

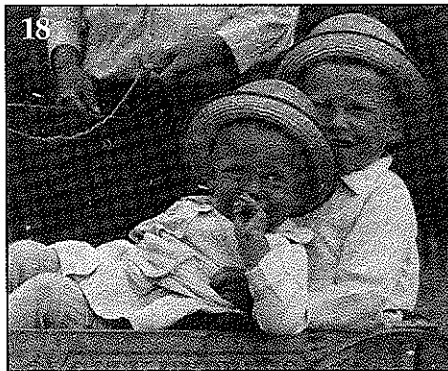
ORIGINS



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CRAMERSBURG

A P R A I R I E E X P E R I M E N T



by David E. Zandstra

A small fenced weed patch lies ignored in a vast wheat field. It is the cemetery of the Cramersburg Christian Reformed Church. A basement pit, a few widely scattered sun-bleached shacks, and remnants of a farmyard shelter belt are the only other tangible remains of the Dutch colony of Cramersburg, Saskatchewan. Begun in 1911, it endured until 1923. The site is now grassland again and large dryland farms.

Several Dutch families from the Chicago area had their interests kindled in western farming by an exten-

train in April of 1910, the investigating Dutchmen were greeted by the frontier town of Swift Current. Just outside of town they viewed the endless prairie which would soon be their home. No houses, no tents, no animals, no trees, no trails, no noise. Undaunted by the harsh difference from their Chicago-area living conditions, they set out with the aid of their guide to locate a site for their colony. The committee was looking for one large continuous parcel upon which all members of a Dutch colony could live, as the Doukhobors and Mennonites

"proving up." An additional one hundred sixty acres was available to each homesteader for three dollars an acre with five years of cultivation.

The site where Cramersburg was eventually located is an area known as "the flat." About fifteen miles square, it is indeed flat. To the northeast and southwest the horizon is interrupted by modest sand hills. The Saskatchewan River flows five miles to the north. Most of the flat, composed of clay soils, was highly sought after by homesteaders because of its water-holding capacity and hence its potential for productivity. Latecomers to the area were forced to homestead on the edges of the flat in poorer, sandy soil.

Although these truck gardeners from Chicago were reasonably well off financially, they did have reasons for moving. With a strong religious orientation, they desired to raise their families in an environment free of the spiritual pitfalls found in Chicago. Additionally, they longed for relief from the relentless routine of vegetable gardening. Several were young unmarried men who were seeking their fortunes in the great North American West. Finally, given the generous legal provisions granted to homesteaders, they were convinced they would be successful. Several Dutch families who had immigrated from the Netherlands a few years before were living on the flat near the site of Cramersburg. They were pleased with prairie life and believed in the future there.

When the investigating committee reported back to the interested families in Chicago, they received a mixed reception. A general disappointment prevailed when they reported that no large tract of land was available for a colony. Some, after a personal visit,

**David Zandstra, a regular contributor to Origins, is a history teacher at the Illiana Christian High School and an expert in the local history of Highland, Indiana.*

***Probably comprised of Anna Leep, E. K. Leep, Nick De Vries, Aldrick De Vries, and E. De Vry.*



above: William M. Bos and family in snow sled.
across: Lining up for a Dominion Day horse race. Aldrick De Vries on right is starter.

sive campaign of the Canadian government promoting the Canadian prairies as the last chance in North America to homestead with little chance of failure. Encouraged by rail-fare subsidies, a committee** headed west from Chicago to Winnipeg, where the immigration service provided them with free transportation and a guide to Saskatchewan.

Stepping off the Canadian Pacific

had done earlier in order to perpetuate their farming and religious practices. What would become Cramersburg was another seventy-five miles away by horse and wagon. Frustrated in locating a single large tract, the committee decided to stake and register separate nearby parcels.

For a fee of ten dollars, a person could file for one hundred sixty acres at the Swift Current land office. To receive a patent, the filer had to live on the claim at least six months per year and break at least thirty acres in three years. Doing so was referred to as

lost interest permanently. During the winter of 1910–1911 a small group of relatives and friends weighed the decision to go. After much prayerful intercession as well as due consideration of the wives' wishes, ten families chose to try homesteading in Saskatchewan.

The logistics of moving to Cramersburg proved to be considerably more complicated than expected. After disposing of their garden businesses in Chicago, each family hired a freight car on the Pennsylvania Railroad for the favorable rate of eighty dollars and filled it with horses, farming equipment, and household possessions. Duke Leep rode with the freight to care for the horses, but the other men went separately. The women and children were to remain in Roseland till homes were constructed.

Parsonage of Cramersburg Christian Reformed Church, 1919.

Bringing the horses into Canada proved a difficult task. Because of government fear of glanders, a contagious horse disease, all stock had to be tested. After a two-week delay, Duke Leep and the horses arrived at Swift Current. Because it was late March, the prairie soil was still thawing out and unsuitable for wagon traffic. After more delays and with heroic effort, the men were finally able to bring their supplies to Cramersburg.

The first summer's routine required a week of labor to build homes and sod barns and to plant gardens, followed by a week-long trip to Swift Current to purchase additional lumber and supplies. The wives and children arrived early, before the homes

were finished. As a result, the settlers lived in tents until late summer, when the homes were completed.

Shortly after arriving, the Dutch met Charles Cramer, a homesteader who had set up a tent in January 1910. His shack in the Dutch settlement served as the headquarters for a freight business which quickly developed into a local post office and general store. Mail, delivered once a week, was addressed to him for local delivery. Thus government postal authority adopted the name "Cramersburg." (When Mr. E. De Vry, one of the Dutch colonists, eventually purchased the general store from Charles Cramer, he petitioned the postal authority to have the name changed to "Vryburg," but his request was denied.

Remnants of an earlier era were everywhere. There were piles of buffalo bones and trails cut by the buffalo to natural springs called "coolies."



Animal life—soon to be game—included antelope, jackrabbits, coyotes, deer, and a variety of birds. The nearby Saskatchewan River, which quickly became a favorite recreational spot, was filled with fish—goldeneye and grayling.

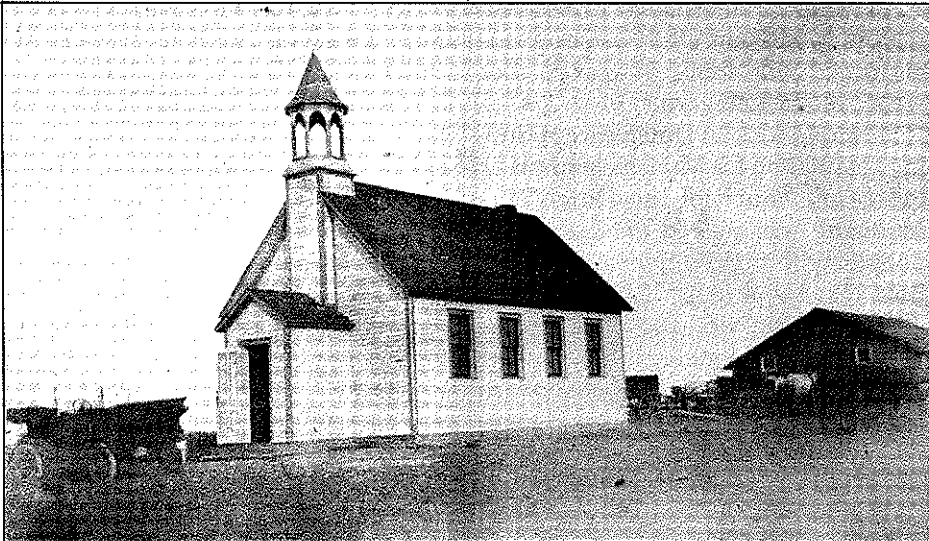
From the Dutch perspective, the people of Saskatchewan were divided into small groups: themselves, Englishmen, and "Breeds." "Breeds" were the Metis, a mixture of French and Indian, whose origins were linked with the fur-trapping era. Disliked by most homesteaders and the

government, they were often regarded as the cause of any civil unrest and were the first suspects following any criminal activity. If the Dutch and other homesteaders could be described as poor, the Metis were poverty stricken, a fact evident even to children who had contact with them at school. If the Metis school children had a lunch, it would be a waxpaper-lined matchbox of cold oatmeal. Occasionally the hungry Metis took water and lunch from other children. The Dutchmen tried to keep contact with the Metis at a minimum.

public offices as well as in religious functions earned the Dutch high marks. Two of these "English" families developed strong links with the Dutch newcomers, and the friendship of the James Herriot and Bruce Greer families with the immigrant Dutch has survived among their children despite the dispersal of the settlement in 1923.

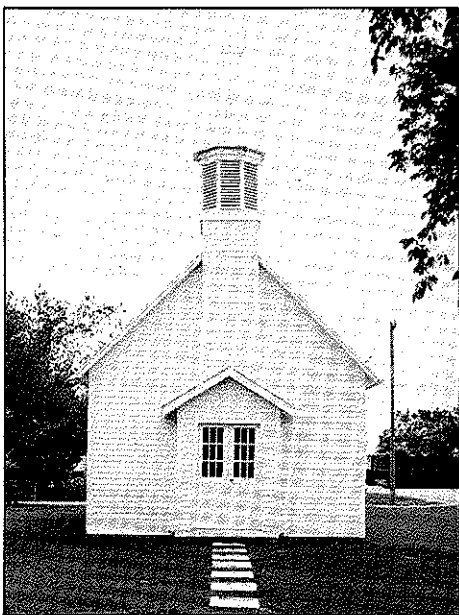
Having arrived in the Cramersburg area from Manitoba a few years before the Dutch, James Herriot quickly became a dynamic leader in the region. Highly respectful of the Dutch for their moral influence in the area as well as their dedication to farming, Herriot soon became their trusted neighbor, even purchasing a threshing separator with them. He enjoyed the frontier to the fullest: chasing coyotes with his hounds, hunting deer and antelope, skiing in the Sand Hills, and attending community dances. Observing his frontier lifestyle, the Dutch also quickly developed a strong interest in hunting, fishing, and other outdoor sports. His stories about his colorful and cavalier past, however, made his regular visits to Dutch homes a special delight to children and adults alike. The Dutch were particularly fond of the stories about his escapades in the Boer War, even though he soldiered on the wrong and winning side.

Bruce Greer, who homesteaded southeast of Cramersburg, was a very gregarious person who regularly invited all passersby in if they had a need. His home became a welcome sight and a regular layover for travelers between Swift Current and Cramersburg. Often a lighted oil lamp in his window served as a beacon to those who were lost or who were forced to travel at night. Although he had tried homesteading, he was more successful as a trader and auctioneer. He also rode his prize stallion from farm to farm to ensure, for a fee, the propagation of quality draft horses.



above: Cramersburg Christian Reformed Church, horse barn in rear, Jim Herriot's Ford in front.

left: Former Cramersburg CRC, now located in Cabri and restored as a historical landmark, 1987.



The "English" were those who were neither Dutch nor Metis. Most of the neighboring homesteaders were young unmarried male Europeans and Canadians of various pedigrees. Only several were actually immigrants from the British Isles. Out of a mutual need for assistance, sociability, concern, and respect, the Dutch colonists developed considerable relations with them. Expensive machinery was occasionally purchased jointly. Willingness to serve in local

Greer was a firm and faithful friend who proved to be a strong Christian as well.

Religious services were inaugurated in a tent immediately upon arrival of the Chicago Dutch in 1911. Church life was the social center of the Dutch community, though some refused participation. Aldrick De Vries, E. K. Leep, and E. De Vry led the congregation regularly in *preek leezen*. During the winter months reading services were often cut short by darkness, and church was canceled during bitter cold spells. Services were conducted in one of the elders' homes till a church was constructed in 1916. Pete Vander Werff, a carpenter by trade, supervised construction. Classis Pacific of the Christian Reformed Church granted the homesteaders authority to organize as a church under the direction of the Edmonton consistory and home missionary Rev. T. Jongbloed. Because William (Billy) De Vry, an accomplished musician, was a member, the church also purchased

Disking wheat stubble: Duke Leep and his oxen, Cramersburg, Saskatchewan.

an organ. During the peak years, 1917 and 1918, a parsonage was built next to the church. It was probably the finest house in the region, but it was never occupied by a minister.

The semiannual celebration of the sacraments was conducted by visiting ministers such as Tiede Vander Ark, F. J. Drost, Tjeerd Jongbloed, D. H. Muyskens, John Gerritsen, Nicholas Gelderloos, C. Vriesman, Arend Guikema, and John De Jonge. Seminarians also assisted the Cramersburg congregation during the summer months and were greatly appreciated as a welcome alternative to sermon readings. Mission efforts among unchurched neighbors, however, met with callous disregard.*

Sermons were in Dutch except during seminarian Joe Monsma's summer term, and much of the Dutch sermonizing was wasted on the young people, who could converse in household Dutch but really lived in an English-speaking world. As an accommodation, the congregation decided in December 1920 to conduct services in Dutch and English. Henry Hoogveen donated the English hymns.

Catechism classes and Young People's Society were conducted in English after the evening services. A hymn sing, led by Billy De Vry, was a welcome part of the proceedings. Church picnics meant a day on the Saskatchewan River a few miles north. Events often included fishing and horse racing.

These Dutch Calvinists functioned as the area's religious vanguard, and they were regarded as moral leaders. When their church was built, the first in the district, many of their neighbors volunteered their labor and materials. When a neighbor's wife died, E. K. Leep was asked to conduct the funeral. He also led English services briefly for the community until an ordained man arrived. An ecumenical spirit pervaded Cramersburg. Hymn sings with Canadian neighbors blended Psalter selections with English hymns. The unofficial Canadian anthem, "The Maple Leaf Forever," was a perennial favorite. A local pastor occupied the Cramersburg CRC pulpit

**Local mission leaders were Wm. Terpsma, Joe Monsma, John Wamaker, William Goudberg, Harm Vander Woude, and Edward Boeve.*



at least once, and an Easter contata by the young people, under Billy De Vry's direction, was even performed in nearby Lancer.

Although the Cramersburg group maintained their distinct identity, they did not hesitate to involve themselves in community and public affairs. They had come to stay and after receiving citizenship were ready to participate. Local school boards, district government bodies, grain-marketing agencies, and telephone co-operatives were all served by members of the Dutch colony. Probably the

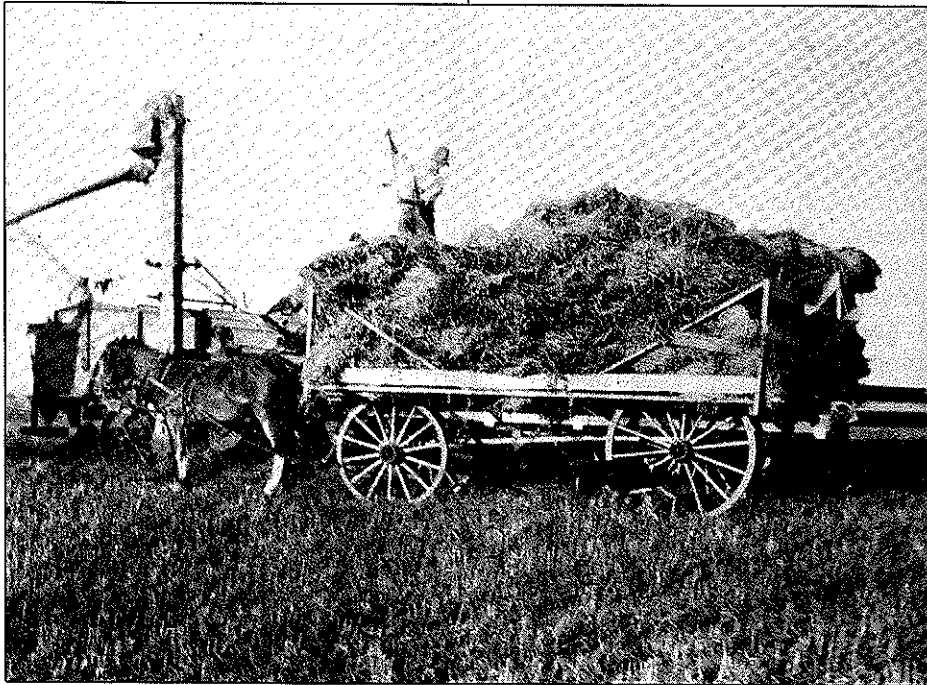
were needed, if assistance to harvest grains was required, neighbors would freely give and freely ask for help.

Because of limited means, these resourceful colonists found use for almost everything around them. Coping with the brutal forces of winter was of paramount concern. Buffalo chips gathered by children served as fuel the first season. Later, cotton wood brush gathered from nearby sandhills was stacked tepee style and used as the primary winter fuel. Horse manure was carefully piled window high around the house for

ground floor would be divided into a kitchen and living room-bedroom. A second-story bedroom, usually a three-foot-high crawl space, was reached by a permanent ladder through a small opening in the ceiling. Typically, a family of ten could live in such quarters. Lean-tos were occasionally added to the house as children matured. Water was obtained from cribbed pits dug to the water level about ten or more feet down. Salamanders and lizards were often perennial residents in these wells.

The homesteaders' most basic food was oatmeal and "Maple Leaf" syrup. However, every family planted a large garden to supply themselves with fresh produce as well as staples for winter survival. Although these farmers were excellent gardeners, their best efforts were often frustrated by late and early frost. Potatoes, rutabagas, and carrots were stored in root cellars for winter consumption. If there were garden surpluses, they could be exchanged for other necessities in Swift Current. Fresh meat was available only when surplus bulls were slaughtered in the fall, when the climate provided a natural freezer. Canning of foods became a major summer project for the women in preparation for the long winter season. For a welcome change a case of apples might be purchased at Christmas.

Health problems and trauma were particularly difficult to deal with on the prairies. With no professional assistance available, home remedies, though stern measures, were the only recourse. A commercial compound, Creoline, a creosote derivative, was the first and usually only line of defense against infections. If medical attention was required, unorthodox means were often the only choice. When a young boy blinded in one eye through a farming accident needed a doctor to salvage the eye from infection, the father corresponded with a



Wagon load of grain; the wagon team was made up of "regular broncos."

most respected was E. K. Leep, who was asked to serve as a member of parliament in Ottawa just prior to his departure for the States in 1923.

Living on the Saskatchewan frontier required a new code of conduct. With life often hanging by a thread, neighbors (anyone living within fifty miles) could be called upon at all times of need. If shelter from cold and storm was needed, if a midwife's aid was required, if draft animals or implements

added warmth. In spring that same manure was spread on the vegetable gardens to increase production.

Isolation and self-sufficiency characterized home life in Cramersburg. The brunt of this was borne by wives, who had been accustomed to the amenities of Chicago. Some women visited Swift Current only twice during their tenure in Cramersburg, first when they arrived and again when they left. Houses, built by men with little or no construction experience, were usually shacks about fifteen by twenty-five feet. The

doctor in Chicago. The remedy was successful. When another adolescent developed a severe case of ringworm on the scalp and a trip to Swift Current failed to find any doctor to attend to the infection, a veterinarian was asked to help arrest the disease, which he did. Babies born at home were delivered by the father or the area midwife.

Death was always close at hand. E. De Vry, one of the founders of the colony, died of a severe nosebleed. Pneumonia and influenza ended the lives of several mothers and children. Several infants died of unknown causes. If someone died in winter, the necessary but macabre practice was to store the remains in a shed until the spring thaw would permit burial in the church cemetery.

Although Cramersburg never enjoyed electrical service, it did have telephones. The Lancer Telephone Company, a local cooperative, arrived with service in 1916. The telephone proved to be a godsend, especially for women who were often trapped in their homes. Some of the dreariness of winter could be relieved through a telephone visit. With six or more people on a line, group conversations were regular features. One home with an Edison recorder would play cylinders over the phone so the entire party line could be entertained.

Home reading material included *De Wachter*, *Free Press Prairie Farmer* (a weekly Canadian newspaper), catalogues from Eatons and Simpsons, the Bible, and an occasional catechism book. Library books were available from the local school and church. Novels by Ralph Conner, a Canadian author, and Zane Grey were popular with the young people.

Mt. Arrarat School District was organized in 1913 for the Cramersburg area. E. K. Leep, Jim Herriot, and others were elected to the board. After the fall harvest, children were permitted to attend school. Walking was the

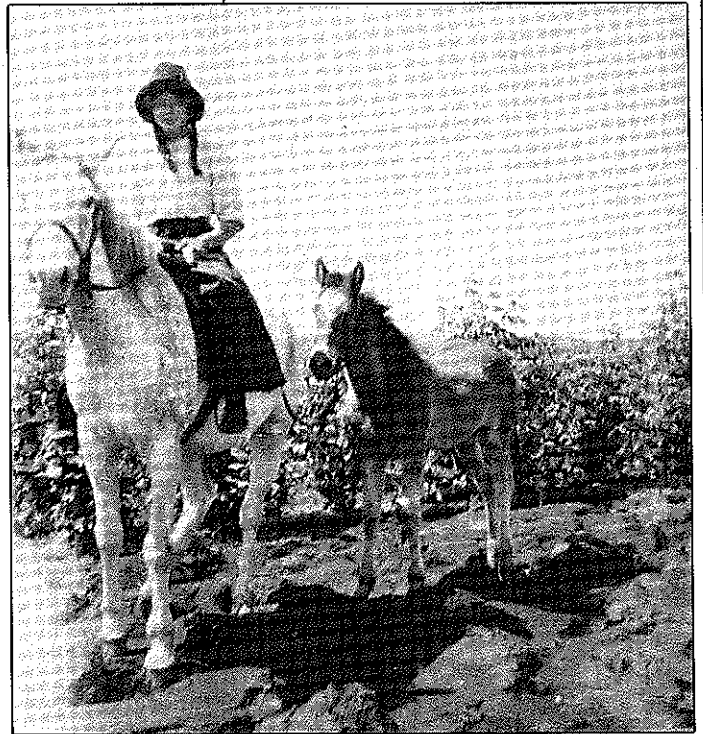
only transportation to school, even in winter. Frostbitten faces, toes, and fingers were fairly common after an hour or more of exposure on extremely cold days. Occasionally children would be stalked by coyotes. Lunch consisted of a salt, pepper, and lard sandwich. Since the school had no well, the students carried drinking water in tins.

