Origins

Historical Magazine of the Heritage Hall Archives

Volume XLII • Number 2 • 2024

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Heritage Hall is located in the Hekman Library at Calvin University. It is the archives of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, Calvin Theological Seminary, and Calvin University.

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Origins is designed to publicize and advance the goals of the archives. These include the gathering, organization, and study of historical materials produced by the day-to-day activities of the church, seminary, university, and the diverse communities that support them.

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Cover photo:
Member of Fruitland Christian Reformed Church painting inside the church in 1953.
Image courtesy of Heritage Hall.

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from the editor. . .

The essays in this issue of *Origins* cover a variety of unrelated topics. Two are stories about individuals. Three are stories about people whose history often is neglected. And one is a book review.

One of the stories about individuals continues to the wartime saga of Walt and Wilma Lagerwey, as told by Marcia Lagerwey, their daughter, using Walt and Wilma's letters. Part three, in this issue, focuses mostly on Walt and his experiences in England and Europe during the war. We learn something about what Walt did during the war, but we learn more about what he felt and thought about his experiences. We learn about how his time in the army, away from his Dutch Reformed home community, challenged and changed him, experiences that occasionally led to conflict with Wilma. The second story is by Peter Bulthuis, a retired history and geography teacher. (One of my high school teachers, in fact!) He tells the story of how an immigrant named Dick Veenendaal constructed more than a dozen church buildings for new Christian Reformed communities in Ontario between 1948 and 1958. Veenendaal and his crew did not just construct buildings, Bulthuis explains, but knit together church communities.

The three stories on groups neglected in Dutch and Reformed history in North America include one on a Dutch woman who, after immigrating to Iowa, became a Mormon; one on African Americans in Holland, Michigan, in the 1800s; and one on women at Calvin Seminary, specifically the spouses of seminary students from the 1920s to the 1970s. Janet Sheeres tells the story of Geertruij Marcus, a woman uprooted in many ways. She, like thousands of other women, found a new home in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, including becoming a "plural wife." Robert Swierenga puts light on an overlooked part of the story of Holland, Michigan, describing the lives of the small number of African Americans who found their way there from the 1840s, when it was a Dutch immigrant colony, to the post-World War II years, when a still small but more permanent, African American community emerged in the area around Holland. My essay tells the story of the "Calvin Seminary Dames," a club for the wives of seminary students, founded in 1927. Along with that, I tell the story of my mother, a Seminary Dame in the 1960s.

The book review is of *Village Talk: A Country Merchant's Memoir and Folk History* (2023), edited by Michael J. Douma and Robert P. Swierenga. *Village Talk* was written by Ray Nies (1877–1950), the owner of a hardware story in Holland, Michigan. It's a quirky window into the town's culture and history, depicting the era when the town was evolving from a Dutch immigrant colony to a modern American city.

News from the Archives

The big news for the archives this fall is not about Heritage Hall itself but our home in the Hekman Library building. The renovations to the library building are nearing completion, as I write in early September. The 200 and 300 level floors are back open for business. The 100 level is almost done. That means it is once again easy to find Heritage Hall.

We are on the 200 level. Before the renovation, that was the floor with the circulation desk for the library, where you could check out books. The 200 level is now the Student Commons. Most of the offices on the floor are student offices (e.g., *Chimes* and

Caption: View from the main entrance to the Student Commons area on the 200 level of the Hekman Library building. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

View from the main entrance to the Hekman Library on the 300 level of the building. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

Student Senate) and offices for Student Life staff. The desk area on your left when you come through the main entrance is now the Helpdesk for Calvin Information Technology and Audio-Visual resources. The staff will also help you find your way to Heritage Hall if you are not sure where it is. In the back of the photo, you can see Peet's Coffee and on the left are

View from the stairwell to the event area of the 100 level. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

student offices. You cannot see it, but to the left from where the photo was taken is a stairway in the middle of the floor. It goes up to the 300 level. Heritage Hall's entrance is behind that stairway, as is a set of stairs down to the 100 level.

The 300 level is where the circulation desk is now located. It is near what is now the main entrance to the library part of the Hekman Library building. That 300 level also has offices for library staff, the library's research helpdesk, Campus Ministries offices, reading areas, and more. The view in the photo is from the main entrance on the 300 level. You can see the stairwell going down to the 200 level, where Heritage Hall is located. If you go down that stairs, you'll need to circle around behind it to find Heritage Hall. The entrance to the library on the 300 level is the one you will remember from the 1970s and 1980s, but it is much more open now.

On the 100 level of the Hekman Library building are the offices of the Calvin Information Technology team and an area for students to hang out. The hangout area is built to host everything from small lectures with audiences of thirty to forty people to small concerts or movies with a few hundred people. It is still a work in progress in early September. Also on this floor is a room with several dozen rows of compact shelving. Most of the Hekman Library's periodicals will be located here, along with several rows of Heritage Hall material.

Inside Heritage Hall not much has changed in the past half year. Our spaces mostly have been left untouched. The big push in the next year and a half in Heritage Hall, as at Calvin as a whole, will be projects related to the one-hundredth anniversary of the university and seminary. For the archives this includes digitization projects and providing services to other offices that need access to historical photographs and other records.

Contacting us has not changed. You can reach us at crcarchives @calvin.edu or 1-1616-526-6313.

Subscribe to Origins and Support Heritage Hall

Please remember that in 2023 we raised the subscription rate to $15.00, after many years of the subscription price not changing. The "Friends of the Archives" endowment supports producing the content for *Origins*. This fund is also called the "Origins" endowment, reflecting its close ties to the magazine. Subscriptions pay for the cost of printing and mailing the magazine. The endowment also supports other work in Heritage Hall, such as helping publish books related to Dutch North American and Reformed history and special projects to digitize material and make it available online.

Remember that you can now subscribe to *Origins* using a credit card. If you want to do that, please go to *Origins Online* (https://origins.calvin.edu/issues/). This link takes you to the "Origins in Print" page of the blog.

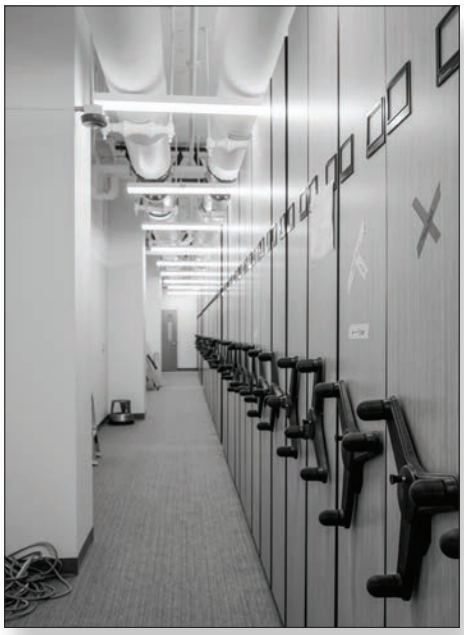
At the top you'll see a brief description of the mission of the magazine and the archives. If you scroll down, you'll see back issues of *Origins* from 1983–2020. You'll also see a link titled "SUBSCRIBE TO ORIGINS or PAY FOR SCANNING AND RESEARCH." The link takes you to a Heritage Hall page with two options. One is "Research & Scanning." The other is "Origins—Subscription and Contribution Options." Just as with

any other online "store," you can add items to a basket and then choose to "Continue Shopping" or "Checkout."

If you purchase a subscription, it is not tax deductible. If you make a contribution, it is tax deductible. Please note that, if you make a contribution and do not also purchase a subscription, we will treat $15 of the contribution as a subscription and the rest as a contribution.

You can "Register" or check out as a "Guest." You'll go to a secure page where you provide your name, address, phone number, and email address. The address section includes a "state" option. If you're from a country other than the United States, ignore the "state" option. On the next page, you will see a tab where you are able to type in the province, state, or region of the country you are from and enter credit card information.

We hope this is convenient for you.



Compact shelving on the 100 level of Hekman Library. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

You can still send checks or cash by mail. From Heritage Hall's perspective, and that of the financial services office at Calvin University, we hope people will consider switching to this credit card option. It is more economical for us to process credit cards than to deposit cash and checks. If you run into problems, let us know. We can help you make transactions online over the phone. Whether you pay online or by cash or check, please always give us your email address, if you have one. That way, if we have any questions about your subscription or address, we can easily contact you.

In between issues of *Origins* in print, remember to check out *Origins Online*, our blog (at https://origins.calvin.edu/). If you're on Facebook, check out our page for bits and pieces of history and news related to Heritage Hall (https://www.facebook.com/heritagehallarchives).

Will Katerberg

Dick Veenendaal – Dutch Canadian Church Builder

Peter Bulthuis

In April 1930, twenty-year-old Dick Veenendaal arrived in Canada with a desire for adventure and a gift for carpentry. He was part of a small vanguard of pre-war Dutch Reformed immigrants to Canada. Most Dutch emigrants to North America in the century before World War II went to the United States. The small group in Canada grew exponentially after the war. From the late 1940s to the early 1960s more than 160,000 immigrants came from the Netherlands, settling in large numbers in southern Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia, and in smaller numbers all over Canada.

A pious man, Dick had left the Netherlands alone to see what God had planned for him in a new country. He could never have guessed that in the decades after World War II he would go on to become one of the most prolific builders of churches for Christian Reformed Church (CRC) congregations in Canada. Before World War II there were only fourteen Christian Reformed congregations in Canada. From 1948 to 1959, more than one hundred new Canadian CRCs organized.

Dick Veenendaal's first car, in 1931.

Settling in Sarnia

Dick's father had previously visited North America and loved it, but his mother did not want to go, so Dick ventured out on his own and settled in Sarnia in the southwest corner of Ontario.

But Dick was not on his own for long. Soon after his arrival, he met a German girl, Jannette ("Nettie") Penning. The couple married within a year and went on to have three children: Janet, Will, and John.

Like many Dutch immigrants in Southwestern Ontario at the time, Dick became involved in farming. He did not know much about farming but rented some land near Sarnia and grew potatoes, carrots, and onions. It was far from lucrative. (In the middle of the Depression, a bag of potatoes sold for fifty cents in Canada.)

Eventually, Dick bought a 150-acre farm east of Sarnia, where he raised cattle and horses and grew wheat and corn. He never made a living at farming, had trouble making payments, and sold the farm in 1952 when his oldest daughter, Janet, got married. After that, he built his own home near the farm.

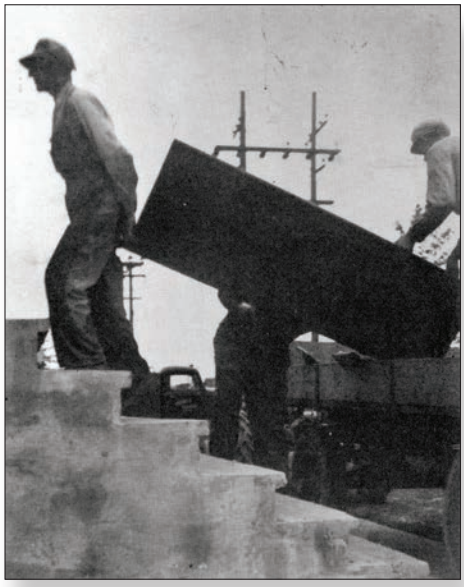
Born in the Netherlands, raised in Canada, and intrigued with CRC buildings, Peter Bulthuis is a retired principal and geography-history teacher, now living in Ancaster, Ontario. He also worked as World Renew's Director of Church Relations in Canada.

Becoming a builder

While farming during the late 1930s and the 1940s, Dick found a way to return to his first love: building. In the Netherlands, he had enjoyed being an apprentice carpenter, and he was grateful when people in and around Sarnia began to ask him to build barns.

His church, Sarnia CRC, had been in existence as a worshiping community since 1926. It was organized as an official CRC congregation in 1934. By 1943, the original building—which the congregation had bought and relocated in 1931—had become too small and was sold. It began constructing a new one in 1943. A "basement church" was dug, the blocks were laid, and the roof was put on that basement in 1944. Soon, as even more people arrived from the Netherlands after the war and joined the church, Sarnia CRC needed a still larger facility. Word of Dick's skills had already gotten around the church community, and members called on him (and others) to help construct a new church building atop that basement.

The Sarnia CRC church leaders budgeted with a strict limit of $50,000 for the construction project. The basement church had been built above grade, so it already had fairly large windows. The new setup, however, with the superstructure to be built above the basement, necessitated the construction of stairs. Thankfully, Dick and his young crew had no problem building and using stairs. The newly arrived young families did not have any problems with climbing stairs, either. The basement-stairs-sanctuary building model was typical of virtually all the original CRCs built in Canada, and the immigrants themselves were mostly young and healthy. Virtually all these buildings were retrofitted in later years as the immigrants aged. The congregation completed construction and dedicated the new facility in 1949. Dick had completed his first CRC church building project.



Dick Veendendaal and another member of the church carrying a pew into the new building. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

Dick Veenendaal's company car, in the late 1940s.

The A-frame structure of Sarnia CRC served as a general template for the style and budget of the churches that would follow. Dick was fond of saying that by sticking with this basic architectural plan "congregations would be spared the cost of an architect."

People in the tightly knit Dutch Reformed communities in southern Ontario beyond Sarnia began to hear about Dick's crew. He had a reputation for being a good Dutch guy with a good Dutch team that charged only for labor and materials. He went on to build eleven more church buildings for CRC congregations in southern Ontario.

During the time Dick's crew was active (1948–1959), only fourteen other Christian Reformed congregations in the region north, south, and west of Toronto constructed their own buildings. So, Dick, the CRC church builder, built almost half of the houses of worship constructed in that ten-year span. Dick and his crew also constructed an addition on the back of the Clinton United Church (where he had also built a Christian Reformed church facility) and the Christian school in Woodstock. (See the appendix for the list of churches.)

Once Dick started building churches, he loved it; he responded in a heartfelt way to the spiritual, ecclesiastical, and social needs of the local CRC congregations.

Veenendaal Construction

Dick prided himself in assembling a solid crew to carry out each project. After members of a church consistory contacted him, he would gather crew members and move them into the community. Some focused on the interior, while others concentrated on the exterior. The Veenendaal Construction

Wellandport Christian Reformed Church.

crew would stay at each church for approximately six to seven months.

In 1952 Dick became connected with James (Jim) Huberts, a carpenter and bricklayer living in Strathroy, Ontario. Jim was worshiping with a CRC congregation that met in the Strathroy Town Hall—a congregation that had been organized only the year before—when discussion arose about constructing a building for this new congregation. Dick's reputation from building the Sarnia church preceded him, and the church gave him the contract to construct its facility.

When Dick arrived in Strathroy, about forty miles west of Sarnia, he realized that Jim would be a good addition to the team and hired him. The two men worked together for the next six years, constructing a total of nine churches for CRC congregations.

Soon after Jim joined the team, Dick noticed that he was a skilled craftsman and made him the interior foreman. He also raised Jim's salary from $1.50 to $2.00 per hour. Jim would often tell his wife, "*We hebben het goed in Canada*" ("We have it good in Canada").

Dick, Jim, and the Veenendaal Construction crew worked with committed local volunteers to build the inexpensive and sturdy Strathroy CRC building. Volunteer labor became a consistent and essential part of all twelve of the church buildings constructed by Veenendaal.

The Veenendaal crew helped to organize the labor provided by the men and women of the CRC communities wherever they went. The crew, and especially Dick, made a point of approaching each project with diplomacy, craftsmanship, and frugality. From the moment construction began, church buildings became centers of newly developing communities.

After Strathroy, the reputation of Veenendaal Construction grew. Soon the "outside crew," headed by Allen Taylor, moved on to Wellandport to erect a church for the CRC community there. Jim and the "interior crew" stayed in Strathroy to finish the interior (stained plywood wainscoting with a repeating dark diamond, a pattern for future churches).

Jim also built the pulpit for the Strathroy church in his home. He did the same for other churches over the years to earn some extra money. These pulpits met the immediate need for the preaching of the Word in the churches. In some instances, the original pulpit, or another very much like it, remained in the worship space for decades. (As of 2021, a form of the pulpit built by Jim was still being used in the Grace Free Reformed Church in Brantford, which purchased the facility from the Brantford CRC in 1993.)

When the interior work in the Strathroy church was completed, Jim and the interior crew joined Dick in Wellandport, in the middle of the Niagara Peninsula. Dick and the outside crew would spend the week in Wellandport, boarding in people's homes, and go back home for the weekend. At first Dick went on his own; eventually Nettie came along. Jim and his whole family moved in with a local family in Wellandport. Thus began the pattern that would continue for the next six years: some

The new Christian school across the road from Wellandport CRC.

Interior of Brantford Free Reformed Church.

crew members would go home to Sarnia for the weekends, and some (occasionally with their families) would move in with church members for the duration of the construction.

In late 1953, Dick and his crew started on the Fruitland/Stoney Creek church, about thirty miles from Wellandport. It was the first of several brick buildings. They and the congregations that hired them were now fine-tuning the pattern set with earlier projects: first, the outside crew would start and enclose the building and then move on. The inside crew would overlap with the outside crew for a time, finish the project after it had left, and in turn move on, too, to the next project. Jim and his family stayed in Wellandport during the building of both churches; Dick went back and forth to his home in Sarnia.

In the spring of 1954 Veenendaal's teams built Wyoming CRC (just east of Sarnia), followed by Clinton CRC (an hour north of Sarnia). Jim moved his family to Wyoming and used his home there as a base to travel back and forth to Clinton. As with the earlier churches, these were A-frame buildings. (People occasionally described Dick as the "Henry Ford of the CRC: he built A-frame and affordable.")

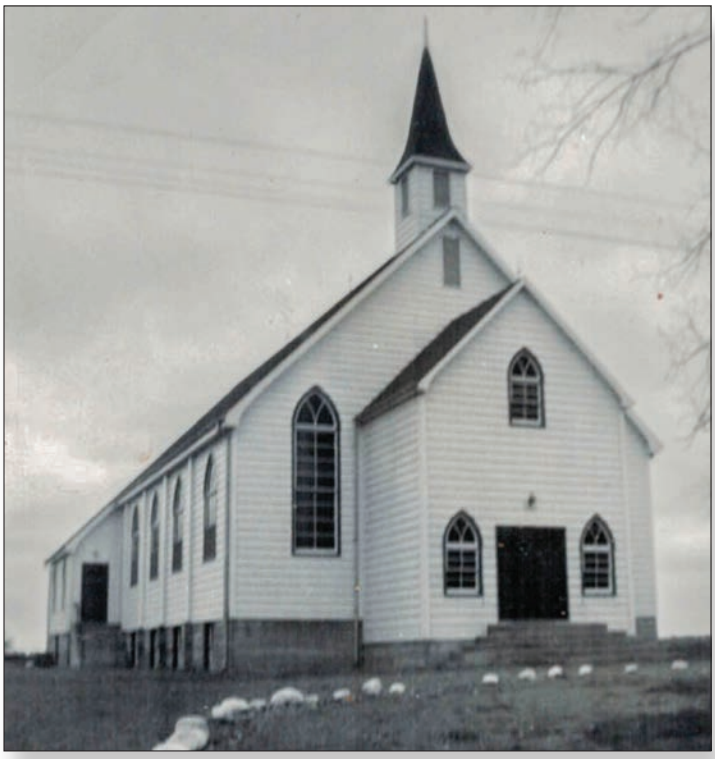
Next came Brantford CRC (a half hour west of Hamilton). Dick drove back and forth, going home on weekends, while Jim moved to Brantford full-time with his family. From there Jim also finished interior work on the Barrie and Brampton churches (an hour north and a half hour west of Toronto, respectively), which Dick and the outside crew had begun. That year, 1954, marked the greatest burst of church building for the Veenendaal Construction Company; there were several crews at work at the same time across Southwestern Ontario.

