

ORIGINS

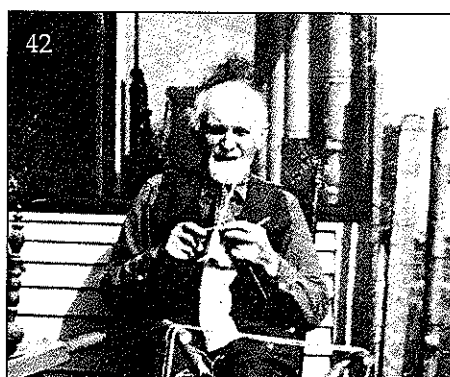


**2 Missaukee County—A
Wilderness Colony 1869-1938**
by H. J. Brinks

4 Frederik Diemer Letters 1894-1928

10 The Meekhof Farm

**13 The Twenties in Highland
Michigan**
by Rev. William Vander Hoven



19 County to Province

24 Grace and Glory Days
by Thomas Boslooper

31 Raised in Zeeland 1915-1929
by Lester De Koster



**37 Impressions of The "Old"
Country 1848-1940**
by H. J. Brinks

46 Books
by Conrad J. Bult

48 Contributors

Cover: Crossing a stream with a deer

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MISSAUKEE COUNTY

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A Wilderness Colony

by H. J. Brinks



The Midwest's first Netherlandic colonies date from the 1840s, but by the 1870s the original sites in the Chicago area, Pella, and west Michigan had already begun to fill up. The consequent colonization process created new communities in northwest Iowa, on Indiana's Ridge Road, and in the Grand Rapids-Muskegon-Holland triangle. These new Michigan settlements—Borculo, Allendale, and others—fringed the original colony; by contrast, the new colony in Missaukee County, one hundred wilderness miles away, was a bold exception. The leader of this venture, John Vogel, represented a cluster of folk who believed that Ottawa County was thickly settled by Hollanders and that the time was ripe to discuss the advisability of opening up new settlements. He organized the first of five Dutch villages in Missaukee County, and today that village still bears his name.*

Vogel immigrated to west Michigan in 1854 and worked as an itinerant carpenter in at least six Dutch communities before he joined the Union army in 1861. He survived several wounds prior to his 1865 discharge, after which he returned to his ancestral village in the Netherlands. Later his parents and several family members joined him on the return trip to Noordeloos, Michigan, where he constructed a gristmill. But fire destroyed the mill in 1867, and that same year Vogel led a search party to investigate land near Missaukee County's Clam River, where they discovered heavily wooded and inexpensive land suited for cultivation. Consequently, in the spring of 1869 Vogel and several companions staked claims along the Clam River, where they cleared land to crop the virgin

**Vogel Center (1872), Lucas (1883), Falmouth (1894), McBain (1912), Highland (1914).*

(photo, left) Clearing land in Lucas, Michigan



(above) Logging in McBain, Michigan, c. 1910. (below) Crossing a stream with a deer, 1910.

soils. By 1875 Vogel Center's population approached one hundred. In 1880 another group organized the nearby village of Lucas. These pioneers, mostly from Graafschap, Michigan, joined Harm Lucas, who was an experienced sawmill operator. Actually both Lucas and Vogel were more involved in lumbering than in agriculture. These pursuits, while usually intertwined on wooded frontiers, were an especially obvious feature of Missaukee County.

During the winter many of the area's new residents worked in lumber camps or lumbered their own lands for cash. Money was exceedingly scarce because partly cleared farms could not produce adequate surpluses to sustain independence though nearby lumber camps provided a limited market for eggs, potatoes, and other produce. Until the trees were removed and railroads linked the region to national markets, the best strategy for survival combined work in the forests with part-time farming.

The Lucas-McBain area continued to expand until the 1920s, when an agricultural depression curbed addi-

tional growth and sent many of the region's young adults to Grand Rapids and other flourishing urban areas for gainful employment. But by then the five surviving Dutch villages were established. Concerning the last of these, Highland, Michigan, Rev. William Vander Hoven (p. 13) has drawn a loving recollection of the 1920s, a time of simpler virtues and pleasures that dominated a mutually supportive community. Ronald Jager's recently published *Eighty Acres: Elegy for a Family Farm*, (see p. 46) provides a similarly personal account of life in Missaukee County. His fetching recollections demonstrate that, however attractive they may be, eighty-acre farms on marginal soils can no longer sustain a family. Growing up in McBain, Jager enjoyed the final years of a passing phenomenon in the era between 1900 and 1950, when Missaukee's small farms still sustained large families. But for most of his generation the future lay elsewhere, in the opportunities of business, advanced education, and professional careers.

Nonetheless, hundreds of Dutch-American families still cluster in McBain, Highland, Falmouth, Lucas, and Vogel Center. From McBain and Vogel Center the Calvin College

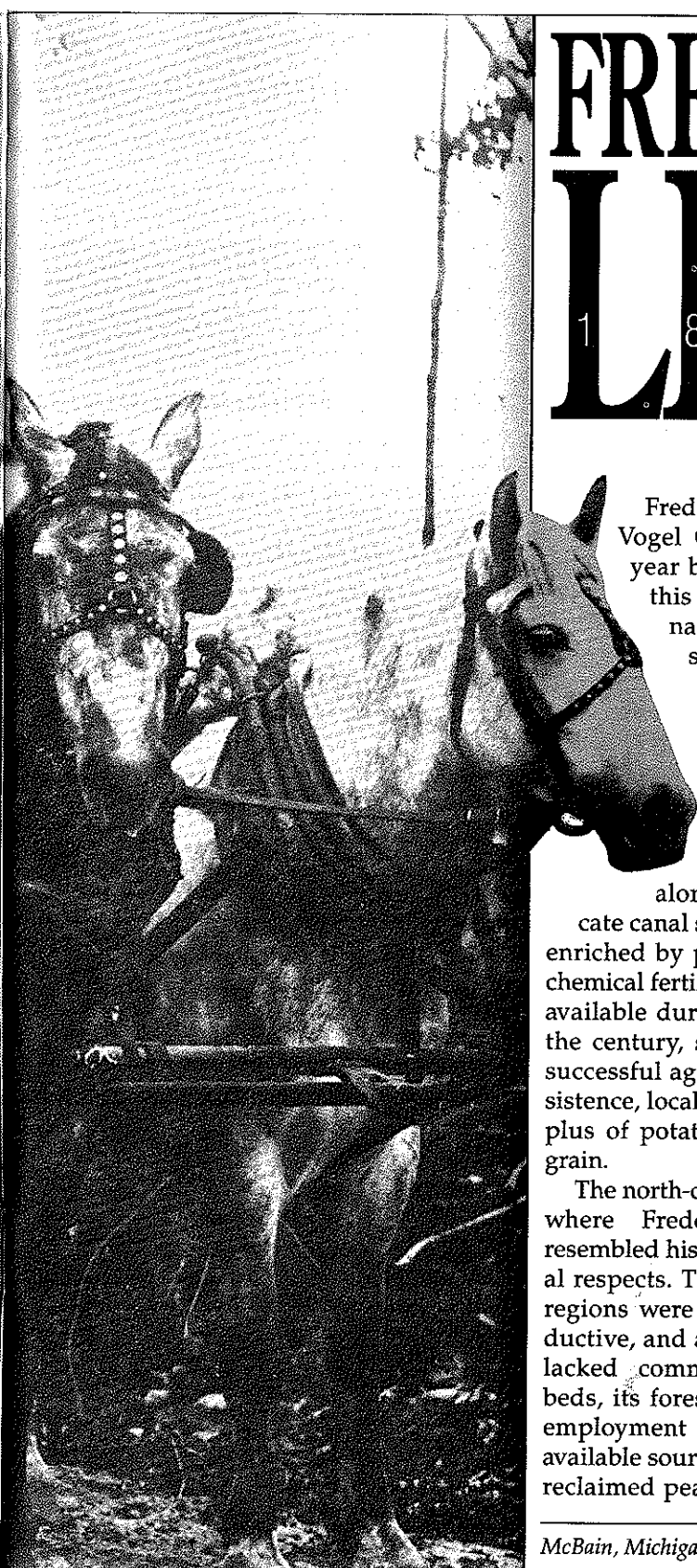
Archives has acquired the correspondence of several settlers. Frederik Diemer's letters (1894-1928) describe the life of an immigrant farmer in McBain; two letters from the Meekhof family (1915 and 1938) illustrate the transition from confident prosperity to the bleak prospects which prevailed during the Great Depression. Wartime markets (1940-1950) revitalized small-scale agriculture for a time, but already in the fifties agricultural consolidation was beginning to marginalize Missaukee County's family farms.





FREDERIK DIEMER: LETTERS

1 8 9 4 - 1 9 2 8



Frederik Diemer arrived in Vogel Center, Michigan, one year before the first letter of this series was written. His native hamlet, Hollandscheveld, stood near the edge of Hoogeveen in the province of Drenthe, an area known for its peat beds and sandy soils. Turves dug there for fuel found local markets along the route of an intricate canal system. The sandy soil, enriched by peat and manure until chemical fertilizers became generally available during the second half of the century, supported moderately successful agriculture. Beyond subsistence, local farms produced a surplus of potatoes, butter, and some grain.

The north-central area of Michigan where Frederik Diemer settled resembled his native village in several respects. The sandy soils of both regions were only moderately productive, and although Vogel Center lacked commercially useful peat beds, its forest, like peat, provided employment and a conveniently available source of fuel. Moreover, as reclaimed peat lands had once pro-

vided an agricultural frontier in the Netherlands, Michigan's woodlands were the primary source for the state's agricultural expansion in the 1890s.

In Holland, Frederik's father, Rev. Evert Diemer, pastored a small and generally poor Hollandscheveld congregation which was affiliated with the Christlijk Gereformeerde Kerk. In all likelihood he received the abundant respect with which sectarian church groups are inclined to mantle their prophets, but his economic status was little better than that of the farmhands and turf diggers who occupied his pews. His four children could expect no handsome inheritance, and without an advantage of that sort, little economic opportunity awaited them in the Netherlands, particularly if they hoped to become independent farmers.

It appears that Frederik Diemer arrived in Vogel Center with enough funds to acquire a twenty-acre farmstead, and he began to clear it immediately. That purchase exhausted his funds, and he then sought wage-paying work of varied kinds. He lumbered, carpentered, and dug wells or ditches while clearing the land for his first crops. By 1910 he had acquired an additional eighty-acre plot of adjacent stump land. But he was

McBain, Michigan, c. 1910.

never able to live entirely from farming, and he continued to contract carpenter work until his death in 1928. In fact, his death resulted from a construction-site accident.

Dina Sikkens, who had become Frederik's wife in 1894, reported the news of his death to surviving siblings in the Netherlands. The Sikkens family had migrated to Vogel Center several years before Frederik's 1893 immigration. During their thirty-three-year marriage the Diemers had eleven children; with their help they managed a farm which had grown to 120 acres by 1923. After Frederik died in 1928, two adult children remained at home to assist with the farm, older siblings having already moved to other places in Michigan. The agricultural depression of the 1920s had severely limited economic opportunities around Vogel Center; Diemer wrote in 1927, "At present conditions are much more favorable in the cities than in the country and on farms. . . . Earlier, many individuals came from the cities to work in the woods during the winter. Now that is all in the past, and the opposite is true."

September 13, 1894

Dearly beloved Parents, Brothers, and Sister,

By God's grace I am still in good health. It is at present very difficult to earn any money. I am making wooden railroad ties. These are beams under the railroad track. I make a dollar a day, paying my own expenses. I get seven cents a piece. I leave in the morning and return at night. All day long I am all alone, chopping in the woods, and I see no one. H. S. is not content with that kind of work, and he plans to move to the state of Missouri. What will the outcome be? No one is standing in his way. He has by

this time made himself odious everywhere.

I have cleared about two acres of my own land. That means cutting down and burning the trees. The stumps remain for a few years. But a person can raise crops around them. If my plans do not change and if all is well next year, I will plant potatoes in all of it. If things work out favorably, about three hundred bushels might be harvested. A bushel now costs thirty to fifty cents. For now these are only plans.

My purse is as thin as can be after losing thirty dollars in camp last winter and not having had a very successful summer or fall. I have a little left here and there, but things will probably come out all right if I continue to be in good health. I must make about a thousand wooden ties. I began a few days ago. I could not begin sooner because of terrible forest fires. But now it has rained for a couple of days, which was very sorely needed, and as a result the fires were put out.

I received your letter of August 6 in good health. You say I did not answer your letters of June 28 and July 7. What were they about? Was that the letter in which you asked me about sending money? I have not answered that. If you

were rich, I would have been pleased to accept. But I know you need it badly too. I could use it very well, but I can get along without it. I get plenty to eat. My clothes, at least those I wear every day, are a bit shabby, but the others are still too good to be used as work clothes.

As soon as I can save \$100 I am going to get married. It is possible to earn enough here for food, wheat, and pork at almost any time. To get started—a small house and necessary furniture—that is a problem. We are both completely prepared for it, even though money for the morrow has to fall out of the air, and then I will have a home of my own. If times had not been so bad, and they still are, and if I had received my money last winter, maybe we would have been married already. We will see how things turn out. We will leave it in the Lord's hands.

The crop has been very poor this summer. Hardly anyone has anything to sell. And it appears that it will be a hard winter. Wherever there is work I am sure to be there, whatever it is. I do not care what kind of work it is: carpentry, digging, chopping, sawing—it makes no difference. As you see, I can adjust to any type of job. I have even been a well digger for a couple of days. In that way I get along. When I have nothing to do, I work



Hette Vander Woude, left, with ax—Vogel Center

on my own land and I work three days a week for my board. At this moment I have only thirty-five cents in my purse, and I do not know when I will have more. I will not receive pay for making railroad ties until the beginning of next year.

Do not worry about me, for I would not want to go back to the old country if I were offered twice as much money as the trip would cost. I have enough to eat, but there is a scarcity of money. I can always whistle while I work, and sing, and be thankful that I am in America. As soon as I am married and can make the arrangements, Hendrick* can come over if he wants to. There will be something for him to eat also in America. And if Grietina** has a desire to do so, she can also come along. I think that in the long run it is better in America than in the Netherlands.

If Geert is not at home, send him my greetings, and Hendrick too. Geert asked me for a better photograph, but there is no money available. That would cost about \$6 altogether. He mistakenly thought I had the photographs.

Greetings from me and Dina,
Frederik

*His brother in Hollandscheveld.

**His sister.

March 7, 1897

Dear Parents,

Alas! I delayed writing too long. The winters here are not as pleasant as in the Netherlands. Here it is only a time to work, usually far from home. During the whole winter I left the house in the morning before six and returned at seven in the evening. There has been quite a bit of work this winter, but the wages are low. A person cannot expect more than fifty to sixty cents daily. I think economic conditions are getting worse rather than better. I do not think it is advisable for people who are making a living in Holland to come here, especially those who are afraid of doing a little work. If I

did not stick my nose in every place where some money could be made, I would not have been able to exist—sometimes with a spade, sometimes with an axe, sometimes with a saw, and then with a plane, and I don't know what else. Our well is not drilled, but dug, and then lined with four-foot-long boards, which are joined together. It is about twenty-five feet deep, and that is surprisingly satisfactory.

Our new church is still unfinished, as it was last spring, but the plan is to go on with the job again this spring. Most of the Groninger fellows are already back in the Netherlands.* Rev. Schepers is about the same. I could tell you about him, but I prefer to say nothing.

The manure from the cattle is quite necessary for this land, just as it is in your case, but, since the cows roam about along the roads and in the woods, little can be done to collect it.

We live about a mile and a half from church. That is a half-hour trip. We're two miles from Dina's parents.** It has not been a very favorable winter here. There was not enough snow, although

just now we have more on the ground than we had all winter.

Jan Haveman wrote me a letter. He is in Hull, Iowa, and is still working for a farmer. He did not look around much either. I do not know where B. Van der Heide is. I have not heard from him for more than a year. If Dina was not so attached to this place, I would also look around to see if I could find a better area.

Evert is very lively and is beginning to talk, saying "papa," "mama," "bread," "more," and so on. You, Mother, will easily imagine such matters.

You will receive this letter sometime before Mother's birthday, although I do not know when it will be mailed. I congratulate Mother in advance on her birthday, and I wish the very best for her, more than I can write or say.

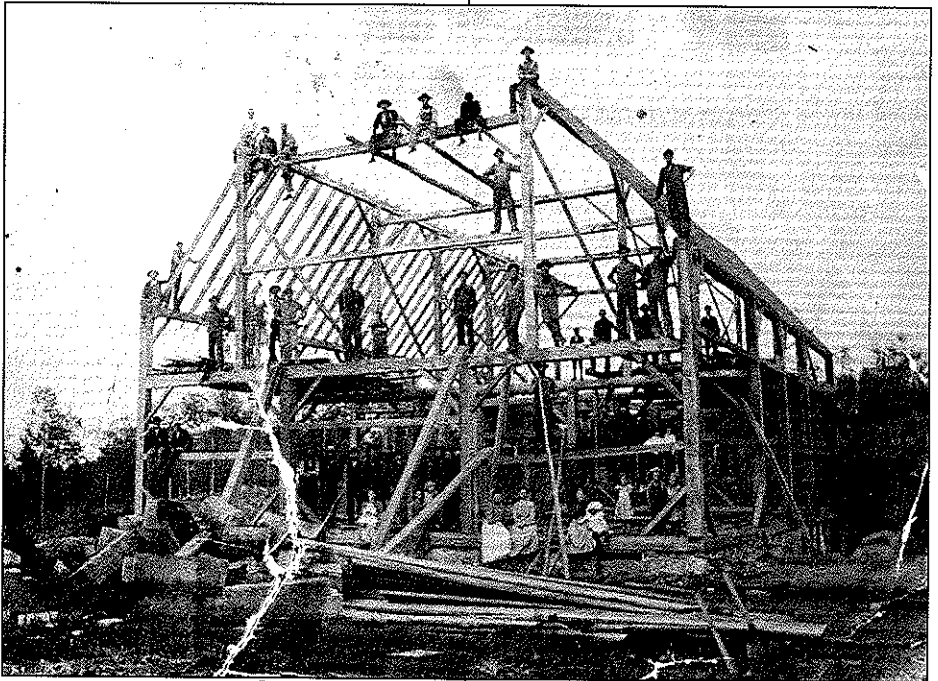
I have no reason for complaint. The Lord is still good to us. We all send our greetings.

Your children,
Frederik, Dina, and Evert

*Visitors from the province of Groningen.

**The Sikkens family.

Raising a barn in McBain, Michigan



October 20, 1910

Dear Parents, Brothers, and Sister,

Well, congratulations to all of you on the birth of little Grietina. Our wish is that she may grow up in good health.

We congratulate Father on his seventy-sixth birthday. Our wish is that the Lord may continue to spare you and that you may become better prepared day by day here on earth for the Father's home above. May he grant both of you many more happy years of life.

The children are all well. Hendrik is a real rascal. He walks and roams everywhere, and when he sees one of us leave the house, we have to be careful because he follows us as fast as he can. And keeps it up.

We are having a beautiful spring here. The fall crops turned out quite well. Mother asked whether I was satisfied with my new land. Much needs still to be cleared because it is a lumbered woodland.* I have not rented it, but bought it. I had to take out a mortgage for \$375, but it is registered in my name. Carpenter work was a bit dull this summer.

Greetings from Father and Mother** too. They are both still quite spry.

Father must not forget "Michigan" on our address in the future. It seems they had quite a bit of trouble finding us from New York the last time. They had filled in the address with red ink there themselves and had printed another red stamp on it, but it turned out all right.

Greetings to all from all of us.

Frederik, wife, and children.
F. Diemer

*Usually referred to as "stump land," i.e., lumbered land with tree stumps still in place.

