rapids. Ellis Island Record: Page # 940, Manifest for *Nieuw Amsterdam*, Date of Arrival: 2 June 1914; Port of Departure: Rotterdam. Available via <http://www.ellisland.org/>.

10. Because Meindert's father's brother was a mute and could not serve, Remmeren had to serve both his own term and his brother's term of military service.

11. In the original Meindert states there were four children, but Dutch birth records and the passenger list make clear there were five children: Kornelis, Jiltje, Tjitske, Renze, and David.

12. In the original De Jong says Dokkum, which as he noted earlier was seven miles from Wierum; eighteen miles away is Leeuwarden the provincial capital. Later De Jong notes that the closest rail line to Wierum was eighteen miles away. There was a rail connection to Dokkum into at least the 1930s. David De Jong also reports that the family took the train from Leeuwarden; see *With a Dutch Accent; How a Hollander Became an American* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1944) 181.

13. Heine Vander Wal, who had emigrated with his wife in 1880.

# “Bless the Lord, O My Soul”

## *The Bible’s Influence on the Dutch Immigrants*

Robert P. Swierenga

One year before his death in 1876, Rev. Albertus C. Van Raalte addressed a reunion of the 25th Michigan Infantry, in which the sons of the Colony, including two of his own, had served during the Civil War. “Welcome, welcome then, beloved and honored 25th!” Van Raalte began. “Your presence thrills our heart with



Cover page of a 1690 Staten Bible, the official Dutch translation of the Bible, first printed in 1637. Image courtesy of the Archives, Calvin College.

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the deepest emotions. . . . You all are monuments of God’s sparing mercy and love! . . . Surely your presence is a solemn voice within us: Bless the Lord, O my soul . . . . Yea, we say,

Bless the Lord, O my soul!” The aged dominie closed his brief oration with a prayer that the veterans “may earn that never fading crown in the higher battles under our Captain of Salvation, Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

Biblical idioms came naturally to Van Raalte’s lips. His public addresses, speeches, and writings are full of scriptural references. This was the coin of the realm in Dutch Reformed circles. In his sermon on 4 August 1864, which President Lincoln had declared a Day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer, Van Raalte selected a passage from the prophet Jeremiah (18: 5-10), which portrays people as clay and God as a potter at the wheel. “Can I not deal with you, O Israel, like this potter? Behold, as clay in the hand of the potter so are you in My hand.” God has the “incontestable authority, [the] irresistible power,” said Van Raalte, “to form nations unto His end.”<sup>2</sup>

In a service of commemoration two years after the Holland fire (19 October 1873), Van Raalte chose the parable of the talents in Luke 19:13 to stress the obligations of Divine stewardship. “Seeing that your homes and goods have been restored, Congregation at Holland, I remind you of what Jesus says concerning all our possessions. They are a trust . . . [and] must be placed in the Master’s service. He is watching us.”<sup>3</sup>

A year earlier, at the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Holland’s founding, Van Raalte declared that the purpose



Rev. Albertus C. Van Raalte (1811-1876) led the first groups of Dutch immigrants to western Michigan. Image courtesy of the Archives, Calvin College.

for establishing the colony was “to secure a center of unifying religious life and labor for the advancement of God’s kingdom. . . . In truth, God has wrought great things for us!” (paraphrasing Num. 23:23).<sup>4</sup>

Van Raalte preached every Sunday for decades, knew the Scriptures, and quoted passages liberally in his sermons. Some three hundred sets of his sermon notes have survived, many scribbled on scraps of paper. His first student sermon at Leiden University was on Romans 6:1 (about the call by Jesus Christ to Paul to be an apostle, set apart to preach the Gospel of God). Van Raalte had to preach the sermon without the notes he had so carefully crafted, because his professor had slipped the sermon manuscript from Van Raalte’s coat pocket shortly before the service without his realizing it. Van Raalte didn’t know that he had no text to read until a few minutes beforehand. After he recovered from his panic, he preached a magnificent sermon that impressed his professor and all his fellow seminary students.<sup>5</sup>

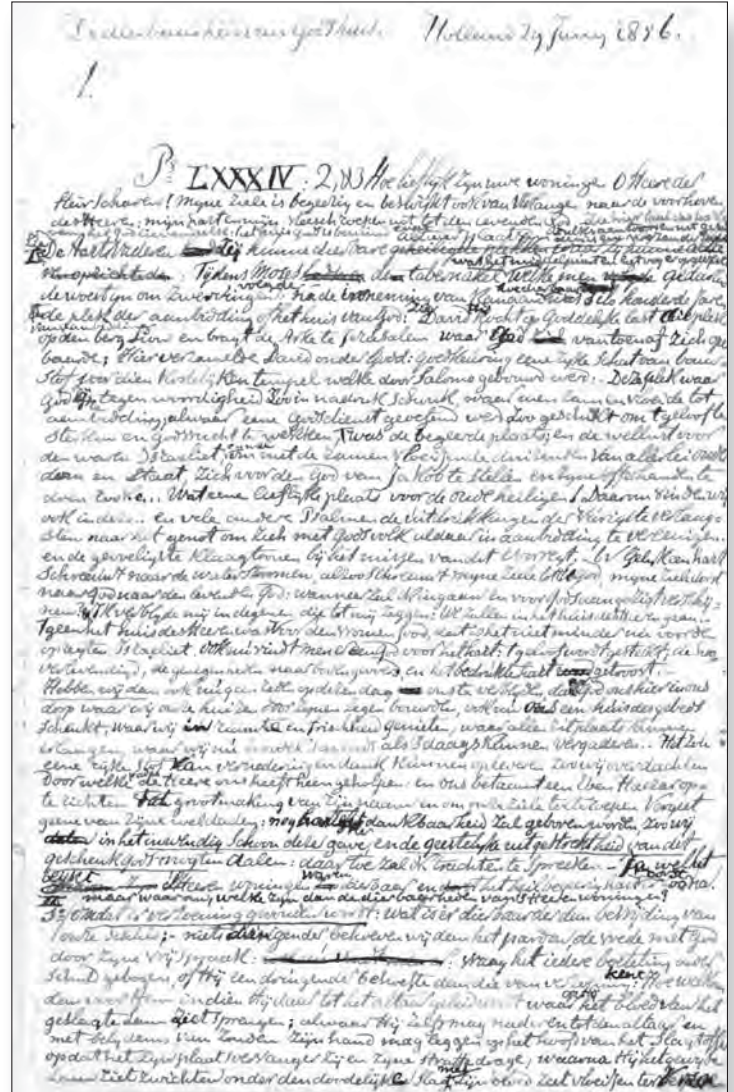
The late Gordon J. Spykman, who read all of Van Raalte’s extant sermon

notes and wrote a book entitled *The Pioneer Preacher*, discovered a surprising fact. In his sermons Van Raalte seldom chose Bible texts that applied to any specific needs of the colonists, such as times of poverty, disease, and death in the early years. He did not use the Bible to give his people strength to face their problems. Rather, his sermons were evangelistic, calling the hearers to repentance and a life of obedience.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps Van Raalte’s parishioners needed no specific biblical applications. The entire Scriptures were their guide for faith and life, as befitted disciples of the Secession of 1834. “God’s will, not my will,” was their credo. They would make no major decisions without first ascertaining the will of God.<sup>7</sup> This was especially true of emigration.