For children the Saskatchewan prairies were paradise. Boys often carried a rifle afield, lived off the land, and ate whatever they could shoot or find. Rose hips and cactus berries were highly sought after as forage food. Hiking in the Sand Hills, fishing at the "Big Rock" on the Saskatchewan River, hunting birds and beasts, horse riding on the plains: adventure everywhere! By trapping coyotes they could even supplement the family income.

Southwest Saskatchewan was open-range cattle country in 1911. Buffalo grass, which had covered the Canadian plain for centuries, was excellent animal feed. This stable but fragile ecology presented an apparently good opportunity for farming, though bringing the land into grain production required the destruction of the grass cover, the land's natural protection from wind and drought.

Wheat was the cereal grain that made Cramersburg possible. Oats, seed flax, and rye were also planted for specific reasons, but spring wheat was the premier cash crop. Production was always linked directly to rainfall.

With timely summer rains, production in the virgin soils was phenomenal. The 1915 crop of fifty bushels per acre has apparently never been equaled. Natural fertility was so high that wheat would flatten, due to excessive stalk growth in adequate rainfall seasons. But with a shortfall of moisture, no production was possible. The 1914 returns were so meager that the government provided welfare food not only for homesteaders but for livestock as well. If a man had a team, he could be hired by the provincial government to improve the grid



Della DeVries riding and colt following.

roads and thereby pay his real-estate taxes. During the war years, 1915-1917, production was excellent, and there was also a strong demand for wheat. As a result, a feeling of well-being and confidence pervaded the Dutch colony.

Harvesting the wheat in August was always a demanding but happy event. To appreciate the magnitude of effort required, it must be realized

that most of the process was animal or hand powered. Horse-drawn reaper-binders would cut and then tie the wheat into sheaves. Later, these bundles were loaded on a wagon and brought to a stationary separator, purchased cooperatively, which was usually powered by a primitive steam or gasoline engine. After all their own wheat was safely in grain bins, the farmers would hire themselves out to

other threshing crews. Women could also find employment as cooks, since meals were always prepared at the scene.

But Cramersburg did not escape disasters. Perhaps the most disheartening was the widespread glanders epidemic among horses in 1913. To halt the spread of this highly contagious disease, the government ordered all horses destroyed. Suddenly all the sources of power for travel and farming were gone, and the homesteaders were forced to resort to oxen at considerable expense. Although

slow and subject to heat exhaustion, oxen proved a workable alternative to horses, even for driving to church. After the prosperous 1916 season they were replaced by horses.

Then came three years of complete crop failure. Not only did the settlers face the worst efforts of nature—drought, hail, wind, and grasshopper hordes—but there was little demand for wheat worldwide. Rainmakers appeared, promising precipitation for a fee. Unlike many of their neighbors, the Dutch, with a more traditional view of who controlled the weather,

Leep brothers (Henry, Anna, Dave, Duke) fishing at the "Big Rock" on Saskatchewan River, 1919 church picnic.



were immune from this fraud. With such punishment and a grim future, Cramersburg could not endure. Staying in a dry and wind-driven place seemed pointless, but leaving proved extremely difficult because the farmers were in dire straits financially. Men, women, and boys hired themselves out for any type of work available: working on threshing crews, drilling wells, and driving teams—anything for the cash needed to leave. One son was instructed by his father to drive a team for a particularly obnoxious neighbor. When the boy protested, the father allowed that he would work for the devil if necessary, to receive wages enough to leave. Parents, fearing for their family's welfare, were desperate to escape. Their children, on the other hand, were homesick at the thought of leaving. Many tears were shed on both accounts. The final event before a family's departure was always the farm auction conducted by Bruce Greer. Since there was little demand for tools and stock, these auctions generally produced little income.

When the last church officer, a deacon, left in 1923, the church closed. Only a few families remained—the De Vrys in Cramersburg, the Bosses and Hoogeveens near Shackleton.

Recollecting his twelve years in Cramersburg, E. K. Leep wrote:

Low in funds but rich in experience. I was truly sorry that we were forced by conditions beyond our control to leave Canada. We had learned to esteem the country highly for its laws, its law enforcement, and for its people. The time worn question, Why? Why? Why? asserted itself. Believing that the motives which prompted us to come to Canada might meet with Divine approval, I was perplexed by its complete miscarriage. This troubled my spirit until I realized clearly that God is omniscient, and I knew nothing. . . .

I was thirty-four years old when we went to Canada and I was forty-six when we left there. It seemed as though we had lost twelve years, the years generally considered the most productive in a man's life. In that assumption, however, the moral values are often discounted. This is wrong. The attainment of material prosperity only does not constitute the greatest good. Now as I have grown old, I gratefully confess that God has been good to me every day of my life.

Appendix 1

CRAMERSBURG FAMILIES

(This is a tentative list gathered from the records of the Cramersburg church. However, not all homesteaders joined the church.)

1. E. K. Leep and wife Jennie De Vries, 1911–1923, 10 children; to Highland, IN.
2. Duke Leep, brother of E. K. Leep, returned to Chicago in 1912 to marry Edith Dykstra, 1911–1923, 5 children; to Martin, MI.
3. Nick Leep, bachelor and brother of E. K. Leep, 1911–1922; to Munster, IN.
4. John De Vries, brother of Jennie De Vries, married Kathryn Hoogeveen, sister of Henry Hoogeveen, 1914–1922; to Munster, IN.
5. Aldrick De Vries, cousin of Jennie De Vries, and wife Jessie, 1911–1921, 10 children; to Shepherd, MT.
6. Anna Leep, brother of E. K. Leep, and wife Sarah De Vries (died in 1915), 1912–1921, 8 children. Hired a housekeeper, Catherine Sheffler, through an ad in *De Wachter*, married in 1918.
7. Pete Vander Werff and wife Kate De Vries, sister of Jennie De Vries, 1914–1920, 5 children; to Lansing, IL.
8. Garrett Vander Werff, younger brother of Pete Vander Werff, returned to Chicago in 1916 to marry Kathryn, 1914–1922, 2 children; to Seattle, WA.
9. Bert Nightengale and wife Nellie De Vries, sister of Jennie De Vries, died of influenza in 1918, 1912–1921, 3 children; to Detroit, MI.
10. Mrs. Klaas Leep, widowed mother of 5 Leep brothers, 1913–1920; to Martin, MI.
11. David Leep, brother of E. K. Leep and wife Fannie Douman, 1917–1920, 4 children; to Martin, MI.
12. Henry Leep, brother of E. K. Leep, and wife Clara Dykstra, 1917–1920, 1 son; to Chicago, IL.
13. E. De Vry, widower, 1912–1919, died, 2 adult children, William (Billy) De Vry and Irene De Vry, both unmarried, remained in Cramersburg.
14. William S. (John) De Vry, bachelor cousin of E. De Vry, 1912–1921; to Chicago, IL.
15. Pete Vander Plaats and wife, 1916–1923, 10 children, came from Iowa by way of Calgary; to California.

16. Bill Veltkamp, bachelor, 1912–1920; to Colorado to herd sheep.

17. Jim Vander Wall, bachelor, 1912–1921; to Spokane, WA.

18. Louis Dykstra, John Jacobsma, Henry Zylstra, 1917–1918, came from Roseland to avoid military conscription of W.W.I.; each lived with an acquaintance in Cramersburg.

With the exception of the Pete Vander Platts family, all of the above came from the Chicago area.

Several families who came directly from the Netherlands had settled a few years earlier near Shackleton, about 10 miles southeast of Cramersburg. Some of these family members still live in Cabri, Saskatchewan.

1. Henry Hoogeveen, 1908, returned to Netherlands in 1913 to marry Geesje (Geertje?) Vos, she died in 1921, 5 children; married Ann Leep, oldest daughter of E. K. Leep, 1922, 6 children. Ann lives in Cabri (1988).

2. William M. Boss, 1908, married Ralphena Hoogeveen, Henry's sister, 1913, lived near Cramersburg.

3. William L. Boss, half-brother of William M. Boss, 1908, married.

4. Chris and Klaas Beckering and mother, 1908, friends of William L. Boss.



5. Bob Hoogeveen, 1908, brother of Henry Hoogeveen.

6. Bert Hoogeveen, 1908, brother of Henry Hoogeveen.

7. Henry Hoogeveen, Sr., wife and 4 children, 1913, came with Henry Hoogeveen (listed in #1); children: *Christine (married Nick A. Leep, son of Anna Leep), Kathryn (married John De Vries), Ralphena (married John De Vries), Jack.*

Appendix 2

YEARLY CROP PRODUCTION AT CRAMERSBURG

- 1911—Vegetable gardens only, some land broken, most time spent in home construction
- 1912—More land broken, wheat sown in land broken during 1911
- 1913—First year of full cultivation, favorable rains, acceptable production
- 1914—Complete crop failure, government provided work for farmers and feed for stock
- 1915—Bumper crop of wheat, 50 bushels per acre, price \$.95
- 1916—Excellent production, some fields damaged by hail, 40 bushels per acre, price \$2.25

- 1917—Good production, 25 bushels per acre
- 1918—Very dry, short stalks, about 3 bushels per acre, insufficient hay for animals
- 1919—Severe drought with heavy winds, extensive soil erosion, probably poorest year
- 1920—Crop failure, drought and heavy winds again, rye planted to stabilize open soil
- 1921—Drought, crop failure again
- 1922—Continued drought, very slight improvement in production, rye extensively planted
- 1923—Poor production again

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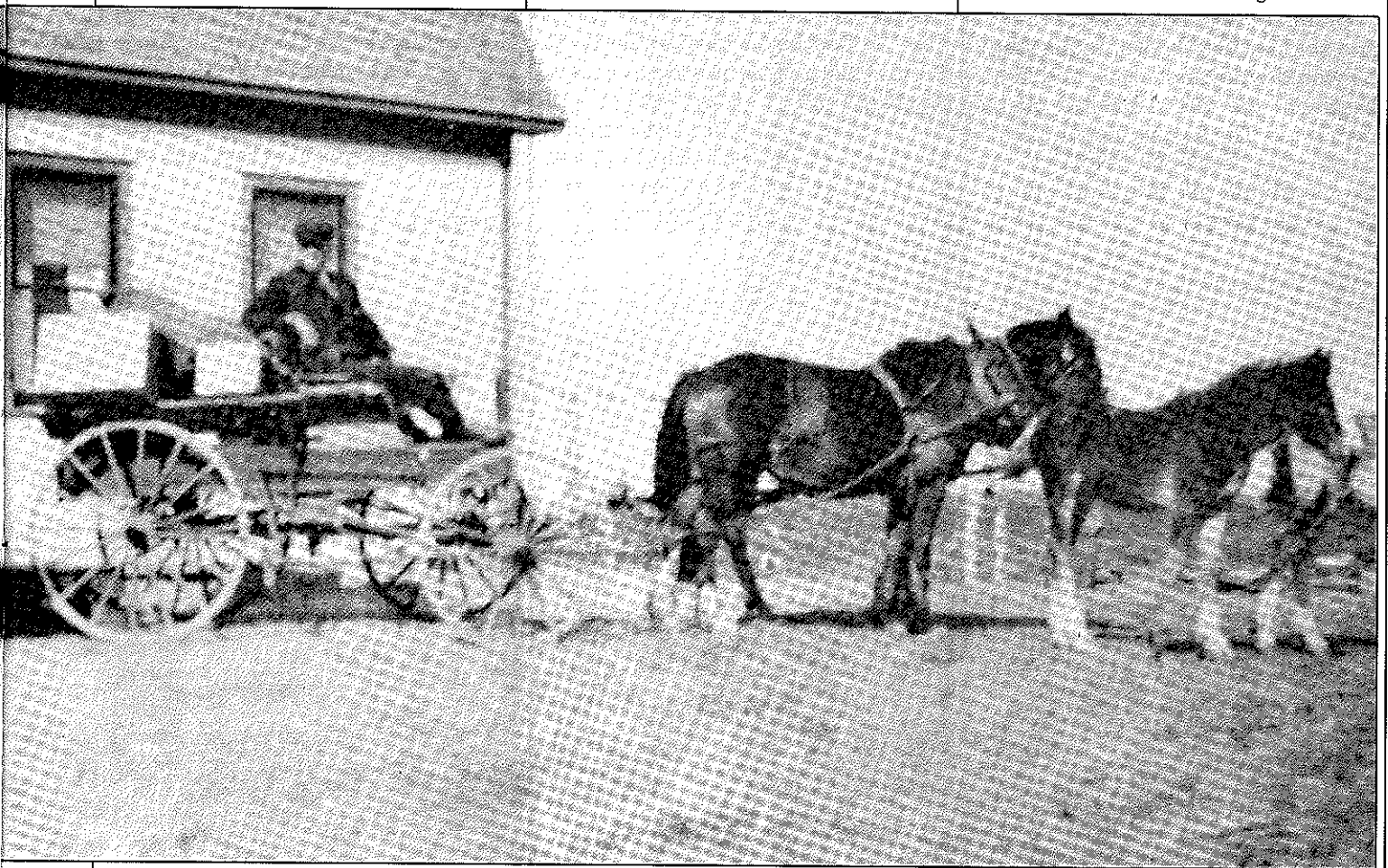
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Mail arriving at Cramersburg Post Office and General Store. Irene DeVry, postmistress and proprietor, in center with mail bag. Fall, 1919.



SIoux CE

Those acquainted with Sietze Buning's (Stanley Wiersma's) writings recall his unforgettable essay on B. D. Dykstra, a multitalented theologian and bicyclist. Strictly speaking, Dykstra was not a resident of Sioux Center. Yet he spent an enormous amount of time on the back roads of our town. And every now and again his pedaling and peddling took him our way. As a rule he rolled onto our long driveway near mealtime; he knew where to get a hot meal and a hot argument simultaneously.

Uniquely, B. D. composed, printed, and sold his own books. In his study he would write and create, and in his basement the material rolled off his own press. The finished product loaded into a basket on his bicycle, he would trundle off into the countryside. Sales were slow for his theologi-

cal tomes, but he had a quick-sale book, an "ice-breaker," that he used to soften up the prospective readers, mainly farmers. This booklet, an original, was called *Wit-bits for Two-bits*. It is safe to say that the thin volume of anecdotes and quips quadrupled the sales of the heavy religious matter.

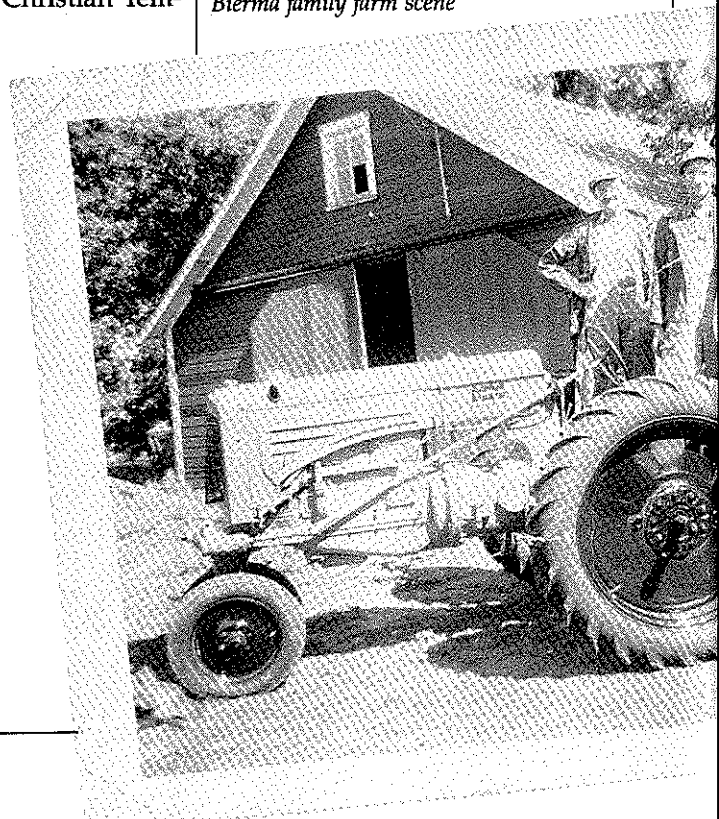
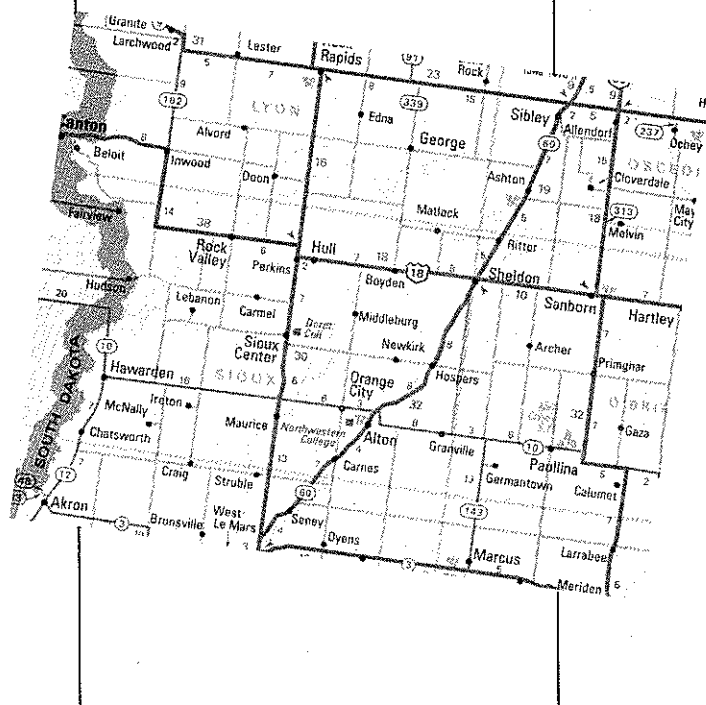
B. D. could be spied any time from spring to fall pumping up and down hills anywhere between Sioux Center and Orange City. (By the way the shibboleth for a stranger was the way he pronounced "Orange City." If he said "Orn City," he was a native; if he said "Orange City," he was an outsider.)

B. D. had blood relatives living in Sioux Center. The most prominent was his brother-in-law, Mayor Anthony Te Paske, one-time state representative and a lawyer. Mrs. Te Paske, B. D.'s sister, was also a lawyer and head of the Women's Christian Tem-

perance Union of Sioux County, a Prohibitionist organization. Wags called it the Women's Continually Teasing Us Group. Anthony was shrewd but always had the look of an absent-minded professor. With his gold-rimmed glasses riding on the tip of his nose and a walk halfway between a stumble and a shuffle, he would often be seen consulting his gold pocket watch, which opened with a pop. Then suddenly he would look around as if he were unsure of his destination. On his gravestone is etched the epitaph "And the government shall be upon his shoulder." But the same presumptuous inscription is carved on his son Maurice's headstone. Maurice followed his father's footsteps, except for the expedition into state politics.

B. D. also had a brother Reindert, whose humble position as sexton and

Bierma family farm scene



ENTER

Thumbnail Sketches of Memorable Sioux Centerites

by Syne Bierma*

janitor of the Central Reformed Church was a comedown for Mrs. Te Paske. The Te Paskes attended the Old Sioux Center Reformed Church, where most old-timers and Dutch-speaking folk went.

Rein was part of the landscape of uptown (New Sioux Center). His blinking, peeping eyes, his chin tilted upward in order to see better, his shambling steps—were reminiscent of Tim Conway's old man shuffle, and his "Dutch pet" (cap) made him unforgettable. He lived in a small house in Te Paskes' backyard.