**Mr. and Mrs. Sikkens, Frederik's parents-in-law.

March 10, 1913

Dear Father, Brothers, and Sister and Family,

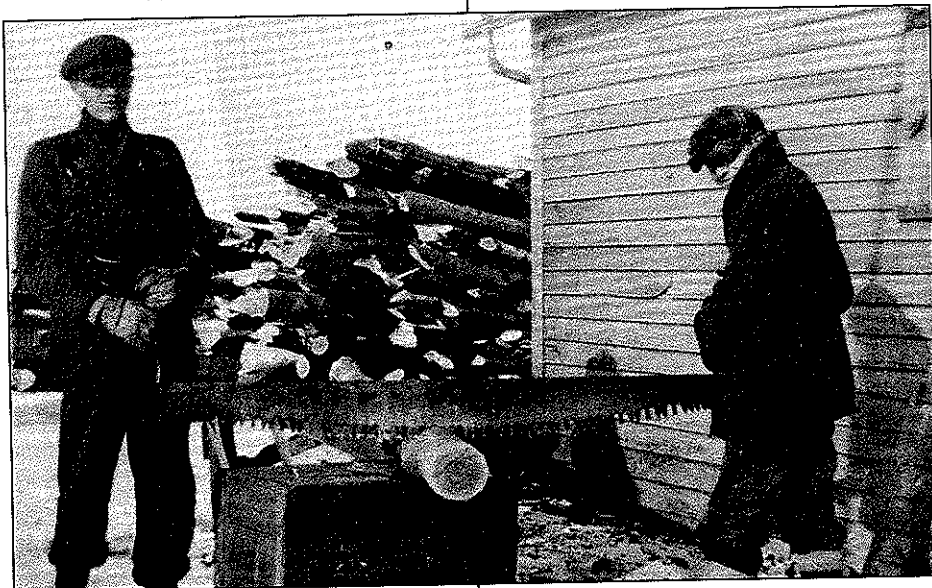
We received Father's letter in a reasonable state of health. It is true, as Father writes, there is quite often a good deal of irregularity in a large family. At

the present time my wife and Evert have what I think are symptoms of influenza, and they have trouble swallowing. Dina's father and mother are, as far as we know, in good health.

I thought I had previously given you the name of our minister. He is Theodorus Wilhelmus Rudolf Vanhetloo—a long double name which he says is foolishness. So he has dropped the double name for all

still have a preaching turn due to us from our neighboring congregation of Lucas, and probably Rev. P. Van Vliet will preach here.

I am clerk of the church council now and am also in charge of the salary fund. So I am quite busy, and, besides, we elders must go to Muskegon to attend the classis. That takes about three days of time. I feel that I am a bit too young to be



(above) Crosscut saw; Charlie Gugle, left—Lucas, Michigan. (across) Missaukee County District No. 2 Public School (Lucas), 1908.

of his children except one. In the Netherlands his father was a minister of the Christian Seceded Church, but here he accepted a call from the Reformed Church in America. His son Theodore, our minister, preferred to study at the Christian Reformed Church seminary in Grand Rapids. So he is a minister of the Christian Reformed Church.* He is a man without special talents and does not have an attractive character. Still, he is very serious and even somewhat melancholy on the pulpit. Father, you ask me if I have ever read a sermon for worship service here. Yes, that has happened. The first time I naturally offered a short prayer and read a short sermon, so the entire service lasted only an hour. I dreaded it, and I prayed a good deal about it, but after I got started, it was not too bad. Next Sunday our minister is scheduled to be gone again, but then we

an elder, at least when it comes to admonishing the elderly. May the Lord give me the necessary ability and confidence.

The weather is very changeable here—cold and then warm, with storms and wind. There are many misfortunes at times from storms and floods. We have been spared remarkably, but in other states many thousands have lost their lives.

Greetings,
Frederick

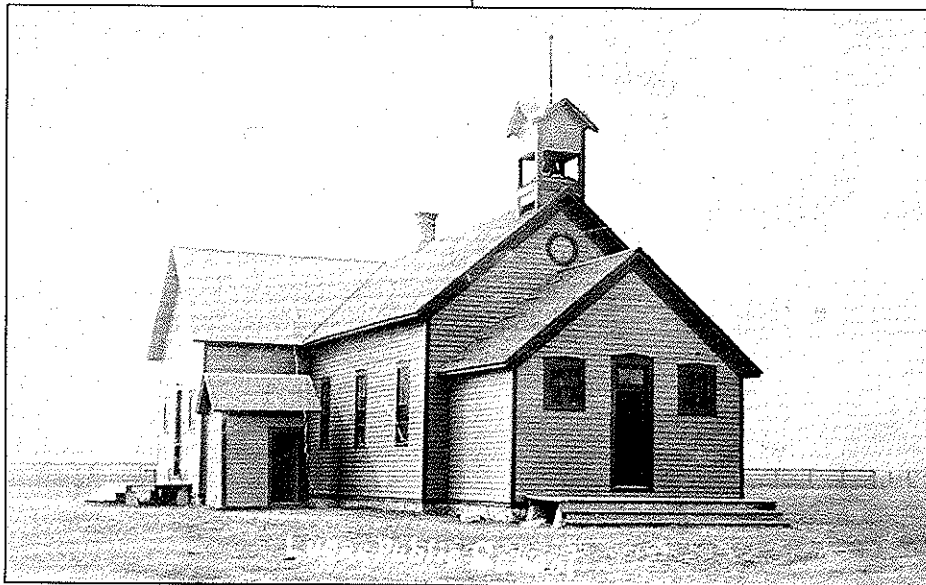
*The Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church were the two major church groups with which Dutch-Americans affiliated. The second of these, the CRC, maintained strong ties with sister denominations in the Netherlands.

January 28, 1927

Dear Brother,

Really, little Brother, I deserve punishment for delaying so long. A person hardly knows what to write, for the newspapers bring news from the ends of the earth after a day or two. If inventions continue at the same pace as during the last fifteen years, then within ten years I think we will fly across the ocean in one

site is true. And there are no more immigrants arriving. As a result, the Dutch language is disappearing; for example, my younger children can no longer speak Dutch. They understand some of it, probably most of it, but the answers are always in English—and my children know more Dutch than many others. This is because school and catechism are all in English. Sermons are fifty-fifty,



day. Satan is making good use of it all, but God can also use it to hasten the coming of his kingdom.

We are all quite well here, but there are the usual exceptions. The grip [influenza] is quite common here as it is in Europe, and it causes deaths as a result of complicating lung fevers. Dina continues to cope with stomach trouble, but she is not bedridden.

Our three oldest children work in Grand Rapids. Two are married, and the third plans to be married in the spring.

At present, conditions are much more favorable in the cities than in the country and on farms. The farmers all have trouble getting by. Many are obliged to quit or go bankrupt. Things have changed a great deal since I came to America. Earlier, many individuals came from the cities to work in the woods during the winter. That is all in the past, and now the oppo-

one in Dutch and one in English. If a Dutch immigrant were to arrive who knew absolutely no English, he would feel very lonely, for the older generation is dying off.

Greetings,
Frederik

June 3, 1928

Dear Brother and Sister,

You will undoubtedly be surprised to receive a letter from America, but sometimes it is very necessary, and then the thought occurs to us that something has happened, which is true in this case, namely, that I have lost my dear spouse, Frederik, by death. On May 30 he left for work hale and hearty in the morning, and at 2 o'clock in the afternoon we received the terrible news that he had been killed where the school building was

being torn down. A part of the building was blown inward by a gust of wind right where he was working, and there was not enough time for him to escape, and as a result he was caught underneath. His companion had just enough time to get away from the danger, after which he went for help at once, but it was too late. The accident had happened so suddenly that he could not speak, and he died in a few minutes.

But we may firmly believe that he is with the Lord. You can well imagine, Brother and Sister, how terrible this is. Yes, it is impossible to express it in words. But we have the great privilege of being assured that he has gone to his Fatherland, which is a great comfort for us. The funeral was conducted on Saturday, June 2. Since we are not sure about the address, we are sending the news to the address of The Rotterdamer newspaper.

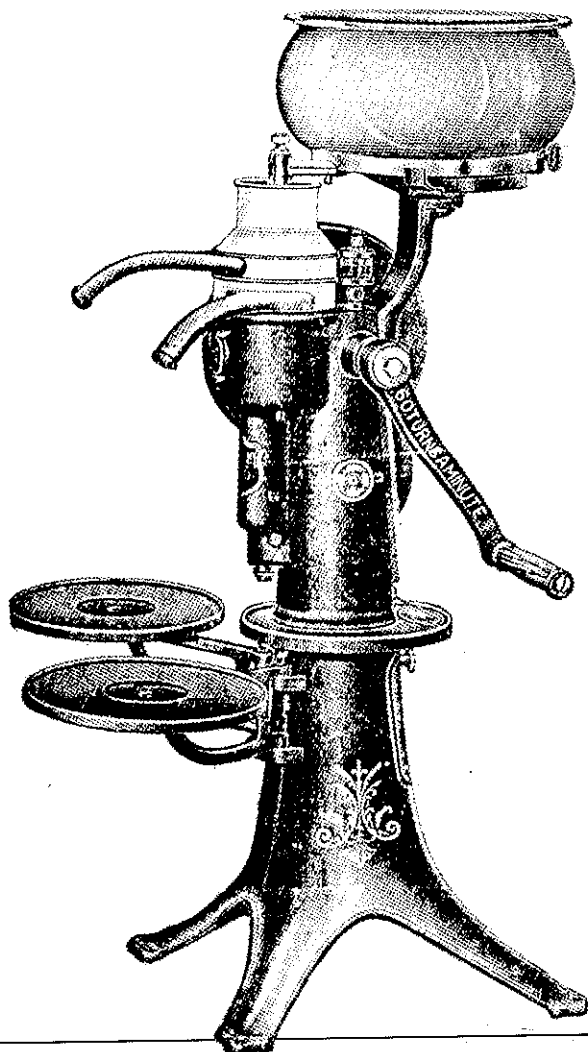
If you will be so kind, let the other relatives know, and now one more request. Will you please write back to us? With this I close the letter.

Receive the regards from the deeply grieved widow and children of F. Diemer.

Your sister,
Mrs. Dina Diemer

Photos, pp. 5-9, donated by Mr. and Mrs. William Schripsema.

THE MEEKHOF FARM



The two Meekhof letters below (1915 and 1938), addressed from Vogel Center to Havelte in the southwest corner of Drenthe, provide vividly contrasting accounts of changing economic prospects near Cadillac, Michigan. In the first letter Mijna Meekhof sent his siblings a photo of his Vogel Center farm and an advertisement picturing the cream separator which he prized so highly. Returning correspondence from Havelte included similar documentation of success in Drenthe. Both of these proud symbols appear below.

By 1938, when the widow Wilhelmina Meekhof-De Jong reviewed her altered status, the Depression's grim toll was obvious. Most of her children, like the Diemer offspring, had moved away. The ancestral farmstead, although still tilled by her son, produced little or no profit. She was personally comfortable and well tended, but the prospect, dear to most farmers, of establishing a landed class of Meekhofs on adjacent farms had evaporated.

January 9, 1915

Dear Brother and Sister,

We received your letter and were happy to learn that you have a good farm and that your children live nearby. That is surely a great blessing.

Of our situation I can report that we have 187 acres (an acre is about forty by one hundred paces). Of this plot a hundred acres is cleared, and the rest is still wooded. We use that for pasture, but it still has much good timber on it. We had a good summer, so the crops were also good. We harvested 2,000 bushels of potatoes from ten acres, and we sold 700 bushels for about forty-five cents per bushel. The unsold bushels are in our cellar and are now very cheap. In addition

(left) Cream separator—skimming capacity, 375 lbs. an hour; advertised for 36 dollars. (across) Meekhof-De Jong farm, Lucas, Michigan

we harvested 900 bushels of corn, 140 bushels of wheat, 175 bushels of rye, and about 35 tons of hay. We also raise garden vegetables, apples, pears, and such.

We have thirteen milk cows and four others which will freshen in the spring. Another nine cows are young animals. Then we have five work horses, six pigs, ninety chickens, five cats, and no dog.

All the work on the farm is done with machines—so we have a self-binder, a mowing machine, a machine that turns hay over, and a manure wagon that spreads manure over the field. We have a gasoline engine that powers a grinder for corn and rye and a saw to cut firewood. We have a telephone at home so we can speak with the grocer and other shops and also talk with our neighbors. As soon as we milk the cows, we use a separator, a machine that quickly removes the cream, which is sold to the butter factory. We keep our cows inside during the winter.

The land here is of all sorts, from heavy clay to light sand and flat or hilly. Our land is a mixture of clay and sand and mainly hilly, except for forty acres of lowland which we use for pasture. Land is getting more expensive here.

The most commonly raised crops are corn and potatoes. Corn is a good and useful crop. It grows to a height of six to ten feet. For corn we use a silo here, which is in the form of a barrel constructed of wood, cement, or stone. It must be quite thick. Ours is twelve feet across and thirty feet high. Every summer when the corn is almost ripe but still green, we chop up whole plants and place them into the silo. There they remain green and provide good food for the cattle during the winter. The corn that is not put into the silo remains in the field to ripen, and then the seed is removed. The remaining stalks are also used for fodder in the winter. Well, enough of that.

All of my family are well. Jennie and Geert visited us yesterday. One of J. Berens girls was married last week, and we went to the wedding. Willempje and Jan live near us. Yesterday we received a letter from the Graafschap Bentheim in Germany—my wife comes from there. Many have been wounded, killed in action, or are missing. We are privileged to live in peace and prosperity, for which we must thank God, the giver of all good things.

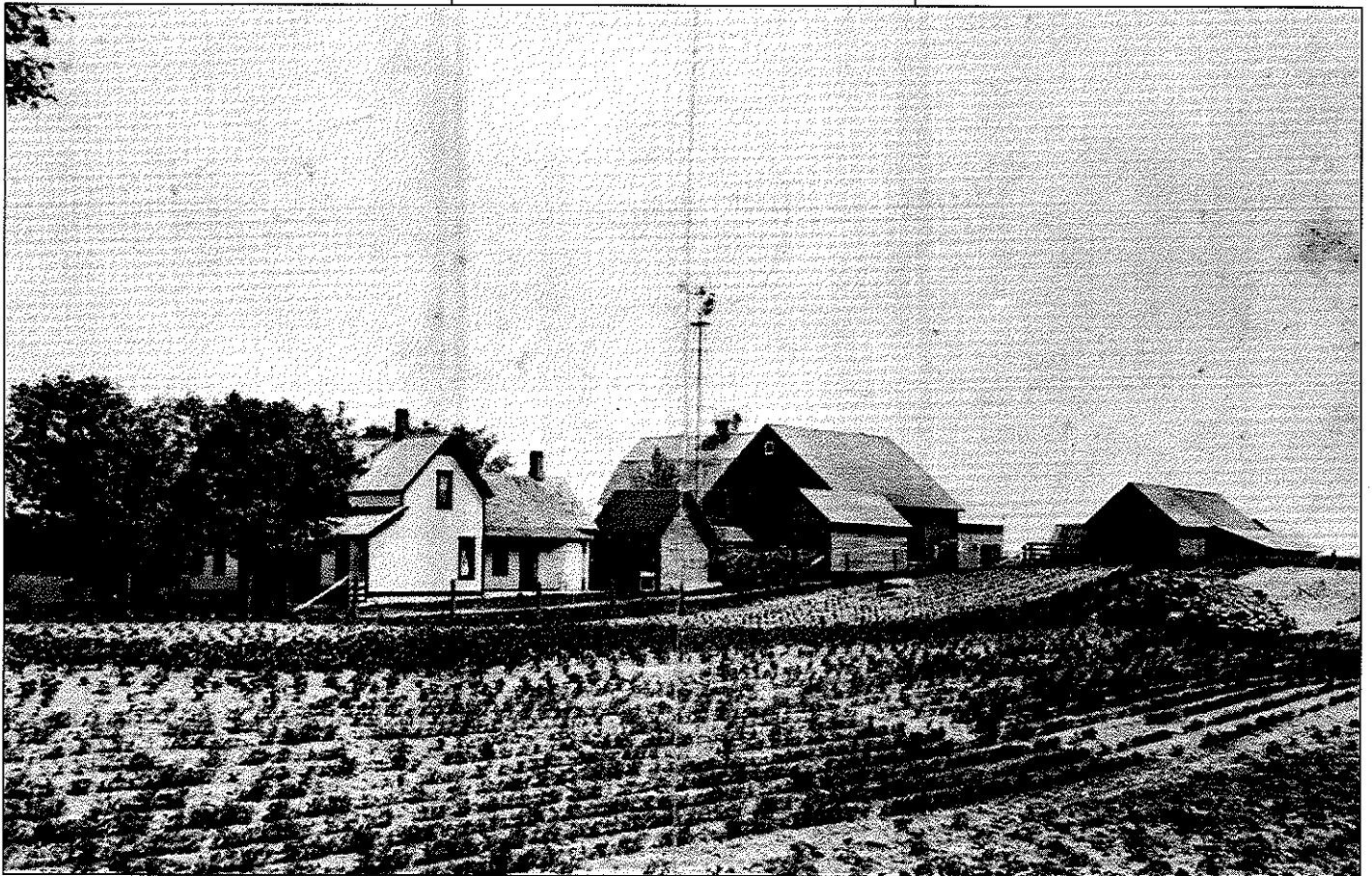
Hearty greetings from us all.

Mijna Meekhof

December 9, 1938

Dear Brother and Children,

January 7 will mark the first anniversary of my husband's death. I live alone now in a small house. This winter I had a schoolgirl living with me, so it was not so lonely. Also, two of my children live



nearby, and I visit them regularly. De Jong's brother also lives close at hand, but I can't walk there, so they pick me up with a car. Everyone here has a car, or automobile.

Four of my children live in Grand Rapids—a hundred miles from here. Last winter I spent three months in the city with them. Two of my boys are not yet married, although they are surely old enough. One is already 38, and the other is 35. One of my daughters lives in the state of Washington, and a married daughter of De Jong also lives there.

We had a good harvest this year, but prices are so low that farmers can make little. My son who lives on our farm harvested 1,100 bushels of potatoes but got only thirty-five cents per bushel. And then many of them sold for only twelve cents because they were slightly damaged.

