Origins

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

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Clarence Schipper

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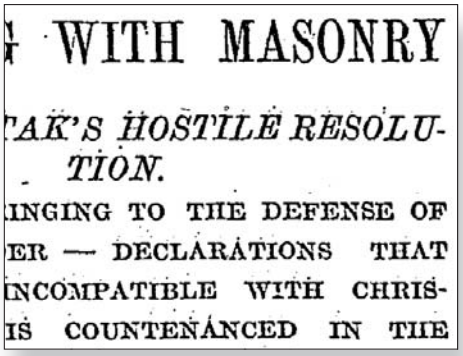

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This Issue

This issue features three articles that focus on the lives of individuals. The life of a young man who left Grand Rapids with his brother to "cowboy" in the early twentieth century is provided by Clarence Schipper in detailing the life of his grandfather Jack. Dr. James C. Schaap examines the life of Renske Hiemstra (née DeJong) living on the American prairies through her correspondence with her older sister Baaye Bakker, still living in the Netherlands. Rev. D. (Douwe) van Dijk describes conditions in the rural Netherlands at the beginning of the twentieth century. Lastly, the work of Rev. Peter Lepeltak, who was a notable presence in the late nineteenth-century Reformed Church in America, is reconstructed and told by Kenneth Schaaf.

Farewell from the Archives and Editing *Origins*

The production schedule of *Origins* requires that I write this in January, just as I pass my nineteenth anniversary in Heritage Hall. To use a cliché, the years have flown by. But, it also means that by the time you read this I will have retired, having reached "full-retirement age" (FRA, in social security-ese) in April. Although I will miss many things from my work here, there are also many things I look forward to being able to do, once my time becomes unencumbered by a formal job. I took over from Dr. H.J. Brinks, who began Heritage Hall a half-century ago and *Origins* thirty-five years ago. He edited the first seventeen years, so it seems appropriate that I stop after the second seventeen years. There have been challenges in editing, but never with the support from you readers. You have encouraged me and generously funded the effort, and for this I am profoundly thankful.

As I look back on this cold winter's afternoon, I marvel at the large number of people who helped me do my job. These individuals did what I asked and more, and as a result Heritage Hall was able to significantly build on the foundations put down by our predecessors. As I retire, you know the names of those who helped me. If I have omitted anyone, it is due to my faulty memory, not their lack of contribution, and I am sorry for the omission.

Some have moved away, some have moved on, some have died, and those marked with an asterisk are still here. All have done much, and I owe all of these individuals much more than they realize, and so offer each this sincere, public, and heartfelt thank you. I am grateful for your gifts to our effort.

Space does not allow me to give these people their due, but three were here when I started and deserve mention. Hendrina VanSpronsen has been on staff longer (twenty-eight years) than anyone else and contributed as much to the production of *Origins* as I did. Robert Bolt has been our field agent for congregational records and has "doggedly" (to use his own word) pursued this task as he did when I arrived. Ed Gerritsen has faithfully volunteered in Heritage Hall twice weekly for the last twenty years (that's a remarkable eight years of labor for no pay!). Helen Meulink came shortly after I began, and also deservers mention for her many volunteer hours of keying information into a variety of databases, mostly birthdays, marriages, anniversaries, and deaths from the *Banner*.

Publications

In addition to the two hard-copy issues annually, we have electronically published *Origins* through 2014 via our webpage (*http://www. calvin.edu/hh/origins/Origins_Main_Page.htm*) and continue adding to our index of birthday, marriage, anniversary, and obituary announcements from the *Banner*, adding the years 1955–1964 and 2016 (links to these are at *http://www.calvin.edu/hh/Banner/Banner.htm*).

Endowment

Currently the *Origins* endowment and operating funds have a total value of $515,209, which is a 2.6 percent increase from last year. The monies in our operating fund cover the expenses for *Origins* (now in its thirty-fifth year of publication), programs in Heritage Hall, and book publication projects. Thanks to the

generosity of many donors, the subscription price remains $10 per year, as it was thirty-five years ago.

Thank you to all for the gift of work I received. I wish you all well and ask that you continue to support the work of Heritage Hall and *Origins*.

Richard H. Harms

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Jack Schipper: God's Providence in Action

Clarence Schipper[1]

In 1903 my grandfather, Klaas Schipper, emigrated to the United States from Bedum, the Netherlands,[2] with his wife, Trijntje (née van der Veen), and their ten children, three boys and seven girls.[3] My father, John (originally Jan, but more commonly known as Jack), was eleven at the time. He was the fifth child in the family. His older brother, George (Geert), eighteen months older than Jack, was the fourth child and was generally the leader of the two as they grew up. A younger brother came along some five years later and grew up quite apart from the two older boys. The family settled in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where the last daughter was born.

Times were hard. Klaas worked as a huckster selling produce throughout the southeast portion of the city. He took his horse-drawn wagon to the produce markets, bought attractive foodstuffs, and sold them directly to housewives. He was one of many such hucksters traversing the streets of Grand Rapids.

As was the case for most immigrant families, the children, especially the boys, were expected to contribute to the family income as soon as they reached their twelfth birthday. Klaas expected much from each of his children and was very strict with them. The children attended Sigsbee Christian School. Jack and George probably left school after third or fourth grade. Their younger sisters all eventually graduated from high school.

When Jack was about fourteen he decided he could no longer live at home. He and George left home in search of new experiences. They hopped trains to Chicago where one of their married sisters, Alice Schaaphok, lived. They worked in the gravel pits on the south side of Chicago for a short time. When they had earned some money, they headed for the Far West. They again hopped trains across the country, much as the hobos of the time did. Usually they tried to ride in an unlocked boxcar, but at times they had no choice but to "ride the rails" underneath the train cars. They tied themselves to the suspension rods of the boxcars so that if they fell asleep, they would not fall off. Had they fallen off, they would have landed on the tracks with certain injury and possibly death.

After a number of unremarkable adventures on the way, Jack and George arrived safely in the area of Twin Falls, Idaho, in September 1911.[4] That community and nearby Rock Creek, which became their usual base location, are located just a little west of the center line of the state, near the southern border. Today Interstate 84 and Highway 93 pass through the area. Although at today's highway speeds this area might pass by in a flash, it was a broad expanse for those traveling on horseback.

This was the cowboy country they had been hearing about. They decided to stay for a while and began looking for work. They started out as horse wranglers, caring for a herd of between 70 and 100 horses; the horses were not theirs but belonged to the actual cow herders. They also

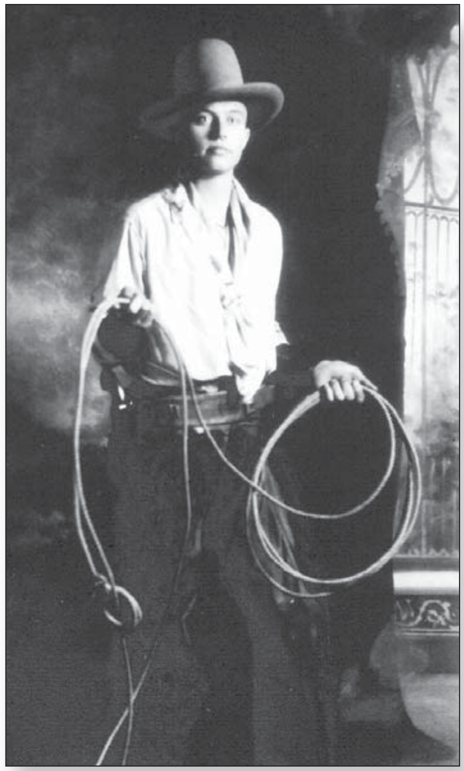
A native of Grand Rapids, Clarence Schipper worked as a tool and die maker at Keeler Brass for forty-one years. After retirement, he and his wife, Betty, spent twenty-six winters volunteering at Wycliffe Bible Translators in Tucson, Arizona, and at JAARS Aviation and Radio in Waxhaw, North Carolina.

captured wild horses and broke, trained, rode, and sold them. Like others, they rode in rodeos. According to a later article in the *Grand Rapids Press*, George reported that during a seventeen-month period beginning in 1914, "he and three other men caught 1,056 head of horses." These horses were sold to cowboys throughout the area.[5]

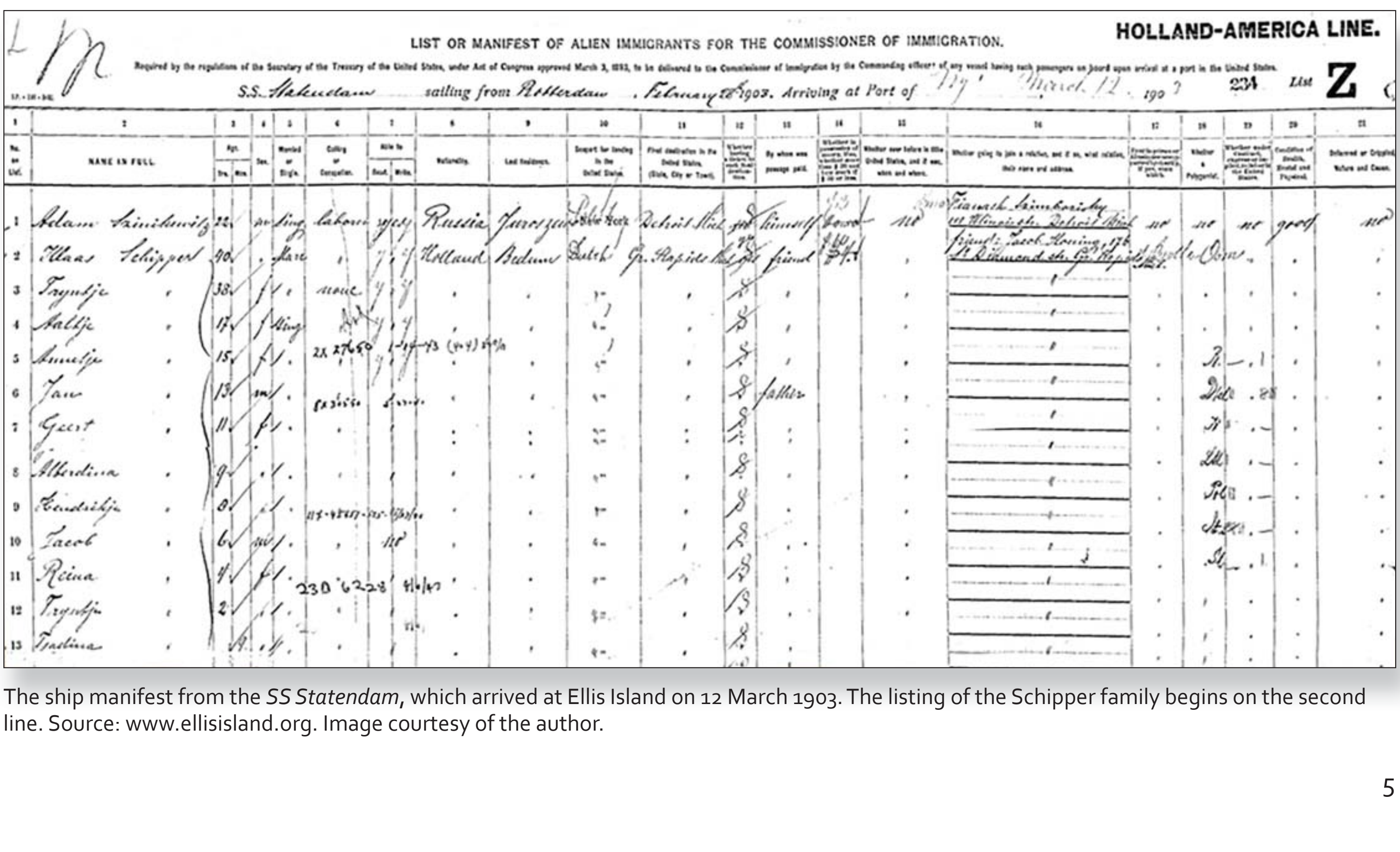
Eventually, Pete Larsen, the owner of a large cattle ranch, hired Jack and George as cowhands. This was a step up from the position of horse wrangler and earned them each about $25 a month. They rounded up cattle and drove them long distances to the rail yards for markets in the East. These were like the storied cattle drives of the old West, the subject of many books and movies. A typical cattle drive might contain some 700 head of basically wild cattle. Some of these drives took them south into Utah; others went to Idaho towns with railroad connections.

The location and lifestyle were enjoyable enough that the Schipper brothers decided to stay in the Rock Creek, Idaho, area. Although we do not know of George's plans, we do know that Jack filed an application for a 200-acre homestead in south central Idaho, near Rock Creek. To gain clear title to the land, he had to go through three steps within a five-year period. First, he had to file an application for the homestead with the local land office. This began the process. Second, he had to "improve" the land by building a habitable structure, clearing the land, and planting crops. Raising cattle did not constitute a "crop" under the Homestead Act. Third, at the end of his five years of labor, he would have to have his work inspected by a land agent and formally apply for ownership. This was the US Government's plan for settling the empty spaces of the West.

The house Jack built was small, located close to a creek that offered good trout fishing. Jack always claimed that if he wanted to have fish for breakfast it would only take a brief time to "catch a meal." One of the crops he planted was about forty trees. On this prairie land, trees were rather unusual. This crop was highly successful. Another crop was wheat; but raising wheat was not as



Jack Schipper posing in a photographer's studio in his cowboy attire. Image courtesy of the author.



HOLLAND-AMERICA LINE.

LIST OR MANIFEST OF ALIEN IMMIGRANTS FOR THE COMMISSIONER OF IMMIGRATION.

Required by the regulations of the Secretary of the Treasury of the United States, under Act of Congress approved March 3, 1893, to be delivered to the Commissioner of Immigration by the Commanding officer of any vessel having such passengers on board upon arrival at a port in the United States.

S.S. Statendam sailing from Rotterdam, February 28 1903. Arriving at Port of NY March 12, 1903. 234 List Z

No.	Name in Full	Age
1	Adam Sainikewitz	22
2	Klaas Schipper	40
3	Trijntje	38
4	Aaltje	17
5	Annetje	15
6	Jan	13
7	Geert	11
8	Alberdina	9
9	Hendrikje	8
10	Jacob	6
11	Reina	4
12	Trijntje	2
13	Tradina	11 m.

The ship manifest from the *SS Statendam*, which arrived at Ellis Island on 12 March 1903. The listing of the Schipper family begins on the second line. Source: www.ellisisland.org. Image courtesy of the author.

successful as raising trees. Primarily, however, he raised cattle.

The brothers had been brought up in a Christian home and had attended a Christian Reformed church. But at this point, formal religion played no part in their lives. They were rough and tough cowboys, taking control of their own lives.

One day, while riding the trail, they met another horseman going the same way. Talking together as they rode, they discovered that the man—known later by the pen name "Wandering Levite"—was the pastor of a Christian Reformed church.[6] His was one of the few churches in that area of Idaho, in the rural community of Amsterdam. It was some distance west and south of their home near Rock Creek. He invited them to come to his church when they were in his area. The two towns are some twenty miles apart via today's road system. Traveling by horse was somewhat more direct than modern car travel, but, even so, this trip would likely have taken them three or more hours. The brothers did, however, manage to be "in his area" a number of times. They worshiped in his church when they were nearby, but more often they were occasional visitors at "Wandering Levite's" home during the week. Their visits to his home occasioned some "serious talks," presumably about their lives, past and present.

In the days before radio, television, or the internet, evenings were often spent in telling stories. Because my father was a good storyteller, the family often would question him about his life out West. I was all ears! In those stories I heard about the pastor whom my father and uncle had met and also that he had written an article about them in the *Banner* under the pen name "Wandering Levite."

Years later, I took a class at Calvin College through Elderhostel (now Road Scholar). As part of the class, I stayed for a week in the Calvin dorms on the Knollcrest Campus and during that time visited Calvin's library. The second floor of the library houses the Calvin Archives containing rare books and copies of every issue of the *Banner* ever published.

I asked the man who worked

Jack Schipper's homestead in 1982, now part of National Park land, which allowed nature to erase the evidence of the once human presence. Image courtesy of the author.

Jack Schipper's homestead with its modest residence to the left and stable to the right. A fence line is visible behind the "house," c.1910. Image courtesy of the author.

Jack Schipper in his US Army uniform during World War I. Image courtesy of the author.

there if they had any articles written by the Wandering Levite in the years 1910 to 1912. There was nothing for these years, but there was an article by Wandering Levite in 1923. Disappointed at the apparently incorrect timing, I took the large book of bound issues, opened it, and there was the story. It was published in the 15 February 1923 issue. The author refers to the "S" brothers, "J" (Jack, my father), and "B" (which probably should have been "G" for George). I later discovered that Wandering Levite was Rev. William Meyer, who served the church in Amsterdam, Idaho, from 1914 to 1917.