Late 1954 marked a major design shift for Dick and his crew. Maranatha CRC in St. Catharines, another congregation in the Niagara Peninsula, wanted Dick and his crew to build its new church. It wanted a style different from the typical wooden A-frame, however. Turkstra Construction had built an A-frame structure for Maranatha in 1950–1951, but the congregation had outgrown it by the time it was finished. Maranatha bought land across the street for a new, larger facility and contracted with Veenendaal to build it. The new church was to be cross-shaped. Dick developed a new design with Maranatha CRC, and he and his crew added new skills to their repertoire.

Veenendaal Construction completed its work on the St. Catharines building late in the spring of 1955. Dick and his crew made the move back to Sarnia, and Jim returned to Strathroy. Dick was called to do some work on for Second CRC of Sarnia and asked Jim to assist. In November of that same year, they built several pulpits and tables in a Strathroy shop.

Fruitland Christian Reformed Church, in 1955.

In the fall of 1956, Dick agreed to build St. Thomas CRC, just south of London, and then the Dundas CRC, near Hamilton. This was to be the last church that he and his crews would construct. He again asked Jim to be his



Wyoming Christian Reformed Church.

Maranatha Christian Reformed Church in St. Catharines.

Barrie Christian Reformed Church under construction.

interior foreman. Jim had been trying his hand at farming in Moorefield near Listowel after returning home from the St. Catharines building project but found that farming was not his calling. This time Jim would drive back and forth from Dundas, going home for weekends, as Dick had always done. After they completed the Dundas church in early 1958, Dick and Jim parted ways. Jim moved back to Listowel, where he helped to build the Listowel CRC in 1961 and the Palmerston Presbyterian church. He then built a permanent home for himself in Strathroy and (finally) settled there.

Building stories of faith

Throughout his church-building career, Dick never lost sight of the fact that all buildings—including churches—tell many stories and shape communities in many ways. He thoughtfully attended to all the details because he understood that a church building is something *inside* of which the story of faith is told, but also *by* which the story of faith is told.

Every church he built included a steeple pointing to heaven. This was a standard fixture. Inside every one of his church buildings, the heavy pulpit stood front and center, raised above the main floor on a platform of usually four steps and set into the front wall in an alcove. The communion table and the baptismal font rested on either side of the pulpit, normally on the main floor. The lights typically hung low on long chains.

For the CRC members growing up in these church buildings, these elements became a common architectural experience, and these familiar kinds of spaces helped to create a standard and style for worship. In the words of Winston Churchill, in considering the rebuilding of the House of Commons in 1941: "we shape our buildings, afterwards they shape us."

Dick installed Gothic windows into all but two churches, because "that's what churches should have." (He had been familiar with them in the Netherlands.) He put virtually the same roof on every church building, starting in Sarnia, all engineered by

Wyoming CRC, with an addition on the back.

Wellandport CRC, with an addition on the back from 1969 and renovations in the early 2000s.

John Tolhoek from Windsor. John was a part-time architect; his day job was as an engineer at the Ford Motor Company. His model for the roof construction was railroad trusses. The first full blueprints, from Strathroy, were used again and again, with only minor variations to suit local wishes. The pillars along the outside walls, stabilizing the rafters, were 16 feet apart and constructed of 12' x 12" square BC fir.

Dick was a trusted builder. His reputation among people in Ontario CRC communities was one of constructing solid, functional, and reasonably priced buildings. He built most of his churches with a budget of $35,000–$60,000. Congregations often financed their building with loans from CRC congregations or individuals from the United States.

Dick was a lifelong member of the Sarnia CRC, where he had gotten his start in church-building. Yet being away from home for much of the 1950s meant that he never became integrally involved in the life of his own congregation. He was, arguably, a missionary of sorts.

After Dick's crew had completed the Dundas church, there no longer seemed to be a need for his church-building skills, and he set about building barns and houses in and around Sarnia. Four of his houses still stand on the street where he lived during the latter part of his life.

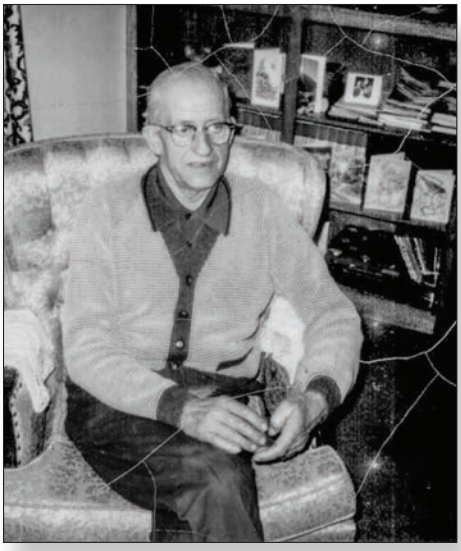
Nettie passed away at the age of 67 in 1973, and Dick married Josie Verdun two years later. He passed away at the age of 87 in 1996; his funeral eulogy made no mention of his incredible contribution to the growth of the CRC in southern Ontario. Josie passed away five years later.

The Veenendaal legacy

Dick Veenendaal and the men who worked with him in the 1950s were true church builders, not just builders of facilities. They believed that the local church, and by extension the church building, was the focal point in Dutch Reformed immigrant communities and the physical expression of the spiritual life of the congregations. It was the place where the important activities of the congregation happened: worship, baptisms, weddings, professions of faith, funerals, catechism classes, bazaars (downstairs), meetings of Young People's groups and Men's and Ladies' society meetings, and so much more. These buildings housed the body of Christ. And the members in those churches understood their value.

In the words of Jake Feenstra, one of the long-time members of the building crew, the 1950s "immigrants would literally give their last penny for the church building; Dick made sure that the congregations were not disappointed." These new communities were fueled by a powerful drive to build the places that would centralize their activities, religious and otherwise. It is noteworthy that, of the congregations that organized from 1950 to 1960 in Ontario, the typical time between organizing as a congregation and constructing or buying a church building was two to three years. Many of those immigrants might not have come to Canada if they had not trusted that there soon would be a familiar kind of church in which to worship.

Right from the digging of the basements, these church buildings helped to facilitate the bonds of community. The congregations were often made up of recently arrived immigrants from various places in the Netherlands, often from a variety of denominations there and speaking a variety of regional Dutch dialects, as well as Frisian. Constructing a building together was a symbolic step in making the "many" into "one." Since congregations would supply volunteer laborers for short lengths of time, Dick and his crews always helped to organize the workers in these church communities. Working together to build their own building was therefore both a physical and a spiritual



Dick Veenendaal in retirement.

exercise. Dick's natural gift of facilitating was both needed and appreciated.

Men and women volunteered to do what was necessary to complete their buildings: they were after all, building their worship spaces for their Lord.

Dick and the crews built twelve CRC church buildings in southern Ontario between 1948 and 1958. Of these, seven are still being used for worship. Each of those has been altered to meet changing conditions: additions added, elevators installed, walls removed, and walls added. In one case, that of Wellandport CRC, the worship space was turned around 180 degrees: the back became the front and vice versa. In several other cases, the platforms at the front were extended into the seating space to make room for the praise team. The seven remaining buildings, renovated, endure as homes for worshiping communities more than six decades later.

Dick Veenendaal, those who worked for him, and the volunteers who worked alongside him and his crews all believed that God was using their gifts to provide physical spaces that would help whole communities to flourish across generations. The young Dutchman who set out for a new country in 1930 found not just adventure, but a lasting vocation rooted in faith in God, the ultimate Creator and builder. And he left more than buildings. In the lives of all who continue to use these thoughtfully constructed houses of worship, Dick's legacy and story of faith endures.

Appendix

The church buildings of Dick Veenendaal and his crew.

Congregation:	***Completed:***
Sarnia (First)	1949
Strathroy (East)	1952
Wellandport	Summer 1953
Fruitland	Late 1953
Wyoming	Spring 1954
Clinton	1954
Brantford	1954
Barrie	1954
Brampton	March 1955
St. Catharines Maranatha	June 1955
Clinton United *(addition on the back)*	1955
St. Thomas	1956–1957
Dundas/Greensville	1956–1958
Woodstock Christian School	1959

Twenty-eight CRC buildings were constructed in Ontario west, south, and north of Toronto between 1948 and 1958. Twelve of those were built by Veenendaal and his crew—i.e., 43 percent: five in Classis Huron, one by Veenendaal; three in Classis Niagara, all by Veenendaal; four in Classis Toronto, two by Veenendaal; twelve in Classis Ontario Southwest (formerly Chatham), four by Veenendaal; and four in Classis Hamilton, two by Veenendaal.

Information for this article was provide by Jake Feenstra, Sarnia (last of the original crew); Janet and Harry Antonides, Toronto (Janet is Dick's oldest daughter); John and Betty Veenendaal, Sarnia (John is his youngest son); Dr. Terry Huberts, Victoria (son of Jim Huberts); and Dean Antonides (grandson).

The "Calvin Seminary Dames"

William Katerberg

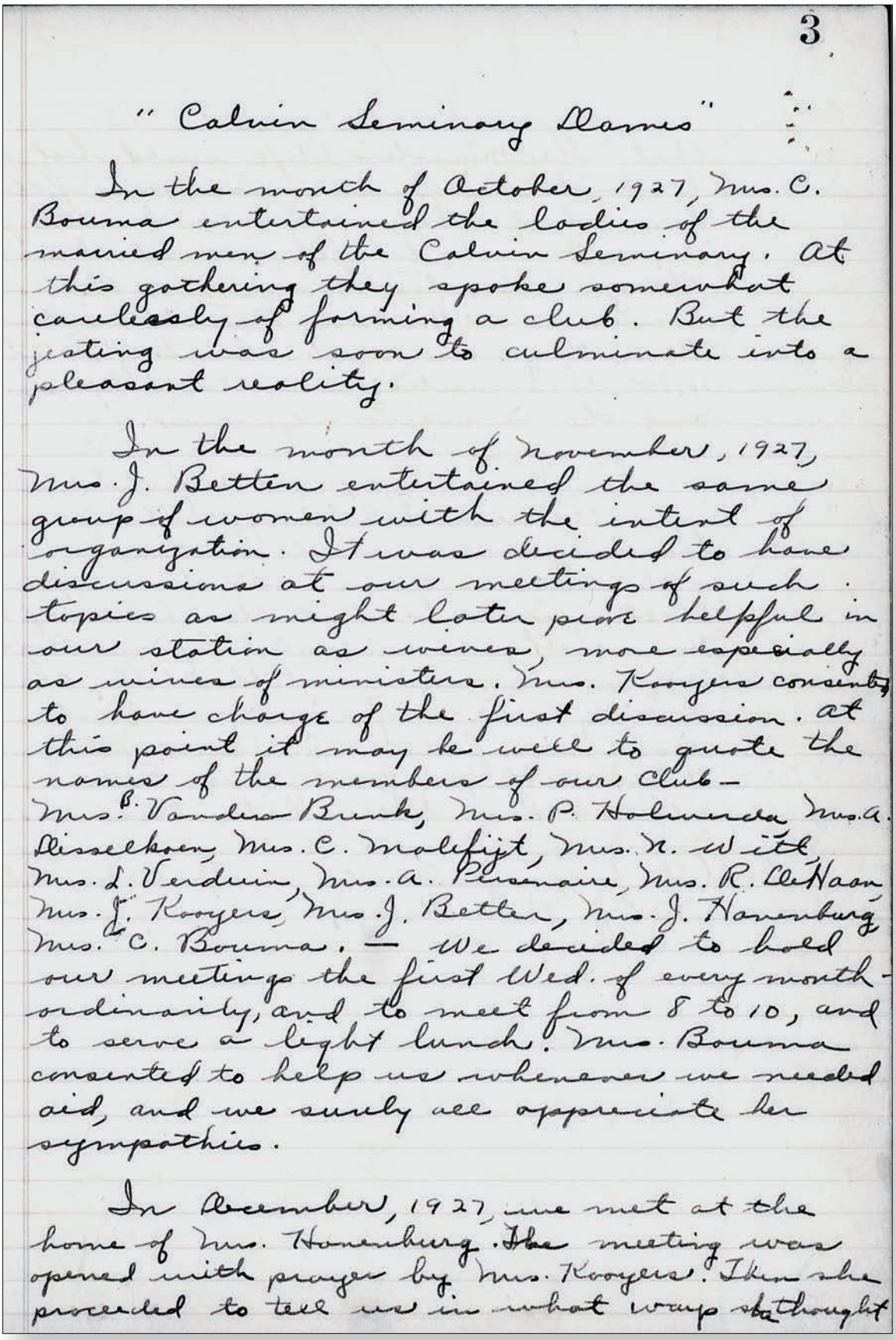
"In the month of October, 1927, Mrs. C. Bouma entertained the ladies of the married men of the Calvin Seminary." So reads the first sentence in the *Record Book of Calvin Seminary Dames*. "At this gathering," the minutes go on to say, "they spoke somewhat carelessly of forming a club. But the jesting was soon to culminate into a pleasant reality." The jesting was real and was reflected in the playful name "the ladies" gave themselves. But the club's goals were earnest.

Mrs. C. Bouma (Tessie Luidens) was the spouse of Rev. Dr. Clarence Bouma. She was from Grand Rapids and at 33 years old likely was not a whole lot older than some of the Seminary Dames. Clarence Bouma had graduated from the seminary in 1917 and had gone on to earn graduate degrees at Princeton, Harvard, and the Free University in Amsterdam. He and Tessie married in 1918 in Grand Rapids. He briefly pastored a church in Passaic, New Jersey, before they returned to Grand Rapids in 1924, where he would teach at the seminary for almost thirty years.

In November 1927 the "ladies of the married men of the Calvin Seminary" met again. Thirteen of them. They entertained the idea of organizing a club, deciding "to have discussions at our meetings of such topics as might later prove helpful in our station as wives, more especially as wives of ministers." We can learn a lot from the "Dames'" history—about the seminary, the church, and the roles of women and men.

Tessie Luidens Bouma, front row, center, from a photo of the Girls Society of Summer Street Christian Reformed Church in 1924, where Clarence was pastor in 1923-1924. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

William Katerberg is curator of Heritage Hall and a professor of history at Calvin University.



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"Calvin Seminary Dames"

In the month of October, 1927, Mrs. C. Bouma entertained the ladies of the married men of the Calvin Seminary. At this gathering they spoke somewhat carelessly of forming a club. But the jesting was soon to culminate into a pleasant reality.

In the month of November, 1927, Mrs. J. Betten entertained the same group of women with the intent of organization. It was decided to have discussions at our meetings of such topics as might later prove helpful in our station as wives, more especially as wives of ministers. Mrs. Kooyers consented to have charge of the first discussion. At this point it may be well to quote the names of the members of our Club — Mrs. B. Vanden Brink, Mrs. P. Holwerda, Mrs. A. Disselkoen, Mrs. C. Malefijt, Mrs. N. Witt, Mrs. L. Verduin, Mrs. A. Persenaire, Mrs. R. DeHaan, Mrs. J. Kooyers, Mrs. J. Betten, Mrs. J. Hanenburg, Mrs. C. Bouma. — We decided to hold our meetings the first Wed. of every month — ordinarily, and to meet from 8 to 10, and to serve a light lunch. Mrs. Bouma consented to help us whenever we needed aid, and we surely all appreciate her sympathies.

In December, 1927, we met at the home of Mrs. Hanenburg. The meeting was opened with prayer by Mrs. Kooyers. Then she proceeded to tell us in what ways she thought

The first entries in the Record Book of Calvin Seminary Dames. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

The wives of pastors, along with women generally, are mostly missing from histories of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). Typically, wives of seminary students and pastors left behind few records, or no one bothered to keep records that might have existed. Often, even their names are not mentioned in church histories, as Janet Sjaarda Sheeres notes in *For Better For Worse: Stories of the Wives of Early Pastors of the Christian Reformed Church*. Entries from the fall of 1927 in the minutes book of the Seminary Dames reflect this pattern. "Mrs. C. Bouma" and the dozen other women did not record their own names.

Despite this habit of overlooking women, by the early twentieth century some Christian Reformed congregations expected the wives of pastors to play active roles in the life and work of their church community. Pastors' wives in these congregations served as "unpaid adjuncts to their husband's work," as Sheeres puts it.

Some pastors' wives came from middle class and elite homes. By the 1920s and 1930s some had obtained not only high school diplomas but also college degrees. A few of those college graduates likely had stood out as excellent students at Calvin College. But unlike their husbands, they had few career options, especially because they would be the wives of "*dominees*" or "reverends."

Some of these women came from blue collar and rural backgrounds, however, and perhaps felt less equipped by social class and limited education to live up to the expectations of being the wife of the *dominie*. Local expectations for pastors' wives presumably varied, shaped among other things by whether the church was rural or urban, working class or prestigious. But there were always expectations.

Henry Katerberg and Jean Visscher (standing) at a wedding, 1962. Courtesy of the author.

My mother, Jean Visscher, was one of these women—blue collar, rural, immigrant, and a Calvin Seminary Dame. She was twenty-three when she arrived in Grand Rapids and had been raised on family farms in the Netherlands and Canada. She had immigrated with her family from a small town in the province of Drenthe to Drayton, Ontario, in 1949 at the age of eight. The teacher in the small school set immigrant children back a grade or two because they did not speak English, she later recalled.

She quit school at fourteen to work at home on the farm. In September 1963 she moved to Grand Rapids to join her fiancé, my father, Henry Katerberg. He was already in Grand Rapids, studying at Calvin College, and three years later would be a student at Calvin Theological Seminary. She studied at the Reformed Bible Institute (RBI) for a couple of years before they had children. He had played on the soccer team his first year at Calvin but did not rejoin it the next year, instead spending time with my mother and working more hours to be better able to support the two of them when they married. A little over a year later, in December 1964, they married in Drayton.

That first year my mother lived with a family in East Grand Rapids, serving as its cook. She made meals for the family, eating by herself in the kitchen. "So that should give you an idea of what kind of people they are," she commented tartly in a letter home a week or so after arriving. She also did the ironing "and some other small things to fill the necessary hours," which included keeping an eye on the 13-year-old daughter. She had the third floor of the house to herself, with a bedroom, bathroom, and hallway. It was more space than she had ever enjoyed in farmhouses crowded with children. But it was perhaps a little too quiet for a young immigrant woman accustomed to a boisterous family. Her employers left her with the dog one weekend when the family went away for the last time that season (to a cottage, presumably).

In her first letter to her family back home in Canada, my mother explained that she was waiting for the results of tests that she had written at RBI to determine which classes she would take. These tests were required of all students who, like her, did not have a high school diploma. She was eager that night to write a second letter, one to her sister Alida, who lived in Bloomfield, Ontario, with her husband Reverend John Zantingh. He was the *dominee* at Bethany Christian Reformed Church, their first pastorate. In the 1980s and 1990s he and my father would play golf together on Mondays, their day off, often with other local CRC pastors.

My mother's younger sister, Thereasa, arrived in Grand Rapids with her and started at Calvin College that same month. She also boarded with

Seminary Dames from 1935, with their husbands, in 1975. The photo is listed as the graduating class of 1935. Almost none of these photos included the spouses. One of the Dames is sitting alone, her husband having passed away. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

and worked for a local family, in the fashionable Ottawa Hills neighborhood southeast of the Calvin College and Seminary campus on nearby Franklin Street. She and my father took classes at both the Franklin campus and the new Knollcrest campus being built during the 1960s.