He bought the ninety-three acre farm from me for \$4,000, and he must pay \$200 interest on the loan every year. I have to live on that money, but he can't pay it. He has a family with four children

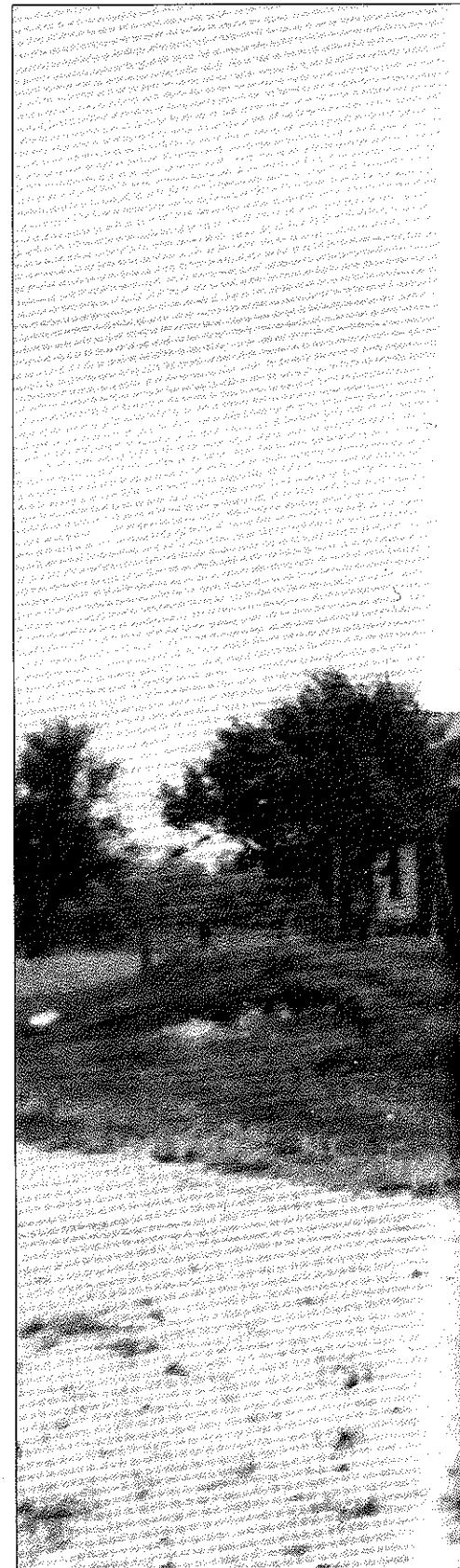
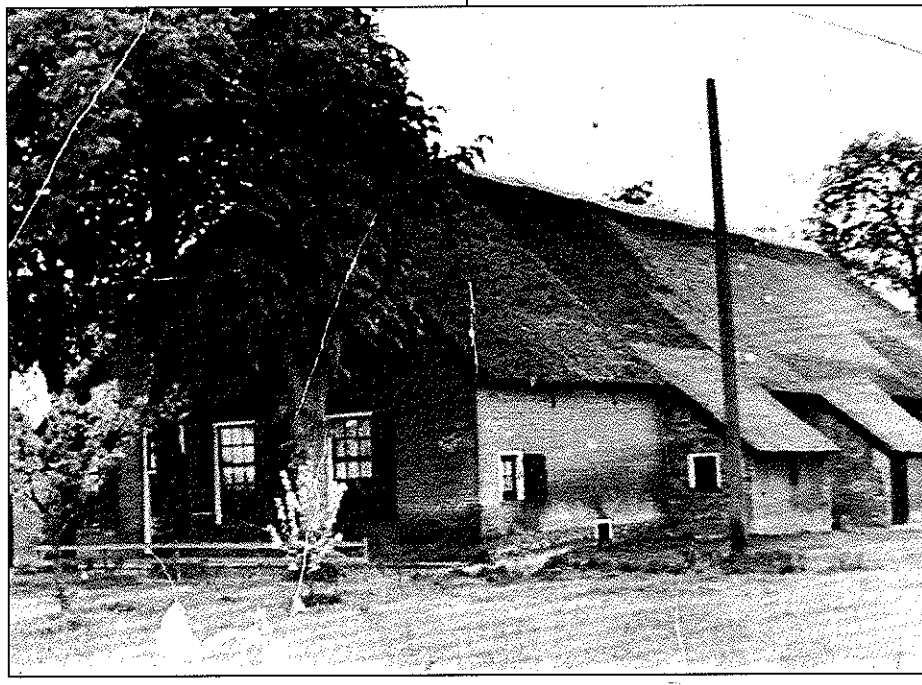
to support. I can stay here in this small house for as long as I live, but it belongs to De Jong's children, and the crops raised on the ten acres beside the house belong to them.

Where are your children? Do you live with them, or are you also alone? I've not had a report from you for a long time. Brother Rijnder is 81 years old and is married a second time.

Now you must write to me again. Greetings from me and my children.

Wilhemina Meekhof

(below) Havelte, Drenthe, the Netherlands.
(across) Tijmens farm.



THE TWENTIES IN HIGHLAND

M I C H I G A N

by Rev. William Vander Hoven



The Highland that I know and the Highland I still love best is the local community and church of the 1920s. They had humble beginnings. A few families living south of the Lucas CRC needed a church of their own, and although their first small log church dates from 1886, they did not organize the congregation until 1914. Despite their poverty they had enough devotion to erect a better building and assume the obligations of a new congregation. The story of God's benevolent ways with that struggling group needs telling, but mine is a different story. My days in Highland began in the early twenties, when my parents, John and Cornelia (Feringa) Vander Hoven moved from Grand Rapids to Missaukee County.

Our reason for moving was simple enough. My father had no kin in America, but my mother's family lived around Highland. Although my parents had met, married, and gained four children in Grand Rapids, familial cords ultimately drew them to Highland. So my father sold his business and purchased the old Wyma farm one mile west of the Christian Reformed church.

It was far from the best farm—forty acres of sandy hills—but it was the home to which Sylvia, Julia, John, and I adjusted very quickly. And after many years I cherish no memories more than those which cluster around that farm in Highland. It was there that I felt the first stirrings of a call to the ministry. And although poverty drove us off the farm after a short time, I will always treasure the friends and experiences we gained in those years. I'm not alone in that matter as it seems that every meeting of former Highlanders sparks some talk of the old days. All of us seem to have left a large part of our hearts in those sandy hills.

Who can forget the blizzards that howled around the corners of the

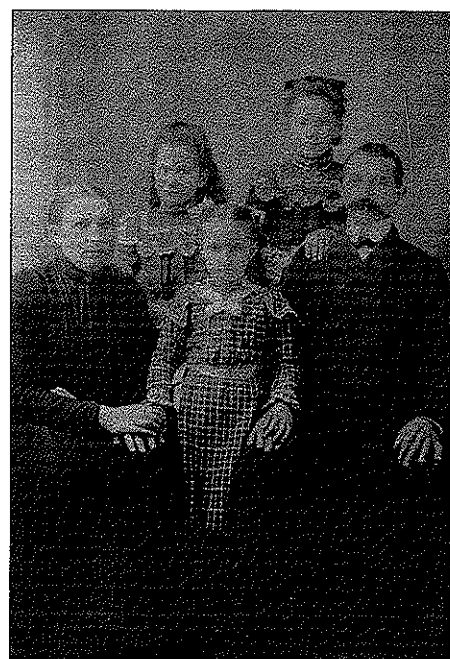
houses, the deep drifts of snow everywhere, the noiseless smooth gliding of sleigh runners over unplowed roads with only the jingling bells of the horses or the church bell to break the silence as it pealed over the countryside, calling us to prepare for Sunday. Who can forget the spring forest floor, white with trillium, the jack-in-the pulpits and cowslips at the foot of a rotten stump, and yellow adder's-tongues growing in the dells. And who can forget the smell of new-plowed land or new-cut hay? Who doesn't remember the livestock sales in Marion, swimming in Lake Missaukee, fishing in Jennings Lake, the huffing of the old engine at Coffee's mill? Who could forget any of that? Who would ever want to?

The Farm

Farming in Highland was primitive in those days. The main cash crop for almost everyone was potatoes. I don't know of anyone who owned a tractor in the twenties. Fields were plowed by teams, a furrow at a time. Many farmers owned binders for oats and wheat, but there were some who still harvested with the scythe. All corn was cut by a small hand-held sickle. There were a few hayloaders, but many farmers cocked their hay in the fields and pitched it onto wagons pulled between the cocks. Threshing was the event of the harvest season. The huge steam tractors went puffing down the sand roads from farm to farm, neighbors following to help neighbors. It was fun to watch the farm wives in threshing time. Standing in a huddle at church they rolled their eyes in mock dismay at the prospect of feeding the crew. And in truth that was no small task. There were a lot of threshers, and they gathered at the table with gargantuan appetites. But secretly the wives

of Highland relished the opportunity to show off their cooking, and they enjoyed the good-natured jolity at the table.

Each fall nearly every family butchered a hog and a cow. The wives canned the meat in Mason jars, with no regard for steaks or chops. Everything was diced. Canned meat and the potatoes we all



(previous page) Vander Hoven farm, Highland, Michigan. (above) Louwe and Sepke Feringa, Katie, Bertha, and Minnie. (across, top) Front seat: Frank Hendriks, Prof. De Young; back seat: Mrs. De Young, Mrs. Hendriks—McBain, Michigan, 1910. (across, bottom) Highland Christian Reformed Church, 1964.

stored either in barns or in pits covered with vines and sand kept us alive through the winters. And, of course, everyone had chickens.

My father had a thousand of them. He had established a door-to-door route in Cadillac, which provided a large part of our cash income. There was also the butter. We had a tumble-barrel churn, and it was my task to make butter once a week. That task was bad enough, but the

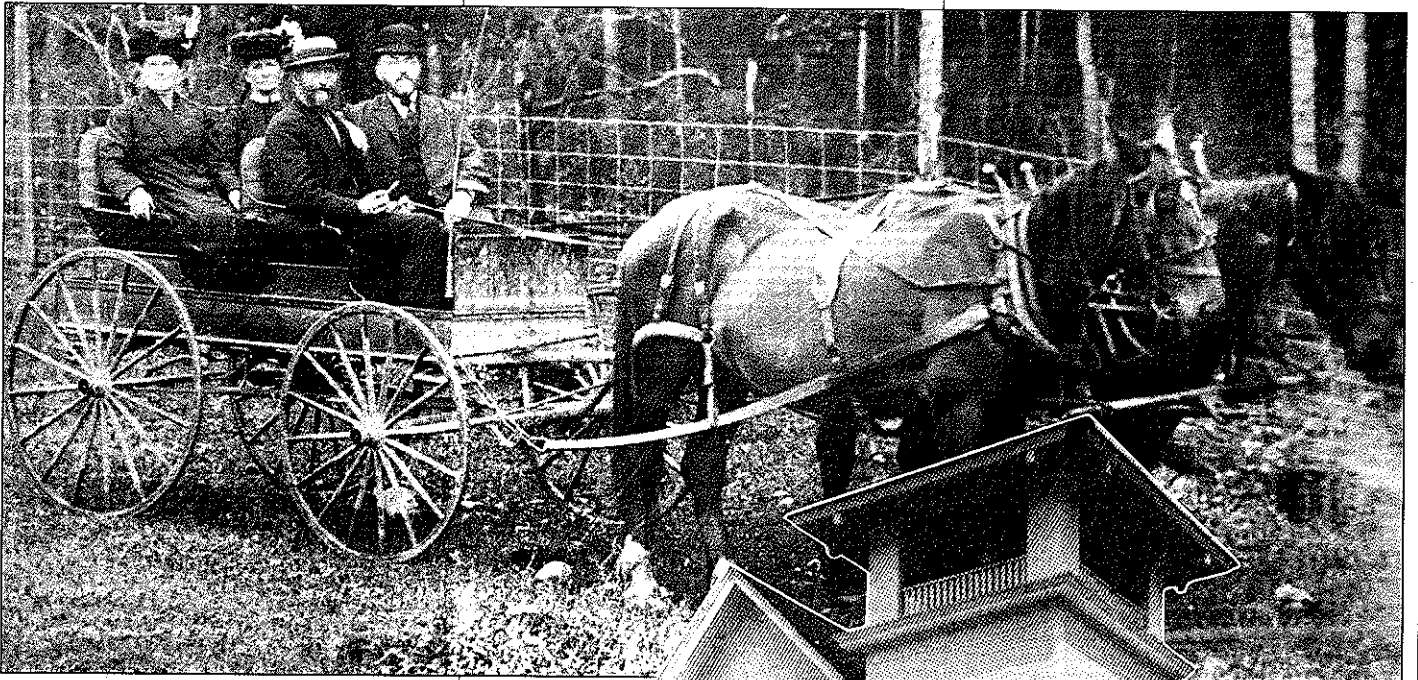
crowning misery was that the butter went to Cadillac with the eggs, and we ourselves had to eat our bread with *spek* fat. *Spek* fat is one of those things that can't be described. If you've had it, no one need tell you; if you haven't, you wouldn't understand anyway.

Most houses in Highland were built for large families, and ours was

different light. When she had given us all the comfort we didn't need, she took last year's Sears catalog and with a table knife stuffed the cracks full of the pumps, Coleman lamps, harnesses, boots, and anything else pictured on those enchanting pages. That was the last of snow on the blankets. But it was still bitterly cold upstairs. The house was heated by a

potbellied Art Garland stove set in the living room, and it could never be kept burning all night.

Like all the wives in Highland, my mother ironed our clothes with four or five irons which came with one interchangeable handle. They were heated on the kitchen stove. As mother ironed, when one iron became cold, she switched the handle



no exception. My sisters, brother, and I slept in an unfinished upstairs, all in one bed. We had no screens, and our first summer nights in the house were plagued with mosquitoes until my father somehow scraped together the money for netting to tack over the window frames.

Then came our first winter. During the first stormy winter night snow blew in through the loosely set windows, and we awoke to find our blanket white with it. When my mother saw snow on the bed, she gathered her four shivering little kiddies in her arms and wept over us. We had thought nothing of it. We loved our house, and if snow blew in, so be it. But my mother saw it in a



to a hot one and put the cold one with the others to be reheated. But those irons had another use: on winter evenings our mothers heated them all, and by bedtime each night all the kids in Highland were trundled off to sleep hugging their own personal irons, wrapped in towels. Once abed, we kicked the irons down to where our toes reached. That's how all the little feet stayed warm long enough for us to fall asleep.

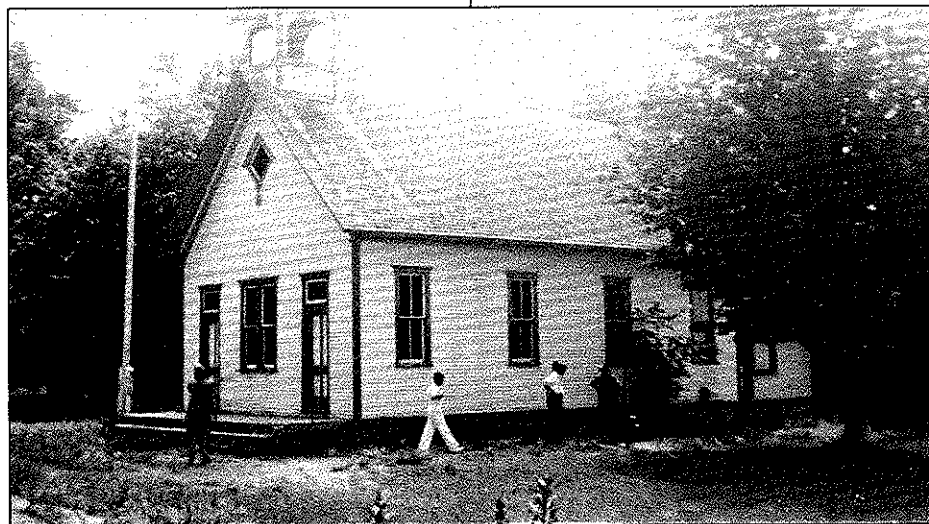
Winter evenings were dark, and except for Stuart Balkema's home, the only lights were kerosene lamps or Coleman gas lamps. Until we were sent to bed, we all sat around the table reading. There was *The Banner* or *De Wachter*, the *Michigan Farmer*, *Hoarde's Dairyman*, and the well-thumbed catalogs. The lamp was in the center of the table, and we all pushed our reading material as close to it as we could, for the circle of adequate light was small. The real social event was to be invited to visit the Balkemas, who had one flickering electric light bulb in each room.

Our barn was built of logs, flanked on both sides by wooden sheds which had been added later as lean-tos. The log section was for hay and straw. In the south shed we kept our stock, and the north shed stored the few farm tools we had. Behind the barn stood a good-sized chicken coop. A windmill, well house, and a few fruit trees made up the yard around the house. It all fronted on a little sand-track road which led to the Roedes' home and ran dead at Public School Number Seven.

The School

School was something all by itself. Don't ridicule the old one-room eight-grade country school. It wasn't all bad. The teacher called the grades one at a time to the recitation bench before her desk. There they went through their lessons. Each grade

heard all the other grades reciting. By the time a first grader reached the eighth grade, she or he was already well versed in eighth-grade subjects. And as the pupils listened to the classes below them, they were getting a thorough review of what they had already studied. Our curriculum may have been limited and primitive, but what we learned we learned well.



all of us went on to Roedes', the last farm before the school. From Roedes' to the school was a little more than half a mile of sand track. Barely passable in summer, it was as forbidding as the Donner Pass in winter. So after a heavy snow—and we had several each winter—Mr. Roede would mount a horse and break a trail for us through the drifts. By that time we

There was no need for a new millage proposal every year in those times. The school budget was pretty much bare bones. We had no school buses to maintain, no gymnasiums, swimming pools, or athletic grounds. We got all the exercise we needed by walking to school and playing running games at recess and noon hour. We played ball but didn't need an expensive diamond for it. And no one felt sorry for us or thought us underprivileged. It certainly never occurred to us to pity ourselves. There was one luxury, however, which we did enjoy in winter. Several of us had developed the custom of walking to school together. The Westmaases lived farthest; they walked to De Haans' house where they were joined by Sieburn and Anna; they all continued to our place, where my sister Sylvia and I became part of the entourage; then

(above) Missaukee County District No. 7 School, Highland, Michigan. (across) Stacking bundles of oats for threshing; Lew Bos, Corneal Bos, Larry Vredevoogd—C. Bos farm, Highland.

had had about enough of kicking our own single-file path. That gave us half a mile of easier walking just when we needed it most. Besides, if we reached school a bit late, Mr. Roede was there to explain our delay to the teacher. How good can you have it!

Another good device, for those who had no boots, came from John Ouwinga, the Highland storekeeper, who had a big Reo Speedwagon truck. This truck was equipped with large tires, but, more important for the little folk of Highland, the Reo used large inner tubes, and blowouts were common. Big-hearted John always saved his broken tubes for winter. They were free as long as the

supply lasted. People who had cars drove Model T Fords, but their inner tubes were good for nothing but slingshot rubbers. The Reo's tubes could be cut into seven- or ten-inch lengths and pulled up over your ankles to your knees, and then, with rubbers on your shoes, you could kick your way through the drifts. There was a cold little gap at your ankles between your rubbers and your inner tubes, but your feet and shins were dry. What more did you want?

In time many parents in the Number Seven district became increasingly dissatisfied with the school. Number Two, on the corner by the store and church, was a two-room school with more pupils and better teaching than Number Seven. But rather than transfer to Number Two, several parents began to agitate for a Christian school. In 1928 the two-room school was opened with two teachers: Lena Westmaas and John Kremer. What a change from Number Seven! I still thank God for that Christian school. It didn't come easily. Everyone was poor, and the work was all donated. My uncle Corneal Bos gave five acres of land across from the church horse barns. The school later was consolidated with McBain, but for some years it served the Highland Christian School people well.

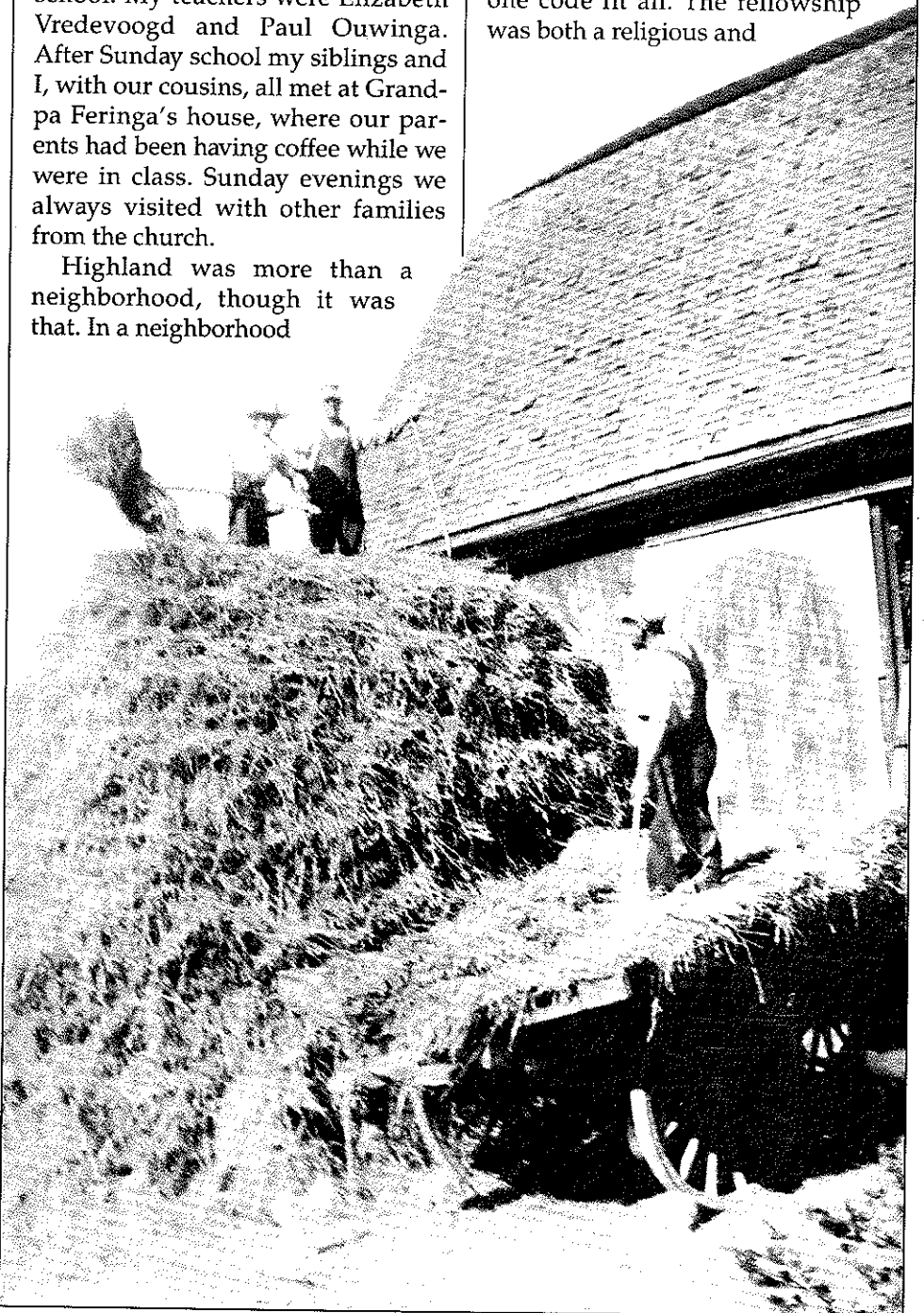
Our Church

The church was Highland's pivotal institution. Church activities pretty much held priority over almost anything else. People were faithful in attending worship. No one dared, or even much cared, to skip catechism. We complained but not seriously. Those were the days of transition from Dutch to English, and I remember pastor Holwerda teaching with a Dutch catechism book in one hand and an English in the other.