The article indicates that the two cowboys in the West and their Grand Rapids-based family stayed in contact via letters. Some of the letters Jack received from his sisters, apparently in response to letters written to them from Idaho, are still held by the family. Also included is a letter from their mother, written partially in English and partially in Dutch. The *Banner* article indicates that Klaas Schipper had written to Rev. Meyer asking if he had any information about his two sons. Apparently, Grandfather thought or hoped that a Christian Reformed pastor serving near his sons' last known location might be able to make contact with them. That contact came one Sunday morning when the two brothers traveled several hours on horseback to the minister's house. They worshiped with the congregation and then spent time with Rev. Meyer. The story indicates that George was having thoughts about spiritual matters and the afterlife because of a friend's grave illness. The story makes clear that George and Jack were together most of that period.

Thursday, February 15, 1923

BANNER

FROM THE DIARY OF A WANDERING LEVITE

It was on a Sunday morning that the lady of the house in an unusual tone of voice exclaimed: "Husband, hurry up; there is someone at the door." And a peculiar feeling came over her as she spied a couple of men, peculiarly dressed, upon the back porch. They were real western cowboys, without coats, with a bandana handkerchief about their necks, big-rimmed hats upon their heads, revolvers fastened in a belt about their waistline, wearing highheeled boots with stirrups attached and sheepskins covering their knees. Unusual dressed men they were, and strange enough to make any lady reared in a city and not accustomed to frontier life fear for her life.

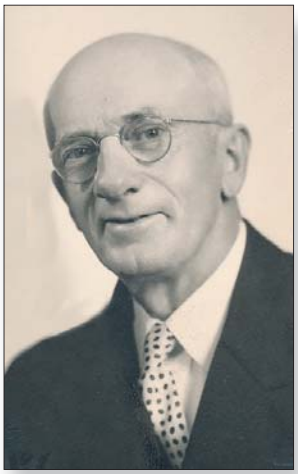
However, Wandering Levite took courage, opened the door and inquired about their mission. And there and then these genuine cowboys told him that they were two brothers, S. by name, concerning whom he already had received letters of information from an anxious Grand Rapids father. And all fear was soon expelled, for even these strange-looking cowboys could speak the Dutch language.

There was no time for conversation, for the church bells of Mountain Home were ringing and the whole community went to the house of God. Of course, the cowboys in their peculiar dress, minus their revolvers, went along to church that morning. It is unnecessary to relate that the audience on that occasion cast a furtive look at the strangely clad men. But since nothing strange happened the service proceeded as usual.

After the service Wandering Levite made a closer acquaintance with the cowboys. And B. and J. told the story of how they had left their home in the east, dissatisfied with home surroundings and how they finally landed at Rock Creek. They had Christian parents, had attended Christian primary schools in Grand Rapids, but now were cowboys. B., the older of the two, though only about twenty-five years old, looked to be about thirty-five or forty years old. He had tamed many a broncho and on different occasions vied for prizes in Wyoming and Montana frontier celebrations. Riding wild horses sometimes had caused the blood to flow from his ears and nostrils. And his looks betrayed the hardships endured in these celebrations.

Wandering Levite was interested in their life story. Here were a couple of young men reared in our Christian Reformed Church, but now living the cowboy life on western ranges. He gave the boys counsel and advice as much as possible. These young men were covenant children, estranged from the church in which they were born and seemingly they were satisfied with their outward and spiritual circumstances, though far from what

When World War I broke out, the brothers were still in the Rock Creek area. Their draft registrations indicate that George was a "cowhand" while Jack was a "stick man." George still had his Dutch citizenship, but Jack became a US citizen on 21 June 1917.



Rev. William Meyer (1882-1959) was ordained as a minister in 1911, with thirty-eight of his fifty-two years in the ministry as a home missionary on the United States prairies or in Canada after World War II, so that his self-described pen name "Wandering Levite" was an accurate appellation. Image courtesy of Heritage Hall, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

We don't know if George enlisted, but after entering the US Army Jack was called to serve in Hawaii, in the Coast Artillery Department. He was stationed at Fort Armstrong and served on a mine-laying ship that worked the area of Honolulu. They mined the

Schipper family photo, taken on a Thanksgiving Day, shortly after George returned to Grand Rapids. From left to right: (standing) Harriet, Alice (who had just had a wisdom tooth extracted), George, Tena, Jake, Dena, and Ann; (seated) Jack, Irene, Klaas, Trijntje, and Bertha. Image courtesy of the author.

harbor and approaches against the possibility of a German naval attack.

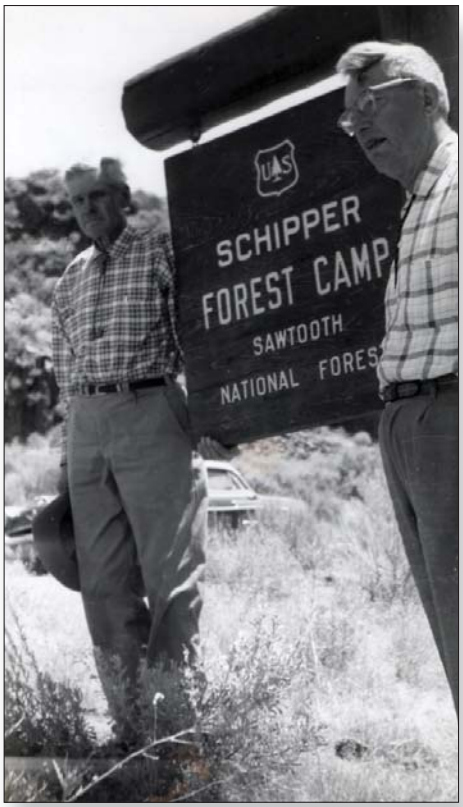
When his military service was completed in 1919, Jack went back to Idaho. His service to his country granted him the homestead property as his own, but things had changed since his earlier cowboy days. Barbed-wire fencing was being put up; the land was being tamed. The long trail to bring cattle to market had disappeared as the new train stations were closer and more convenient. The changes were significant enough that Jack and George's lives as cowboys ended. They could become "dirt farmers" or find something else to do, so the brothers decided to leave Idaho.

They returned to Grand Rapids where the brothers separated; George headed south. He appears to have worked as a cowboy in Texas, traveling east, following the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. He ended up in Biloxi, Mississippi, where he married a Cajun woman whose first name was Onito. They had two daughters, Dena and Joyce, and returned to Grand Rapids by 1930. Jack stayed in Grand Rapids, where he met and married Frederika Van der Bos. They had three children: Clarence, Geraldine, and Ralph.

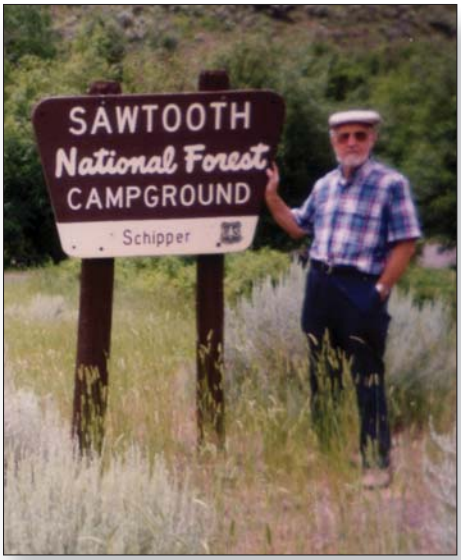
With the brothers reunited in Grand Rapids, they went into an employment quite different from their cattle-driving days: they became auto mechanics. After some time learning this new trade, they ended up owning their own shop—the Schipper Brothers' Garage, located at the intersection of Kalamazoo Avenue and Humboldt Street in Grand Rapids. My father must have made peace with his folks, because when my family and I visited with them, all was well. Large family gatherings were common events.

I remember that in my childhood my father would receive letters once or twice a year from his Idaho boss, Pete Larsen. Especially memorable were the letters that arrived near Christmas each year. During the Depression, in the thirties, Jack sold his homestead to his former boss. Many years later the state of Idaho built one of its many public parks near Rock Creek in the Sawtooth Mountains on Jack's old homestead. The state government named these campgrounds after the first person who had owned the land. So now there is a Schipper Campground in Idaho.

Some years later, when Betty and I were living in Jenison, Michigan, and attending Ridgewood Christian Reformed Church, another retired couple joined our church. Their last name was Kooistra. I welcomed them, and we began to talk. The Kooistras had moved to the Grand Rapids area from South Carolina. Billie, the lady, was a storyteller, and she informed me that both she and her husband, Mart, were "PKs" (preacher's kids) and that she had been born in Idaho, near Twin Falls. As our conversation continued I asked her if her father



Jack Schipper (right) and friend Pete Larsen (left) at Schipper Camp, named in honor of his homestead decades earlier. Image courtesy of the author.



Jack Schipper on the Sawtooth National Forest Campground that includes his former homestead. Image courtesy of the author.

rode horseback and if he had written any articles in the *Banner*.

"Yes, he did," she said.

"Did he write under the pen name of Wandering Levite?"

"Yes!"

Could Billie's father be the person who influenced my father so many years ago? Yes, he was!

What a wonderful person Rev. Meyer must have been; he did not judge the two rough young men he met on the trail, and he did not turn them away. He had faith in our covenant God. He probably never knew that both these men came back to their family and back to the church and had brought their children up in the way of the Lord.

Endnotes

1. The author dedicates the story to his grandchildren, who gave him $89 on his 89th birthday. This effort was a family one: his granddaughter, Laura Wilmot,* assembled the text he wrote and the pictures they selected into a digital format so that his story could be printed in booklet form. As the resulting booklet was distributed to the family, it was also shared with a son of Billie and Mart Kooistra, daughter and son-in-law of Wandering Levite. Their son, Mart Kooistra, Jr., helped edit and expand the original work. So the son and the great-granddaughter of Jack Schipper and the grandson of Wandering Levite worked together to bring you this history. As Clarence says: God's providence! Clarence Schipper and his wife, Betty, have 4 children, 10 grandchildren, and 11 great-grandchildren.

2. The ship manifest from *SS Statendam* indicates that it docked in New Jersey on 12 March 1903. Source: www.ellisisland.org.

3. The children were Aaltje (1886–1981; her twin brother was stillborn), Annechien/Anna (1887–1984), Geert/George (1889–1981), Jan/Jack (1891–1965), Alberdina/Bertha (1892–1988), Hendrikje (1894–1904), Jacob (1897–1994), Reina/Rena (1898–1994), Trijntje/Tena (1900–1947), Tjaardina/Dena (1901–1965), and Henrietta/Harriet (1907–1995).

4. Jack's naturalization document: The National Archives at Seattle; Seattle, Washington; ARC Title: Petitions for Naturalization, 1907–1980; NAI: ARC 1229787; Record Group Title: Records of District Courts of the United States, 1685–2009; Record Group Number: Record Group 21 at http://search.ancestryinstitution.com.

5. Although the newspaper page on which this quote appears is undated, internal evidence suggests that it was published in the mid-1960s. The title of the article is "Cowboy Remembers – Still Tall in Saddle."

6. The appellation comes from the story in Judges 17 when Micah employs an itinerant Levite as his personal priest.

*Laura Wilmot laura.a.wilmot@gmail.com & Marty (mlkooistra@sbcglobal.net),

The Groanings that Cannot Be Uttered

James Calvin Schaap

The close family ties are being broken here on earth. Annie is no longer here, mother has gone, Albert is no longer here, and Maggy has also departed. What a great privilege it is that we are ensured we all shall meet where we never shall have to part again. And that is the case with us, isn't it? We shall together rejoice before God's throne, never be apart again.

Nellie DeJong
17 February 1928

An accomplished and gifted writer, Jim Schaap taught literature and writing at Dordt College for thirty-six years. He is a contributing editor to Origins *and now an emeritus professor of English at Dordt. Although a Wisconsin native, his roots in Iowa are now as deep and firm in the prairieland as those of the native grasses.*

It would be dishonest for me to claim objectivity in the family story Nellie DeJong summarizes here in one of many letters she and her family sent to her sister in the Netherlands long ago. The DeJong family is not my blood kin; and while my emigrant Schaap family also left the province of Friesland to put down roots in the same South Dakota neighborhood, the DeJongs and the Schaaps could not have known each other because the Schaaps had already left Douglas County by April 1894, the year the DeJongs arrived.

That does not mean that Ms. DeJong and I are not related. We both descend from a pious tribe of Dutch Calvinists, men and women who frequently took their faith so seriously that they could and did, simultaneously, glory in the love of God and yet obsess about whether or not they deserved his blessed favor.

Nellie (born Lykeltje) DeJong, along with her brother George (born Jorrit), arrived in South Dakota in 1893, a year before the rest of the family, to determine where her brothers and sisters and parents would locate when they stepped off the train.[1] Nellie DeJong attracted my attention because she had been the first teacher in a tiny mission school on the Zuni Pueblo, circa 1908, at a time when she likely spoke both Dutch and her native Frisian more fluently than English and certainly Zuni. "I do not understand their language and it will be quite some time before I can understand anything at all," she told her sister still in the Netherlands in a letter that first year. Her letters—and

Nellie taught at the Zuni school, 1908-1921, when she moved to Harrision, South Dakota, to teach. She married John Ten Harmsel during the 1930s and died in 1940 in Hull, Iowa. Image courtesy of Heritage Hall, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

those of her entire family—appear in a book titled *Zuster, Kom Toch Over/ Sister, Please Come Over* (1999), published in the Netherlands in both Dutch and English.[2]

What she confided to her sister in the old country was stated honestly. "We do sometimes feel quite lonely here, especially on Sundays," she wrote ten months after arriving at the Zuni Pueblo. "Only once have I heard a sermon since I arrived here and not in six months. We celebrated then the Lord's Supper and we had to travel 10 miles on the wagon. That is the only means of transport that we have and it is an open one at that." And then a

bow to God almighty: "We lack many things here, and the work is not very pleasant; but the Lord is not bound to any time or place, and if we walk in his ways He will give us the strength to do his work."

Such public piety often wears poorly, especially to those who don't similarly leaven their speech or writing. A hint of excess almost always feels postured, but Nellie's expressive piety is characteristic of my heritage, as determined as wooden shoes. My parents nurtured such expressions, although my mother was the enthusiast. She called that language "talking spiritual," and held it as a virtual sign of the elect.

That kind of religiosity runs through the hundreds of letters collected in *Sister, Please Come Over*. Family members tell the relatives all kinds of farm foibles—droughts to skunks to tornadoes—but season the news graciously with reflections on God's presence.

The DeJongs all did it in their letters home, some more than others, a select few decidedly more accomplished than their siblings. My mother would love these letters; maybe that's why I was attracted to one of the daughters, Renske,[3] as greatly as I was when I first read the collection, a scrapbook of correspondence that reads like a novel. I forgot the Zuni school teacher once I read her sister Renske's letters, enriched as they are by spirituality that sometimes borders on the baroque.

I told a friend of mine how fascinated I was by the spiritual plenitude of Renske Hiemstra's letters home. I told him I wanted to recreate her story in some form for a contemporary audience, maybe a theater piece. He said he didn't know if a contemporary audience could tolerate that kind of piety.

But as tiring as her piety is, her very difficult life on the Great Plains includes so much suffering that it's hard to call her spirituality excessive. That she could withstand the temptation to call her life a curse is itself a miracle, and yet hers is a story that is less about the miracle of faith than its mystery.

Zuster, kom toch over: Belevenissen van een emigrantenfamilie uit Friesland; Brieven uit Amerika in the periode 1894-1933 / Sister, please come over: Experiences of an immigrant family from Friesland/The Netherlands, Letters from America in the period 1894-1933, [sic] (Winsum: Ulbe B. Bakker, 1999).

* * *

She was twenty-five years old and seven months pregnant when she and her husband, Albert, left the port city of Antwerp, Belgium, aboard *SS Westerdam* on 10 March 1894. Their first child, Hieltje (Harry), arrived just two months later on 10 May.

Why Renske's parents and entire family, save the oldest child, Baaye, decided to come to America is answerable only by reasons given by millions of others at the turn of the twentieth century: most European "tired masses yearning to be free" believed America offered opportunity beyond anything offered at home. More than 17 million European emigrants came to America between 1880 and the beginning of the First World War.

The DeJong family, like most nineteenth-century Dutch emigrants, departed localities other emigrants, often friends, had also already left, bound for new world communities where other Dutch people, sometimes friends, had already settled. Emigration was rarely something Dutch men and women, even families, did freelance. Dutch emigrants at the turn of the twentieth century left the old country in clusters only to locate in similar clusters in the States. Why the DeJongs determined to live in Douglas County, South Dakota, is not clear, but other emigrants from Friesland already lived there. They were greeted by George and Nellie when they arrived. Why they chose the month and the year will also likely never be known. A grain glut in Europe drove prices down and created hardships for Dutch wheat farmers and squeezed many farm laborers out.

The DeJongs embarked on their emigrant journey in 1894, when emigration to America from Holland fell by 80 percent. Dutch emigration to America had swelled after the Civil War, then dropped after 1893 when a steep economic downturn made Europeans wary of emigrating. The worst economic downturn in the history of the United States up to that time had just occurred, the Panic of 1893. Overbuilt railroads went bankrupt and took banks down with them. Unemployment in the US stayed above 10 percent for almost a decade. Strikes and work stoppages occurred in many places, and violence raged among workers across the face of the nation.