The Dutch believed that God called them to leave the fatherland and they explained (some would say they “rationalized”) their decision by an appeal to the Scriptures. Although the emigrants were poor and sought economic betterment, for them deciding to go to America was fundamentally a religious, not an economic, decision.

Van Raalte even turned the lack of work for the laboring class in the



Van Raalte’s sermon on “The Preciousness of God’s Dwelling Place” based on Psalm 84. Image courtesy of the Archives, Calvin College.

Netherlands into a spiritual sign that God in His providence had prepared America for them. After all, God said to Adam, “By the sweat of your brow you shall eat your bread.” This was difficult, if not impossible, in the homeland. The dominie wrote in a widely-circulated pamphlet: “With our eyes upon God, and not until after a long and agonizing struggle, we are taking the step” to emigrate to North America where our people, “living in quiet obedience to God . . . can eat their bread, earned by diligent labor and sweat.” Moreover, who “can doubt that the future of the



Like many Dutch immigrants, Derk Natelborg took comfort from the words of Psalm 107, verses 23 and following, before embarking on the 3,500-mile voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. Image courtesy of the Archives, Calvin College

Netherlands looks dark,” given the national sins of religious apostasy and economic oppression practiced by the government.<sup>8</sup>

Van Raalte’s friend and fellow Seceder cleric, Rev. Hendrik P. Scholte, founder of the colony of Pella, preached even more strongly that the Netherlands and indeed all of Western Europe was a decadent, doomed civilization ripe for God’s judgment. Believers must escape the wrath to come. “Come out of her, my people,



Rev. Hendrik P. Scholte (1806-1868) led a group of Dutch immigrants to what is now Pella, Iowa, when Rev. Van Raalte was leading his group to Holland, Michigan. Image courtesy of the Archives, Calvin College.

lest you take part in her sins and share in her plagues,” Scholte proclaimed, quoting Revelation 18:4.

A Scholte follower, Mrs. Christina Budde, of Burlington, Iowa, echoed the dominie’s teaching in a letter to a female friend in Amsterdam in 1849: “In Amsterdam we saw a dark dense cloud spreading over all of Europe, and considered the difficulties of farm life [in America] easier to get used to than the unanimous report of the dark future for the old Fatherland,

and even more so for those who fear the Lord. . . . We praise the Lord for having led us here.<sup>9</sup>

Scholte named his colony Pella, the biblical “city of refuge” in the district of Decapolis (east of the Sea of Galilee in the mountains of Gilead) where Christians fled in 70 AD following the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. In Iowa’s Pella, the faithful remnant would be saved. The revolutions throughout Europe in 1848 gave credence to Scholte’s prophecy. Erupting

first in France and spreading quickly to Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, and elsewhere, mob violence and street fighting behind barricades seemed to presage the breakup of European civilization.

Europe stood under judgment, Scholte taught, because it was inextricably linked, historically and geographically, with the Roman Empire, an empire marked for destruction for having crucified Jesus of Nazareth. The intentions of the Almighty had been clearly predicted centuries earlier by the Jewish prophet Daniel’s vision of the great “Image” crushed by a huge stone “hewn out of the mountains without hands.” Since America had never been part of the Roman world, Scholte believed it was a safe haven, a place of escape from divine retribution.<sup>10</sup>

Scholte insisted that his Pella colony be directed by the Bible. In 1846, several months before embarking, he wrote in his religious periodical, *De Reformatie*: “As far as the ecclesiastical fellowship and organization of the colony are concerned, the Word of God shall be the only rule, foundation, and touchstone.”<sup>11</sup>

Rev. Cornelius Vander Meulen, Van Raalte’s colleague at Zeeland, Michigan, wrote in a widely-circulated letter to the Netherlands in 1847 that prospective immigrants had to see God’s leading in their decision, and realize that the fatherland “is going under” because “God is just and chastises sin with sin.” Rev. Gerrit Baay, pastor of the Alto, Wisconsin, colony, declared in a letter to his followers in Gelderland: “In leaving for North America, one should also be mindful of the Lord’s admonition, Luke 17:32: ‘Remember Lot’s wife.’”<sup>12</sup> Europe was Sodom and Gomorrah, and the emigrants should not look back.

To obey this injunction, they had to cross the sea which some feared. When Derk Natelborg bade farewell

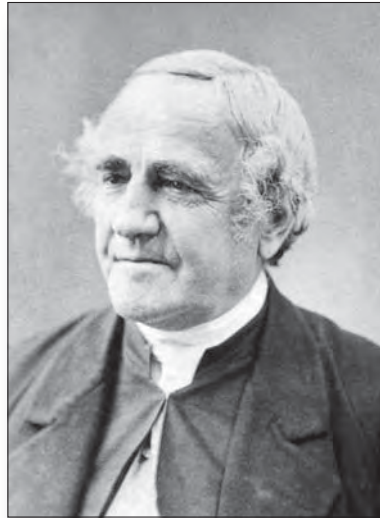


in 1862 to his fellow congregants at Uithuizen, Groningen, and set out on the ocean for America, his pastor's wife insisted on reading aloud Psalm 107 (vs. 23-32), which speaks of deliverance from the sea:

Some went down to the sea in ships, . . .  
 they saw the deeds of the Lord,  
 his wondrous works in the deep.  
 For he commanded, and raised the stormy wind,  
 which lifted up the waves of the sea.  
 They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths;  
 their courage melted away in their evil plight; . . .  
 They reeled and staggered like drunken men,  
 and were at their wits' end.  
 Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,  
 and he delivered them from their distress;  
 He made the storm be still,  
 and the waves of the sea were hushed.  
 Then they were glad because they had quiet,  
 and he brought them to their desired haven.

Natelborg noted in his "Memoirs," written years later, that God answered this prayer. When the storm was at its height and the passengers were at their "wits' end," they cried to the Lord and he "made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad because . . . he brought them to their desired haven."<sup>13</sup>

The Seceders were steeped in the Bible and turned to it in every crisis or turning point in their lives. It was said of many of them that "a Bible always lay close at hand." And when



*Rev. Cornelius Vander Meulen (1800-1876) led the group of Dutch immigrants that founded Zeeland, Michigan. Two of his sons and three grandsons also served as ministers. Image courtesy of the Archives, Calvin College.*

facing death they turned to it. In a last letter to her children, a widow wrote: "Dear Children, oh, pray to God daily and do not let a day pass without reading his Word. Let nothing keep you from doing that: it alone remains when all else fails."<sup>14</sup>

Geesje Vander Haar-Visscher, a close associate of Van Raalte and member of his congregation, recalled as a young child losing her grandfather during the dying time in the Holland colony in 1847. Years later, she wrote in her diary:

I felt very sad. My father and mother were also ill with typhoid fever and many people died at that time. . . . I was with Grandmother a great deal and during the day I went to school. In the evening Grandmother would kneel to pray with and for me. Many pious people came to call on Grandmother and on those occasions I had to read chapters from the Bible.<sup>15</sup>

After World War II, some of the or-

thodox Calvinists in the Netherlands developed quite elaborate rationales for immigration. For instance, the Central Committee of the Anti-Revolutionary Party (founded by Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer in the nineteenth century, and later led by Abraham Kuyper), cited the cultural mandate, to "be fruitful and multiply," and the great commission—"go ye into all the world"—first voiced by Van Raalte a century earlier. Overpopulated Holland had no room for large families, especially of small dissenting subcultures. By emigrating, Calvinists could expand the kingdom of God and his church, find room, and become a majority culture.<sup>16</sup>

In 1952 the editor of the *Friesch Dagblad*, reporting on the character of the numerous Frisian families departing for North America, wrote: "Although they wished to improve their lot, yet that can never be the one and only thing. The first question must remain: Can I with my family there in that far land, in the new fatherland, be helped in the building of spiritual life; can I also be a pioneer of Jesus Christ?"<sup>17</sup> This was the same mentality that motivated Van Raalte's trek in the 1840s.