Despite English being her second language, and not having been in school for almost a decade, my mother loved being at RBI. "I enjoy every minute of school, classes and other activities," she told her father and family in a letter soon after school had started in September. "All except the homework." Ever the pragmatist, and by upbringing unable to do anything less than work hard, she went on to say, "But since one doesn't get anywhere without that, I do it whether I like it or not. This usually keeps me busy all afternoon till it's time to start supper, and till ten or so at night. So you see I have not time to get into mischief."

The comment about busyness and mischief perhaps was meant to reassure her worried father back home on the farm in Canada, letting him know that his two daughters, away from family for the first time and living in a strange city in a foreign country, were safe and behaving responsibly. My mother's life would only get busier in the coming years. The same semester she became a Calvin Seminary Dame, when my father started as a student there in the fall of 1966, she also would become the mother of the first of her children, twin boys whose mischief would drive her and my father to distraction—pulling her pots and pans out of cupboards and messing up his carefully organized bookshelves.

Back in November 1927 the new Calvin Seminary Dames club decided to meet on the first Wednesday morning of each month and enjoy a light lunch. Tessie Bouma "consented" to serve as a mentor for the club—its "honorary president"—and agreed to help when the dames "needed aid." She would play this role into the 1940s.

At the December 1927 meeting one of the members, a "Mrs. Kooyers," spoke on the theme of "The Minister's Wife." A discussion followed. The next meeting, in January 1928, was on a Friday due to exams at the seminary. The Dames read and discussed an article on "The Christian Family." In February, Clarence Bouma spoke on "How the minister's wife can aid

her husband from the pew." One wonders whether he consulted with Tessie when preparing his remarks!

The club's minutes reveal that the meetings followed this format into the early 1970s. (The last minutes that the archives have are from 1977.) The club of necessity became more structured in the early 1950s, as the number of members grew to almost eighty. It then began to divide its members into groups, each group taking charge of one meeting a year, giving all the members an "opportunity for training in leadership."

In addition to lectures and discussions, the meetings included prayers; updates on the Dames and their seminary husbands and children ("cheer reports"); and "refreshments" or a "light lunch." Sometimes "the men" joined them for refreshments. On occasion the Dames had meetings in the evening. But the group had grown too large to meet "in each other's homes," as it had done in the early years.

These details are reported in the description of the club in the 1951 edition of the Calvin *Prism*, the annual photo yearbook of Calvin College and Seminary. The club had become well enough established to be treated as an official seminary club, and that year *Prism* included a photo of some of the women. In the late 1960s the "Calvin Seminary Dames" were listed as a club in the official seminary student handbook.

Speakers at meetings continued to include "Seminary Dames" themselves and the wives of pastors and missionaries. A growing number of club members over the decades had earned college degrees. The wives of pastors sometimes focused on "how they feel they, as wives, fit with their husband's ministries." Speakers also included seminary and college faculty, local clergy, missionaries, and staff from the CRC denominational offices. A speaker in the early 1970s, for example, talked about how the Calvinettes program for girls was evolving. (The Calvinettes, now "Gems," and Cadets were Christian Reformed alternatives to Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts, with both CRC clubs starting in the 1950s.) When there was no speaker, the club discussed Bible passages and other readings.

The speakers and discussions remained mostly practical, as the founders of the club had proposed in 1927. Should "your door"—the parsonage was also a home, after all—always be open to parishioners in need? What should a pastor tell his wife about goings on in the church? In the decades after World War II, the meetings often included reports by wives on their husband's summer internships or slide shows by missionaries.

Calvin Seminary Dames in the 1951 Prism yearbook of Calvin College and Seminary. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

My favorite discussion topic is from November 1965. Dr. Lester De Koster spoke on the delicate subject of "How to Criticize Your Husband's Sermons." De Koster himself was not a pastor but a historical theologian, librarian, professor of speech, and later editor of *The Banner*. The minutes describe his thoughts as "interesting" and based on "(1) our relationships to our husbands and (2) our relationship to what he says." I wonder what the seminary student husbands thought if they and their Seminary Dame wives discussed the topic later that evening. (I do not recall my mother critiquing my father's sermons, but my sisters and I sometimes had fun with him—him taking our smart-alecky remarks in good stride.)

Only rarely did political events or social and economic issues make it into the minutes. The January 1942 minutes, for example, make no mention of the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 or the U.S. declarations of war a day later. The focus of the January 1942 meeting, reflecting the club's purpose, was (1) what ministers' wives should do "regarding sales, bazaars, etc., when these are opposed by some in the church" and (2) whether a minister's wife should be "allowed to belong to organizations or take part in activities outside the church." The same meeting featured one of the wives offering "a very instructive lesson in directing" choirs.

The general silence on current events and issues does not mean that the Seminary Dames never discussed such matters but simply reflects the fact that they were not part of the club's stated purpose. On the rare occasion when a current issue comes up

The twins with Opa Visscher in 1967. Courtesy of the author.

in the minutes, it is in the context of something that would affect the work of local churches. The minutes for February 1966, for example, record that Louis Smedes spoke to help club members "better see the problems facing minority groups." In November 1968, a woman spoke on the topic of "A Black Christian Looks at Race." In the early 1970s, a guest speaker led the group in playing "Star Power," a game about social conditions and rules. After playing, the group discussed "what we as Christians can do to help change harmful social rules and conditions." Another speaker, a local obstetrician and gynecologist, spoke on abortion and the Right to Life Committee.

As these topics suggest, the concerns of the wives of seminary students and pastors evolved along with those of the church. My parents were in Canada at one of my father's summer internships during the "race riot" in Grand Rapids in July 1967. They both told stories about their African American neighbors in Grand Rapids, however, and recalled how the assassination of Martin Luther King in April 1968 unsettled the neighborhood in which they lived.

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My mother shows up several times in the Calvin Seminary Dames minutes, reflecting the joys and sorrows of life, even for the mostly young seminary students and their families.

The first time is the meeting minutes from the month after my twin brother and I were born in 1966. "We" were a total surprise. "*Twee jonkies?!*" ("Two little ones?!") exclaimed my paternal grandmother upon finding out. My father, on hearing after his morning class that my mother was in labor, rushed to the hospital. He likely felt faint on learning that he had not one but two children. Remarkably, the minutes also mention that twin girls had been born to another seminary student couple. It was quite a month for babies at the seminary, apparently. The seminary had a donation box for my brother and me, as we had arrived six weeks early and my parents needed help to pay the hospital bill for keeping us in incubators.

Two years later there are four reports related to my mother. One report notes that my brother was at Blodgett Hospital in East Grand Rapids. A standalone follow-up entry a week later records that he had died and that the club had sent a sympathy gift to my parents. The next month, a third report indicates that my parents had sent the club a thank-you note. Finally, two months later, the minutes report that my mother led the singing at a joint meeting of the Calvin Seminary Dames and the Adelphia Society of Western Theological Seminary, the women spouses' organization there.

Leading the singing was an example of the kind of role that the club was meant to encourage. My mother loved music and had a naturally good voice. She often sang ditties or played classical music records at home while she worked. And she sang in the choirs of the churches my father pastored. In the year after this meeting, the Calvin Seminary Dames met more times with the Adelphia Society at Western (a seminary in Holland, Michigan, associated with the Reformed Church in America).

A year later, my sister was born. By then my father had graduated from the seminary, and we were living in Canada. My sister arrived the same month during which he started ministry in his first congregation and was ordained. My mother had graduated, too, from Seminary Dame to pastor's wife. Apparently confused about having a sister, I am reported to have asked, "He's a she?"

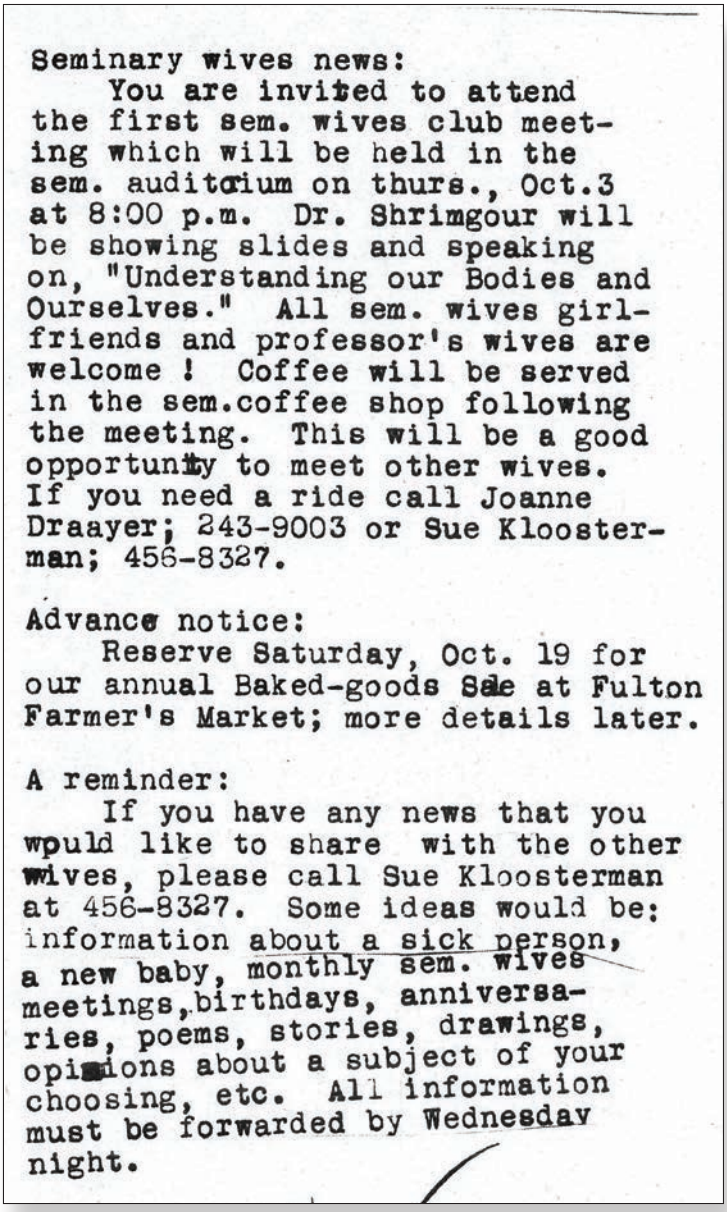
In the 1960s the Seminary Dames were meeting on the new Knollcrest campus. They had their refreshments in the seminary coffee shop or in the Commons cafeteria on the college campus. A sign of cultural and religious change in the Sixties and Seventies was a talk by a local Methodist minister on "The Crisis in the Ministry Today." Another sign was a presentation about the role of "Christian folk music" and how it can speak to contemporary religious questions. The minutes record that the members enjoyed listening to selections of both "folk music" and "Christian folk music."

It is hard for me to know—drawing on childhood and adolescent memories—how being a Reformed Bible Institute student and Calvin Seminary

Dame shaped my mother. How well had these experiences equipped her to be a pastor's wife? (She and my father both helped my sisters and me with homework, abilities enhanced by their time studying in Grand Rapids.)

I remember that my mother was active in the congregations that my father served. She was always in the church choir. Over time she gained enough confidence to solo on occasion in a worship service. She did not, in my memory, lead women's groups in the congregations my father pastored, but she participated in most, if not all, of them. I do not know how much of the "spiritual service" expected of a pastor's wife she enjoyed and how much of it was a burden that she endured. I know that she had fun hanging out with church youth and young adults at the annual Young People's Society retreats. The "Young People," and especially the guys, delighted in and were exasperated by the fact that they could not beat her in ping pong.

In the early 1980s, after many years of being a dutiful pastor's wife, participating in all the "ladies'" organizations in their congregations, my mother's sister Alida decided that she'd been a dutiful spouse long enough. She stepped back a little from the expected duties as the pastor's wife and began working as a nursing aid in senior care facilities, something she loved. A few years later, in the late 1980s, my mother similarly went back to work outside the home. These choices coincided with their children growing up and moving out, as there was less work to keep up with at home.



Seminary wives news:
You are invited to attend the first sem. wives club meeting which will be held in the sem. auditorium on thurs., Oct.3 at 8:00 p.m. Dr. Shrimgour will be showing slides and speaking on, "Understanding our Bodies and Ourselves." All sem. wives girlfriends and professor's wives are welcome ! Coffee will be served in the sem.coffee shop following the meeting. This will be a good opportunity to meet other wives. If you need a ride call Joanne Draayer; 243-9003 or Sue Kloosterman; 456-8327.

Advance notice:
Reserve Saturday, Oct. 19 for our annual Baked-goods Sale at Fulton Farmer's Market; more details later.

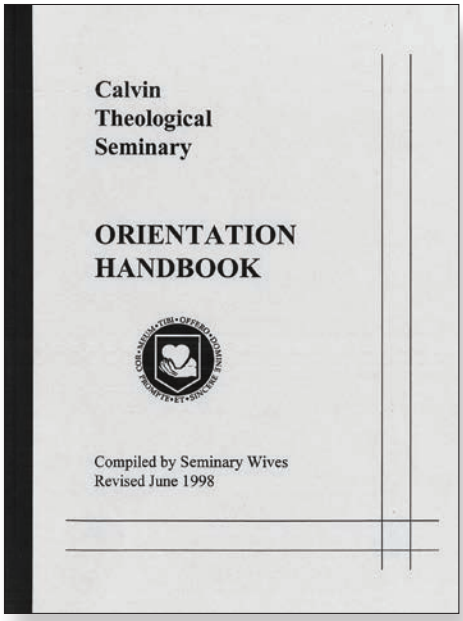
A reminder:
If you have any news that you would like to share with the other wives, please call Sue Kloosterman at 456-8327. Some ideas would be: information about a sick person, a new baby, monthly sem. wives meetings, birthdays, anniversaries, poems, stories, drawings, opinions about a subject of your choosing, etc. All information must be forwarded by Wednesday night.

Advertisement for "Seminary wives" in the 30 September 1974 issue of Kerux, the seminary student produced weekly newsletter. It mentions the "our bodies and ourselves" lecture.

In the early-to-mid-1970s, the club began to change. In 1972 the Seminary Dames began discussing the club's future, with an eye toward making "it "more inviting to the wives." Meetings in the following years often included games, skits, and crafts. Some of the topics focused less on their roles as future pastor's wives and more on themselves as women. In 1974, for example, the minutes report a discussion of "our bodies and ourselves as women," led by a local doctor of internal medicine, a woman. The club also investigated organizing a daycare nursery for seminarian children at the seminary. Though the official name of the group remained the Calvin Seminary Dames in the seminary's annual catalog, the group was now generally referring to itself as "Seminary Wives."

The description of the "Seminary Women" group in the seminary Student Handbook in 1987 alluded to challenges that seminary wives faced. "It is very important, a note said, "that you communicate your situation to someone so that the Body of Christ might function and serve as it should! Please do not suffer in silence."

The new challenges the club faced reflected changing social, cultural, and political views about women's roles. Debates in society and church about women's roles likely help explain declining interest in the club by seminary student wives and a desire for something different. A speaker in 1972 focused on women's roles in the church, "a married woman's relationship with her husband," and sexism. Two months later, Calvin



Calvin Theological Seminary Orientation Handbook, 1998. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

Seminary professor Melvin Hugen led a discussion about divorce and dealing "redemptively" with those going through divorces. In 1973 the group discussed "frustration" and whether its members should send a petition to the seminary to create non-credit courses for wives.

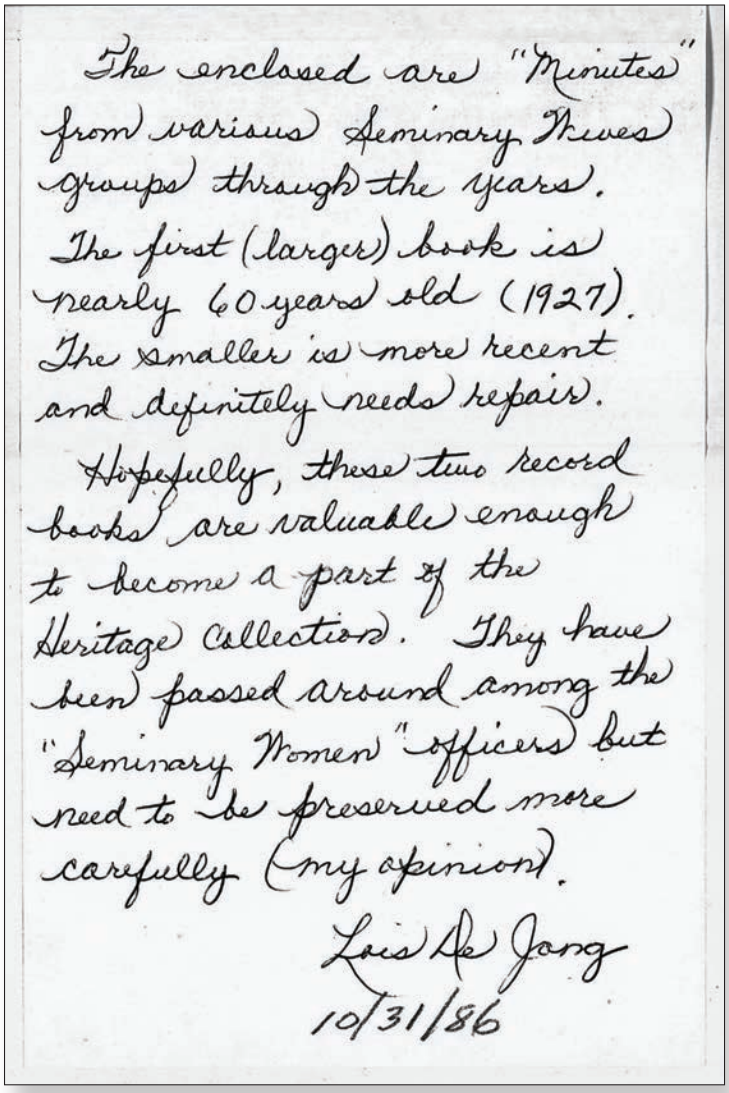
Wives of Calvin seminary students perhaps no longer held shared cultural and religious expectations about being a pastor's wife, as had been the case from the from the 1920s through the 1960s. They may no longer have assumed that this role would define who they were. By 1975–1976 the club was no longer meeting monthly. Seminary faculty wives would have changing groups of student wives to their homes for "informal discussions." The "traditional teas and banquets would be held as usual," however. Instead of club-organized programing, the seminary offered non-credit courses for seminary wives, notably in preparation for their being ministers' wives. The first few women students began taking regular courses at the seminary in the 1970s—as "unclassified students."

In the 1980s and 1990s, the wives of students continued to play a "spiritual service" role at the seminary, putting together the student life "Orientation Handbook" for seminarians and their families. It detailed resources for these families while they lived in Grand Rapids. The covers read, "Compiled by Seminary Wives." By that point, however, the era of the "seminary wife" was ending.

A small, growing number of women at the seminary were there as degree-seeking students, some aspiring to become pastors themselves and some eventually succeeding. The spouses of seminary students and pastors began to include men as well as women. And, whether men or women, increasingly the spouses of clergy would have careers of their own. Those spousal careers have become factors in whether and when pastors are able accept a "call" to move to a new congregation.

The minutes we have in the archives for the Calvin Seminary Dames end in 1977. A note card from 1986 inserted in one of the two minutes books (1927–1963 and 1963–1977) explains that the "'Seminary Women officers" had passed around the books over the decades.

The person who wrote the note and sent the minutes books to the archives was Lois De Jong, wife of the then seminary president, Reverend James De Jong. She wrote that she thought the minutes should be "carefully preserved," commenting: "My opinion." Perhaps her pastor-president husband was not so sure, or perhaps she worried that the curator of Heritage Hall might not agree. In any case, the minutes are here in the archives, and they provide an important window into the histories of the seminary and the church and the place of women in those histories.