Generally speaking, the DeJong family did not arrive in America at a time when it was easy to say, with

Apostle Paul, that all things work together for good for those who love Him. In American history, 1894 was not a winning year.

What's more, successive droughts in central South Dakota made carving out a life not only trying but also onerous. During the worst of the next few years, the years when the DeJongs were just beginning to build a new life in a new land, economic conditions in some central South Dakota counties were so deplorable that the state did not attempt to collect taxes.

Throughout the final decade of the nineteenth century, South Dakota's population grew from approximately 350,000 to just over 400,000. However, in 1895, the state's population actually decreased to 330,000, which means that at the time the DeJongs—and the Hiemstras—were laying the foundation for a life for themselves, many of their neighbors, whatever their nationality, climbed back on the wagons or the train and left.

Albert and Renske Hiemstra, the author of many of the letters, with their children Harry (Hielke) and Bertha (Baaye). Image courtesy of the author.

Whether the DeJongs were aware of the conditions they found themselves in when they disembarked from that cross-country train ride cannot be known. Immigration was—and still is—the dream of dispossessed people. Even today, that dream sometimes turns into nightmare. Renske and Albert Hiemstra began farming in Douglas County, South Dakota, like their parents.

* * *

Renske's very first letter to her sister Baaye brings the news of their little Harry's birth. She is fearful and uncomfortable: "I do not yet love America," she writes. "When Albert is working on the land during the day, if I did not have the little boy, I would have been as homesick as anyone could be, but now [he is] a great comfort to me."

Her first florid expression of faith feels fearful, even repressive: "Dear sister, may we raise our dear little ones in the fear of God and may we faithfully put them in Jesus's arms," she says. "For what are we, [if not] sinful, and will it not be difficult to raise them . . . in this sinful world? Oh, may the Lord have mercy upon them. When you travel to America, you see how much sin and injustice there is in this world."

A month later, when Renske sits down to write, she outlines a theology that feels harrowing but offers scant explanation for the darkness she feels. "Communication with the Lord is so beautiful, but most of the time we forget about it because our depraved hearts and obstinacy are so powerful," she says. "I often wonder when all this misery will come to an end because I wish to be freed from all sins, although on the other hand we seem not to be able to stop sinning."

Whenever darkness threatens, however, she insists she still can be rescued by God's hand: "How wonderful that the Lord still cares about such a humble and dismal heart and that we can always rely on Him," she writes.

The amplitude of Renske's spirituality—doubt on one side, belief on the other—suggests, at least to me, that she may not have been strong enough to endure the challenges a Great Plains homestead required in the 1890s. Still, the fearful meandering she does between faith and fear has come to be recognized as the emotional utterances of doggedly strong Calvinist believers, her people and mine, who are convicted of both realities: their sin and God's grace. "If the harvest is as bad as last year's," she writes in the dark of winter, 1895, ten months after arriving, "we shall be awfully poor and not just us but everybody who is living here because it will also mean that the land is worth only little or nothing at all." But always there is hope. "We should not worry about that yet, although it is difficult not to. We should trust in God more often and rely on Him who has always helped us to survive and who has always favored us."

A year later, she seems almost to revel in her sin and misery:

> May the Lord also guide us in such a way that we may continually call for Him in all we do. Dear Sister, I so often think of these things; one can say, "How dear my children, my family, my parents, and my brother and sister are to me." But then again I have to say, "[I] have no love because I am negligent in begging the Lord for mercy and salvation for them—and that [negligence] is not love."

In this moment and in this letter, Renske begins to sermonize after rejoicing with her sister and brother-in-law for the birth of a child, their first. "Are not these little children a great gift?" she asks, but always shadows arise: ". . . but are not they also a heavy responsibility?"

The principal cash crop of the North American prairies during the nineteenth century was wheat. Image courtesy of Heritage Hall, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Even though her own little Harry is only fifteen months old, she gives voice to her deepest fears: ". . . but if the Lord would take them away from us, an inner voice would ask, 'What if they are lost because we did not seek the Lord for them sufficiently?' Oh, what a heartrending feeling this would be."

That extraordinary piety is exhausting, even something of a prison. If our children would die because we didn't pray enough, we could not abide that horrifying result of our sin, could we? she says to her sister. The sentiment takes "pray without ceasing" literally. Simply being subject to such imaginings seems a curse.

Eleven months later, Renske and Albert Hiemstra are blessed with another child, a boy they name Lieuwe, after his grandfather. Renske's heart overflows.

He is not a fatty, but a sturdy child, and he is much sweeter than [Harry] when he was his age. After he has had the breast, he goes to sleep straight away. If everything stays as it is, I have more than enough milk for him. Brother and sister, is not the Lord generous to us? We never dared to expect this. Should we not be humble and beg him for mercy? Oh, when I was in bed I wished above all that I could do so. So often David's words occurred to me: 'What shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits to me?' But then when we are busy with all sorts of other activities, we easily forget.

Two years later, her own dreaded fears were tragically realized in the first in a succession of calamitous events that tested that seemingly brittle faith. On 14 April 1897, Albert is the one who writes to Baaye; perhaps Renske could not bring herself to speak.

It is our sad duty to tell you that the younger of our two sweethearts has died. For a few days he was suffering from whooping cough, though not badly; yesterday morning he got convulsions as well. This lasted the whole day and became gradually worse until he passed gently and calmly into eternity at three o'clock this morning.

Albert draws the world he sees before him. "It is hard to describe what

we felt in our parents' hearts at this blow," he writes. "It is our wish that the Lord may spare you from having to experience this and from knowing what it is to have to miss part of your lives." He and Renske take traditional solace by trusting that their two-year-old now finds himself in a place, "better than we could have done for him."

A beloved child is no longer part of the home. "He was such a sweet little boy," Albert writes. "Everything was always all right with him and he could laugh so sweetly at Renske and me and he took so much pleasure in [Harry]." They take consolation down a path taken often by bereft believing parents. "We often thought that he was too good for this earth," he writes. "We feel certain that he has a place among the angels now."

* * *

When Albert and Renske Hiemstra's toddler didn't recover from convulsions, he had to have been one of many to die that year in rural South Dakota. Death records were not tallied in the state until 1908, when the Department of Commerce and Labor reported that 1,023 children had died before their first birthdays, one-fifth of all the deaths reported. Whether more or fewer deaths occurred fourteen years previous cannot be determined; but if the percentages differ, the number may well have been greater earlier since total deaths per one thousand population dropped from 1894 to 1915. By 1915, ninety-four infants out of every one thousand in the United States died in their first year of life.

Still, that the death of children was a more frequent occurrence on the American frontier than it is today should not, a century later, diminish our perception of their pain.

Just five days after her husband sent the news to the family in the Netherlands, Renske opened her soul to Baaye. "Dear Sister," she begins, "should it be so that the Lord took away one of your loved ones, you would perhaps understand this even better. . . . It rips a wound that will bleed till our grave and it appears that all the joy of life has disappeared just like that."

Somehow, her grief is assuaged, she says, by her faith in what she claims to be God's inviolable will. "But we can and may say that God's will be done, for we believe that [Lieuwe] now rests safely in the arms of Jesus." Renske's intense spirituality continues in really radical amplitude. "When he was still alive, I could always [say that] if it had to be, if it would please Him to take my children, [I could] say, "Lord, they are Yours. Do as you please."

If we believe what she's testifying—and I do—then the prayer she describes was daily discipline: "It could seize me [so] that I had to collapse sometimes from my work by the cradle and beg the Lord for salvation and mercy for this little one; for then I felt the sin and guilt press my heart so, and also my powerlessness to do good for him." That kind of daily supplication, she believes, makes a claim which she forms into a question: "And now should I not believe that those prayers were heard and [God] released this lamb and saved him from unrighteousness?"

The intensity here cannot even be summarized clearly. Renske's overpowering faith reminds her daily to ask for the Lord for "salvation and mercy for this little one." The discipline of such intense begging, she says, was itself a reminder of her inability to do anything good for her children. With the child's horrible death, she says it's only right that she give thanks because God did just what she'd begged him to, give her baby "salvation and mercy."

The only justifiably human element in the elaborate theological scaffolding her grief has created is that the entire statement is a question: ". . . should I not believe?" That question suggests doubt, which seems to me to be a relief.

The Christian Reformed Church in New Holland, South Dakota, was thirty-two feet square when built in 1883; twenty-one feet were added the next year, resulting in this rectangular building. Image courtesy of Heritage Hall, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

The parsonage of New Holland. When the DeJong family arrived during the 1890s, the crops were poor, rainfall meager, and the shallow wells often dry. Image courtesy of Heritage Hall, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Renske does not expect her sister to respond because in truth the question she's asking is itself a kind of wound bleeding faith and doubt simultaneously. She knows what her comfort should be but finds that comfort impossible in the inky darkness. "Nearly twenty-four hours he was so short of breath—oh, it was unbearable to watch." And then, once again, God's hand: "Oh, to see that lamb suffer so for our sins, that breaks my heart; but he has accomplished it, as did his Savior, whose days we now also commemorate."

Her use of the word *lamb* may have prompted the analogy: little Lieuwe as Jesus. The argument she uses focuses on the condition of sin rather than her own or Albert's specific wrongdoing. Lieuwe is gone, she tells herself, *because of* sin and suffering. Lieuwe's death has sin to blame, just as did Jesus Christ's. Like Jesus, Lieuwe is now as free as that very "Savior whose days we now also commemorate." (Lieuwe died on Wednesday of Holy Week. Renske is writing her sister on the day after Easter.)

But missing her child is unendurable, "a wound that will bleed to our grave," she says. "The longing can be so painful sometimes that one must ask, 'Where is life's happiness?'" Still, she scolds herself for the burden of her grief. "I should be grateful because many are the Lord's blessings that are given to us." What blessings? For her health, she writes, and then this: "I am myself quite well, though not very strong; but I think that is due to the circumstances," at which point an announcement slips in almost as afterthought, as if the news hardly matters: ". . . and that if all is well," she says, "I am again expecting."

When? "I do not think that it will be many weeks after you receive this letter," she writes. "I do not know exactly because I have since the birth of little Lieuwe not had the menses so I cannot really predict."

Just a month later, tragedy strikes again. Albert writes once more: "On the 24th of this month we were blessed with the birth of a perfect baby boy," he says, but "our joy has been transformed into misery as our darling has today been taken from us by death. Only two and a half days he was allowed to us."

Yet again, the frightful death of a child darkens the Hiemstra home, only ten months since Lieuwe, their two-year-old, was taken so suddenly.

"Everything went well." Albert tells the story. "Mother is here with us and we did not call in the doctor. The baby seemed as healthy as possible. He had exactly the same thing as our little Lieuwe. What it really is I do not know. One could soon see that death was inevitable."

Twice, Albert has taken up the pen in the wake of his sons' deaths. "Everything here is as well as can be expected under the circumstances," he tells his sister. "Renske seems at the moment to be quite well."

"And now dear brother and sister, what is to be said about such things?" a suffering father and husband asks. "We sometimes ask our Lord the reason for such things, but our God does not answer."

Our is a possessive adjective whose character demarcates the lines on a spiritual battlefield. God's silence is made insufferable by the testimony of that single word *our*. In his omniscience, God remains *our*s, as difficult as that may be to affirm in his absence.

But more needs to be said. "May He in his grace let us see some little wisdom in his deeds and to rest in his will," Albert writes. And then, "Although it is difficult indeed for our flesh and blood to have to part with our little darling, we take comfort in the belief that he is now with Jesus and is spared from much sin and sadness."

Albert Hiemstra may well have spent most of his years being coached into faithful acceptance of tragedy. But even if what he says here is obligatory, his language and sentiment is, I believe, deeply felt and purposefully meant.

* * *

In her first three years on the prairie, Rinske Hiemstra gives birth to a healthy baby boy, then loses his little brother, a two-year-old, to consumption, and ten months later loses a newborn she and Albert had determined to name after the little boy who so quickly and painfully left. She has, additionally, suffered droughts that sent neighbors back east to thrive elsewhere. She has moved to different farms as Albert has tried to find the right place at the right rental price.

"When the time came things went quite quickly," she writes when she tells the story, "but for the last two months I felt very ill indeed. I was very nervous and had bad headaches, but I think that was caused by thinking so much about little Lieuwe." When her mother first laid eyes on the baby, she tells Baaye, her mother said he looked "exactly like his . . . brother."

Their joy soon dissolves: ". . . His death was the same, same symptoms, the same trouble with breathing. To his very last cry it was exactly as it was with his brother," Renske says. "Dear sister, you can have almost no idea how painful it is to watch one's darling wrestling with death."

Did she misspeak, or does her use of *my* mark a change? ". . .Then I had to say again and again, 'Oh, why, Lord? Is it for my sins that I must pay?" Once the cause was sin itself; now it is something more personal, "*my* sin."

Still, she asserts God's assurance: "But this is my comfort—I hope and trust that they are now delivered and may sing praise before the throne of God."

On 13 March 1899, once again Albert tells his Dutch relatives that a child has arrived. Renske adds some of the particulars as a postscript: "Everything went beyond expectations. Because, Baaye, I was so apprehensive sometimes, I imagined that the Lord would judge me by my sins; I have prayed a lot during that time."

She had every right to be apprehensive. Typically, she ascribes her fears to a lack of faith, but this time the baby, a girl, is healthy. "But how faithful the Lord is," she writes. "He does not judge us by our sins and does not repay us for our iniquities. See how good the Lord is." When this new baby girl arrived, Renske was alone. "As a precaution we had sent for the doctor this time as we did not trust it very well," she tells her sister. "When the hour had come, one of our neighbors went to fetch Mother and the other one to call for the doctor." Precautions. "Yet they were both too late." She says she could not decide whether to wait for help to arrive or else get into bed; "but as soon as I was in bed, it happened right away." And then, "We have named our daughter after you."

In a Christmas note that year, Renske tells her sister that the disappointment Baaye feels in her husband's refusal to leave the Netherlands is understandable. "It does not surprise us that you long for us, especially for our parents. It would not be natural otherwise," she says. To repel the sadness, she explains how difficult it was to suffer the death of her children. "But still," she says, "how close I felt then to the Lord, especially the second time." She says she pledged herself to "do my duty and live for God," but was unable to accomplish that, given her weaknesses. "How often do our hearts not measure up to that of the great Apostle? So often we look for strength within our worldly hearts and are offered nothing but distress and tiredness of spirit."

On 11 June 1901, two years later, Albert and Renske suffer yet another loss. "Tomorrow evening it will be three weeks since a lifeless baby girl was born to us," she tells her sister later in a letter. "This is now the third time that the Lord has taken such a hope for the future from us," she says.

New Holland, South Dakota after 1910 (the year the wings were added to the church in the center of the image); the parsonage is to the left. Image courtesy of Heritage Hall, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Friesland, South Dakota, about twenty miles from New Holland, where the Hiemstras lived for a time. Image courtesy of Heritage Hall, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

"How this touches a parent's heart cannot be understood by those who have not undergone such an experience."

Still, she holds stubbornly to God's providence. "Nonetheless, the Lord governs," she asserts, even in the confusion she feels. "What answer can we give the Lord and how shall we meet Him? He gives and He takes away that we may, even in this, praise his name." A commitment to God's will lives in the very heart of those forever-open wounds: "It is certainly God's wisdom that he deals this way with us, [so] that we in all circumstances submit to his will. That [submission] takes much from us and we therefore have to say, 'Do not bring us to judgment and serve us according to our iniquities."

Then she returns to her grief. "When people are healthy and all is well with them, then one is full of earthly things—and what is that when the hour of fear comes and the pain of death?" Then a startling definition of hope: "What a blessing is the pain of the Lord, because the crown of victory is grand and wonderful, dear brother and sister. Oh, may that once be your and our part. Oh, that the Lord will give us his embracing grace."

* * *

At some moments in Renske's story, it's difficult not to believe that faith is actually a burden and that her species of piety is an elaborate façade to mask fear and anger.

But Renske DeJong Hiemstra believed that adversity is a passport for those visibly and clearly "of Christ." In the fifth chapter of Romans, Paul explains being justified with Christ through Christ: "Therefore," he says, "since we have been declared righteous by faith, we have peace with God" that comes by way of that declaration. He then moves very quickly into an assessment of human suffering. "Not only that," he begins, "but we also glory in our sufferings."

Renske had to know that passage.

Matthew Henry says the apostle Paul's assertion has to be seen in context: "Tribulation in itself worketh impatience; but, as it is sanctified to the saints, it worketh patience." Only in believers can profound grief be assuaged.

Here's Martin Luther:

> Whatever virtues tribulation finds us in, it develops more fully. If anyone is carnal, weak, blind, wicked, irascible, haughty, and so forth, tribulation will make him more carnal, weak, blind, wicked and irritable. On the other hand, if one is spiritual, strong, wise, pious, gentle and humble, he will become more spiritual, powerful, wise, pious, gentle and humble."