The same centrality of the Bible was evident in church education (catechism and Sunday school), in men's and women's societies, in psalm singing and choral societies, in evangelism, around the table at home (the so-called family altar), in Christian day schools, and much more. Clearly, the Bible was the focal point of life among the Dutch Reformed in America. It sustained them as they faced privation, illness, and death. It fed their souls and enabled them to persevere. With such a trustworthy guide, they could hardly fail.✝

## Endnotes

1. "Soldiers Reunion of the 25<sup>th</sup> Michigan Infantry," 22 Sep. 1875, in Gordon J. Spykman, *Pioneer Preacher: Albertus Christiaan Van Raalte* (Grand Rapids: Calvin College, 1976) 141-142.
2. Spykman, *Pioneer Preacher*, 100. [Spykman refers to the sermon as the "President's Day Sermon" of 4 July 1864, but the original sermon has 4 July changed to 4 August and the sermon is labeled "President's dag van verootmoediging and gebed" – President's day of humiliation and prayer. Van Raalte omitted 'fasting' from his description. See: *Sermons, 1864, Van Raalte, Albertus C. Collection, box 6, folder 8, Archives Calvin College. ed.*]
3. *Ibid.*, 106.
4. A. C. Van Raalte, "Commemoration Address, 1872," in Henry S. Lucas, *Dutch Immigrant Memoirs and Related Writings*, 2 vols. (Assen: Van Gorkum, 1955, rev. ed., Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997) 2: 487.
5. Gordon Spykman, "The Van Raalte Sermons," *Albertus Christiaan Van Raalte, 1811-1876-1976: Centennial Studies in Reformed Review* 30 (Winter 1977): 95-96; Leonard Sweetman, *From Heart to Heart: Letters from the Rev. Albertus Christiaan Van Raalte to his Wife, Christina Johanna Van Raalte-De Moen, 1836-1847* (Grand Rapids, 1997) 10-11.
6. Spykman, *Pioneer Preacher*, 38.
7. Robert P. Swierenga, "'Pioneers for Jesus Christ': Dutch Protestant Colonization in North America as an Act of Faith," in *Sharing the Reformed Tradition: The Dutch North-American Exchange, 1846-1996*, eds. George Harinck and Hans Krabbendam (Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1996) 35-55.
8. A. Brummelkamp and A.C. Van Raalte, *Landverhuizing of waarom bevorden wij de volksverhuizing en wel naar Noord-Amerika en niet naar Java?* (Amsterdam, 1846). Quoted from John Verbrugge's English translation in typescript, pp. 3, 7, 8, Archives, Calvin College.
9. C. M. Budde-Stomp, (Burlington, Iowa) to J. Wormser-Van der Ven (Amsterdam), 1849, Wormser Letter No. 33, p. 305 (quote), in Johan Stellingwerff, Robert P. Swierenga editor, Walter Lagerwey translator, *Iowa Letters: Dutch Immigrants on the American Frontier* [published in 1976 as *Amsterdamse emigranten: onbekende brieven uit de prairies van Iowa, 1846-1873* (Grand Rapids; William B. Eerdmans, 2004).
10. Hendrik P. Scholte, *Tweede stem uit Pella* (1848), published in English translation by Robert P. Swierenga, ed., "A Place of Refuge," *Annals of Iowa, Third Series* 39 (Summer 1968) 321-357.
11. Stellingwerff, ed., *Iowa Letters*, 34.
12. Letter of C. Vander Meulen, Holland, Michigan, 8 Oct. 1847, to the church community in Goes, Zeeland, the Netherlands. Published in a pamphlet by Widow C.W. de Jonge, *Aan al mijne geliefde vrienden in Nederland* (Goes, Jan. 1848); Letter, Gerrit Baay, 4 Jan. 1849, to "Dear Friends in Holland," published in pamphlet form in Amsterdam in 1849. An English translation, "Dear Friends Back Home," is published in *Delta* (Sept. 1959) 26-35 (quote 34).
13. Derk Natelborg, "Memoirs," Chicago, 23 Dec. 1890, provided by great-great-grandson Robert Zwiers.
14. Stellingwerff, *Iowa Letters*, xviii; Mrs. H.S. van Hall-SchermbEEK, *ibid.* 31.
15. "Geesje Vander Haar-Visscher Diary, 1820-1901," typescript, p. 1 (quote), Genemuiden, Netherlands & Holland, Mich. Translated from the Dutch by Clarence J. Jalving, Feb. 1954, Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College.
16. Stellingwerff, *Iowa Letters*, 33-35.
17. J. D. Wildeboer, *Friesland verliest zijn kinderen* (Assen: Van Gorkum, 1954) 39.

# Different Worlds: The RCA and the CRC 1850–1900

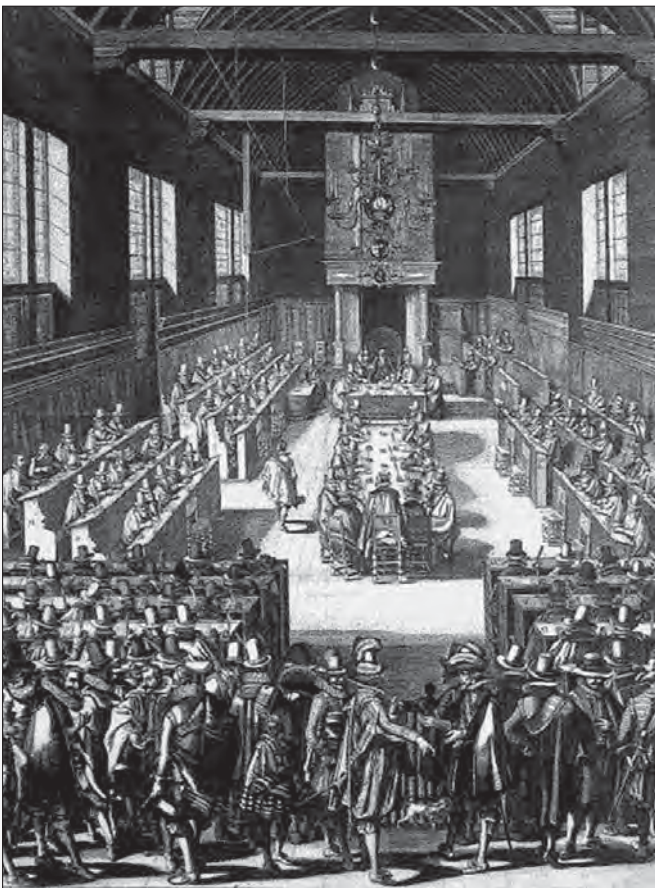
Harry Boonstra

The intertwined history of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) has often been a complicated one. The early writings about their relationship and their separation were frequently caustic, and brotherly love was often buried under respective accusations.<sup>1</sup> These descriptions also tended to concentrate on theological and liturgical issues—sometimes perceptively, sometimes prompted and colored by adversarial attitudes. Certainly theological questions are involved in this intertwined history, but a broad-angle perspective shows that the differences between the two churches were deep and wide—in fact,

versy over Freemasonry between the two churches had been largely played out, the story has its roots in the seventeenth century.<sup>3</sup>