The enclosed are "Minutes" from various Seminary Wives groups through the years. The first (larger) book is nearly 60 years old (1927). The smaller is more recent and definitely needs repair. Hopefully, these two record books are valuable enough to become a part of the Heritage Collection. They have been passed around among the "Seminary Women" officers but need to be preserved more carefully (my opinion).
Lois De Jong
10/31/86

Note from Lois De Jong, 1986. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

The First Dutch-Born woman on a Mormon Wagon Train to Utah

Janet Sjaarda Sheeres

Founded in 1847, Pella, Iowa, was named thus because biblically it means "City of Refuge," in this case for Dutch Reformed immigrants. Not all considered it such. Only a couple of years after arriving, one woman decided it was not a refuge for her and left not only the town but her husband as well. What prompted Geertruij Marcus van Beijnum to join a Mormon wagon train and head for that other "Zion," a refuge for Mormons in Salt Lake City, Utah? Hers is one of those Dutch immigrant stories that has long been neglected but is worth sharing.

First Marriage

At promptly nine o'clock on the morning of Wednesday, the 25th of February 1835, Geertruij Marcus, a domestic servant, and Antonie van Beijnum, a tailor, appeared at Utrecht's city hall to be married. After handing over the required identification documents and answering the questions he posed to them—that each would take the other as their spouse—the officiating magistrate declared the two husband and wife. Not having learned to write, Geertruij's signature is absent from the document.[1]

The Dutch marriage law of 1806 did not concern itself with the private affairs of people entering marriage, such as age difference or religious affiliation. Antonie being sixteen years older and belonging to the Dutch Reformed Church and Geertruij having been baptized in the Roman Catholic Church thus were not issues. Geertruij's parents had passed away many years before the marriage and were not present to forbid her to marry outside her church. The couple settled in Utrecht.

Already in the Middle Ages, Utrecht had been an important city in the Netherlands, second only to Amsterdam. It was known for its clothing and fabric shops. A city full of well-to-do people would have provided an adequate income for a tailor, and Geertruij could have expected a promising future with her much older husband. After her marriage she no longer needed to work as a domestic but could run her own household.

In July of the year of their marriage, Rev. Hendrik P. Scholte, a Dutch Reformed pastor who had left the state church, arrived in Utrecht to preach a secessionist message.[2] He was able to rouse enough interest in this new movement that a number of people soon withdrew their membership from the Dutch Reformed Church. They joined the newly founded Christian Seceder denomination when Rev. Scholte formally instituted a congregation in Utrecht in December 1836.

According to its membership list only Antonie joined in 1844.[3] Nevertheless, Geertruij attended services with her husband because, when in 1847 Rev. Scholte organized a party of seceder immigrants to emigrate the United States, both she and Antonie signed up. The bylaws of Scholte's *Society for Emigration to North America* specifically stated that

Janet Sheeres is a researcher, author, editor, and frequent contributor to Origins. Her forthcoming book is on immigrant women working as midwives in Dutch colonies in the United States.

Roman Catholics were not eligible to join.[4] This restriction is understandable given that Scholte "hated the Catholics more than anyone else," according to historian Jacob Van Hinte.[5] Scholte also stipulated that the Society's board "accept only those who can pay their own way [to America] and [once in Pella] establish themselves."[6] It seems that Antonie's tailoring had not been as profitable as hoped, as he was not able to raise the required passage funds. Fortunately, help arrived in March of 1847, a month before their sailing, when Gerrit Rijsdam, an Emigration Society board member, paid the 160 guilders "passage for van Beijnum *et ux*."[7] The couple had no children.

SS Katherine Jackson of Baltimore. Painted by M. A. Thomas in 1844. The ship was built in 1833. Collection of Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum.

The Journey

Their journey from the Netherlands to Pella across the ocean and halfway across the United States took four months. The Scholte group left the Netherlands in four ships in April 1847. Antonie and Geertruij sailed on the *SS Catherina Jackson,* the first of the four ships to arrive in Baltimore in May.[8] Twenty passengers among the nearly eight hundred on the four ships suffered fatal injuries as a result of a violent storm at sea. The ships' crews placed the bodies of the deceased in canvas sacks and, with an appropriate ceremony, consigned them to the deep.[9] When the other three ships arrived in Baltimore, Scholte joined the passengers and helped them on their journey inland.

From Baltimore the immigrants took the train to Columbia, Pennsylvania; from there they continued by canal boats to Pittsburgh. While the Dutch were used to canal boat travel in the Netherlands, this was an entirely different experience. The eleven-day, 172-mile trip was negotiated by 130 locks, each lifting the boats seven to eight feet. This leg of the journey claimed the lives of four more immigrants, whose bodies were buried along the canal. From Pittsburgh they sailed down the Ohio River to St. Louis, Missouri. Here the party suffered the most deaths of the entire journey, due to cholera; the hot, humid weather; poor food and water; unsanitary housing; and the lack of medical care.

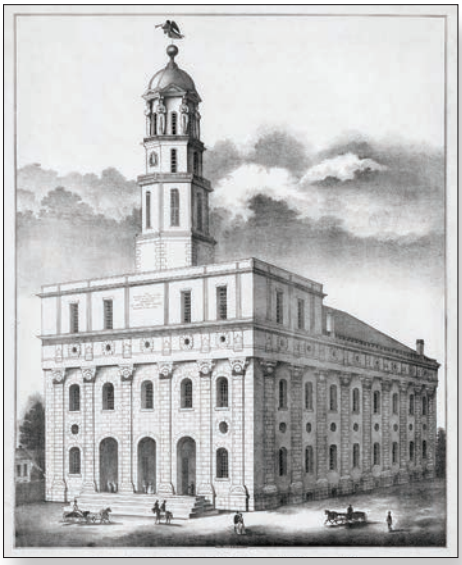
After a few-weeks stay in the city, waiting for Scholte to procure land in Iowa, the immigrants pushed on to Keokuk, Iowa, by riverboat. For the final 120 miles of the journey to Pella, the well-to-do purchased horses and carriages, while others bought oxen and carts, and still others slogged on foot through mud in the pouring rain, arriving in Pella in August. This last leg of the journey cost the lives of three more people. Gerrit Rijsdam noted that "It is possible that during the entire trip as many as one hundred people died before reaching Pella."[10]

Pella

Not all the immigrants arrived in Pella at the same time. According to fellow passenger Sjoerd Sipma, "about half of those destined for Pella, including tailors and seamstresses, remained in St. Louis to earn money."[11] That decision made practical sense. Pella did not yet have living quarters in August 1847 and certainly no place to

A view of Pella, ca. 1847. Artists unknown. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

set up a tailoring shop. Besides that, there were more pressing needs in the early days of the settlement than having a suit or dress made. Antonie and Geertruij arrived at some point during the spring or summer of 1848, when enough cabins had been built



Print showing exterior view of Joseph Smith's original Mormon temple building in Nauvoo, Illinois. Des Moines, Ia. : State Lith. & Eng. Co., c1890. Library of Congress 2006677498.

to house the newcomers, along with a cabin that served as a church.

In comparison to Utrecht, a city with a cathedral and beautiful church buildings, the cabin erected to hold worship services likely seemed primitive to Geertruij, who from now on would use Gertrude, the English version of her name. Henry Hospers, in a letter to his father in the Netherlands, described the frontier church as follows: "The building measures 40 x 60. Everything shows that lack of money prevented its completion. And when one enters it on Sundays, he sees, notwithstanding a floor half finished, rough-board seats and a crude pulpit."[12] According to the council minutes of the (independent) Christian Church in Pella, the van Beijnums, while they may have attended, did not join this congregation in the years 1848–1849.[13]

The details of this story are essential to understanding what happened to Gertrude. Leaving behind her Catholic roots when she married, along with the hardship and disorientation that she and the other immigrants experienced in leaving Holland and slogging to frontier Iowa, likely left her feeling uprooted enough that joining Mormon colonists going to Utah would attract her.

Pella and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

After the death of their founding leader, Joseph Smith, at the hands of a lynch mob in Nauvoo, Illinois, in June 1844, the leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), usually referred to as Mormons, fled Illinois. They crossed the Mississippi and spread out into southeastern Iowa, including the Pella area.[14] Here they established staging areas to organize wagon trains heading farther west. Mormon leaders settled on Utah, a Mexican Territory, as their new Zion, a refuge to avoid being in a United States jurisdiction.[15]

In 1846 Brigham Young, the newly elected Mormon leader, led the first wagon train to Utah. So many would follow that by 1848 large wagon trains rolling through Pella were purchasing cattle and other necessities to take farther west.

Gertrude had already learned something about Mormons in St. Louis, where thousands of Mormon immigrants from Europe were waiting for riverboats to take them to southeast Iowa, the staging area from which they prepared to cross the prairies to Utah. As the Mormon wagon trains passed through Pella, she learned more about these people and why they were on the move.

Rational for leaving Pella

To understand why Gertrude joined the Mormons, keep her background in mind. She had been brought up in the Roman Catholic Church and was not staunchly Reformed like Antonie. Unlike the stern Christian Seceders, Mormons, like the Roman Catholics

Nauvoo, Illinois, circa 1846, with the Temple on a hill in the background. Wikimedia Commons.

of her youth, allowed for more entertainment, such as dancing, singing, and card playing.[16] Until her marriage to Antonie, Gertrude's faith life had included the adoration of saints. The Roman Catholic Church venerated many saints, including one that was her namesake, Saint Gertrude, whose

Portrait of Brigham Young, the Mormon Moses, taken by Marsena Cannon in Salt Lake City in 1853. Wikimedia Commons.

day the church observed on November 15. The adulation of saints, so abhorrent to Protestant Christians, had been a comforting element of her childhood. Leaving the Netherlands had further unmoored her as a person. Now, in Iowa, there were people who called themselves Latter-day Saints and who like all saints were willing to face persecution and hardship for their faith. John Huijskamp's article in the *Sheboygan Nieuwsbode* noted that the Mormons were vigorously proselytizing among the Dutch in Pella and that their testimony inspired Gertrude to hear them out and ultimately join them.[17]

The LDS wagon trains were highly regulated. Single, unchaperoned women were not allowed. As with Rev. Scholte's rules, the LDS church decreed that travelers had to pay for their own passage and be able to support themselves once in Utah. On her own Gertrude did not qualify; nor did she have the financial means. Any money she and Antonie had earned in St. Louis was earmarked to pay off their debt to Gerrit Rijskamp and to set up shop in Pella.

Whatever her reasons for leaving, the 1850 Iowa United States Federal Census (USFC) indicates that Gertrude had left Pella. Antonie is listed in the Census as boarding with a Dutch family, confirming that Gertrude had left him by that time. According to the Marion County Probate Records, he died on 9 May 1851.[18] Another person not listed as living in Pella, or in the surrounding county, was Martin Zyderlaar.

Martin Zyderlaar

Martin was six years old when his father died in 1830 in Dordrecht, the Netherlands. Two years later, his mother, Maria de Boo, married Pierre A. F. Wigny, a *scheepsslijter,* (shipping agent).

According to family records, Wigny was well-to-do and deeply religious.[19] In 1834 he left the Dordrecht Dutch Reformed Church and joined the Christian Seceders. In March of 1840 he was the elder delegate for the Dordrecht Christian Seceders, attending a special meeting of the church's supervisors in Amsterdam. Here he met with such seceder notables as the Reverends De Cock, Scholte, Van Raalte, Van Velzen, Brummelkamp, Zonne, De Moen, and others.[20]

By 1847 Wigny had become such an influential person in Secession circles that he was appointed by Scholte as the Emigration Society's board member for Dordrecht. His task was to oversee the applicants. This board was instructed to receive only sober, industrious, and moral persons as members of the colony. Infidels, Roman Catholics, and atheists were barred.[21]

Young Martin, now Wigny's stepson, was a teenager when he attended the Christian Seceder congregation in Dordrecht, along with his mother, his stepfather, his older sister, and his younger stepsister. After finishing his elementary education, he became a sailor, thereby learning rudimentary English.

Emigration

Like the van Beijnums, the Wigny family joined the Scholte group bound for America in 1847.[22] They sailed on the *SS Nagasaki*.[23] The obituary of Martin's stepsister in the 27 April 1922 issue of *de Volksvriend* states that she came to America in 1847 with a sister and a brother.[24]

Either on the journey or soon after their arrival in Pella, Martin's mother and sister passed away. Wigny married Gertrui Helmich on 27 January 1849.[25] The marriage lasted only until October of that year, when Gertrui died due to consumption (tuberculosis). In February 1850 Wigny married Anke van Hettinga.[26] Marrying shortly after the death of a spouse was not uncommon in the early days of Dutch colonies, when a man needed a woman in the house and a woman needed a man for support. But Wigny's successive marriages, so soon after the death of Martin's mother, may have riled Martin. He may also have felt that Wigny's decision to emigrate had subjected his mother and sister to dangers and led to their deaths.

At the age of 23, feeling no allegiance to his stepfather, nor to Pella and the Christian Church organized by Scholte, Martin was free to go as he pleased. At some point, either in St. Louis or in Pella, he had become intrigued with Mormonism. In Pella he saw the wagon trains heading west and decided to join them. His sailor earnings and whatever his mother had left him allowed him to

Drawing of the enlistment of the Mormon Battalion in 1846 at Council Bluffs, Iowa. Mormon leaders hoped to earn favor from the U.S. government by forming a battalion to participate in the Mexican American War of 1846-1848. Drawing by C. B. Hancock, ca. 1895. Courtesy of the Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. PH 2814

purchase a wagon, a team of oxen, and provisions. Somewhere along the way Martin met Gertrude Marcus, who shared his convictions. Two people who had been unmoored from their pasts seem to have hoped to find new stability in each other and a new religious community.

1850 to 1853

There are no extant records of where Getrude and Martin were between 1850 and June 1853 when Martin joined the LDS church. They married in Salt Lake City.[27] The best we can do is describe the likely journey they took.

The only way to travel to Utah in those years was by wagon train, and because they joined the LDS church in Utah, they likely traveled there with a Mormon wagon train. Information about these early wagon trains fills in the gaps about their likely whereabouts. They left Pella early in 1850 before that year's federal census was taken. (The census was usually taken in June.) Wagon trains left from mid-April to early May, and thus by June they were already traveling across Iowa. Neither would they have been counted in the fall when they arrived in Pottawattamie County, Iowa, to overwinter.

Having endured the strenuous Atlantic crossing from the Netherlands to America and then across half of America to Pella, Getrude apparently was not afraid to undertake a journey farther west. She had no children to keep her in Pella, and without having given birth to any, at age forty she was still in relatively good physical shape. In 1850 there were still no railways crossing Iowa, so the first leg of the trip took Gertrude and Martin through Iowa to the Mormon winter quarters in Pottawattomie County, Iowa.[28]

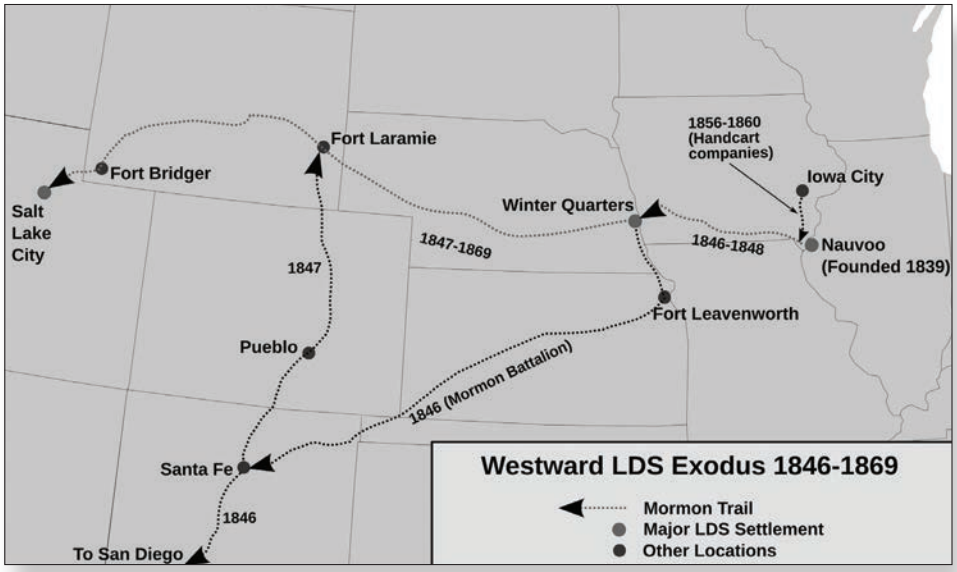
The main Morman staging area at the Missouri River, called the Grand Encampment, was located south of Council Bluffs, extending nine miles to the east. There was not enough grass, wood, and water to support 10,000 to 15,000 people, 3,000 wagons, 30,000 cattle, immense flocks of sheep, and great numbers of horses and mules. The Mormons thus fanned out on both sides of the river (mostly on the Iowa side), forming small communities.[29]

Here many Mormons settled for a time in1846–1847, to assist later groups bound for Utah. These Mormons took advantage of business opportunities in a bustling frontier outfitting center. It soon would teem with even more travelers, many of them bound for California after gold was discovered there in 1848. By early 1852, the population of Kanesville, one of the Mormon towns, had reached about 5,000, even after most Mormons had left in late 1851, obeying Brigham Young's summons to remove to the Mormon colony in Utah.[30] In whatever community Gertrude and Martin lived during the winter months, they made themselves useful. Every person was needed to look after the ill, the cattle, and food supplies and take care of countless other tasks.

Like their fellow Mormons, Gertrude and Martin heeded Brigham Young's call to proceed to Utah and left winter camp in the spring of 1851. Young was a Mormon Moses of sorts, but a Moses who would arrive in the "Promised Land" and rule it for three decades.

Depending on which wagon train they traveled with, Martin and Gertrude's treks through Nebraska and Wyoming to Utah that summer likely took two to three months. As Gertude

and Martin entered the Salt Lake valley through Emigration Canyon, they saw a vista of pleasing land laid out in square fields of corn, wheat, and oats.[31] There were over 40,000 Mormons in the Salt Lake Valley by 1851, with 6,157 living in the city proper. They arrived in Utah in the fall of 1851 and settled in the city.[32]



Westward LDS Exodus, 1846-1869. The northern route was taken by pioneers heading to Salt Lake City. The southern route was taken by the Mormon Battalion in 1846. Wikimedia Commons.

Salt Lake City and Baptism

In February 1853 a large crowd gathered in Temple Square to attend the ground-breaking ceremony of the building of the Mormon temple. The sheer spiritual and emotional exhilaration of the moment cemented Martin's soul to the church; he was baptized one week later by Elder John A. James. Gertrude's name does not appear on any baptismal records.[33]

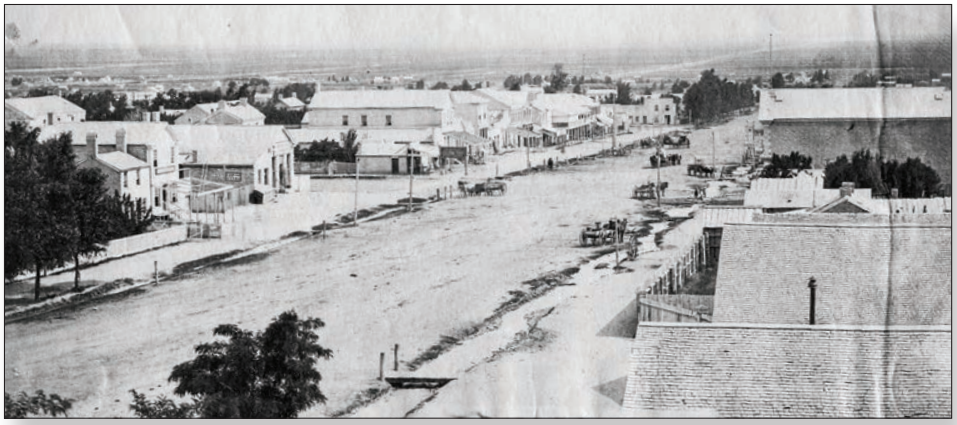
Eventually the news of Antonie's death reached Gertrude because in 1855 she felt free to marry the fifteen-year-younger Martin.[34] The 1860 United States census lists Martin as a laborer with real estate valued at $200 and personal assets of $50. While their cabin may have been small, at least it was housing. Without children to care for, the two were able to survive financially. They remained the only Dutch-born people in Utah for the following eight years.