That Renske Hiemstra ever read Martin Luther or Matthew Henry is not crucial. The peculiar blessing of adversity is a truth she would have heard frequently in her devotional life. The catechism explains God's intent in the first commandment, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me," in this way:

> That I . . . learn rightly to know the only true God; trust in him alone, with humility and patience submit to him; expect all good things from him only; love, fear, and glorify him with my whole heart; so that I renounce and forsake all creatures, rather than commit even the least thing contrary to his will.

Renske could well have considered her suffering to be a function, even an emblem, of God's love, that her pain was her sanctification.

She carried seemingly irreconcilable impulses: the determination to believe God almighty was not as absent as he seemed, but the ache

and pain and sorrow from three lives that left her behind. "It rips a wound that will bleed till our grave and it appears that all the joy of life has disappeared," she wrote after her first child's death. Can even the most faithful recover?

But there is more.

Throughout the hundreds of letters the DeJong family sent back to Holland, Albert is the only family member who even mentions leaving South Dakota. "Albert is not very cheerful lately. He is not happy in this area," Nellie tells her sister in a letter. It's difficult to imagine that losing three children was any easier on him than it was on his wife.

For reasons no one will ever know, sister Baaye did not store all the letters she received from family members in America, and one of them that is missing must have told the story of Mother DeJong's death in November 1920, more than twenty-four years after she and her husband had immigrated to South Dakota. Renske begins a long and painful remembrance ("these were depressing, emotional days") by alluding to that lost note, then she explains that she had "no notion at all that the Lord had prepared an even greater sorrow for me and my children" because one month later, on 31 December 1920, her husband of twenty-seven years, Albert Hiemstra, 56 years old, died in a hospital in Geddes, South Dakota, his life carried away by internal bleeding diagnosed as a stomach ulcer. In his last days he was attended by his two children, Harry, 27, and Bertha, 22. "We lost a lot with his passing," Renske tells her sister. "His heart was always full of love and care for his family, but God's will and compassion are with us."

Twenty years had passed since the death of Renske's third child, but her faith at this moment still seems a fortification. "The Lord knows what is best for us, even if it appears very somber and incomprehensible," she says. "He further gave us the mercy that we still can live in his presence."

About four miles east of New Holland was the creamery that processed milk from the Dutch farmers early in the twentieth century. Image courtesy of Heritage Hall, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

When the end was near, his own adult children, Harry and Bertha, were asked "to infuse him with their blood so that he could gain strength to build himself up physically," Renske explains to her sister. Initially, he seemed to rally, but when he had a sudden relapse, "all hope was lost. His life slowly ebbed out in blood lost from the wound in his stomach. . . . I never saw him alive again."

Renske was not healthy enough to attend him. She was homebound. Through his hospitalization, at his death, and even at the funeral, his wife was unable to be there.

"He meant so much to us as a husband and a father," Renske says. "The doctors said they had never seen so much love between parents and children as in this case."

She details the funeral arrangements and says she could not attend "because of physical weakness," but she had learned from her children "that the minister gave a very compassionate funeral oration that was really a great comfort for our children—may they be blessed by it." Then she says this of herself: "My strength is slowly recovering; it is now only us three and that is not a large family."

Noticeably missing in this letter is any return to hope in suffering, any assessment of God's plan for her, or for her children. Given her propensity to couch so much of her life's experience within the mysteries of God's will and favor, that she doesn't do it when she tells Baaye about her husband's death seems striking.

The letter is not without any characteristic piety, but she ushers it in before she relates the story of her husband's death: "It was God's will and his compassion is with us. He further gave us the mercy that we still can live in his presence." It's not grand, not effusive, and not at all characteristic. In this harrowing sequence of events—her mother's death, then her husband's, her children's tortured vigil, and her absence from Albert's deathbed and then his funeral, it's not beyond imagining that the letter might have reiterated what she so often repeated: "Thy will be done." But she did not.

Renske Hiemstra was twenty-six years older than she was when she and Albert arrived. Perhaps she wore through the almost petulant faith she insisted would sustain her. Perhaps her own weakness—it's there all the way through the letters—makes it impossible to be strong spiritually. Perhaps the blood and grief from those wounds she promised would go with her to her grave ran her out of strength and left her weary.

"Regarding myself," she says in a letter she writes seven years after her husband's death and her daughter Bertha's marriage, "things could be better; however, at the moment I feel reasonably well. I am planning when time allows to go and see the specialist, the doctor advised this." Years of arduous pioneering are behind her.

> This winter I felt ill once again, short of breath, bad digestion, and very nervous and weak. Now I never feel in the winter as good as in the summer; yet the children thought that I should be examined by the doctor. He said that my stomach was not functioning properly and that I should go and visit a specialist. He was concerned about ulcers or something like that.

By 1927, her daughter Bertha was married and had at least two children, maybe a third on the way. Oddly, the letters contain no mention of grandchildren.

*

Designated devotional moments every day of the week made the Bible required reading in an orthodox Dutch Reformed rural household like Renske's. My father, born in 1918, knew very few Dutch words, but he repeated two phrases often enough to embed them in my memory: "*Laat ons lezen*," and "*laat ons bidden*," (let us read and pray), both repeated after family meals. If we can assume anything of Renske Hiemstra, we can assume she knew "the Word" well enough to be familiar with that passage from Isaiah meant that has brought comfort to anguished believers: "a bruised reed shall he not break."

She was a bruised reed; simply retelling the story is painful. But I wanted to know what happened to Renske Hiemstra and what happened to her faith in her later years out in the country.

When the letters ceased, she was on the farm with the only son who'd lived, Harry, and her daughter, Baaye (Bertha). They lived three miles south and one mile west of New Holland on a farm that still sits, rather uncharacteristically, in the very center of a wide and perfectly flat section of South Dakota farmland. The driveway rolls on forever and must have been a burden in winter, less so if whoever lived there had no desire to leave the house.

Her farmhouse is long gone, as are the barn and probably all of the buildings that might have been there eighty or so years ago; nothing is left to mark the place where she lived for two decades after Albert died. The family who lives there now seems respectably clean and industrious; drive on the yard sometime and you will see. It is mostly a livestock operation, some hay. Row crops tightrope the land beyond the yard; but long ago already, local farmers learned that if they were going to scrape together a living on South Dakota's too often meager rainfall, cattle and hogs would have to sustain them. That the family living on the farm today would know anything at all about the life the Hiemstra family, before or after Albert's death, is unlikely. I checked. No one living there now has ever even heard her name.

What kind of farming went on at the Hiemstra place once Albert died is not clear to anyone who remembers after all these years, but we can likely assume the operation was neither large nor specialized nor prosperous. Given Renske's health, and her own confessions of weakness, the farm's operation fell into son Harry's hands. Her daughter Bertha managed her own family, as well as what went on inside the old house.

Bertha's marriage to William C. Vorst, a salesman and piano tuner (he had obtained his piano expertise work in the Steger Piano Company, one of the premier piano manufacturers

One of the many peddlers who visited the prairie farms in the region around New Holland. Pictures of John Vander Velde who sold the products of the J. R. Watkins Company, headquartered in Winona, Minnesota. Image courtesy of Heritage Hall, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

in Chicago—a city known for piano making, among other things), sometime in 1921, goes strangely unobserved in the final letters Renske sent to her sister Baaye. The first of the five Vorst children, Julius, was born already in 1923, just three years after Albert had passed away. The Vorst children were all born in that house.[4] Their father, William C. Vorst, died in 1935.[5]

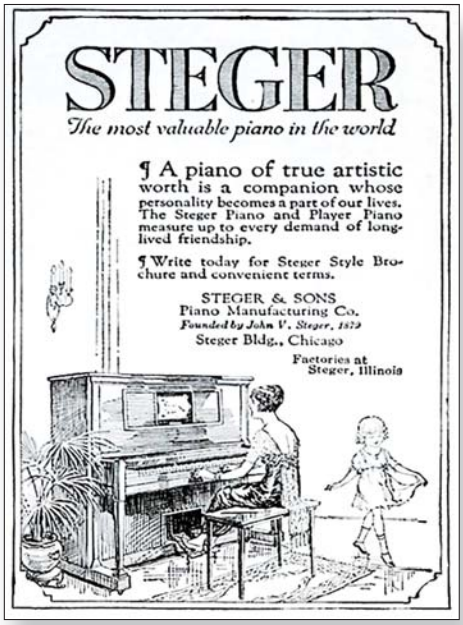
The children were still young, the oldest just thirteen when Bertha left. It would have been difficult for the farm in the middle of the section to support the whole family. With her husband dead, mid-Depression, she and her five children departed first to Worthington, Minnesota, then to North Hollywood, California, where she reared those five children alone and kept very little communication with extended family, even those who had also moved west during the Dust Bowl.

* * *

Today what remains of the story seems shrouded in isolation and darkness. Those who remember Renske are very old.

With what little I have learned from them, my imagination creates a bird-like woman, less than five feet tall, who seems almost unable to bring her arms up high enough to rest them on the kitchen table before her. I imagine her sitting almost painfully in a press-back chair, unmoving, her eyes wincing, as if in sunlight, looking slowly around the room, not as if expecting something or someone, simply fearful. Bertha is gone, as are her children. Harry is outside. Harry is almost always outside on the acreage.

Only a few ninety-year-olds and one woman who is 103 remember her, and their memories are spotty. What they recall is slight because Renske was. Those I spoke to said that for most of those last years, she was rarely seen. She had missed her husband's funeral in 1920, and for decades after she missed Sunday worship just down the road in New Holland. She never attended church, never participated in the sacraments, at least publicaly; and neither did her son, Harry, who, in the Dutch Reformed tradition, had never made public profession of his faith. Mother and son lived together, alone, on that farm in the middle of the section, rarely leaving the acreage, and rarely seen.



Cornelius Vorst worked in John Steger's piano factory in Steger (originally Chicago Heights), Illinois. Eventually the plant employed 1,400 workers and was reported to be the largest piano manufacturing factory in the world.

I was told that some people wondered how the Lord allowed what went on in Renske's life; after all, Scripture is clear on what will not happen to broken reeds. Life itself may have driven off into the horizon when those grandchildren stepped out of the back door and moved so very, very far away.

All remember her son Harry's mysterious reclusiveness. They wonder whether Harry was incapable of running the farm. A woman who visited over there weekly to clean claims in a year of visits during the Depression she never saw Harry, so persistently he kept himself out of public view and hers. She was, at fifteen, quite happy that she didn't meet him. Mrs. Hiemstra would often be sitting there at the kitchen table, unmoving, staring, silent, when the neighbor girl arrived.

One can only imagine what she might have thought when a knock on the door occurred. Was she anxious? Did she regret the interruption? Did she sometimes long for visitors?

"Good morning, Mrs. Hiemstra," the young girl says to her. She carries with her the basket her mother packed before she left the house across the section.

> What I remember is that she never really did anything but sit in that chair by the kitchen table when I'd come. I don't know that I ever saw her walk or even move. She'd be sitting there when I came and when I left, as if she were assigned that old chair.

That ninety-year-old who went to the house as a girl remembers those visits as a dedicated act of mercy. *My mother said I should go there to that house, so I'd walk through the fields across the section, and I'd clean a bit and make things tidy, bring some food too because I told Mother after once I'd been there that there seemed to be no food, nothing.*

The house has dark corners the neighbor girl hesitates to open or enter. She did what had to be done with a thrift created by fear and the oppressive atmosphere. The house is small and square and barely large enough for the two of them. Because she had never seen Harry, her school friends think that Harry is very strange and scary.

* * *

On the basis of what can be known, the last decade in the life

of Renske De Jong Hiemstra arcs downward into ever-fading obscurity, friendless and ever more alone. The woman whose expressive piety shimmers in her sickness and her health, in pain and suffering, goes seemingly speechless. The one thing everyone I spoke to said was that she and Harry never attended public worship.

Spirituality and religiosity can sometimes seem mutually exclusive. Her non-attendance does not have to argue for some dramatic loss of faith. Besides, the letters Renske wrote to her sister throughout her life contain scant references to what happened in church or what text the Dominie might have chosen for his sermon. Anecdotes about preachers and their own personal stories exist, but it is not difficult to infer that, throughout her life, given her poor health, she may have stayed away from public worship more frequently than she attended, even when Albert was alive. In Renske's old age, her Sabbath absences may have become so decided a ritual that even imagining attending worship at the church down the road grew difficult for her. Her absence may well be more understandable in a fortress as conformist as a tiny Dutch Reformed community like the one in which she lived, circa 1940. It was simply easier for her not to attend.

What happened to the ample faith so vividly expressed in the letters she wrote during the first two decades of her American life? That her piety lost its fervor is understandable, but did her faith in God similarly grow cold?

Remske Hiemstra's piety runs in my veins and soul. I could offer up fine helpings of spiritual talk myself—I know it that well, inside and out. But when I try to piece together what happened to Renske Hiemstra and the ebullient spirituality as characteristic of her writing as her handwriting might have been, it's difficult not to imagine a trajectory drawn from those dreary naturalistic novels of Thomas Hardy. Life became more and more and more and more difficult for her—and then it simply ended.

That few might like to read this immigrant saga is understandable. For some, it simply demonstrates Mark Twain's quip: "Faith is believing what any damn fool knows ain't so."

* * *

In 1909, a circle of enterprising women from Missouri made clear

The grave marker for Albert and Renske (Americanized as Renscke) in the New Holland Cemetery. Image courtesy of the author.

their desire to honor the women who had, with their husbands and families, pioneered through the American West, women like Renske Hiemstra. They contacted a stone carver in St. Louis, who created twelve eighteen-foot statues, "Madonnas of the Trail," for placement along a section of a cross-country highway following the old Sante Fe Trail.

Today those twelve statues are still in the towns chosen for the honor, each of them facing west (most of them anyway), but barely noticeable by travelers who opt instead for interstate highways. Still, the Madonnas testify to the strength of pioneer women. They are square-shouldered, their hands beefy, their features so proud it's difficult to believe the sculptor used a feminine model. With their left arms cradling infants, their right hand clutching a rifle, they look both vigilant and composed, prepared for whatever crises might be waiting just over the hill. Another child, an apprehensive boy, walks alongside his mother, clinging to her skirt.

As far as I know, only one picture of Renske Hiemstra exists, a formal family portrait that makes her look nothing at all like the Madonnas. She leans in tentative confidence on the shoulder of her Albert, her daughter before her, her son at left. Her husband's eyes seem vacant, his face chalky, ghost-like, a tall, thin man, as dour as the caricature of any Dutch Reformed pioneer of his era. He and his small family are dressed quite smartly.

Renske's shoulders have nothing of the breadth of the Madonnas. Her hands are small and feminine, her waist thin, her arms short. Descendants claim she was a tiny woman. If Albert were to stand beside her, the portrait suggests he would tower over her, his arms again as long as hers. If Renske Hiemstra were to stand beside those ten-foot tall statues, she would come up no higher than Madonna's elbow.

But Renske is, like the Madonnas, a pioneer woman, even if the dangers she encountered were not those that sparked the sculptor's imagination. She will never inspire our myth-making, but that doesn't mean her story should not be told.

*

In the New Holland cemetery, the Hiemstra gravestone stands as high and proudly as any, but that it does is doubtless an accident of time and space. The stone bears witness to Albert and Renske's staggered deaths because even after all this time—she died in 1942—the stone's glossy face is noticeably buffed where the stone

cutter etched her name and the dates of her birth and death beneath her husband's.

Step out of your car at the gate, walk in just a few steps, look up, and there it stands, looming over the others in this garden of the dead. I doubt Albert ever picked out a burial plot, and I find it difficult to imagine Renske would have chosen this place when her husband died, incapable as she was of even getting to his bedside, absent from his funeral. If Albert had purchased a lot, I can't imagine him having said, "See that roll, that slight hill—up there, that's where I want us to be." Nor Renske.

The Hiemstra stone is neither the most regal nor least distinguished. It's broad and tall, square-cut from shiny gray granite; and even though the cemetery ground has no hills, what roll there is crests right there so what was likely never true during their lifetimes is oddly true now. Today, Albert and Renske's remains lie comfortably above the crowd, and will for as long as the mortal coils of other locals are put to rest in the cemetery east of town.

That the Hiemstra stone stands indomitably higher than the rest is somehow reassuring. And yet, on the only remaining public register of her life and death, on that shiny gray granite her name is misspelled as Renscke.

* * *

The story of Renske Hiemstra is not a delight to unearth or hear or tell. Psalm 5:12: "Surely, LORD, you bless the righteous; you surround them with your favor as with a shield." In her story, promises like that feel terrifyingly off key.

What about Lamentations? Let me alter the words she could have read: "It is good that a woman should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord." Listen to the words and imagine for yourself. There she is, reading those words in that old chair beside a kitchen table she can barely reach with her elbow.