## History: The Reformed Church in America

The RCA dates to the beginning of America with the semi-official founding of a Reformed congregation in “New Amsterdam” in 1628. RCA members experienced and participated in both the struggles and victories in the colonies and later nation since that time.<sup>4</sup> Because the British had taken over control of New Netherlands from the Dutch in 1664 and were victorious in the various colonial wars, by 1850 the Dutch Reformed parishioners, living predominantly in New York and New Jersey, had become loyal (English-speaking) colonists. In the 1600s and 1700s these Reformed folks had observed and participated in the displacement of Native Americans, who were driven ever farther west or annihilated. The beginning of trade in African slaves was part of their history as were the Salem “witchcraft” trials, albeit the latter only remotely so. They had been shaped especially by the Revolutionary War and the quest for independence from the English monarchy. The history (and myths) of Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, several Adamses, and countless other heroes and villains was theirs, as were such shameful events as the British military using Middle Dutch Reformed Church in



The painting of the Synod of Dort by Pouwles Weyts (also Pouwels Weyts de Jonge). Image courtesy of the Archives, Calvin College.

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they inhabited and constituted different worlds, which made genuine cooperation and union extremely problematic.<sup>2</sup> Although this story of the intertwining of history begins in 1850 when Dutch immigrants to the American Midwest joined the “old” eastern RCA and ends by 1900 when the contro-

New York City as a horse stable and riding school during the Revolutionary War.

The members of the RCA had lived under more than twenty presidents and experienced both the highs and lows of political and economic life by 1850. The “peculiar institution” of slavery was debated as hotly in their homes as in other American homes. They had seen the population of New York City grow to 515,000 inhabitants by 1850, and that of the nation to over 23 million. Much of this growth had come from immigration; for example, between 1851 and 1860, two and a half million new immigrants arrived in America. Since these immigrants came from all over the globe, America came to be known (for better or worse) as a gigantic melding of languages, nationalities, races, and religions.

This melding also included a wide diversity of social, economic, and educational circumstances. Rural areas often continued at a low or middling standard of living, while some plantation owners became enormously wealthy. The big cities exhibited a broad range of living standards, from pauperism to those with millions of dollars. Although America did not have the same class structure of family and aristocratic descent as Europe, a new class structure built on economic wealth was at times just as rigid in the new land. Education differed greatly from one region to another, depending partly on the local level of economic development. Although some British and French visitors mocked American education and learning, the colleges in the older East Coast towns and cities eventually began to rival European universities.

The members of the RCA became part of these American economic and social patterns. Many of them continued in small-town positions and

lifestyles, as did the tavern-owning parents of Martin Van Buren, in the village of Kinderhook, New York. But in 1837 Van Buren emerged from his humble origins to become the president of the country. Theodore (an RCA member) and Franklin D. Roosevelt (Episcopalian), distant fifth cousins, took very different paths.<sup>5</sup> Their families had long been members of the economic and social elite and assumed their presidency as the final step befitting their privileged status.

### History: Nineteenth-Century Immigration

By the early nineteenth century the RCA was attempting to reach out to people on the nation’s westward moving frontier. Many of those on these frontiers came as immigrants from many parts of the world to a land of promise. Even though some immigrants experienced abject poverty, illness, and death in America, most achieved a measure of success and some became wealthy, and if not themselves their children did. The nation experienced times of economic deprivation and cycles of economic depression, but overall the American spirit was characterized by confidence and optimism and the American experience saw economic growth.

Dutch immigrants had been part of this immigration for years, but the 1847 arrival of Rev. Albertus C. Van Raalte and his people marked the beginning of more large-scale immigration, especially to the Midwest. These immigrants came from various provinces in the Netherlands, often under the leadership of ministers, of whom Albertus C. Van Raalte was the best known. Their forebears had fought their own war of independence, the Eighty-Years’ War (1568-1648) from Spain; a war that was as much religious (Dutch Protestantism versus

Spanish Catholicism) as political. Unlike their American religious kin, for nineteenth-century Dutch emigrants the Duke of Alva, who had carried out his campaign of terror, was the ultimate villain. Their celebrated heroes were the *Watergeuzen*, intrepid privateers who made hit-and-run attacks on Spanish ships and garrisons, and were largely responsible for the Dutch rising up in full revolt against the Spanish. The Dutch national hero was Prince William of Orange and their chief allegiance continued to be to the House of Orange, although regional and provincial loyalties were often as strong. The harsh Dutch war for independence was eclipsed by the seventeenth-century Dutch Golden Age of arts, science, and commerce. Dutch banks flourished especially,



Rev. Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen was buried without a tombstone in Elm Ridge Cemetery, North Brunswick, New Jersey. Because the exact location of the grave was lost in 1884, this cenotaph was placed at the cemetery. Image courtesy of the Archives, Calvin College.

and for many generations their loans went to various European countries as well as to American commercial enterprises.

The immigrants' more recent history included European alliances and wars, with the Netherlands gradually losing its position of power. This decline reached its lowest point



William I. Source: *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. 25 January 2011. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/media/33120/William-I-detail-of-a-painting-by-JA-Kruseman-in>.

in 1795 when the country became a de facto province of France under Napoleon, and William V, Prince of Orange, had to flee to England. The mythological heroes at this time were patriots who were able to smuggle contraband into the country. This period ended in 1813 when Prince William VI of Orange returned and was crowned as King William I.

For many people in the Netherlands the 1800s were not kind. They were subject to a rigid system of family, aristocratic, and social preference. The upper classes had economic opportunities and wealth, while laborers and their descendants often lived a pauper's existence, usually with no assistance (other than the poorhouse) from either state or church. Education was similarly based on class preference. The universities of Utrecht and Leiden had achieved international

fame, but admission was virtually closed to the lower classes. At best, their children would receive three or four years of education in a village school and join the workforce before they were teenagers.

Nineteenth-century emigrants were drawn to America, a land seen as filled with opportunity and optimism, with the late 1800s even becoming the Gilded Age for the upper classes. Of course, there was a measure of wishful thinking in these images of prospects in America, but the immigrants continued to come. For those from the Netherlands there were such push factors as the general economic malaise that largely gripped the nation; and the potato blight that destroyed the principal source of carbohydrates for the poor in the 1840s was seen as symptomatic of a national failure.

