

Origins

Historical Magazine of the Heritage Hall Archives

Christian Reformed Church in North America

Calvin Theological Seminary

Calvin University

Volume XXXX • Number 1 • 2022



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Historical Magazine
of the Heritage Hall Archives

Heritage Hall Archives is located
in the Hekman Library at
Calvin University.

It is the archives of the Christian
Reformed Church in North America,
Calvin Theological Seminary, and
Calvin University.

Heritage Hall, Calvin University
1855 Knollcrest Circle SE
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546
(616) 526-6313

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

William Katerberg
Editor

Laurie Haan
Circulation Manager

Tracey L. Gebbia
Designer

James C. Schaap
Robert Schoone-Jongen
Robert P. Swierenga
Contributing Editors

InnerWorkings
Printer

Cover photo:
Immigrants building the first
"basement" facility of Drayton
Christian Reformed Church in 1952.
Image courtesy of Heritage Hall.



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From the Editor

The articles in this issue of *Origins* have two themes. One theme is memory and family history. The other is forgotten individuals whose lives illustrate big stories.

The family history pieces are by James Schaap and by me. I'm delighted to publish a lengthy memoir by Jim about a tragedy in his family and the book about death, grief, and comfort given to his grandparents. This story illustrates larger themes in Dutch ethnic history and Reformed piety. Schaap's piece is longer than a typical *Origins* article, so I've divided it into two parts. It's a gem. My essay focuses on my grandfather and the immigration of my mother's side of the family to Canada. My grandfather's life reveals both continuities and changes for immigrants as they moved to a new homeland. It also reveals the ties between the immigrant experience and Christian faith. Immigrants did not just build new homes, but new churches.

The two forgotten individuals lived worlds apart. Janet Sheeres tells the story of a Dutch con man with ties to the Netherlands; Indonesia; South Africa; Iowa, Kansas, and Colorado in the United States; and England. In the late 1800s, steamships and railroads made it easier for immigrants to pick

up and start over in new places; they also allowed grifters to flee their crimes and find new marks in another part of the world. Kurt Selles makes sense of the life and death of a Christian convert in China in the late 1920s. He had ties to Christian Reformed missions and to the nationalist and communist movements of his country. How did he become connected to movements that might seem contradictory to readers today?

News from the Archives

Heritage Hall mostly feels back to normal, despite COVID-19 continuing to affect our work. The archives, library, and university and seminary still require people to be free of COVID-19 and to wear masks indoors. But Heritage Hall continues to serve the needs of the many communities connected to the CRCNA, the seminary, and the university.

In the past year we've received various kinds of archival material from institutions and individuals. A recent example is a dozen letters from German men to a Christian Reformed pastor in Michigan. The men were POWs held in a camp near Fremont. They wrote him after returning home.

We've helped several Christian Reformed congregations with anniversary history projects. We've served dozens of university and seminary students, faculty and staff, scholars from various colleges and universities, and people interested in personal projects. These people came to Heritage Hall to use published material on the shelves of our reading room,

documents in our archival collections, and books and magazines in our rare books collections. We've received hundreds of requests from people around the country and the world by email and phone; they contact us looking for information or for digital scans of published and archival material. The most requested material, as usual, was related to immigrant letters and memoirs, genealogy and family history, photo collections, congregational and classical minutes, the history of Reformed Christianity, and rare books.

Heritage Hall is still adjusting to staffing changes. If there has been a mistake with your subscription (e.g., wrong mailing address), or if your name should but did not appear in the "contributors" pages in *Origins*, please let us know.

I continue to work in Heritage Hall for the whole day, most days. The other staff—Laurie Haan and Emily Koelzer—are part time but collectively cover the whole week. All three of us have access to the general email address of Heritage Hall (crcarchives@calvin.edu) and the general phone number (616-526-6313). Someone normally will answer. But if not, leave a message or email us. You also can find us via the Heritage Hall website: (<https://library.calvin.edu/guide/collections/hh/staff>).

I am thankful for our volunteers and student workers. Phil Erffmeyer processes congregation and classis minutes. Clarice Newhof is working on cataloging our extensive photo collection. This spring we have several student workers. They are working

on the online catalogs of our collections, helping with the Van Raalte project, and helping me research the multicultural history of the Christian Reformed Church.

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

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William Katerberg, Curator

Transplanting Family, Farm Life, and Church

William Katerberg



RMS Aquitania.

My grandfather and his family emigrated from the Netherlands in late March 1949 and arrived in Canada on the RMS *Aquitania* in early April. Franke Visscher had been a well-off farmer in the Netherlands, but he was concerned for his children's future. There was little land to rent or buy where they lived in the province of Drenthe. He and his family would find the land they wanted about seven miles south of Drayton, Ontario, a small town southwest of Toronto.

The family had talked about emigrating for several years. They had considered South Africa, where there was a large Dutch community. By 1949 they had chosen Canada. Just before they left, a local reporter asked my grandfather why he was not afraid to go. Thinking back to World War II and the German occupation, and

to trials endured by his family going back to his childhood, he appealed to faith: "The same God that led us here and helped us through a lot of things will be in Canada too."

The reporter's question might seem odd. Opportunity beckoned in Canada, after all, while Europe was still in ruins, rebuilding, and dealing with millions of refugees. The winter of 1948–1949 was dreary. Prosperity was years away. A "Cold War" between communist and capitalist powers was dividing Europe. Leaving family, friends, and familiar places behind was daunting, nonetheless, no matter how uncertain the future seemed in the Netherlands. Starting over in a new land and learning a new language weren't for the timid.

At the same time, if the Visscher family sought opportunity in Canada—farmland—they wanted to take their religious life with them. "When we can't go to Canada and join a church that is suitable for us," my grandfather explained in an oral history taken in 1978, "we can't go."¹

The story of my grandfather and his family fits the general history of Dutch immigration to Canada. Before the war, some 25,000 Dutch immigrants arrived in Canada. Those who were Reformed started a few churches in Ontario and Alberta. Tens of thousands came year after year after the war. The first wave, from 1946 to the mid-1950s, mostly sought farmland; a second wave, into the late 1960s, was a mix of rural and urban immigrants. From 1946 to 1968 over 167,000 came, and more followed in the years after that. Dutch Reformed

William Katerberg is curator of Heritage Hall and a professor of history at Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Michigan. His research has focused on religion, immigration, and politics in North America and on the American West.



The Visscher family in the Netherlands in 1949. All Visscher family photos are courtesy of Thereasa DeHaan.

immigrants assimilated readily, learning English quickly, and did not show strong interest in maintaining ethnic traditions. They worked hard, however, to transplant their religious life, organizing churches, building Christian schools, and founding other religious institutions, reflecting a belief that faithfulness to God should extend to all areas of life.²

In the Netherlands

My grandfather described his life in the Netherlands in his 1978 interview for the oral history project. That life was shaped by farm work, religious experience, sacrifice for family, and participation in community.

Born in 1901 in Smilde, a town in Drenthe, a young Franke Visscher took over the family farm by his early twenties. He began by helping his father, Albert, run the ninety-acre farm during World War I. The Netherlands was neutral, but his three older brothers had joined the army. Franke may not have regretted taking on this responsibility, but he did not put up with his brothers' high view of them-

selves after they returned from the military. When one of them told him that "we" in the army "made everything alright for you," he responded, "Well alright. I was on the farm, and you were just playing. So, I did the work for you." The Netherlands was



Franke Visscher in the 1920s.

not in the war, he explained to his interviewer. "But I had to do the work with my father on the big farm we had."

At night during his teens, Franke went to agricultural school, learning about dairy and pig farming. There was no Christian school in the area, so he went to a "neutral" school. The family was part of the *Hervormde Kerk*, the national church, not the *Gereformeerde Kerk*, the more conservative body that was a product of secessions from the national church. In Canada his family would join the Christian Reformed Church, which was close to the *Gereformeerde Kerk*.

Life in the Netherlands was not all work, of course. Visscher was a winning speedskater in his village and the surrounding area as a young man. He remembered seeing champion racers, describing their gear as *onderbroek* (i.e., long underwear), referring to "the Poepjes" from Friesland, perhaps meaning Lijkle Poepjes, a well-known skater. He bragged that it was "no work to keep up with him." Visscher also enjoyed basketball. The family enjoyed music. His boyhood home had an organ. My grandfather played it, as well as the flute and mouth organ. And the family sang together.

The older Visscher boys married and left home in the years after the war. In 1923, Franke's father died, and the farm became his responsibility. Decades later, he remembered the religious dreams that these burdens seem to have inspired. In one, he asked Jesus why he had taken his father. In another, Christ returned. Franke was in a room with his family and the head elder in the church. They were looking to see if Jesus was there. And then he realized he was alone. "I stood alone. And so it is when we go to meet Christ. Then we are alone, and we stand alone."

It is no surprise that faith was important to my grandfather all his life.



Wezuperbrug School in the Netherlands, 1937. My uncle Johannes Visscher is second from the left in the front.

"I found my Lord when I was really young," he explained in 1978, "or he found me." The grief of his father's death had been overwhelming, but it also shaped a deep, lifelong piety in him.