On Her Own

At the time of his baptism in 1853, the LDS church also ordained Martin as an elder. According to the LDS doctrine, "the duty of an elder is to teach, expound, exhort, baptize, and watch over the church. Elders have the authority to administer to and bless the sick and afflicted, to confirm those who are baptized into the church, by the laying on of hands for the baptism of fire and the Holy Ghost."[35] Newly baptized adult men are also ordained as priests upon their baptism. Priests are organized into Quorums of Seventies in their wards and assist in the administration of the Church across the world.[36] Gertrude supported Martin in his position as elder and priest. Both their lives now revolved around the LDS church.

An engraving published in Le monde (1874) based on an 1868 drawing by Adrien-Emmanuel Marie. It depicts a traveling company of Latter-day Saints in 1868. Wikimedia Commons.

In 1861 the church ordered Martin to use his Dutch language skills and go on a mission to proselytize among the Dutch Afrikaners in South Africa. This left Gertrude as the sole Dutch woman in Salt Lake City for two years, until Martin returned. Wives of men who went on missionary journeys had to look after their own needs. As a girl growing up the Netherlands, Gertrude had learned to knit and sew, and she had worked as a domestic before her marriage to Antonie, giving her skills to support herself while Martin was away. Also by now, she was established well enough in the Mormon church to feel comfortable in her position and could count on many of the female church members for support.



View of the eastern part of Salt Lake City, ca. 1861-1862. Courtesy of the Church HIstory Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.PH 518

Plural Marriage

While in South Africa Martin embraced the Mormon doctrine of "plural marriage." After his return to Utah in 1863 he soon married two more women.[37] One of his new wives was Catherine Hansen (1839–1922), a Danish woman. They married in February 1864. In June of the same year, Martin married Cornelia Ages, a newly arrived Dutch convert. Cornelia had been born in 1830 in Amsterdam, where she had converted to Mormonism; she arrived in Salt Lake City in 1863. By also marrying Cornelia, Martin fulfilled Section 132 of *The Doctrine and Covenants*; it stated that "a man needed at least three wives to attain the 'fullness of exaltation' in the afterlife."[38]

Another of the rules of plural marriage was that the first wife had to give her consent to subsequent marriages. Gertrude's acceptance of the twenty-eight-year younger Catherine and the twenty-year-younger Cornelia as "sister-wives" proved that she too had accepted this Mormon doctrine.[39] If, over the years, Gertrude had harbored hopes of having a child with a younger husband, these hopes did not materialize, and perhaps for Martin's sake she welcomed these women. She may also have recognized that they, like her, were looking for stability in a community and that plural marriage in Utah offered this. Catherine delivered a baby boy named Martin on 21 April 1866, and Cornelia delivered a daughter, Martha, on 11 June 1866.

Tragically, neither Gertrude nor Martin would see these babies born. Gertrude had died in April 1865 and Martin in November. Unlike Gertrude, Martin at least knew that two younger wives were pregnant. Gertrude and Martin were buried in Salt Lake City's main cemetery. The cause of her death was "general debility" and Martin died of gastro-intestinal issues. Little baby Martin lived for only a year and was buried alongside his father.

The first Dutch-born woman on a Mormon wagon train west, and then a citizen of Salt Lake City, thus was a wife who abandoned her first husband and then became a plural wife—though she likely saw herself as having been lost and then found.[40] One wonders how much scandal her actions stirred up in Pella. Mormon women were encouraged to keep a journal. Sadly Gertrude, being illiterate, left no account of her life. Without children, there was no one to continue her legacy or record her story. She likely would have been surprised that her story has surfaced a century and a half after her death.

Portrait of Ira Eldredge and his three wives, circa 1864. Nancy Black Eldredge, Hannah Mariah Savage Eldredge, and Helvig Marie Andersen Eldredge. Eldredge was bishop of the Sugar House Ward in Salt Lake City when this image was taken. Courtesy of the Church HIstory Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. PH 4248

Endnotes

1. Civil Registry of marriages in the province of Utrecht 1811–1902 (www.wiewaswie.nl). Unlike the Dutch Reformed Church that encouraged all children to learn to read so they could read the Bible, even if they could not write, the Roman Catholic Church did not yet encourage its membership to read the Bible for themselves, so Gertrude probably did not learn to read either.

2. In 1816 King Willem I of the Netherlands changed the governing structure of the Dutch Reformed Church. Instead of a Presbyterian form of governance with local councils, regional classes, and national synods, he formed regional boards to which he appointed people, rather than church members electing representatives. This, along with several other issues the seceders had with the Dutch Reformed Church, led to a large exodus of concerned people who in 1834 formed the Christian Seceder denomination.

3. Membership registers 1835–1852 of the Christian Seceder congregation at Utrecht. Repository: Het Utrecht Archief https://hetutrechtsarchief.nl .

4. Kommer Van Stigt, *Geschiedenis van Pella, Iowa en Omgeving* (Pella, Weekblad Drukkerij, 1897), 86.

5. Jacob van Hinte, *Netherlanders in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1985), 313, 875.

6. Ibid., 138. See also *Souvenir History of Pella*.

7. Toni Rysdam-Shorre, *Gerrit—A Dutchman in Oregon* (Bend, OR: South Forty Publication, 1985), 24.

8. Lucas, Henry S. *Netherlanders in America* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1955), 166.

9. Rysdam-Shorre, *Gerrit,* 26.

10. Ibid., 32, 33.

11. Sjoerd Aukes Sipma*, Belangrijke Berigten uit Pella, in de Vereenigde Staten van Noord America.* Second letter of Sipma. Repository: Calvin University Archives, Beets, Collection. *Wij hadden kleermakers en naaaisters bij ons die eenigen tijd te St. Louis zijn gebleven en daar geld als water verdienden. Het naaijen is hier in de steden verschrikkelijk duur.* (We had tailors and seamstresses among us who remained in St. Louis for a time where they earned good money. Tailoring is here in the cities very expensive.)

12. Doug Rozendal, ed., *Seek ye First the Things of God! The Life and Writing of Jan Hospers* (North Hills, CA: self-published, 2019), 201.

13. Archief- en Documentatiecentrum Nederlandse Gereformeerde Kerken, Kampen, the Netherlands.

14. For a timeline history of the LDS church, go to:
https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/mormons-timeline/.

15. Utah was a Mexican Territory when the first Mormons arrived in 1847; The entire Southwest became U.S. territory after the United States went to war with Mexico in 1846–1848 and took much of the Southwest and California. American control of the territory became official with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in February 1848.

16. *De Sheboygan Nieuwsbode*, 17 May 1853. John M. Huijskamp, correspondent for the Dutch language weekly, accused the Mormons of trying to convert the Dutch people living in the area. He also bemoaned the fact that the Mormons played cards, sang, and danced until late in the evening.

17. Ibid.

18. https://iagenweb.org/marion/otherRecords/probateRecords/.

19. https://www.haans.info/genealogie/familie.html?familie/wigny.html.

20. *Handelingen en Verslagen van de Algemene Synoden van de Christelijk Afgescheidene Gereformeerde Kerk (1836-1869)* (Utrecht, den Hertog B.V.), 160. Wigny was an elder delegate from Dordrecht at the meeting of overseers in Amsterdam on 6 and 7 March 1840.

21. *Souvenir History of Pella.*

22. Also spelled as Zyderlaan. Dutch: Zijderlaar/Zeijderlaar/Sijderlaar/Zijderlaan/Zeijderlaan/Sijderlaan.

23. Martin is not listed on any of the four ships, but, being a sailor and having to pay for his own passage, he worked his way across the Atlantic on one of the four immigrant ships and would have been listed as a crew member. He is not listed on the Pella Christian Church's membership list.

24. *De Volksvriend,* 4 April 1922. Martin's sister, Henrietta Maria Wigny, was born in 1837 in Dordrecht. At age ten she traveled with her family to America. In 1861 she was united in marriage to Jacob Versteeg by Rev. Scholte, after which she moved to Orange City, IA, where she died on 19 April 1922.

25. Marion County Iowa marriage records on https://iagenweb.org/marion/.

26. Marriage information from Rev. H. P. Scholte's Register of Justice of the Peace. Repository: Central College Archives, Pella, IA. On the 1850 USFC of Iowa, Anke (Anna) van Hettinga arrived in New York on 15 July 1849 on the bark *SS Franziska* and traveled inland to Iowa, where she met Wigny.

27. https://ancestors.familysearch.org/en/KWJN-XVS/martin-zyderlaan-1824-1865.

28. The first Mormon Winter Quarters was across the Missouri River in Nebraska from 1846 to 1848; however, this was on Indian territory and not approved. From 1849 on, those crossing Iowa wintered over on the Iowa side of the River in Potawatomi County. Kanesville was the largest Mormon settlement; there were several others. Gertrude and Martin would have wintered over in Kanesville or one of the other settlements.

29. Information courtesy of the Douglas-Sarpy Counties [NE] Mormon Trails Assoc. at https://sites.rootsweb.com/~iapcgs/MrmnStlmnts.htm.

30. Iowa Department of Transportation, *The Mormon Trail Historic Byway Inventory and Evaluation* (Topeka, KS: Decision Data Inc. & Tallgrass Historians LC, Iowa City, Iowa), C-45.

31. Ibid., 40.

32. I am basing these dates on the assumption that they would have had to arrive in the fall of 1851 to find work, settle down, and learn English and the rules of the church in order for Martin to join less than a year and a half later and be considered worthy to be an elder and a priest.

33. The LDS Church acknowledges that many of the early baptism records were destroyed due to lack of space. Records of missionaries were kept; thus Martin's baptism and marriage registrations were retained.

34. Lucas, Henry S. *Netherlanders in America*, 190. By 1848 Pella had a post office, and there was mail delivery twice a week from the eastern states and the Netherlands; by 1851 mail would have reached Salt Lake City; certainly by 1855. According to Endowment House records, Martin and Gertrude were married in the Endowment House, a substitute building dedicated to temple rituals while the temple was being built.

35. *The Doctrine and Covenants of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*.

36. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Missionary Registers (Worldwide) 1860–1937" https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1.1:QKDW.TLxB.

37. Mormons generally refer to "polygamy" as "plural marriage." "Polygamy" is a generic term for having multiple spouses. "Polygyny" refers to multiple wives, a common practice historically; "polyandry" refers to multiple husbands, a rare pattern historically. A good short history for Gertrude's era in early Mormon Utah is Julie Roy Jeffrey's chapter on Mormon women in *Frontier Women: "Civilizing the West? 1840–1880*, Revised Edition (New York: Hill & Wang, 1998). The defining work is Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women's Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835–1870* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017). Jeffrey and Ulrich discuss critiques of polygamy by mainstream Americans but focus more on plural marriage from the viewpoint of Mormon women, noting reasons plural marriage was a practical as well as a spiritual choice for women such as Gertrude in an era of social dislocation in Europe and America. They were not dupes. Plural marriage as an option seems to have attracted some women; on occasion, devout Mormon women sometimes convinced reluctant husbands to enter plural marriages. Scholars of Mormon plural marriage generally agree that (1) there were many continuities between it and monogamous marriage at the time; and (2) experiences of women in plural marriages varied as much as those in monogamous marriages.

38. *The Doctrine and Covenants* (according to the LDS church), is a collection of divine revelations and inspired declarations given for the establishment and regulation of the kingdom of God on the earth in the last days.

39. Cornelia died in 1918.

40. According to United States Censuses of 1850 and 1860 and Utah State Censuses, Gertrude was the only Dutch female national living in Utah until 1863, when two more converted Dutch women arrived.

A Puritan in Babylon

Marcia Lagerwey

The first Nazi concentration camp was liberated in Lublin, Poland, by Russians in the summer of 1944. "How we long to see an end to this strife and turmoil. To this indiscriminate killing of young and old," Walt had written a few weeks earlier (July 2, 1944). He confessed to hating "the Germans bitterly," calling them "scoundrels of a very low degree," and was convinced that "this Nazi Beast" was engaged in a "death struggle." Without moral restraints, there was in his view "no limit to the depths of evil [to which human beings] can decline." Wilma mildly chided Walt for "such vehement hatred" but knew that he was seeing "much which I cannot realize" (July 14, 1944).

After four years of German occupation, the Allies finally liberated Paris on August 25, 1944. A month later Walt, based in London, and Wilma, in Grand Rapids, avidly followed news of the Allied campaign (September 17–25) to liberate the still-occupied Netherlands, where their aunts, uncles, and cousins lived. Wilma followed "very closely and a bit tensely the unfolding events" of a fierce battle in Arnhem. "Will we hold this city?" she asked, predicting that "we will but with a great many casualties" (September 23, 1944). She noted the "fierce fighting" on which "the final day of the war" depended and wondered why the Germans were "putting up such great resistance." It was "a pity that Holland, the country we love so much," must "undergo such devastations," she observed, "and now many Germans are already thinking in terms of another war" (September 24, 1944). Nearing her son's birth, Wilma dreamed about the "Arnhem battle" (September 25, 1944). Tragically, the Market Garden offensive failed, and the full liberation of the Netherlands required another seven months.

Soldiers from the British Glider Pilot regiment searching for German snipers in a Dutch school damaged by mortar fire. September 1944. Imperial War Museum, BU 1100.

During the

Director of Education at Worcester Art Museum in Worcester, MA for 30 years, Marcia Lagerwey is writing a memoir titled "Diary of a Curator" as well as working on her parents' World War II letters.

American soldiers watch as the Tricolor flies from the Eiffel Tower again. 1945. National Archives. NAID: 196289.

fall of 1944 and the winter and early spring of 1945, the different experiences of Walt and Wilma would lead to strains and even conflicts between them, even as they continued to be faithful in their promise to write to each other as often as possible.

Daily Life in the Signal Corps

As noted in the previous article (Spring 2024), Walt and his team were transferred from London to Versailles, France, near liberated Paris in mid-October 1944. On a ship in the English Channel, Walt described how "there are a few easy details such as K.P. and guard duty" and "cards and money changes hands all day long," "Fortunes [are being] made and fortunes lost," a situation he didn't think was right (October 17, 1944). Days later, he and his fellow soldiers left the ship with "duffel bag[s] containing all [their] belongings." They were now "on French soil." Walt found it "significant that we should safely walk where others had fought and died and conquered." The further they went, the "more mud" they slogged through. You had "mud over your ankles," Walt wrote. "My heart was pounding as I lumbered along—would it never end!" (October 22, 1944).

Walt and his unit arrived at SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force) in Versailles, a few miles west of Paris. The Paris Signal Center was an extensive communications hub by the time they arrived. SHAEF required enough equipment for a small city—miles of teletype tape carrying thousands of messages with millions of words to thousands of military stations in the greater Paris region.[1] A teletype operator, Walt, along with his unit, provided essential communications to support advancing armies.

Paris had "hardly any fuel," Walt found, a situation that forced people to search for "bits of dry wood" to counteract the chilly, wet weather—weather that caused "all the colds I have had," he commented (December 21, 1944). The Army billeted Walt and his comrades at the Petite Ecuries—Louis XIV's stables—and gave them "passes and free transportation to Paris." He took in points of culture at "every opportunity." A Christmas party in Paris and a Christmas Mass in Versailles were "high points and gave rise to extensive correspondence between Wilma and me," he observed later (Chronology, Walter Lagerwey).

Walt's Signal Corps team included 18 enlisted men with ranks from corporal to master sergeant. It was a "fine team of specialists" that "could be transferred as a unit to a signal battalion that required their services." The Army attached his "Dutch team" to the 3118th Signal Battalion. It "operated the signal center at the headquarters of General Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander, but always retained its identity within the large battalion with its own officers." Walt rose through the ranks from Private to PFC (private first class), then to T/5 (corporal technician), and finally to T/4 (sergeant technician).[2]

While in Versailles, Walt confronted his commanding officer Lieutenant Mol in one of "the most significant events of" his "army life." It was a "real turning point," he explained, "because I stood up to an officer, with his permission, to challenge his statement that I was the worst member of the team." Lt. Mol had reprimanded Walt for "questioning the word" of a British officer who was "also working in our message center." The officer had repeatedly given Walt "wrong orders," ones that he "could not carry out." Walt went to their sergeant, who explained to Lt. Mol that Walt "had never made a mistake." After the confrontation, Walt said later, "Lt. Mol's attitude began to change, he became friendly!" In December 1944, a month after his "run-in" with Mol, Walt's "team was [singled] out for its efficiency, quality and reliability, high praise obviously for the officer and the team."[3] On January 18, 1945, Walt and his team received the "official commendation" for the work it had done in France. "Are you proud with me, Wilma?" he asked. Walt described the incident with Lt. Mol via "blue mail," sent through "the chaplain's office or through the battalion commander" but not censored by his commanding officers.[4]

Walt's move to Versailles led to a two-month letter delay. At home, Wilma didn't want to upset him but described her "ordeal" of "utter loneliness." "As I sit writing the tears are plentiful," she said, describing herself as "alone with my thoughts." "Dreadfully nervous," she worried that her anxiety would affect their five-week-old baby. Determined at first to stay in their house alone, Wilma eventually moved back in with her parents. There, she settled in. She described baby Wallace's schedule, telling Walt that his son was an "ideal baby" who

cried very little. "I love to care for him.… My housework is a sideline done in between the acts," she declared (November 25, 1944).

Walt eagerly read war news and sent news home, telling Wilma that "all is going much better" and that "we all hope this will be the final blow" (November 24, 1944). "I kiss our son gently and clasp his little hand in mine and his perfect smile almost seems to break my heart," he wrote (December 7, 1944).

Late in December, Walt was back in London but couldn't reveal why. "[Any] troop movement is veiled in secrecy and must be," he told Wilma. He himself didn't know the "real reason" and could "only guess." Although a major German offensive, the Battle of the Bastogne, started two days before he left Paris, he reassured Wilma, "This is not a retreat!" (December 29, 1944).

Walt and colleagues at Versailles. Courtesy of the author.

Wartime Misunderstandings

Walt rarely described the course of the war in his letters, attentive to censorship regulations. Yet for him and Wilma and other separated couples, war's horrors were the pervasive backdrop to their personal dramas, dramas played out "far apart." Walt's and Wilma's "desire to tell it all," a "good intention," occasionally resulted in "serious misunderstandings."[5]

One misunderstanding was not directly related to the war's horrors. It was more a result of the impact of their being apart and the disparity between the horrors and tedium of war that Walt experienced compared to what Wilma could only read about and imagine. It started with a report from Walt about a Paris Christmas party that precipitated "hurt feelings on both sides of the Atlantic."