### Church Life: The Reformed Church in America

The history and social worlds of the early and later Dutch immigrants were very different, as were their church lives. The story of the settlement of the Dutch in North America in 1625, the founding of New Amsterdam as a settlement under the control of the mercantile Dutch West India Company, and the beginning of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church (the later RCA) in 1628 has often been told.<sup>6</sup> Just a few major facts and issues that came to the fore in the middle and late 1800s need to be presented here.

Initially the RCA congregations were mostly small, struggling to survive.<sup>7</sup> But by the eighteenth century the number of congregations grew steadily; by 1700 there were 25; 68 in 1750; 120 in 1800; and 296 in 1850. The first issue of significance for these colonial churches was their relationship to the *Hervormde Kerk* (or Dutch Reformed Church), the

national church of the Netherlands.<sup>8</sup> This denomination was born out of the religious controversy and persecution from the Roman Catholic Church and the political struggle for independence of the Seven Provinces of the Netherlands from Spain in the sixteenth century. Although beginning as a persecuted minority, the Dutch Reformed Church later grew into a dominant, national church, with many of the attributes of a state church. The States-General, representatives from the seven provinces that attempted to rule as a national government, were very intertwined in the life of the church. For example, the Synod of Dordrecht (1618-1619) was called by the States-General, and the government representatives took an active part in the deliberations to settle a religious controversy that had arisen following the spread of Arminianism. So also with the translation of the Bible into Dutch—it was mandated by and paid for by the States-General.

Since the Dutch West India Company, which was required by its charter to establish and support the churches, was headquartered in Amsterdam, the congregations in New Amsterdam came under the supervision of the Classis Amsterdam, one of the regional bodies in the *Hervormde Kerk*. This connection continued for over 160 years—virtually all the decisions for the RCA were made in Amsterdam, nearly all the ministers were Dutch, and even when they were not, they had to receive their theological training in the Netherlands. Given the time cross-Atlantic communication took at the time, the churches in the colonies were at a significant disadvantage in resolving questions under this relationship. Not until 1754 were the colonial churches allowed to form their own classis, and in 1792 their own constitution as an independent denomination.

The colonial immigrants came to New York and New Jersey with their Dutch Bibles and their *psalmboeken* that also contained the Calvinistic creeds of the church and the liturgical “forms.” These documents thoroughly shaped the life of the RCA. The heavy hand of the Amsterdam classis, the preaching in Dutch, the adherence to the predestination theology of the Canons of Dort, the practice of singing psalms instead of hymns—these factors were the glue that kept the RCA together, but frequently also became a major source of controversy and division.

But as with all immigrants, the Dutch immigrant churches experienced acculturation. Acculturation involves every aspect of the immigrant’s life, from the minute to the momentous: language, food, religion, clothing, marriage, schooling, vocation, family relations, hygiene (or lack thereof), child rearing, politics, race, holiday customs, and so on. This acculturation affects the first generation of immigrants the most dramatically (and often traumatically), but it continues over several generations, as a family changes from its original nationality to becoming American.

To take one of the most prominent Reformed families as an example, we can focus briefly on the Roosevelts. The first Roosevelt (Claes Martenszen van Rosenvelt, from the province of Zeeland) came to America probably in 1647. The family joined the RCA, as did most Roosevelts after them. Theodore, born in 1878, and Franklin, in 1882, were fifth cousins, each descended from one of Claes’s two sons, and by the years of their births the clans had experienced American life to the fullest (including Indian, Revolutionary, and Civil wars), rising through the ranks of prosperous merchant and land-holding class, educational stature, political power,



Cover page of the Dutch national church’s book of psalms and hymns. Dutch seceders objected to the use of hymns in official worship since only the psalms were based on the directly inspired words of God. Image courtesy of the Archives, Calvin College.

and social prestige. The families’ acculturation had resulted in virtually complete Americanization.

A major aspect of acculturation is language and language change. Often this change becomes a burning issue in a church and, if new immigrants keep coming, it can last for several generations. For example, in Schenectady, Dutch was the language of worship from the beginning in 1680, without much resistance. As fewer members were conversant in Dutch,

however, the community became more Americanized; the opposition to Dutch became stronger, until it developed into a severe controversy from 1794 to 1804 as young people, unfamiliar with Dutch, began transferring to the Episcopal or Presbyterian churches that worshipped in English. The consistory tried a number of options, but in each case either the Dutch or the English proponents felt cheated. One resolution reads: “To wit . . . that for all coming time so long as there are twenty families in the church, who attend Divine Service in the church of the village, who contribute from time to time with others their just proportion for the maintenance of Divine Service, and who declare that they can be better instructed in the Dutch than in any other tongue, so long, either the forenoon or afternoon service in the church of the village shall be delivered in the Dutch and the other in the English tongue.” The percentages for preaching in either language changed several times, including a period in which one half of the service was to be in Dutch

and one half in English! The chapter closes as follows: “When Dominie Dirck Romeyn’s long and honored ministry terminated in 1804, stated Dutch preaching ended in the First Church of Schenectady.”<sup>9</sup>

A third issue that affected most congregations was the rise of pietism. Certainly the Reformed tradition has always recognized the need for Christians to lead a pious life, but it is also true that the expression of experiential faith has often come in waves.

The RCA was very much involved in the American waves of revivals and spiritual awakenings. The First Great Awakening occurred from approximately 1730 to 1760. During these years revival meetings took place in many RCA congregations and this influence made a lasting impression on the church as a whole. The RCA was more than just a follower, since its own Dominie Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen was one of the early leaders in the revival movement.

The revival meetings tended to be non- or inter-denominational and were usually led by itinerant preachers. Besides extended preaching sessions, the gatherings also included prayer, singing, and times of confession. Some of the more extreme revival practices included fainting, dancing, occasionally speaking in tongues, and other expressions of spiritual “enthusiasm.” The tone of RCA revivals tended to be more subdued, but the general encouragement for more expressive manifestations of the faith became part of the religious tenor of the denomination, as did the worshiping with those of other denominations. One particular instance of spiritual deepening and renewal arose in the RCA—the Fulton Street Prayer Meeting. Beginning with a few men in 1857 in the Old North Dutch Church in New York City, the church became the gathering place for noon-hour prayers. These noon-time prayer meetings blossomed, first filling Old North to overflowing and then imitated by New York churches of all denominations, then by wider areas, and even world-wide. (A 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary was held in the New York Hilton Hotel in September 2007.)

In terms of interaction with other churches and denominations, plans for union with other denominations faltered, but the RCA did interact and cooperate with other churches. The most significant cooperation came by

joining with the United Foreign Missionary Society in 1821, as the RCA carried out mission work in China, India, and Borneo (then a Dutch colony). This cooperation generally worked well, as each denomination maintained semi-independent status. However, by 1857 the RCA wanted closer identity between the mission work and the denomination and separated from the ecumenical mission effort.<sup>10</sup> The denomination also participated in a number of local and national religious ventures. These included the American Bible Society, the American Tract Society, the American Sunday School Union, and the American Temperance Society. A different connection was fostered with the international Presbyterian Alliance (later called the Alliance of Reformed Churches) in 1876, which has continued to the present.