> It is good for a woman
> to bear the yoke
> while she is young.
> Let her sit alone in silence,
> for the Lord has laid it on her.
> Let her bury her face in the dust —
> there may yet be hope.

She must have read Lamentations, and she had to have known Romans 8. See her in that chair, in the silence, her Bible open? "If we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it." She must have found herself in those words, hoping, yet seeing nothing. Then more: "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought."

Whatever it was in her—dementia, frontier post-traumatic stress, maybe she was simply worn out by human longing—if she read from Romans 8, she had to read these words: "but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered."

Renske is, in a way, my sister, and I want badly to believe it makes no difference whether or not she believed those words, because my comfort in her demanding story is that even when we lack the wherewithal to distinguish every good and perfect thing, even when the light is dim, the flame extinguished, or the reed bruised and bent to the water, the Spirit groans in us and with us and for us. Isn't that the promise?—even the groaning that cannot be uttered.

Out there today on that long demanding driveway to an acreage in the middle of the section, with nothing of her anywhere close, I like to believe that if I stop for a moment to listen, I can hear the Spirit groan.

Probably less is known of Renske's son Harry than is known of his mother; he left no letters. After Renske died, Harry, alone on the farm, left South Dakota for Lynden, Washington, where he lived on the farms of relatives, often shuffled back and forth from one to another. People knew him, but those who did have some difficulty describing him. Whatever personality disorders he may have had in South Dakota went with him to Washington.

The minutes of the church council at Third Lynden Christian Reformed Church contain references to Harry Hiemstra as far back as 1951, nine years after the death of his mother, when they note a letter from the New Holland church, dated 23 May, accompanying Harry Hiemstra's baptismal membership ("baptismal" interjected into the minutes after they were originally entered).

That letter addressed to the consistory of Third Lynden advises them they will find Harry Hiemstra's baptismal certificate within. The certificate leaves blank a line after "Attending of Divine Worship," a blank which says "letter enclosed."

That letter makes clear that Harry Hiemstra has not been forthcoming about church. "The New Holland consistory has been urging Mr. Hiemstra for a long time to have his baptismal papers transferred to a church on the west coast where he could attend," the consistory says. And then, "These efforts have been without success." Harry must have been recalcitrant, which suggests the transfer of that baptismal certificate occurred without his knowledge or consent, albeit in the best interest of his soul in mind, or so the consistory would have said.

The Third Lynden consistory accepted that correspondence and recorded as much with the minutes of the August 22, 1951 meeting.

But there's more. Twelve years later, on 6 October 1963, Harry Hiemstra,

first child of Albert and Renske Hiemstra, made his "Profession of Faith" in Lynden's Third Christian Reformed Church. He had appeared before the consistory a few weeks earlier, on 17 September. He was, at the time, 69 years old. It had to have been an unusual event. Just exactly how he'd come to determine that the time had come for him to make a public profession, no one knows or remembers.

Harry died in 1980 at the age of 86.

Harry Hiemstra's story is a postscript to the life of his mother, Renske De Jong Hiemstra, but somehow I believe it needs to be said.

At least something in me needs to hear it.

Endnotes

1. The parents were Lieuwe Jorrits DeJong and Tjitske Lykeles Memerda, their children: Baaye, 1868-1951, married Gerrit Bakker and remained in the Netherlands; Rinske, 1869-1942, married Albert Hiemstra; Jorrit/George, 1871-1954, married Hendrica Teeslink; Lykele, 1873-1875; Lykeltje/Nellie, 1875-1940, married John Ten Harmsel; Pieter/Peter, 1878-1965, married Gerritdiena Tiemens; Taeke, 1880-1881; Taeke, 1882-1974, married Grietje/Maggie Maas and later Whyna Maas DeWaard; Klaas/Nick, 1884-1958, married Johanna Likkel; and Tjitske/Jessie, 1887-1984, married John DeHaan.

2. The letters of Renske De Jong Hiemstra, as well as those of her brothers and sisters in America, are included in *Sister, Please Come Over: Experiences of an immigrant-family from Friesland, the Netherlands*, published privately as *Zuster, Kom Toch Over*, in Winsum, Friesland, the Netherlands, 1999. I have been greatly helped by the descendants of Lieuwe and Tjitske De Jong, Renske's parents, as well as interviews with three 90+-year old former neighbors, as far as I can tell the only ones who remember Renske DeJong Hiemstra.

3. At birth on 10 December 1869 according to records in the Netherlands (her gravestone indicates the year as 1868) she was named "Rinske" for her maternal grandmother. Although Rinske and Renske sound similar, they are different names in the Netherlands. In all likelihood the change occurred after immigrating when Americans misheard the name.

4. Julius Leland, 1923-1991; Alvin Lowell, 1925-1991; Clareborne Elliot, 1927- ; Eunice Lavonne, 1932-1978; and Lucian Garland, 1933-2003.

5. Vorst was born in South Holland, Illinois, in 1891, the son of a shoemaker. He worked in factories before moving to South Dakota after World War I with his brother and their sister to farm. By 1930, his occupation is listed as a piano tuner and salesperson.

D. van Dijk, Hoe het was en hoe het geworden is

(Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, N.V., 1960)[1]

Richard H. Harms, translator

Blije, where I was born on 17 December 1887, is not a very large village and is located in the clay region of Friesland,[2] on the road between Leeuwarden and Dokkum. It lies close to the sea dike, which, as the saying notes, "surrounds Frisian land as a mother's arm does her children."

Many do not find beauty in the northern part of Friesland. They find it to be barren and cold. But this is how the area appears only to a stranger. To enjoy the beauty of this region, you have to become one with it. And to do this you need to stroll through the fields on a summer evening, after the sun has set, as the roar of the sea quickly races through the silence without breaking it. Or see a mother duck, leading her young, quietly chattering and looking for food in a narrow, reed-filled ditch. On a summer morning, you need to sit in a remote field on the bank of a ditch, with the smell of wild balsam, rustling reeds, the singing warbler, and a beetle drawing designs on the still water. Or, in the early, brisk spring when the fields are still bare, walk along the rugged, barren ditched fields with a pole on your shoulder, looking for the nest of a wild duck; then suddenly, under a handful of weeds, finding a dozen of those wonderful green-hued eggs. Or, in July, look across kilometers of potato fields in bloom from the gravel road to the sea in the distance; it's like an expansive flower garden. Or, in winter, when the canals are frozen and the east wind blows

Although the current road from Leeuwarden to Dokkum passes to the north of the village, this is the entrance into Blije from Leeuwarden on the road the author mentions. Image courtesy of the translator.

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through the dry reeds, wander along roads toward the farms rising up from the snow-covered fields and hear the crescendo of the rhythmic beating of the flails on the threshing floor in the looming barns.

I mean to truly know the beauty of this country in the north of Friesland you almost have to have been one with this beauty from childhood onward. But once you discover this, you will feel connected to that world; you will feel that no matter how good things are elsewhere, no place can ever be home except there, particularly every spring when the blackbird sings anew, or when fall begins, or as winter passes. There is nostalgia when waking up to that country by the sea.

Now that is Blije.

It is not a large village, and it was a poor one. This is ironic since the ground is very fertile and every possible inch is cultivated. The people are industrious and work long days, both in summer and in winter.

The reason there is so little wealth there is due to conditions in the entire province. The land does not belong to the people who live there. Very few owned the land they worked, which when I was born, perhaps more so than now, belonged to absentee owners. As a result, wealth produced by the land went elsewhere. Little of the cultivated land is part of a farm; instead it was divided into small lots that were rented to laborers or, as we called them, gardeners. These were people trying to make a living from these rented parcels so that they no longer would have to work as day laborers on the farms.

You might think that this would lead to a better standard of living for these people, compared to working as day laborers. But this was not the case. The plots of land were so small and rents so high that the land had to be worked in the evening after the long, hard day labor. These gardeners

Rev. Douwe Van Dijk from the dust jacket of *Hoe het was en hoe het geworden is.*

earned very little and accumulating capital was absolutely beyond possibility.

In good economic times when the land produced well and prices were high, a few gardeners were able to generate a surplus and, if able, rent a bit more land. Unfortunately, when revenues rose, rents also immediately and quickly rose. And then when the crops were poor and prices fell, the little money earned disappeared like snow in the sun, and the workers could barely, if at all, pay rent.

As a result, Blije remained poor.

After I was born, conditions became quite severe. The agricultural depression that had begun in 1878 had improved a bit in 1896, and then conditions declined precipitously to its lowest point. My memory goes back to when things had again improved a bit from that low point, but conditions then were still dire. The few farmers there could hardly continue. Income was low, but production was still high. In order to survive, farmers had to lower wages of their workers.

In the spring, when outdoor work began, wages were 60-70 cents per day; as daylight increased these wages rose to 80-90 cents, perhaps occasionally even to a guilder. And they worked long days, as the sun rose early and set late.[3] Men left the village at five in the morning for work in the fields.

We lived at the corner of two streets, and I well remember that mornings I was sometimes awakened by the talk of men gathering as they prepared to leave for their day's work, each talking about what their tasks would be. When the clock struck five, they left. When the clock struck nine, they returned home. That's when they ate their mid-day meal; yes, dinner was between nine and ten a.m. At ten o'clock it was back to the fields. At two o'clock they were home again to drink tea and eat a piece of bread. At three o'clock, out the door again. Then they remained in the fields until the clock struck six, which signaled the end of the workday.

A long, hard day, only slightly shorter in early spring and late autumn, when the sun rose later and set earlier; daylight determined the length of the work day. And this for such a [modest] wage.

There were certain times when the earnings were higher, contract work paid better than day labor work. When mowing, bundling, and drying flax, or in the fall digging up potatoes, sugar beets, or chicory, a person

working very hard could earn six or seven guilders a week. But rainy days were immediately deducted from such wages. And if in the middle of a work period, for instance 5-9 a.m., rain drove workers back to their houses, pay stopped the moment they left for home. During a wet summer you often heard, "For the farmer things will work out, the worker is the first to take a loss and will never recover from this loss." Virtually every day laborer experienced days of unemployment.

And then there were those long winters, when the country lay empty and bare, and only a few found work in the barns or in the stalls. The majority worked at so-called "flax breaking." It is said that Blije was first village in Friesland where flax was grown and processed. I hope that's true. Flax is a wonderful crop in the summer, when it is in bloom a white or sky-blue cloth covers the fields, then, because of the strength and resilience of the stems, undulates and sways with the caresses of the summer breezes.

Early in late summer—early August—it was harvested. When dried, the flax was rippled. This was done on a narrow bench about ten feet long. At each end astride the bench sat a man. Between them, in the middle of the bench, was a comb of tapered iron teeth about fifteen inches high, each about the thickness of a little finger, spaced about a quarter of an inch apart. In turn, each man took a large handful of the flax and drew it through the teeth of this comb to remove the seeds from the flax.[4]

The rippled flax was placed into ditches, where it began to rot. This separated the harder fiber from the inner core. All who know this region well know the smell of this drifting across the fields. When the rotting process had progressed far enough, the sheaves were again laid in the fields to dry, after which the sheaves went into a barn or an attic until winter.

In the winter, men and boys stood in old, low, sheds breaking the flax. Through this processing the fiber, "glue" as it was called, was separated from the hollow, woody stalk, which surrounded the core. All day we heard the crashing of the large wooden brakes, which beat the stems—tok, tok, tok. It was a primitive machine with which a handful of flax is drawn through while holding the bundle on either side of the beater. Through this the woody stalks finally become beautiful glossy fibers, which later go to the spinning and weaving mills to be processed into white linen.[5]

What a job that was in those dusty, drafty sheds. Not a few of them, breathing the dust all winter, coughed and seemed to have become weaker by the next spring when the outside work started again. And wages? In my childhood it was the case that a long week of such work paid perhaps as much as three guilders. The average weekly wage of a worker, during an entire year, around 1896, was a maximum of 1-5 guilders; I suspect many earned less.

Certainly the cost of living was less then, compared to now. But consider that house rentals of five guilders, clothes (which were subject to great wear and tear in the fields), food and drink, contributions to church and the kingdom of God, all had to be paid. They had to live frugally, incredibly frugally, to survive. It had been worse earlier. I remember my mother saying, "Poverty is over" when she recalled the days when the children went to school in the morning having eaten a slice of kohlrabi and young people married in May, so that by the first winter of their marriage they could have accumulated a few pennies to buy some peas and barley. Those [earlier] times were worse, but poverty was still severe when I was a child.

A view of some of the village houses from an early-twentieth-century postcard. Image courtesy of Heritage Hall, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Clothing was simple; and its cost sobering. No one talked about "meat and bacon," as it was called. It was potatoes or potatoes with lard, not fat purchased from the butcher, but lard—rendered fats—imported from America for a few cents per pound. Houses, shacks and hovels in some cases, were where an entire family huddled together. Where, once tuberculosis entered in, it spread from one family member to the next; and there was no help available.

Often as a child I went to the civil poor relief on behalf of older women who physically could no longer go themselves to get their weekly support payment of ninety cents to a guilder. And the diaconate was no better. It did not occur to them to be the first to assist the poor in the community. First a person went to the civil Guardians of the Poor, and only then to the deacons, who supplemented the meager civil support by adding an even more meager supplement of a dime per week for widows. I know, most members of the church were virtually as poor themselves. But that principle of providing aid was not sound. It wasn't, "How can we offer the broadest support," but, "But how can we manage funds by spending the least?" This was the tone for providing aid.

Every New Year's Day afternoon there was a "congregational accounting," as it was called. I still see my father returning from such meetings and my mother asking, "And how are things?" Father replied, "Things are good, the church has this much left over and the deaconate has this amount." Then mother indignantly responded, and rightly so, that money was not given to the deacons so that it could be saved, but it was to help the poor.

Families with small children suffered the most. The mother, and wife, in addition to her laborious household work, tried to earn a little extra by whatever means possible, even if it meant working in the fields.[6] But mainly the family's income came from the husband's meagre earning. Conditions improved a bit when the children could go along to work. Often they began working while they were still of school age, which was why the compulsory school education law was passed.[7] Headmasters constantly had to deal with pleas for exceptions to the legal requirements due to mitigating circumstances of the needs of the family. Obviously, such poverty marked all of life.

Because of the lack of financial means, the people never left their own village, they never changed, they never improved much. As a result, personality oddities became inborn, and never disappeared. Village life at the time was filled with "unique people."

Oh, if only I could tell you about the village's "personalities." I would describe them all to you, but I lack the literary ability for this, and this would fill an entire book on its own. There was "Peter Bachelor." I don't know why his surname was Bachelor, since he was married and had three sons. But his surname was never used; he was called "Mayor." A village rhyme about him was:

> In Blije, in the slum
> There is a man who runs
> the entire village,
> He is the mayor,
> And his son is the clerk
> unfortunately, the entire council
> consists of
> two people, Hidde and Klaas."[8]

He probably received the nickname as the result of the juxtaposition between his poverty and his small, fat, merry stature and his jaunty manner of speaking. He was a wonderful gentleman, this Peter. He had a deathly fear of work. A village humorist said of him, "When he was five years old, a doctor forbad him from working at breaking flax, and he has never forgotten this prohibition." For him it was an art to keep from working. He constantly feigned being sick. The poor doctor had a regular customer in him. When the good doctor finally tired of this, he said, "Peter, you have a strange ailment; I've tried everything and nothing helps. Now in my supply of medications I have one

A typical large farmstead from the northern Netherlands that would have used day laborers in van Dijk's time. This also is from a postcard view, courtesy of Heritage Hall, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

The St. Nicolaas Church (Hervormde) in Blije, whose clock set the workday for the community and surrounding farms. Parts of the tower date to the thirteenth century, while the main structure dates to the sixteenth. Image courtesy of the translator.

The Gerformeerde Church in Blije to which the van Dijk family members belonged. Image courtesy of the translator.

more item, but it will either cure or kill; you will either die from it or you will be cured." He took out a potion, but Peter refused to take the risk. The potion was put back, and Peter was healthy for a long time.

There was a man who during the prosperous years between 1871 and 1878 became a farmer and, according to reputation in the village, used a pound of tobacco every week. He was not a brave person; when he shot the crows in the yard from the stable door with a revolver, he could not look at the victim as he shot. He teased everyone but himself could not bear the slightest teasing. On a Saturday night old Menaris (Meinardus),[9] a poor soul, came to him with a bag, asking for a few potatoes. He agreed and told Menaris to complete his errands in the village, meanwhile the farmer would fill the bag. Menaris retrieved the gift on his return. When the poor wretch returned home that evening and was welcomed by his wife, they discovered that he had lugged home a bag mostly filed with mud, with a few potatoes on top.