Wiebe Tamminga, perhaps my father's closest friend, was another Frisian. Wiebe sold Dutch tea and coffee. Because he had only one lung, he was unable to do heavy work. While still in Holland he had contracted tuberculosis, and his life had been de-

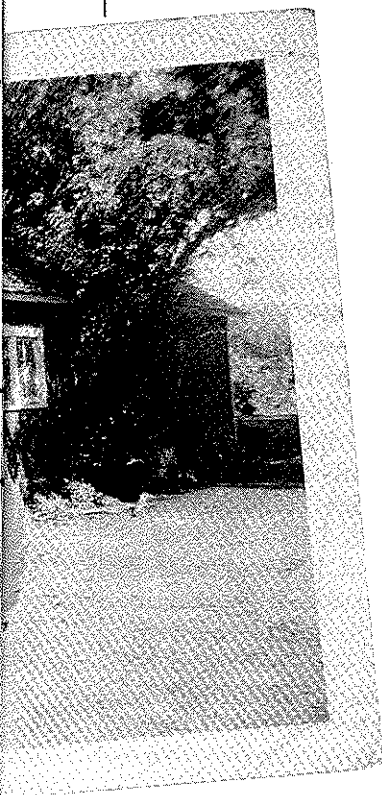
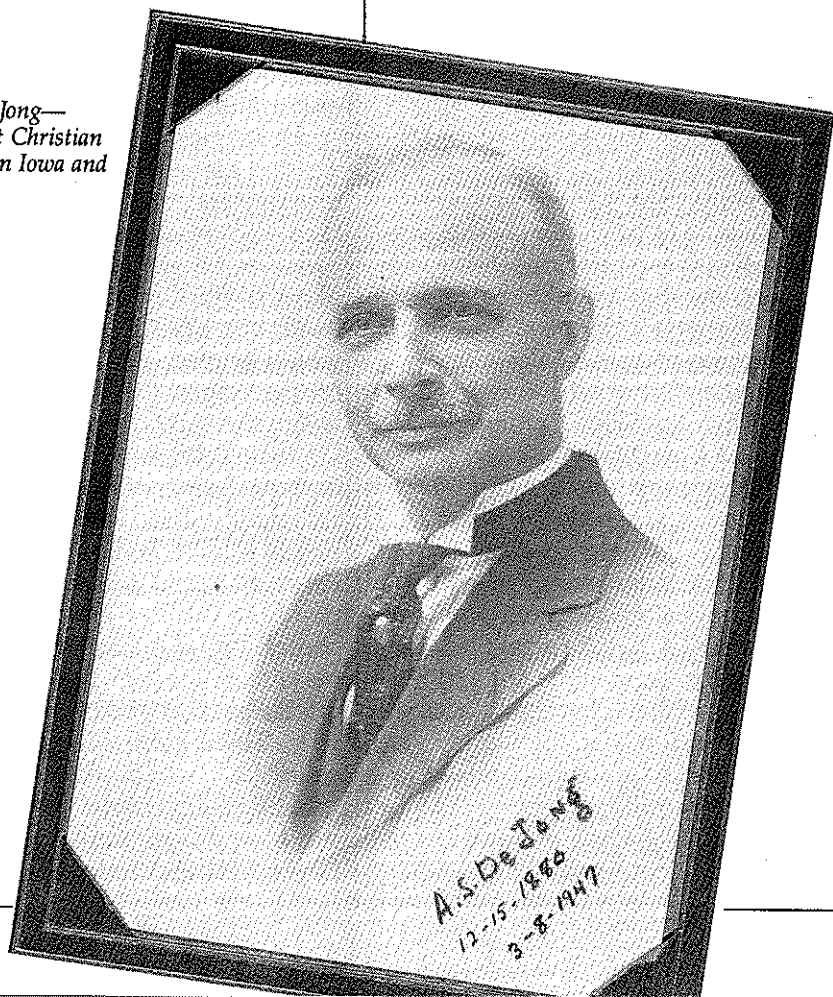
spaired of when he was only twenty-nine. But he lived on well into his eighties. He and his wife would frequently visit us, and my parents went to coffee at their home every Sunday while we were in Sunday school. Mrs. Tamminga was a sharp-minded woman who would chip in on all matters theological. Behind her back we called her "Old Dutch Cleanser" because she walked stooped forward and seemed in an eager hurry at all times, like the woman on the Old Dutch Cleanser can. When Mother was ill, she stepped in to help. The Frisians have a word for scrubbing; it sounds like *rus-sen* and that's what she did to our ears

till they were beet red and raw.

Pete De Lange (Lang) was a short man who loved gossip. My father suspected that he was Jewish or perhaps a French Huguenot whose ancestors had escaped to Holland. One burning desire consumed him: to be elder, but he never realized his ambition. During the Twenties, Pete was the official organ pumper. He worked unnoticed during all the loud psalm singing. A carpenter by trade, Pete, when not working behind the scenes, sat about

**Mr. Bierma has retired after a lifelong teaching career, of which the last twenty-seven years were devoted to Unity Christian High School, Hudsonville, Michigan.*

A. S. De Jong—
prominent Christian
educator in Iowa and
Chicago



four or five rows from the front, keeping a hawk eye on his sons, and when they fell asleep, Pete would poke them awake. Five minutes later he himself would nod and doze off.

"Mollie," the dwarf, baptized Lawrence Mol, went to our Christian school. He stood a little less than four feet tall and had a heavy man-like voice even in grade school. Often he stood on his head for pennies.

For whatever reason, there was an annual fight, no holds barred, between Mollie and a public school adversary, John Den Herder. It always took place after school on our school grounds next to the boys' outhouse. In the large circle Mollie would bait John with obscene words that shocked us all. They circled around like two roosters in a cockfight, and finally Mollie would charge full steam at John's knees, toppling him to the ground. The fight was on in earnest. Cuffing each other viciously and then rolling in the grass, each took a beating. Finally, one or the other tore loose and scrambled to his feet. Mollie, whose nose was bloodied by this time, asked John, "Had enough?" John would say, "Guess so," and the fight would be over—for another year.

Mollie, years after he left grade school, became a shoe repairman in Van Steenwyk's Harness Shop. Sadly, he became a hopeless alcoholic.

Another figure who wandered up and down the Sioux Center countryside was Case Mouw, related to Berend. His vocation was considered only semi-respectable; he was a stud peddler. His Belgian stallion was adorned with a neatly roached mane with a miniature red pom-pom dangling from the headband of the bridle. Celluloid rings of white and red were scattered over the harness. Case paid more attention to grooming his stud than he did to grooming himself.

A firmly independent bachelor, Case lived like a true pioneer. He disdained modern conveniences, and it

was widely rumored that he slept in the same barn that housed his Belgian. Whether on his animal or himself, he applied axle grease to any open sore. He claimed it had great curative power.

My memory goes back to another personality, and I recall him only in our church, not outside it. He was a deposed minister from Chicago named Dominie Riemersma. He wore a dark green derby with his Prince Albert coat and striped trousers. During "long prayer" the elders and deacons dutifully stood up, and Riemersma stood up singly in his pew. Riemersma sold religious books; they and a daughter who taught in a country school were the family's only visible means of support.

Pete Berghuis, pronounced "Berg-house," was known as the weigh-scale man. Housed in a little glassed-in shanty at all times of the year, Peter, with pencil shelved behind his ear, would operate the scale which belonged to the local Farmer's Co-op Elevator and Lumber Yard. Pete was a smallish man whose mustache reminded me of the daguerreotypes of Jesse James, the outlaw. He would read the numbers on the counterbalances, tilt his head, peer under his glasses, which were raised to his forehead, and say: "Oh, right." And we would be off to unload whatever was on the wagon. Later we returned to weigh the empty wagon.

When Pete got stiff and needed a change, he would pace on the sidewalk with a slow, wide-legged stride, hands interlocked behind his back. Pete read a good deal and was an independent thinker. He went to our church but always sat separate from his wife. There were some others who did the same; I could never figure out why. These men were never in the council.

Living on the outskirts of town on the New Sioux Center road, Hamburger Bill had only one feat to be

remembered by: he had once eaten sixteen hamburgers at one sitting. It was done on a bet. If he could devour fifteen hamburgers in a half hour, he could eat free hamburgers for a week. The wager was made with Ben Kammerman, who owned a hole-in-the-wall restaurant off Main Street. Bill, with an audience who took side bets, choked down fifteen and "one for the road," as he said. I never knew Bill's last name. He never married and worked as a "gandy dancer"—a section hand—on the railroad tracks.

Old John Kempers was a rich farmer who went to our church in the early part of the decade. He looked like a tramp who had wandered into church by mistake. What made him so visible was that he made his doddering entrance into the southwest door in front. His clothes were dusty green with age, and he took off his overcoat slowly and laid it on the bench next to him. I noticed he had a large tumor on his neck that looked like a misplaced Adam's apple; in Fries it was called a *pookle*.

Old Kempers was tightfisted and ignored the long fishing-pole collection pouch as it went by him. It was his boast that he still had the first silver dollar he had earned. Before the end of the Twenties, Old John, like many other oldsters, passed from the scene, unheralded and unsung.

The Gerrit De Raads were both comical and deeply pathetic. They had no children and seemed to draw baiters and hecklers wherever they went. Gerrit, a little man, had a non-conformist left eye that wandered off to the side and a right eyebrow that sagged permanently at half mast. He was sane enough and could carry on a civil conversation. His wife looked and acted pixilated. She had no teeth and was wapperjawed. It seemed that she munched on her gums. Her wispy hair and intense eyes enhanced her witch-like appearance. Little boys trailed her and hooted at her—until

she turned on them. Then they scampered out of sight.

Often she stood pathetically by store windows mumbling to herself. It was a common sight to see her traipsing down Highway 75. Many times she had only a dime in her hand and would spend it on a large bag of peppermints after walking all the way from home, a mile north of town.

The domestic battles between Gerrit and his wife were like a pre-Armageddon warm-up. They were as noisy as they were brief. Usually it involved a busy exchange of clods, tea kettles, bottles—anything handy. Then the Mrs. would scurry off to town with Gerrit dogging her a block and a half behind. They never owned a car nor any other kind of transportation, so they walked everywhere but never together.

It sounds English, but my father had a tailor who came to the house for measurements. Pete Schoep drove three miles to fit my dad. After a month or two he would come back with the finished product. In fact, I can't recall that Papa ever bought a suit off the rack.

Speaking of Papa, he got off some of the most resonant sneezes in Sioux County, a firm seven on the Richter scale. We had a De Lavel cream separator standing in our kitchen whose bowl had an eight-gallon capacity. Papa's sneezes reverberated in that bowl for a full minute. The bowl fairly rang, and all the mice ran for cover in the attic.

In retrospect, I see my dad looking calm and philosophic with his saxophone-shaped pipe dangling past his jaw. When the pipe died, he would whip out a lucifer match and strike it on his back thigh with a flipping swipe.

A. S. De Jong, our Christian School principal and father of Wally, I considered to be the brainiest man in town. This estimate was based on his shiny forehead and riveting blue eyes. No

one's forehead had the illumination that radiated such intelligence. He often came to our farm to discuss school and church matters with my father. And his cocksure confidence left no room for doubt. After he laid out his ideas, there was no room for doubt or rebuttal.

Frequently A. S. stationed himself at the front door of our school, greeting us as we came in. This was a rigid ceremony. I would stare at his kneecaps, mumble "Morning," and A. S. would take my chin between his thumb and forefinger, tilt my head back and say, "I can't hear you." I would repeat, "Morning." "Morning, who?" "Good morning, Mr. De Jong." That guaranteed release. Once a quivering victim went through this routine, he never forgot. I never did.

Miss De Groot, our teacher from grade three through grade five, felt that being a boy was somehow a condition to be atoned for. I spent three years in her room in atonement. She was forced to deal with some thorny problems, one of which was Tom—a rather large boy who as a child had sustained brain damage from a disease. As a result, Tom had a short-fused temper, and what he thought, he said aloud.

On occasion Tom and Miss De Groot would tangle verbally. When they did, he would sputter and storm out of the room, calling loud attention to her steatopygic figure, using the colloquial nomenclature. The girls would bite their lower lips in supposed shock, and the boys would snicker. Next day Tom would blubberingly apologize: "I will never call you . . . again."

Another thistly problem for her was her nephew, Porky V.A. Resorting to the truth was for Porky a last desperate contingency. Cheating came easily for him, and catching him was just as easy for Miss De Groot. She had lynx eyes, and her eyes went everywhere. Three grades in one room called for a

juggling act. But if anyone stole a casual glance at another's paper, she would snap off his name in warning.

Once, when I was in the fourth grade, I was checking out the aerodynamics of a paper airplane as it majestically floated toward the teacher, who was writing on the board at the time. The plane went straight and true, poking its nose cone into her bun—the hair bun in her neck. I concluded one couldn't rely on automatic pilot. I did time after school.

Uncle George worked for my father until I was three. Behind his back the older children called him "Gwosse de Dwaase." "George" was a rough equivalent of his real name, "Gwosse." *Dwaase* denoted "stubborn one."

His combustible temper flared at the slightest provocation. On one particular occasion he accused my mother of opening his mail. That caused him to storm and fume while packing his belongings. Rushing out of the house without a good-bye, he cut through the grove of cottonwood trees, crossed one barbed-wire fence, stalked through the cow pasture, opened the cowgate that led to the road, and strode up the road. I can still see him knife through the first fence and hear him shout invectives.

He was gone for eight years. We didn't know whether he was dead or alive for four of those years. After four years he contacted his son in Minnesota. After another four years the crusty old prodigal returned without notice. When three of us children came home from school, he was sitting in his old place, chair tilted back and bragging of all the places he had been and worked, from Alabama to California. He gave each of us children a peace offering—a stick of Juicy Fruit gum. And then he was all right in our books. I did notice that he was particularly polite and genial toward my mother.

Uncle George never went to church, as far as I know. He was an agnostic and incorrigible. He worked

for his son for several years before he blew up again, and then no one heard from or of him until he died in Prairie City, Iowa.

Growing up and Moving on

In the Twenties there was a significant rite of passage in wearing knee pants. Before ten one was compelled to button his pants *above* the knee. After ten, in fact, on his tenth birthday, he was allowed to fasten them *below* the knee. Dark blue stockings held above the knee with a black elastic band were common attire to complement knee pants.

Going into the Thirties was a dreary time for everyone; the era was one of the three *Ds*: Depression, Dustbowl, and Desperation. I recall vividly that on October 29, 1929, my father held up the *Sioux City Journal*, and the huge banner headline read "STOCK MARKET CRASHES." That meant a decade of hardship, doing

without, and prices so low it wasn't worthwhile to drive into town to sell eggs. We dumped them into the hog trough to save on feed.

At that time we didn't have to travel to see the country. All that was necessary was to step out on the back stoop and watch the country come to us. So much of South Dakota took to the air it was in danger of losing its statehood. In a given day we could see several states parade by in full review.

How did we know one state from another? By the color of the dust. Illinois' fugitive real estate had a brunet cast, South Dakota's was a sick Italian yellow, Kansas and Nebraska edged

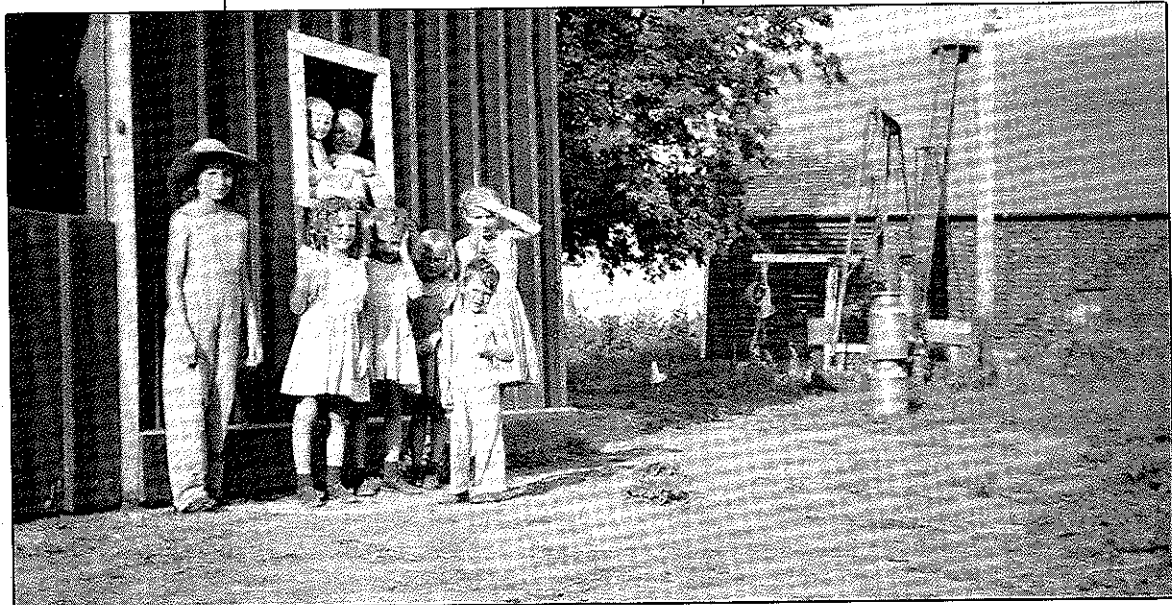
toward dishwater blond, and Minnesota had a gray-wolf look. The story made the rounds that the dust was so dense it confused the squirrels. They didn't know whether to dig up or down.

Grasshoppers harvested the crops and saved the farmers the trouble. When a farmer checked his crops, he stepped on a moving carpet of hoppers and would be transported across the field as if he were on a horizontal escalator.

Prevailing winds in the early and mid-Thirties were ninety miles an

stalks never grew beyond two or three feet tall. Farmers chased their livestock into the fields to get what feed they could forage.

Ironically, in 1926, after an especially arid year, the county had its worst flood ever on September 17. Seven lives were lost, and millions of dollars' damage was wreaked when it rained eleven inches in nine hours. We were in school, my brother, sister, and I, with dim electric light bulbs cutting the darkness. The thunder and lightning boomed and flashed all day with torrents of water pouring



hour. Anything not battened down went scudding to the neighbors. Topsoil from ten midwestern states stopped at the boundary or field-dividing fences. What once was a five-foot barrier was reduced to a one-foot fence. Dust drifted like snow. In order to be out in the fields and survive, we covered our noses and mouths with blue or red bandannas knotted at the back of the neck.

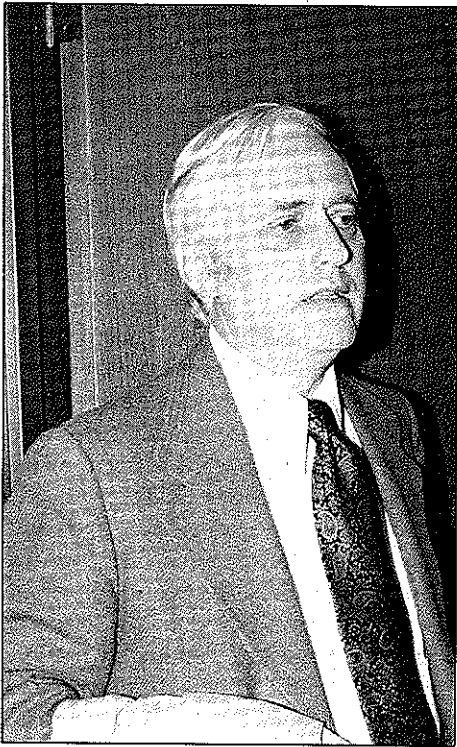
My father observed that wet and dry years ran in roughly ten-year cycles. From 1926-38 the entire Midwest went through the worst drought of the century. There was a total crop failure in Sioux county in 1936. Corn

down out of the cloudburst.

At our home on the farm, three miles away, my parents, with Clare and Bill, watched outhouses, mailboxes, parts of wooden bridges, and even cattle and hogs go floating by. Fortunately, our house was on a hill. Countless bridges gave way to instant erosion, and at the Million Dollar Corner, five miles south of town, the railroad tracks were cut in two and curled up for a quarter of a mile in each direction from the sheer violent force of the current. Water was everywhere.

Evening came, and there was no slacking in the downpour. We three children wondered where we would

spend the night. All roads were impassable. Arendsen, the storekeeper of the general store where we waited, invited us to stay at his place. The next day, Saturday, saw the sun burst upon a drenched and water-swept earth. Any moment I expected a dove to fly by with a green twig in its beak. Around mid-morning the water had receded enough for us to trudge home. The mud road had been beaten hard by the pounding rain; hence we had no trouble until we got to the bridge that wasn't there. We took off our shoes and stockings and forded



Stan Wiersma (The Wiersma farm was located a mile and a half east of ours and a half mile south. I never knew Stan in those days, since he was fifteen years younger than I, but I went to high school with his older brother, Clare, and played basketball on the same team. My father and Sam, Stan's dad, sifted and examined many a philosophical and theological issue. Both men were nominal farmers but maybe better adapted by temperament to polemics.)

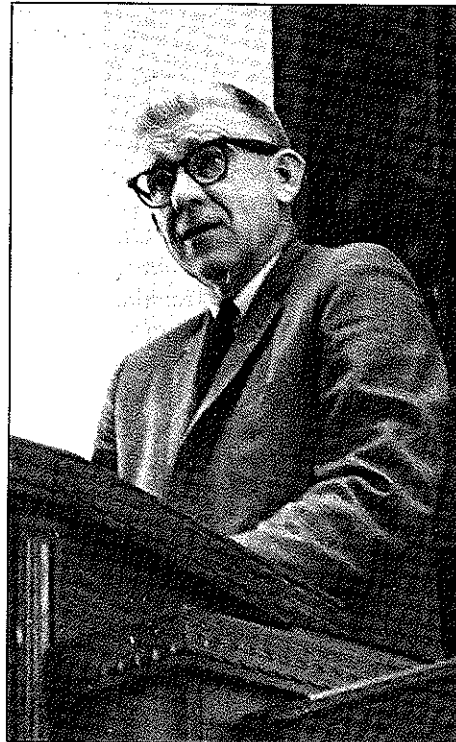
the stream where it had tamed down and was shallow enough to cross.