During the 1920s and 1930s my grandfather's life filled out. He married Jantien Boer in 1927, and they rented a farm in the nearby village of Wezuperbrug in the township of Zweeloo. They eventually had eleven children. One died in her teens during the war, from diphtheria. Another died in infancy, the year before the family emigrated. The other nine (ages 2–20) would go to Canada with him and Jantien.

Visscher was active in politics and community life. He was a leader in his young people's group. Interested in politics from a young age, he was the president of the local branch of the Christian Historical Party. He voted "more for the man than the party," however, giving his vote to the Anti-Revolutionary Party in 1937, because he viewed Hendrik Colijn as a stronger person than the Christian Historical Party leader. He helped start a new Christian newspaper after the war, *De*

Nieuwe Drentsche. He was part of the Orange Society and the neighborhood association, and he helped start a local Christian agricultural school. He also taught hand-milking techniques at the local "milk factory," passing on "some tricks" to the boys and girls in his classes.

"I had plenty to do" with all these organizations, my grandfather remembered decades later, "and I was glad

when we left the Netherlands"—adding wryly, "but soon it was the same thing" in Canada.

Journey to Canada

The move was no small affair. The family had been comfortably well-off, but the Dutch government limited the amount of cash that emigrants could take with them. So, the Visschers sold their household goods, using the money to buy new furniture and a car to take with them. Then they paid to have everything shipped to Canada. When he left, my grandfather promised that—"Lord willing"—he and Jantien would return for a visit in three years. He doubtless had a lot of family and friends in mind, but especially Jantien's father, the only one of their parents still alive.

Visscher kept a journal during the weeklong journey from their farm in Drenthe to the new farm near Drayton. The family took a boat to England, and another to Canada, and then went by train from Halifax, Nova Scotia, to Kitchener. Their sponsor, a farmer, picked them up and drove them to their new home near Drayton. In his journal, my grandfa-



Franke and Jantien Visscher with the car they brought to Canada.

ther described the cities, buildings, and countryside in England. But, as with so many immigrants, it was the landscape and size of Canada that impressed him. "What we saw in England was nice," he explained, "but this is different. It is so much more on a grand scale."

"There is no end to what I could tell you about the landscape we see from the train here in Canada," my grandfather wrote in his journal, describing the journey through Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec, and Ontario. "You read about it in the Netherlands, and you see pictures and films and think they are exaggerating about the beauty of the landscape. Well, I have to tell you that the way it really is exceeds this all." He commented on rock walls, where the tracks cut through the Canadian Shield. He noticed hills, massive forests, logging areas, springs and rivers, meadows, and valleys. The farms he saw struck him because the barns for livestock were not attached to the house, as in the Netherlands. "Anyone who enjoys nature and has the money for it should travel through the length and breadth of this country," he recommended.

Getting Started on the Farm

A Christian immigration society in The Hague, in the Netherlands, had connected my grandfather with Charles Spoelhof, a home missionary from the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). Spoelhof had helped the Visscher family find a sponsor as they planned their move to Canada. The Visschers settled into their new house and started working a farm owned by their sponsor, Amos Brubacher, a farmer and a Mennonite minister. A year later Brubacher sold the farm to my grandfather, trusting him to pay for the farm and the equipment that came with it as he was able. "God brought you to Canada," Brubacher

told my grandfather; "because now you bought my farm and I see his hand in it."

The older Visscher children worked the farm or got jobs to support the family. The younger ones went to school. The teacher in the nearby one-room school set immi-

the cream from the milk. The milk is then fed to the pigs. Like most farmers we have pigs and cows. Also, on this farm we have a lot of chickens, about 1000."

In the first weeks on the farm, as winter turned to spring, Visscher fed the animals and gathered eggs from



Peel Public School, spring 1949. My mother, Jean Visscher, an aunt and an uncle are in the picture, new immigrants.

grant children like my mother and her siblings back several grades, to give them time to learn English. Only the youngest two girls finished grade school and high school. The others left school in their early teens and started working.

As with the countryside he saw from the train, Visscher was impressed with the land he now farmed. "The ground here is good, and anything can grow here," his journal records. "Here it is mostly oats, barley, and wheat and the rest is grass." He welcomed the technology that even modest farms had. "Most houses, also ours, have electric lights and running water. You open the faucet and have water. Also, the appliances, washing machine, and stove are electric," he wrote. "The barn also has electricity for milking and a machine to separate

the chickens. He also spent a week trimming the trees in the orchard. Then he and the family turned to working the land. "Yesterday, April 15, we started sowing the oats and barley." He described the process. "We were busy with three tractors. First was a tractor with a disk harrow, behind that one with a regular harrow—about 3 meters wide—and after that the seeder—about 3 meters wide. In the seeder there is fertilizer in one container and oats and/or barley in another. Sometimes these are seeded together. The fertilizer and seed are sowed together in this way."

My grandfather wrote his account of life in Canada with people in the Netherlands in mind. He kept the journal, according to family memory, because a Dutch newspaper, *Trouw*, had approached him to write articles



The Visscher farm in 1952.

about his family's experience. He made it clear that he was impressed with his new home—with the landscape, technology, and opportunities Dutch folk would find in Canada if they visited or immigrated. "They can work quickly here," he emphasized. "The tractors go so fast that if you had to walk alongside you would have to walk fast."

Soon my grandfather bought a second farm. It eventually went to one of his sons, but in the meantime two other Dutch immigrant families started out in Canada on it. Soon Visscher was recruiting immigrants from the Netherlands and helping settle them. This work as a "field man" led to

his oral history interview in 1978, a project sponsored by the Multicultural History Society of Ontario. Over Christmas and the New Year in 1952–1953 he and Jantien made their promised return visit to Drenthe.

Life in Canada was good, but not without its normal sorrows. Jantien fell sick and died in 1959, and their oldest son, Albert, died in a work accident in 1966. My grandfather remarried in 1961, to Frieda Reinders. I remember visiting him, Aunt Frieda, and the Visscher clan regularly in the 1970s.

Building a Church

In addition to getting settled into the house, beginning to farm, and finding jobs, the Visschers helped found a church. My grandfather had been busy with community life in the Netherlands, and when the family got settled in Canada, he did what came naturally. He started

organizing, working with other recent Dutch Reformed immigrants—such as the Van Elswyk and Van Veen families. Once again, Reverend Spoelhof played a key role.

Born and raised in Paterson, New Jersey, Spoelhof worked out of Kitchener, 45 minutes south of Drayton. From the late 1940s into the 1960s, he helped settled immigrants and start Christian Reformed congregations in southern Ontario—in places like Kitchener, Woodstock, Drayton, Stratford, Listowel, and Clinton. Later he did the same in British Columbia, eastern Ontario, and Quebec.

With Spoelhof's support, the immigrants began worshipping in a house



Reverend Charles Spoelhof. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

in mid-April 1949. My grandfather read a sermon when Spoelhof could not be there. They soon needed more space, with new families arriving regularly. In June they started using Knox Presbyterian Church in

Drayton for worship services, paying rent of \$2.00 a week. The CRC recognized the group as an "organized" congregation, First CRC in Drayton, in June 1950. My grandfather was one of the first two elders, along with Gerit Vander Heide.

The new congregation had more than a dozen families and almost one hundred members. It worshiped on Sunday afternoons and held Sunday School and catechism classes afterward. It started a young people's group and women's and men's societies. The congregation celebrated the Lord's Supper when Reverend Spoelhof could come, with a communion set borrowed from the Kitchener



Two Visscher sisters squabbling, one reading *Calvinist Contact*, the newspaper of Dutch Reformed immigrants. It offered Reformed perspectives on the news and helped immigrants and their communities connect with each other.



Building the first "basement" facility of Drayton Christian Reformed Church. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

CRC. They began having services in English, once a month, in 1951.

Drayton CRC quickly outgrew the Knox Presbyterian facility. In 1952, the congregation built a "basement church," purchasing land suggested by my grandfather. It was centrally located for the immigrant families in the area. The congregation also called its first minister in 1952. Reverend Andrew Folkema was a Dutch immigrant himself and had served CRC congregations in South Dakota, Iowa, and Illinois. By 1959 there were 75 families. In 1963, led by its third minister, Lambert Doezeema, the congregation decided to demolish the basement church and build a facility that could hold 600 people.

In 1954, the Dutch Reformed community in the Drayton area began talking about a Christian school. It soon founded a Society for Christian Education, with a membership fee of \$1.50 a month. And in 1956 the school opened its doors as Calvin Christian School (today, Community Christian School).

The school's website emphasizes that its founders were inspired by the Dutch Reformed ideal of education

shaped by Christian worldview, even while most were immigrants with little money to spare. My grandfather remembered that they didn't "feel the sacrifices" during that time. "We were all one and we all were happy, and we were busy in our church life and in our life to form Christian Schools and all that, you know, and the different societies."

The school's early documents are in Dutch, of course, and doubtless the shared immigrant experience helped the children learn English and adapt to life in Canada. Its mission was not to be an ethnic sanctuary, however, but to transplant the vision and the institutions of Christian education in Canada.

Dutch Re-

formed immigrants did not just build churches and Christian schools. By the 1980s they had started the Institute for Christian Studies, a graduate school, and Redeemer College, an undergraduate institution. They also founded a wide variety of other kinds of Christian organizations, among them a Christian Farmer's Federation.