Some parents insisted their children learn the Dutch; others allowed English. We grew up with a fair knowledge of Dutch. Catechism was always on Saturday, and while we waited for siblings in other class times, we played in the church horse barns. In the summer we had Sunday school. My teachers were Elizabeth Vredevoogd and Paul Ouwinga. After Sunday school my siblings and I, with our cousins, all met at Grandpa Feringa's house, where our parents had been having coffee while we were in class. Sunday evenings we always visited with other families from the church.

Highland was more than a neighborhood, though it was that. In a neighborhood

people wave and say hello. They may help each other, or carpool to the park. But each family has its own code and life-style. That's where Highland was different. Highland was, and is, a parish. With but very few exceptions, everyone for miles around was Christian Reformed, and one code fit all. The fellowship was both a religious and



a social covenant. Certain social aspects of the covenant were unspoken rules, behavior which you learned from your parents. Saturday, for example, after the church bell, was time to prepare for Sunday. You grew up knowing that; Sunday had its own special parameters. You learned them too, and you were careful to conform because the last thing you wanted was to become "gossip." When you "joined church," you not only committed yourself to the Reformed doctrines but also, tacitly, to the accepted mores and folkways.

And the covenant worked. All members heard the same sermons and consequently believed the same things and lived by the same pattern. Even the few "Americans" who didn't belong to the church were so much influenced by the subculture of the Dutch congregation that they generally conformed to our life-style. If in some things they went their own way, we understood. They might make hay on Sunday, which we took to be the "American" way. Among ourselves we shared our disapproval, but we maintained our casual friendships with them and created no rift in our "neighboring." If, however, one of us had done the same thing, it would have been entirely something else. Such a one would not merely have been "different," but an embarrassment to the fellowship. The "Americans" of Marion and Park Lake would smile knowingly, and all of Highland would have lost face because its code wasn't as wholeheartedly accepted as was claimed.

But the deviation was even more than an embarrassment; it was more like a repudiation of the covenant, a challenge to the viability of the body. The congregation could be tolerant of the ways of "Americans"—there was no deep bond between "them" and "us." But with one of "our own" it was different. The covenant had been

violated. It may have been a transgression of the Decalogue or an upset of a folkway. The body recognized the difference but disapproved of both kinds of deviation. Both were offenses which, if left unattended, could erode the fellowship. The violator must be, as they said, "labored with" by pastor and consistory.



J. Vredevoogd home, Highland, Michigan.

And yes, the disapproval was not without patience and love. God is also a God of love. The offender was part of the body and must be restored. Scripture teaches the care of believers for one another. So all the women murmured, "It's so sad," and all the men shook their heads and said, "Stupid." The pastor and consistory "labored with" the erring one, who usually repented and was welcomed back into the fellowship. In the covenant, stern censure could be followed by sincere forgiveness.

But the bond was more than life-style. It included mutual support. You did your grocery shopping at John Ouwinga's or Bazuin's because they were part of the body. If you happened to have gone to Cadillac (a rare excursion) and purchased something that could have been obtained from "one of us," you felt guilty.

Today Highland is probably more alive than ever. The old country store is no more, and the horse barns have long since been torn down. But the congregation has doubled since our family lived there. The preaching through the years has been consistent and biblical. The covenant is still strong, although the life-style has

been updated. People take vacations, own the latest appliances, dine out, and have more contacts with the world beyond Highland. Highlanders are no longer so conscious of the distinctions between "us" and the "Americans," and Highland has a much stronger commitment to outreach and church growth.

The seventy-fifth anniversary booklet published by Highland Christian Reformed Church in 1989 notes accurately that "By the grace of God our witness has extended beyond Highland"; . . . our "men and women have gone . . . into all walks of life." And even unto the fourth generation, "the high purpose which our forefathers set before us" continues to guide our path. With these words Highland CRC has traced the presence of the blessing of God across seven decades.

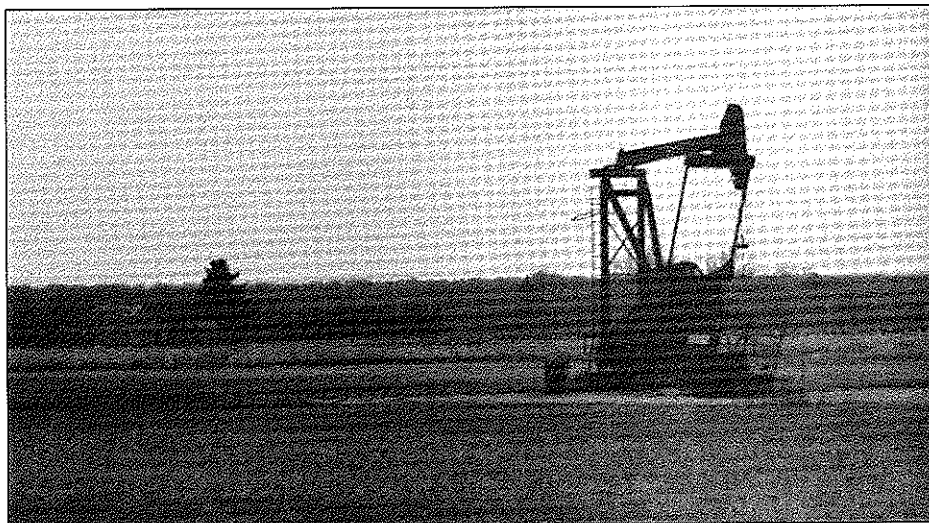
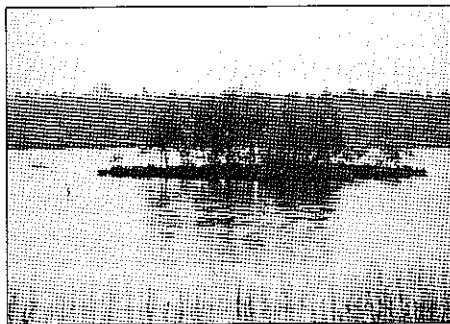
County to Province

Both the Meekhof and Diemer families emigrated from Drenthe, a Netherlandic province which is similar to Missaukee County. In general both of these areas are better suited to forestry than intensive agriculture, and they also share sandy soils which, when generously enriched by commercial fertilizers, can produce large potato crops. Nonetheless, production costs on marginal land of this sort are too high to compete effectively when agricultural surpluses prevail. For that reason both Drenthe and central Michigan have turned to reforestation, wildlife conservation, and recreation as alternatives to agriculture. Thus, though separated by some four thousand miles, the farmers of Drenthe and the Lucas-McBain areas have much in common. And since a goodly number of Missaukee County's Dutch-Americans have ancestral roots in Drenthe, the people of these places should be invited to a reunion. Let this segment of *Origins* function as their reintroduction—County to Province.

Missaukee County photos by Mr.
George Gruenberg



(top) Clam River in Missaukee County. (bottom) Country lane along ditch in Drenthe.



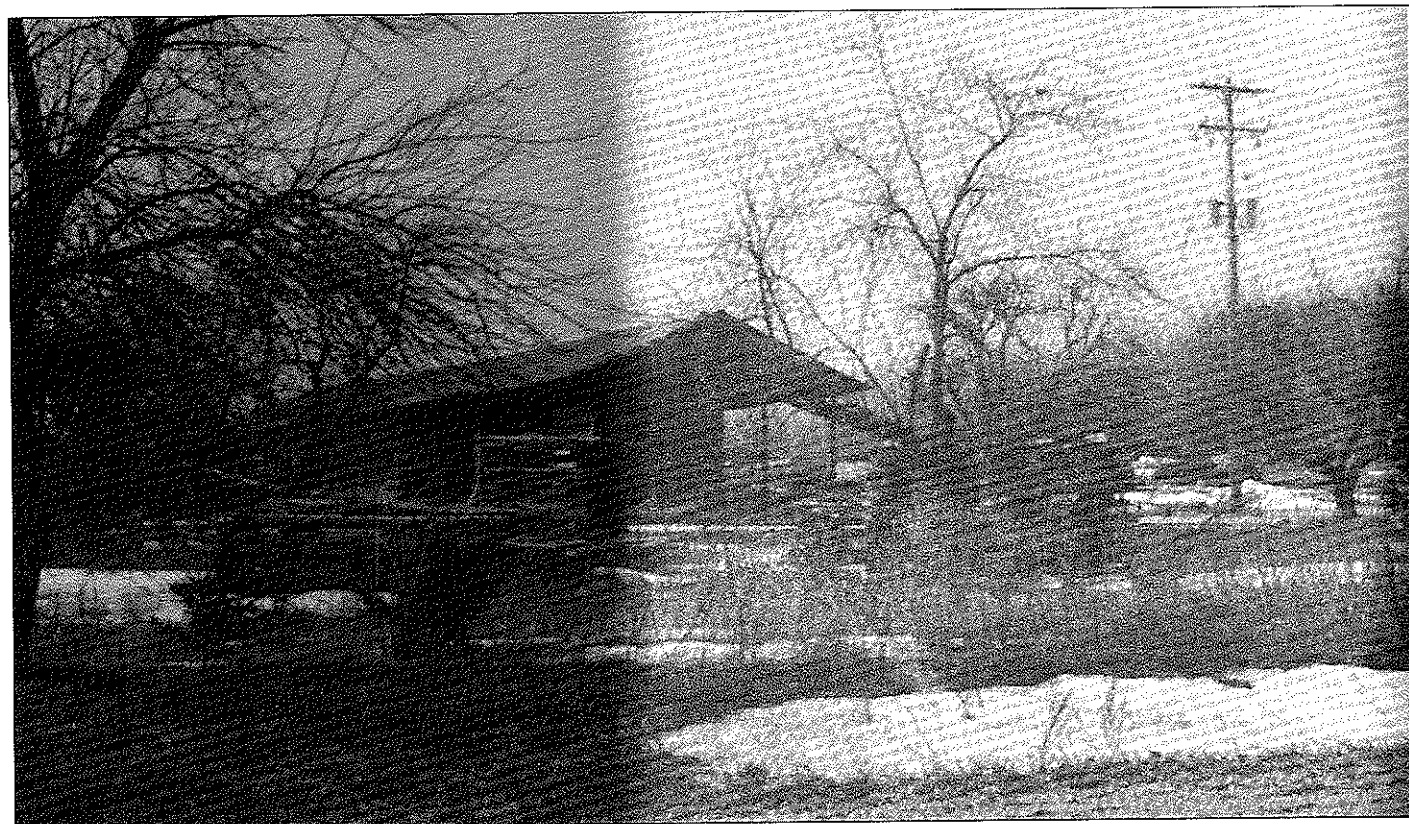
(clockwise from below) Oil pumps in winter, Drenthe; oil well pump, Falmouth, Michigan; swamp in Drenthe; farmland marsh, Missaukee County; old log home, Missaukee County; country road with milk cans, Drenthe.

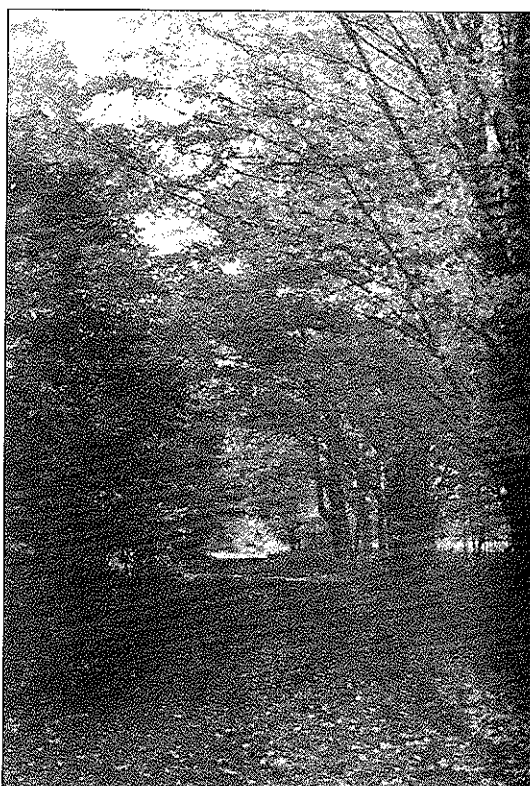






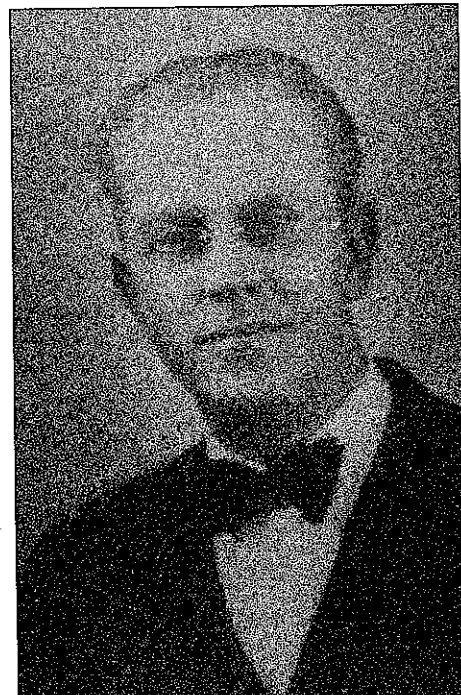
(right) Drying sods of peat in Drenthe.
(below) Sawmill in Missaukee County.





(left) Woods trail, Missaukee County. (right) Country road, Missaukee County. (below) Country road in Drenthe.





In 1919 Harry Bultema was deposed from First Christian Reformed Church in Muskegon, Michigan. In 1929 M. R. De Haan and A. H. Waalkes of Grand Rapids were deposed from the Reformed Church in America, and John E. Bennink's deposition from a Muskegon Reformed church soon followed.

Bultema is well remembered in CRC circles as the minister who organized Berean Church, and M. R. De Haan is recalled in RCA circles as the minister who started Calvary Udenominational Church. Albert Waalkes disappeared from the Calvinistic consciousness when he died in 1932, shortly after leaving Garfield Park Reformed Church (Grand Rapids) to organize the Church of the Open Door. Bennink, the deposed minister of Unity Reformed Church in Muskegon, organized the Bethel Gospel Tabernacle, which went bankrupt in 1932, and because

he never regained a place in the ministry, Bennink was soon forgotten.

Few members of either RCA or CRC churches recall or realize that these men worked together and espoused a common desire to present the Dutch Reformed community with a dispensationalist understanding of God's grace and the hope of his coming glory.

Bultema enjoyed a long and well-sustained pastoral and radio ministry in Muskegon until his death in 1952. M. R. De Haan went on to establish not only a large church but also the "Radio Bible Class," which became the basis for "The Day of Discovery," currently televised from Florida.

These four Reformed clergymen united their efforts in *Grace and Glory*, a thirty-two-page monthly magazine issued from January 1929 through 1930. Bennink was editor. Associate editors were Bultema, De Haan, and Waalkes. Their intention was to enrich orthodoxy, but they became increasingly controversial because their dispensational fundamentalistic positions were based on their use of the *Scofield Reference Bible*. Their preaching became increasingly adversarial, with diatribes against denominationalism and assertions of the singular validity of premillenarian views.

This may be an appropriate time to look back at what may be called "the grace and glory days" and to review what transpired in the Dutch Reformed communities of western Michigan two and three generations ago. In 1920

*The author of this article, Dr. Thomas Boslooper, lived through much of the history here presented. He was baptized in Third Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1924, and made his confession of faith and commitment to the ministry at Calvary Church in response to M. R. De Haan's ministry in 1936. He graduated from the preseminary program at Calvin College, rejoined the Reformed Church of America in 1944, and completed his theological training at Hope College and Western Theological Seminary in 1947. In 1954 he received his doctoral degree in New Testament studies from Columbia University. From his ordination in 1947 until his retirement in 1987 he served the Reformed Church in America. He is the author of many articles and reviews and several books. This article is a condensation of his book *Grace and Glory Days*, which can be obtained by writing Woodswalker Books, Box 237, Clearwater, Florida 34617.



by Thomas Boslooper*

Grace and Glory Days

Muskegon's newspapers declared that every Dutch church in western Michigan was affected by the stir which Bultema caused, and in 1929 the press in Grand Rapids was full of De Haan stories. Bultema and De Haan, along with Waalkes and Bennink, were the subjects of table talk and the cause of controversy in scores of Dutch Calvinist homes.

The degree of acrimony generated by reaction to these men is symbolized by Bultema's wry comment that there were parents who would rather see their children go to the movies than to hear Bultema. The recollections of an elderly Christian Reformed layman reflects the emotional character of the dispute. "When the parents of my best and closest childhood friend decided to go to Bultema's church," he recalls, "I never saw him again. I never knew what became of him. I have no idea where he is. For years I have grieved over this loss."



Harry Bultema

In 1901, at the age of seventeen, Harry Bultema came from the Netherlands to study at Calvin College. Prior to graduation he joined his close friend W. B. Eerdmans in publishing the first issue of *Chimes*. His lifelong practice of reading a book each day stems from this period. Before entering his first pastorate in Peoria, Iowa, he married Dena Kuiper, the sister of

H. J., who succeeded Henry Beets as *Banner* editor in 1929. Bultema quickly gained recognition as an excellent preacher who provided effective leadership in the Iowa classis.

In Muskegon he continued not only to read but also to write, and by April 1917, Eerdmans, who had become a publisher, printed Bultema's *Maranatha*, a four-hundred-page Dutch-language tome which advocated premillennialism. The book was a response to what Bultema felt was lacking in Calvinistic congregations—Christian hope—and so he focused on the blessed hope of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Bultema's premillennial interpretation was widely and warmly received by clergy and laity alike, but at Synod 1918 Bultema found himself on the agenda. Four overtures, from Classes Zeeland, Holland, Orange City, and Sioux City, had come to synod. Herman Hoeksema presented the case which condemned Bultema's book. Although a committee met with Bultema, he himself was not allowed to address synod.

Synod viewed *Maranatha* as contradicting the prevailing biblical interpretation that Israel and the church formed a unity and that the church is one from the time of creation until the time of Christ's Second Coming. For Bultema, Christ was *King* of Israel and *Head* of the church. According to Christian Reformed confessions, Christ was to be thought of as King of Israel and King of the church. Fundamentally, the struggle between Bultema and synod was over the question of whether confessions serve to

interpret Scripture (synod's view) or whether Scripture serves to interpret the confessions (Bultema's view). Bultema's consistory was instructed to correct its minister.

Meanwhile, since no Christian Reformed publication would carry any of Bultema's comments on the controversy, he wrote and published *De Bereer* twice monthly with support from businessmen in Holland, Zeeland, and Muskegon.