Around eleven o'clock that morning we came home to a relieved and

happy family. We were warmly hugged. Every family in the whole area could relate a narrow escape or had a relative who was in extreme danger.

The Thirties was a decade of sheer, unmitigated drought. But 1930 was unique in that not a single flake of snow floated down the entire winter. The mercury never dipped below twenty-eight degrees above zero. From '30-'36 dust storms raged from early spring to late autumn with little break.

It was a bleak, dreary time to be alive. Every farmer was running out of



James Daane in 1966

water for man and beast; the most faithful wells ran dry. Well diggers delved down ninety to one hundred feet to tap a vein. Water was lugged from West Branch Creek by desperate farmers. We hand-dug various holes, most of them in the creek bed, before we found a "live" one.

In 1936, Clare came home in May with a fellow Calvin College student, a pre-sem by the name of James

Daane. They had hoped to spend half the summer in Iowa selling Winston dictionaries and Bibles to finance their tuition for the coming year. The next half of the vacation they were to sell books in Grand Haven. But by June the market ran dry; the Depression had choked off everyone's money flow. My father had gone to synod by train; Mother and I were to fetch him by car. Jim Daane decided he had met enough sales resistance for one year, so he came with us.

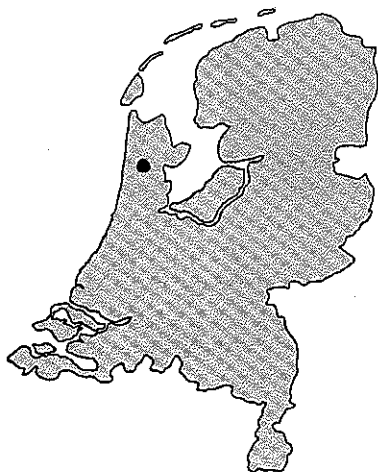
On the way we stayed in Chicago at the A. S. De Jong home. We planned to lay over a day or two, and that gave me the opportunity I dreamed about: to see Connie Mack in person and watch my favorite Philadelphia Athletics play the White Sox. None of the De Jong boys were able to go, and I pleaded with Jim to accompany me. He cared absolutely zero for baseball. After I promised to pay his way and supply him with all the peanuts he could eat, Jim caved in. And we saw a thirteen-inning affair that was simply thrilling to an eighteen-year-old; the score was 3-2, White Sox winning. That also completed Jim's chapter of life in the country. For the rest of his career he performed his scholarly research in cities.

I also ended my stay in Iowa in 1940, when I started Calvin and, after a year and a half, entered the army as an obedient if reluctant nephew of Uncle Sam. My tour of duty took me from Australia on to New Guinea to the Philippines and to Okinawa. While I was there, the war ended, and I returned to Grand Rapids.

Over the years Sioux Center has changed radically. Homes now stand on the old Christian school site. The town has Dordt College and the resulting expansion in businesses and residential sprawl.

DUTCH PIONEERS IN THE AMERICAN WEST

by Rob Kroes*



*From Amsterdam
to Amsterdam,
Montana*

**Professor Kroes holds the chair of American Studies at the University of Amsterdam and is director of its America Institute. He is at present writing a book about Dutch migration to the American West, entitled Dutch Pioneers in the American West. A Dutch version will appear in the spring of 1989. An English version will come out later that same year.*

Rob Kroes' analysis of cultural change in Amsterdam, Montana, has potential validity for almost any immigrant community in the U.S.A. and Canada. The same forces and tensions are evident in Grand Rapids, Chicago, Toronto, or Pella, Iowa. All ethnic communities, Dutch, Polish, Korean, and others, face the prospect of diminished cohesion and the loss of individuals and families to the lure of assimilation into larger cultural mainstreams.—H.J.B.

Over the last three centuries many of my countrymen have left the Netherlands. And as the Dutch language appropriately describes them, they became *landverhuizers*, that is, they did not merely exchange one home for another, but they literally changed countries. Many were searching for a better life than the Netherlands could offer, and it was primarily poverty, unemployment, and scarcity of land that fueled their agonizing decision to try their fortunes elsewhere. Many also left anticipating the practice of their own religious views with freedom from outside intrusion, surveillance, or suppression. These folk and their offspring are scattered across the globe. We can trace them in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada,

and South America.

But for centuries their favored destination has been what we call nowadays the United States. They came by tens of thousands and in a number of separate waves. They first arrived early in the seventeenth century, settling in what was then known as the New Netherlands, and they left a lasting imprint on the evolving American society. One of the oldest denominations in the United States, the Reformed Church in America, is an offshoot of the Reformed Church of the Dutch Republic. A second influx, a great wave compared to prior immigrations, began to pick up in the late 1840s. It would bring a large number of the Seceders (an orthodox breakaway from the official Reformed Church) to America, along with religious leaders such as Scholte and Van Raalte. It led to the founding of a second variety of Dutch Reformed life in America: the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), centered near the area of Van Raalte's first settlement in Michigan.

This denomination in particular received an additionally strong infusion of members from a third wave of Dutch immigration around the turn of the century. In the Netherlands, un-

der the charismatic leadership of Abraham Kuyper, a new religious awakening had occurred which incorporated a large contingent of the lower social classes. Many immigrants, under the fresh impact of this movement, came to reinforce the CRC ranks in America. Their trek across the continent, in many different directions, also brought the expansion of the CRC into what only then would be a truly nationwide denomination.

It was a crucial occurrence. Earlier waves of immigration had always settled more to the East, when there was still virgin land there. In the days of Van Raalte and Scholte, the frontier had not moved much beyond Michigan and Iowa. But with the westward expansion after 1870, cheap and abundant virgin land was to be found only in the vast expanse of the American West. There, in that empty vastness, fertile but arid, with its fickle climate, new immigrants began to settle—Norwegians among Norwegians, Germans among Germans, Scots among Scots, Dutchmen among Dutchmen. The newly constructed railroads had opened up the land for them. The U.S. government, at a token fee, offered homesteads from its vast public domain to those willing to break the land and settle it. The railroads, at a higher price, sold land which they themselves had received as an incentive from the government. Finally, land-development companies which had invested in irrigation works—bringing water to the thirsty land—offered farms to prospective buyers.

Grim as conditions may have been, the promise of land in the land of promise, the prospect of independent farming, drew many immigrants to the West. Some of those immigrants came from the Netherlands. Little has been written about their weal and woe. Traveling in Montana, I ventured upon one of their settlements, two minute boroughs, Amsterdam

and Churchill, several miles south of the small railroad town of Manhattan. I drove around, went to church there, talked to several people, and in their first cemetery on the rolling hills I went back to their past. When I walked between the graves, the stones began to speak. There they lay, the first pioneers. The language of their tombstones was still Dutch, their birthplaces still in the Netherlands—in Friesland, in Groningen, in South Holland, in Zeeland. When I left, it had become a part of me. I decided to go back for a longer period and to find out more about the history of the place. I spent the winter of 1988 in the midst of these Dutch-Americans.

It is, in a sense, a wonder that they are still there, recognizably together as a tightly woven ethnic community, after nearly a century in a country of such restless movement. Many other places in Montana have a different story to tell. Place names that one finds in old letters are no longer on the map. Communities of brave homesteaders, more often than not organized around a little church, a Christian school, after years of drought, locusts, and hail pulled up their stakes to try their luck elsewhere. Some went back to the Netherlands; others found jobs in the cities back East; still others moved on to the more regularly watered regions in Washington and Oregon or to Dutch communities in California.

But in the areas around Amsterdam, Montana, things went differently. The location offers a number of natural advantages. It is surrounded by mountains from which three rivers flow—the Gallatin, the Madison, and the Jefferson. And these headwaters of the mighty Missouri bring a ready supply of water to an otherwise rather arid region. The soil is fertile and drains well. About a century ago Henry Altenbrand, a successful New York entrepreneur in the malting business, set up two companies, the West Gal-

latin Irrigation Company and the Manhattan Malting Company, with a view to growing malting barley in the Gallatin valley. Comparative research had shown the area to produce a quality of malting barley that rivaled the best grown anywhere. The irrigation company invested in the construction of an elaborate system of irrigation canals and also bought large tracts of land from the Northern Pacific Railroad. All that was needed in addition were farmers to work the land.

A Presbyterian minister, A. J. Wormser, of Dutch origin himself, was serving in the area as a home missionary for the Presbyterian Church. He also was a bit of a land speculator with a keen interest in the development and settlement of the West. The directors of the Manhattan Company hired him as a recruiting agent. He was well connected among the Dutch immigrants in Iowa and Michigan, and he succeeded in getting some ten immigrant families to move from Michigan to the Gallatin valley in 1891. Most of them were of Frisian origin. One family hailed from Winterswijk near the German border. Wormser also took a trip to Groningen, the northernmost province of the Netherlands, in 1892, at a time when many from the sea-clay region were considering or actually undertaking migration to the United States. Consolidation and modernization of farming threatened to drive from the land many farmers' sons and farmhands who dreamed of becoming independent farmers. Through Wormser's recruiting activities, a number of farmers' sons from the area around Bedum and Spijk decided to try their luck in the Gallatin valley.

But they were not among the class of poor and destitute hired agricultural laborers who also left the country in droves. They had some financial means to ease the hardship of the early years of settlement and were able to take up a homestead or, after a

number of years, to buy land from the irrigation company. Added to the initial investment of the New York land developers, the immigrants contributed economic resilience to the settlement. That helped later immigrants from the Netherlands—from Groningen, Friesland, Zeeland, and South Holland—many of whom offered little beyond their willingness to work as hired agricultural labor. Yet, the start was difficult for all of them. Repeatedly, the first irrigation canal caved in or broke its bounds. In dry spells even the irrigation system ran

out of water. Living conditions were not unlike those found elsewhere on the farming frontier. But early on the steadfast resilience of this little community vindicated itself.

Their first act of community consolidation was to withdraw from the guardianship of the Presbyterian Church and affiliate with the CRC. Characteristically, many whose background in the Netherlands had been Reformed

rather than Christian Reformed joined in this act of consolidation. It put their own stamp on a community and preserved it in the face of the assimilating force of their American environment. There was a unity of purpose which was reminiscent of the world view of the great Dutch theologian and church leader Abraham Kuyper. His emphasis on what he called "the antithesis" between the true believers and the secular world served as the central strategy for social

organization of the covenanted people, both in the Netherlands and among his followers in America. Before long, this collective sense of purpose led them to build their own church and to start their own Christian schools. It was a remarkable test of social strength at a time when many had difficulties making ends meet.

For nearly a century, the continuity of this community has been contingent on two ingredients: economic resilience and religious ties. Economically they have weathered quite a few storms, literally and metaphorically,

and, finally, in the thirties, potato growing. Thus, on a relatively limited scale, an agricultural economy had grown with a remarkable degree of internal integration. Both the necessary diversification of products and crop management for soil conservation dictated farm operation. Potatoes, for instance, a staple crop in the local economy, can be grown on the same piece of land only once every five years. In a rotation system, wheat is grown for two consecutive years, followed by two years of hay or alfalfa. These are products with a local de-



Grain elevator at "Amsterdam"

through solidarity, but also through an increasing agricultural diversification. Their initial position was overly dependent on the malting barley market, and following Prohibition in America, their fortunes with the Manhattan Malting Company rapidly declined. But already their agricultural production had branched out to accommodate new demands—peas for the canning industry, cereals other than barley, hay to feed their horses and cattle, dairying and ranching,

mand among dairy farmers and ranchers. In the meantime, land is often rented from other farmers to continue potato growing. This, along with the relative protection against the vagaries of climate through irrigation techniques (both the old ditch and the new deep well) has made for a very successful agricultural economy.

Naturally, this picture is not without its internal tensions and conflicts.

As in every farming community, the one in the Gallatin valley is made up of individual producers for the market. Inevitably, neighbors are also competitors, with all the attending changes of individual fate and relative position as well as all its consequent envy and gossip.

But there is a second ingredient which has kept them together as a thriving community: their religious ties. These are still highly visible. Every Sunday one can see these ties at work. During the week their dispersal across the countryside might lead the

way to the two churches on Church-hill—their Church Hill. As it happens, the community has expanded across the valley to such an extent that two more churches serve those that are living farther out, in Bozeman near Gallatin Gateway.

Not even their religious history, though, has been totally free of tension. From the beginning, communal consolidation around Reformed principles has required an act of self-affirmation which screened them from the surrounding world and its rival views. It also meant that the com-

clusive redemption for the true believers only. But the two positions have their own socially disruptive potential. The first, like a polar icecap melting, would mean the eventual dissolution of the community through its absorption into the wider environment. The second can cause a rift running right through the community when a self-styled group of guardians of the true faith too narrowly draws the line of proper doctrine.

Both polar attractions have actually affected the life of the community.



Manhattan CRC

outsider astray. There isn't much in the way of a clear center of social life, no village the way we know it in the Netherlands. But on a Sunday, hovering in the air, one would easily be able to see the social web come to life. Then, like many little spiders, cars move along the country roads on their

munity chose to position itself in a tenuous halfway station between two poles of attraction: on the one side American religious life, offering its array of alternatives, on the other side an internal group which saw the best defense for communal boundaries in a radical version of the Kuyperian antithesis, emphasizing a doctrine of ex-

election and of special grace beautifully served the purpose of radically defining the boundary of antiethical thinking, a clustering around doctrinal positions seen as the true teaching of the church. As it happened, it was a boundary that ran straight through the community, to the point of dividing families against them-

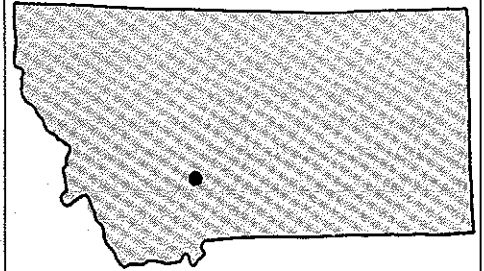
selves. It was the local reflection of a schism which had occurred across America in CRC circles and which took some of its cues at least from similar developments in the Netherlands. Yet, for all the similarity with the Netherlands that was undeniably in it, the schism in America had a different existential meaning. There its main function was to serve the self-definition of an immigrant group vis-a-vis an alien cultural context.

Still, it is my belief that in spite of all the pain caused by this schism, it, in a rather unexpected way, kept the community together. In a very real sense it turned its back collectively against the wider environment because the language of the debate had meanings which its members alone could grasp. Although they separated into two rival camps, they were like two soccer teams—to use a Dutch simile—contending according to a set of rules which only they intimately understood. The conflict brought them together and collectively set them apart from their environment. In a sense,

then, the conflict was a clear sign of communal vitality centered in commonly recognized values and traditions.

The rift has been healed. In 1960 the two separate churches reunited within the CRC denomination. The community is still recognizably there, economically open to the outer world, yet culturally inclined to preserve its own identity. In the future it will be harder to perform this feat. Increasingly they move to a wider world for education and occupations. But even so, what strikes the outside observer is the continued attempt to keep the next generation within the cultural orbit of the CRC in America. It is a strategy on the part of the parents to maintain ethnic cohesion through church affiliation. On a deeper level, the two are inextricably linked. With a view to maintaining their local identity as they cherish it, they perceive themselves as part of a Dutch-American network which is truly continental, spanning the United States from sea to shining sea. Yet, as many will admit

in private conversation, with more than a hint of nostalgia and regret, it may be a world that is set on a course of eventual extinction.



Montana landscape (children with wagon)

THE DUTCH-IMMIGRANT CONGREGATIONS OF ALTO, WISCONSIN



Alto, Wisconsin, Winter Scene, c. 1921 (Courtesy of Dora Smit)

1845—1900

*By Elton J. Bruins**

Henry S. Lucas, in his monumental *Netherlanders in America*, noted, "Alto, in Fond du Lac Country, Wisconsin, the first community in the Middle West to be founded by Dutch immigrants, began its existence in 1845."¹ Lucas devoted approximately three full pages to this little, relatively unknown Wisconsin community, tracing its early history in considerable detail, and he also mentioned it often at other points in this book.² Jacob Van Hinte, author of another very important work on the Dutch in America, also referred to Alto many times.³

Alto, like many other Dutch-American communities, has a rich history but one that is little known.⁴ The settlements of Holland, Michigan, and Pella, Iowa, have received much attention and are probably the best known Dutch ethnic towns in the United States. They were founded by the charismatic leaders Albertus C. Van Raalte and Hendrik P. Scholte respectively. These men not only established the communities but also became prominent in their education, religious, and cultural affairs. This was not true of settlements such as Alto, Wisconsin; Overisel, Michigan; South Holland, Illinois; or Holland, Nebraska. However, these Dutch-American villages shared significantly in the development and growth of Dutch ethnic life in mid-America. Both the Christian Reformed and Reformed denominations were especially dependent upon the congregations in these communities for numerical strength and financial support. Some of the early immigrant congregations became mother churches to other congregations in those areas.

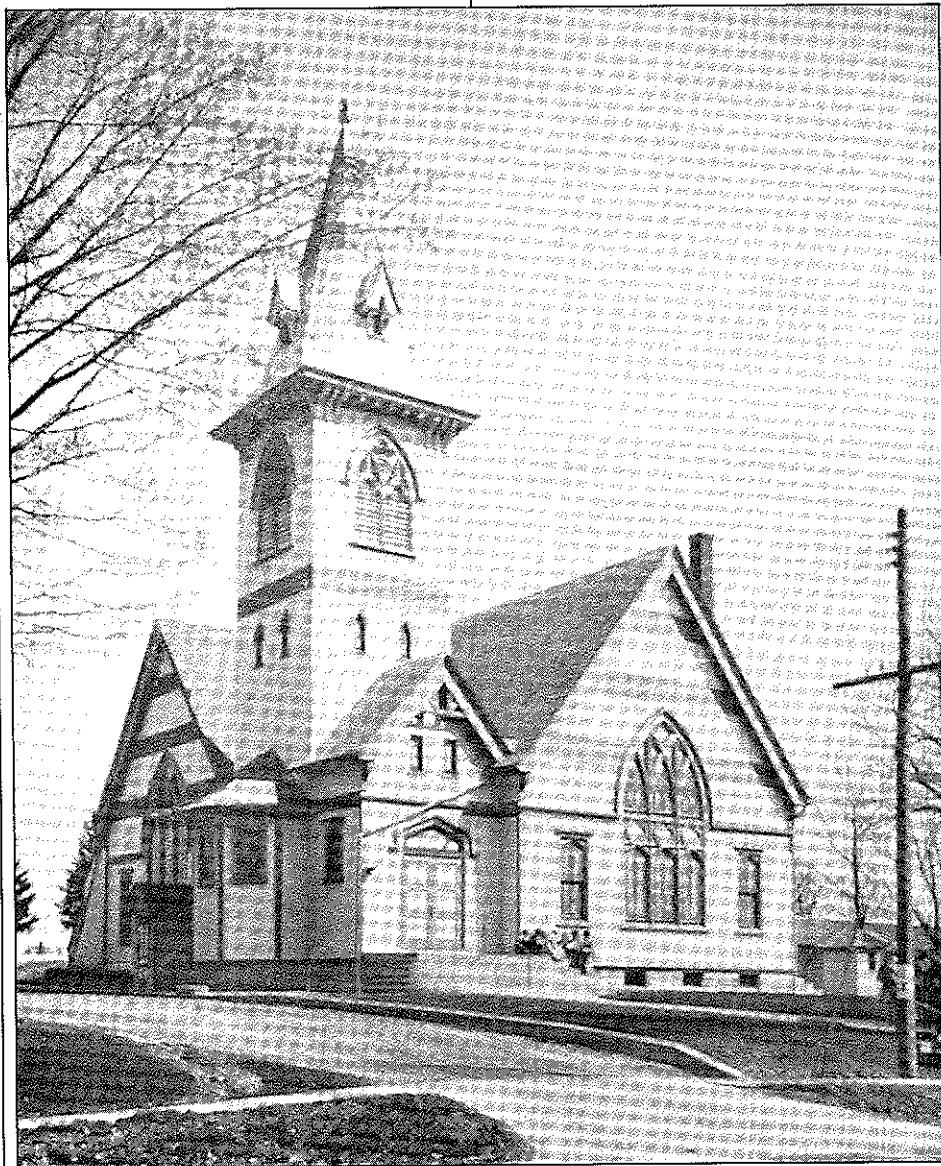
Alto is a case in point.⁵ In spite of the difficulties that go with migrating from one country to another and becoming established in a new land, a vibrant church

life began in the Alto Reformed community, in doctrine, piety, and expression of the Christian life, and that continues to the present. The first church which was organized in Alto is the mother congregation of all the Reformed congregations in Alto,⁶ Waupun, Brandon, Fond du Lac, Friesland, and Randolph, Wisconsin. Including the Netherlands Reformed and Protestant Reformed churches, there are fourteen congregations⁷ in existence today which stem from or relate to the first congregation in Alto. Since the first Alto church was a product of the Dutch *Afscheiding* of 1834, the daughter

churches continued to be Seceder in spirit and church practice to a greater or lesser extent.