One of the people who worked for this trickster was illiterate, simple-minded, and unable to learn, and had to survive on a few dimes per day, which were the wages at the time. He was called Tsjerk "Hay-turn." It was said that when Tsjerk was a soldier he did not know right from left and so they attached a wisp of hay at his right hand and straw to his left. He was drilled with the commands of "hay turn" (right turn) and "straw turn" (left turn). When Tsjerk brought his earnings home on a Saturday, his wife [Aal], who was more astute, noticed that there was too little pay. Tsjerk, of course, had to return to correct this error. When he reached the farm, he explained what had happened. "Yes," said the farmer, "Aal is right." He took back one dime and replaced it with two halfpen-

nies. "Is this okay, Tsjerk?" "Yes sir," said Tsjerk and trudged home, to later have to return again for his full meager wage.

There was a nearly deaf man who used the greeting "Dig" instead "Day"[10] due to his hearing challenge. So he was called "Anne Dig." Anne Dig had a plot of land near that of this farmer. When Anne was bent over totally focused on the task at hand, the farmer sent a boy to sneak up behind the deaf toiler with a sharp pin and stick the pin through the pants stretched across his backside, while standing safely on his own property laughing at the expression of sudden surprise and anger.

Then there was Pike Menaris, a son of the old Menaris of "bag full of mud" fame. Pike was, as they say in Groningen, a bit "simple." He lived a bit outside of the village mainstream. He wandered around the village, he begged, and he played in and dug through the trash. One winter's night Pike ended up at the mill, where the mill hand, using the favorable wind, was busy grinding fava beans. Pike was hungry and asked if he could eat some of the savory tasting bean flour. The mill hand agreed. He ate until he could eat no more, but didn't realize that the hard, dry bean flour would significantly expand in his stomach. Terrified of dying as his stomach began to swell, he lay outside in the cold night, until his system was able to process the bean flour.

Another time, Pike, in fact, was working. On a rainy autumn day, he and a lanky girl were in a field loading chicory roots onto a wagon. The wind began to blow and then came the rain. The girl's father was certain his daughter quickly would come home. But she did not; the wind continued to blow, the rain continued falling, but no daughter. He couldn't understand it. Finally, he went out to see what was going on. As he neared the field, he saw the wagon but saw no people. Then, suddenly, he found them, huddled on the windward side of the wagon where the rain was pouring down on them. Only after he came did they seek shelter.

The center of Blije at the beginning of the twentieth century. The canal to the left was filled in after World War II. The two-story building at the far right is one of the inns that van Dijk mentions. From a postcard view, courtesy of Heritage Hall, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

There was Jitse, a brother of Pike. Frisians generally have the peculiarity that they have seen things or know things before anyone else. And it is true that often over the course of time Frisians seem to have invented things that later turned out to have little significance. This was the case with Jitse and ice skating. After Jitse had his skates sharpened he noticed that the smith had ground the underside of the skate flat so that the edges of the blades were razor sharp, as they ought to have been. But Jitse decided that this was wrong, that blades should be sharpened so that they had edges more like knives. And he decided to remedy this problem himself. With a grinding stone he removed the sharp edges so that the blades became rounded, which he concluded was more like a knife's edge. I'll leave it to your imagination as to how his skating went after that.

I could tell you about Kei-Janke (Janke, the wife of Kei), who was missing part of one arm and expressed her emotions by what sounded like barking. During the summers she gathered and dried chamomile flowers so that the entire village could drink chamomile tea during the winter to ward off colds and influenza. In Blije chamomile was known as "Kei-Janke flower." Or I could tell you about Jan Ekes, who could entertain the men in the barber shop for hours with his droll humor; or Romme Eel (Eel the son of Romkje), the sagacious illiterate, who in his jesting mocked the stupidity of others; or Blue Jelle, who rented strips of green along the edges of roads to graze his few cows and was the terror of all boys who wanted to pick a few handfuls of grass from those edges for their hungry rabbits; or—I should stop.

But one more. There was a small-scale farmer who was an alcoholic. He was not unique, but typical of an entire generation that was enslaved

by alcohol. Every morning, about eight o'clock, he left home and walked past our windows to a tavern west of our house. After a few minutes he returned and continued his journey to the eastside, where he visited three taverns. He repeated this in the evening. He did this every day.

But he was not the only one. There were so many who drank an awful lot in that small, poor village in those days. This was not the case in Blije alone, I could almost say that "our entire Dutch nation was drinking at that time."

In that small village of 1,000 inhabitants, a significant number of whom lived outside of the village proper, there were four taverns and bars, besides a liquor store, where you bought by the bottle not by the glass. Of the three owners of carpentry businesses, two were drunkards; of the two blacksmiths, one was; the painter was a drinker; the wheelwright was a drinker; the cooper was a drinker; a baker was a drinker; the freight shipper was a drinker. Actually, everyone who earned slightly more than a farm laborer drank.

Included among those who drank were those who spent part of their terribly small earned pittances on drink. All occasions called for a drink. The woman who helped clean house, received a drink. The canal boat owner who delivered peat to the attic in the summer had to rinse the dust from his throat.[11] The man who came to settle a bill was treated to brandy with sugar.

A view of the center of Blije in the twenty-first century. While the current population of the community is a bit less than in van Dijk's time, many of the residents still commute to work, but no longer as low-paid day laborers. Image courtesy of the translator.

At our home we kept a pig during the summer months that was slaughtered in November. On the morning of the day when the butcher was to come, we children walked to the inn with a beautiful crystal bottle for a pint of brandy; proof, incidentally, that normally there was no alcohol in our house. When the butcher was ready to cut apart the carcass he suddenly complained that the knife had been used before, was stiff, and had to be lubricated. This meant that he had to have his first drink. After finishing at our house the poor man went to the next [customer] where the entire scene was replayed.

When the abstinence movement began to appear in our community, Reformed people, most of all, wanted nothing to do with it. My father's example convinced most that the movement was anti-scriptural; the scriptures, after all, called wine and liquor God's good gifts.

At our Public Youth Festivals, where everyone was admitted who had paid thirty-five cents toward the expenses, delegates from sister associations in the region presented topics which were debated. Total abstinence was a favorite topic, after Socialism and Communism. We debated about these endlessly. In later years, particularly through the work of the liberal preacher Dr. Westendorp Boerma, abstinence became more common among liberal youth. And this gave the Reformed Society for Prevention of Drink a small starting point; fortunately even Reformed circles eventually began taking a strong stance against drinking.

Endnotes

1. Rev. D. (Douwe) van Dijk (1887-1985), was minister in the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, 1913-1944; Gereformeerde Kerken (Vrijgemaakt), 1944-1985. He was one of eight children born to Jan van Dijk, the village shoemaker, and Frouwkje Klazes Wielenga. Two of the sons became ministers, and three became educators. We were unable to find contact information for the author's heirs and publishers and so present this translation under Fair Use. We welcome any contact from such heirs and/or publisher.

2. Generally, the province is seen as divided into four regions, the clay region of the northwest, the forest region of the southeast, the southwest region of woods, lakes, and fields, and the region of the Wadden Sea island.

3. Because of the proximity of the Netherlands to the arctic, in June the sun rises shortly after 5 a.m. and sets after 10 p.m.

4. Some of the seed was saved for the next planting; the rest was pressed into linseed oil.

5. Flax soaked in water was a light blond color, which led to the descriptor flaxen haired.

6. At the time, fieldwork was for men, and not for proper women.

7. In 1874 the Netherlands passed a law prohibiting children under the age of twelve from working for wages. In 1901 this law was amended to require children ages six to twelve to attend school.

8. In Dutch towns and villages of the time, the two highest-ranking functionaries and most important people in the community were the mayor and the clerk.

9. A number of the names used are not found in the civic records, so the presumption is that van Dijk used pseudonyms or used popular names rather than registered names.

10. In Friesian the greeting of "Day" was akin to "Good Day" with 'good' being understood.

11. Peat was cut in the eastern Netherlands (particularly in eastern Groningen and Drenthe) and used for fuel. It was stored in attics to keep it dry.

Peter Lepeltak: Pioneer Pastor, Caring Shepherd, Father to the Homeless

Kenneth A. Schaaf

"He left no record whatever of his life or work," begins the tribute to Peter Lepeltak penned by his adopted daughter, Eunice, a century ago.[1] No correspondence to trace his concerns, no journal to reveal his private thoughts, no sermon file to bear testimony to his biblical orthodoxy. For one intent on telling Lepeltak's life story, Eunice establishes an enormous challenge with this comment. Unlike so many of the better-known Reformed pastors of the nineteenth century, he left no trove of papers awaiting investigation in repositories like Heritage Hall at Calvin College, or the Joint Archives at Hope College, or in the DeWitt Library at his much-loved Northwestern College, or even his own Rutgers University and New Brunswick Theological Seminary. For one of his intellect and years of active ministry—forty-one years served in six churches—what explanation could there be for such a paucity of personal papers?

Lepeltak's 1862 graduation picture from Rutgers College. At that time, Rutgers was a private college affiliated with the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church. Image courtesy of Rutgers University Library.

Despite this scarcity, my digging began—in the Dutch town of his birth, in the schools he attended, in his family circle, in the churches he served, and in the communities in which he lived. Slowly his story began to take shape, the story of a highly gifted immigrant pastor, one who cared deeply and was loved by those entrusted to his care.

Peter Lepeltak was born on 16 June 1842 in the coastal town of Haamstede, on the dune island of Schouwen-Duiveland, in the province of Zeeland. His parents, Cornelis and Maatje (de Glopper) Lepeltak, were innkeepers. In the mid-nineteenth century, tourism was not a major industry, so it was necessary for Cornelis to have a second trade. Like his father before him, Cornelis operated a shoemaker's shop in the front room of his home. As a skilled craftsman, he was more fortunate than most of his neighbors. The vast majority of men in Haamstede were day laborers without steady employment, while most of the town's women, if not married, worked as maids.

The Lepeltaks were members of the national church, the *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*, as were almost all of Haamstede's 685 inhabitants, save for seven Lutherans and two Roman Catholics. When King Willem I established the national church in 1816, many churches accepted his designation of *Nederlandse Hervormde*. For more than two decades the Haamstede congregation refused the label, insisting on using *Gereformeerde Kerk*.[2]

By the time Peter reached his fourth birthday, his parents decided they wanted a better life for their

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children. In late August 1846, they registered their intention to leave for North America. Just weeks later, with their possessions stuffed into four chests, plus their bedding, they stood at the gangplank of the bark *Manchester* in Rotterdam harbor. Cornelis and Maatje and their five children—Adriaantje, nine; Johanna, seven; Peter, four; Jan, two; and Jannetje, eight months—joined two other Zeeland families en route to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Of the ship's 150 passengers, almost all the others were of German origin.

On 13 October 1846, the Lepeltaks arrived in Philadelphia and immediately made their way to Albany, New York, the *terminus a quo* to the Erie Canal. Here they remained until spring, when the canal was ice-free and they could continue on to the Dutch settlements in Western Michigan.

The better life that Cornelis and Maatje sought came with no guarantee. Sometime before 1850, the two youngest children disappear from the historical records and are assumed to have died. In August 1849, thirty-eight-year-old Maatje Lepeltak succumbed to dysentery, leaving her husband to care for Peter and his two sisters. Describing those early years, Eunice wrote, "the family shared the hardships of early pioneer life in Michigan, with barely enough to eat and hardly clothing enough to keep warm."[3]

Census records for Ottawa and Allegan counties and church membership rolls give evidence to the family's movement in Michigan—from Holland, to Overisel, to Grand Haven, and back to Holland. It was while they were in Overisel that an opportunity was presented to Peter. In 1850, Rev. A. C. Van Raalte met with the correspondence secretary of the Protestant Dutch Reformed Church (now the Reformed Church in American [RCA]) to plan the establishment of a Christian school in Holland, Michigan. Its specific purpose would be "to prepare sons of the colonists from Holland for Rutgers College and also to educate daughters of said colonists." Van Raalte called it his "anchor of hope for this people in the future."[4]

The Overisel Church had two candidates for teaching or ministry in 1852, Peter Lepeltak and Marinus Kiekintveld. Since the school—Holland Academy—was some ten miles from their homes, plans were made for the boys to leave home early each Monday morning and return Friday evening. During the week, they would board with Jacob and Marie Labots, a young couple who had emigrated from Rotterdam.

In a day when there were few established roads between Overisel and Holland, it was necessary for Cornelis Lepeltak to accompany Peter and Marinus for a time, until the young boys could follow the path on their own. Eunice tells the story of the morning they arose about 4 a.m., ate a quick breakfast, and went on to the Kiekintveld home, from where the boys went on together. "Soon it became very dark," she wrote, "the wind began to blow, the dogs barked, and the tall pines sighed and moaned, and rain drops began to fall. Our young friends became very much alarmed, took refuge under their umbrella near a pile of birch bark, and were soon fast asleep. When they awoke, the storm had ceased, the sun was shining, and they proceeded on their way to Holland."[5]

It was while he was in his last year at Holland Academy that Peter opened his heart to the claims of Christ and dedicated his life to the gospel ministry. He was an exceptional student and, upon graduation in 1859, was accepted into Rutgers College in New Brunswick, New Jersey, as a sophomore. Grade distinctions were not apparent in the early years; scholars were sent off to Rutgers whenever the Academy thought they were ready or, as former student Adrian Westveer put it, "We went like our mothers used to put a batch of Dutch cookies into the oven to be baked. Whenever a batch was supposed to be ready, it went."[6]

Again he excelled, graduating from Rutgers in 1862 with honors and the distinction of winning the Jacob Brodhead Classical Prize for his Latin

Hertzog Hall, prominently located on New Brunswick, New Jersey's "Holy Hill," was Lepeltak's residence while at Rutgers College and New Brunswick Theological Seminary. Public domain image.

translation and essay. Of his class of thirty-four students, he was one of twenty-two known to enter the ministry.

The year 1865 was particularly significant for Peter. In June he graduated from New Brunswick Theological Seminary and was licensed to preach, in July he received his first call, in August he was examined for ordination and installed in his first church, and in September he married.

Bouktje Woltman was from Ulrum, Groningen, near Holland's northern coast, many miles distant from Peter's birthplace in Zeeland. Had their families not migrated, settled in Holland, Michigan, and joined the First Reformed Church of Holland, the Pillar Church, it's unlikely they would have ever met. But on 13 September 1865, Bouktje and Peter stood side by side before Rev. A. C. Van Raalte and exchanged their vows. Immediately the young couple moved into the parsonage in Illinois.

Roseland, Illinois

First Reformed Church of Roseland—then known as the High Prairie Church—was established in 1849 and had been served part-time by Rev. Marten Ypma and Rev. Seine Bolks, both trained in the Netherlands, both senior men twice the age of the new minister. In September 1866, Teunis van den Hoek wrote to his parents in South Holland, Netherlands, "We usually go to the church in Calumet Station or High Prairie, which is a seven and a half hours [walk] south of the Chicago church. Rev. Lepeltak . . . preaches there and P. Prens is an elder. Lepeltak is well educated but has little experiential knowledge."[7]

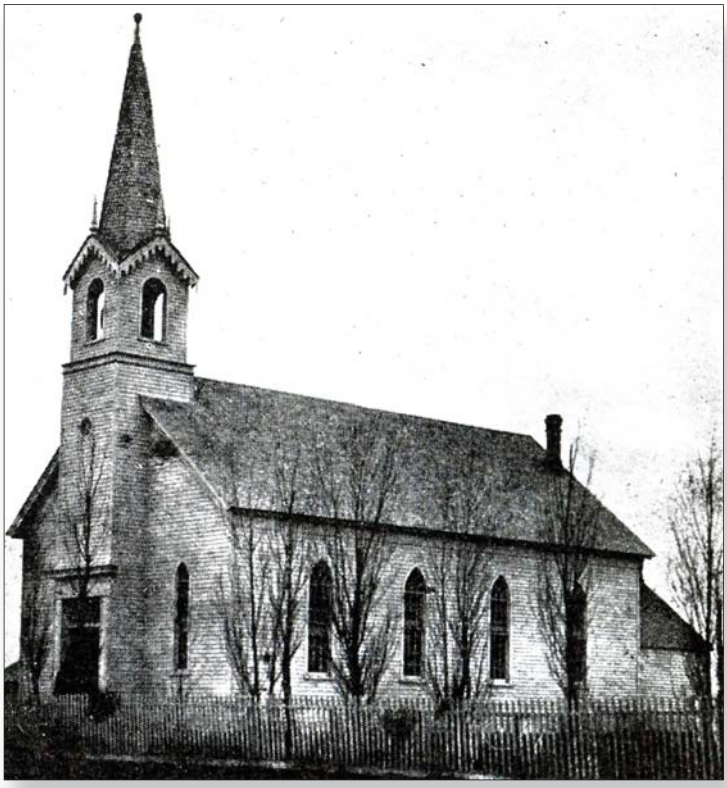
While short on experience, he was long on energy and loving concern for those within his charge. The church grew, and by late 1866 it had outgrown its sanctuary and began to raise funds to build a larger building. It was the opinion of the building committee that the best position for the new building was partially on the parsonage garden plot. Since the vegetables grown were viewed as part of the minister's salary, compensation for this loss was made with produce from other gardens in the congregation. By the end of 1867, the new church was completed, dedicated, and ready for use. As more Dutch immigrants moved to the south Chicago area and joined the Roseland church, it was necessary to increase the number of elders and deacons and to schedule infant baptisms the first Sunday of every month.