Walt described imbibing ten glasses of wine as an "experiment," one that he likely never would have tried except in the midst of the war. Wilma told Walt that, with this reported behavior, he had hurt her as never before. "Had you thought of the real meaning of Christmas'" she chastised him, "could you have possibly celebrated in this way?" The incident came up repeatedly in letters over the next two months (letters from Walt on December 24, 1944, February 5, 12, March 2, 1945; and from Wilma on January 6 & 7, February 11, 1945). "The miserable story of the Christmas party," Walt wrote later, bothered him most "because it was all such a shock to Mother."[6] He described her "reprimands, her disappointment and hurt feelings," and her inability to "enter into my life overseas in a completely man's world." Looking back, he found it interesting to see how "I struggled to be true to my background as I encounter so much that is different."[7] It was "impossible to live in the army as one would at home, even religiously" (March 2, 1945). In retrospect, he realized that he couldn't have skipped the Christmas party but wished he'd "written more discretely about it."

Wilma and Wally in 1945. Courtesy of the author.

Walt was experiencing the world beyond their Dutch American enclave in a way that Wilma could hardly imagine, creating a gap wider than the Atlantic. "Mother's inability to understand my situation, being thrown into a non-CRC world and having to cope with so many religious and social questions," he observed six decades later, "made things difficult." The "long intervals between letters" did not help, either. His world was "challenged and enlarged in many ways… with moral and theological questions," ones he confronted daily; but Wilma's world remained "basically unchanged."[8]

In one letter "Wilma 'bawled me out' about seeing a movie," Walt remembered. He realized that "writing is very different from speaking together" (February 27, 1945). Already in 1944 Wilma had recognized how, unlike Walt, she wasn't "forced to change because of my environment." She had promised then that Walt would find his "wife the same as ever." She trusted that he'd "still be the one I can love deeply"

(July 14, 1944). The Christmas party "experiment" was perhaps the first time she confronted the reality of the war changing Walt. Was he the same man she'd married? Disagreements took months to resolve by mail.

Walt anticipated a future when they would be "glad to read" their letters again, which would be "a true indication" of their "abiding love for each other." He imagined that "if we quarrel . . . perhaps you'll read a letter to me, and all will change" (January 25, 1945). Wilma enjoyed filing and rereading letters. "Just think," Walt wrote, "of the day when we shall sit together—and occasionally browse thru our letter library—It will be just plain good fun!" (March 10, 1945).

The fact of censors reading Walt's letters also became a point of discussion. The "problem of censorship" made "writing in an intimate and frank manner difficult," Walt observed (February 25, 1945).[9] His mail was "read by the three officers" on his "team (one at a time)." Since their group was so small, "it enabled them to know all of our personal affairs." Walt disliked this "greatly" and said it affected his writing. "They are pretty small about it occasionally," he complained, and "that which to us is intimate and beautiful is to them perhaps silly—but we must bear with it unfortunately" (September 24, 1944). And bear with it Walt did, not stopping opening his heart and mind in his letters to Wilma.

Wilma caught glimpses of the censors and their work. She noticed a letter "censored by Lt. Albert Mol . . . but at least not by Lt. Heeren," who had "ridiculed" Walt "so meanly." She wished that someone else could "censor your letters," she told Walt, and advised him not to discuss certain things because "censors have also read it" (December 30, 1944, January 25, 1945). The censors themselves complained to Walt about his letters. "Another long letter, you are the *writingest* man on the team," an officer chided him (September 19, 1944). Occasionally, Walt wrote in Dutch to evade censors. And he occasionally railed against officers who tried to control his writing. But he continued to create a rare record of their tumultuous times (February 25, 27, 1945, letters),[10] recording his impressions "like a camera," his mind acting "as an interpreter of the scenes it recorded."

Walt and a colleague at Versailles. Courtesy of the author.

Although "careful in writing" because of the censors, Walt and Wilma needed those daily self-revealing letters.[11] Walt told Wilma that living without her was "like trying to walk with one leg when you have two" (May 31, 1944). "Wilma, how you make every word vibrate with your living self—the pages radiate," he gushed (November 10, 1944). Walt felt this way about even their disagreements. He hoped that his being "active in new spheres of influence," with an open mind and not "quite as rooted in convention," would "persuade" her to be open to new ideas and experiences, too. Their thinking and faith were "finely balanced," he observed, and "our life will proceed happily" in the future benefitting from "our exchange of ideas, then as we do now" (February 20, 1945). "A rather optimistic view of matters!" Walt wrote years later, looking back on their wartime disagreements.[12]

Walt thought a lot about violence. On January 1, 1945, he read about Hitler's speech on the German "Bulge" and was concerned that Germany would "fight on" even longer, meaning "more strife and struggle, more bloodshed and separation." But by January 10, the war news looked "brighter on the Western front." Later in January, he described the verdict of a murder case in London and noted how "at billets we discussed capital punishment." Walt couldn't "condemn a man (let alone a woman) to death." "Worried about Wallace" and fearful of "what might happen if he should ever go wrong," he wrote to his infant son:

> Wallace, my son, I want you to grow into a big, good man. I want to set you an example and I intend never to ask anything of you that I would not do myself, or believe in myself. Life is strange, Wallace. There are so many questions that puzzle dad. . . . Dad wants you to ask him questions and he will always answer them truthfully as you are able to understand.
>
> . . . you'll ask me about God and why I believe in him.… Somehow I'll try to explain that it is faith. Just like I believe you are living with mother, though I've never seen or heard you ...just because Mother tells me you're there, I believe. And so we'll go on and on, and if you listen to Mother and Dad you'll be a bright and happy boy and man someday. You'll be able

to live and face life (January 24, 1945).

Wartime Ruminations

Guard duty gave Walt time to ruminate. While on duty one night, he poured out his thoughts in a letter to Wilma, as if "speaking to you"— not writing. The "moon shone brightly" and "cheered me," he told her, because "I hate to be alone in the dark!" His rifle loaded, slung over his shoulder, he ate lemon drops, consuming "almost a hundred of them in those four hours!" He whistled "popular melodies and hymns," and soon "one hour had slipped by." He imagined Wilma getting ready for bed, reliving "these 'bed-room' scenes of ours," and he "gazed in silent wonderment and loving appreciation at your beautiful self," his beloved who "thinks of me, prays for me, torn away from her side by war," a "silent partner in prayer." May "we be joined soon again," he pleaded to the Almighty. "But thy will be done." Walt's thoughts "turn[ed] to God," wondering where he is. "In the heavens? On a throne? …Many prayers ascend—do they come to him—as messages one after the other—is it one continual stream-like ticker tape—how human I am . . . As you pray God seems all about you, not far removed, and He does hear and answer us I know."

At 6:00 a.m., "life begins again," he explained to Wilma. "Reveille, a recitation of names, followed by 'Dismissed' and as the men dash… mess gears [kits] clack and clank in an unharmonious din." Walt examined a Jeep driver's papers, then returned to "walking and thinking," reflecting on an issue of the Christian Reformed Church's *Young Calvinist* magazine, where he'd turned first to the "Gold Star Page" for death notices. "Are there familiar names or faces?" A young man he knew "sleeps the rest of death. No cold, no fears he has, no unpleasant labors, but such aching hearts are left behind. Death is so others may live, also I." Walt acknowledged assurances of "eternal life and joy" for those "sleeping the death of the righteous," but asked: "Am I ready to die and face God, death is so personal." He speculated that "perhaps someone could write a favourable obituary for me too. But would it be read." Faith must be accompanied "by works or it is not faith. Where are my works? Do I condemn myself?" Walt pondered, as "tower bells echo melodiously for the last time," guard duty over; then "my mind, my thoughts rested again."

Walt concluded the letter by telling Wilma that he aspired to "touch up on German and French," because his "knowledge of these languages may come in handy." Many replacements were "being made of late," because "the infantry needs men badly," but he preferred "linguistic work to combat duty." He told Wilma not to be alarmed about the "impending transfer of men" that the newspapers described; the present news was "so encouraging" that he lived "in hope that you will receive my letter in peace, not in war." There was "every indication that we are in the final stages" (January 29, 1945).

But the war dragged on. "Our tools of war are more devilish than ever, our destructive powers greater," Walt wrote. Although he felt that the Christian church had "influenced world affairs to the good" at times, "what an awful condemnation of its failure to witness to the Truth the present world condition exposes. How human we all are" (February 14, 1945).

Walt's earnestness did not escape his fellow soldiers. When another soldier joined Walt on K.P. duty, he greeted Walt with, "Here is our holy man," which Walt didn't like. This was another kind of experience that Wilma, still ensconced in the Christian Reformed community back home, could hardly imagine.

With Wilma, Walt continued to discuss theological concerns, including criticism of Christians, perhaps particularly a sectarian CRC community that historically had sought isolation from other Americans. He wrote to her about "our aloofness, our unconcern about our neighbor," something "the world" often did much better (February 14, 1945). He found "doctrine or creeds . . . man-made," he said, telling Wilma that he preferred reading his Bible without influences from "John Calvin or others." He found "our approach to salvation. . . one-sided in the extreme." These were shocking statements for Wilma, a staunch Calvinist. Do not be too "alarmed or offended by my statements," Walt advised, because "I have a questioning mind—and I seek the right answers" (February 19, 1945).

Walt reflected on "happiness and pleasure," how there was "plenty of opportunity for the latter," and described how, in London, "a marching 'maiden' gently slapped my face in passing and greeted me with 'hello dear'—such mocking words. Is it a wonder that I feel like a 'Puritan in Babylon' at times" (February 20, 1945). He was impressed by "how man's spirit lives on after him—in writing," adding that he wanted to have his thoughts live after him. "I want them to be worthwhile and good and ever new," he asserted (February 25, 1945).

An Outsider Seeking Connections

Walt hoped he might be transferred to the Netherlands Military Attaches Embassy office after the war, an opportunity his friend William Spoelhof, a Navy lieutenant, supported. Walt discussed the idea with Lt. Mol, telling Mol that he was "genuinely interested." He told Wilma that he

★ ★ ★ GOLD STARS ★ ★ ★

Lt. Darwin E. Aten

Pfc. James Smith

Pvt. Edward Folkersma

Pvt. Gerald Boven

On July 24, 1944, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Aten received the sad news that their son

LT. DARWIN E. ATEN

was killed in an auto accident on July 23 in Texas.

Lt. Aten was the first serviceman to give his life for his country from our church.

May the Gracious Heavenly Father comfort his parents, sister and brothers, in their sorrow.

Arlene Young People Society
Cand. W. Du Bois, Pres.
Mr. W. Hilbrants, Vice-Pres.

* * *

On Tuesday, July 4, 1944, the parents of

PFC. JAMES SMITH

received word from the war department that their son had been killed in action on the 6th of June in France.

The J.O.Y. Girls' Society and the Young People's Society of the West Branch Chr. Ref. Church wish to express their sincere sympathy to the Smith family.

May our Heavenly Father graciously comfort them in their sorrow.

Young People's Society
J.O.Y. Girls' Society
Ruth Jager, Sec'y

* * *

LT. JOHN KAMPS

A Marine Air Corps Pilot, Lt. Kamps lost his life last December when his plane fell into the sea near the Solomon Islands. He was the son of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Kamps of Ripon, Calif., and is survived by them and four brothers and five sisters. John was a graduate of the Ripon Chr. School and was active in the young men's society, serving as leader for a season.

Lt. John Kamps

Pfc. Eugene N. Reminga

PFC. EUGENE NICHOLAS REMINGA

On July 16 Pfc. Reminga gave his life in the battle of France. Entering the service on August 25, 1942, he received his basic training in Camp Wheeler, Ga. He went overseas in April, 1943, and trained in England, to take part in the D-day invasion. He is survived by his wife, formerly Dorothy Vander Werp, his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Nick Reminga of Jenison, Mich., and two sisters.

* * *

PVT. EDWARD FOLKERSMA

Another Gold Star was added to the Byron Center service Flag when the news of the death of Pvt. Folkersma was announced. Edward was born October 29, 1914, during the first World War and gave his life in France on August 2, 1944. He is survived by his father, Mr. Kemp Folkersma of Byron Center, Mich., and a brother and two sisters.

* * *

PVT. GERALD BOVEN

Entering the service June 2, 1942, Gerald became a member of a Tank Destroyer outfit. His vehicle was the leader of a spearhead seeking a breakthrough, on July 11, 1944. He was instantly killed. Surviving are his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Joe Boven of Falmouth, Mich., three brothers and nine sisters. He was a member of the Prosper Chr. Ref. Church.

* * *

On August 10, 1944, Mr. and Mrs. Julius Split of 1060 Sheridan Ave., Grand Rapids, Michigan, received word from the War Dept. that their son

PFC. JOHN E. SPLIT

had been killed in action July 9, 1944, in Italy. John entered the armed services Oct. 5, 1942. He attended the Southwest Christian School and Davis Tech High School. Before entering the service he was employed by the Vredevoogd Furniture Store. John was a faithful member of the Franklin St. YMS in which he took a leading part. He also was president of the YMS at Camp Gruber while stationed there. A deep spiritual life was indicated by letters he wrote home and the testimony he gave for his Lord at all times. This certainly is a great comfort for those who mourn his departure.

The Franklin St. YMS.,
S. De Went, Pres.

Pfc. John E. Split

October, 1944

A page from the Young Calvinist of October 1944 with "Gold Star" death notices. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

Walt, reading a letter, with a colleague. Courtesy of the author.

was hoping—but hardly expecting that this might occur," mentioning the "possibly I might see Dad" (February 27, 1945). He hadn't seen his father in nine years.

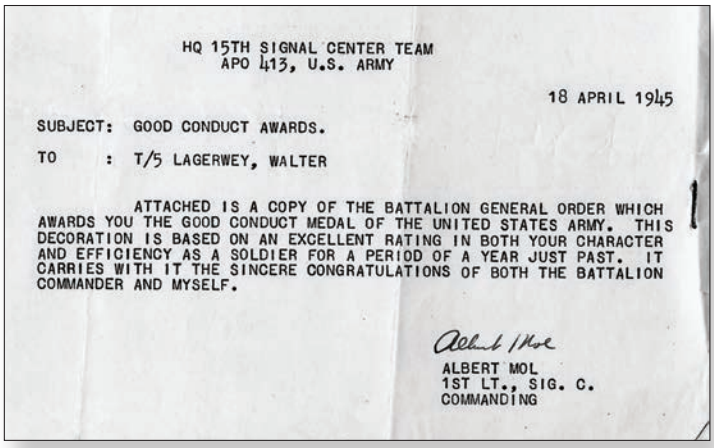
Separated from Wilma for a full year by this time, Walt's writing turned moody and preoccupied, to the point that he found himself questioning God's Providence:

> You say sometimes Wilma that the war is answering God's eternal purpose—perhaps stronger—it is within His plan. Today I cannot agree—I cannot believe that God would bring such suffering upon men . . . —You say it is because of sin—But sin we inherit—we live in it—we breathe it—and it becomes part of us—without special grace men's hearts are not renewed—so we believe—To say that God had planned the world thus—seems utterly incredible to me. . . .
>
> Our faith is so abstract. Will God eternally condemn—on the basis of a life of twenty—or even seventy years? Are we not God's creatures? Oh the severity of our faith—and the coldness of our hearts—The logic of it—seems cruel almost—God's love was so great that He gave His son—Will He not redeem all His creation? We are so small and can hardly conceive of the misery of the world—Lately I have contacted it—a G.I. from the front said tonight to me—"I don't give a d. about anything anymore—See those furrows on my brow—I am twenty-four [years] old."—It puzzles me intensely—Wilma do you understand why I become "broad-minded"? Why I hate arguing about trivials. . . .
>
> The men are at the front—the bullets fly—my friend thinks "fate" determines their destination—Just words to me—Is fate a person or power? No—It's chance—maybe yes, maybe no. We Calvinists believe that God directs all things—and this too? I cannot believe this my love—not now . . . When we question those things in which we believed most firmly—Wilma—we are surprised—and feel a loss. You probably never questioned yourself why you thought that the Bible—was God's word to us. I know I speak as an "outsider"—yet the question rises as I think of my associations with those about me. . . . After writing you my thoughts I feel unburdened (March 6, 1945).

Walt often felt like an outsider. A first child of Dutch immigrants, his father had been committed to Pine Rest Christian Hospital when Walt was eight years old, and his family had moved back to the Netherlands in 1932, where his father was institutionalized for mental illness. Walt went to Dutch schools from ages 14 to 18, returning to the United States in 1936 as Nazi Germany rearmed and people began to fear the possibility of another war in Europe.

In the army Walt's moral practices and piety set him apart. "I walk alone," he told Wilma, "though there are many people about me" (February 25, 1945). Viewed as morally conservative by his team in the army, Walt's deep spiritual questions also would have put him at odds with the Calvinist community in Grand Rapids, and at times they did with his new wife.

One such disagreement between Walt and Wilma concerned Arminianism. Was the Christianity of Arminians truly "dangerous?" he asked. "Really Wilma, our people are so closed-minded!" His wartime experiences had opened his "eyes to the fact that there are 'others'—many millions of others—and Christian too! Not dangerous either" (March 12, 1945). Walt and Wilma's letters are unique for their sustained discussion of these questions. Yet Walt's experiences were similar to those of other CRC veterans of World War II. They, like Walt, would bring their wartime experiences back to their church communities and would have an impact on Calvin College and Seminary and the CRC in the years after the war.



HQ 15TH SIGNAL CENTER TEAM
APO 413, U.S. ARMY

18 APRIL 1945

SUBJECT: GOOD CONDUCT AWARDS.

TO : T/5 LAGERWEY, WALTER

ATTACHED IS A COPY OF THE BATTALION GENERAL ORDER WHICH AWARDS YOU THE GOOD CONDUCT MEDAL OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY. THIS DECORATION IS BASED ON AN EXCELLENT RATING IN BOTH YOUR CHARACTER AND EFFICIENCY AS A SOLDIER FOR A PERIOD OF A YEAR JUST PAST. IT CARRIES WITH IT THE SINCERE CONGRATULATIONS OF BOTH THE BATTALION COMMANDER AND MYSELF.

Albert Mol

ALBERT MOL
1ST LT., SIG. C.
COMMANDING

Good conduct award to Walter Lagerwey, signed by Lt. Mol. Despite being feeling like an outsider, Walt was valued by his commanders. Courtesy of the author.

Walt planned to go to Edinburgh on furlough in March, and his sergeant wondered why he was going alone. Walt replied that he had a wife and a baby, surprising the sergeant with his moral faithfulness. "Then you are true? I thought there were no more people like that.

Well, keep it up—came the approving words" (March 8, 1945).

Walt was subject to "spells of extreme optimism—idealism—hope and even faith—and love" where "joy knows no bounds," but he also found himself "in the dumps" at times. "Then realism, pessimism—apathy—and almost I would say heresy abound." He warned Wilma to consider his "thoughts in the light of these traits of mine." He was having "a great spiritual struggle" and asked her to "understand your 'wavering Thomas'":

> The end is not yet—perhaps there never will be an end—in this life. As I live and learn—as my knowledge increases and my mind develops—I reflect more—although in the oddest circumstances often—you will admit. Who would think of theological and philosophical questions on K.P. but Walt! Can I help it that my mind refuses to be inactive and constantly asks "why"? There are times when I wish I could forget—and just live and try to enjoy life.
>
> But I cannot!—I cannot be as many of our people are. Theirs is a simple faith. They have been brought up as Calvinists—as were their parents—and they accept it without question. . . . Those people have faith—and live easier . . .

In Walt's wartime correspondence course studies, the term "power politics" loomed large, along with prevalent thinking that this war "will be followed by another on an even greater scale." There were "only three or four 'great powers,'" he explained to Wilma, and "[we] are one . . . fighting to preserve our ideals—our way of life" (March 14, 1945). Walt here was referring not just to the war with Germany and Japan but to the jockeying between the Soviet Union and the United States and Britain for post-war influence in Central Europe and the Mediterranean. His intellectual inclinations and the courses that he was taking led him to connect his experiences to "power politics" in ways that many soldiers might have missed.