Bultema's church, the largest in Muskegon, and one of three huge CRC congregations, was filled three times every Sunday with 1300 people. Because his congregation supported him and his consistory refused to act on synod's recommendation, Classes Muskegon, Grand Rapids West, and Holland met on December 19, 1919, and then unanimously deposed Bultema and his entire consistory from the denomination.

By this time about forty families of First CRC, Muskegon, sided with the denomination, against Bultema, and since neither Bultema, his consistory, nor the rest of the congregation would remove themselves from the church facilities, the resolution of the question "To whom does the building belong?" became paramount. The question was not answered until, following a series of court hearings and appearances, the Michigan Supreme Court rendered a decision on March 31, 1921, whereby the property was to remain with the denomination.

On April 4, 1921, the 260 families of "the cast-out congregation" made plans for a new building and parsonage. During the next four days members of the congregation built a "tabernacle" seating one thousand persons. This was used until the new Berean Church was occupied on November 13, 1921.

The Berean Church was known for its outreach into the community, for its music, and for its zealous missionary activity both at home and abroad. Bultema, who sought to evangelize both Jews and Gentiles, was accustomed to overflowing pews.



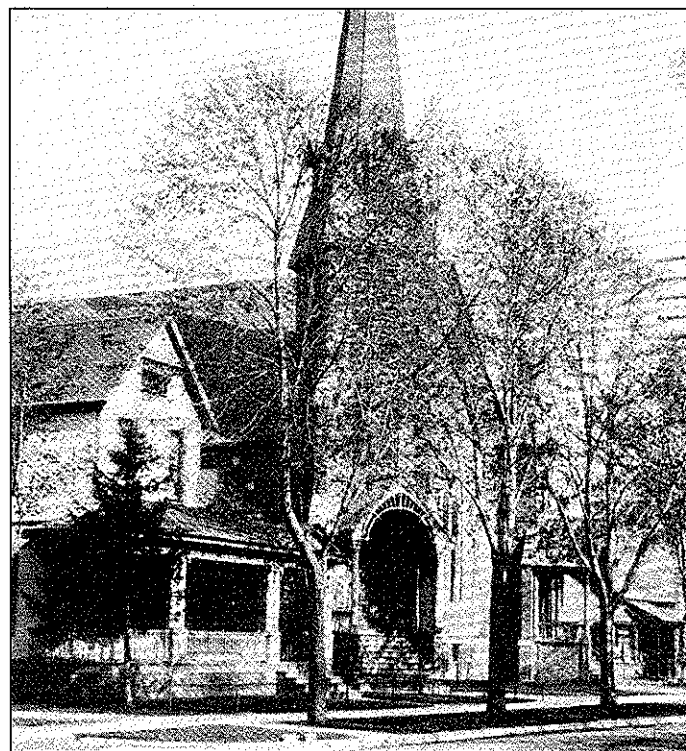
Martin R. De Haan

M. R. De Haan was born in 1891 in Zeeland, Michigan. He attended Hope College, and in 1914 graduated from the Abraham Lincoln Medical School at the University of Illinois as class valedictorian. He married Priscilla Ven Huizen and began his medical practice in Byron Center, Michigan.

He gained recognition as an outstanding physician and surgeon but was also known for his excessive drinking. In 1921 De Haan suffered a cut and subsequent blood poisoning, which nearly caused his death. From his Blodgett

Hospital "deathbed," he cried to the Lord for healing and pledged to serve the Lord for the rest of his life. After his recovery De Haan sold his medical practice and home for \$10,000. He put his drinking behind him and enrolled in Holland's Western Theological Seminary, planning to support his wife and four children with a part-time medical practice.

Upon graduating from seminary in May 1925, he was called to Calvary Reformed Church in Grand Rapids. Under his ministry the church not only prospered; it



(above) First Christian Reformed Church Muskegon, Michigan; Harry Bultema, Pastor, 1916-1919. (across) The Tabernacle, used by Berean congregation, April 1921 to November 1921.

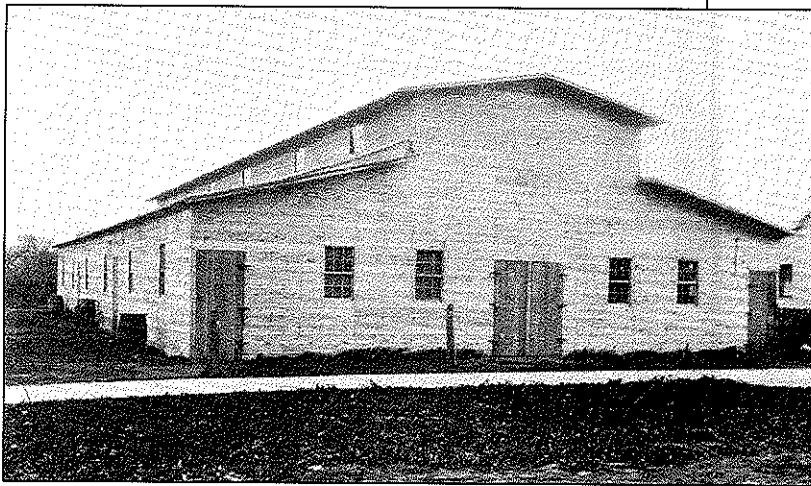
exploded. Dedicated in 1924 with a sanctuary seating six hundred, Calvary was expanded to seat fourteen hundred during De Haan's pastorate.

De Haan's evangelistic preaching, however, was perceived to be in conflict with the doctrinal standards of the Reformed Church in America. On January 25, 1929, the consistory of Calvary Reformed Church asked a classical committee to discuss the troubled relationship caused by "doctrinal differences" between Calvary Reformed Church and its denominational officers.

At the February 26 meeting of classis, John A. Dykstra of Central Reformed Church reported that a dispensational division of Scripture had led Calvary's consistory

to hold that infant baptism is not in accordance with Holy Writ. That stirred the classis into action, but De Haan had moved beyond the governing body's reach. On February 26, 1929, the very day on which the committee of classis made its report, he organized what was to become Calvary Undenominational Church, and on March 6 his newly formed congregation gathered at the Orpheum Theater on lower Monroe Avenue.

On the following Sunday De Haan was installed into his new ministry by Rev. Harry Bultema of Muskegon.



Both morning and evening services filled the 1100-seat theater to capacity. Of his topic for the evening—"Owls, Bats, and Vultures"—*The Christian Intelligencer* reported, "It is not probable that this was a strictly ornithological discourse."

Classis convened on March 14, and a series of six charges, including being "un-Reformed in doctrine," were brought against De Haan by several unnamed members of classis. De Haan did not attend the meeting. Another session of classis was held on April 2. Again De Haan did not attend, but classis took action at that meeting to depose him from the ministry of the Reformed Church in America.

The Calvary Reformed congregation was devastated. Though it retained fewer than one hundred persons, the church owed \$75,000 to the bank and was obligated to other sources for nearly \$20,000. De Haan was condemned by classis—"for [an] unscrupulousness [which] so far as we know, [is] without parallel in the history of the church." De Haan himself had reported that prior to his deposition he and the consistory had offered to assume the entire debt and pay it off if the classis would allow them to continue the ministry at Calvary Reformed Church, more or less agreeing to disagree on certain doctrinal issues. Classis' decision to depose De Haan left four

of his successors with a debt which was not paid off until the ministry of George Douma in the early 1950s.

When De Haan had to locate new quarters, he and his followers purchased the old elementary school on Michigan Street just west of College Avenue for \$12,500. Within five months they constructed a new \$120,000 auditorium attached to the grammar school. The building was soon occupied by a Sunday school of one thousand. Congregations of two thousand filled the auditorium twice each Lord's Day.

Services at the new structure began on January 26, 1930, and the dedicatory services featured the participation of Harry Bultema and John Bennink from Muskegon and J. C. O'Hair from Chicago. The organist, Leonard Greenway, a student at Western Seminary, played dedicatory recitals. Within a year the church supported eleven missionaries, and in the early 1930s De Haan's worship services were on the radio for eight hours each Sunday. Families from Reformed churches in Zeeland, Holland, Coopersville, and surrounding communities began to attend Calvary Undenominational Church. De Haan's influence was described as being like tentacles that seized hold of the Dutch communities

throughout western Michigan.



Albert H. Waalkes

Albert H. Waalkes was born in 1889 in German Valley, Illinois, and he graduated from Western Seminary in 1916. While at Western he met and married Grace Prins, organist of First Reformed Church in Holland. After serving the Reformed church in Hagerman, New York, Waalkes went to Garfield Park Reformed Church in Grand Rapids in 1927. He was soon alarmed by the "formality" and "liberalism" in Reformed circles—bazaars and suppers, movies and dancing, smoking and drinking. He was admired for his preaching on the importance of relying on the Holy Spirit and for being an outstanding teacher and motivational speaker.

In addition, Waalkes came to be known in Classis Grand Rapids as a premillenarian who questioned the validity of infant baptism. In the same 1929 meeting which inquired into De Haan's status, the RCA called Waalkes to account for his view of infant baptism. He held up a Bible before the assembly and asked for someone in classis to locate one verse that clearly stated the

basis for infant baptism. No one responded. Waalkes indicated a willingness to practice infant baptism based on the Reformed tradition, but he stated that he did not believe the practice was biblically based. Classis insisted that he accept the doctrine as biblical. That, Waalkes said, he could not do, and he was suspended.

Soon thereafter he left Garfield Park Reformed Church, taking twenty-six families with him. His Church of the Open Door found its first permanent quarters above the Jurgens and Holtvluwer Department Store on Grandville Avenue, but his own ministry was short-lived. He was forty-three when he died from blood poisoning in 1932, the result of a knife wound incurred while cleaning fish. The poisoning was complicated by strep throat and lock-jaw. Funeral services were conducted by Martin R. De Haan at Calvary Undenominational Church. But the Church of the Open Door survived and now occupies quarters in Wyoming, Michigan.



John E. Bennink

Word had it that John Bennink was trying to do in Muskegon's Unity Reformed Church what De Haan had done in Grand Rapids, and Bennink was also known to associate with Harry Bultema. Bennink had grown up in Second Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, had attended Hope College, where he was president of the Oratorical Association, and had completed Western Seminary in 1915. With his new bride, Everdene Van Hazel, Bennink took the challenge of organizing Immanuel Reformed Church in Chicago. Thereafter, he served churches in New York State, where for one term he was president of the Particular Synod of Albany.

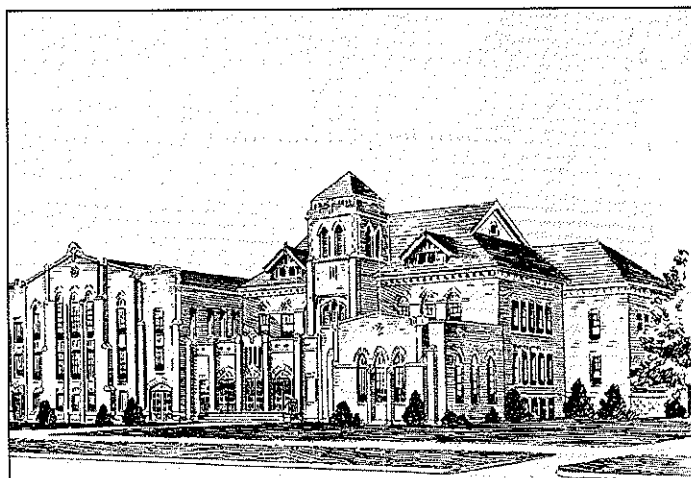
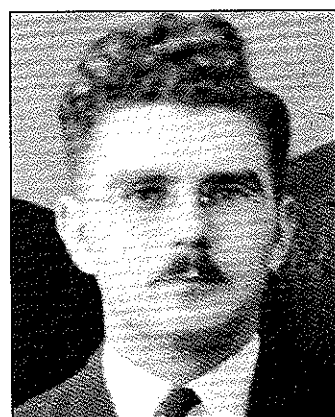
When John A. Dykstra was called from Catskill, New York, to Central Reformed in Grand Rapids, Bennink was called to the Catskill church, where he thoroughly renovated the church, put the church on a budget basis, and took on the support of a foreign missionary. Under his strong evangelistic preaching, attendance for Sunday-evening services doubled.

In December of 1925 Bennink became minister of Unity Reformed Church in Muskegon. There he completed the building of the sanctuary begun by his predecessor, erected a new parsonage, and inspired his congregation to make a substantial increase in attendance at prayer meetings. Classis Muskegon, however, based on complaints from members of Unity Reformed Church, appointed an investigatory committee in the fall of 1929 to examine Bennink's teaching about baptism. At the 1930 meetings

of classis, actions were taken which resulted in his deposition.

Bennink was charged with questioning infant baptism, with espousing premillenarianism, and with criticism of the Board of Foreign Missions of the RCA. He did not ingratiate himself with his peers by making public statements to the effect that if Christ himself would appear at some of the Reformed churches, the clergy would not recognize him. It was discovered, too, that he had joined M. R. De Haan on March 6, 1929, to assist in organizing the Grand Rapids pastor's undenominational church.

Even before classis acted against him, Bennink took sixty families out of Unity Reformed and met with them in Bultema's old "tabernacle" while awaiting the completion of his new Bethel Gospel Tabernacle. Bennink then petitioned to get himself transferred by Classis Muskegon to this



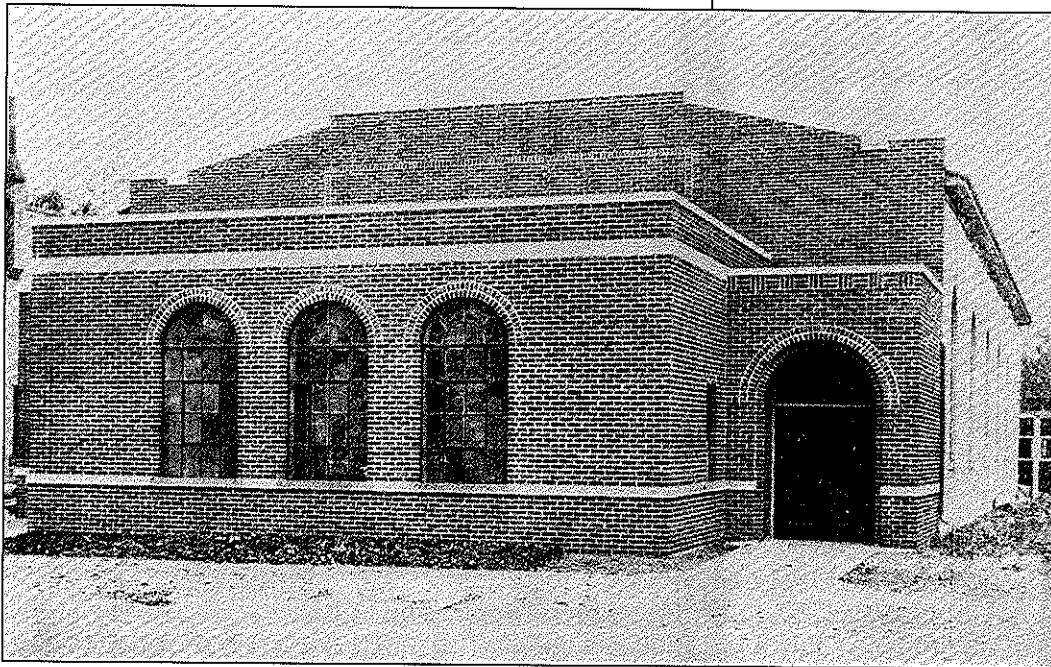
(above, top) Leonard Greenway. (above) Calvary Undenominational Church. (across) Bethel Gospel Tabernacle.

new ministry, but instead classis deposed him. Eventually, at the spring session of Classis Muskegon in 1932, that action was finalized, but the vote was extraordinarily curious because both the stated clerk, Henry Schipper, and China missionary Henry Beltman voted to acquit Bennink of all charges.

Within a very short time Bennink's Bethel Gospel Tabernacle went bankrupt. His second attempt, this time with the Church of the Open Door, also failed. That same

year one of his parents and both of his wife's parents died, and personal problems overwhelmed him. With his two sons he moved to Grand Rapids, where he lived in the Van Hazel family home at 1049 Hermitage (across from Dennis Avenue Christian Reformed Church). Everdene sought a medical evaluation in Chicago from her brother, Dr. Willard Van Hazel, and within a short time she was taken to Pine Rest Psychiatric Hospital, where she spent the remaining twenty-six years of her life.

church. Most of them returned to Reformed churches. Bultema's espousal of "dry baptism" was probably influenced by his relationship with J. C. O'Hair of Chicago, who was renowned for the same interpretation. On a Sunday when De Haan was away, his guest replacement, J. C. O'Hair, preached "dry baptism" so convincingly that by the time De Haan returned, his baptistry had been boarded up. De Haan resented the intrusive action and broke off relations with both O'Hair and Bultema and clashed with members of his board.



Bultema continued a strong ministry until his death in 1952. The strain of his controversial ministry, along with raising seven children, proved to be very difficult for his wife, Dena. She was hospitalized at Pine Rest on three occasions but recovered to outlive her husband by twenty-five years. One of Bultema's sons, Daniel, became a leader in Grace Fellowship, which developed from the Berean ministry.

Meanwhile De Haan's autocratic behavior led to the resignation of his long-time associate and song leader John Smits. Personal

John E. Bennink worked for the WPA and for two different furniture companies in Grand Rapids. He expressed deep repentance for his disruptive activities in Unity Reformed Church, and while seeking forgiveness, he tried to reenter the ministry. After prolonged correspondence with Classis Muskegon and the consistory of Unity Reformed Church, Bennink received no word of forgiveness. His request to join the Central Reformed congregation in Grand Rapids went unanswered. He died in 1957.

Bultema and De Haan

Meanwhile, after both Waalkes and Bennink had sunk into oblivion, Bultema and De Haan continued to have dynamic but controversial ministries. Beginning in 1933, Bultema preached his opposition to both infant baptism and baptism by immersion. He espoused what is called "one baptism"—the baptism of the Spirit. On the Sunday he first declared this belief, one hundred families left his

estrangements also developed between the pastor and other intimate associates—including members of his governing board and the publisher Louis Kregel. In 1938 disputes regarding the board's authority resulted in legal action against De Haan. Thus, on a May Sunday morning in 1938, with radio time remaining, he unexpectedly announced his resignation and walked out. Most of the people followed him out the door, and for several Sundays they met at the Ladies Literary Club. Soon De Haan informed them that he had no intention of becoming their pastor. Thus abandoned, the group organized as The Calvary Gospel Center. De Haan then began the ministry for which he was perfectly suited—"The Radio Bible Class." For many years and until his death in 1965 a national audience considered him a Bible teacher without peer.

The editors of *Grace and Glory* were convinced that they were deposed from Reformed denominations because they were premillenarians. And in fact the

CRC's *The Banner* insisted that a premillenarian could not be Reformed. Ironically, a principal charge against De Haan was his reluctance to espouse infant baptism, and yet, from its inception, Calvary Church always accepted members who had been baptized elsewhere in infancy. One of De Haan's RCA peers believed that if the right men had talked with De Haan in the right way, he could have been persuaded to reverse his stand against infant baptism. The crux of the conflict, then, was eschatology—the doctrine of Christ's Second Coming.



John and Everdene Bennink.

The CRC battle with Bultema was fought primarily in *The Banner*, while in the RCA Professor Albertus Pieters of Western Seminary traveled extensively, giving lectures on eschatology. Some of his principal writings on Revelation and baptism date from 1929. Pieters lectured for the Ministerial Association of the Christian Reformed Church in 1938 to critique the *Scofield Reference Bible* and the

millennial problem. His book *The Lamb, the Woman, and the Dragon* was published in 1937 and republished by Eerdmans in 1953 as *The Revelation of St. John*. Pieters, however, rarely referred to Bultema, De Haan, Waalkes, or Bennink, choosing instead to consider issues rather than persons. On the Western Seminary campus, discussion of either the issues or the individuals was off limits.