However, the vibrant church life which was rooted in the Secession of 1834 suffered from a great amount of dissension in the Alto community. During the period from 1848 to 1883, six congregations emerged: two Reformed churches, two Christian Reformed churches, a Congregational church, and a Presbyterian congregation, all in Alto township, with its

Alto RCA, constructed 1898
First Reformed Church: Seventy-fifth Anniversary (privately printed, 1930), p. 4



*Elton Bruins is a dean and religion professor at Hope College. His published works include *The Americanization of a Congregation: A history of the Third Reformed Church of Holland Michigan*.

limited Dutch-immigrant population. The Seceders in Alto, though united in spirit to the *Afscheiding*, found it very difficult to establish harmonious church life. The intensity of their commitment often resulted in disagreement and division. In the zeal to have a strong and devout congregational life, the Dutch immigrants in the Alto community went through a great deal of pain and unrest before some degree of unity and peace was achieved. In spite of the ecclesiastical trials in the Alto area, the history of Dutch-immigrant church life in Alto township is an interesting story which deserves telling.

and Hollendyke.⁹ In 1847 more families arrived: Bruins, Boom, Veenhuis, De Groot, Veernhout, Van Eck, and Walhuizens. Two brothers, Jan and Hendrik Straks, had also arrived in 1846.¹⁰ Nearly all of these Gelderland families were from Winterswijk, Aalten, or Dinxperloo.¹¹ Meenk had undoubtedly written back to his family and friends, thereby encouraging emigration of many families known to him.

A greater encouragement came from Roelof Sleijster, who had arrived in 1846. He had been a student preparing for the ministry in the Seceder Church of An-

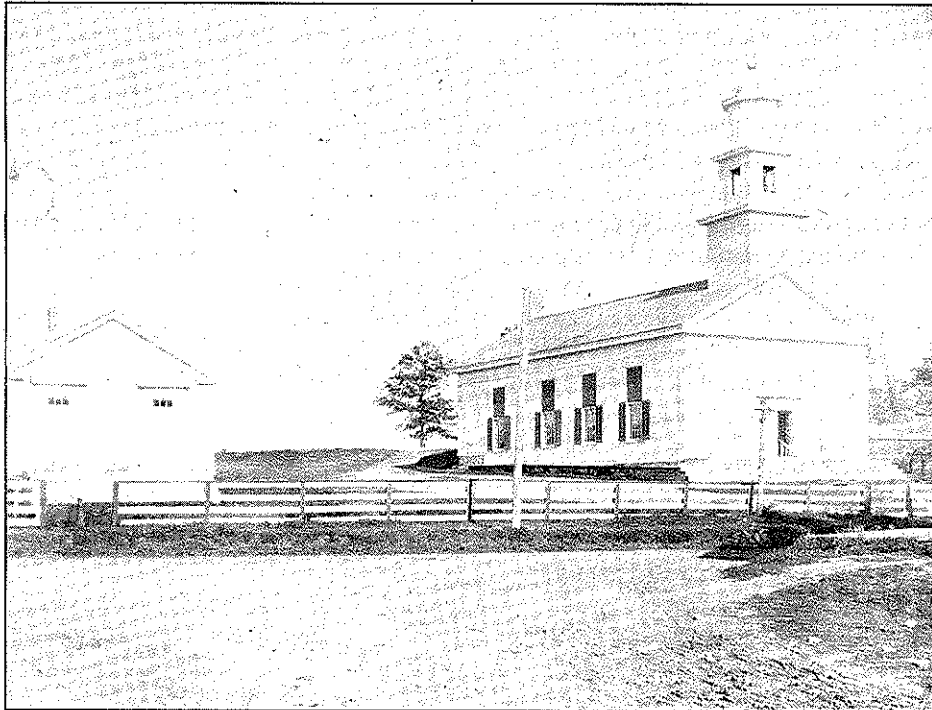
many Seceders to America, and for Brummelkamp there was evidence in these letters that the move to America had the blessing of God. Brummelkamp had this to say of Sleijster:

This brother wrote us many letters both from there [Milwaukee] and from Boston and other stopping-places on his journey—pretty regularly one every three weeks, and we have not discovered any one of his letters to have been lost. He sent us many important messages. Although it pained us that he could not prosper in his studies, especially since we would very much like to have kept him as a preacher of the Gospel in the Fatherland, in the interest of those who must emigrate to America, his journeying ahead and sojourn there and activities and investigation will have great value. The Lord be with him and bless him further in this weighty work for the good of many sighing, worried, and faint hearts. If it be God's will, he will be able to become a preacher of the Gospel there.¹⁴

In his letter to Brummelkamp, Sleijster had also written for permission to preach.¹⁵

In the short time that Sleijster was in Alto, he found it thoroughly to his liking. He purchased eighty acres and claimed another one hundred sixty acres. He built a home for his family, and he was able to earn extra money by carpentry, painting, and plastering. Money was in short supply, so he earned wages to buy basic staples and provide a home for his family. He had chosen a site for his home near a creek of fresh water, but he could see the creek only from a hill because the prairie grass was so high and plentiful. He reported that the area was fertile, with heavy clay soil, with not much timber, but an adequate supply for building and fuel. The land was easy to cultivate. He also liked the unstructured and free life in America. Sleijster was a strong spokesman for migration to the Alto area.¹⁶

The first families who settled Alto organized congregational life immediately. David A. Van Eck opened his home for



Alto Reformed Church, 1857-1989

Albertus Meenk, a Gelderlander from the town of Winterswijk, was the first Dutch immigrant to arrive in Alto. When he came to America in 1845, he had heard about the area from a person whom he had met on his trip.⁸ He chose not to stay in Milwaukee, where several Dutch families had already settled, but proceeded to Alto. In 1846 ten families came to the area and settled near Meenk: Ter Beest, Loomans, Rensink, Vanden Bosch, Sleijster, Ridders, Niewenhuis, Hoftiezer, Boland,

tonie Brummelkamp in Arnhem when he decided to join the mass migration to America.¹² On August 26, 1846, he wrote to his mentor, Dominie Brummelkamp, and praised the Alto area as a place to settle. Brummelkamp decided to publish Sleijster's letter, along with others, including one from Van Raalte, in a pamphlet entitled *Stemmen Uit Noord-Amerika, met Begeleidenen Woord van A. Brummelkamp (Voices from North America with a Foreword by A. Brummelkamp.)*¹³ Brummelkamp favored the emigration of

services until a log church was constructed on his property in 1847. The site of the first church was one-half mile from the center of the present Alto village and the Alto Reformed Church. There is no record that Roelof Sleijster conducted the services, but since he had the blessing of Brummelkamp to preach, it is certain that he gave some pastoral leadership to the Alto congregation. G. Ter Beest, M. Duven, and Cornelius Veernhout provided the catechetical instruction.¹⁷ The new congregation was pleased when Gerrit Baay¹⁸ accepted the call to be its minister. Baay, a student and disciple of Hendrik P. Scholte, arrived in Alto with his family in June of 1848.

In Dominie Baay, Alto found another booster, who wrote a promotional letter which was published in *De Toestand der Hollandsche Kolonisatie in Den Staat Michigan Noord Amerika, in het Begin van het jaar 1849* (*The situation of the Dutch Colony in the State of Michigan, North America, in the Beginning of the Year 1849*).¹⁹ It was a lengthy letter in which he gave a detailed report of his trip to America. His helpful tips to would-be emigrants were beneficial, especially warning people not to be taken in by some unscrupulous Americans and Dutchmen. He regreted that many emigrants had decided to go to Michigan rather than Wisconsin. Milwaukee was to his liking, and the new Dutch families there wanted him to stay as their pastor, but he went to Alto, where he preached his first sermon on Pentecost, 1848. The Van Ecks took the Baay family into their home until the addition to the log church, which would serve as living quarters for the pastor and his family, was finished. The area was to his liking because the Dutch people were already making a very good living. Moreover, his wife, who had been ailing for twenty-eight years in the homeland, now felt healthy and strong.

Baay immediately began an active ministry. He conducted two services on Sunday and also preached in homes during the week. He organized the congregation, presumably along Seceder lines, but the

congregation apparently was independent, with no denominational affiliation. No records remain of the period of his ministry, which unfortunately turned out to be very brief. He died in November 1849, leaving a rich spiritual legacy as a result of his brief pastoral labor. His remains rest in an unmarked grave. After the Alto congregation built a new structure in 1857, the original log church, which was used as an *armenhuis* (poor house), and the nearby graveyard disappeared in the course of time. His wife, "Grandma Baai," as she was known, was laid to rest in the new cemetery, near the new building.

Baay's love for the Alto community and his promotion of the area led to the coming of many more Gelderland. The editor of *The Ware Burger* in Waupun, six miles to the southeast, claimed in 1859 that the Alto area had eight hundred Dutch residents.²⁰ Most likely the number was exaggerated, but the Alto community had developed with some rapidity. By 1880 the entire township had 1430 residents, of which three-fourths were Dutch. Easterners who had settled there earlier often sold their farms to the incoming Dutch. Consequently, not all of the Dutch had to homestead.²¹ Many of the immigrants prospered during these early years.

But the first Dutch congregation in Alto was destined for some very troublesome days following the death of their beloved pastor, Gerrit Baay. Even while he was their pastor, it appears that "some people began to hold church services in others' homes."²² Even though nearly all of the early settlers spoke the same language and had even come from the same towns in Gelderland—Aalten, Dinxperloo, and Wintersijk—they apparently had disagreements within the *Afscheiding* fellowship of the Alto church. Possibly some people in the congregation preferred a different emphasis from Baay's and may have echoed Scholte's viewpoint. In 1850 Dominie Van Raalte came all the way from Holland, Michigan, in an effort to bring the congregation into the Reformed

Church fold. He found the congregation full of dissension and division and got nowhere with them.²³

Strangely enough, after Van Raalte had returned to Michigan, it was rumored in Alto that he would be visiting the Sheboygan area, where a number of Gelderland people had also settled.²⁴ The Alto congregation, now apparently showing more interest in Van Raalte's leadership, dispatched C. Landaal and J. Baai²⁵ to Sheboygan. Going some sixty miles on foot to that area was not considered too difficult a trip in order to meet the dominie from the Holland *Kolonie* in Michigan. When they arrived there, the Sheboygan people were surprised to see them. Van Raalte was not there, nor did they expect him. But the dominie in nearby Cedar Grove, Reverend Pieter Zonne, seized an opportunity. Zonne did not like Van Raalte because Van Raalte had refused to approve his ordination, and he had turned to the Presbyterians for ordination.²⁶ Apparently a very good preacher with a charismatic dimension to his personality, Zonne was attractive to the Alto brethren. Zonne's competition with Van Raalte for "sheep" began to develop in full force. Zonne had written back to the Netherlands warning about the poor area which Van Raalte had settled in the Michigan area.²⁷ He said that the broad area of fertile clay soil and majestic hardwood forests in Sheboygan County was far superior for settlement. Zonne gave the Alto gentlemen his undivided attention and offered to come to Alto to preach and to help the little church become Presbyterian.²⁸

There are no written records to prove that the congregation did become Presbyterian, but for at least two years Zonne's influence was very strong in Alto. Dominie Van Raalte then brought his influence to bear. Dominie Seine Bolks, who became pastor in the Milwaukee church in 1855 and who was a former cohort of Van Raalte in the Holland *Kolonie*, was dispatched to Alto to give assistance and direction. The year before, the Reformed Church had organized the Classis of Wis-

consin, which included all the Dutch congregations of Illinois and Wisconsin. The Alto people liked Reverend Bolks and accepted the invitation to become officially affiliated with the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church, into which Dominie Van Raalte had led the Holland Classis in 1850. The 1855 statistics of the Classis of Wisconsin show that the Alto congregation numbered forty families when it united with the Reformed Church in America.²⁹

Reverend Bolks also helped the church find a new minister. Reverend Herman Stobbelaar, who had trained in Kampen, arrived in Alto in July of 1857. The church grew under his ministry, and by the time he left in September 1860, the church had sixty families, seventy-five people in communion, and ninety-seven children and youths under catechetical instruction.³⁰ But not long after he arrived, a number of

families apparently took a dislike to him and left the church to form a congregation which located just one mile north of the Alto Reformed Church, which had moved into its new building in 1857. Neither of the "official" histories of the Alto church—one by Henry Harmeling in 1898 and one by John H. Kregel in 1930—mentions the secession of this group. However, Reverend J. De Jonge wrote that "during the pastorate of Reverend Stobbelaar, the fires of division were again rekindled. Some thirty families appeared to disagree with the 'Domine.'" ³¹ De Jonge overestimated the number who left the church, the actual number being only about a third of his estimate, but it seems clear that De Jonge gave the correct reason for the defection of these families.³²

This new Alto congregation was organized in the spring of 1858. It called itself the 'Hollandsche Gereformeerde Sion Kerk te Alto, Wisconsin.'³³ The heads of the families who formed the church were

William Hoftiezer, Martin Welhuizen, Garret J. Rikkers, Henry J. Welhousen, Dirk J. Rikkers, Jan De Groot, Dirk J. Nagel, Dirk Freriks, Derk J. Lammers, Jacob Welhouse, Jan Welhuizen, and Henry J. Rikkers. There are clearly some family groupings here—three Rikkers families and four families with the name Wellhouse, as they came to be called in time. The Swierenga immigration records show that all of these families came from Aalten or Dinxperloo.³⁴ They could not have been outsiders from the Alto Reformed group on the basis of origin in their home province. The word *Gereformeerde* in their title shows that the dissidents were apparently of the same theological persuasion as those in the Alto Reformed congregation. It does not appear likely that there was a division along theological or ecclesiastical lines. The group purchased land from D. J. Nagel for sixty dollars, and a lovely fieldstone church was built for five hun-

Alto General Store



dred dollars.³⁵ A graveyard was laid out several hundred feet west of the church, and in time a parsonage was constructed just south of the church.

The most unusual aspect of the founding of this church was the denominational affiliation it chose. It did not go to the Presbyterian denomination, which obviously was known to the members through the earlier association of the Alto Reformed Church with Zonne. Instead, it went to the Congregational Church. It is likely that the pastors of the Congregational churches in Waupun and Brandon, American towns nearby, offered their assistance.³⁶ The congregation, however, had Dutch immigrant ministers to serve it. During the entire time the congregation was able to support a minister, the pastor was Dutch, could preach in Dutch, and kept records in Dutch. Pastors who served this congregation were Reverends Frans Schroeck, 1858–1866; C. W. Van de Ven, 1866–1871; B. H. Idsinga, 1874–1878; Sipko Rederus, 1879–1885; and Anco Rederus, 1885 to about 1900. The congregation experienced modest growth for a time.³⁷

Alto Reformed Church membership dipped somewhat when the Zion members defected, but it continued to thrive because it had effective pastoral leadership for the rest of the nineteenth century. Reverend Martin Ypma, who had founded the Vriesland, Michigan, church in 1847, was pastor of the Alto Reformed Church from September 1860 to May 1863, when he died. Reverend Roelof Pieters served from May 1865 to May 1869, when he left for Holland, Michigan, to succeed Dr. A. C. Van Raalte in the Pillar Church. The congregation had enlarged its building while Pieters was pastor. John H. Karsten served from June 1869 to December 1882, followed by J. W. Te Winkel, James F. Zwemer, and Henry Harmeling. The unusual aspect of the division in the Alto church in 1858 under Stobbelaar is that the Congregationalists obtained a new congregation. By this time, the news of the Secession of 1857 in Michigan, which resulted in the organization of the Chris-

tian Reformed Church, must have reached Wisconsin, but it apparently made no impact in Milwaukee or Alto.

As Dutch immigrant families became a majority in the township and the township became fully settled, some immigrant families found it difficult to become established because new land was no longer available. Many Alto people looked farther west to new settlements for low-priced farmland. Many Dutch and American families alike were lured by the abundant land available farther west. The Nagels went to Greenleaf, Minnesota, and several families went to Sioux Center, Iowa, when Sioux County opened for settlement. Some Dutch families from Alto moved into neighboring townships, and some moved to the city of Waupun, where, in time, a new Reformed congregation was organized.³⁸ Overall, the Dutch farmers in Alto did very well. Some prospered. Hendrik and Henrika Van Wechel Bruins, who settled in the township in 1847, were able in time to give a farm to each of their six children.³⁹

While many of the Alto people did well financially, ecclesiastical peace eluded them. Dissension and division developed once more and overwhelmed the entire community. Between 1878 and 1883, four more Dutch-immigrant congregations were formed. The reasons for the disruption of church life were varied. Hendrik Bruins wanted his own church; Presbyterianism surfaced once more; the devastating controversy over lodge mem-

bership, which began in the Pillar Church in Holland, Michigan, spilled over into Wisconsin; and the Christian Reformed Church made its entrance into the ecclesiastical life of Alto township.

The new ecclesiastical dissensions began first in the Congregational Church. Reverend B. H. Idzinga decided to go into the Presbyterian Church, and he wanted to take his whole congregation into the Presbyterian fold with him. He influenced the congregation to enter the Presbyterian Church by a vote of 42 to 25 in 1878.⁴⁰ But the Winnebago Conference of the Congregational Church had other



Alto, Wisconsin, windmill at about 1900

ideas. It did not allow the taking of the whole congregation into the Presbyterian denomination, so a division took place. Reverend Sipko F. Rederus⁴¹ became the new pastor of Zion Church, and Reverend Idsinga left the area for another congre-

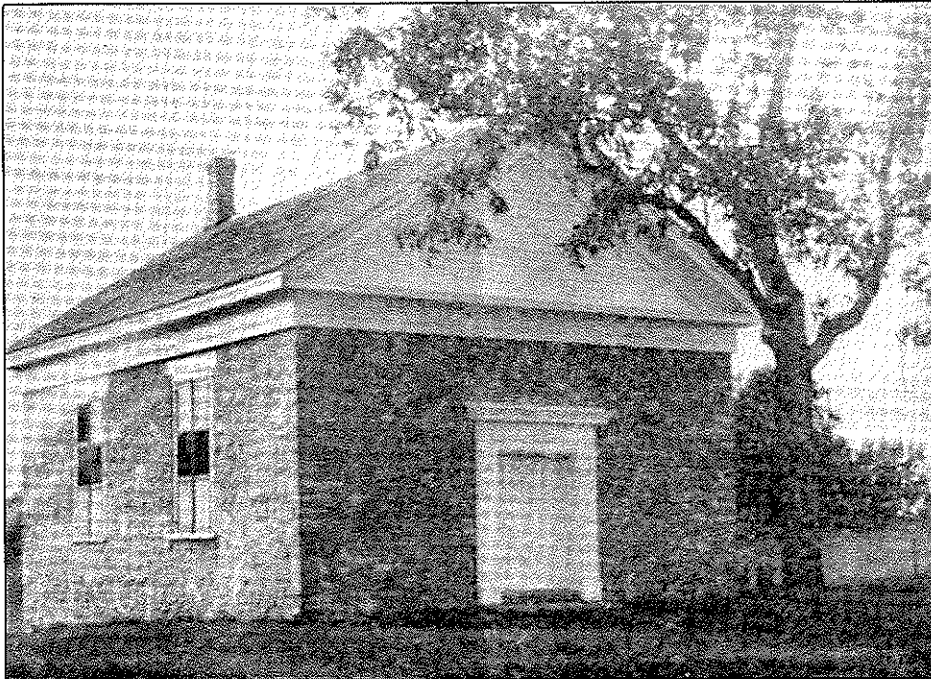
gation. However, a number of congregants built a new church about two miles southwest of the village of Alto and called themselves Calvary Presbyterian Church. They built a parsonage on the east side of the church and laid out a cemetery on the west side. Their first minister was Reverend Buurt Vis. Other pastors who served them were Reverend Eekhof; Gerrit J. Bloemendaal; Dries Mouw; John H. Tietema; Louis H. Benes, Sr.; Joseph Klerekoper, Buurt Vis (second time); and Paul E. A. Schroeder, the last pastor. Dutch preaching prevailed, and Reverend Pieter Zonne's hope for a Dutch Pres-

the congregation was called, were his own children and their families.⁴⁴ Local wags now had names for the four Dutch-immigrant churches in the community: Ebenezer was the Bruins Church, Alto Reformed was the Planken ("Wooden") Kerk, Zion was the Stone Church, and Calvary Presbyterian was the "Kikvorsen" ("frogs") Kerk, because it was located next to a creek. But the name Ebenezer ("Hitherto the Lord has helped us." 1 Samuel 7:12) did not help the Bruins Church. The congregation was not able to get a minister, much to Hendrik's disappointment, and when he died on

he took a wait-and-see stance, and the congregation did stay in the Reformed Church. Although the Alto congregation did not secede, the Masonic controversy opened the door to the Christian Reformed Church. Hendrik Bruins was partly responsible for this. In his disappointment that his own congregation was not flourishing and had failed to obtain a minister, he was open to the ministry of Reverend T. Vanden Bosch, a missionary of the Christian Reformed Church who came to the Alto area.⁴⁸ Jan Willem Bruins, Hendrik's son, whose third wife, Aaltje Rens, had Christian Reformed sympathies,⁴⁹ shared in the organization of First Christian Reformed in 1881, an offshoot from Bruins's Ebenezer Church. And where was this new congregation located? Right next to the Bruins Church, out in the country, four miles northwest of Alto village.⁵⁰ Moreover, the will of Bruins stipulated a legacy of nine hundred dollars to build the new church. Why not honor the venerable Hendrik Bruins by building a new church right next to Ebenezer with the money he provided?