Conclusion

The Drayton congregation and its immigrant families soon turned from needing the CRC's help to supporting the denomination and serving in it. The first immigrant student from Drayton to go to Calvin College and Seminary and become a minister in the CRC was Arnold (Arend) Rumph, a Drenthe boy. He graduated from the seminary in 1957 and served churches in Ontario and then as a missionary in South and Central America.

Others soon followed. My uncle John Zantigh and my father, Henry Katerberg, graduated from the seminary in the 1960s. Both had emigrated to Canada from Drenthe with their families and had met and married



The house I remember, where Frank and Freda Visscher lived in retirement, in 1968.

Visscher girls (Alida and Jean) in Drayton.

My grandfather may have left behind his busy life of community organizing in the Netherlands. But he and immigrants like him took the habits and vision of Christian faith that shaped all areas of life with them and transplanted it in Canada. When he retired in the mid-1960s, one of his sons took over the farm and he and Frieda moved into the house next door to Drayton CRC. I remember reading books in their library and shooting pool with him on a table in the basement. 🍷

Endnotes

1. All material quoted from my grandfather is from a collection of family history material compiled by my Aunt Thereasa (Visscher) DeHaan. She transcribed material and translated it. I have a digital copy of the diaries, oral history, photographs, official documents, and genealogical material she collected. The oral history was conducted and recorded on cassette by Elizabeth Hietkamp. The interview was part of an oral history project of some 6075 interviews sponsored by the Multicultural History Society of Ontario. You can find Frank Visscher's name in the oral history inventory, <http://mhso.ca/wp/oral-testimony-collection/> and http://www.mhso.ca/docs/MHSO_Oral_History_Inventory.pdf (accessed 10 February 2022).

2. For background in this history, see essays by me, Phil Teeuwssen, and Adrian Guldemon in *Origins: Historical Magazine of the Heritage Hall Archives*, XXXIX:1 (Spring 2021). I describe growing up in immigrant communities in Ontario; Teeuwssen focuses on Christian schools; and Guldemon examines Dutch Reformed immigrants building Christian institutions to fulfill the mission of bringing Christian faith to all areas of life. Finally, more generally, note Herman Ganzevoort, *A Bittersweet Land: The Dutch Experience in Canada, 1890–1980* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988); and Tymen Hofman, *The Canadian Story of the CRC: Its First Century* (Belleville, ON: Guardian Books, 2004).

Christian Convert and Communist Martyr: The 1928 Execution of Zhou Huiwu

Kurt Selles

Due to widespread national unrest, the Christian Reformed Church's mission in China was forced to close in the spring of 1927, and all but two of its missionaries were repatriated. The two missionaries who remained in Shanghai continued communicating with some of



Portrait photo of Zhou Huiwu,
1895-1928.

their Chinese workers and sporadically traveled to check on their work and their property in Rugao county of northern Jiangsu Province. During a visit there in June of 1928, the missionaries learned to their surprise and dismay that one of their earliest converts had been convicted and executed for participating in a Communist plot to overthrow the local government. Local accounts reported that, before being shot, the Christian convert Zhou Huiwu had declared, "Jesus went to the cross for the poor; I'm going to the cross for the sake of

the revolution. . . . I am not afraid of being nailed to the cross."¹

Zhou Huiwu's execution took place during the middle of one of the most complicated and difficult times in modern Chinese history. The Qing dynasty had fallen in 1911. Foreign powers were competing for spheres of interest around the country. Churches from those powers had sent missionaries to China. And the Chinese themselves were struggling to reclaim and unify their nation. Two movements for rebuilding China emerged, the Nationalists and the Communists. They started as a fragile coalition but over three decades fell into civil war. Zhou Hui's life was shaped by these events. His death came at the very beginning of the split between the two movements.

1895-1924: Early Life

Almost a hundred years after his death, the details of Zhou Huiwu's life remain sketchy. According to the Chinese Communist Party's account, Zhou Huiwu (*Chou Huei Wu*) was born in the year of the Ram on Saturday, 16 March 1895, in Rugao City, north of the Yangtze River in northern Jiangsu Province.² No available records provide details about his family, such as where his parents were from or if he had siblings. We do know, however, that as a child Zhou attended the oldest primary school in Rugao City, the Anding Academy, a school founded during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and named after a famous Confucian scholar of the

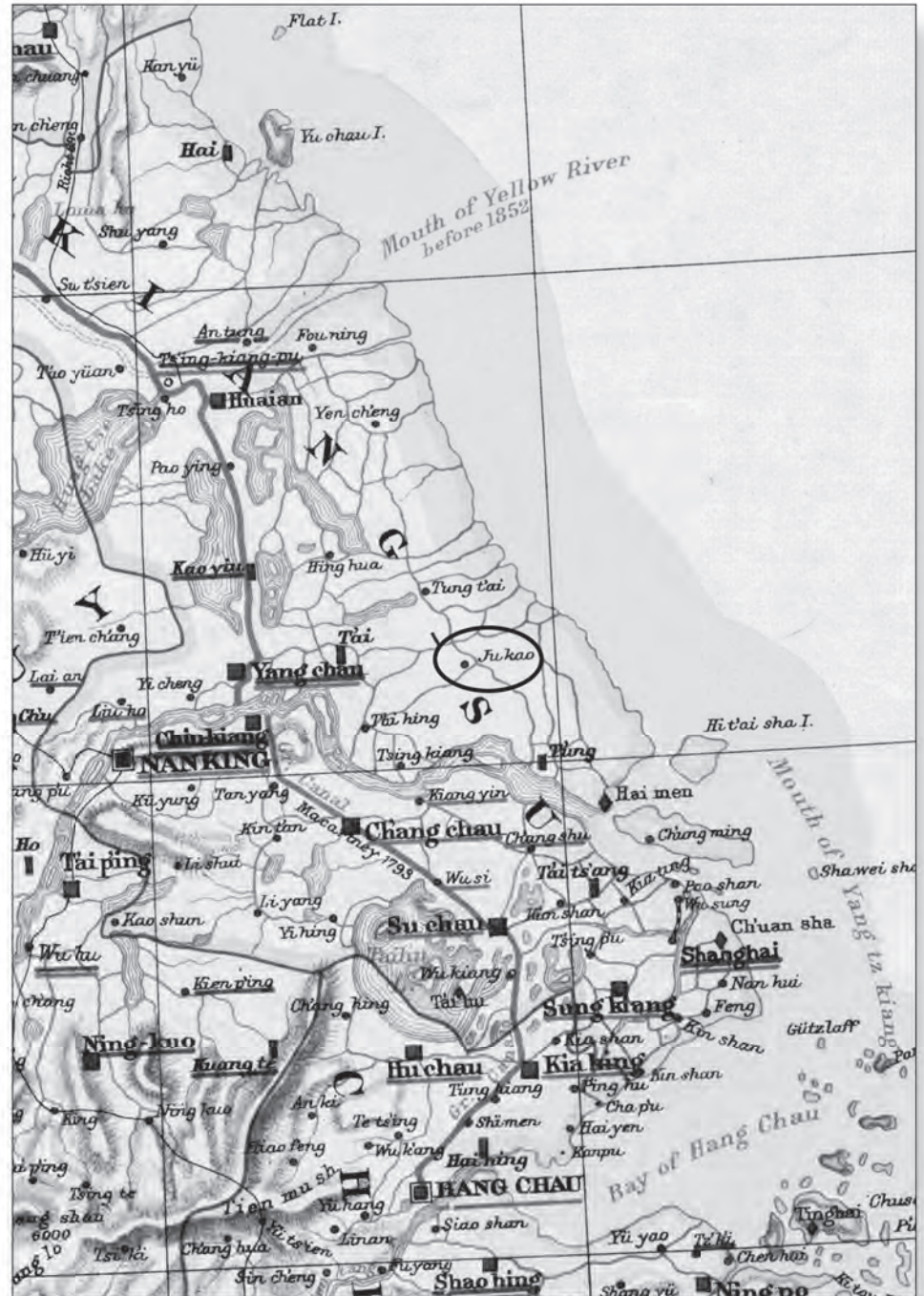
Kurt Selles is the author of journal articles and books on missions, notably *A New Way of Belonging: Covenant Theology, China, and the Christian Reformed Church, 1921–1951* (2011). He has served as missionary for the CRC and currently is director of *ReFrame Ministries for the CRC*.



Christian Reformed missionaries and their families arriving in Shanghai in 1920. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

Song dynasty (960-1279). Though “primary school” suggests the lowest level of education, there were actually two levels of primary schools established during the Republican era (1911-1949): a lower level for younger students and a higher level for older students. While it is unclear which level of primary education Zhou completed, the fact that he attended school at all, not to mention a well-known primary school, indicates that his parents somehow had the means to provide him with a rudimentary education. At the very least, we can assume that he was literate, offering him access to many avenues of Chinese society closed to the illiterate.³

Sometime after graduating from the Anding Academy, Zhou moved to Motou City to train as a pharmacist at the Jiangxing Ting apothecary. Motou, a market town in Rugao county about six miles south of the county seat, had a population of about 40,000 in the 1920s.⁴ Sometime later, we learn that Zhou “transferred” to another pharmacy in Fanchuan, a market



Selection from a Map of China produced for the China Inland Mission in 1900. Rugao (called “Jukao” in this map) is circled. It is east of Nanjing (“Nanking” on the map) and north of Shanghai. Edward Stanford (London: Stanford’s Geography Establishment, 1900). Library of Congress 2007633876.

town about one hundred miles north and west, two counties away from his hometown of Rugao City. Fanchuan, though not a major city like nearby Yangzhou, was itself a bustling county town, noted during the Republican era for its “restaurants, smokehouses,

theaters, and brothels.”⁵ It is unclear if Zhou moved to Fanchuan to continue his studies or to begin working as a pharmacist.