It was during their time at Roseland that Peter and Bouktje, now called Betsy, took in a four-year-old child as their own. He was John Woltman, the son of Betsy's brother, whose wife had died in 1866. John would be the first of a dozen needy ones taken in over the years by the Lepeltaks.

The 125th anniversary brochure for the church discloses that in the early years, the consistory and the congregation did not hold back criticism of the minister when differences presented themselves. Eunice writes, "It was at this place . . . that the elders of the church would not support a prayer meeting. They paid the dominie to pray, why should they be called on to help support a prayer meeting?"[8] To the young minister, this was the "heaviest burden" of his early ministry. Yet, when a call came from a church in southeast Minnesota, Lepeltak was not eager to leave. It was only after a third call, and once he was convinced that God was calling him, that he accepted and on 18 July 1869 preached his farewell sermon at Roseland.

Greenleafton, Minnesota

The Reformed Church of Yorktown, Minnesota, had little to offer a new pastor; some might even view it as a step backward. Roseland had an expanding body of seventy-three families, while the newly organized Yorktown fellowship had only thirty. Roseland provided an attractive new church building and parsonage adequate to their need. Yorktown offered an empty five-acre lot in Section 1 of York Township and a tiny 18'x24' home for the pastor and his family;



Lepeltak's first call as a minister of the gospel was to the High Prairie Church, later the First Reformed Church of Roseland, on Chicago's far south side. Public domain image.

it was considerably less than what they had had in Roseland. But it's unlikely that the young pastor saw it that way; he saw the congregation's need.

The Yorktown colony in Fillmore County, Minnesota, was an 1856 offshoot of Dutch immigrants, who moved westward from Alto and Waupun, Wisconsin, seeking inexpensive land. The colony was loosely clustered near the intersection of York, Forestville, Carimona, and Bristol townships. Rev. John Karsten, also a graduate of Holland Academy, Rutgers College, and New Brunswick Theological Seminary, had facilitated the formation of the Reformed Church of Yorktown, Minnesota, and may well have recommended the call to Lepeltak.

On Sunday, 22 August 1869, under the cover of a roughly built temporary shed, with a carpenter's bench as a pulpit, Peter was installed by Rev. Karsten as the first pastor of the infant church. His inaugural message was taken from I Corinthians 12:3. Peter and Betsy were encouraged by the church's immediate formation of a committee to plan the construction of a sanctuary in 1869, as well as a 24'x30' addition to the parsonage.

Gerrit van der Bie, a Dutch-born Civil War veteran who moved to Fillmore County, Minnesota, during Lepeltak's ministry wrote years later that "Peter Lepeltak . . . proved to be just the man for these poor western pioneers. He worked hard for and with them, being not only their spiritual adviser, but in many ways assisting them by instruction and advice. He was also the means by which a Christian lady from Philadelphia . . . offered to give the sum of $3,550 for the building of a church house."[9] The 1870 annual report of the Board of Domestic Missions of the Reformed Church announced that Miss Anna Greenleaf, a frequent and generous

The Greenleafton Reformed Church was constructed in 1870 at a cost of $3,550, the generous gift of a single contributor. Image courtesy of Charlotte Wright.

supporter of Christian causes, had provided the full amount needed. It modestly concluded with "Yorktown, Minnesota, has a neat, commodious, and comfortable sanctuary for the worship of God."[10] At once, in honor of its donor, the Greenleaf name was applied to both the church and the community, a designation that soon evolved into Greenleafton.

Over the next eight years, the congregation saw 103 infants baptized and an increase in communicants from 68 to 98. The parsonage received its promised addition. Lepeltak was known to travel great distances to preach and baptize where Dutch people gathered and pulpits were vacant. To aid him in making his calls, a horse was provided by the church. He made repeated visits to the New Amsterdam (Wisconsin) Reformed Church (later Presbyterian) some one hundred miles to the east and across the Mississippi River. On one visit there he baptized sixteen children. As remote as Greenleafton was, the Lepeltaks built close relationships there and considered making it their permanent home, going so far as purchasing forty acres of farm land one mile north of the church.[11] When a call came to serve in his home church in Overisel, Michigan, in late 1876, he declined.

But life on the frontier came with challenges. When diphtheria and dysentery claimed many lives in the congregation in the spring of 1871, the twenty-nine-year-old pastor led the congregation in a time of prayer and confession. Betsy Lepeltak frequently suffered from illness and in March 1877, at the age of thirty-four, passed away. The entire community mourned as her body was laid to rest in the cemetery behind the church and parsonage.

Overisel, Michigan

It was no surprise that when a second call came from his home church in Overisel in 1877, Lepeltak accepted. Established in 1848 under the leadership of Rev. Seine Bolks and built up through the subsequent ministry of Rev. Gerrit J. Nykerk, the church had grown considerably since Lepeltak left it as a boy. The church had prospered, established a daughter church in East Overisel, and was now in need of a second minister. In a rare arrangement, Lepeltak was hired not as an assistant pastor but rather to serve as

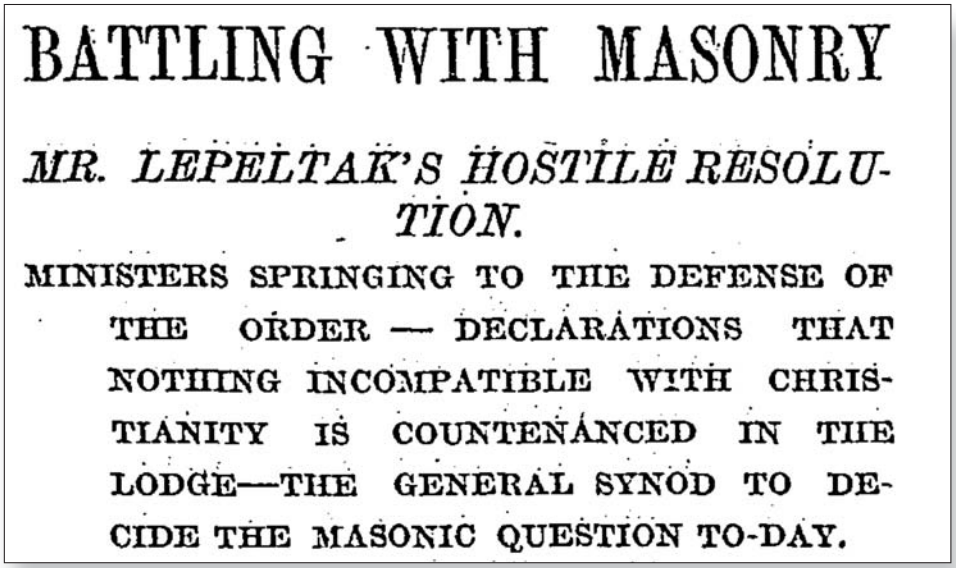
a joint pastor with Rev. Nykerk, sharing equally in the work of the church. Combining Nykerk's years of practical experience with Lepeltak's energy and ambition, the two formed an effective ministry team.

"These men, differing much in temperament," wrote Rev. G. J. Hekhuis at the time of the church's fiftieth anniversary, "yet both loyal to the Master and to the welfare of the church, were in large measure a complement to each other. That they labored together for fourteen years speaks very highly of their love and esteem for each other."[12]

By 1880, the church had grown to 226 families with a total membership of 490 communicants, with worship services held in five locations. Two Sunday schools were established—one in the church, the second in a local school—with a combined enrollment of 350 young students. The weekly catechism program also had a healthy enrollment of 350 students. A Christian Endeavor Society was established for the young people of the church, as well as a Ladies' Missionary Society.

Lepeltak also saw changes in his home. Six months after leaving Greenleafton, Peter asked Dena Ter Beest to join him in Overisel as his wife. Dena, her twin sister, Nettie, their brother, Hendrik, and their widowed mother, Elizabeth, had emigrated to America in 1854, eventually settling in the Greenleafton community. Peter was the family's pastor and neighbor and had come to know the family well. After their April 1878 wedding, the couple took in Dena's elderly mother and handicapped sister to live with them, as well as Peter's half-brother, Cornelis.[13]

During his years of ministry in Overisel, Peter lent his voice to an issue challenging the the Reformed Church in America—membership in secret societies. While the denomination's much older eastern consistories had come to accept church membership and lodge membership as compatible, the new Dutch western leaders did not. When Classis of Holland and Classis of Wisconsin raised the matter of Free Masonry and church membership to the General Synod in 1868, the Synod dismissed it, stating, "[It] did not consider it proper to express an opinion on the case," believing it to be abstract and not purely ecclesiastical.[14]



BATTLING WITH MASONRY

MR. LEPELTAK'S HOSTILE RESOLUTION.

MINISTERS SPRINGING TO THE DEFENSE OF THE ORDER — DECLARATIONS THAT NOTHING INCOMPATIBLE WITH CHRISTIANITY IS COUNTENANCED IN THE LODGE—THE GENERAL SYNOD TO DECIDE THE MASONIC QUESTION TO-DAY.

Press coverage of the 1880 General Synod of the Reformed Church in America was very clear as to how it regarded Lepeltak's stance on secret societies. *The New York Times*, 9 June 1880. Image courtesy of Library of Congress.

For the next decade, the unresolved question festered in the western RCA churches. At the Particular Synod of Chicago in May 1880, approval was given to once again bring the matter before the General Synod the following month. Peter was designated as the primary delegate for Classis of Holland, his fourth appearance before the General Synod.

This was not Peter's first experience with the General Synod of the RCA. Thirteen years earlier, just shy of his twenty-fifth birthday and a pastor for less than two years, he was one of the synodical delegates who voted with the majority in support of removing "Dutch" from the name of the denomination. But now the matter being brought by the western churches came with a conviction not shared by the nearly 150 delegates from the eastern churches.

The venue for the week's meetings was the First Reformed Church of Brooklyn, on Joralemon and Court Streets, an edifice of classic Greek design, its facade reportedly an exact copy of the ancient Parthenon. The New York press was sent to cover the proceedings. Following the first day's session, the *New York Times* posted with a yawn, "The General Synod Organized for Business," reporting on the opening formalities, selection of the moderator, hours of the sessions, rules, procedures, etc.[15] Admittedly, for the reporters, it was not like covering the construction of the nearby Brooklyn Bridge or the successful launch of the iron-hulled steamboat *Albany*, recently shown to reach the speed of twenty-four mph on the Hudson River.

Then on Friday, day three of the General Synod, the *Times* reporter was roused by the document presented by the Classis of Holland on the matter of secret societies. It may have also caught the Committee on Overtures

off guard; all discussion on the matter was postponed until Monday afternoon, giving time to the committee to strategize its response.

On Monday afternoon, before a charged chamber, the Committee on Overtures presented its own counter resolution, in essence, a statement of neutrality on oath-bound secret societies. Heated, spirited, emotional debate followed, by those supporting the purity of the church and those favoring individual conscience. One speaker tried addressing the issue with humor interspersed with "bitter flings" believing the entire matter was "humbug." When Lepeltak rose in denunciation of Masonry, he was interrupted by two defenders of the lodge, followed by periods of confusion and calls for "order." The debate went on into the evening, when it was finally adjourned until the next morning. With a touch of sarcasm, the *Times* captioned, "Masonry Misunderstood—Curious Arguments Against the Mystic Order—Legends Revived of Riding Goats and Naked Members Taking Their Degrees."[16]

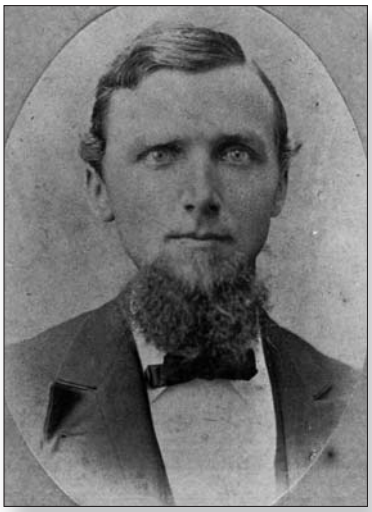
On Tuesday morning, the Synod reconvened and immediately returned to the issue in hand. After several pro-Masonry presentations, Lepeltak rose, countered each point, and offered a substitute resolution. Despite his vigorous urgings, support from the eastern churches was absent. Under the banner, "Battling with Masonry: Mr. Lepeltak's Hostile Resolution," the *Times* announced, "A rousing 'No!' killed the substitute."[17]

Although the matter was taken up with further discussion on Wednesday morning, the outcome was not favorable to the western delegates. In its final report, the *Times* carried "Masons Can Now Apply: Western Classes Instructed to Admit Them to the Church."[18] The western brothers returned home in disappointment.

By 1891, after fourteen years of a fruitful joint ministry in Overisel, both Gerrit Nykerk and Peter Lepeltak experienced poor health. At age seventy-two, Nykerk had given thirty-three years in ministry, all of them at Overisel, and was ready to step down. Lepeltak, forty-nine, began suffering from bouts of depression; to Eunice it was "a nervous breakdown." Lepeltak left in March of that year, and Nykerk resigned one month later.

Alton, Iowa

As a respite from his pastoral responsibilities, Lepeltak was given a classical appointment to serve as a domestic missionary in Hospers, Iowa. Although the details of his new work are not clear, it seems to have required only preaching two Sundays each month. Apparently this light duty routine was beneficial. Nine months into his assignment, he accepted a call from the nearby First Reformed Church of Alton, Iowa, where he was installed on 10 April 1892 as the church's third minister. It was his fourth, and possibly his most productive, charge.



Lepeltak in his mid-thirties, about the time he began his ministry at his home church in Overisel, Michigan. Image courtesy of Joint Archives of Holland.

During his years at Alton, he pastored an average of 120 families or approximately 220 communicant members. As their pastor, he delivered two sermons each Sunday, at 9:30 and at 2:00, both in Dutch. He performed their marriages, baptized their children—all 236 of them—taught their catechism classes, led their midweek prayer meetings, and officiated their funerals. But his efforts extended beyond the congregation. At home he and Dena continued to take in young people who, due to a variety of circumstances, found themselves in need of a nurturing family. Within the RCA, he served on the Council of Hope College and on the Board of Superintendents of Western Theological Seminary. He was elected President of the Board of Northwestern Classical Academy and, in 1903, was appointed to serve on the Board of Trustees at Hope College.

One document that survived the passage of years is an address he gave on 27 November 1894, on the occasion of the dedication of Northwestern's new academy building, later known as Zwemer Hall. "Beloved Friends," he began, "on a special occasion such as this, I would have welcomed the opportunity just to be one of the listeners to the address of dedication, but we count it a special privilege to have this opportunity to speak a word."[19] Delivered in about twenty minutes, the five-point speech illustrated his reverence for his Heavenly Father, his love for the Word, and his consuming desire to provide the best Christian education possible for the young people of his day as well as for future generations. Although given in November 1894, with the exception of references to locale, its wise and powerful message still applies today. He concluded his appeal with this: "In love then for our young people, in joining hands with each other; with sincere resolve in our hearts not to slacken our pace,

First Reformed Church of Alton, Iowa. During the coldest winter months, it became necessary to bring in extra stoves to heat the sanctuary. Image courtesy of Joint Archives of Holland.

but with ever increasing zeal for the school, and with keen interest in her work, conscious of that which is unworthy—of our faults, our sin—we commend ourselves, our institution, our teachers, and student body, her present and future friends, to the rich and unspeakable Grace of our Triune God."[20]

After twelve years of ministry in Iowa, Lepeltak received a call to the newly formed First Reformed Church of Portage, Michigan. In September 1903, the Classis of Iowa assembled in Orange City to formally acknowledge Rev. Lepeltak's ministry with the following resolution, in part:

> Resolved that we hereby express our appreciation of the consistent Christian life and conduct of our brother Rev. Peter Lepeltak while in our midst, of the value of his counsel in the deliberations of Classis, of his cheerful and conscientious services rendered the Northwestern Classical Academy, and his zeal, earnestness, and ability as a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and further that we express our sense of loss in his departure,
>
> Resolved that we heartily recommend him to the congregation and classis with which he now becomes connected and pray that the Divine blessing may rest upon him in his new field of labor and that the consciousness of God's abiding presence and approval may ever be his cheer.[21]

By 1 October 1903, the Lepeltaks saw to the sale of their household goods and were on their way eastward, a trip of nearly 700 miles.

Portage, Michigan

This chapter in his ministry remains somewhat of a mystery by virtue of its brief ten-month duration. Understandably, the First Reformed Church of Portage, Michigan, centennial history in 2003 has a scant six sentences devoted to its first pastor. Lepeltak was installed on 21 November 1903, and by 1 October 1904, he had moved on. While there is no indication of why his ministry in Portage was brief, he may, once again, have been experiencing health issues. During that year construction of the congregation's first building, an unpretentious 24' by 36' sanctuary. There is no evidence that he ever preached in it.