### **Church Life: The New Immigrant Churches**

Like the RCA, the nineteenth-century Dutch immigrants to the Midwest had their roots in the Netherlands and in the *Hervormde Kerk*, which had undergone many changes and theological controversies since the founding of the RCA churches in the seventeenth century. The most important among the controversies was the dispute between Calvinists and Remonstrants (Arminians), which culminated in the famous Synod of Dordrecht in 1618-1619 and the publication of the “Canons” and “Church Order” of Dort (the RCA began about ten years after this synod met). Officially, the *Hervormde Kerk* remained faithful to those documents, as well as to the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism. In time, however, the church suffered from both a dead orthodoxy and the spiritual ravages of the Enlightenment. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment, as imported from England, Germany, and France,

first entered the universities and then the church, creating a spectrum of factions from hyper-Calvinism to liberalism and modernism.

An additional issue troubling the churches was the frequent interference from the government. This interference became severe again with the return in 1813 of the House of Orange, after the French occupation. In 1816 the government published a church order that virtually made church government a branch of the civil government. Through all of this, traditional believers often found spiritual nourishment outside the established church in various streams of pietism and met in conventicles (informal meetings in homes for prayer and mutual encouragement and Bible study).

The modernist versus orthodox controversies came to a head in 1834 when Hendrik de Cock, a pastor in Ulrum, Groningen, had taken the side of those protesting the liberal trends in the church. He was suspended from his ministerial office; his consistory, however, supported his stance, and the congregation separated itself from the national church on 13 October 1834. This date is usually cited as the beginning of the Secession (*Afscheiding*). A number of other pastors and congregations also seceded soon after this date, forming what later became the Christian Reformed Churches (*Christelijke Gerformeerde Kerken*) in the Netherlands. This *Afscheiding* group was harassed by both the government and the *Hervormde Kerk*, who denied the right of existence of an alternate Reformed church. Their meetings were broken up by police and soldiers, the ministers’ ordination rights were taken away, and some of them were imprisoned. It is this denomination that figures prominently in the relationship to the RCA. Others sought to reform the *Hervormde Kerk* from within—among these was the



The protest of Rev. Hendrik de Cock (1801-1842), grandson of a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church, against the singing of hymns in official worship and other practices in the church led to a secession in the Netherlands. Dutch immigrants that joined the RCA and CRC both came from this secession. Image courtesy of the Archives, Calvin College.

famous Abraham Kuyper, but in 1886 he also became the leader of a separated group (the *Doleantie*, that is, “mourning” or “lamenting”). These two groups came together in 1892 to form the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (*De Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*).<sup>11</sup>

The immigrants who arrived from the Netherlands after 1847 came from both the *Hervormde Kerk* but particularly from the *Afscheiding*, and it was the latter group that generally set the tone when new congregations were organized in America. Leaders such as Albertus Van Raalte and Cornelius Vander Meulen (Zeeland, Michigan) were intent on founding congregations that would be free from government control and would continue the teachings and practices of the *Afscheiding* churches.

These immigrants of 1847 and the following decades were warmly received, encouraged, and assisted by the eastern RCA, both materially and organizationally. In 1849 the immi-

grant congregations were invited to join the RCA and in 1850 this union took place.

The processes of acculturation for the seventeenth-century and nineteenth-century Dutch immigrants were similar. Both had to learn American ways. Language was one of the most immediate adjustments and also the cause for disagreements in local congregations—when should English catechism classes be allowed and when should the first English sermon be preached? But the problem was compounded for the Midwest churches—how could the Dutch-speaking immigrants interact meaningfully with the eastern churches that used English exclusively? This difference was particularly in evidence at General Synods, where the Midwestern delegates were at a disadvantage in discussions and debates. Also, the church magazine *Christian Intelligencer* (all in English) was virtually unknown in the West and *De Hope* (in Dutch) was not read in the East, and thus the two sections in the RCA lacked genuine communication. Also, as all immigrants can testify, not mastering the local language places one in an inferior position.

Place and geography also fed the tension for some in the Midwest with their religious kin in the East. The distance between the eastern and the western regions of the RCA made regular communication and interaction difficult. Moreover, those in the West were struggling to establish farms, around small and simple communities where rural roads were often impassible. New immigrants sometimes had to live in sod homes; in what is now South Dakota one congregation built its church with cut sod. Although the East also had rural congregations, there were also the Collegiate Churches of New York City inhabiting a bustling cosmopolitan city. Other dimensions of distinction were work,

economic level, and social standing. Some congregants in the East worked at humble jobs and made a simple living. But others were successful in the professions and still others were millionaires. Two of them became United States presidents. Education also presented an incredibly different picture. Ministers such as Van Raalte had a superb university education, but most of the immigrant ministers did not, and the church members often had no more than a few years of rural elementary schooling. In the East, however, college and university education was often taken for granted in many families. (In the *Acts and Proceedings* of the RCA General Synods the names of many ministers were followed by the prestigious DD.)

Moreover, in church practices and theology the gap was often a wide gulf. Van Raalte and others may have thought that RCA history, theology, and practice were similar to those of the *Afscheiding* church, but the dissimilarities were many. The *Afscheiding* represented a very narrow slice of Reformed theology and church practice (and even then the *Afscheiding* brethren continued to quarrel about which of their particular interpretations was the *truly* Reformed stance). To compare all the theological issues would take too long, but two examples of church life—worship practices and the relations with other denominations—are useful.

Hymns were introduced in the RCA in 1789, no doubt following the example of other American churches, and influenced by revival experiences; psalm singing became increasingly rare. The orthodox in the Netherlands (when they were still members of the *Hervormde Kerk*) despised the 1807 Dutch Hymnbook, and hymn singing was completely banished in the *Afscheiding* congregations. It took the CRC until 1934 before they officially

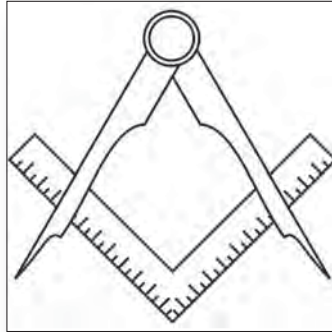


accepted hymns. No doubt the worship style of the RCA confused the immigrants. Some congregations in the East had accepted certain practices from the Episcopal church, and written prayers, for example, became rather common, either from a prayer book or composed by the minister. Other congregations had been influenced by revivals, and spontaneous prayers and testimonies of faith during the service became accepted practice.

Secondly, relations with other Protestant denominations were nonexistent in the Netherlands. Since the *Hervormde Kerk* was the national church, there was in effect no room for other groups. Anabaptists, Lutherans, and Remonstrants were tolerated, but there was no significant contact with those groups. Members of *Afscheiding* churches were even more loath to interact with other denominations. The RCA, however, had developed a wide range of “ecumenical” contacts. Their physical proximity to many denominations, their involvement in the revivals, joint efforts such as the American Bible Society, and common interest in foreign missions had all promoted friendly relations with other Protestants. A casual glance at the *Christian Intelligencer* reveals this interest and involvement. Every issue of the paper reports favorably on activities in other denominations.