1924-1925: Christian Conversion
At some unknown date, Zhou left

Fanchuan and returned to his hometown of Rugao City. Though it is impossible to verify the exact date, it was most likely sometime in or before 1924, since the Christian Reformed Church's (CRC) China missionaries note that they had first met Zhou in that year.⁶ Although we do not know when he returned to Rugao, the gazetteer account of his life records that



City gate of Rugao. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

"because of the death of his mother at an early age, he had no interest in business, and once was so depressed that he became ill, and was forced to return to Rugao City."⁷ The record goes on to add that when he returned to Rugao, "he moved into the Christian church and became a Christian."⁸ These vague statements raise a host of questions. When did his mother die? Was she the reason for his depression and illness? Did he leave Fanchuan because of her death or because he had decided to give up working as a pharmacist? And why did he move into the church? Where was his father



Missionary Albert Smit at the rear entrance of the CRC chapel in Rugao. Image courtesy of Heritage Hall.

when he returned to Rugao? Had his father left the city? Did he reject Zhou because of the stigma of his illness? Or did Zhou reject his father, perhaps because of his depression and illness? Sadly, there is no way to answer any of these questions.

We can piece together something about Zhou Huiwu's conversion to Christianity, however. After returning to Rugao, Zhou took up residence in the CRC mission's east gate chapel. There he may have lived in a space at the back of the storefront-converted chapel behind or to the side of the pulpit area. Living in the east gate chapel would have exposed Zhou to a beehive of Christian activity. Under the direction of the missionaries, the chapel organized and led worship services twice on Sundays, held daily preaching services, and ran a weekly Sunday-school program. The missionaries themselves also sponsored Chinese and English Bible classes in the chapel. Usually, attendance at the Chinese Bible classes was sporadic and sparse, typically with just a handful of students. The English Bible classes, on the other hand, could occasionally draw up to forty participants.

Surrounded by Christian activity and in contact with the missionaries, Zhou Huiwu apparently decided to become a Christian sometime between 1924 and his baptism at the end of 1925. Under the spiritual care of the missionaries, he would have undergone a rigorous process confirming his conversion before receiving baptism and church membership.⁹ After converts made a formal request, the missionaries carefully examined them before approving them for baptism. Sometimes, despite having given a satisfactory testimony, those seeking baptism and membership had to be examined more than once before being accepted.¹⁰ After receiving mission approval, converts' names were announced at worship services two Sundays in a row. The week before receiving the sacrament, church members were then invited to a meeting at the home of a missionary to voice possible concerns about the candidate.

Zhou Huiwu formally requested baptism sometime in 1925 and after a successful examination was baptized late in the year. About his baptism, mission minutes record, "On Sunday morning, November 22, three men,

Mr. Lee, Mr. Liew, and Mr. Dzew [Zhou] made public confession of their faith in the Lord, and thereupon were baptized. . . . In the afternoon we again met with these three brethren and the other Christians of Jukao [Rugao] and together commemorated the death of our Lord. Dr. Huizenga administered the sacrament. A very happy day for us all."¹¹

The missionaries carefully monitored the spiritual lives of their converts once they had received baptism and been accepted into the church. One area they took very seriously was participation in the sacrament of communion. As a rule, CRC mission churches practiced "closed communion" for the three times the sacrament was offered annually. For two

Sundays before communion, notice was given of the date when the sacrament was to be served. Then, similar to the vetting of baptismal candidates, the week before communion a meeting took place at one of the missionaries' homes where objections could be raised against anyone electing to receive the sacrament.¹² As a precaution to guard the Table and to avoid misunderstanding by seekers or casual church attendees, communion services were held at a separate Sunday-afternoon service. Sometimes the missionaries had to take strong action when their converts fell short of the missionaries' spiritual standards. In 1926 they established a "Committee on Discipline," for instance, "in view of the seeming delinquency on

the part of some of our Christians in attendance at public worship."¹³ Through this committee on discipline, the missionaries addressed the peccant spiritual misdemeanors of their flock.

1926: Radicalization

Nothing in the mission record suggests any concerns about Zhou Huiwu's Christian faith or practice. A local source noted that Zhou Huiwu helped with teaching Sunday school songs to children in the church.¹⁴ The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) narrative, however, mentions that Zhou "became acquainted with the underground workers of our party while he was in the church, and began to lean towards revolution."¹⁵ Why or



Young Men's Society in Rugao. Members and friends gathered in 1927 to bid farewell to Rev. and Mrs. Dykstra who were returning to the U.S. Zhou Huiwu is in the middle of the group, face circled. Image courtesy of Heritage Hall.

how he was attracted to the revolution is unknown, but that he was attracted is hardly surprising since communist ideas had sparked a flame in China in the 1920s. After its founding in Shanghai in July of 1921, the Chinese Communist Party membership quickly spread throughout the country, especially among educated young men and women in urban settings. The CCP made its entrance into Rugao county from neighboring Nantong City through primary school teachers, such as Xu Fangde, a Rugao native trained and radicalized at the Nantong Normal (Teachers) School. Returning to his hometown of Rugao in the mid-1920s to teach at a primary school, Xu used his teaching post as an opportunity to recruit young people for the Communist revolution.¹⁶

Because Zhou Huiwu had already been out of school for some time by 1925, it is highly unlikely that Xu Fangde directly recruited him. Perhaps, though, one of Xu's recruits did, or maybe Zhou was introduced to Communism through a friend or an acquaintance. We can only speculate, obviously, but one possible source of Zhou's Communist connection may have been another young man named Liu Junxia.

Born in 1899, four years younger than Zhou, Liu Junxia, a native of Shuangdian, another market town in Rugao county, had received a primary school education before being apprenticed to a grain store. In 1917 he moved to a city south of the Yangtze River in Jiangsu province to study surveying and mapping. After graduating, Liu returned to Rugao county to work as a surveyor.

Through surveying work in the countryside, Liu's CCP biographic entry notes, he learned much about "the suffering of China's peasant farmers."¹⁷ In the "May 30th Incident" of 1925 in Shanghai, foreign police killed nine Chinese students and

injured a dozen more. The incident sparked massive national protests, including in Rugao. Liu Junxia stepped up his activism in the countryside, "distributing progressive books and materials among the peasants," exposing peasants to "the crimes of filthy officials, local tyrants and evil gentry," and promoting "revolutionary ideas."¹⁸

The party eventually feared that Liu's activism was becoming too risky, and it ordered him to move into Rugao City. There he took a job in 1927 at a publishing company and was secretly placed in charge of the CCP's labor organizing efforts in the city. Liu Junxia and Zhou Huiwu probably first met in 1927 when both participated in the founding of the local Nationalist Party office, while secretly meeting at the same time with other Communist sympathizers.¹⁹

Nationally, the spring of 1927 marked a public split between Nationalists and Communists in their united effort to eradicate the country of regional warlords and reunite the nation under the Nationalist party.

Having reached Shanghai by March of 1927, the Nationalist general Chiang Kai-shek secretly organized a purging of Communist elements from the Nationalist Party.

On April 12, in what became known as the "Shanghai Massacre," hundreds of Communists were killed in Shanghai, and in the weeks following many more thousands died around the country. The spring chaos and violence touched Rugao county as well, but not as a Communist purge. The violence involved a bloody clash between the militia of the Nanjing warlord Sun Chuanfang, who controlled northern Jiangsu Province. Together, those loyal to Chiang Kai-shek and to communism fiercely fought to overthrow Sun's forces in the county.

One Communist Party member in the effort to overthrow warlord Sun was Zhang Liansheng. Though not a Rugao native, Zhang was working both as a teacher at a primary school in the county in 1927 and for the CCP in cooperation with the local Nationalist Party. In April, Zhang



The Third Plenary Session of the Second Central Committee of the Kuomintang, March 1927. The KMT still included communists at this meeting, including Mao Zedong, future communist leader of China. (Circled, third from right in second row.) Wikipedia Commons.

took part in leading the attack against warlord Sun's militia in Rugao's countryside. Armed with hoes, machetes, broadswords, and spears, thousands of peasants attacked Sun's troops. In the bloody clash, one of Sun's generals had his right arm hacked off, and five soldiers and 17 peasants were killed.