The decision of First Christian Reformed Church to locate next to the Bruins Church did not suit people of Christian Reformed sympathies who lived in or near the village of Alto, so they organized Second Christian Reformed Church in 1883.⁵¹ They were successful in getting as their minister Reverend J. C. Groeneveld, from East Saugatuck, Michigan, who had taken his Reformed Church congregation into the Christian Reformed Church during the Masonic controversy. The 1885 *Yearbook* of the Christian Reformed Church lists ten families and fifty-two souls for First Christian Reformed Church and fifteen families and eighty-seven souls for Second Christian Reformed Church. The elders of the First Christian Reformed Church were H. Tien, J. W. Bruins, and L. Wensink. The W. Vande Bosch, D. Mulder, and A. Bronkhorst families and Mr. G. Brink were among the first members of the Second Church.

The Classis of Illinois of the Christian



Zion Congregational Church

byterian congregation in the Alto area was at last achieved.⁴²

About the same time Calvary Presbyterian Church got underway, the aging Hendrik Bruins, who never did like the site chosen for Alto Reformed Church in 1857, decided to build a church on his property about four miles northwest of Alto village. He had been a successful farmer, had raised a large family, and could afford to build this church with his own money.⁴³ Many of the members of the new Ebenezer Reformed Church, as

February 21, 1881, the church was doomed. The property was given to the Alto Reformed Church, and in time the church building was moved to a farm one mile south, where it still serves as a barn.⁴⁵

Now the Masonic controversy which had plagued Holland, Michigan, reached the Alto community.⁴⁶ Dominie John H. Karsten of the Alto Reformed Church was so incensed that the Reformed Church General Synod did not condemn membership in the Masonic Lodge that he persuaded his congregation to vote secession from the denomination.⁴⁷ However, before this action was carried out,





Reformed Church was disturbed by this development. On January 16, 1884, Reverend F. Broene and H. Tempel met with both groups in an effort to unite them. The effort failed, but agreement was reached that they would share the cost of Pastor Groeneveld's salary. The First Church weakened rapidly, however, and in 1886 the Classis of Illinois ruled that the congregations become one. In the merged congregation there was now a good nucleus for a successful congregation. In addition to the names mentioned above, other early heads of households of the merged congregation were H. Gerritsen, J. H. Loomans, G. Van Loo, J. Rens, B. Bronkhorst, A. Dondersgoed, W. Donkersgoed, B. Vossekuil, Otto Redeker, H. Beekman, A. Mulder, and T. De Motts. A friend of the Alto Christian Reformed Church, Mr. J. Kloosterboer, gave a plot of ground across the street from his farm as a site for the new church, which was built in 1884, before the merger was completed.⁵² The southwest section of the Alto Reformed Church cemetery was reserved for the Christian Reformed departed, truly a magnanimous gesture, for several of its members had left the Reformed congregation. The new Christian Reformed Church was built just a block south of the Reformed Church.

By 1900, the number of Dutch-immigrant congregations in Alto village and township was back to three. Zion Congregational discontinued its services about this time and was no longer an active congregation. Alto Reformed Church was always the dominant church in the settlement, and it continued to grow. The Christian Reformed Church grew slowly but steadily. Calvary Presbyterian Church had considerable strength until well into the twentieth century. As sad as the history of ecclesiastical life in Alto was during the nineteenth century, the two surviving congregations today, the Reformed and Christian Reformed, became the base for development of the Re-

*Alto CRC Congregation, 1941
Sixtieth Anniversary Celebration (privately
printed, 1941), pp. 20-21*

formed Christian community of that general area. The Friesland Reformed Church was organized in 1893. The First Christian Reformed in Waupun was organized in 1921. Others followed.⁵³ The present fourteen congregations referred to earlier sustain a strong Reformed Christian witness in spite of the difficulties of the first generation of Dutch-immigrant settlers in Alto, Wisconsin.

Endnotes

¹*Netherlanders in America: Dutch Immigration to the United States and Canada, 1789-1950* (Ann Arbor: U of M Press, 1955) 201. The village of Alto is located approximately seventy-five miles northwest of Milwaukee. The township is in the southwest corner of the county.

²See pages 40, 41, 167, 348, 647, and endnote 24.

³*Netherlanders in America: A Study of Immigration and Settlement in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries in the United States of America*. Ed. Robert P. Swierenga. Trans. Adriaan de Wit. 2 vols. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985. Another important source for Alto history is *The History of Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin* (Chicago: Western Historical Company, 1880) 771-72 and 1057-63. This account is especially helpful in its information about the "English" settlers of Alto township. This historical account mentions that the township was named by Silas Miller, a lay preacher of the Methodist Episcopal Church. There is then no connection between "Alto" and "Aalten," from which some Dutch immigrants came. There were two non-Dutch churches founded in the Alto area, a German Methodist and a Methodist Episcopal, both of which have vanished without a trace.

⁴Rev. Gerrit Bieze of Athens, Ontario, is very knowledgeable about Alto history and has given me inestimable help in the preparation of this essay.

⁵A key difference between the founding of Alto and Holland, Michigan, is that Alto was not founded by one person, such as Albertus C. Van Raalte, who had a vision for the development of the community. Rev. John H. Karsten in his essay "A Half Century of Dutch Settlement in Wisconsin, 1847-1897," deplors the fact that Alto lacked a charismatic leader like Van Raalte (Henry S. Lucas, ed. *Dutch Immigrant Memoirs and Related Writings*. 2 vols. Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1955. 2:129-39.)

⁶Alto is often hard to locate because it no longer has its own post office. The people living on the north side of the village have a Brandon address, and the people on the south side have a Waupun address. Both the Alto Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed church have a Waupun address.

⁷The congregations are Alto Christian Reformed Church, 1882; First Reformed Church of Waupun, 1887; Friesland Reformed Church, 1893; First Reformed Church of Randolph, 1908; First and Second Christian Reformed Churches

of Randolph, 1908 and 1938; First Christian Reformed Church of Waupun, 1921; Bethel Reformed Church of Brandon, 1936; Grace Reformed Church of Fond du Lac, 1938; Emmanuel Reformed Church of Waupun, 1941; Protestant Reformed Church of Randolph; Netherlands Reformed Church of Waupun, 1951; Trinity Reformed Church of Waupun, 1955; Bethel Christian Reformed Church of Waupun, 1961.

⁸Lucas, *Netherlanders in America*, p. 40. In an article by Lucas, "The First Dutch Settlers in Milwaukee," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 30 (1946) 174-83, he refers to Meenk as "John A." (p. 179) but calls Meenk "Albertus" in *Netherlanders in America*.

⁹This list of early families is found in Henry Harmeling's article "Historical Review of the First Reformed Church of Alto, Wisconsin, at the dedication of a new church building, December 7, 1893," (Lucas, *Dutch Immigrant Memoirs* 2:73-78). This article first appeared in *De Hope*, December 28, 1898. John H. Kregel repeats this information in his history of the Alto Reformed Church entitled *First Reformed Church, Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Souvenir, Alto, Wisconsin, 1855-1930*, p. 6. Kregel's name is not listed as the author of this pamphlet, but it can be safely asserted from internal evidence that he was the author. Kregel draws heavily on Harmeling's historical sketch, but Kregel also interviewed Mrs. Jennis Bruins Glewen, the oldest member of the congregation in 1930, who was a student in the day school taught by the first pastor, Rev. Gerrit Baay. Mrs. Glewen, born December 7, 1841, was the seventh child of Hendrik and Hendrika Van Wechel Bruins.

¹⁰Both Harmeling and Kregel failed to mention Jan and Hendrik Straks. Lucas reported this information in his article "The First Dutch Settlers in Milwaukee," p. 177, fn. 9. In the obituary of Rev. Henry Straks, Jan Straks, his father, is said to have arrived in Alto in 1846. He married Johanna Van Wechel in 1848. *The Minutes of the General Synod*, June 1913, p. 887.

¹¹This information is mentioned in various places and confirmed in the *Dutch Immigrants in the U.S. Ship Passenger Manifest 1820-1880 and Dutch Emigrants to the United States, South Africa, South America, and Southeast Asia, 1825-1880*, both compiled by Robert P. Swierenga.

¹²Melis te Velde, *Anthony Brummelkamp, (1811-1888)* (Barneveld: Uitgeverij de Vuurboek, 1988) p. 169. Of Brummelkamp's forty-seven students from 1846 through 1857, six others besides Sleijster went to America.

¹³Published in Amsterdam by Hoogkamer and Company, 1847. The Sleijster letter is on pages 53-59.

¹⁴Page 5. Translation by Dr. Henry ten Hoor.

¹⁵There is no evidence that Sleijster did any preaching. He was a farmer in the Alto area. He served as a member of the Wisconsin State Assembly in 1870. (John H. Karsten, "A Half-Century of the Dutch in Wisconsin," Lucas, *Dutch Immigrant Memoirs*, 2:132.) Although Sleijster was prominent in the Alto community, there is no information on his life in Wisconsin. The family name has died out. The Sleijster farm

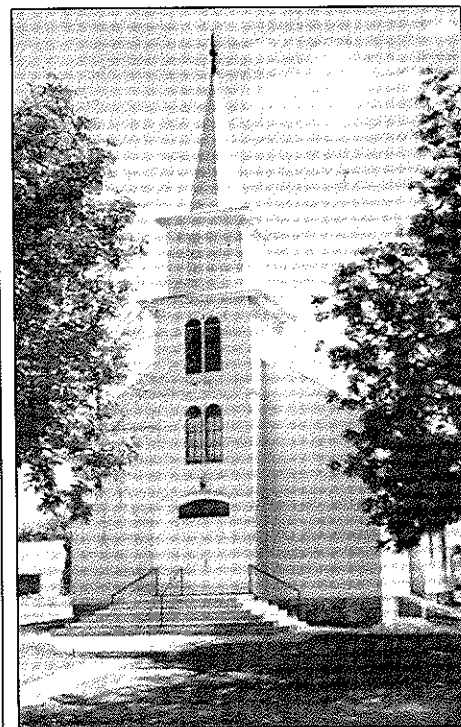
was about one and one-half miles west of Alto village.

¹⁶Some of Sleijster's exact words were, "This area is fertile, heavy clay soil, not much timber in comparison with some other areas, but enough for building and fuel. So the land is much easier to cultivate than that in other areas. There is good water and the climate is healthful." According to Lucas, Sleijster visited the Van Raalte settlement in Michigan "but had been so discouraged by the forests and swamps in the Black River country that he had decided to return to Wisconsin." *Netherlanders in America*, p. 167.

¹⁷Kregel, p. 6.

¹⁸Also spelled variously as Baay, Baai, or Baaij.

¹⁹Amsterdam, 1849.



Alto CRC, 1881-1941
Sixtieth Anniversary Celebration (privately printed, 1941), p. 4

²⁰Lucas, *Netherlanders in America*, p. 203.

²¹Van Hinte, p. 294.

²²J. de Jonge, in a letter to Rev. Henry Beets, February 5, 1914, Calvin College Historical Collections. This letter is a very important source for Alto church history from a Christian Reformed point of view. Harmeling's and Kregel's essays represent a Reformed Church perspective.

²³A. C. Van Raalte wrote in a letter of June 19, 1850, that he found "much bitterness and division" among his fellow countrymen in Alto. (Cited by Van Hinte, p. 296). Reverend Isaac N. Wyckoff, who came to the Holland Kolonie in 1849, also went to Milwaukee. He did not have the time to visit Alto but said this of Alto in his

important report to the Board of Domestic Missions of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church: "At Waupun, six mile [sic] from Fond-du-Lac, the head of the Winibago [sic] Lake, there is a settlement of thirty families or more and a regularly organized church under the care of the Rev. Mr. [Gerrit] Baay, containing more than forty members." *Dutch Immigrant Memoirs and Related Writings*, 2:456. Lucas said of Wyckoff's entire report that it "will ever remain an instructive document in the history of Dutch immigration" (*Netherlanders* 450.)

²⁴J. de Jonge, letter, February 5, 1914.

²⁵Baai was the son of the minister. He later entered the Presbyterian Church ministry.

²⁶According to Dr. Herbert J. Brinks, Calvin College.

²⁷Lucas, *Netherlanders* 205.

²⁸This information on Zonne's efforts to bring the Alto congregation into the Presbyterian fold comes mainly from the J. de Jonge letter. Kregel and Harmeling say very little about the "Presbyterian phase" of the Alto church's history.

²⁹*Minutes of the General Synod*, 1855, the statistical tables.

³⁰*Minutes of the General Synod*, 1860, the statistical tables.

³¹J. De Jonge to Henry Beets, February 5, 1914.

³²Information supplied by Rev. Gerrit Bieze. Stobbelaar seemed to cause schisms in the churches he served. From Alto he went to Zeeland, Michigan, where a Christian Reformed congregation was formed in 1861; while he was serving next in the Cedar Grove, Wisconsin, area, a Christian Reformed congregation began in Oostburg, and when he went to Pella, Iowa, in 1873 and served a congregation for six years, he took it out of the denomination, and it became independent. Stobbelaar must have been a controversial person.

³³The records of this congregation are extant and owned by the cemetery association which owns "The Stone Church" building and cemetery.

³⁴See end note 11.

³⁵The church stands to the present day and contains many of the original furnishings. The cemetery association conducts one service a year there during the month of August.

³⁶J. De Jonge reported that some "persons had come into contact with the Congregational Church, and what was reported about it sounded so good that they decided to affiliate with that denomination." Translation by Rev. Gerrit Bieze.

³⁷Some of the members of the church who are buried in the cemetery are Arant Van Spankern, 1835-1936; Henrietta Van Spankern, 1843-1924; Hermanus Kemink, 1835-1898; Engelina Klompenhouwer Kemink, 1839-1923; Adolph Berkelaar, 1833-1908; Henry B. De Groot, 1849-1926; Hendriena De Groot, 1858-1936; William Kastein, 1814-1878; Aleida Kastein, 1813-1880; Jakob Walhuizen, 1834-1918; Marten Walhuizen, 1816-1870; Rev. Corn. W. Van de Ven, 1805-1871; E. Ypes, M.D., 1803-1875; William Boland, 1812-1876; William Hoftiezer, 1805-1865; Jannetze Hoftiezer, 1825-1867; G. W.

Smits, 1831-1912; Henry J. Reusink, 1813-1882; Dinna Reusink, 1816-1878.

³⁸The church began with forty-four charter members in 1887.

³⁹The Bruins family holdings amounted to more than two sections of land or 1,280 acres (Hannah Bruins Vander Velde, "Early History of the Hendrik and Hendrika Bruins Family"). This account appeared in the Bruins family genealogy, which Hannah published c. 1940. It has been reprinted in the *The Bruins Family of Alto, Wisconsin*, 1980, Elton J. Bruins, editor, pp. 101-106.

⁴⁰The records of Zion Congregational Church and information supplied by Rev. Gerrit Bieze.

⁴¹He was the son of Frances C. Rederus, an RCA pastor from 1874-1886, who had been educated at Kampen. Sipko was born in Grootegast, the Netherlands, July 29, 1854. He attended New Brunswick Theological Seminary and was licensed by the Winnebago Conference in 1881. After he left Alto in 1885, he served Presbyterian and RCA churches (*The Historical Directory of The Reformed Churches in America*, Peter N. Vandenberg, editor. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978, p. 143. Rederus's article on "The Dutch in Sheboygan County" appeared in the *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 1 (1918) 256-65. He gives much information about the Dutch Presbyterian churches but virtually nothing about the Christian Reformed churches and Reformed Church congregations.

⁴²Records of the Calvary Presbyterian Church are in the possession of the First Reformed Church of Waupun. Some early members were John N. Van Hierden, Berend and Gerendina Smits, Jentje Van De Berg, Hattie Van Egtern, Johanna Van Veen, Jan Van't Hof, Stepke and Johanna Frens, Klaas Numerdor, Hermanus and Jentje Van Buren, V.N. and Mary Van Hierden, Jannetje Bos, and Harmen Gerritsen. The Vande Zande clan also was in this church. Many of these people were buried in the little cemetery which remains cared for to the present. The church was disbanded in 1932. Several members left the church in 1925 to join the new Protestant Reformed congregation in Waupun. After the congregation disbanded, most members joined the First Reformed Church of Waupun. They, in turn, were the nucleus of the Emmanuel Reformed Church when it was organized in 1941.

⁴³Hendrik was an ardent Seceder. He was arrested but not convicted in 1836 for holding a conventicle of twenty-nine people in his home at Twello, near Deventer, the Netherlands. Dr. Cornelis Smits discovered Hendrik's arrest papers in Amsterdam in 1977. Harry Boonstra provided a translation of the material.

⁴⁴Son Derk and his wife, Cynthia, joined Ebenezer church reluctantly (Hannah Bruins Vander Velde, "Early History of the Hendrik and Hendrika Bruins Family," p. 105).

⁴⁵On the John R. Kemink farm.

⁴⁶For details of this controversy see my essay "The Masonic Controversy in Holland, Michigan, 1879-1882" in *Perspectives of the Christian Reformed Church: Studies in Its History, Theology, and Ecumenicity*. Ed. Peter de Klerk and Richard

R. De Ridder. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1983. Pp. 53-72.

⁴⁷Reported by J. de Jonge in his letter of February 5, 1914.

⁴⁸An obituary of Hendrik Bruins written by his son Andrees was published in *De Wachter*, March 31, 1881. It had been reported in *De Wachter* on February 10, that Hendrik contributed five dollars to the Student Fund, five dollars to the Foreign Missions Fund, and five dollars to the Home Missions Fund of the CRC. The paper also reported other gifts in March of 1881, including one hundred fifty dollars for Home Missions. Hendrik clearly had CRC sympathies by the time of his death. Home missionaries Rev. T. Vanden Bosch officiated at Bruins's funeral service in the home, but Rev. John H. Karsten, pastor of Alto Reformed Church, officiated at the service in the Alto church (Hannah Bruins Vander Velde, "Early History of the Hendrik and Hendrika Bruins Family").

⁴⁹According to my father, Clarence R. Bruins.

⁵⁰*The Plat Book of Fond de Lac County Wisconsin* (Minneapolis: 1893), p. 20, clearly indicates that the two structures were next to each other on the northwest corner of the intersection. The First Christian Reformed Church was organized March 21, 1881 (J. de Jonge, February 5, 1914).

⁵¹The exact date is April 4, 1883. "Historical Sketch of the Christian Reformed Church of Alto, Wisconsin," in the *Souvenir of [the] Sixtieth Anniversary Celebration, 1881-1941, Christian Reformed Church, Alto, Wisconsin*, p. 7. The *Yearbook of the CRC for 1885* mistakenly gave 1881 as date of the founding.

⁵²"Historical Sketch of the Christian Reformed Church of Alto, Wisconsin," pp. 7-8.

⁵³Additional information on Alto church history can also be found in the following works: Borduin, M. "Het Hollandsche element in de Presbyteriaansche Kerk." *De Gereformeerde Amerikaan* 8.3 (1904) 119-25. Ligterink, G. H. *De Land Verhuizers: Emigratie naar Noord-Amerika uit het Gelders Westfaalse grensgebied tussen de jaren 1830-1850*. Zutphen: Walburg Press, 1981.

The "Vander Aa"

Church of South Holland, Illinois, c. 1869–1876

by Gerrit Bieze



E. L. Meinders

The Archives of Calvin College contain a bundle of letters known as the "Teunis Bos Vanden Hoek Collection." This correspondence was written by Teunis Vanden Hoek from America to family members who remained in his ancestral home, Noordeloos, South Holland, The Netherlands. Vanden Hoek emigrated from Noordeloos in 1866 and settled in South Holland, Illinois, where he lived until 1882.

His letters shed much light on the South Holland community during the years 1866 through 1882. Since there were several families in South Holland who had originated in Noordeloos, he shared the news about those families with his own family in Noordeloos. Sometimes his letters seem disjointed because he was answering inquiries from his family about persons living in South Holland, inquiries which were contained in letters from the Netherlands which we do not have. This is especially true with regard to the news about the "Vander Aa" church in South Holland. Apparently the people in Noordeloos had heard the news that Jacob Vander Aa from Noordeloos had started his own church, and the Dutch villagers were eager to hear what Teunis thought of this whole strange business.

From Vanden Hoek's letters we know that upon his 1868 arrival in South Holland he affiliated with the Reformed Church because its pastor, H. Koopman, was also from Noordeloos and was highly regarded. Rev. Koopman had accepted the call to South Holland's Reformed Church and had arrived there in 1866.