Further, a number of the new-

comers had problems with the RCA (ranging from admitting non-Reformed people to the Lord’s Supper to the singing of 800 hymns in worship), and in 1857 two ministers (one returned to the RCA after a few months) and four congregations of about 300 individuals broke their ties with the RCA. This “secession” was



*The square and compass symbols of Freemasonry. Allowing Freemasons to join the church was another practice that divided the Dutch immigrants since the RCA allowed them as members, while the CRC did not.*

the beginning of the Christian Reformed Church. About ten years later this small, struggling group was soon bolstered by the growing Freemasonry dispute in the RCA. One of the Americanization features in the RCA had been the acceptance of Freemasonry, and a goodly number of RCA members, including ministers, had ties with the Masonic movement. For the former *Afscheiding* people this was

an abomination since the Masonry movement in Europe was actively anti-Christian. From 1868 to 1884 various congregations and classes attempted to have the General Synod of the RCA decide that Masonic membership and church membership were incompatible. Because these efforts failed, a number of members and congregations left the RCA (including the First Reformed Church of Holland, which had been founded by Van Raalte). Most of the protesters joined the CRC, and after 1884 the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands encouraged new immigrants to join the CRC.

Certainly theology and doctrine, church customs, and worship practices were often different and sometimes conflicting and these fed the misunderstanding and strife that prevented the joining and fusing of the old Dutch Reformed and a part of the new Dutch Reformed. Moreover, the stubborn and mulish personalities of some (many?) leading personalities often made joining and even discussions problematic. The history, the experiences, the culture, the language, the acculturation, the gaps of time and space—all stood in the way of good intentions of religiously joining the old Dutch with the new Dutch in nineteenth-century America.<sup>3</sup>

## Endnotes

1. For two contemporary examples see, *Brochure op Kerkelijk Gebied* (Holland, MI: Cornelius Vorst, 1869), an attack on the RCA, and Nicholas M. Steffens' characterization of the CRC, whose schism was "unnatural, unhuman, unchristian, unbiblical, unreformed." Quoted in *De Wachter*, 1 September 1881, 3.

2. M. Eugene M. Osterhaven alluded to this "two worlds" cultural gap in his essay "Saints and Sinners: Secession and the Christian Reformed Church," in *Word and World*, James W. Van Hoeven, ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986) 66. Elton Bruins deals with a number of Americanization issues in "1882—Secession Yet Again: the Masonic Controversy" in Robert P. Swierenga and Elton J. Bruins, *Family Quarrels in the Dutch Reformed Churches in the Nineteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999) 108-135.

3. This article is based partly on my *The Dutch Equation in the RCA Freemasonry Controversy, 1865-1885* (Holland, MI: Van Raalte Press, Hope College, 2008).

4. There are many excellent essays

and books dealing with the RCA, such as John P. Luidens, "The Americanization of the Dutch Reformed Church" (PhD dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1969); Gerald F. De Jong, *The Dutch Reformed Church in the American Colonies* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978); and Firth Haring Fabend, *Zion on the Hudson: Dutch New York and New Jersey in the Age of Revivals* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

5. Theodore Roosevelt and Martin Van Buren were third cousins, three times removed, while Theodore was the uncle of Franklin Roosevelt's wife Eleanor.

6. Boonstra, *The Dutch Equation in the RCA Freemasonry*.

7. For the sake of consistency the Reformed church congregations in North America will be referred to as RCA congregations even though independence from the church in the Netherlands did not come until 1792 and the name Reformed Church in America was not adopted until 1867.

8. A helpful (although brief) introduction to the *Hervormde Kerk* in English is Karel Blei, *The Netherlands*

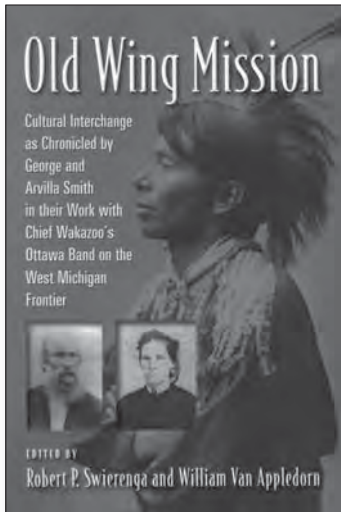
*Reformed Church, 1571-2005*, Allan Janssen, translator (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006). For a recent analysis of the *Hervormde Kerk* during the same years covered in this essay, see Annemarie Houkes, *Christelijke vaderlanders: Godsdienst, burgerschap en de Nederlandse natie, 1850-1900* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 2009). This book provides an excellent overview of the conservative Reformed members (*orthodox-protestansen*) who stayed in the *Hervormde Kerk* (Abraham Kuyper is no hero in this book).

9. Jonathan Pearson, *Three Centuries: The History of the First Reformed Church of Schenectady, 1680-1980* (Schenectady, NY: First Reformed Church, 1980) vol. 1, 126-128.

10. For more details see Herman Harmelink, *Ecumenism and the Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968) 22-29.

11. For a thorough discussion of the *Afscheiding* and the subsequent story of the Reformed Dutch immigrants to America, see Robert P. Swierenga and Elton J. Bruins, *Family Quarrels*.

# book review



## Old Wing Mission: Cultural Interchange as Chronicled by George and Arvilla Smith in their Work with Chief Wakazoo's Ottawa Band on the West Michigan Frontier

Robert P. Swierenga and William Van Appledorn, eds. (*Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008*) ISBN 978-0-8028-6381-2, hardcover \$49.00

Old Wing Mission contains details, summaries, interpretations, and histories for many readers. They will encounter many historical figures and events from the middle 1800s that represent the changes of American pioneer life. The tome contains a marvelous introduction by Robert Swierenga; the diaries of Congregational missionary George Smith, and of his wife, Arvilla Smith; and various other documentary pieces and correspondence to and from Smith.

The Reverend George Smith is the

central character, a transplant from Vermont, where he had achieved rather spotty theological education, most of which confirmed his steadfast Calvinism. He and Chief Wakazoo established the Old Wing Mission (named after Wakazoo's recently deceased brother) near the Black River (in Allegan County just south and east of the city of Holland). Smith became fully involved in the life of the Indians, freely accepted them into his home, and became a close friend of Chief Wakazoo. Although Smith's main goal was the conversion of the Indians to the Christian faith, he also was the schoolmaster trying to teach both adults and children English, "white" farming, and living permanently in settled communities. He also was an agent for the US government, trying to be a bridge between the government and the Native American people. The obstacles in carrying out these roles were immense and a person with less determination and faith would have given up after a few years. Smith's greatest disappointment was that only a few accepted Christianity; most remained confused or uninterested or antagonistic. Sadly Smith was unable to master the Ottawa language and for years he had to rely on (unreliable) interpreters. His diary notes that the largest Sabbath attendance was about forty people, and on many Sundays none came. One entry is typical of the latter case, "Sabbath, Jan. 8, 1843. But one little boy came. I explained to him the four first commandments."

The Smith family lived a "pioneer" life in abject poverty most of the time and sometimes relied on the Indians for their food. The person who

bore the brunt of this poverty was his wife, Arvilla. Equally devoted to the Christianizing of the Indians, she also had the task of providing for the ever growing family of five surviving children. She had several miscarriages and five children died. And when he traveled and traipsed for days on end, she was confined to the house, usually without any neighbors or friends. No wonder that she suffered the plight of many pioneer women—loneliness and deep depression, with virtually no emotional support from her husband.