According to the CCP account, after Nationalist leaders in Rugao learned of Communist Zhang Liansheng's role in organizing the uprising, for unknown reasons they secretly plotted to arrest him. Before they could, however, Zhou Huiwu, also a member of the local Nationalist Party and a clandestine Communist sympathizer, informed CCP leaders, who ordered Zhou to quietly escort Zhang Liansheng out of the county, which he successfully did.²⁰

May 10, 1927: Rickshaw Drivers' Protest

It is unknown how or if Liu Junxia participated in the battle against the Nanjing warlord Sun Chuanfang, but just weeks after the battle Liu and Zhou Huiwu teamed up to organize a strike by rickshaw drivers in Rugao City.²¹ Sometime earlier in 1927, the Rugao Nationalist Party office had appointed Liu Junxia to work on labor issues. The Nationalist Party also selected Zhou Huiwu and several others to work with him. Liu and his team had immediately begun unionizing barbers, sanitation workers, textile workers, and rickshaw drivers. Rickshaws, the main means of transportation in Rugao, as well as all of urban China, constituted a particularly sensitive labor issue as a highly charged symbol of oppression of laborers.

According to the CCP account, the Rugao government's accounting office "colluded" with the city's police to squeeze rickshaw drivers. The government had issued new regula-

tions that prohibited rickshaws from being parked on city streets, in back alleys, or at bridgeheads, under the guise of improving "traffic order." The new regulations stipulated that rickshaws could be parked only in empty backstreets.²² Consequently, the CCP directed Liu Junxia and Zhou Huiwu to organize a strike, reasoning that a strike would highlight the plight of rickshaw drivers and strengthen the efforts of the CCP in the city.

According to the CCP's detailed narrative, at 8:00 on the morning of Tuesday, May 10, 1927, more than three hundred rickshaw drivers jammed their vehicles together outside the front gate of the city government's accounting office. The throng of strikers shouted, "Let's sell our rickshaws to Zhu Yinzong," the director of the accounting office.²³ When no one opened the gate, the protest came to a standstill. Representing the Rugao county trade union office, Zhou Huiwu arrived on the scene and shouted to the strikers, "Everyone settle down!" Then, taking aside Shen Xuegen, the head of the rickshaw trade union, Zhou suggested that the rickshaw drivers go to the CRC mission's east gate chapel to discuss what to do next.

Once the rickshaw drivers had assembled in the chapel, which was closed for services because of the recent unrest, Zhou Huiwu stepped up to the pulpit to address them. Before he could, however, five city police officers armed with guns burst into the chapel. The policeman in charge rushed to the pulpit and shouted, "Who's in charge here?" With an angry cry, the rickshaw drivers roared, "We're all in charge!" The head policeman then turned to Zhou Huiwu, shouting, "What's going on here?" Standing straight and tall, according to the CCP's narrative, Zhou responded, "What do you think we're doing?"

When the policeman noticed Zhou's long scholar's robe with his official KMT triangular badge pinned on his chest, he immediately calmed down. Then, turning and addressing the strikers, the policeman said, "Okay, choose a few representatives and follow me to the police station." He then asked, "How many rickshaw parking spaces are there in the city, and where are they located?" But the workers only shouted in reply, "We don't want to send a delegation. We all want to go."

At that moment, according to the CCP account, Zhou Huiwu turned and "winked" at Shen Xuegen, also a Communist sympathizer, who, understanding the signal, said to the rickshaw drivers, "Okay, the head of our labor union is going, so don't leave and wait for us to come back." With that Shen, Zhou, and four other members of the rickshaw drivers' union went to the police station. According to the CCP account, the delegation returned to the chapel thirty minutes later, grinning and informing the rickshaw drivers that "the police station has promised to set up fifteen parking spaces on the streets of the city." Although they had achieved a small victory through the threat of more labor unrest, Shen Xuegen challenged the strikers, "We can't let up the pressure," adding, "We need to keep organizing resistance."

1928: Failed Uprising, Arrest, and Execution

In retrospect, the 10 May 1927 Rugao City rickshaw drivers' protest may have been the high point of Communist-sparked activity in Rugao during the 1920s. Though the CCP continued organizing resistance after this successful protest, by the end of the year the Party's fortunes in the county had shifted dramatically. The chief reason for their reversal of fortunes lies with a change in the lo-



Trina Selles, grandmother of the author, in a rickshaw. Photo likely taken outside Nanjing, circa 1926. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

cal Nationalist Party's attitude toward Communists and other left-leaning sympathizers. The Nationalist/Communist alliance had violently ended in April 1927, but in Rugao, and some other rural districts, cooperation between the two factions had continued into the fall of that year.²⁴

The Nationalist Party branch had only been formally established in the county in early 1927; and, some of its charter members, including Liu Junxia and Zhou Huiwu, were openly supportive of the Nationalist Party and only secretly supportive of the Communist movement. Perhaps that helps explain why a purge did not take place immediately after April 12 in Rugao.

By November 1927, however, this peaceful coexistence ended when the Nationalist Party forced known CCP members into the open, driving them to flee the city. It is unclear what caused the Nationalist Party to finally act, but it may have been that Rugao county appeared frequently in the national press as a hotbed of Communist activity.²⁵ From Rugao, CCP members fled to the western border of Rugao county, a poor area from

which some of them had originally come.²⁶ Though they had participated secretly in Communist activities, neither Liu Junxia nor Zhou Huiwu's connections to the CCP were uncov-



Ferry boats and house boats on the moat around Rugao. The missionaries sometimes used boats like this when they travelled. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

ered in the purge, and they remained in Rugao City.

From the villages of Lugang and Jiang'an in western Rugao county, the refugee CCP leaders quickly regrouped and sprang back into action. They followed a national CCP plan formulated early in 1928 to foment

revolution through strikes and uprisings, and they began to make plans for rural unrest in western Rugao county. In April, they joined with CCP members in neighboring Taixing County to plan simultaneous peasant uprisings on May 1, International Workers' Day. Leading up to the riots, the CCP encouraged peasant organizations to demand rent reductions and to promote land reform. They also mobilized a propaganda campaign to distribute leaflets and post slogans in the surrounding villages.

Because the two men were still members-in-good-standing of the Nationalist Party, their Communist sympathies still secret, the CCP directed Zhou Huiwu and Liu Junxia to remain in Rugao City. With other undercover comrades, they were to continue organizing workers, shop assistants, and the poor residents of the city to draw possible attention away from the peasant riots being

organized in the countryside. Since the Rugao City government was once again threatening to squeeze the city's rickshaw drivers, and perhaps because of their successful protest a year earlier, Liu and Zhou decided to initiate another rickshaw drivers' protest. At 9:00 in the morning on Sunday, April

29, over three-hundred rickshaw drivers gathered again outside the gate of the Rugao City government office. They demanded that the proposed rickshaw tax increases be rescinded. Though details are lacking, as it had done a year earlier the city government backed down, agreeing not to raise taxes.

Forty-eight hours later, at 4:00 a.m. on Tuesday, May 1, the CCP-organized peasant uprising began in the western part of Rugao county. The peasant mob attacked a county police station, killing five police officers and capturing several guns. Later the same day, CCP leaders led 3,000 peasants from the surrounding districts in attacking Lugang and Jiang'an villages from the north and from the south. During the rioting in the countryside, which lasted five days, peasant mobs seized more guns from rural "landlords and tyrants," burned the houses of 27 "bully landlords and evil gentry," and broke into grain storehouses, distributing food, along with clothing, to the poor. Only after calling in troops from adjacent counties was the Rugao county government finally able to quell the unrest by May 5.²⁷

Following their successful rickshaw drivers' strike, while the peasants rampaged in the western part of Rugao county, Liu Junxia and Zhou Huiwu remained in Rugao City. Since government troops had been called out of the city to deal with the unrest in the countryside, CCP organizers planned to bring the peasant unrest into the city as well. Unexpectedly, however, a CCP leader was captured during the rioting and betrayed his comrades. On Saturday, May 5, county police stormed CCP hideouts around the villages of Lugang and Jiang'an. Then four days later, on May 9, police arrested nine Communists in Rugao City, among them Liu Junxia and Zhou Huiwu together, possibly



Street scene in China, 1920s. The sign reads "Down With The Imperialists," referring to the influence in China of foreign powers such as the U.S., Britain, France, and Japan. Image courtesy of Heritage Hall.

in the CRC's east gate chapel. Despite being tortured, bloodied, and beaten, the two men yet "remained steadfast and unyielding." When Zhou's "fiancée" visited him in jail, he declared, "Jesus went to the cross for the poor; I'm going to the cross for the sake of the revolution." He then added, "The reactionary government would not let me live, and I am not afraid of being nailed to the cross."²⁸ At their trial shortly after their arrests, Liu Junxia scolded the county judge, who sentenced both men to death.

Liu Junxia and Zhou Huiwu's executions took place at 10:00 in the morning on Tuesday, May 15, on a school exercise grounds outside the city's west gate. On the way to their execution, to which they were likely conveyed on a truck bed through the city for all to see, they sang the "Internationale," the battle hymn of the worldwide communist movement.²⁹ As they were being forced to kneel, probably before a crowd of onlookers, both men struggled to stand

and loudly denounced the crimes of Wang Haoran, the county magistrate, and Shen Jinghua, the director of public security.

According to the CCP account, their final words were "Communist fighters will never die!" and "Long live the revolution!" Finally, after their being secured on their knees, the executioner shot them both, presumably using a revolver with a single shot to the back of the head. Their heads were displayed on the city wall by one of the main gates, as often was done to discourage others. Liu Junxia was thirty years old at his death, and Zhou Huiwu was thirty-four. After his "martyrdom," the Rugao CCP County Party Committee ratified Zhou Huiwu as a member of the Communist Party of China.