By the process of deposition the CRC and the RCA ejected four dispensationalist Calvinists. No doubt both denominations believed that they had correctly removed premillenarian divisiveness from their communities. The cost, however, was great, as both churches were left without a well-defined and popularized eschatology, and both churches also lost talented and dedicated men.

Resources

Conversations and/or correspondence with Paul W. Bennink, June De Haan Boone, Daniel Bultema, L. C. Dalman, Jerome De Jong, George Douma, John A. De Kruyter, Helen Bultema Fisher, Gloria Bultema Fowler, Aletta Bultema Hiddema, Herman Hoffman, Harold Huyser, Robert Kregel, Howard Maatman, M. Eugene Osterhaven, Harriet Baker Prins, Abraham Rynbrandt, James Schut, Lewis Smedes, Bertha Dagers Sullivan, Cornelius Vander Naald, Marian Vander Jagt Van Eck, Marian Waalkes Veltman and Peter Veltman, T. Phillip Waalkes, Harold Workman.

Memories of acquaintances of M. R. De Haan and John Smits.

The Archives of Western Theological Seminary.

The Archives of Calvin College and Seminary.

Records at the Kent County Court House, Grand Rapids.

Grand Rapids Public Library.

The correspondence of John E. Bennink.

File of press clippings on M. R. De Haan provided by Robert Kregel.

File of press clippings on H. Bultema provided by Daniel Bultema.

Historical Directory of the Reformed Church in America, Peter Vandenberge. W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978.

Grace and Glory issues provided by Paul W. Bennink and Daniel Bultema.

Calvary Church—60th Anniversary, 1929-1989.

Valiant for the Truth, Harry Bultema, Grace Publications, Inc., 1986.

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Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of Berean Church, Muskegon, Michigan, 1921-1946.

RAISED IN ZEELAND 1915-1929

“As Ever in My Great Taskmaster’s Eye”

by Lester De Koster*



John Milton wrote the famous line quoted above in a sonnet devoted to arriving at his twenty-first birthday. He might have been writing about my childhood in Zeeland.

I recall the distinguished and eccentric Meindert De Jong, author of award-winning children’s stories, saying that he achieved almost total recall of his childhood in the Netherlands while working over his youth

as background for his first stories. For me it’s not become that, but both the face and the feel of growing up in Zeeland come in sometimes vivid scraps. They probably would congeal if pursued long enough.

What *was* it like, growing up in Zeeland *circa* World War I and its aftermath, up to the fearfully quiet day when word got around that the banks had shut their doors and lifetime savings were in jeopardy? A pall was in the air, and at home, on that “black” day. Strange contrast to my dim recollections of the whistles blowing and church bells ringing at eleven o’clock on November 11, 1918. What did both mean, one wondered, *really*? And has one ever found out?

Zeeland had been founded in 1849 by the Johannes Vande Luyster group, who followed the Van Raalte

Celery farming in Zeeland, Michigan.

1847 immigration. They were called the “Forty-niners,” and they settled both Vriesland and Zeeland. My mother used to tell how her mother, brought over as a child in 1849, remembered the woods ringing with Dutch Psalms, as the settlers ended a hard day’s labor by raising resounding praise to God as evening fell. So, too, in my youth, on warm summer evenings with church windows open, the Psalm-singing congregations could be heard fitfully on the wind from blocks away, heaven drawn to earth or earth risen to heaven on swelling torrents of haunting sound. My mother, whose persistent struggle with pernicious anemia reduced our church-going and kept me on short tether, had her favorites,

*The familiar initials “LDK,” fixed in the collective memory of *Banner* readers and early subscribers to the *Reformed Journal*, carry, like “R.B.” and “B.K.,” the freight of an established identity. Les De Koster, who offers here his recollections of being raised in Zeeland, Michigan, has written many books and many more editorials over the past fifty years. But he has until now penned little autobiography. Here is his beginning.

as did everyone, it appeared. To want more than the Psalter, then, for setting words upon the lips in moments of adoration and plea was unthinkable—and still, I think, probably by heritage, should be.

I do not know how many people lived in Zeeland during the period I have chosen to recall, but I do know that when I got my first teaching appointment, to Grand Rapids South High School, in 1937, there were more students under that one roof than citizens I grew up with. And rather a different breed, too, as I learned to my shocked surprise by foolishly leaving a watch and then some pens and the like unattended on my classroom desk. Yes, Zeeland had its own defects, but most families never locked their doors. A favorite story at our house was about one neighbor who was aroused in the night by an intruder pushing open his bedroom door. The angry householder leaped out of bed and shoved with all his might to shut the door, the intruder plaintively shouting, in Dutch, "Ouch, ouch . . . my foot! My foot!" What happened next was lost in laughter.

There were four of us: my father, one-time clothing salesman, then office manager successively for Pere Marquette Railway and Consumers Power Company, and for several terms elected city clerk; my mother, courageously enduring victim of her incurable anemia, whose every hour at housework had to be matched by an hour on her favorite couch; my brother, nine years older than I, who left school early and worked at various jobs in the town, most happily in the chick hatcheries common at the time. Of relatives we had few and saw very little. If there were family reunions, we never attended them. Company was restricted to a few close friends, the commonest

evening visits given over to an ongoing checkers tourney between father and friend while the ladies crocheted and talked—and I soon drifted off to sleep. My skill at the game never matured enough to interest my father much in playing with me, plead as I would.



SOME RANDOM RECOLLECTIONS

Aromas

One might, I guess, compose a little account like this in terms of olfactory remembrances: "The Blessed Scents of Childhood." Home-baked bread, not at our house but at a friend's. Thick slices fulfilling the promise of the oven aroma, bathed in creamery butter (was there any other kind?) and then topped with soft, sticky peanut butter, and a glass of cold milk undenatured of the cream huddled at the top of the glass bottle and waiting to be shaken into the rest. Ahh . . .

One of the houses we lived in was heated by steam radiators. The boiler in the basement would sometimes display a shimmering sea of anthracite coal, just right, my father would opine, for toasting. Then great slices of white bread would give rise to indescribable saviors while being dangled over the glowing coals in a wire contraption only father could maneuver. How lean a substitute is the product of an electric convenience. Ahh . . . again.

The chick hatcheries blanketed the town, under certain atmospheric conditions in the fall and winter, with the gas given off by anthracite coal, not unlike, I imagine, what the coke ovens once did to steel towns. I rather liked it, as I am still intrigued by the disappearing Gary, Indiana, blast furnaces. We all know how some whiff, come upon unawares, will recall scenes long forgotten. There was, happily enough in its ways, a time before the EPA.

The fast-disappearing rite of burning leaves in the fall became our after-school enthusiasm for a few weeks. No need to be required to rake the lawn. The game was to make "smoke houses" by lighting leaf fires and then throwing rakefuls on any flames that broke out, until cars driving by had to slow down for the acrid haze. Then came time for a few potatoes to be tossed into the heart of the fire for baking, "like the Indians did it." And, finally, supper, with butter and salt applied to the tuber's flesh, white under the coal-black skin. I won't say it again. . . . Alas, all now lost to fun-hating local ordinances.

One might go on: there was the slightly stale but somehow appropriately unique odor of Zeeland First Christian Reformed Church on Sunday mornings, the smell of a building unused for the week save for cleaning and polishing. And, ah, how

cigar and pipe smoke was thick about our house in the evenings. Yes, one might attempt an olfactory history.

Customs

The spread of the horseless carriage among common folk slightly antedated my birth in Zeeland. One grocery man some years later was persuaded to exchange his horse and

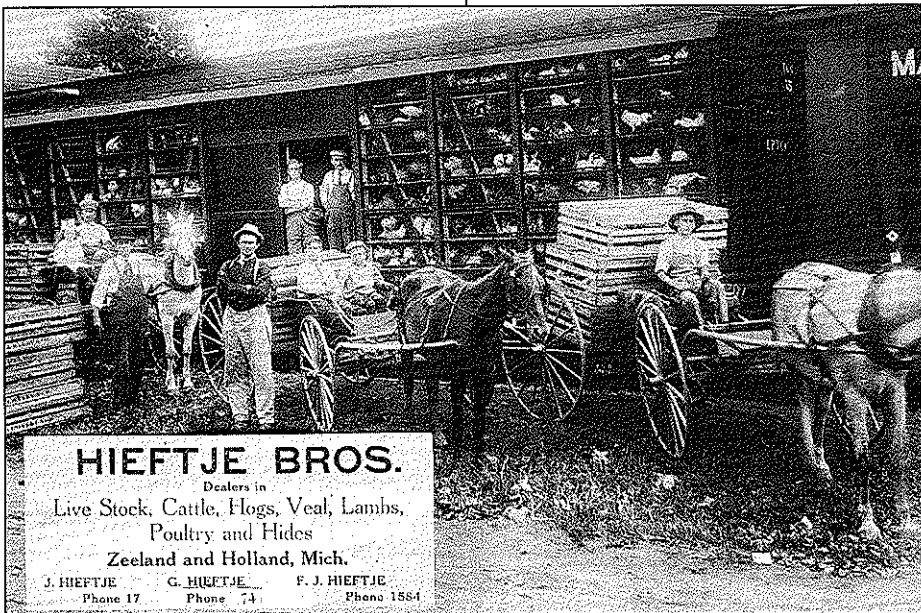
the steel-shod wooden runners, clinging to the sleigh box. It amused some of the drivers to step up the pace once we were firmly footed, and they would go too fast for us to get off until out of a town half a mile or so. Then we'd try to hitch a ride back.

The forty-mile trip to Grand Rapids, most exceptional when I was

tried to work quietly, fearful that either the victim might see or that our parents might materialize out of the darkness. We tried being grownup enough to snatch grapes, or melons, or whatever, too. St. Augustine wondered, I found out much later, what was the attraction in snitching; was it the pears, Augustine asked, or the lure of the mischief? Nothing ever, he recalled in his *Confessions*, tasted all that good. That was my experience, too, though none of the partners in crime ever let on to that. But there was, in Zeeland, the matter of conscience. . . .

We did a lot of sledding on hilly streets impassable to cars, carefully keeping out of the way of iron-shod runners on huge, homemade bobsleds, which came thundering down at frightening speed. And, finally, time inexorably running out, it was home to something hot and sweet and a warm, flannel-sheeted bed in a frigid room.

Electricity was carefully rationed at our house. Lights were either in justifiable use or else turned off. On winter evenings, father and brother still at work and no lamps lit, the street light in front casting shadows in the living room, mother would recite from her favorite poets, usually Whittier and Longfellow, to wile away the time until supper. As a college sophomore, confirmed in the Greeks' use of the name (half-baked), I came to disdain Longfellow as "didactic" (a teacher)—and then finally matured enough to disdain my own disdain. (It takes a while to unlearn "learning.") You may recall Longfellow's line about the evening hour: "The day is done, and darkness falls from the wings of night, as a feather is wafted downward from an eagle in its flight." Aha, said I one time, the soft shadows still in my memory, and how did he know that an eagle dropped a feather just at



(across) Henry W. Longfellow, 1879.
(above) Hieftje Brothers, livestock dealers.

wagon for a Ford delivery truck with an open box. In good weather and bad, while some employee drove the vehicle, the owner sat with door open and one foot on the running board, ready for hasty exit if . . . who knows what might happen? Many cars went up on blocks at first, come cold weather; tires were removed and hung in the garage. Unplowed streets fell into ruts made by hardier drivers; once caught in one of them, it was touch and go to escape or to make the corners. Farmers came in by sleigh, bundled in great fur coats, hats, and mittens, singing out in steaming syllables, "Get up, there, Molly." We'd try to catch a ride on

very young and made only with well-to-do friends, was measured in flat tires; turnouts on the dirt roads provided for changing them every few miles or so. I early got the notion that cars needed "gas" and "gasoline" both, for fuel. As we boarded the open touring car, I would query the driver, who let me sit with him, "Enough gas?" Patiently, "O yes, plenty!" Then, "Enough gasoline?" Equally patiently, reaching for the starter, "O yes, lots!" We made it.

Halloween was special, of course. "Big" people overturned outhouses and somehow got buggies onto shed roofs. For us it was soap cautiously applied to windows of people we liked, wax for others, not many of either. Trembling all the time, we

twilight? The query was followed by a little disquisition on what I later learned was figure of speech. It became a bit of a game for a while. Each time that poem was recited, I would clear my throat to say something like, "But how . . .?" One remembers.

All told, these customs were probably parallel or akin to ones remembered of all small-town childhoods. And how many more there were. But Zeeland wasn't all that different, I suppose.

The Taskmaster

If one recollection recurs repeatedly, it is the moral or ethical or religious ambiance of my upbringing, as characteristic of the town at large as of its homes, at least of ours.

Some of the title pages of old books are created by woodcuts with a triangle engraved at the top. Inside the triangle is an eye. The symbolism is obvious: the Trinity has an eye on you.

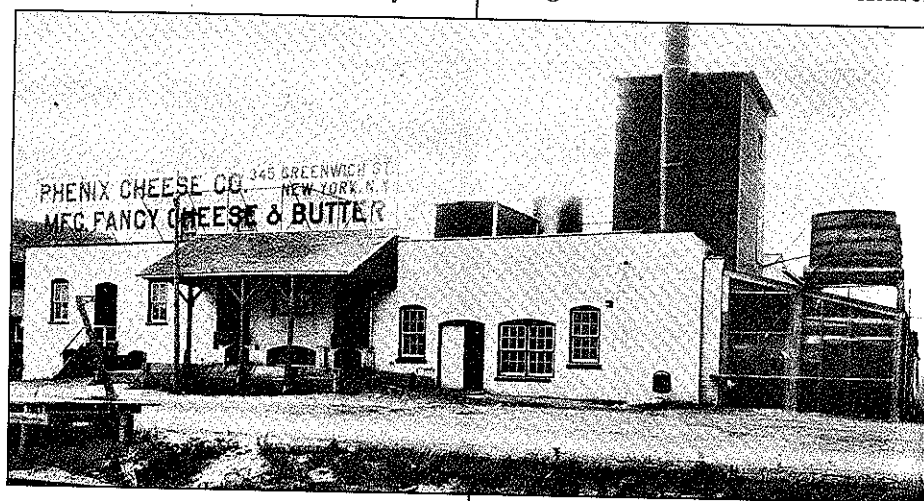
In Zeeland God had just that. It, too, was certainly not unique to my experience or my home town, but no account of growing up in Zeeland could omit it.

It wasn't so much by way of instructions taken for granted. God is; God is at hand; God knows and sees all; God has very definite ideas about right behavior, which he conveys through parents, through preachers and teachers, and as it were, by the very air we breathe. Moreover, God tends to chastise wrongdoing. Merit was rarely, if ever, up to his standards. Reward came by way of exception, wholly by grace. Zeeland was not really a kind of secular monastery, where, its detractors said, the sidewalks were rolled up at night, but the influences that impinged on me partook of that atmosphere. Something of what Milton was thinking, probably, in the quotation heading this piece. We

learned long before hearing Augustine phrase it for us that "to flee God pleased was only to encounter Him displeased." And we saw, as Calvin was wont to say, that God clothed himself in the garment of his creation, ever immediately active there for our benefit and instruction.

Prayer and Bible reading at three meals a day and "Now I lay me

indeed in the twinkling stars, but much closer too. He was in prayer—in prayer in the spring for good planting and in the fall for abundant harvest; prayer for the well, for the ill, for the wayward; thanksgiving for everything; always made aware of being persistently in the presence of God, in whose hand were we and all things else. To misbehave in church



Phenix Cheese and Butter Factory, Zeeland, Michigan

down to sleep" on going to bed, church-going, catechism (with everything assigned being done in full and on time), and Sunday school were all as native to life as the seasons were. The going, the doing, the memorizing, the chastening were not so much by parental as by divine impetus. Authority in the Zeeland I knew was *in loco divinitatis*. The minister spoke for God; parents acted for him; civic officials did, or were expected to do, his bidding; laws embodied his will. All was God's, and so were we. To disobey parents was to disobey God. To be out of their sight was not to be out of his. Conscience worked overtime.

God was ever witnessing his presence in sunshine, rain, wind, and storm, through every natural, unnatural, and supernatural event. He was

or school or on our own was disobedience to him whose eye was on both the sparrow and the child. One absorbed the distinction between the serious and the gloomy, between the earnest and the anxious, between awe and timidity, between the stern and the angry. "Fear God" was indeed the "end of the matter" in a kind of reassuring way.

How else might it have been in a town where church bells rang for every service and tolled for many funerals; where quarantine notices barred the doors of the contagiously ill; where wreathes mounted the doorposts to advertise death; where the cemetery, which mother's Longfellow called "God's Acre," was often the goal of a Sunday-afternoon walk and where, as it were, the dead sauntered among the gravestones with the living, though I recall as if it were yesterday a grieving father's saying to us (in Dutch, of course)

something to the effect that "Search for them you may, but find them you cannot."

"There is no hearth, how'er well tended," said Longfellow, who knew from experience, "but there is one vacant chair." And the departure of the missing brought a casket into the living room, visitors by day and evening, a service in the church and at the graveside. "Life is real, and life is earnest, and the grave is not its goal; dust thou art, to dust returns, was not spoken of the soul"—and in Zeeland, life, death, grave, and judgment were part of the fabric borne upon the shoulders of the living. And God embraced all.

Prayer changed things. Few bulletin announcements omitted the D.V. (*Deo volente*, the Lord willing). The Dorcas ladies aid would meet, D.V., next Tuesday at two o'clock. So would just about everything else, D.V., at its, no, *His*, appointed hour. Divine election, reprobation, providence—as we came to understand them—needed no argument. The Canons of Dort were the stuff of daily life long before they came into print.

And it showed.

Probably some early settler, maybe many of them, knew that Calvin counted "order" a facet of sanctity. There was, at any rate, a veritable "rage for order" surrounding my youth. A place for everything; everything on schedule, bedtime no exception. Bells on Sunday, whistles on weekdays, set times for meals, strict rules for behavior in house and out—order, order, order. Freight engines rumbling through the town were identified each by its own guttural whistle and always checked for being on time: "That's old 77; running a little late today; sure makin' it up!" The six-day work week ("Six days *shall you labor*," as Judge Gary said to the first steel

union organizers) was standard. Even father's office vacations consisted only of a couple of summer days off to see a baseball game in Detroit or Chicago—once I saw Babe Ruth loft a ball out over the upper deck and run round the bases on his spindly legs. But otherwise, order was, with its twin—cleanliness—next to godliness—or even closer.

Religion took on what became a bitterly controversial cast when the gentle, benign, courtly Marinus Van Vessem was succeeded at Zeeland First CRC in 1927 by William Kok. Only one person asked him to stay, Van Vessem said at his farewell, and that (we learned later) was a somewhat simple man who went to no church at all. A cruel thing, 'twas said at our house, but it was time . . .

Reverend Kok was a big man of colossal energy and gifted with ability to match. He carefully crafted three sermons each Sunday, taught (as I recall) most of the catechism classes, which included written home assignments, and organized both a band and a choir for recreation. They never performed in the services, of course, but there were other occasions. Yes, he had survived a serious heart attack. I owe him, I am sure, much of my appreciation of the Reformed tradition.

When joined by William Hendriksen, who came to Third CRC also in 1927, the two pastors set out to coerce Christian school enrollment out of every family in their respective congregations. The result was great turmoil, much bitterness, and a considerable exodus of CRC families to the Reformed churches. The struggle hit home, of course, where there were children not in the local Christian school. I was one of these, who became a "public school devil" in street parlance. We returned the epi-

thet, of course, with "Christian school devil."

My father's church experience had got off to a bruising start. At age twelve he had had a bitter conflict with his father over a refusal to promise to go into the ministry. Given the choice of that or "to the woods," off he went into the logging industry, estranged thereafter from the rest of his family. I never knew how many uncles and aunts I had. And in consequence he never transformed his baptismal membership into one by confession. (This relative independence stood him in good stead when the local American Legion post undertook for a while to show wild-west movies in Zeeland and asked him to run the projection machine. There were, I gathered, growls from the consistory, but I guess that silent censure did not fit. For a while Tom Mix was a household name, and I collected his picture from ad posters.)