Of these events H. J. Brinks asserts,

Concerning religious matters, Vanden Hoek noted that there was "much confusion" in 1866. The back-

**Rev. G. Bieze is pastor of the Athens, Ontario, CRC. His interest in the early ecclesiastical patterns of the Reformed churches in America is longstanding and expert.*

ground to that observation concerned a division within the South Holland Dutch Reformed Church (RCA), which had fragmented in 1862. That year marked the arrival of Seine Bolks, who was unable to satisfy the expectations of a segment within the congregation. These folk banded together to form an independent church. Rev. H. R. Koopman probably came to South Holland in 1866 with hopes of healing the 1862 breach because he had been a highly regarded pastor for many of the South Hollanders before they immigrated. And, in fact, after Koopman was installed, most of the dissidents did rejoin the RCA, to remain with the congregation until Koopman left in 1868. At that time the church fractured a second time, and the minority group eventually acquired the service of Rev. Ede L. Meinders in 1874. (Brinks 12-13)

Later letters from Vanden Hoek demonstrate that he and his family also left the Reformed Church and affiliated with the Christian Reformed Church by 1875, when Meinders became the first pastor of the South Holland Christian



Reformed Church.

The South Holland Christian Reformed Church actually predated the 1868 exodus from the Dutch Reformed Church. Dr. Henry Beets relates that in 1865 a Christian Reformed congregation was organized in South Holland. But in the following year this newly organized congregation nearly died out, apparently because some of its members returned to the Dutch Reformed Church when Rev. Koopman arrived. The situation was so bad that in 1867 worship services were no longer held because the small group had no place to hold services (Beets 125). But in 1868 the congregation was revived by those who left the Reformed Church when Rev. Koopman left to serve the Christian Reformed Church at Pella, Iowa.

The origins of the Christian Reformed Church of South Holland may be traced back to the 1862 exodus out of the Reformed Church. Those dissenters banded together to form an independent congregation. Later, in 1865, they, or at

least a segment of them, sought affiliation with the Christian Reformed Church, known then as the True Holland Reformed Church. The consistory minutes of the original Christian Reformed Church, now the Netherlands Reformed congregation of South Holland, relate the following history of the origins of the congregation:

The Classical meeting of the True Dutch Reformed Church (CRC), held on January 12 and 13, 1865, at Zeeland, Michigan, has, at the request of a few members residing in Low Prairie, Illinois, appointed and delegated a committee composed of Rev. W. H. van Leeuwen and elder T. de Jong of a congregation at Grand Rapids, Michigan, to go there and, if possible, organize a congregation. The aforesaid committee put forth efforts to that end on Friday, January 27, 1865, at the home of a member, Arie van Drunen, after having heard a sermon preached by Rev. van Leeuwen based on Psalm 89:16a. . . . (Kersten and van Zweden, 83)

Those same consistory minutes tell us that the first officebearers were Anthony van Drunen, elder; Arie van Drunen and Peter de Jong, deacons. The group also decided on February 13, 1865, to erect a church building. Those plans, however, were not realized immediately. Only after the congregation was numerically strengthened in 1868 were these plans carried out. Also, only after 1868 did the congregation grow to such a size as to be able to support a minister. In the late fall of 1873 they called Rev. E. L. Meinders of the Wellsburg (Iowa) Christian Reformed Church to be their pastor. He accepted their call and began his ministry in South Holland on March 15, 1874.

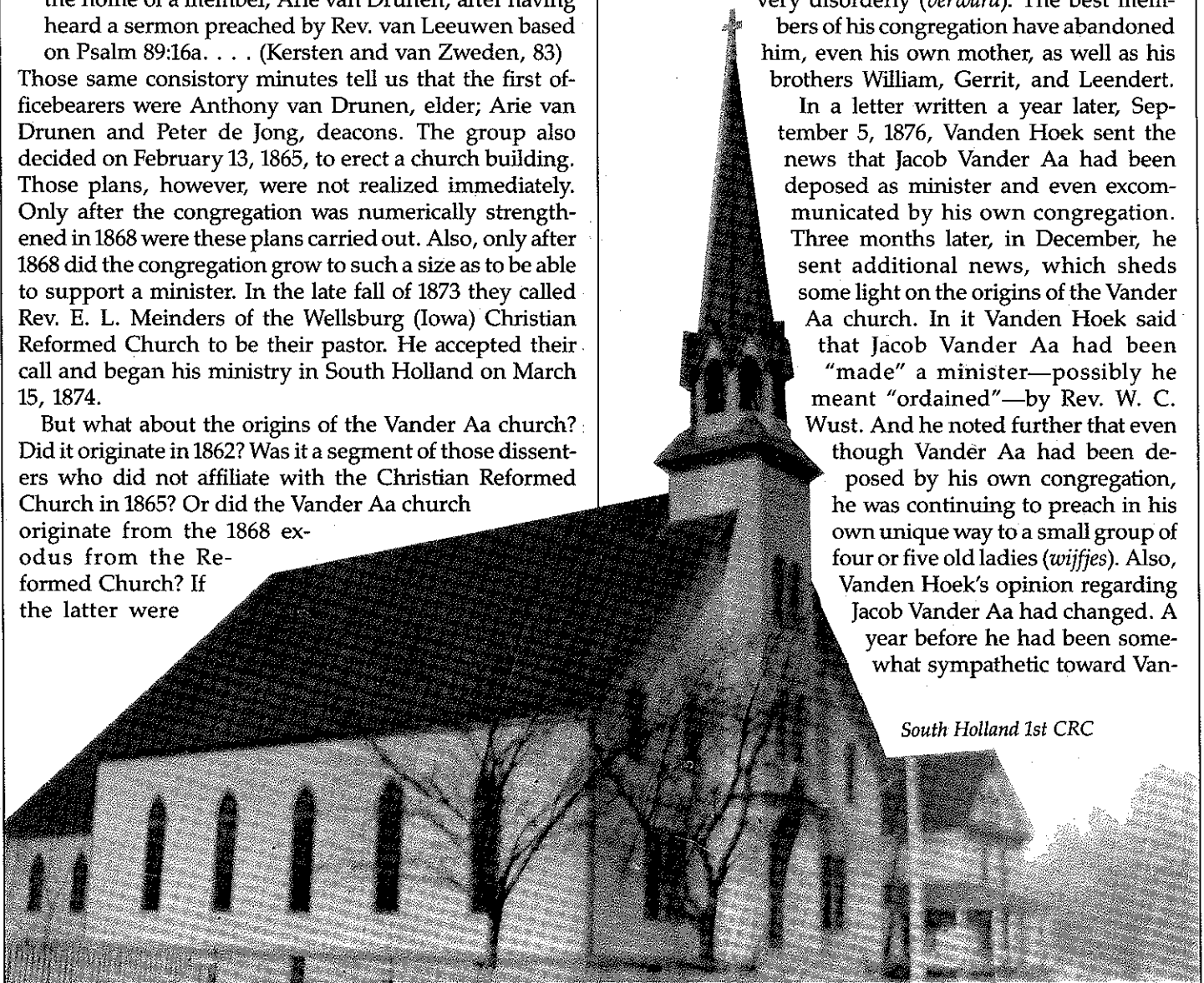
But what about the origins of the Vander Aa church? Did it originate in 1862? Was it a segment of those dissenters who did not affiliate with the Christian Reformed Church in 1865? Or did the Vander Aa church originate from the 1868 exodus from the Reformed Church? If the latter were

the case, then it appears that the 1868 dissenters went in two directions, some joining the Christian Reformed Church, others following the leadership of Jacob Vander Aa to form their own independent congregation. The Vanden Hoek letters seem to present some evidence for seeing the origins of the Vander Aa church in the 1868 exodus.

In a letter dated August 10, 1875, Vanden Hoek first mentioned the Vander Aa church. In all likelihood he had received a letter asking him what he knew about Jacob Vander Aa and the church he had started. He wrote back to them, saying,

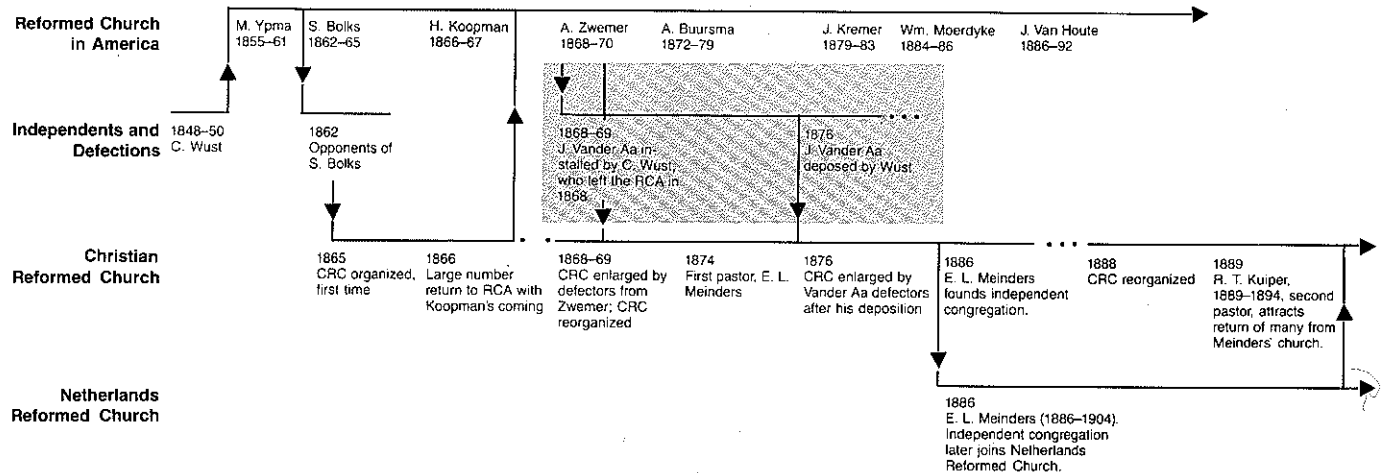
The congregation of J. Vander Aa is very small, with only 5 families left in it. Vander Aa preaches "the Truth" but due to his lack of formal training, his preaching is very disorderly (*verward*). The best members of his congregation have abandoned him, even his own mother, as well as his brothers William, Gerrit, and Leendert.

In a letter written a year later, September 5, 1876, Vanden Hoek sent the news that Jacob Vander Aa had been deposed as minister and even excommunicated by his own congregation. Three months later, in December, he sent additional news, which sheds some light on the origins of the Vander Aa church. In it Vanden Hoek said that Jacob Vander Aa had been "made" a minister—possibly he meant "ordained"—by Rev. W. C. Wust. And he noted further that even though Vander Aa had been deposed by his own congregation, he was continuing to preach in his own unique way to a small group of four or five old ladies (*wijffjes*). Also, Vanden Hoek's opinion regarding Jacob Vander Aa had changed. A year before he had been somewhat sympathetic toward Van-



South Holland 1st CRC

PROBABLE ECCLESIASTICAL MOVEMENT OF REFORMED PEOPLE IN SOUTH HOLLAND, 1849-1894



der Aa, feeling that he was preaching the truths of the Bible. But now his preaching showed a very strong Labadistic strain (a narrow definition of the "pure" church). He had tried to talk some sense into Jacob Vander Aa, but to no avail. Thereafter Teunis Vanden Hoek wrote no more of Jacob Vander Aa and his South Holland followers.

The letter which reported about Rev. Wust's having "made" Jacob Vander Aa a minister also suggests the time when this church originated in South Holland. Rev. Wust had been the first minister of the South Holland Reformed Church at around 1850. At that time it was an independent congregation. Thereafter Wust returned to the Netherlands but eventually came back to America and served churches in New York State and New Jersey which belonged to the Reformed Church in America. While a minister in the Reformed Church, he surely would not have dared to ordain Jacob Vander Aa. But after Rev. Wust had broken with the Reformed Church, sometime after April 1868 (Bos 77-78), he would have been free to organize a congregation of dissenters. Since Rev. Koopman did not leave South Holland until October 1868, the second exodus out of the Reformed Church must have taken place late in that year. In all likelihood, then, the Vander Aa church was officially organized as a congregation sometime in 1869, after the group had gotten into contact with Rev. Wust. However, Rev. Wust never mentioned Vander Aa in his 1882 autobiography, *Mijn Twee-en-veertigjarige Loopbaan in de Kerk Gods*. In his 1878 correspondence with Rev. D. Bakker of 'sGravenpolder, while entertaining a call to the Ledeboerian

churches in the Netherlands, he wrote that he had been "thrown out" of the Reformed Church and that he and his congregation had become independent. He did say that there was another congregation affiliated with him, whose pastor, Rev. C. Vorst, he had ordained in Grand Rapids (Florida, 240; and *100th Anniversary*, 10). But he mentioned nothing about Jacob Vander Aa in South Holland.

Perhaps Vanden Hoek was right. Perhaps Wust did ordain Vander Aa in 1869. And he may also have deposed and excommunicated him in 1876. If so, then there was little point in recording this failed venture in his 1882 biography. But other questions come to mind: what happened to the group which deposed Vander Aa as its pastor? Did they continue to exist for a time as a congregation in fellowship with Rev. Wust? Did they return to the Reformed Church or affiliate with the Christian Reformed Church? Did the group of "old ladies" following Vander Aa after his deposition simply disappear after a time? And what about Jacob Vander Aa himself? What happened to him?

This account of the Vander Aa church gives a historical glimpse of one of the oldest Dutch-American communities. Here, as elsewhere (see pp. 23 to 33 in this *Origins*), splits and splinterings were common among the Reformed people. Thus Teunis Vanden Hoek's report of much confusion among the people in South Holland in 1866 is hardly surprising. Already in 1850, Rev. Wust had left South Holland to return to the Netherlands as a result of "confusion" in the church. The confusion of the 1860s which Vanden Hoek reported gave birth to both the



T.B. Vanden Hoek

Christian Reformed church and the Vander Aa church in South Holland. Again in the 1880s turmoil developed when Rev. Meinders and his congregation broke away from the Christian Reformed Church to form an independent congregation which eventually became part of the Netherlands Reformed Church. After Meinders's departure, the South Holland Christian Reformed Church was reorganized in 1887. In the 1920s, dissention broke out again, leading to the formation of the Protestant Reformed congregation in South Holland, which in the late 1950s divided into two groups.

This scenario of splits, splinterings, and secessions was not unique to the South Holland community. It was

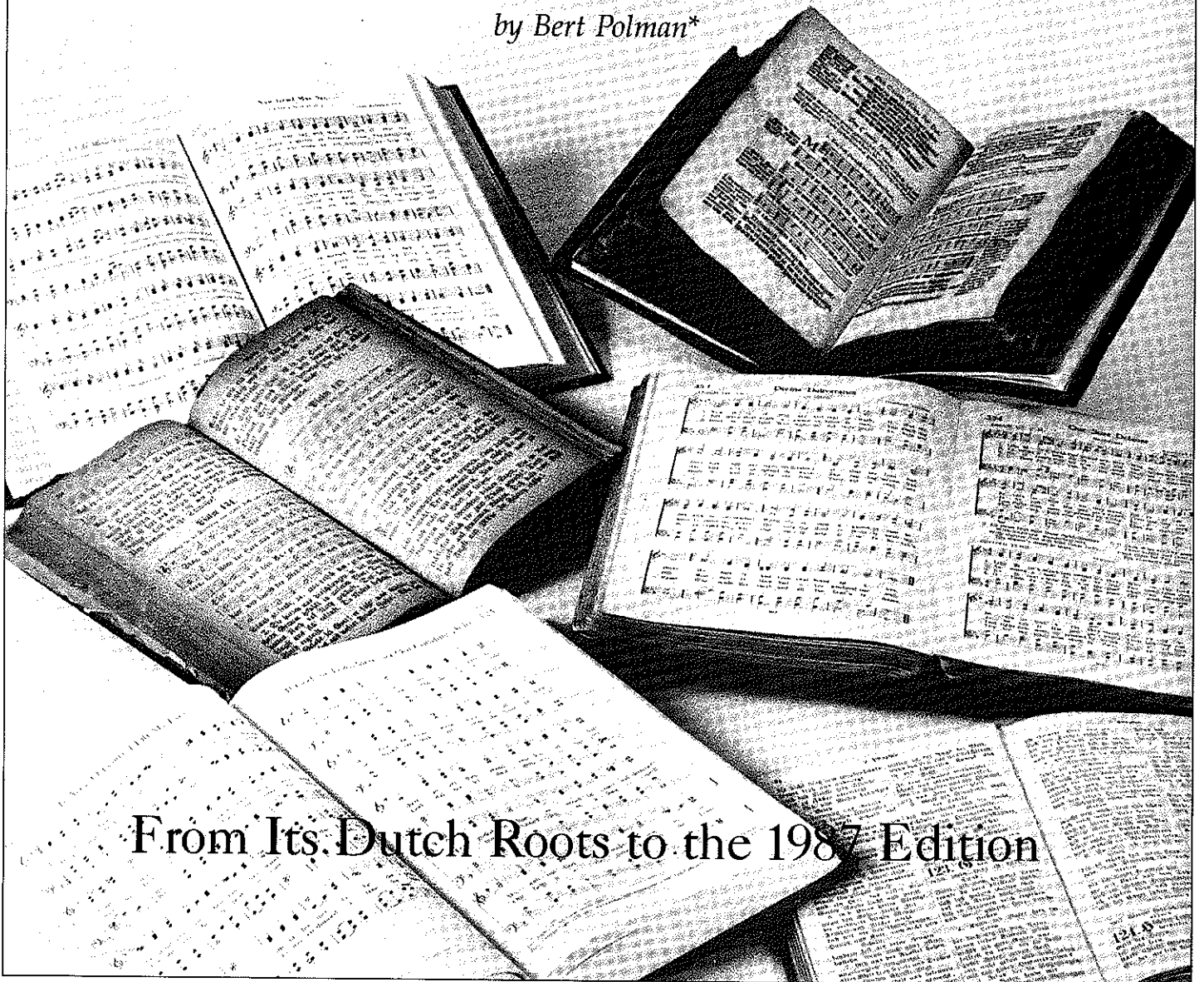
and still is a common feature in many North American Dutch Calvinistic communities. The story of origins is very complicated.

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THE PSALTER HYMNAL

*by Bert Polman**



From Its Dutch Roots to the 1987 Edition

Many of the readers of *Origins* will be familiar with the TV series called *Roots*, which traced the history of an Afro-American family. A Dutch-American enterprise along the same lines would probably be called *Bulbs!* Using a growth metaphor, this article traces the development of the Christian Reformed *Psalter Hymnal* in the following stages: the Dutch soil, the American planting, the ecumenical flowering, and the multiethnic grafting.

The Dutch Soil

As a Christian denomination, the CRC may trace its earliest musical roots to biblical times and to biblical songs—the Old Testament psalms, the Lukan canticles (Luke 1-2), and the various early Christian hymn fragments quoted by Paul and John. As the Christian church developed, psalmody remained one of the principal categories of its music. At the time of the Reformation Calvin chose the psalms as the main musical repertoire for Reformed worship, and under his leadership a number of poets and musicians worked on the French *Genevan Psalter*, which was published in its completed form in 1562.

The *Genevan Psalter*, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Palatinate liturgy were translated into Dutch by Peter Datheen in 1566. Datheen faced great difficulties in trying to unite the natural accents of the Dutch language with the musical accents of the Genevan tunes. Many scholars agree that Datheen's translation is poor, but it became the accepted Dutch *psalmboek*, hallowed by many of the Dutch martyrs who died while singing from it.

Singing from Datheen's version was done unaccompanied, frequently with the help of a *voorzanger*—often the local school teacher. There were no

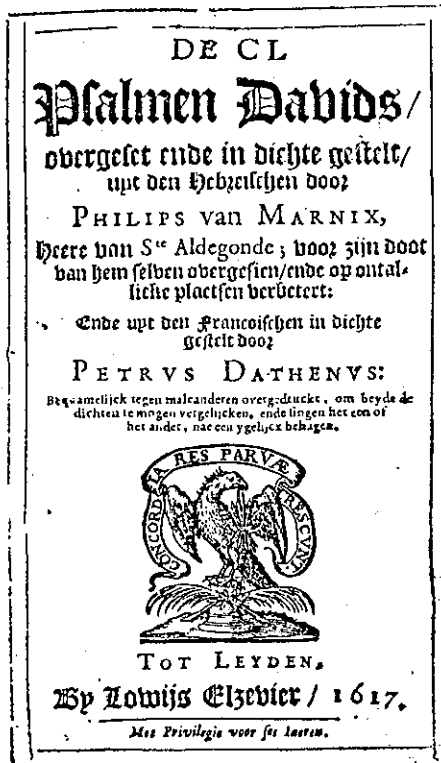
**Dr. Bert Polman, Associate Professor of Music at Redeemer College, Ancaster, Ontario, wrote his doctoral dissertation on the history of liturgy and music in the CRC and served on the most recent Psalter Hymnal Revision Committee for the past ten years.*

choirs which sang during worship, and organs were not used until later, in the seventeenth century. The practice of singing the psalms was canonized in the Church Order accepted at the Synod of Dordt in 1619.

Because of the poor quality of Datheen's translation and because of changes in musical style and taste in general, the modal and rhythmic characteristics of the Genevan tunes were gradually erased from Dutch singing. Eventually the tunes tended to be sung in major or minor keys (not consistently in their original modes) and in "isorhythm" (all notes of the

flecting the alterations of the Genevan tunes. From this time onward organ accompaniment to congregational singing was the rule, though the singing was very slow. One *voorzanger* reputedly took twelve minutes to sing one stanza of Psalm 68.