A month later, at a meeting on June 11, 1928, the two CRC China missionaries who had remained in Shanghai traveled up the Yangtze River to hold a mission meeting in Rugao. After opening with prayer,

noting attendance, and approving minutes from their April 23 meeting, they recorded in item “4.” the following:

The sad duty devolves upon us to report the execution of Mr. Chow Hui Wu [Zhou Huiwu]. Mr. Chow was baptized by Rev. H.A. Dijkstra [Dykstra] in December of 1925, and continued to show interest in the work of the gospel here. We knew he used to be an ardent Nationalist and was active in politics, but we knew nothing of any Communist activities in which he is supposed to have been engaged. But early in May he was arrested as one of the alleged leaders in a Communist plot against the Jukao government and within a few days after his arrest was, by order of the local Magistrate, shot and beheaded and his head exposed on the city wall. It is reported that he confessed having had part in this plot, and the common opinion in Jukao [Rugao] is that he was actually guilty. From the knowledge the Mission had of him over a period of at least four years, we are convinced that he had a clear knowledge of the way of salvation, and we find it difficult to believe that he could deny his profession of faith to the extent of plotting destruction and murder.³⁰

Christian Covert and Communist Martyr

Much about Zhou Huiwu's short life remains an unsolved puzzle, with many pieces not fitting squarely and major pieces missing. Consequently, drawing conclusions about him almost a hundred years after his death presents a difficult, if not impossible, task. One particularly knotty question concerns his actions as a church member and a patriot based on the conflicting accounts of him by the two political movements he was associated with. The mission's belief in Zhou's Christian commitment was based on the missionaries' careful, ongoing spiritual vetting of their converts. Moreover, that he became

a Christian during a virulent wave of anti-Christian protests sweeping across China in 1925, including in Rugao, where protesters disrupted Christmas services that year, further supports the credibility of Zhou's Christian commitment.

Along with his Christian convictions, Zhou was an “ardent” nationalist involved in local Nationalist Party politics, something that does not appear to have troubled the missionaries. They were unaware, however, that he was also secretly involved in Communist activities. Zhou was hardly the only Christian who saw communism as a possible means for national salvation.³¹ But what about his confession of and conviction

for plotting to violently overthrow the local government, something local reports seem to maintain as accurate?

Knowing the young man as they did, the missionaries themselves simply could not square Zhou's plotting death and destruction with what they believed was his genuine faith. Their own report of these events seems carefully worded, possibly to cast doubt on the charges against him. After all, this was a time of civil war and extreme turmoil in the country, and these trials were motivated by political and military aims. It seems entirely plausible that Zhou fell victim to these aims.

If there are questions surrounding Zhou Huiwu's Christian faith and his Communist activities, there is no question that the CCP has claimed

him as a martyr of their revolution. Zhou's partner Liu Junxia was already a CCP member when they were convicted and executed for the same crimes. But it is unclear when the CCP posthumously inducted him as a member. This may suggest that Zhou had not fully committed himself to the CCP or adopted all its goals and methods.

Despite being a minor figure, Zhou



Zhou Huiwu Place in the Rugao Museum of the Communist Revolution. Courtesy of Kurt Selles.

is still lauded today in Rugao's museum of the revolution. Highlighted in every case are not Zhou Huiwu's Christian faith but his nonviolent, successful rickshaw drivers' protests in 1927 and 1928. As with all of Rugao's martyrs, the depictions of Zhou's life and activity clearly read as hagiography (a genre of Christian writing about the lives of saints), which calls into question the accuracy and truth of the stories the CCP presents. Zhou's small story fits too conveniently with the CCP's larger story, which heralds the Party's salvation of China while relentlessly legitimizing its continued governance of the country.

So, in conclusion, though it is clear that Zhou was a Christian, that he was a Communist martyr is less clear. Since we must rely on “other voices”

rather than Zhou's own, obviously we can only speculate from the record available. Though scant, the missionary record seems less biased and thus possibly more reliable than the CCP's exaggerated account of Zhou's actions. In both accounts, Zhou Huiwu comes across as a committed nationalist whose approach was to "negotiate" rather than impose his will through violence. His guilt, if any, may be by association with the violence that took place during the peasant riots in the countryside, with the label of Communist martyr later conveniently bestowed on him. Unfortunately, there is no way to know for sure. The best we can say is that Zhou Huiwu, the most famous figure in the CRC's China mission history, was killed and, accurately or inaccurately, became known as a Communist martyr. As to the other many unanswered questions about Zhou Huiwu's life, we have no way to make a determination. ❸

Endnotes

1. This quote is from the original Rugao County gazetteer of Zhou's life and can be found on multiple Chinese websites, such as "Baidu Baike," the Chinese internet encyclopedia. See <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%91%A8%E6%83%A0%E5%90%BE/4148157>.

2. Chinese names and places in this article use the pinyin system of Chinese transliteration, with the Wade-Giles romanization, where needed, set off in parenthesis.

3. Estimates are that 80 percent of the Chinese population was illiterate before 1949, and the percentage was possibly even higher in the 1920s. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-09/25/c_138420577.htm.

4. See <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%A3%A8%E5%A4%B4%E9%95%87/9007103>.

5. See <https://baike.baidu.com/item/樊川鎮>.

6. CRC China Mission records, Mission Meeting Minutes, June 11, 1928. Heritage Hall Archives, Calvin University.

7. See <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%A3%A8%E5%A4%B4%E9%95%87/9007103>.

8. Ibid.

9. China Mission, Annual Report for the Year 1924, "E. Work now being done" and "F. Spiritual Progress." Heritage Hall Archives.

10. Minutes of Mission Meeting, May 3, 1926; item 3. Heritage Hall Archives.

11. Minutes of Mission Meeting, November 30, 1925. Heritage Hall Archives.

12. Ibid, item 6.

13. Ibid, item 9.

14. Noted from an article in the author's possession written by Guan Weilin, who attended the CRC mission's Sunday as a boy in the 1920s and went on to work as a teacher in Shanghai. Where this was published is unclear but most likely in the Rugao historical gazetteer. "Some Notes about the American Presbyterian Mission in Rugao," May 1976, revised July 7, 1985, 134–140.

15. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%91%A8%E6%83%A0%E5%90%BE/4148157?fr=aladdin>.

16. On Xu Fangde, see "Bloody Fertile Spring Mud: The Stories of Eight Rugao County Party Secretaries," <http://app.cpcrugao.cn/?app=article&controller=article&action=show&contentid=54489>.

17. <http://ren.richinfer.net/history/5/liujunxia.html>.

18. Ibid.

19. "Bloody Fertile Spring Mud."

20. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%91%A8%E6%83%A0%E5%90%BE/4148157?fr=aladdin>.

21. The narrative of this strike follows the biographic entry of Zhou Huiwu's short life and is edited for clarity. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%91%A8%E6%83%A0%E5%90%BE/4148157?fr=aladdin>.

22. Ibid.

23. Though both Liu Junxia and Zhou Huiwu are credited with organizing the protest, only Zhou appears in the narrative.

24. See Lenore Barkan, *Nationalists, Communists, and Rural Leaders: Political Dynamics in a Chinese County, 1927–1937* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 1983), 460.

25. Ibid.

26. Barkan, 473.

27. Ibid, 475.

28. At least one account refers to his prison visitor as his wife.

29. See, for example, Lu Xun's famous scene in *The True Story of Ah Q* of 1922.

30. China Mission Minutes, June 11, 1928, Heritage Hall Archives, Calvin University. According to mission minutes from their 30 November 1925 meeting, Zhou Huiwu had been baptized on Sunday, November 22 of that year.

31. One example is Deng Yuzhi, a YMCA leader who was sympathetic to Communism as a means for saving China. See Emily Honig, "Christianity, Feminism, and Communism: The Life and Times of Deng Yuzhi," in Daniel Bays, ed., *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, Stanford University Press, 1996, 243–262.

Rudolf Albert van Angelbeek: A Polished Rascal in Pella, IA

Janet Sjaarda Sheeres

Rudolf van Angelbeek's angelic face fronted a scheming mind. Behind his handsome and debonair exterior existed a wily brain bent on mischief to elevate his professional and financial status.¹ How had this well-dressed, well-spoken young man been able to bamboozle the honest and upright citizens of Pella, Iowa, to such an extent that they allowed him access to their homes and church pulpits? How had he convinced the pastor and council of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in Dispatch, Kansas, that they needed an academy and training school for young men to equip them to attend the denomination's Theological School in Grand Rapids (now Calvin Theological Seminary)? And even after he had been convicted of fraud and sent to jail, in May 1893, how was it that some people still steadfastly believed that he had been the deceived and was not the deceiver?

Background

It was not having been disadvantaged or growing up in poverty that made van Angelbeek obsessed with advancing in the world, so much so that he was willing to take liberties with the law. No, he came from a well-connected and upstanding clan. His father and grandfather were career Dutch government officials in Indonesia, then a Dutch colony, where Rudolf was born on 13 May 1866. He was the eighth of twelve children of Johannes Jacobus van Angelbeek and Christina Elisabeth In 't Veld.