THE DECATUR DAILY REVIEW EXTRA

PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT DIES AT WARM SPRINGS

Capital is Shocked By Announcement

TAKES OATH

Truman Takes Oath Before Justice Stone

WORLD MOURNS F. D. R. DEATH

Death Came at 3:35 After Hemorrhage

Mrs. Roosevelt Feels Sorrow For the Nation

Roosevelt Shatters Traditions in Office

Newspaper headlines and stories about the death of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in April 1945. Courtesy of Newspapers.com.

Turning Points

On April 12, 1945, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt died. He did not live to see the end of the war in Europe only a month later in May 1945 or in the Pacific in September. His death was a shock to America and its allies.

The next day was "very solemn," Wilma wrote, and the radio played "music in memory of our late president" (April 13, 1945). It was "hard to believe" they would "never hear Roosevelt's voice again." She read his last speech and "could just hear him speaking it." He had "a silver tongue and was an excellent speaker and orator." Still, the war news was "very, very good," Wilma reminded herself and Walt, expressing hope that organized German resistance soon would cease. "Can it possibly be true?" (April 14, 1945).

Walt wrote in much the same vein. "Our Commander-in-Chief is dead. . . . it was so very sudden. . . . it almost seems that the war cannot continue without him. He has been our great leader so very long, we can't separate him from the war or peace. . . . The flags are half-mast." Walt hoped that the war's end wouldn't be delayed. "May complete victory come soon. What a tragedy" (April 14, 1945).

The fourth essay in this series will focus on Walt's experiences on VE Day in May 1945 and what he saw in the Netherlands and Germany as part of the occupying army there. He hoped to find family in the Netherlands, notably his father. And he would return home to Wilma and see his son for the first time after 21 months of separation overseas.

Endnotes

1. George Raynor Thompson and Dixie R. Harris, United States Army in World War II/The Technical Services/The Signal Corps: The Outcome (Mid-1943 Through 1945) (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1966), 138-–143.
2. Walter Lagerwey to Marcia Lagerwey, Email, July 7, 2000.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Email, July 26, 2002.
6. Email, July 7, 2000.
7. Email, July 26, 2002.
8. Walter Lagerwey to Marcia Lagerwey, email, July 26, 2002.
9. Ibid.
10. Emails, July 7, 2000, July 26, 2002.
11. Email, July 26, 2002.
12. Email, July 26, 2002.

Overcoming Prejudice: Black People in Holland

Robert P. Swierenga

Whether black people lived in the Holland colony founded by Dutch immigrants in the 1840s is a common query. The short answer is "yes," at least since the post-Civil War era. In the decades that followed Holland became still more ethnically and racially diverse. Interestingly, the first African Americans to come to Holland had lived among "Old Dutch" Reformed families in New York and had even joined their churches, where they learned about Rev. A. C. Van Raalte's colony.[1]

In 1847 a fleeting benefactor passed through the fledgling Zeeland colony as the men were constructing their log cabins. They needed advice on how to fell trees, and he obliged. Jannes Vande Luyster, the "father" of the Zeeland settlement, learned of the stranger's expertise "in the manner of cutting down trees," and he and his wife, Dina, invited the man to lodge with them. At the time the woods were so dense that immigrants risked getting lost walking from one log cabin to another. They believed that trees were God's gift of building material for crude cabins and a ready source of marketable products, yet they had no idea how to fell the giant "Sons of Anak," as these biblical folk occasionally described the old growth trees. In the Old Country, except in the rare case of owning a woodlot, it was illegal to cut down trees. Tragically, many novice Dutch woodmen learned the hard way that girdling trees (axing around the trunk) made them fall willy-nilly, sometimes on themselves or on their cabins.

According to the recollections of Jacob Den Herder, Zeeland's future banker, on a "certain Sunday" Vande Luyster brought his boarder "to instruct us." Den Herder had his misgivings but was grateful for the tutorial and even more for the stranger's short stay. He noted in his memoir, "We were much surprised to have to put up with a Negro boarder with a skeleton of a horse. No pasture for the poor animal was anywhere near, only the leaves of trees, and a bushel of corn in the back was all he had for the poor animal. Consequently, in a few weeks the creature died of hunger, but the Negro did well in instructing us in the warfare with the forest. He was a quiet man, but we were glad to see him move away after a few week's stay."[2]

That Den Herder focused more on the man's race and emaciated horse than on his valuable tutoring, and that he was grateful the man quickly moved on, speaks volumes. The Dutch were creating a community that resembled the tight-knit villages of their homeland. They had little or no prior contact with people of African descent, other than reading about slaves on American and Caribbean tobacco and sugar plantations. They were, of course, wary of white Americans, too.

Van Raalte's company of immigrants traveled overland from Kalamazoo and spent weeks in Allegan in March 1847, while a cadre of men went to build log cabins in the future village of Holland. The route by wagon through Otsego and Plainwell to Allegan would have exposed them to black people for the first time.

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Freedmen and runaway slaves being protected by sympathetic white Christians were common in southern Michigan. Two "Underground Railroad" routes ran through Allegan in the 1840s, and in 1853 a group of black Americans settled there. Dutchmen walked to Allegan often in those years for much-needed foodstuffs and store goods.[3]

John H. Hanson

The first black person to live in Holland was John Hanson, an interracial man born in Brooklyn, New York. He came to Michigan on his own after the Civil War and remained long enough to marry and begin raising a family of his own before returning to Brooklyn. Hanson was born in 1843 to Edward Hanson, a Danish immigrant who worked as a ferryman, and his freed woman, New York-born wife, Elizabeth, who was a live-in maid with an Irish family. She had obtained her freedom when the New York legislature outlawed slavery in the Empire State in 1823.[4] The Hanson family worshiped in one of the many local congregations of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church (after 1867, the Reformed Church in America) in the borough of Brooklyn.

The Brooklyn census lists Edward and Elizabeth Hansen with three sons and a daughter. They shared their dwelling with another ferryman family, which suggests a working class status. Edward Hansen passed away in his mid-thirties, casting the family into financial jeopardy. The 1860 census has Elizabeth, age 43, and her five children boarding with a single mother and daughter, both born in New York. John Hansen, Elizabeth's firstborn at age 16, was an errand boy, while his younger brothers were still in school. In 1870 Elizabeth was still boarding with her three youngest teenage sons, all printers, who were supporting their mother.[5]

James Bishop House, New Brunswick, Middlesex County, NJ, ca. 1960. Historic American Buildings Survey, Isziah Rolfe. Library of Congress nj0107

After the Civil War, John Hansen went west to seek his fortune. He chose to settle in the Holland colony. Perhaps someone in his church had suggested Holland to him. The colony was well known to people in the Dutch Reformed churches in the East. Already in 1850 Van Raalte had led the churches of the Classis of Holland to join the New York-based denomination. The *dominie* also had spent many weeks in the 1850s fund-raising in New York for his Holland Academy, the colony's Lake Michigan harbor, and various personal business ventures.

Hansen is recorded in the 1870 census of the City of Holland at age twenty-six, boarding with the William and Isabel Kelly family. William, a barber, and wife, Isabel, were native-born Americans. The young couple shared a duplex with another native-born family, of which the husband was a woodturner. The census does not record Hanson's occupation, but he may have worked for his neighbor.[6]

Hansen married in Holland sometime after 1870, and he and his wife had three children by 1880, when the family was recorded as being back in Brooklyn, living near his widowed mother and three unmarried brothers, all still printers. John joined them. Census takers entered Elizabeth and her sons as "B" (black) in the race column of the 1860 census, but in the 1870 and 1880 censuses they designated her and her children and grandchildren as "W" (white). Civil War era amendments to the U.S. constitution may have induced census marshals to disregard race as they canvased door to door.[7]

Silas Sills

Silas Sills (1832–1907) is the second black person known to have lived in Holland, arriving in 1873 when he was 41. Sills was born and raised in New Brunswick, New Jersey, of New Yorkers. In 1860, at age 28, Sills found employment as a waiter and boarded with the prominent family of James Bishop. Bishop was a wealthy businessman and politician who reported $77,000 ($2.7 million today) in real estate and $100,000 ($3.5 million today) of personal property.[8]

Bishop's next door neighbor was John Van Rensselaer, a direct descendant of Kiliaen van Rensselaer (1586–1643), an original director of the Dutch West India Company and founding patroon of the Manor of Rensselaerswyck.[9] In short, Silas Sills lived among the most prominent

Dutch American families of northern New Jersey, where the Dutch language could still be heard in church services and in colloquial conversation.

Sills lived out his life in Holland.[10] Like Hanson, he likely was directed either by Bishop, the Van Rensselaer family next door, or a faculty member at Queens College or New Brunswick Seminary, the flagship institution of the Dutch Reformed Church. Sills arrived in Holland financially destitute but found steady employment as the coachman at the newly erected City Hotel. The three-story building, located on the northeast corner of Eighth and Market (now Central Avenue) Streets, had fifty rooms and was *the* place to stay in town for a half century.

City Hotel, with coachman Silas Sills boarding guests on the hotel bus, 1880 (Holland City News, 1 Jan. 1925). Constructed in 1872, after Holland rose from the ashes of the 1871 inferno, the hotel, renamed Holland Hotel in 1898, served well until 1924, when the Holland Furnace Company had it razed to make way for their Warm Friend Tavern, now the Warm Friend Senior Center.

As the hotel's porter and coachman, who for twenty years conveyed guests in his horse-drawn "bus" to and from the train depot, Sills became a local character. He startled hotel guests with his greetings in the Dutch tongue—"*goede morgan*" (good morning), "*goede dag* (good day), "*hoe is het met je*?" (how are you?)—all polite phrases picked up from the Old Dutch in New Jersey. Everyone in Holland, not just travelers, knew Silas, including Rev. Albertus C. Van Raalte, Holland's founder and leading cleric.[11]

For three years, from 1873 to Van Raalte's death in 1876, the two men presumably crossed paths on city sidewalks and streets. The *dominie* lived a block from the train station and often frequented shops and stores on Eighth Street near the hotel. Although there is no mention of Sills in Van Raalte's correspondence and writings, he certainly knew the coachman and likely bantered with him, perhaps in Dutch, when their paths crossed. The *dominie* may have taken the hotel bus to and from the station when important visitors came to town, as he did in October 1873 when the famed Netherlands pastor Martinus Cohen Stuart arrived. The two clergy were meeting for the first time. Sills regularly met the train and served visitors like Cohen Stuart, offering baggage handling and transportation to the hotel.[12]

Although Sills continued driving the hotel bus until 1893, by 1880 the census marshal found him as a "servant and farm worker" boarding on Manly D. Howard's eighty-acre sand farm on Grand Haven Road (now Butternut Road) at Quincy Street. Howard, a New Yorker by way of Ann Arbor, came to Holland in 1856 as part of a Yankee influx. He became a prominent business leader and state politician and served as a vestryman in Grace Episcopal Church, which he helped found. By 1876 he and Sarah, his England-born wife, and their three children (the oldest daughter enrolled at Hope College), were living on their farm. The wealthy businessman could afford live-in maids and servants, including Silas.[13]

The Holland newspaper in 1889 noted that the legendary Silas was celebrating his sixteenth year at the hotel. He retired in 1893 and in 1900 was boarding on the farm of Anthony Vander Kolk, a neighbor of Howard a mile south on the Grand Haven Road at Greenly Street. That Sills never owned his own home but was dependent on families boarding him may have been a preference, but it also likely reflects the low-paying work a black man like him could get.

Sills died at the Vander Kolk farm on a Sunday evening in 1907 at age 75, leaving no next-of-kin. Rev. A. R. Merrill of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Ventura conducted his funeral service, and his body was interred in the paupers' plot at Holland's Pilgrim Home Cemetery.[14]

Ben Mulder, the long-time editor of the *Holland City News*, waxed nostalgic about Sills after his death. Everyone "joked with him to their heart's content. . . . He was quite a character. His infectious laugh could be heard for several blocks and folks would say: 'there goes old Silas again.' . . . All had a good word for him. . . . He was never known to get angry. His big bass voice could be heard a block away when he started his team to the depot. Being polite and helpful, Silas was popular with the traveling public. It is safe to say that Silas Sills was the first black businessman in Holland."[15]

How white Hollanders perceived Sills and other African Americans tells us more about their nostalgia and

views of race than about the experiences and feelings of Sills himself. He was not a businessman but an employee—and an economically marginal one at that—as his life in retirement indicates. He likely knew that, as a black man dependent on others, he could not let himself get angry; he always needed to appear friendly, even servile, to maintain the good will of his employer, customers, and the white residents of Holland.

Holland train station of the Chicago & Michigan (later Pere Marquette) Railroad

In 1880 Nelson Cooper, a young black freedman from Alabama, was farming alone near the Vander Kolk farm north of Holland in Olive Township. There is no record that Sills and Cooper were friends, but it is likely that they were acquaintances at least, given their proximity. In 1910, Cooper died at about 69 years of age at Hackley Hospital. Tony Vander Kolk of Grand Haven was the "informant" for the coroner.[16]

Amos

Amos was the field boss at the Orchard Beach Farm along the lakeshore in Holland Township. His surname is not recorded. Harry L. Williams, a wealthy Chicago dealer in pig iron and coke, developed the two-hundred-acre farm in 1900. It stretched a mile from Tennessee Beach Road (later James Street) to Riley Street. Every June Harry and his wife, Virginia, and their daughters Virginia and Rowena, came from Louisville, Kentucky, to spend the summer at the lakeshore. The Williams farm lay directly north of the famed Getz Lakewood Farm, also known as the Getz Farm and Zoo, which George Fulmer Getz founded in 1910, and Williams's workers certainly saw the animals through the fence.[17]

To work the farm and manage the household in high style, Williams brought a small group of black laborers from his native city of Clarksville, Tennessee. The workers came by steamer from Chicago to the Ottawa Beach Hotel dock, where wagons carried them to the Williams farm. Amos directed the workers, and his wife, Mary, managed the house staff and prepared meals in the large dining hall.

The agricultural work included raising poultry, keeping milk cows and cattle, growing a variety of vegetables, and tending an apple orchard. The apple barn is the only remnant of the farm still standing on Lakeshore Road. The plantation's produce was consumed on site and sold locally. For three decades, until the early 1930s when the property was subdivided and sold for cottages, Orchard Beach Farm had all the markings of an elegant and formal antebellum plantation.

It is strange that few historians in Holland have taken note of this large operation, and its story has been lost from the collective memory. This has not been the case with three of Williams's contemporaries who were also wealthy Chicago developers in Park Township.They were George Fulmer Getz, Judge John C. Everett of Waukazoo Inn, and Egbert H. Gold of Marigold Lodge. Perhaps the racial implications of Williams's effort to recreate the Southern-style plantation of his family in Tennessee, including black laborers from back home, made Hollanders uncomfortable.

Ship crews

Some black residents came into the city as deckhands and maids on various Lake Michigan freight and passenger ships. They left behind a fleeting presence in the historical record. In 1920, two deckhands drowned near King's dock on Black Lake (now Lake Macatawa). When no one claimed the bodies, Nibbelink-Notier Funeral Home opened its parlors, and Rev. Guy B. Fleming of

Postcard showing the SS Puritan docked at the Ottawa Beach Hotel.

the Methodist Church performed the service gratis. The city provided a plot with a "suitable marker" at Pilgrim Home Cemetery. No "potter's field burial for the unfortunate colored boys," the *Holland Sentinel* recorded. Fellow crew members served as pallbearers, and the ship's maids sang spirituals in the "southern fashion." It was a "respectable funeral," the newspaper concluded, and "enough funds were gotten together to make this possible."[18]

Henry Flake

In December 1921, the *Holland Sentinel* reported that a single African American man was living in a shack on the Vrieling property between Waverly Road and the Pere Marquette Railroad Bridge over the Black River. "Holland has never had much of a Negro population," the editor noted, "and the number of colored folks who are residents of the city can always easily be counted on the fingers of one hand, with a few fingers left uncounted. There are fewer than ever at present, but there is at least one living near Holland who makes his living working in the city and who is an interesting character."[19]

This person was Henry Flake, who came to Holland in July 1921. The editor described him as an "unusually neat housekeeper" who "cooks his own meals and keeps his house spick and span," despite being flooded out once. "Mr. Flake is getting to be a well-known character about the city and has made many friends since he arrived here. . . . [He] is a one-armed man but in spite of that handicap he can do a lot of kinds of work that would stump a two-armed person. He is remarkably versatile and gets along in first class shape, doing many jobs that are usually not expected of a one-armed man."

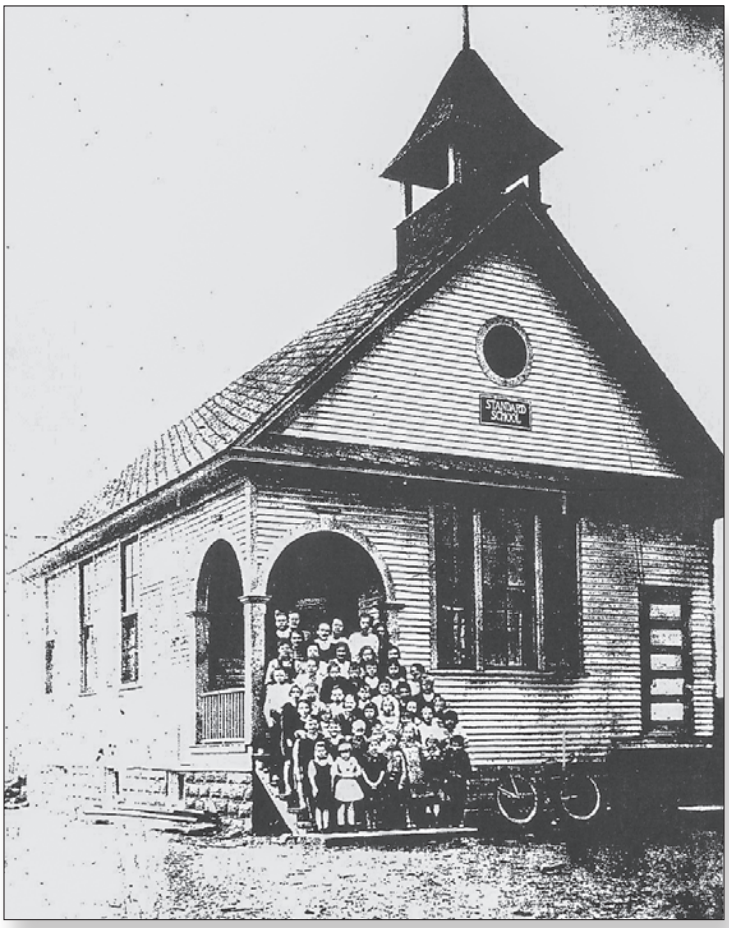
"He will hold a double celebration on Christmas day," the report about Flake continues. "Not only will he celebrate this holiday in the true Christmas spirit, but it happens that his 40th birthday anniversary comes on the same date. 'Ah's gwine to eat roas' chicken, yessah!' he said, but he admitted that he would probably have to eat it alone. However, he said he was used to that. . . . He declared [that] he likes Holland and that he expects to make this his permanent home." As with the story about Silas Sills in the *Holland City News* in 1907, this story depicted Flake as a curiosity and played into racial stereotypes about African Americans that were common in both the South and the North in the United States.