The local public school board was largely filled with members of the Reformed churches, the school day opened with prayer (with chapel in the high school), and Bible courses were part of the curriculum. Bibles were given at graduation (the ACLU made a fuss over it just a few years ago), and the town atheist (and boozier) was considered an amiable oddity. My parents saw no reason for allocating from their slender income school tuition for me.

Sermons poured down from the pulpit on the "sin" of having a child in the public school. These, coupled with frequent personal clashes, would bring father's fury to shouted declarations (at home) of intent to leave First CRC. Enough was too much! Always countered by mother's calm, "We were here, Neal, before 'that man' [said with a unique intonation] came; we will be here when he is gone." (She was mistak-

en; Reverend Kok conducted her funeral; and then father did leave—at once.)

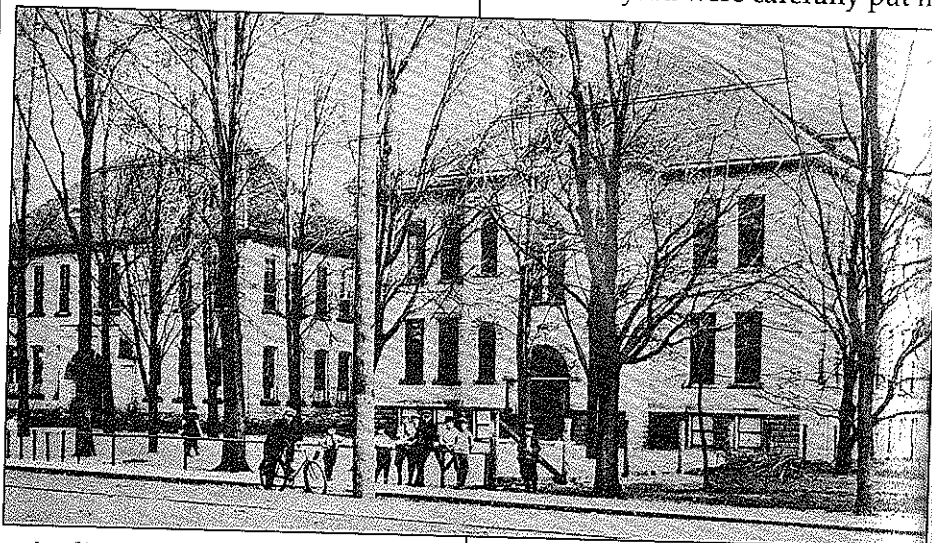
Monthly light bills were paid in person, usually at my father's Consumers Power Company office. This meant that Pastor Kok, an iron-willed despot, and father, who, though but a mildly adamant sort, was better left alone when angry, waged ongoing war. The sparks that flew at the office were sometimes over thinly veiled pulpit references to some office encounter. Religion could never be further away than the back burner at our house. Father's ire was also aroused by the elders' habit of standing to pray at the opening of each service in the pew reserved for them. "Did you see old So-and-So?" he would grumble at noontime dinner. "So crooked he can't lie straight in a roundhouse, and standing there until everybody else had sat down!" Mother might mildly wonder, "Perhaps he knows he needs it." Father would answer with a snort. One discovered early the tendency of religious convictions to breed controversy.

And there was the local doctor, a hearty, shrewd, mountain of a man who ushered babies into the world (over five thousand, he once told me with a grin) and the dying out of it with unruffled equanimity. He could tell, with laughter rippling his great belly, the funniest stories even while death hovered in the bedroom down the hall. On one such occasion he told of having to harness himself in the traces of his little cutter late one night when the snow on our unplowed country roads was too much for his mare—and the stunned surprise registered by another late wanderer, probably more than a little tipsy, at the sight. The doctor sent a bill or a basket of groceries, depending on what he found on his house-

calls, always (it was said) charging the well-to-do a little more and others a little less. Once the "doctors in Grand Rapids" warned him that without an immediate operation of some kind he would not last out the year. He came home, thought about it, declined the operation . . . and lived on another decade. "So many people praying for him," was moth-

thought unanswerable. Her response: "Just put on your rubbers." She was Frisian. Our children used to think I'd never gotten over the habit—for them: "It rained last night . . . don't forget . . ."

Memorial Day eve was devoted to "God's Acre." Family tombstones were polished, bouquets of flowers cut in the yard were carefully put in



Public school, Zeeland, Michigan

er's diagnosis—though the doctor was said to be an agnostic and never crossed the threshold of a local church. Born frail and prone to respiratory illnesses, I enjoyed more than the average share of the doctor's visits. He would listen with his stethoscope, rummage about in his bag to produce something mixed with water in a household glass—it always smelled like paregoric—and assure us that everything would be just fine, which sooner or later it was. Needless to say, my preschool ventures out of doors in winter found me swaddled (I've always liked the term) like the Christmas child in all kinds of coverings, only my nose open to the threat of chill drafts. Later mother would call, "Put on your rubbers!" Thinking myself educated beyond her poor knowledge, I would respond, "Why? Colds come from germs, not wet feet!" which I

place, mourning doves queried life with their sad refrains, and neighbors gossiped as the sun slipped away behind the evergreens. "What a heavy stone," mother used to muse over the great granite block upon the grave of her mother (dead before my birth). "What a heavy stone . . . I wonder . . ." I never asked, but I supposed she was thinking of the resurrection. Would Grandma have any trouble leaping out on that glorious day? Would God hold mother responsible?

So close did heaven bend to earth in the Zeeland of my youth, "so nigh was God to man."

The Old Country*

Impressions of The "Old" Country 1848-1940

by H. J. Brinks





Images of Holland, "the old country," which have survived among the immigrants' descendants are frequently distorted, often consisting of frozen glimpses of grim working conditions on farms, factories, or waterways. When Richard Kortenhoeven visited the Netherlands in 1976, he was surprised to see tractors and automated farm machinery in the fields of Gelderland. The lingering impressions he had gathered from his parents and uncles had fixed his assumption that horses continued to cultivate the soils of the Achterhoek. Similarly, Sadie Tamel-ing was somewhat chagrined that I could find the Netherlands attractive. Her mother had told her that young women, her mother among them, were actually harnessed to farm implements and that they spit blood

after pulling these machines. Henry Ippel's mother remembers long raw-handed days spent raking oysters from the shoals near Yerseke. Others, urban people, recall endless days in sugar, starch, and chocolate factories.

Several years ago an elderly gentleman reproached me sternly because I had written favorably of affirmative-action programs to compensate for racial injustice in the U.S.A. I had overlooked, he said, the equally deprived status of Netherlandic farmhands. They, and he too, had been treated like slaves—quartered in cold barns, cheated of promised food allotments, and worked to exhaustion for less than the wages of survival. Black slaves, he thought, had had no worse conditions than he.

The most redeeming alternative to these grim recollections resides in fond recollections of closely knit families in the old country—the proximity of grandparents, uncles, aunts,

(previous page, left) Basket hoops. (previous page, right) Mr. and Mrs. A. Foppen-Klaasen. (above) Old fishermen.

and village companions. Because these links were so precious, they inspired considerable correspondence between old- and new-world families, and these letters constitute an important source for examining the image of the Netherlands in the Dutch-American community.

In common American usage, "old country" usually denotes an immigrant's land of birth or ancestry, but "old" can also embody a more literal meaning, such as the country of the old folks. The correspondence examined for this article highlights this second and more literal meaning because letters written from all parts of the Netherlands reported more steadily on the experiences of the aged—their ailments, their progressive diminution of powers, and

*In 1989 this article was presented in Middleburg, the Netherlands, at the Netherlands-American studies Association conference.

death—than on the prospects of youthful expectation.

These general characteristics cannot be very surprising. That the immigrants came largely from the younger ranks of the Old World's populace is well known, and, therefore, for at least one generation, the immigrants would have fewer deaths to report. Furthermore, because the older members of most families remained in Holland, the burden of reporting the deaths of grandparents and parents, along with the older generation's siblings, fell to those who remained behind. But the obituaries also extended into the church, village, and region when the demise of local farm folk, shopkeepers, and clergy enlarged the agenda of gloom.

By contrast, Dutch-American towns and neighborhoods attracted a varied populace originating from a mixture of Netherlandic villages, cities, and provinces. Although these Dutch-Americans surely died, their passing elicited little comment in correspondence bound for Europe because letter writers in America assumed that their kinfolk and friends in Holland would have no interest in their American neighbors, who, for the most part, were strangers to the folks left in the old country.

The prominence of obituarial information in the correspondence coming from the Netherlands was partly a function of generational communication patterns. Naturally enough, correspondence came most regularly from the immigrants' siblings and parents or their uncles and aunts. And when these generations passed on, the letters either stopped or became exceedingly infrequent. Consequently, the rising generation of nephews and nieces—those who were gaining education and employment, raising families and building estates in Holland—did not write

often.¹ So information about their hopes and opportunities did not normally cross the Atlantic. Often then, the final word from the old country was that the last regular correspondent had died. And on such occasions the reporters could be strangers who were obliged to introduce themselves while conveying condolences. B. de Haan's 1892 report exemplifies the pattern. He wrote, "You may be wondering who the writer of this letter is. And since you don't know me, I will tell you that I am the husband of Jantje Steenberg [the granddaughter of the deceased]. Perhaps you will recognize me better as the son of Tjeerd de Haan, who died a year ago. My mother still lives."²

It is incontestable that these correspondents provided the immigrants with badly distorted views of daily life in Holland. But however unrepresentative it may have been, much of the news from home fringed the borders of Holland in black. The country was, insofar as the letters revealed it, the land of the aged, for whom frailty and death loomed larger than life—a view not unlike F. Scott Fitzgerald's description of Vienna, a city "old with death."³

The evidence for this study can be summarized rather simply. An examination of one hundred collections of letters written between 1848 and 1940 reveals that 74 percent of these reported at least one death, and in the combined total of 247 letters, 138 brought news of death. Thus, over half (55.9%) of the letters from Holland told of at least one death; only fourteen of these can be described primarily as death notices. These 138 letters reported a total of 260 deaths, with 3 letters recording the deaths of 8 persons.⁴ Deaths from disasters such as floods, shipwreck, and epidemics were not figured into the total number of 260 deaths. In 44 let-

ters reports of death were combined with news of serious ailments; another 22 letters told of folk for whom death was an imminent prospect. So a total of 160 letters (64%) conveyed the gloom of death or its impending reality.⁵

Of the 61 letters reporting multiple deaths, the 1888 missive from J. Potappel of Colijnsplaat is illustrative. "At present," he wrote, "many here are sick, and a number have died during the past month. Maria vande lange Leune at seventeen years of age and Dingeman van Stelle at seventy-seven years. He was well and then suddenly dead. So God surprised him. . . . Also Nina Block, who was buried on the same day as van Stelle. And then Iman Otten and Maria Verhulst, a twenty-five-year-old midwife; also Kees Frederikse. Then a daughter of Kees de Vos van Kats, just sixteen years old. And just this morning Tante de Moor was buried. Thus, as you can see, the angel of death has been walking through our village. So things continue to go as they will continue to go until the end of time."⁶

Still, the letters reporting death and disease were not freighted heavily with gloom. Instead, death, like the weather, seemed to constitute the inevitable stuff of daily life. Furthermore, the reports were not frequently embellished with details of suffering or of life's final pangs. They touched upon little more than the highlights of local affairs. Thus the 1909 letter from a Mrs. Bieleveld in Groningen declares, "B. has certainly written to tell you that father v. d. Broek died. He was only sick for a few weeks—cancer of the liver—and he died on April 16. He died calmly in his sleep.

"No doubt you have also heard of Hoving's death and also that Antje and Jantje have gone to America. William and I met them at Hoving's



funeral, and soon thereafter they sent us a postcard telling of their plans to leave. Have you also heard the report of Luitjes death? He died of stomach trouble. He collapsed on the Boteringe bridge and died immediately. A few women passing by pulled him to the side of the bridge, but they could find no one who knew him, and then he was brought to the police station on a stretcher. They couldn't identify him either, but, as if he were preparing for such an event, he had put a card in his pocket with his address on it."⁷

R. J. Dykstra's letter from Wyckel to Chicago recounts that severe winter of 1929, along with a more typical obituarial update. Of the weather Dykstra wrote, "You have probably read about the terrible cold weather

we are having here. During one whole week the temperature was between thirty and forty degrees below freezing.⁸ According to observers, it has never been so cold and never so disastrous. Some people died of the cold, while many others have gone to the hospital with frozen noses, feet, hands, and ears. Many birds died. Rabbits and hares lie dead in the woods, frozen hard. It began already in December, and it is still (February 21) full winter. Fortunately it has let up at present, but one night the ice in the ditch froze eight centimeters. The ice is so thick and strong that trucks can ride over lakes and rivers They go over the sea from all the islands to the mainland—from Urk to Lemmer and even from Enkhuizen to Lemmer. For the most part potatoes are frozen

(above) Harm and Alice Volkers—U.S.A.
(across) Old woman clearing out weeds
before planting. "De rêch is der oan wend!"
(The back is used to it!)

like stones. But fortunately ours are O.K."⁹

Dykstra's other news conveyed a full quota of human misery. "I don't know if we have told you that Auke Boelsma was buried. We drove by auto to his funeral in Oosterzee. Uncle Anne was there. He is 81, and for some three months now he has suffered from throat cancer. His son Wiebe lives in Utrecht, where he works as a carpenter's helper. He is very unfortunate. His wife died of tuberculosis, and both his son and daughter are in the sanitarium with the same sickness. And now his oldest daughter, who keeps his house, also has tuberculosis. Aunt Tantje is also sickly—suffering from the flu

for the past three weeks but now seems a little improved. The father of Roelof de Tong is also gone. He died of a stroke. Tjeerd de Boer is dead too. He was unloading coal from a boat with a wheelbarrow and fell from the gangplank into the hold of the boat. But the doctor said he was dead before he fell. Eeke v. d. Wall was also buried yesterday, and the widow of B. van Dijk was completely dehydrated. Foeke v. d. Wall married the daughter of Jannis Visser and has, with her, become Roman Catholic. Lieths Davids also died. He was 81. Gerrit Schotanis was buried too. He was 87. His brother Klaaske has been dead for several years already."¹⁰

Furthermore, because most of the correspondents were adults moving into their middle and later years, they were keenly aware of their own mortality and inclined to reflect on life's brevity. Their letters were peppered with such common utterances as *"met het ouderdom komt gebreken,"* and it was not exceptional for them to expand on that theme with pronouncements like those of D. De Vries, who wrote, "As we get older we often say that more and more we are strangers on the earth." Albert Eising reflected similarly, "... age brings the frailties which demonstrate that the best times of our lives are past." But even the teenaged K. D. Damstra offered what must be regarded as precociously gloomy sentiments with the changing of the year in 1875. "The old year is now past," he intoned, "and we have been spared. The Lord has not taken us from the earth with death, but we are another year closer to the grave. And we can never know if death will not come to us in this new year."¹¹

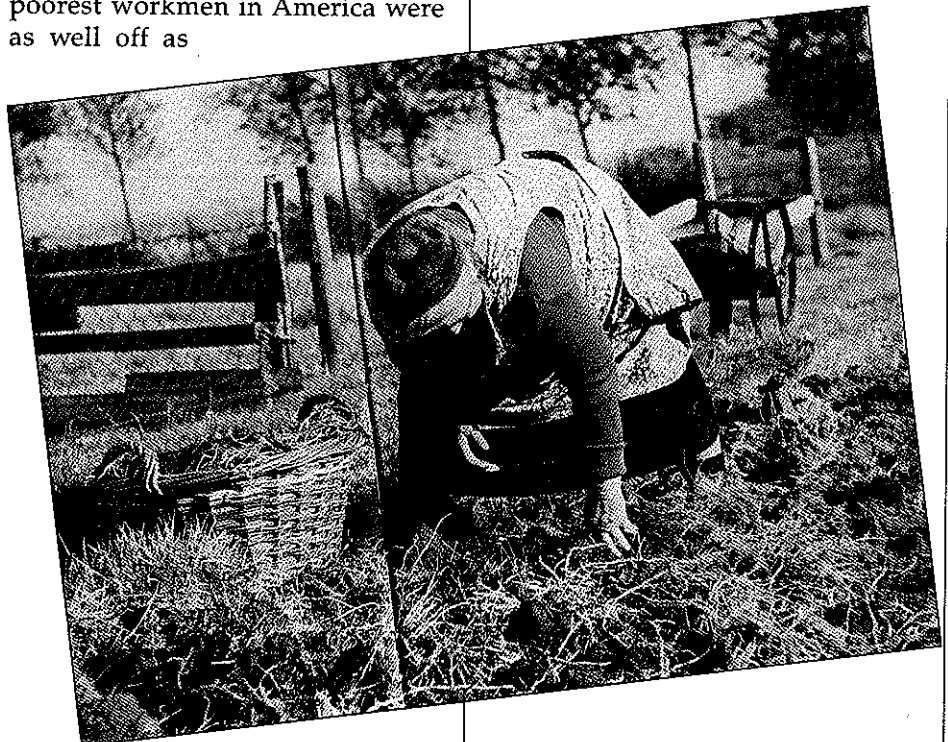
Had these dolorous ruminations been accompanied by reports of dramatic changes in village life or by the prospects of new opportunities, the

gloomy impressions of the old country would have been muted. But instead Dutch nationals regularly noted that "There is nothing special to write about. Everything is as it was," or, "Nothing goes forward here," and, "We live here in the same house."¹² Mrs. W. Bieleveld's 1911 letter neatly describes the contrasting circumstances of the two worlds. "William is sitting next to me smoking his American pipe," she wrote, "and we thank you heartily for it. I find it a pleasant, but also a curious, reminder of you. And that is especially the case since you can easily imagine our situation and surroundings. We, though, have no clear idea about the way you live in your area."¹³

In all probability the Bielevelts did, along with the gift of an American pipe, receive descriptive information about life in the United States. But reports from the New World were difficult to interpret in Holland, and some news was indeed too good to be true. One oral report "that the poorest workmen in America were as well off as

the richest farmers in the Netherlands" motivated J. R. Bos's skeptically curious inquiry to an uncle in Grand Haven, Michigan. "Tell me if that is true," he asked. "If it is, I'll come to America quickly."¹⁴ Such distortions were easily refuted, but many reliable letters from America asserted that those who would work with their hands could expect immediate rewards and a longer-term potential for economic and social elevation. It is certainly true that many landless emigrants became farmers and that wages in the U.S.A. were higher than in the Netherlands. This study, however, is aimed at less frequently measured comparisons—contrast in tone and mood symptomized in reports of death, illness, and declarations about economic prospects.

A comparison of mortality reporting in the correspondence discloses significant differences between the Netherlands and the U.S.A., for, while 55.9 percent of the Nether-



landic mail reported at least one death, only 18.8 percent of the stateside letters brought such news. And, while 24.7 percent of the Dutch letters reported two or more deaths, only 2 percent of the U.S. mail carried news of multiple deaths.¹⁵ Explanations for these differences have been cited above, the most obvious conditioning factor being the younger age of the immigrant community.