In 1868, when Rudolf was two years old, the family returned to the Netherlands for his father's furlough.² The family first lived in Leiden but by 1876 was in Amsterdam, where his mother passed away that year. Perhaps because his father was now a widower, or because he wanted his children to be educated in the Netherlands, the family did not return to Indonesia. Johannes died in 1888 in Dordrecht, leaving the twenty-two-year-old Rudolf to find his own way in life.

Rudolf spent his first school years in a Dutch grade school but by age fifteen was attending a boarding school in Almkerk, in the province of Noord Brabant, studying to become a teacher. He seems to have been particularly gifted in languages and spent a couple of years in Brussels, Belgium, and some time in England, gaining expertise in French and English. When he was twenty (1886), and living and teaching school in Emmikhoven, nearby Almkerk, he had to register for the Dutch military draft. He was exempted from service due to *broederdienst*, meaning that, since his two older brothers were already serving, he did not have to.

Perhaps Rudolf felt that, being the offspring of diplomats, he should not be a lowly grade-school teacher, or perhaps teaching did not pay enough to cover his lifestyle. Whatever the case, he set out to expand his career.

A family acquaintance, Willem Johannes Leijds, was the Secretary of State of the South African Republic.

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

Leijds had also been born in Indonesia, only seven years before Rudolf. Leijds had studied law at the Amsterdam University at the same time that



Willem Johannes Leijds, 1859-1940. Portrait by Jan Veth, 1896. Wikipedia Commons.

the van Angelbeek family was living in the city, and being from Indonesia, he likely was acquainted with them. Leijds began his official career on behalf of the government of the Republic (also known as the Transvaal) when he was only twenty-five years old.³ As its representative in Europe, he traveled between European capitals. His fast rise in the diplomatic world may have inspired Rudolf to likewise set his sights on the Transvaal. Leijds told Rudolf that if he ever decided to go to the Republic, he should look him up when he got there.

To South Africa

Leijds also suggested to Rudolf that he meet with Baron Eugene Oppenheim, the Consul-General of the South African Republic in France, who lived in Paris, and who was planning a trip to South Africa. Rudolf and the baron, who happened to be the same age,



Castle RMS Roslin Castle. It served as a troop ship after the outbreak of the Boer War in 1899.

hit it off, and Rudolf decided to travel with him to South Africa. The use of steamships for ocean voyages had cut travel time considerably. Nevertheless, the trip from France to South Africa still would have taken enough time for Baron Oppenheim to help Rudolf falsify diplomas, stating that he had graduated from the University of Paris, France, and London University in England. Subsequent information about the baron makes this scheme highly probable. Oppenheim was involved in a dubious business venture in South Africa in the early 1890s, and he would be jailed by a Belgian court in 1900 for falsifying accounts.⁴

Traveling together on the *RMS Roslin Castle* from London on June 3, 1891, the two young men colluded so that, when Rudolf showed up at the South African Republic's Board of Education with the Secretary of State, Leijds, he supplied it with the forged diplomas, the documents vouched for by Consul-General Baron Oppenheim. Leijds then recommended that the Board find a position for this talented young man as soon as possible.⁵

Rudolf's streak of lucky breaks continued. Victoria College in Stellenbosch had a vacancy due to the promotion of Prof. Nicolaas Mansvelt as Superintendent of Education for the South African Republic. Mansvelt was only too happy to have this seemingly qualified young man take over his position as professor of modern languages at the College.⁶ Rudolf's starting salary was £400 annually (approx. \$45,500 in today's US Dollars).

Soon several faculty members at Victoria College began to suspect something was amiss. It was not just the young man's instant appointment to such a high position, but that he also immediately had a large photo taken of himself in full academic regalia, which was to hang in the college. Van Angelbeek's colleagues began an investigation and discovered that his diplomas were forged. They



Victoria College. It began as Stellenbosch College in 1881, was renamed Victoria College in 1887, and became Stellenbosch University in 1918.

also found many smaller scams. He did not pay his bills; he appropriated books not his; and expensive items disappeared from where he had been. As soon as Rudolf's deceptions came to light, the college, embarrassed at having been duped, gave him £100 to immediately leave the Republic.⁷

To America

The question for Rudolf was where to go. Certainly not back to the Netherlands, nor France or England, where his ill repute would easily follow him. But America was the land of opportunity, was it not? Van Angelbeek remembered that he had a friend living in the United States, Rev. Arie Vanden Heuvel. The two men had lived for a time in the same village, Emmikhoven, where Vanden Heuvel had been a baker's assistant and van Angelbeek had taught school.⁸ Vanden Heuvel's wife had grown up in the

village, and the couple's three children were born there.⁹

In 1883 the Vanden Heuvel family emigrated to the United States, to Grand Rapids, where Arie enrolled in the Theological School, graduating in 1890. After a short pastorate in Zutphen (Jamestown), Michigan, he moved to Dispatch (formerly Rotterdam), Kansas, in February 1892.¹⁰

Van Angelbeek arrived in the United States the same month and year. It is not known if he first traveled to Dispatch and then conferred with Vanden Heuvel about what to do, or whether Vanden Heuvel had suggested by letter that he take up residence in Pella, as there were no teaching opportunities in Dispatch.

The population of Pella was only 2,408 in 1890, but it boasted a college (Central College, founded in 1854), three Reformed churches, one Christian Reformed, one Dutch Presbyterian, and one Baptist.¹¹ By train the distance from Pella to Dispatch would have taken less than half a day, so that the two friends could still communicate now and again.

In Pella, Iowa

In Pella, van Angelbeek immediately made a favorable impression on the citizens. "He came with many letters of introduction to prominent people. His advent was hailed in the local

papers, both English and Dutch, and all his learning and social distinctions were enlarged upon by an eager press."¹²

Later, in the deposition at his trial for fraud, van Angelbeek stated his reasons for locating in Pella—namely, that he wanted quiet and seclusion in which to carry on the exacting mental work of writing books and examining applicants.¹³ He also claimed to be employed by a Chicago publishing firm to write books on the World's Fair to be held in Chicago in 1893 and to oversee their printing in various languages for the European market.¹⁴ He stated further that,

In February 1892 I arrived in the United States. I tried to procure a position as professor.¹⁵ While I was in Pella, I read an advertisement placed by Andrew Walker in an educational journal asking for a secretary for the National Association of Professors. I went to Chicago, met with him, and got the position. To show that I was serious about it, I had to give him \$75 as proof. I received that money from Mr. van Nimwegen in Pella.¹⁶

The position that van Angelbeek acquired with the National Association of Professors turned out to be secretary for the National University of Illinois. This "University" should not be confused with the National

would not notice since both entities were headquartered in Chicago, Illinois. The legitimate National University had its roots in the Chautauqua movement, a popular U.S. program of adult education that flourished during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁷ It required reading and correspondence study to earn a diploma and had been duly registered with the State of Illinois in 1889.

Later, at the trial, the Illinois Secretary of State testified that records failed to show the incorporation of any institution under the name of "The National University of Illinois, that van Angelbeek claimed to represent."¹⁸

Since van Angelbeek had fudged his own diplomas from universities in Paris and London, he may have recognized an opportunity to "help" others "achieve" the same result. He opened a United States Post Office box in Chicago, where prospective "students" could send their \$5 with their applications. He had fancy letterhead printed with the name of the university in Latin: UNIVERSITAS NATIONALIS IN REPUBLICA ILLINOENSI, with Prof. F. Harkins, M.A. Ph.D. as Chancellor and himself as Prof. R. A. van Angelbeek, Lit. D., F.N.U. He claimed that the school was modeled after the University of London, that it was chartered by the state of Illinois to confer degrees, and that it had 45 departments, all staffed with eminent professors.¹⁹ By using the name Harkins on the letterhead, he also was clearly trying to connect his fraudulent university with Harkins's legitimate one. The National University only granted diplomas in literature, whereas van Angelbeek was ready to grant diplomas in many disciplines.

While van Angelbeek was busily engaged in the fraudulent university scheme, he gave a series of lectures from the pulpit of the Pella Dutch Presbyterian church. In an age before film, radio, and television, people



Postcard, early 1900s, with scenes from Pella, Iowa.

University that had its offices on Throop Street in Chicago and whose chancellor was Mr. F. W. Harkins. Notice the subtle difference in name, just by adding "of Illinois" to "National University," a difference that most people

enjoyed going to lectures. An excellent orator could draw large crowds and make a tidy sum from tickets sold.²⁰ He also gave private language instruction in grammar and literature and in Dutch, English, French, German, and Italian.²¹

At the same time, van Angelbeek was placing ads in American educational journals seeking a governess for his three daughters while traveling abroad. He stated that he was a wealthy man and that interested applicants should not apply unless they had qualifications for the position. As soon as he received a reply, he wrote to the prospective employees that if they did not have a diploma showing their qualifications, they could apply for one by sending \$5 to the National University of Illinois in Chicago. He also had brochures printed for those desiring to “accelerate” their studies and receive a degree without going through all the necessary studies. Again, the “prospective graduate,” when applying, had to enclose \$5 before the diploma could be considered. When students were approved, they were asked to mail in \$30 to receive an official diploma. These were no small amounts. Five dollars in terms of today’s buying power amounts to approximately \$150, and \$30 to approximately \$850 to \$900. Advertisements for these diplomas were placed in newspapers in various countries—after all, who would not want a diploma from an American university? For most of the year 1892 van Angelbeek worked his magic in Pella, all the while escorting one of Pella’s richest heiresses.