Smith's dearest friend among the Indians was Chief Joseph Wakazoo, who also became his staunchest supporter. Although Smith grieved that Wakazoo did not always follow the Christian (Calvinistic) way, they were like blood brothers and became related by blood when Smith's oldest daughter married Wakazoo's nephew. At Wakazoo's death in 1845 Smith wrote, "I almost felt that the doom of our mission was sealed. He was wise in council, noble in spirit, and upright in life. His advice was sought for, far and near, among his fellow red men, and he should be regarded as a benefactor of his race. . . Perhaps in his grave is buried the hope of our mission. True, God can raise up other help, but things to us look dark" (p. 39).

Wakazoo's Ottawa band of about 120 people forms, in many ways, the collective main character of the story. They spent summers in the areas of Mackinac Straits and the Leelanau Peninsula and in the winter in the Black River area (near modern Holland and Allegan). They were mostly hunters and gatherers, with farming and gardening as needed to

supplement their food. Native American cultures were often complicated, as were their languages. One need not idealize their lives and still be horrified by the treatment they received from virtually all Europeans. The Ottawa suffered the same fate that nearly all Native Americans suffered. They were driven (several times) from their traditional lands; they had endured military defeat from the better-armed Europeans; they were often taken advantage of by government, traders, and settlers; their traditions and languages were threatened. They were infected with “white” diseases and tempted with strong drink. Missionary Smith and others had what they thought were noble intentions of Christianizing these “heathen,” and converting them into “civilized” Americans. But they had no understanding or appreciation for the Indian way of life, and their conversion techniques were paternalistic at best and ruthless at worst.

I heartily recommend the book.

Swierenga’s “Introduction” is a meticulous recording of this slice of history, and immensely helpful in setting the stage for the 50-year drama described. He spends considerable time on the charge by some historians that the Dutch settlers “drove out” the Native Americans from the area. His explanation is mostly even-handed, but he probably “protests too much” in his defense of the Dutch. Also, in discussing the Ottawa (and other tribes) he consistently uses the designation “Indians.” I realize that many historians do the same and that there is no unanimity about the terminology (even among American Indians themselves), but I would have liked to see the term “Native Americans” given more prominence.

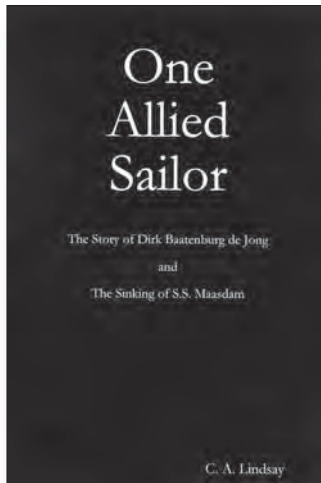
Like all such works, the Smith diaries have boring sections. (In 1842, Smith records the number of inches of snow for nineteen consecutive days, until it was “hip-deep.”) However, the meticulous record by husband and wife weaves a record of their living

on the edge in so many ways. They can be characterized as “pioneers,” and they were more involved with the Indians than virtually all other settlers. The reader alternates between admiration for their endurance, pity for their hardships, and dismay at their inability to really identify with the American Indians.

The picture, the image, of the Native Americans is, of course, seen through the eyes of the two Smiths and from their perspective, and therefore limited. But one sees the American Indians up close. And what comes through clearly is that they were at the end of their way of life. They were buffeted by endless challenges to their traditions, their culture, their language, their religion, their independence, and their pride. They were a lost people. And those losses show us a microcosm of the European conquest and destruction of the peoples of the continent. The tale is a tragic story that needs to be told, acknowledged, and remembered. ❧

*Harry Boonstra*

# book notes

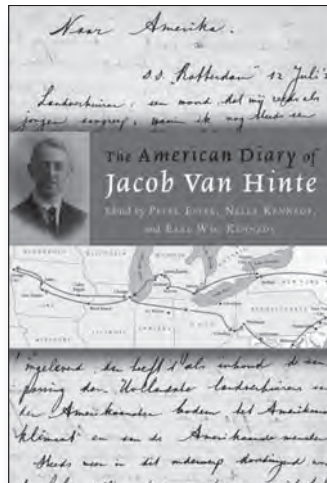


**One Allied Sailor:  
The Story of Dirk Baatensburg  
de Jong and the Sinking of  
SS Maasdam**

*Carol Ann Lindsay*

Lulu Books, 2010 ([www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com))

\$16.00



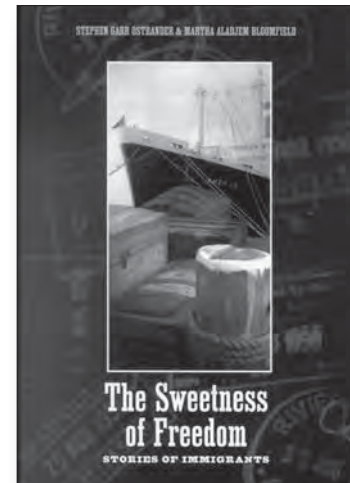
**The American Diary of  
Jacob Van Hinte**

*Peter Ester, Nella Kennedy,  
Earl Wm. Kennedy, editors*

Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010

ISBN 978-0-8028-6661-5

\$22.00 Paperback



**The Sweetness of Freedom:  
Stories of Immigrants**

*Stephen Garr Ostrander and  
Martha Aladjem Bloomfield*

Michigan State University Press, 2010

ISBN 978-0-87013977-2

\$29.95

# for the future

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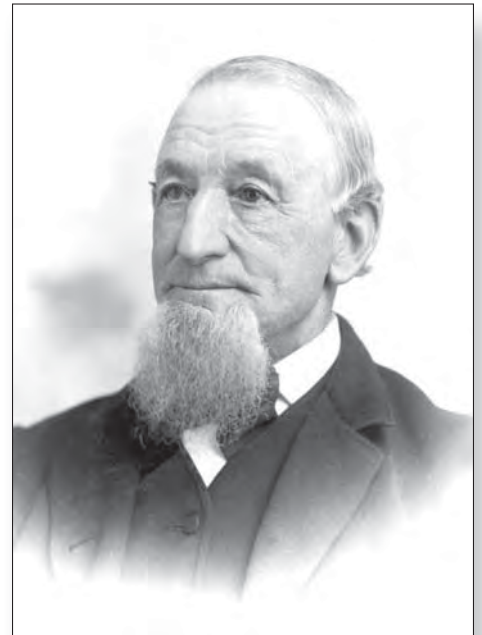
When I Was a Kid, the autobiography of children's author Meindert De Jong

Brother Ploeg: A Searching Saint or a Burr under the Saddle?  
by Janet Sjaarda Sheeres

Now I Will Tell You Children: Hendrik De Kruif's Account of His Immigration  
by Jan Peter Verhave

The New Jersey Dutch  
by Richard Harms

Frisians: Destination — Paterson, NJ  
by James J. de Waal Malefyt



Hendrik DeKruif, immigrant and entrepreneur in Zeeland, Michigan.

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