But, as happened virtually everywhere in Christendom, psalmody was not deemed sufficient in the Dutch churches, and a movement arose to sing more hymns in church. The *Evangelischen Gezangen* was published in 1805, and more hymns were added in its 1866 edition. By late twentieth-century standards, many of



1617 Edition of Petrus Datheenus' "Psalms of David."

same time values—often whole notes). By the early eighteenth century, a number of new psalm paraphrases were attempted, and by 1773 the Dutch churches agreed on a new *psalmboek* with versifications (by various poets) of better quality than those by Datheen and musical settings re-



Petrus Datheenus

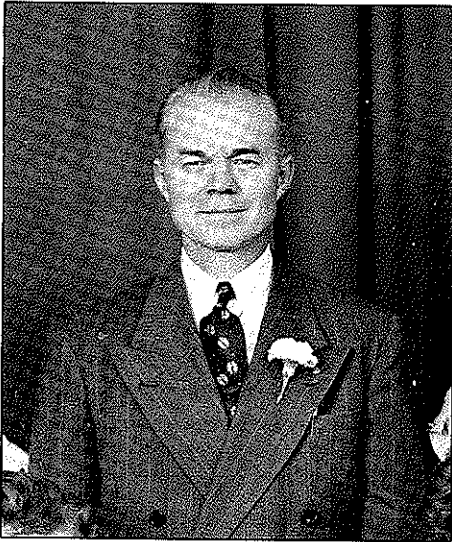
these hymns would be judged not evangelical, but liberal. The enforced use of these *gezangen* led to much unrest in the Dutch churches, and it was one of the factors which led to the Secession of 1834 (*Afscheiding*). A number of these seceders immigrated to the New World and settled initially in Michigan and Iowa. In 1857 they formed the Christian Reformed Church, still singing in Dutch from their 1773 *Psalmbboekjes* to the altered Genevan tunes.

The American Planting

Devout psalm-singers, these early Christian Reformed folk found strength

in their isolation. But before long they were subject to all the pressures of Americanization—as were most other religious and ethnic minorities in the United States. Though these immigrants had left the Netherlands in part over the question of hymns, hymns soon crept into the new Christian Reformed denomination as well.

In the mid-1880s a number of German-speaking Reformed congregations in Iowa and Illinois joined the CRC, and in 1888 the Christian Reformed Synod approved the continued use of their liturgy and



Dewey Westra

songbook—*Die Psalmen Davids zum Gebrauch in den reformierten Gemeinde Ostfrieslands.* This book included not only the one hundred fifty psalms but also three hundred fifty-five *lieder*, or hymns.

In 1890 the True Reformed Protestant Dutch Church joined the CRC to become Classis Hackensack. This group of Reformed congregations had earlier adopted the United Presbyterian *Psalter* of 1887 and also used one hundred ninety hymns grouped according to the fifty-two Sundays of the Heidelberg Catechism. These hymns came mostly from Livingstone's *Psalms and Hymns* (1789), used

in the Reformed Church in America. This meant that after 1890 two minority groups in the CRC were singing hymns in either German or English while the majority of the denomination still sang only the Dutch psalms.

By the turn into the twentieth century, however, more use was made of English in the CRC, and by 1914 its first English *Psalter* was adopted. The development of the *Psalter* began in the United Presbyterian Church, whose leaders wanted to revise their 1887 *Psalter*. Eventually representatives from eight other denominations joined them in their revision work—including the CRC, which was represented by Rev. Henry Beets. A group of versifiers met from 1897 to 1905; their work was again revised by 1909 and then published in 1912 as the United Presbyterian *Psalter*. The Christian Reformed Synod of 1910 permitted local use of this book and by 1914 had adopted it as the first English-language songbook for the denomination. It included four hundred thirteen psalm settings, eight doxologies, and the three Lukan canticles. Most of the tunes were typical British and American psalm tunes with the majority in common meter. Only three Genevan tunes were included, none of them in their authentic forms. The entire musical repertoire was quite a drastic change from the Dutch tradition. When the *Psalter* was published for CRC use in 1914, the texts of the one hundred ninety hymns used by Classis Hackensack were bound into the same volume, and, presumably, congregations beyond Classis Hackensack also began to use them, even without proper authorization.

The Ecumenical Flowering

By the end of the First World War the old-timers in the CRC had not forgotten that hymns were associated with liberalism and were, in part, responsible for the Secession of 1834.

But peer pressure on the young people and the commercial promotion associated with American Sunday school hymnody and the gospel songs could not be ignored much longer. Further, the CRC synod had approved hymns for some segments of the church. Consequently, a number of synodical committees struggled with the issues of liturgical uniformity. Finally, the Synod of 1928 appointed a specific committee, initially headed by Calvin Seminary professor William Heyns, to study the question of hymns. In 1930 amidst strenuous debate, that committee reported in favor of hymns and submitted a draft of one hundred ninety-seven hymn texts. By 1932 the Church Order was changed to permit the singing of "approved" hymns, and by 1934 the first CRC *Psalter Hymnal* was inaugurated. Much work on the new book was done by men such as H. J. Kuiper and Seymour Swets. This "red" *Psalter Hymnal* included three hundred twenty-seven metrical psalm settings (forty of them with Genevan tunes in pseudo-Genevan rhythms, many of these versified by Dewey Westra), one hundred thirty-five hymns, and six selections for the close of worship. Among these hymns were some of the classics of Christian hymnody: medieval texts such as "All Glory, Laud, and Honor," Lutheran chorales such as "A Mighty Fortress," and Wesleyan hymns such as "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today." This book was a milestone in the history of the CRC, for by it the denomination expressed its identity with the whole realm of Christian song and thus with ecumenical Christendom of all times and places.

But parts of the *Psalter Hymnal* received mixed reactions. In 1939 and again in 1946, synod authorized changes in harmonizations and rhythms so that the Genevan tunes would appear again entirely in isorhythm. It became apparent after the Second World War that a revision of the *Psalter*

Hymnal would be necessary. Synod appointed a revision committee in 1951, headed by Henry Bruinsma. After much work, that committee proposed revisions which the Synod of 1956 approved. The new edition was to be known as the "centennial edition" to coincide with the 1957 celebration of the CRC centennial. This "blue" *Psalter Hymnal* was finally published in 1959. It contained three hundred ten psalm settings and one hundred eighty-three hymns. The use of Genevan tunes decreased slightly, but a number of them again appeared in their original rhythms. Like the first edition of 1934, the 1959 *Psalter Hymnal* continued to introduce a number of great Christian hymns in both texts and tunes.

The Multiethnic Grafting

Though initially quite comfortable in its isolation, the Christian Reformed Church had a vision for missions, and by 1896 it was reaching out to the Navajo and Zuni Indians. Today, near the end of the twentieth century, the CRC has greatly expanded its ethnic boundaries: there are now congregations in which the membership is more Black, Oriental, Hispanic, or AmerIndian than Dutch. Other traditions have become grafted into the Dutch vine. That new diversity comes to expression also in the musical repertoire of the denomination. It is difficult for any single hymnal to meet such a diversity. From 1970 onward, CRC leaders faced requests for more latitude in the "approved" repertoire and for supplementary materials. By 1974 synod approved the *Psalter Hymnal Supplement*, produced by a committee chaired by Calvin Seerveld. A few revisions were made before the 1976 printing, which finally contained sixty-four songs. Typical of the more exploratory supplementary hymnals published during the 1960-70s, the *Psalter Hymnal Supplement* featured some traditional hymns but also a

number of folk settings, spirituals, and contemporary texts and tunes, some in a pop style.

But the *Psalter Hymnal Supplement* was used by relatively few congregations. Many other congregations made up their own song booklets (often without going through the proper copyright channels) or purchased other supplementary hymnals; by 1980 some 80 percent of CRC churches were using books in addition to the *Psalter Hymnal*. And various studies showed that psalmody was in serious decline, especially in the United States part of the denomination.

In response to the growing cultural and ethnic diversity of the denomination, the Synod of 1977 appointed another committee to revise the *Psalter Hymnal*, with Jack Van Laar as chairman. After ten years of work, this committee produced the "gray" *Psalter Hymnal* (1987 but published in 1988) under the editorship of Emily Brink. This edition contains six hundred forty-one songs: one hundred fifty settings of psalms, eighty-six Bible songs (i.e., more versifications from Scripture), some three hundred eighty-five hymns, and additional service music. Many of the psalm versifications were completely reworked, with original paraphrases by contributors such as Helen Otte, Bert Polman, Marie Post, Calvin Seerveld, and Stan Wiersma. Dale Grotenhuis had a major hand in preparing the musical settings. This new *Psalter Hymnal* includes Black spirituals and gospel songs, a number of Hispanic texts and tunes (in English and Spanish), some Oriental hymns (including the Korean ARIRANG tune), and a great variety of contemporary hymnody—both of the classical tradition and of the "praise singing/Scripture chorus" tradition. Unfortunately, there are no AmerIndian contributions.

Though other hymnals will continue to be used by segments of the

CRC, the *Psalter Hymnal* is the main songbook of the denomination: it contains not only the denominational creeds and liturgical forms, but it is primarily the "sung theology" that members of the CRC have in common. The history of the *Psalter Hymnal* has shown the denomination's respect for its Dutch roots in American soil but also its willingness to identify with the ecumenical church, which transcends temporary divisions of race, culture, and era. As the preface to the gray *Psalter Hymnal* states,

... in this edition we present several new songs as our particular gift to the church. We see Christ's Kingdom growing across the earth, and we join our voices in praise to God with those far away in place as well as time.

Thus the *Psalter Hymnal* contributes to the song of the church and reveals how other traditions are grafted into that musical repertoire of praise and prayer.

Hymnody

* (Series of 1st line comparisons Psalm 124)

A. Petrus Dathenus, 1566 translation

B. The Psalmen Davids, 1733 Dutch edition, p. 236

C. Christian Reformed Church 1927 Psalter, p. 353

D. Christian Reformed Church Psalter Hymnal, 1957, p. 315

E. Christian Reformed Church Psalter Hymnal, 1988, p. 124

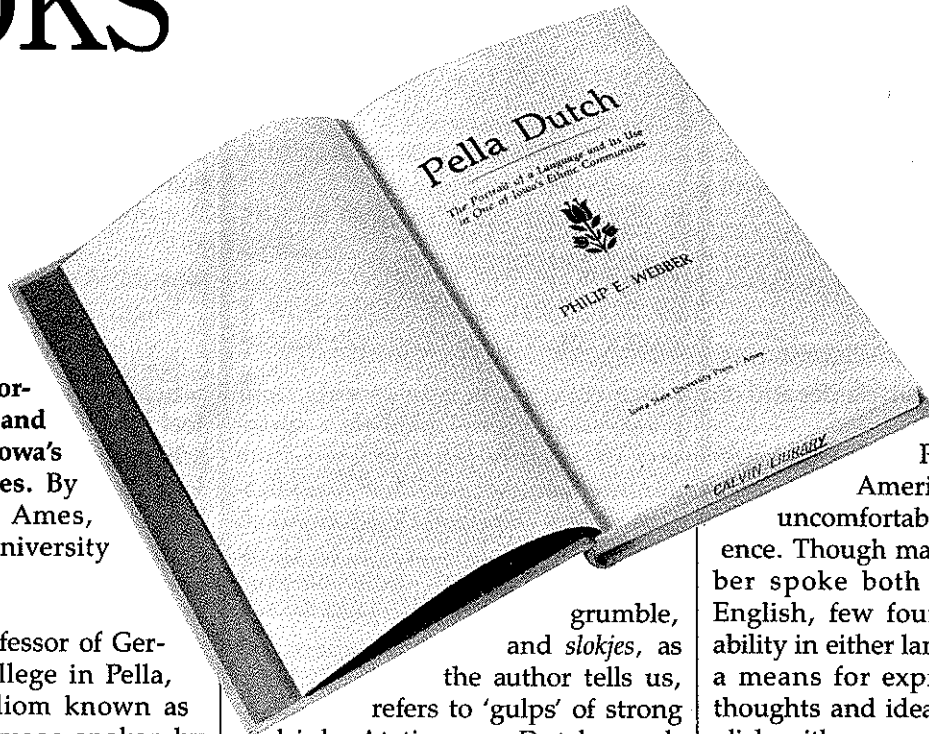
F. German—Songbook for the Evangelical Church, 1909

Sources

This article is revised and expanded from the author's "A History of Music in the Christian Reformed Church" in Proceedings of a Conference on Liturgy & Music in Reformed Worship (Calvin College, July 18-20, 1979), pp. 18-33. A more comprehensive treatment of this topic may be found in the author's doctoral dissertation, "Church Music and Liturgy in the Christian Reformed Church of North America" (University of Minnesota Ph.D., 1981), available in microform from University Microfilms International, catalog #8115028.

BOOKS

by C. J. Bult



Pella Dutch: The Portrait of a Language and Its Use in One of Iowa's Ethnic Communities. By Philip E. Webber. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1988. \$14.95.

The author, a Professor of German at Central College in Pella, writes about an idiom known as Pella Dutch, a language spoken by both the inhabitants of Pella and those living in neighboring communities. Using questionnaires and personal interviews, Webber searches for reasons why those who can still speak Pella Dutch learned it in the first place. The author analyzes the past social linguistic environment in which Dutch and English were spoken and exhibits an appreciative awareness for the Dutch ethnic heritage embodied in the Pella Dutch spoken by the approximately one hundred and fifty individuals whom he or his associates either interviewed or conversed with in a variety of social situations. How, when, and where these speakers used, and still use, Pella Dutch and how their speaking knowledge was passed from one generation to the next, are for Webber fascinating questions which reveal much about the speech and character of the Pella area Dutch.

For Pella citizens, as well as those in other Dutch enclaves, *benauwd* means anxious, *rommel* is junk, *brom* is to

grumble, and *slokjes*, as the author tells us, refers to 'gulps' of strong drink. At times, a Dutch word, sounding like an English word but with a different meaning, is used as a pun. About this characteristic of Pella Dutch, Webber comments:

Hence, there is nothing very jovial about *glad* streets in January (cf. Dutch *glad* 'slick'), nor is there anything particularly vulgar about a man *spitting* in his garden (cf. Dutch *omspitten* 'to turn over [earth] with a spade).

Anglicizing Dutch last names was not a popular habit in Pella. For this reason *Naaktgeboren* (born naked) and *Niemantsverdriet* (nobody's sorrow) remain as not to be forgotten last names for some who still consider the Pella area their home. While we may commend those who retain their Dutch language last names, we will be somewhat dismayed by Webber's statement that "... more respondents admitted to cursing in Dutch than praying in Dutch."

But Webber is interested in more than just the quaint linguistic behavior of those he interviewed. For

many of our ancestors in Pella and elsewhere, Americanization was an uncomfortable linguistic experience. Though many known to Webber spoke both Pella Dutch and English, few found their speaking ability in either language adequate as a means for expressing well their thoughts and ideas. They spoke English with an accent and Dutch of a type which did not resemble the language of new arrivals from the Netherlands. Webber uses the term *schizoglossia* to describe their lack of competency in either language. Not only were most of these persons split personalities linguistically, but they also had an inferiority complex concerning their ability to speak in either language.

No doubt, many interviewed by Webber shared the notion of their immigrant ancestors that the Dutch language was the cherished embodiment of their ethnic and Reformed heritage. Though they wished to become American citizens, they remained very fond of things Dutch and of these the language of the Old Country was the prime example. According to Webber, ethnic cohesiveness in Pella reached its highest point in 1900. By 1920, Webber asserts, the situation was just the reverse. During World War I, those who spoke Dutch were considered less than patriotic by many Americans. Until World War II, Dutch was

often used in catechism classes and on the pulpit.

Though sermonizing in Dutch was no longer a crime, as it had been during World War I, many of those who talked to Webber admitted "... that Dutch sermons from the period between the World Wars were a tedious business." If the "dominee" preached in current Dutch, many in his congregation thought he had little reverence for the language of the *Statenbijbel* while sermons in antiquated Dutch did not appeal to younger people who found English sermons at other churches more attractive. Exhortation by the "dominee" in English was for many of the devout, proof that their spiritual leader had capitulated totally to the American way of life. Both the pastor and his flock found themselves perplexed about what language to use in worship, and, as Webber declares, this dilemma was one among many faced by those who, while they desired to become patriotic American citizens, still clung to their ethnic and religious heritage.

In his final chapter, "The Language," Webber writes about how the spoken language was transmitted from one generation to the next, in what situations it is still spoken, and various more technical features of current usage. Often, those whom he interviewed learned Dutch at home or from a hired man. Almost always young people gained their speaking knowledge from an adult, not from

other children or adolescents, and consequently, the Dutch they spoke was the mature language of adults around them, not a childish or adolescent variant. You conversed in Dutch with other members of the threshing crew if you wished to prove you were one of the boys. Knowledge of the Dutch also enabled you to understand shady stories told on the street and to eavesdrop on your parents and grandparents when they talked about matters not meant for young ears. Humor, folklore, children's rhymes and pithy remarks were often best expressed in Dutch. We note this in Webber's following statement:

In one interview a speaker came to an abrupt stop in a narrative about other persons, winked at me and said, 'Ja, dat muisje heeft een staartje' (yes, that little mouse has a tail, [i.e., there is more to that story; more is yet to come out of what we have been discussing; this will have consequences]).

Webber is not optimistic about the future prospects of Pella Dutch. One of those whom he interviewed said in Pella Dutch: "... zo binnen wel meer dingen dat ik nie weet hoe moet men het in het Hollands zeggen' (there are certainly more things [to tell], but I don't know how one ought to say it in Dutch.' " No longer, Webber concludes, is the Dutch language used to discuss significant issues of life. Also, as Webber observes, few situations, social or otherwise, remain

where those who can speak Dutch feel free to use it. In Pella and elsewhere spoken English conquered spoken Dutch but not without a struggle. The language problem loomed large in the eyes of all our ancestors who were forced to simultaneously evaluate their traditional values and the American way of life and choose from each those elements they thought best for themselves, their church, and their children. Webber helps us understand that for many of our ancestors the transition from one language to another was an aspect of Americanization not easily accepted.

FOR THE FUTURE

The topics listed below are being researched, and articles about them will appear in future issues of *Origins*.

Pelgrim Vaders (continued), translation *by* the late Rev. W. K. Reinsma

Van Schelven's *Grondwet* series, "Historical Sketches from Colonial Life"

Letters from Holland 1846-1940 *by* H. J. Brinks

Christian Education in Northern New Jersey

Ellis Island: Tales of Travel and Arrival, *by* H. J. Brinks.

Additional Notes on the Civil War

The Yff Family—from Amsterdam to Chicago

F. W. N. Huggenholtz, a Liberal Dutch Minister in America *by* Walter Lagerwey

The Oakdale Park Community in Grand Rapids.

Dutch-Americans who served in the Netherlands Armed Forces in World War II *by* Gerlof Homan

M. Schoonbeek—A Time of Sorrow in Grand Rapids, 1873-1890

Sport and Sabbath Desecration *by* John Byl

World War One in Southwest Minnesota *by* Robert Schoone-Jongen

Recollections of WW I *by* Garret Pothoven and Hermine Terpstra

Mins Reinsma: Stories of an Immigrant in the 1950s.



Netherlanders in America

Henry S. Lucas

This hard-to-find volume has just been reprinted in its original, 1955, form. Contact the Origins address or Eerdman's Publishing Co. for further information.

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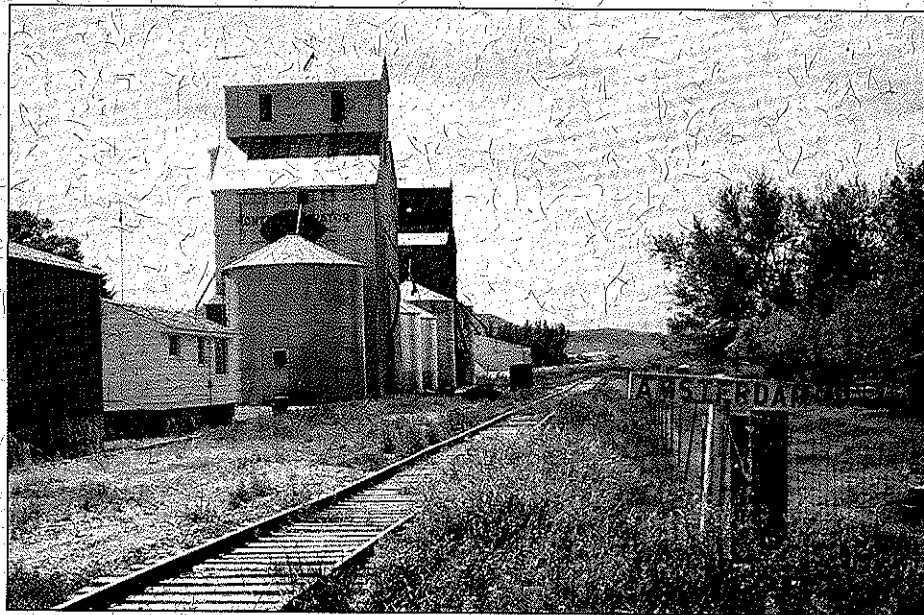
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