It was while he was in Portage that Lepeltak was invited by the Council of Hope College. There on Wednesday morning, 15 June 1904, in a crowded, standing-room-only college chapel, and after a lengthy program of solos, orations, undergraduate and graduate degree conferments, he stood and heard read this declaration: "Whereas the Rev. Peter Lepeltak, a graduate of Holland Academy and the New Brunswick Theological Seminary, has rendered most faithful and valuable service to our Reformed Church, a service marked by the excellence of scholarship, especially in the line of New Testament Greek and by a long and lasting influence upon the lives of not a few of the most fruitful workers of the church of today, therefore, Resolved that the Rev. Peter Lepeltak be tendered the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity."[22]

Honored and humbled, he certainly thought back fifty years, when he and Marinus Kiekintveld were just boys in the academy. The program continued with the awarding of prizes, another solo, the valedictory address—gratefully brief—the Doxology, and the benediction. All too quickly the ceremony was over.

Goodland, Indiana

The distance from Lepeltak's first church in Roseland, Illinois, to his last church, in Goodland, Indiana, was less than ninety miles. Goodland was a small prairie community of 325 dwellings, twenty-two of which were occupied by families of Dutch origin, and seventeen of those affiliated with the newly established Reformed church. Peter, Dena, and adopted daughters Eunice, Ethel, and Esther arrived during the first week of Oc-

tober 1904, and moved into a vacant home on Jasper Street, the main east-west thoroughfare in town. The following spring Lepeltak reported to the Particular Synod of Chicago that "Goodland is conscious of her littleness, but also of her privileges and her calling to be the salt of the settlement. By preaching the Word, teaching in Sunday School, and conducting a Bible class and catechetical classes, the pastor offers to old and young the means for the edification of the church."[23] By the second year of his ministry in Goodland, there were thirty-six communicants and fifty-one children in regular attendance.

In the spring of 1906, he again began experiencing health issues. Selected by the Particular Synod of Chicago to serve as a delegate to the General Synod in New York City in June, he took his last trip to the East.

In August, the local newspaper in Alton, Iowa, reported that "Through private correspondence from Goodland, Ind., we learn that the Rev. P. Lepeltak, formerly from Alton, has been unable to preach for the last five or six weeks on account of a certain difficulty in his throat. During the last few days the gentleman is feeling somewhat better."[24]

Any improvement, however, was all too brief. By early October the *Alton Democrat* announced that "Rev. Lepeltak … has been obliged to leave Goodland, Indiana, on account of his poor health. . . ."[25] Eunice reveals that her uncle was a victim of tuberculosis.

Paonia, Colorado

At the time of Peter's diagnosis of tuberculosis, it was one of the most common and fatal diseases known. Characterized by fever, fatigue, and chronic coughing, it was understood to be highly contagious. At that time, treatment for many meant being isolated in facilities where fresh, dry air, year-around sunshine, and higher elevations were available. During the early 1890s, Maxwell, New Mexico was the destination for many tuberculosis sufferers of Dutch origin [see *Origins*, Fall 2008], but by 1906, this effort was in its closing days. The record, unfortunately, provides no information on how Peter specifically selected Paonia, Colorado, as their new home. Eunice notes that "after earnest and prayerful consideration, he decided if possible to seek relief in the higher altitude of the mountains of Colorado."[26] At 5,682 feet above sea level, Paonia did meet the desired climate.

But Paonia was isolated; at the head of the North Fork Valley and the foot of Mount Lamborn, the town lay some 150 miles west of Denver and seventy miles southeast of Grand Junction, the nearest railway connection. Certainly the 1300-mile distance from Goodland, Indiana, to Paonia, Colorado, and the hardship of early twentieth-century travel may explain why letters, personal papers, and sermons were all left behind.

Although the *Alton Democrat* newspaper would occasionally make reference to a "Colorado colony," the Dutch who settled in western Colorado were scattered fifteen to twenty miles south of Paonia. The Lepeltak family was the only Dutch household in a surprisingly eclectic town. With a population of approximately 1,000 people, fifty men were day labors,

Paonia, Colorado, as it appeared during the 1920s. The city lies on a high plateau between Mount Lamborn to the southeast and Grand Mesa to the northwest, where the climate and altitude might permit a return to health. Image courtesy of Denver Public Library.

sixty were coal miners, and some 220 men worked in the orchards outside of town. Five physicians attended to Paonia's health needs, eight teachers to its educational needs, two clergymen to its spiritual needs, and one moving picture operator, its entertainment. Here the Lepeltaks bought a small house on Delta Avenue, between First and Second Street, on the southern edge of town—a thirteen-block walk from the business district.

The *Alton Democrat* continued to keep its readers informed of their former pastor:

> Dec. 29, 1906: "Word has been received from Paonia, Colo. to the effect that Rev. Lepeltak is steadily gaining in health and strength."
>
> Mar. 9, 1907: "Rev. Lepeltak . . . is doing excellently here. The climate is just what he needed and he is improving in health every day."
>
> Aug. 17, 1907: "We met two gentlemen this week from near Paonia, Colo., who informed us the Rev. Lepeltak . . . is in poor health. They think he has waited too long before going to that more salubrious climate." [He] was improving nicely but about four weeks ago he caught cold and in consequence he is suffering from a distressing cough . . . At present he is feeling much better. [He] and even some of the rich live in tents and find this beneficial."
>
> Aug. 28, 1909: "Herman Riedeman . . . got back Monday from his western trip . . . He reports visiting Rev. Lepeltak . . . and finding his health much improved. He says they will ship . . . 20,000 cars of peaches out of that region this year."
>
> Nov. 26, 1910: "The Bekmans of Orange City received a post card from Paonia, Colo. which contained the following: "Mrs. Lepeltak is very critically ill. We fear she is going to be taken away . . . Word was received later that Mrs. Lepeltak passed away on Sunday morning.

Upon Dena's death, Peter immediately set about preparing his own last will and testament. Eunice wrote, "While life was undoubtedly lengthened and suffering less intense [by moving to Paonia], it was a continual struggle with weakness and despondency for the nearly five and a half years. About ten days before the end, he enjoyed a quiet peace of mind and heart, he looked forward to meeting the dear ones, and being in the presence of his Savior with much joy, and was fully reconciled to leaving the remaining members of his family, trusting the Lord to supply all their need. Early on Sunday morning, February 4, 1912, he entered his Father's house with many mansions to enjoy that rest which has no end."[27]

The *Goodland* (Indiana) *Herald* carried this obituary: "Though disabled from carrying on activity for the Master during his six years residence in Paonia, [Rev. Lepeltak was] largely cut off from the public through tuberculosis of the lungs. . . .There were no children from either marriage but the home had reared eight children, three of whom are left in the Paonia home to grieve the loss of one who had been more than a father."[28] The funeral was held in the Methodist Church in Paonia; Rev. Jan W. TeSelle, a retired Reformed Church pastor residing in Crawford, Colorado, spoke from II Cor. 10:17, "He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord." Burial was in Cedar Hill Cemetery, south of the town.

Rev. John H. Karsten, who had known Lepeltak since boyhood, wrote, "He was to me a close friend and brother."[29] There is little doubt that it was also Karsten who wrote to Eunice the following: "Our brother loved to preach the word of God. He loved it because he had been and constantly was with Jesus. His broad and deep sympathies with his hearers easily gained and kept their attention. His preaching was decidedly Biblical and therefore elevating. He was so sincere. All wrongdoing in whatever form felt uneasy under his impressive and earnest application of God's truth. His views of Christian ministry were very comprehensive, it meant to him education in all Christian virtues not only but in Christian activities. The cause of a higher education found in him a strong advocate and the interest of our educational institutions and missions had a great place in his prayers and in the program of his labors; wherever he has been he has left the impress of his faith and love upon his hearers. . . ."[30]

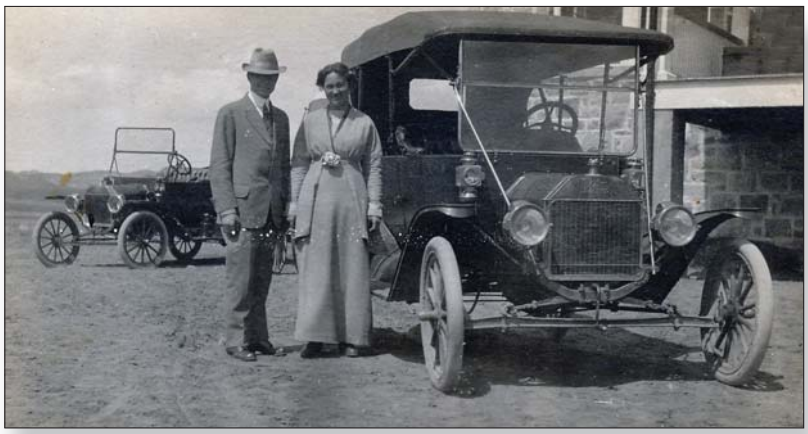
With the exception of 160 acres of farmland owned in Sioux County, Iowa, all his assets went to Eunice for the care of Esther and Ethel, as long as the girls lived with her. Once the Iowa farm was sold, its proceeds were to be divided into sixteen shares—four to Eunice; two to Peter's half-brother, Cornelis Lepeltak; two to the Hope College Council; one share each to five boards of the Reformed Church in America; one share in trust for a teaching fellowship at Western Theological Seminary; one to Northwestern Classical Academy; and a final share to the American Bible Society.

Eunice, his faithful caregiver in his last days, had a large marble stone resembling a pulpit with an open Bible placed over his grave, a fitting tribute to the many years in which he opened the Word to those in his care. And scattered across the country, more than a century after his passing, one can still find evidence of the work of this pioneer pastor, caring shepherd, and father to the homeless.

Endnotes

1. Eunice Lepeltak's tribute to her uncle/adopted father appeared in *Souvenir of the Jubilee and History of the Reformed Church of Overisel, Michigan* for the fiftieth anniversary of the dedication of its church building (Holland, MI: Economic Printing Co., 1916), 30.
2. Haamstede census records between 1822 and 1848 used the term *Gereformeerd* in describing its church affiliation.
3. *Souvenir*, 30.
4. Charles E. Corwin, *A Manual of the Reformed Church in America, 1628-1922* (New York: Board of Publication and Bible-school Work of the Reformed Church in America, 1922), 148.
5. *Souvenir*, 31.
6. Rev. A. Westveer, *The Anchor*, v 1.10, 154.
7. Herbert J. Brinks, ed., *Dutch American Voices: Letters from the United States, 1850-1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 115.
8. *Souvenir*, 32.
9. *History of Fillmore County, Minnesota*, compiled by Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge (Chicago: H. C. Cooper, Jr., 1912), 1125.
10. *Minutes of the Particular Synod of Chicago*, 1870, 11.
11. Land purchases over the years were also made in Michigan, Iowa, and Texas; these investments were used to fund educations for several young people who could otherwise not afford such a benefit on their own.
12. *Souvenir, 94*.
13. Curtis J. Mathison, *TerBeest/Van Sickle Family History*, [1982] 12. Fearing rejection by immigration authorities because of her daughter's physical handicap, Elizabeth surreptitiously brought Nettie through American immigration in a pouch made to fit under the folds of her long skirt.
14. *Acts and Proceedings of the Regular Session of the General Synod . . .* 1870, 96.
15. *New York Times*, 3 June 1880.
16. *New York Times*, 8 June 1880.
17. *New York Times*, 9 June 1880.
18. *New York Times*, 10 June 1880.
19. Dedicatory Address of the Rev. P. Lepeltak, 27 November 1894. English transcription courtesy DeWitt Library, Northwestern College, 1.
20. Ibid, 6.
21. *Alton Democrat*, 3 October 1903.
22. Hope Committee Minutes, 14 June 1904, 169; Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College.
23. *Minutes of the Particular Synod of Chicago, 1905*, 615.
24. *Alton Democrat*, 25 August 1906, 5.
25. *Alton Democrat*, 6 October 1906, 5.
26. *Souvenir*, 33.
27. Ibid.
28. *Goodland Herald*, 24 February 1912.
29. J.H. Karsten letter to J.H. Raven, 16 April 1912. Sage Library, Rutgers University.
30. *Souvenir*, 33, 34.

Early Means of Transportation in New Mexico



book review

Waves of Mercy

Lynn Austin

(Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2016)

On Christmas Day, 1846, Geesje (Gezina) van der Haar Visscher, her husband, and two children arrived in Baltimore, having crossed the ocean on Catharina Jackson. After another demanding journey via the Cumberland Gap, St. Louis, and Chicago, they reached Van Raalte's colony in Holland, Michigan, in the spring of 1847. Two decades later, in April 1869, Geesje wrote down her experiences and hardships as colonizer and continued the journal until her death in 1901.

Trudy Maassen Vander Haar wrote and self-published *No Shadow of Turning* in 2001, a fictionalized account of Geesje's life in the Netherlands and later in America. In *Waves of Mercy* Geesje's story is the basis for a full-length historical novel. Lynn Austin has changed the story slightly. In her version, Geesje arrives as a young woman of seventeen and marries in the colony. In 1897 at the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the colony, settlers are asked to write some of their recollections, which Austin's Geesje does. As this Geesje writes, a wealthy young woman, Anna, arrives at the Hotel Ottawa in Holland to nurse a broken heart. How Anna and Geesje meet forms the plot of the story. In Austin's story, Geesje is a mature, wise Christian, while Anna is a seeking soul.

At first reading, Austin's book almost may seem to be a religious tract in story form, and readers not used to "inspirational fiction" may be put off by the overtly Christian message on nearly every other page. However, in this case it is part and parcel of how the nineteenth-century Dutch seceders spoke and interacted with each other. Geesje van der Haar Visscher's original journal is one long documentary on her faith life, with only a few sentences devoted to what happened in her daily life. Other journals of the time follow a similar pattern. Descendants reading such journals are often stymied by the lack of historical facts about their ancestors, while astonished by the struggles of the soul, concerns about a person's standing with God and their eternal destiny.

In *De Stille Luyden, Bevindelijk Gereformeerden in de 19e eeuw.* (Common Experiential Reformed in the Nineteenth Century), five Dutch scholars examined the journals of thirty of these "Stille Luyden" and noted the same phenomenon. Their findings were that these journals were remarkably similar.

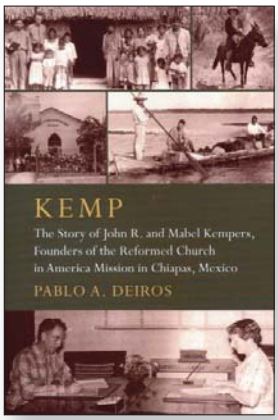
> Although they never rose to any importance or wealth in this world, still for them their struggle was not for daily bread here below, they looked beyond earthly needs, to eternity. Their journey was not of this world. They saw their life much as John Bunyan did in *Pilgrim's Progress*. Heaven was their home, this earth only a temporary abode. That is why if you are looking for historical data such as how their crops were doing, what jobs they had, who they married or what they ate, you will have to search hard. But conversion experiences, matters of the soul, deathbed scenes, those were the real important matters as far as they were concerned and that is what they wrote about.*

Even though Austin may not have been aware of this overtly religious climate existing at the time, her stress on the religious dialog of her characters is historically correct. Waves of Mercy is Austin's twenty-fifth novel and is well written. Her writing has won eight Christy Awards and one of her books, *Hidden Places*, was made into a Hallmark Channel movie. If you enjoy inspirational fiction and one with a Dutch colony setting, you will enjoy the book.

Reviewed by Janet Sjaarda Sheeres

*A.Th. van Deursen, "Vreemdelingen in Mesech" in Lieburg, F.A. van, (ed). *De stille luyden, Bevindelijk gereformeerden in de negentiende eeuw* (Kampen: de Groot Goudriaan, 1994), 85-89. Translation by author.

book notes



KEMP, The Story of John R. and Mabel Kempers, Founders of the Reformed Church in America Mission in Chiapas, Mexico

Pablo A. Deiros

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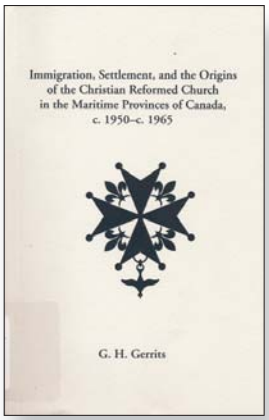

Immigration, Settlement, and the Origins of the Christian Reformed Church in the Maritime Provinces of Canada, c.1950–c.1965

G. H. (Gerrit Hendrik) Gerrits

Kentville, Nova Scotia:
Vinland Press, 2015

ISBN: 9780968072318

$25.00, paperback, 310 pages

for the future

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

In 1904 nineteen-year-old Uiltje Woudstra, the son of a carpenter and contractor, wanted to emigrate to the United States, but his parents objected. He persisted in asking, and his parents finally allowed him to visit a cousin in Grand Rapids for six months. He stayed nine months and left a detailed account of his trip across the Atlantic Ocean and his early impressions of Grand Rapids.

Uiltje Woudstra, 1904

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