Compared to Sills, however, Flake was not just economically marginal and viewed as a curiosity but eventually deemed dangerous. He had been arrested for a "liquor violation" and pled guilty in 1920, a year after the Nineteenth Amendment prohibited alcohol nationally.[20] His life was upended further in August 1926, when a fifteen-year-old white girl who "came to clean his shack" reported to Holland police that she had been raped. Police arrested Flake on a charge of statutory rape.[21] The authorities were concerned that he might be lynched, so "the Holland city police spirited" him to Grand Haven "under a veil of secrecy." Flake never got legal representation, and he languished in jail for eight months before pleading guilty. The judge sentenced him to serve four to fifteen years in Jackson State Prison. The girl was never named in the press, and the state committed her to a mental institution.[22]

The whole incident is strange and troubling. Why was the girl committed to a mental institution? Was she as socially marginal a person as Flake and perhaps deemed immoral? Why was Flake held without a trial and never given legal representation? The African American population had grown in the upper Midwest in the 1910s and 1920s, including in Michigan. Why then were there "fewer than ever" African Americans in Holland in the 1920s? Why were the police afraid Flake would be lynched? Had racial opposition to black residents grown in Holland as the city had Americanized and become more bourgeois?

Racism was growing in the United States in the 1910s and 1920s. Anti-immigrant campaigns succeeded in all but closing the door to immigrants by the mid-1920s, using ethnic-racial quotas to exclude Southern and Eastern Europeans. Asians had long been excluded. The Ku Klux Klan revived, not just in the South but in the Midwest and Far West, including in Michigan (75,000–80,000 members in Michigan by the mid-1920s).[23] Threats of violence and racial covenants in real estate ensured segregated housing in parts of Michigan. And Holland city

The North American and South American, Great Lakes cruise ships, docked for the winter. Courtesy of the Joint Archives of Holland.



Old Harlem Schoolhouse, West Olive, Michigan, in the 1930s.

officials refused to perform marriages between black and white people. It is impossible to directly connect these trends to Flake's case, but they provide the context around it.

The First black community near Holland

Into the early-twentieth century a few African American individuals lived in Holland and on farms in the region around it. Their presence was fleeting and precarious—economically, socially, and racially. Only in the mid-1940s did the first black community form, and then not in Holland itself but in West Olive some ten miles north of the city.

The newcomers arrived from Muskegon, Chicago, and even the Deep South and settled on small farms. These included the Davenport, Pierson, Marshall, and Stoutemire families. They chose West Olive because they felt unwelcome in Holland and Zeeland. Leonard Foster Stoutemire, pastor of a small black congregation in the area, and his wife, Gladys Leone, found a cross burning on the lawn of their Van Buren Street home. The local school did not welcome black children, and the Stoutemire girls recalled that a Mrs. Nienhuis, the teacher at the one-room Old Harlem schoolhouse, flunked all the black students, even those in kindergarten, and passed all the white students.[24]

Stoutemire first stoked coke ovens at a foundry in Grand Haven, and later he and his son Earl worked for the Chicago-based Armour Leather Co. on Howard Avenue in Holland Township. They manned the malodorous "drum," a large machine in which hides were washed. Later they worked for the unionized Holland plant of the Grand Haven-based Eagle-Ottawa Leather Company. Stoutemire's daughter Leonardine Jackson and granddaughter Sylvia Banks were the first black employees hired by the Donnelly-Kelley Glass Co. in 1966. In a time when racism remained virulent in Michigan, this was a testimony to John F. Donnelly's Christian principles. Sylvia Banks's starting hourly wage of $1.87 ($18 today) was far better than the $1.00 ($9.70 today) she had been earning as a housekeeper for Donnelly's sister, Margaret Martineau. Banks continued at Donnelly for 33 years, rising to $15.00 ($28.25 today) an hour, until ill health forced her to retire. Her father, Emmett Brown, also was employed at Donnelly for 15 years and finished at the Eagle-Ottawa Leather Company.[25]

Donnelly was one of the first business owners in the greater Holland area to "break the ice" for assembly line jobs for black residents. Even in the 1940s, during World War II, Holland Precision Parts announced that it would hire blacks only "as a last resort," despite the severe labor shortage. Local black men could fight for their country, however. During the Korean War, Larry Shannon, a member of Stoutemire's congregation, made the ultimate sacrifice. He had come to West Olive in 1950, arriving from Chicago with his grandmother, Mrs. Pearl Shannon, who received the gold star. His parents had died when he was three years old, and his grandmother Pearl had raised him.[26]

In 1956 Melvin Bowden, his wife, Alice, and their two daughters came from Chicago and bought property on Butternut Drive, on which they built a house and raised blueberries and beef cattle. Bowden first worked for Elzinga & Volkers on the J. H. Campbell Generating Plant on Lake Michigan at Pigeon Lake. When Bowden first applied, the foreman turned him away. His daughter Grace Bowden recalled, "My father stayed out in his truck for two weeks outside the site until the foreman finally approached him and said: 'Well, if you're just going to sit here every day, you might as well go to work.'"[27]

One way to ensure work was to buy one's own farm. A black businessman from Chicago, Mason Pryor, in 1951

purchased the eighty-acre Hillview Poultry Farm northwest of Zeeland. Cornie Van Voorst had lost his farm to the Federal Land Bank of St. Paul, Minnesota. The aged Pryor was a "spiritual entrepreneur" who imported "Holy Oriental Oil," other "religious goods," and personal and home care products marketed to African Americans. In failing health, he hoped to provide his Chicago family and friends with chickens and fresh eggs, and at the same time "lead an outdoor life" and thus rebuild his strength.[28]

Hope College

Pursuing higher education was particularly challenging for African Americans in West Michigan. Every problem faced by white students was magnified for black students; they were socially isolated and typically had gotten poor education in schools as children and adolescents. Hope College in Holland began to make concerted efforts to recruit black students during the Civil Rights era. It opened its doors for "at risk" students of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds who were deemed to have the potential to succeed.

Many black students at Hope initially came from the newly organized Bergen Memorial Reformed Church of Brewton, Alabama, a mission church. In 1967 the college joined the Independent Colleges Opportunity Program (ICOP), a national summer trial program for "disadvantaged" students funded by area churches and directed by psychology professor Leslie Beach. It was similar to the federal government's Upward Bound program for disadvantaged students.

In 1969 Hope enrolled sixty at-risk students, half from the ICOP summer program and half from generally middle class families who paid full tuition rates. In 1971 the college had seventy black students, most of them not at-risk students.

By 1984, however, black enrollment had fallen to 18 students (out of 2,500), largely because they felt alone in a city with only a handful of black residents. One student who gained universal acclaim on campus and in the community was Floyd Brady, class of 1968 and the first black basketball star at Hope. But the small numbers did not keep black students from making their presence known through Hope's Black Coalition, a child of the 1960s civil rights revolution. Hope officials recognized the college's failures, even before the coalition leaders proclaimed a "state of crisis," and they determined to do better.[29]

Milton Trotter and Delores Floyd performing in *In White America*, a play about the African American struggle for freedom and equality. Hope College, ca. 1968. Courtesy of the Hope College Archives.

Conclusion

As in most communities in the United States, the history of African Americans in Holland has been fraught with the struggle against racism. Since the 1980s black people have been moving into Holland and the surrounding region, and since 2000 they have been the fastest-growing ethnic group, now at 6 percent and rising. They are finding their way in the community. The annual Kwanzaa celebration, for example, has become part of the city's holiday season festivities. (Kwanzaa started in the 1960s as a black nationalist alternative to Christmas, but many African Americans who celebrate it also observe Christmas.)[30] Hope College and its Upward Bound program have been in the forefront of this integration, as well as Maple Avenue Ministries, an interracial congregation with black pastors that is associated with both the Christian Reformed Church and Reformed Church in America.

Endnotes

1. I am indebted to Julian Sluyters of Holland, Michigan, for his genealogical sleuthing regarding the early black individuals and families described in the article.

2. Jacob Den Herder, "Life Sketch of Myself," English typescript, Holland Museum Archives, cited and summarized in Robert P. Swierenga, *Holland, Michigan; From Dutch Colony to Dynamic City*, 3 vols. (Van Raalte Press, Eerdmans, 2014), 1:67–68.

3. Joe Armstrong and John Pahl, *Rover & Lake: A Sesquicentennial History of Allegan County, Michigan* (Allegan, 1950), 191–93.

4. For the larger story, see Michael J. Douma, *The Slow Death of Slavery in Dutch New York: A Cultural, Economic, and Demographic History, 1700–1827* (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

5. US Census, 1850, Kings County, Brooklyn, Ward 5, Dwelling no. 146, Family no. 302; 1860 Census, Dwelling no. 53, Family no. 63; 1870 Census, Dwelling no. 569, Family no. 1070.

6. US Census, 1870, Ottawa County, City of Holland, Household no., 243b and 243a.

7. US Census 1880, Brooklyn, Ward 5, Dwelling no. 42, Family no. 184.

8. US Census,1860, New Brunswick, Middlesex County, NJ, Dwelling no. 2018, Family no. 2602. Sills was one of six boarders in the James Bishop family of seven.

9. See entries on the Bishop House and Kiliaen van Rensselaer in Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bishop_House_(New_Brunswick,_New_Jersey); and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kiliaen_van_Rensselaer_(merchant)..

10. Sills's age and birthplace, as recorded in the US censuses, are unreliable. The 1880 census lists his age as 35, making his birth year 1845; the 1900 census gives his age as 50, making his birth year 1850. His obituaries in *De Grondwet* (21 May 1907) and *Holland City News* (19 May 1907) give his age as 75 in 1907, making his birth year 1832.

11. *Holland City News*. 8 June 1889, 7 Mar. 1918, 20 Jan 1936.

12. Harry Boonstra, "Martinus Cohen Stuart: Netherlander in Michigan," *Origins*, 22, no. 2 (2004): 18–27.

13. *Holland City News*, 22 Dec. 1877 for a summary of Howard's career to that point. See also Swierenga, *Holland, Michigan*, 1:165–66, 169, 313–14, 2:1512.

14. *De Grondwet*, 21 May 1907 (date of death, 12 May). Howard's farm was in Section 2 of Holland Township, and after 1915 in Section 12 of Park Township; US Census of 1860, 1870, 1880; Robert P. Swierenga, *Park Township Centennial History, 1915–2015: 'Holland's Water Playground,' Ottawa County, Michigan* (Holland, 2015), 120–30.

15. *Holland City News*, 8 June 1889, 7 Mar. 1918, 30 Jan. 1936 (Mulder quote); Randall Vande Water, "City Hotel," in *Holland Happenings: Heroes and Hotshots*, 4:31.

16. US Census Federal Census, 1880, Ottawa County, Olive Tp., dwelling no. 321, family no. 322; Muskegon County death certificate, 21 August 1910 (Michigan US Death Records, 1867–1952, 222).

17. On the Williams Plantation, see Swierenga, *Park Township Centennial History*, chap. 6. Williams did business as Hickman, Williams & Co., a multistate company with headquarters in the Rookery, a prestigious multistory building at 209 South La Salle Street in the heart of Chicago's financial district. The firm, which is still in operation today, with offices in the western Chicago suburb of Cicero in the early 1900s, had branch offices in Louisville, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis. Williams's wife, Virginia Nichols, died at the farm in mid-July 1921 at age 48, survived by her husband and daughters. A forest fire nearly wiped out the farm 14 days later (*Holland City News*, 14, 28 July 1921). For Getz, see Valarie Van Heest, *Lakewood Farm and Zoo: George Getz's Famous Attraction in Holland, Michigan* (Ottawa Beach Historical Society, 2021).

18. *Holland Sentinel*, 28 Sept. 1920; *Holland City News*, 30 Sept. 1920; *Grand Haven Tribune*, 30 Sept. 1920.

19. "Local colored man builds own shack by riverside," *Holland Sentinel*, 8 Dec. 1921.

20. *Holland City News*, 5 Aug. 1925.

21. "Negro Taken to County Jail in Secrecy," *Holland City News*, 26 Aug. 1926.

22. *Holland City News*, 14 Oct. 1926; 3 May 1927.

23. David M. Chalmers, *Hood Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan*, Third Edition (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), 194–197. Note also *Everyday Klansfolk: White Protestant Life and the KKK in 1920s Michigan* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011).

24. Holland Sentinel, 1 May 2002; *Grand Rapids Press Lakeshore Edition*, 1 May 2002.

25. *Holland City News*, 6 Dec. 1923; *Holland Sentinel*, 9 May 1951; Joel Lefever, "Rev. Stoutemire heard," ibid., 27 July 1997; Banks interview, 13–14, 16–19.

26. *Holland City News*, 29 Apr. 1943; *Holland Sentinel*, 31 Jan. 1989, 14 Apr. 1996.

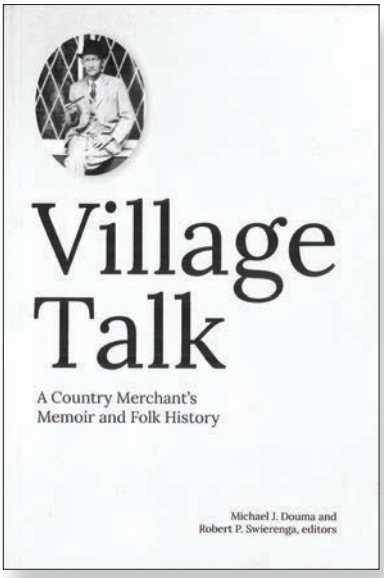
27. Grace Bowden interview by Geoffrey Reynolds, 11 Mar. 2003, typescript, 2 (quote), JAH.

28. *Holland Sentinel*, 18 Apr. 1951. For more on Pryor, see Yvonne P. Chireau, "Varieties of Spiritual Experience: Magic, Occultism, and Alternative Supernatural Traditions among African Americans in the Cities, 1915–39," in Gayle T. Tate and Lewis A Randolph, eds., *The Black Urban Community: From till Dawn* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 193–203.

29. For this and the preceding paragraph, see Hope College *Anchor*, 7 Mar., 5 Dec. 1969, 8 Mar. 1984; Tom Renner memo, 12 Feb. 2011.

30. See Elizabeth Pleck, "Kwanzaa: The Making of a Black Nationalist Tradition, 1966–1990," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 20 (2001), 3–28.

book review



Village Talk: A Country Merchant's Memoir and Folk History.

Michael J. Douma and Robert P. Swierenga, editors
Independently Published: 2023.

Ray Nies (1877–1950) was a hardware merchant of Dutch American descent in Holland, Michigan. When I read *Village Talk*, I imagined him sitting outside his store as a young man, sipping coffee with some of the town's old coots, and listening as they told stories about times past, spouted off about current issues, and commented on the people walking by. By the 1940s, he was one of those old coots, spinning his own tales. Unlike most old coots, Nies wrote down both his own stories and stories he'd heard. Douma came across Nies's manuscript in the Holland Museum archives in the early 2000s and created a typed, digital version of it. During the 2010s he and Swierenga used it in some of their research, and they decided to make it available to the public.

Village Talk "bridges the years from the legendary Dutch pioneers to the modern era, with stories from both the days of rickety horse-drawn buggies to those of chrome-plated automobiles," Douma and Swierenga explain in their introduction. "This is not a history of events or local political, spiritual and economic elites. Rather, it's a montage of unique personalities and cultural and social life in an ethnic community."

If *Village Talk* is not history in the sense of a more-or-less-accurate factual account of the past, then what is it? Much of it is a memoir, as Nies recounts events and people and social-cultural ways in Holland during his lifetime in the late 1800s and early 1900s. (He says little about religion, oddly, despite how important it was to Holland's founding and subsequent history.) A lot of *Village Talk* is what Douma and Swierenga call "folk history"—a retelling of material that is not Nies's personal memories but "folk culture" and local "cultural memory." Nies's stories seem to be a mix of Dutch West Michigan ethnic culture and common American folklore, as Dutch Americans in Holland picked it up from other Americans, including the ethnic and racial stereotyping that often comes with folk culture. Some of Nies's stories and observations have the characteristics of tall tales, in humorous exaggerations of how Dutch Americans in Nies's time viewed themselves and people from other groups in West Michigan.

However we characterize *Village Talk*, Nies seems to have meant to publish his writings. There is evidence that he edited his manuscript here and there. He played with titles, trying out "That's the way 'T was," "Country Storekeeper," and "Country Merchant." The word "country" perhaps is telling, as Douma and Swierenga note. Nies's store was in town, in the commercial center of Holland; so, perhaps he liked to imagine himself a country person. Or perhaps, as is the case with much folklore, and like Mark Twain, a great teller of tall tales, Nies affected a "country" voice, that of a simple rural person who sees through the pretensions of city folk.

Nies's depiction of Dutch Americans and his Dutch-English patois remind me of the way that my Dutch Canadian college buddies and I used to spoof our parents and grandparents. In faux, Dutch-accented English we told tall tales about "the war" and immigration to Canada. Our stories typically ended with moralistic lessons: "You kids think you have it so bad today. You should live through a war. Not that I wish it on you." We weren't old coots sipping coffee outside a hardware store but young smart-alecks playing old coots, smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee outside our dorm or the student center. I'm now closer to "cootdom" than I am to young smart-aleck, but I occasionally do my routine in class for my students, if we're talking about how ethnic cultures work.

Douma and Swierenga help the

reader navigate Nies's tales with footnotes that annotate some of the obscure details. They have added postcards, photographs, advertisements, and maps that illustrate Nies's stories and enhance the old-timey feel of the book. We experience a bit of Ray Nies's world.

You will enjoy the stories Nies tells especially if you had grandparents or great-grandparents who grew up in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century and recall the stories they told. You will also wince on occasion, perhaps remembering times when a beloved grandparent or aunt or uncle who had "lost their filter" would express unpleasant ethnic, racial, or gender stereotypes that once were common but no longer are acceptable. And sometimes you will nod, catching glimpses of wisdom from a man whose world was mostly very local but who saw a lot of life from that perspective.

Village Talk is an idiosyncratic window into one man's version of the culture or "mind" of early twentieth-century Dutch Americans in West Michigan. That ethnic "mind" was giving way to a modern, Americanized, post-immigrant sensibility by the mid-twentieth century. *Village Talk* is not a modern scholarly window that promises an objective view of the past, as if through transparent glass. It's more like one of those old windows with wavy distortions, almost like a funhouse mirror, where personal memory, ethnic culture, American culture, and tall tales get mixed up together. The book is also reminiscent of how, when you retell a good story often enough, knowing that you are embellishing it for effect, you eventually realize that you are no longer sure yourself where the boundary is between fact and fiction.

That might sound like a criticism, and it would be if Nies's book were meant to be straight-up history and should be judged by scholarly standards. But it's not that. It's something more fun and not without wisdom. "Man has gone a long way, but he still has a long way to go," Nies observes in his last chapter, with social changes and the then-recent war in mind. "He has much to learn of many things that are still nature's deep secrets. There are times when one considered a fool can instruct wise men, but no fool can instruct a fool." Whether Nies was foolish is for you to judge. He certainly was a curious observer and had an ear for good tales.

William Katerberg
Calvin University

for the future

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

Fort New Amsterdam, 1650s, in what is now New York City, in Adriaen van der Donck, *Beschryvinge Van Nieuw-Nederlant (Ghelijck het tegenwoordigh in Staet is)* (Madrid, Spain: Evert Nieuwenhof, 1655). Courtesy of the Library of Congress, 2021666733.

The spring 2025 issue will include stories about a Dutch Reformed missionary to Native peoples in the Northeast Woodlands in the seventeenth century, a Dutch immigrant family in Minnesota in the 1950s and 1960s, the final article on the experiences of Walter and Wilma Lagerwey during World War II, and more.

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