While the letters from America reported far fewer deaths than the mail from Holland, the stateside correspondents were also more optimistic in tone and more futuristic in perspective. For example, only 14

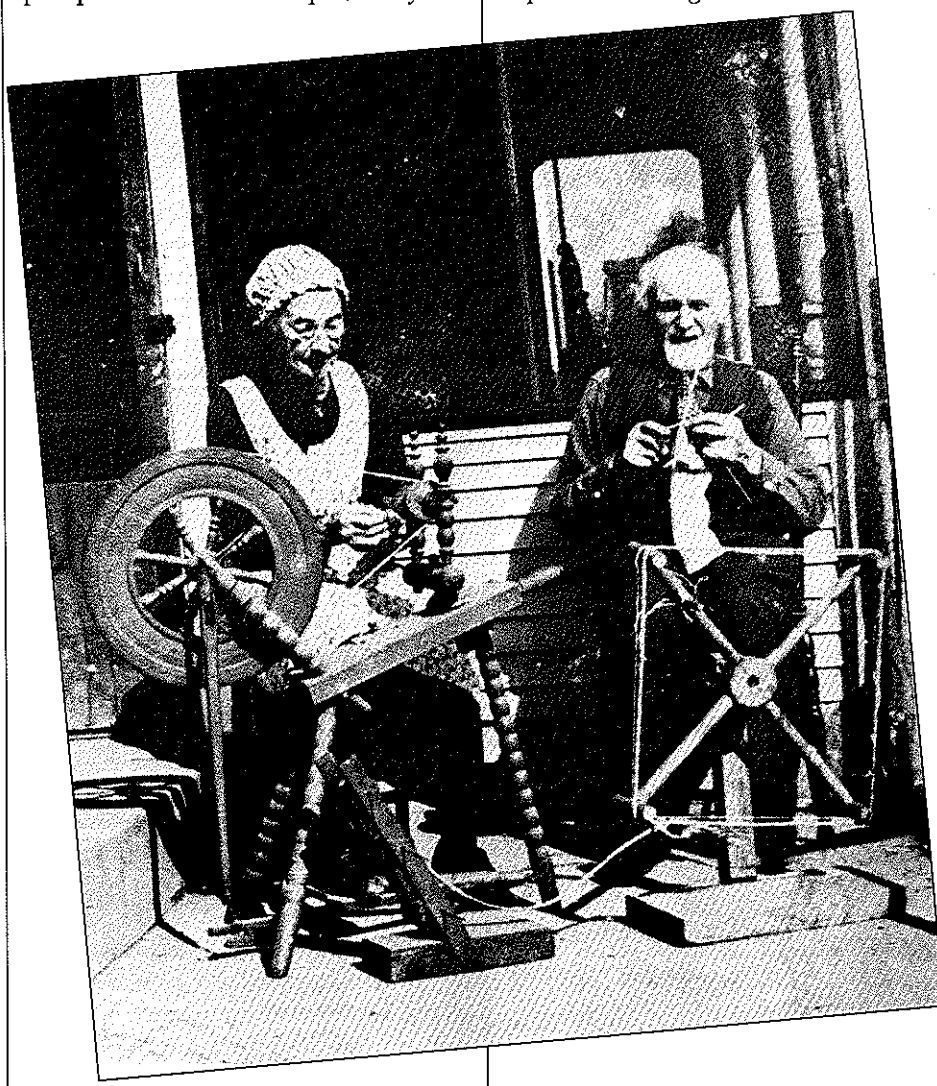
percent of the Dutch nationals reported favorably of their economic prospects, but 82 percent of the immigrants described their material circumstances as good and prospectively better. Furthermore, 34 percent of the European letters highlighted poor economic prospects, whereas only 10 percent wrote of gloomy prospects in America. Then, too, the immigrants' optimism was frequently coupled with news of past or impending migrations, as 30 percent of the immigrant correspondents described their movements from place to place. Meanwhile, only 2 percent of the Dutch correspondents reported a change of address.¹⁶

In general, then, the stateside correspondence reinforced the popular image of America as the land of youthful people who were footloose, unattached, and inclined toward novelty. Netherlanders, by contrast, seemed aged, approaching death, and rooted in place.

The correspondence of William Duijndam reflects much of the American spirit. He emigrated in 1868 and lived successively in South Dakota, Washington territory, and, finally, Lewistown, Montana. He saw that village develop from a few frontier shacks to a flourishing town, and his own ranch prospered with the community. Addressed to a recently widowed sister, his 1898 letter disclosed several aspects of his business and a great deal more of his satisfaction with a thirty-year sojourn in America.

"Dear Sister," he wrote, "forgive me for not writing sooner, but we have been very busy this summer. Our youngest son was busy all summer with rounding up the cattle, and then he transported the fattened steers to the Chicago market. Our oldest son lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan, so we are shorthanded. We had a good summer, with sufficient rain for pasture and hay. Our garden was also fruitful, and we made forty gallons of berry wine . . . It is very good.

"We are enthusiastically American and consider our country a just and good land for all the oppressed. God is with us. There is no other place like America. You have seven children, sister, three boys and a four girls. Would you consider sending two of them to live with us? It would be a good thing for them to see the world and learn the English language. There is much more opportunity for them to make a good living here than in little Holland. . . . When



I first came to America, I had hopes of doing something good for our family—particularly by having some of them come here to join us in this good land. It is so much better than Holland that I can't find words to describe it. Think about it, Sister. It is just as good for girls as for boys. Send one of your girls and one of your boys. They can learn English in two years, and then they will be able to do whatever they wish."¹⁷

Many other correspondents expressed similar sentiments. J. W. Brunner, who, despite the recent death of his wife, wrote glowingly of his well-paid job and the building of a new house. Likewise J. Dekker reported that six years after emigrating he continued to find life in America better than in Holland. And F. Diemer declared, "I'd not go back to Holland for twice the price of the passage." He also urged his siblings to join him because "they would do better here in the long run." And H. J. Hagens wrote, "I will help any of you who wants to come here because I am sorry for those who remain in Holland to suffer want."¹⁸ While it is likely that these and similar assertions reflected some need to justify their authors' decisions to emigrate, they nonetheless created and reinforced the perception that America was indeed the fabled land of unbounded possibilities.

For Liesbeth Workman the habits of optimism were so deeply entrenched that, after writing a somewhat gloomy report of her life in the U.S.A., she hastened to modify its tone within forty-eight hours. At age 81, sixty years after emigrating, Liesbeth Workman received a letter from E. Muschenga, a childhood friend from Kloosterburen. In his 1937 let-

(across) Mr. and Mrs. John Bouwer, Vogel Center, Michigan, c. 1917. (right) Death notice dated March 23, 1923.

Bussard 26. 3. 23.
6400ceendineg.

Geachte Dr. Beets,

Nuwe recensie in de
Banner van 22 Febr. l.j. over Dr.
Liefp's biographie van Dr. Bavinck
wroft mij in persoonlyke meete
denen dat het mij spijt, dat Dr. Liefp
Bavinck's impressies about
Amerika sich heeft bepaald by
het critiseerende
H. verkeer te dat er grote maar
deering tegenover stond, evenwel
niet personals overbunden
betrif.

Yarne had it. Bavinck's aan
hemingen overgegeven aan
bepende de hand van
en de grote



Dr. Henry Beets Esq.
737 Madison Avenue
N. Y. C.

Grand Rapids
Mich. U.S.A.

APPENDIX

MORTALITY REPORTS

Letters from the Netherlands

100 Correspondents

247 Letters

I. Analysis by Correspondents

- A. 74 of 100 correspondents reporting deaths =74.0%
 B. 37 of 100 correspondents reporting serious illness =37.0%

II. Analysis by Number of Letters

- A. 138 of 247 letters reporting deaths =55.9%
 B. 22 of 247 letters reporting serious illness =8.9%
 C. 61 of 247 letters reporting 2 or more deaths =24.7%
 D. Total numbers of specific deaths reported = 260 in 247 letters or slightly more than 1 death for every letter.

III. Analysis by Generations

- A. Written by older generation (Grandparents, Parents, Uncles, Aunts) 12 of 75 =16.0%
 B. Written by same age group (Brothers, Sisters, Friends, Cousins) 55 of 75 =73.3%
 C. Written by younger generation (Nephews, Nieces) 8 of 75 =10.7%

Letters from America

50 Correspondents

175 Letters

I. Analysis by Correspondents

- A. 20 of 50 correspondents reporting deaths =40.0%
 B. 8 of 50 correspondents reporting serious illness =16.0%

II. Analysis by Number of Letters

- A. 34 of 175 letters reporting deaths =19.5%
 B. 8 of 175 letters reporting serious illness =4.5%
 C. 2 of 175 letters reporting 2 or more deaths =1.1%
 D. Total number of specific deaths reported = 34 in 175 letters, i.e., about 1 death for every 5 letters

III. Analysis by Generations

- A. Written to older Generation (Grandparents, Parents, Uncles, Aunts) 16 of 49 =32.6%
 B. Written to same generation (Brothers, Sisters, Friends, Cousins) 30 of 49 =61.2%
 C. Written to younger generation (Nephews, Nieces) 3 of 49 =6.2%

ECONOMIC IMPRESSIONS

Letters from the Netherlands

100 Correspondents

247 Letters

I. Analysis by Correspondents

- A. 14 of 100 correspondents reporting favorable economic circumstances =14.0%
 B. 34 of 100 correspondents reporting poor economic circumstances =34.0%
 C. 19 of 100 correspondents reporting emigration plans =19.0%
 D. 2 of 100 correspondents declaring anti-emigration views =2.0%
 E. 2 of 100 correspondents reporting change of address =2.0%

II. Analysis by Number of Letters

- A. 18 of 247 letters reporting favorable economic prospects =7.2%
 B. 82 of 247 letters reporting poor economic prospects =33.0%
 C. 22 of 247 letters reporting plans for emigration =8.8%

Letters from America

50 Correspondents

175 Letters

I. Analysis by Correspondents

- A. 41 of 50 correspondents reporting favorable economic circumstances =82%
 B. 5 of 50 correspondents reporting poor economic circumstances =10%
 C. 5 of 50 correspondents reporting plans to return to Holland =10%
 D. 18 of 50 correspondents reporting no desire to return to Holland =36%
 E. 15 of 50 correspondents reporting change of address =30%

II. Analysis by Number of Letters

- A. 107 of 175 letters reporting favorable economic circumstances =61%
 B. 5 of 175 letters reporting poor economic circumstances =2%
 C. 5 of 175 letters reporting desire to return to the Netherlands =2%

ter, Muschenga complained, as one might well expect from an octogenarian, that because so few of his friends were alive, he was lonely. Responding in kind, Liesbeth wrote that she too had lost most of her friends and relatives and that life had cast its full quota of burdens upon her shoulders. Her December 18 letter explained, "You write about your loss, and I understand that feeling very well . . . You have lost much, but I too have suffered much. I am from a family of six children and of these, I am the only survivor."

Liesbeth reported that eleven of her siblings had come to America and that one brother had returned to Holland. By 1937, however, they had all died, and with the death of her last-surviving sister, Mrs. Workman reported, "Then I was left alone, and that in a strange land. So I am no stranger to loneliness. But my husband and son are still with me. Even so, life has not been easy. When Fred [her son] was only seven years old he suffered from tuberculosis for the third time. But he is a big fellow now. He lives nearby, has four children, and visits us regularly. My husband, though, has cancer. He had surgery three years ago, but they could not remove all the cancer. Now he takes medicine all the time and is nearly blind. He can't even walk down the street but must stay in the yard like a child."

Two days later, on December 20, 1937, Mrs. Workman wrote a second response to Muschenga's letter. She was chagrined to have written so gloomily of her life in America and declared, "Well, with this letter you may begin to laugh, but my last letter was only about our difficulties. So now I must tell you about the other side of my life," whereupon Liesbeth sketched a more typical portrait of American success. Her son, a truck driver, had done very well. He had

built a new house, and she, with her husband, lived in their son's older but smaller home. Fred had recently been awarded a gold watch for driving without accidents, and his four children were healthy and well. The oldest was attending Calvin College, and the two girls had already made confession of their faith. Fred, likewise, was an active church member and was serving in the church council. "If," she concluded, "people have good children and grandchildren, that is a great pleasure . . . We can't thank the Lord enough."¹⁹

This comparison of Netherlandic and American correspondence displays vividly contrasting images. While the stateside correspondence affirms generally accepted impressions of the Dutch-American experience, the letters from Holland, sources which have not been systematically examined, yield a rather grim panorama. Age, death, and disease, coupled with generally static or uninviting economic prospects, dominate news from the old country and create an unmistakably weary impression of life in the Netherlands. Although doubtless false, that image has acquired a life of its own which, despite the economic revival of Europe since World War II, still persists in the collective Dutch-American memory.

Endnotes

¹Appendix, "Mortality Reports," part III.

²Letter of B. de Haan to uncle, Dec., 1892, in "Immigrant Letter Collection," Calvin College Archives, Grand Rapids, Michigan (cited hereafter as Im. Letter Coll.).

³F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender Is the Night* (New York: Scribners, 1962), p. 115.

⁴Appendix, "Mortality Reports," parts I and II.

⁵Appendix, "Mortality Reports," parts I and II.

⁶Letter of J. Potappel to Brother, Feb. 17, 1888, in Im. Letter Coll.

⁷Letter of Mrs. W. Bieleveld to Brother, March, 1909, in Im. Letter Coll.

⁸This severe winter received considerable attention from *De Standard* in 1929, and the February 4, 12, and 14 editions reported the

use of the seas for "overland" transportation. The lowest temperature reported for Groningen was cited as 19 degrees.

⁹Letter of R. J. Dykstra to Brother, 1929, in Im. Letter Coll.

¹⁰Letter of R. J. Dykstra to Brother, 1929, in Im. Letter Coll.

¹¹Letters of W. Dykstra to Friend, 1932; D. De Vries to Brother, 1937; Albert Eising to Brother, 1899; K. D. Damstra to Uncle, 1875, in Im. Letter Coll.

¹²Letters of G. Gemmen to Brother, Oct., 1882; W. Bieleveld to Family, 1912; J. Cevaal to Brother, 1912; J. Potappel to Brother, Sept. 1890; H. Dykstra to Friend, 1880, in Im. Letter Coll.

¹³Letter of Mrs. Wm. Beileveld to Brother, March, 1911, in Im. Letter Coll.

¹⁴Letter of J. R. Bos to Uncle, 1901, in Im. Letter Coll.

¹⁵Appendix, "Mortality Reports," part III.

¹⁶Appendix, "Economic Impressions," parts I and II.

¹⁷Letter of William Duijndam to Sister, Dec. 5, 1898, in Im. Letter Coll.

¹⁸Letters of J. W. Brunner to Friend, 1867; J. Dekker to Brother, 1898;

F. Diemer to Parents, 1894; H. J. Hagens to Father, 1867, in Im. Letter Coll.

¹⁹Letters of L. Workman to E. Muschenga, Dec. 18, 20, 1937, in Im. Letter Coll.

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Pages 19-23: J. Niemeijer, *Drente d'olde Lantschap*, p. 137; Folkers en Van Der Veen, *Drenthe in Fotos*, np.

Page 31: J. Van Hinte, *Nederlanders in Amerika*, Vol. II, p. 349

Pages 38-44: P. Terpstra, *Honderd Jaar Friese Landbouw*, pp. 55, 31; H. Petersen, *West Over*, p. 56

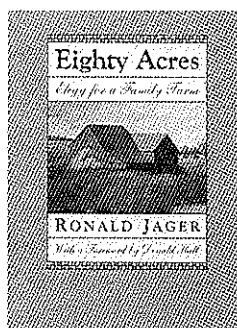
Bintsje Pebesma; in her youth a Frisian variety of potato was named after her.



BOOKS

by Conrad J. Bult

Eighty Acres: Elegy for a Family Farm. By Ronald Jager. Boston, MA: Beacon, 1990. \$15.00.



If you grew up on a farm or lived in a rural community during the thirties and forties, Ronald Jager's recollections of his childhood and adolescence on a farm near

McBain, Michigan, will bring back fond memories. The author treats the time and the place with affection and respect, though he himself has "gone a hundred miles" since the days of his youth. He left McBain for Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he majored in English and philosophy, edited the college newspaper, and served as elected president of the 1955 graduating class. After earning a doctorate in philosophy from Harvard, Jager taught for some time at various colleges and universities. Several years ago he left a professorship at Yale and purchased a farm in Washington, New Hampshire, where he now writes and farms. Among the author's diverse interests are philosophy, state and local history, stone walls, walking, and apple trees. His freelance writing on these topics has appeared in books and well-known magazines such as *Harper's*, *The*

Atlantic, and *Blair & Ketchum's Country Journal*.

Looking backward in time and from the vantage point of more than fifty years, Jager remembers the past and recreates the farm life surrounding him as a young boy and teenager. In the narrative the reader not only meets the young Ron Jager and shares with him varied aspects of rural culture but also simultaneously benefits from retrospective remarks about his behavior while growing up on a farm. Of special poignancy are his memories about teasing a kitten to death and about passing time in church by trapping flies in his fist when they unwarily stopped to sample the peppermint saliva on his clenched fingers.

To farm lads, daily chores were a far cry from catching flies, but they, too, provided the fodder of memory. In his mind Jager still hears the sounds of winter milking, which he describes as follows:

Yet winter stable sounds are comfortable and harmonious, a rustic symphony: horses snorting like snare drums, cats stringing out their meowing, calves bawling and trumpeting for breakfast, cattle stanchions rattling like tambourines. (p. 107)

And he still savors the food his mother prepared, especially her baked beans and huckleberry pie and, above all, a mouth-watering

breakfast repast he recalls with these taste-tempting words:

We put the sizzling tallow and the syrup on the bread and then spread hot, dripping *kaantjes** on top. The gods may break their fast on that. Homemade bread, homemade dipfat, homemade *kaantjes*, homemade maple syrup. Only the poor could be so rich. (pp. 81-82)

The Jager family was poor and farm life hard, but for a youngster like Jager, it was wonderful, especially if he did not have to share his parents' anxiety about how to pay taxes, meet mortgage interest payments, and save for capital improvements. The author's mother, who raised five children in a house without running water and electricity, worried about losing the farm. His father "sought solvency not excellence, and making money had no charm for him at all" (p. 25). Though not economically aggressive, this same man milked cows twice a day for fifteen years straight. In 1940, after this decade and a half, he reluctantly bowed to family pressure and took a few days off for a family outing to visit relatives in Imlay City. Success meant a well-kept, debt-free farm, a standard he had attained by the middle 1950s. Yet he did not continue farming but sought employment as a carpenter. Jager believes his father knew "farming was bent on passing him by" (p. 254).

*Cracklings.

In his remarks about those outside his immediate family circle, the author strikes a compromise between compassion and realism. McBain residents such as the kindly Dr. Masselink, druggist Floyd Teft, and newspaper editor Ben Minier are types those with small-town origins will never forget. Perhaps the most colorful person Jager portrays is his mother's father, Grandpa Albert Schepers, who was censured by his congregation for chasing its minister off his farm with a pitchfork, an event precipitated by Schepers' failure to be elected to the consistory. For a time he attended the Reformed church while his wife and children celebrated the Sabbath in the Christian Reformed church. While doing this, Jager observes, "he could nurse his grudge and his religion at the same time" (p. 22). Seven years later, to the joy of all, he repented and once again worshiped with his family in the Christian Reformed church.

Jager evaluates the Dutch-American religious environment in which both he and his grandfather found themselves with these pithy and succinct sentences:

True, it had the liabilities of insularity and ethnic uniformity, and it had a certain tedious theological superiority complex. But it admits of no easy judgment. As a shaper of character and family structures it had extraordinary resources,

such as seem conspicuously wanting in the social chaos of today's world. (p. 203)

For the author and his adolescent peers, memorizing catechism questions had little appeal. Thinking about this ritual years later, Jager notes that "we had enough puritanism bred into us to spoil some fun, but not enough to find comfort in doctrine" (p. 207). Church dogma meant little to the teenage Jager. He was not overly enthusiastic about either doctrine or chores, yet, as he states, "There was not much dignity in disliking chores, and no sense, either, so we didn't bother" (p. 106).

On the book's dust jacket is a watercolor of an unpainted barn and its haystack set against an open field. Both this painting and the author's brilliantly written, faintly romantic and wistful prose make beautiful what is often considered plain and ordinary. After listening to Jager and glancing at this picture, any reader's appreciation of the commonplace will be enhanced. When the author contemplates nature and rural life in particular, he finds both drama and kernels of truth. Jager the philosopher-farmer is not enamored with agribusiness or mechanized farming. He cherishes the plow, the dump rake, the horse-driven harrow. With philosophical elegance and a discerning eye, he writes about a Dutch-American rural culture familiar to many *Origins* readers. On eighty acres near McBain, the

author's heart, mind, and soul were formed in ways you will understand after reading and thinking about what he has to say about himself and the rapidly vanishing Dutch-American agrarian environment which formed his outlook on life. In his concluding paragraph Jager bids farewell to an ethnic culture which made him what he is today, a philosopher-farmer who looks askance at what others around him consider progress.

Indeed, almost none of the steel in these venerable farm implements has lost its temper—which is somehow a pleasant and vaguely reassuring thought. It's as if something still hints of a world that is gone but whose character and values were intense and tough and well composed.

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