Suspicious Bubble Up

The first tear in the fabric of van Angelbeek’s finely woven scam came from abroad toward the end of the year, from Great Britain, where Edgar D. Broughton Rouse, claiming to be of Christ College, Cambridge, England,

had been perpetrating the same fraud in Europe, issuing bogus diplomas and implying that they came from the National University of the State of Illinois. These diplomas could be had at prices ranging from ten to sixty guineas and were said to be signed by “Prof. Vanangelbach,” Secretary of the University. They gave the name Broughton Rouse of Christ College, Cambridge University, as the English agent for the school.²²

As soon as people in Pella got wind of this news, they realized that they harbored a scoundrel in their midst. Unfazed, van Angelbeek claimed in the *Des Moines Register* that he himself had been duped and that he had not given his name to this scam.²³ There was enough smoke, however, for the council of the Dutch Presbyterian Church to smell fire, hastily call a meeting, and immediately cancel all van Angelbeek’s engagements to lecture in their church.²⁴

By now, there were other entities raising alarms. A Mr. A. H. Weber, an optician who was interested in a diploma from van Angelbeek’s university, found it strange that a medical degree could be had without any kind of examination. He wanted to ensure that his diploma would be legitimate and contacted the Iowa Board of Medical Examiners in Des Moines. The Board advised him to reply and correspond with van Angelbeek in good faith and see what would become of it. The result was that the Board found the diplomas deceptive and referred the matter to the Attorney General for an opinion. What the Iowa A.G. found was enough to bring a suit against van Angelbeek.

As though that were not enough, a Miss Marie C. Boyd, a schoolteacher from Cynthiana, Kentucky, also raised suspicions. She was from a prominent family, as her father, J. S. Boyd, was a federal judge. She had sent in her \$5 for an application for the position of

governess for van Angelbeek’s daughters. After not hearing back from him, she began to suspect fraud and hired a detective to look into the matter. It turned out that young women from all over the country had sent in their \$5 and similarly been duped. She alerted the United States Postal Service with this incriminating evidence.²⁵

On January 19, United States Post Office detectives arrested van Angelbeek at his home in Pella for using the US mail for fraudulent purposes. The trial was set for May 22. As this was a federal crime, it would take place in the United States District Court in Des Moines, with Judge John S. Woolson presiding.²⁶

The Rotterdam Christian Academy and Training School

Despite his troubles in Iowa, van Angelbeek still had friends in Dispatch, Kansas, where he found a receptive ear for his plans to start an academy in which he would teach. Rev. Vanden Heuvel, his friend from the Netherlands and now the pastor in Dispatch, was excited about founding a Christian Reformed college in Kansas. It would prepare young men from the Midwest to be educated at the Theological School in Grand Rapids, Michigan.²⁷ In 1882 the Reformed Church in America had founded Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa, so why not a Christian Reformed one in Kansas? After a year at his post as pastor, Vanden Heuvel brought up the subject to his congregation. At a congregational meeting in March 1893, Dispatch CRC approved the use of its church building as an academy and training school. It also decided that, for the time being, the church council would serve as the school’s board.²⁸ At the same meeting, it appointed van Angelbeek professor at a salary of \$40 dollars.

The 15 March 1893 issue of *De Wachter* announced that the school

would open its doors in five days. According to *De Wachter*:

Rules and regulations of the Society "Ora et Labora" supporting the school, were published. The foundation was to be the Word of God. Membership was as low as \$1 per annum. The professor and his assistants were to be members of the Christian Reformed Church and of the five-member executive committee, three had to be consistory members of the church of Rotterdam [Dispatch]. This congregation was also to be owner of the school building. There were to be three departments, one of which involved a two years' course to train Christian teachers in the Dutch language, and literature, and history. Twenty scholars were enrolled at the time.

Classis Iowa asked four of its pastors to consider being on the board. Three declined. Only one seemed interested at first but by the time of the trial had also declined the offer.²⁹

At its congregational meeting in April, the Dispatch CRC congregation decided to construct a school building. It was to be financed by members signing contribution pledges. At the following congregational meeting, later in April, the congregation decided to postpone building a school for the time being.³⁰ Had news from Pella spread to Dispatch that van Angelbeek's reputation was not as stellar as he had let them to believe? That he was about to stand trial? At a Dispatch council meeting in early May, the school matter came up. Apparently, it had also been discussed at a recent meeting of Classis Iowa, with the result that Classis judged van Angelbeek to be "not a qualified person." The Dispatch council members felt that it should be up to them and not classis to judge the matter.³¹ Van Angelbeek's plans for a school had not fallen apart entirely, as he awaited his trial, but they were in jeopardy.



Dispatch Christian Reformed Church and manse in Rotterdam, Kansas, early 1900s. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

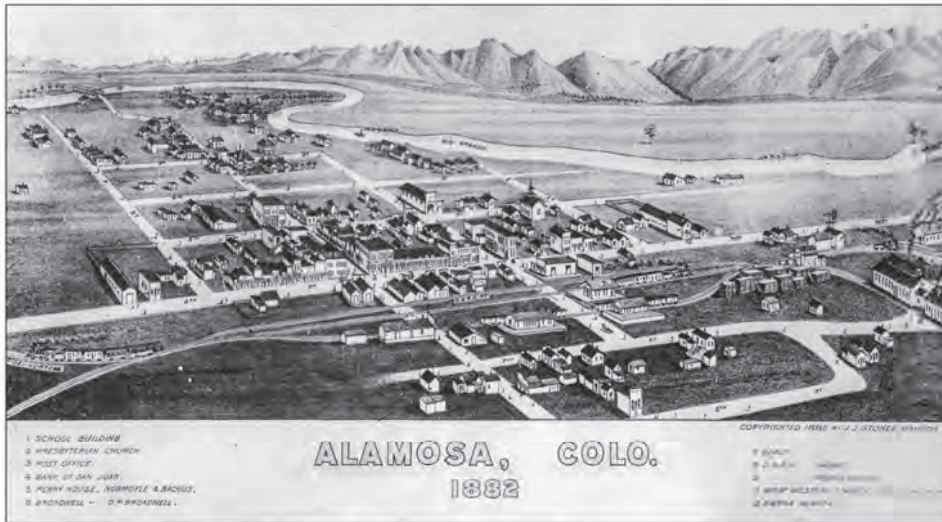
At the same time, van Angelbeek's friend in Dispatch, Rev. Vanden Heuvel, besides promoting the academy and training school, was deeply involved in another project, namely helping settle Dutch immigrants in Rilland, in the San Luis Valley near Alamosa, Colorado.³² In late January and early February 1893, he spent three weeks in the settlement. In *Netherlanders in America*, Jacob Van Hinte noted that,

The [San Luis] Valley afforded a fairly good living. Therefore, they put forth efforts to encourage other Netherlanders to come and settle in the new village named Rilland. [. . .] The Christian Reformed Dutch Americans had helped to organize that church, in particular A. J. Van den Heuvel, the preacher of the True [Dutch Reformed Church] brothers at Rotterdam [Dispatch], Kansas. He had become acquainted through news items in an American newspaper, with the plight of the colonists in the San Luis Valley. He promised to help and received permission from his consistory to go to the Colorado colonists for three weeks and give material and spiritual aid where needed. Many times he preached for them in a school building and led them to organize a congregation.³³

In the March 1, 1893, issue of *De Wachter*, Vanden Heuvel's observations on the Dutch colony in Colorado appeared.³⁴ His presence at the organization of the Rilland congregation on January 20 meant that he was not in Kansas when his friend was arrested. However, while in Colorado, he met a well-known Kansas land developer, Theodore C. Henry, who was working with the Dutch settlers in the San Luis Valley. According to *De Grondwet* of 17 January 1893, a committee of the Dutch settlers had met with Theodore C. Henry. Vanden Heuvel's meeting with Henry would prove advantageous later for van Angelbeek.

The Trial

Defending van Angelbeek at his trial was the highly esteemed, Dutch-born attorney Pierre Henri Bousquet. Mr. Bousquet had come to Pella with the early settlers in 1849 and was one of the leading lawyers in Iowa, as well as the senior attorney of the Marion County Bar.³⁵ For van Angelbeek to retain such a respected lawyer must have made the Pella citizens take notice and perhaps consider the possibility that he was not the scammer, but the scammed, as he himself maintained. Perhaps because his crime



Drawing of Alamosa, Colorado, in the 1880s. Courtesy of the Colorado Historical Society.



Pierre Henri Bousquet.

was not of a violent nature, he was allowed to be free on his own recognition until his trial.³⁶ He used his time between arrest and trial to teach at the academy. By moving to Dispatch for the time being, rather than staying in Pella, he was able to sidestep a lot of questions by the Pella folks. Perhaps the Dispatch community reasoned that a person was innocent until proven guilty and thereby allowed him to continue teaching at the academy until his trial.

Van Angelbeek's trial, from May 22 to May 25, drew national attention. Newspapers as far away as Los Angeles devoted space to it.³⁷ The court allowed him to make a statement introducing himself to the court and the jury. He made a positive impression, telling the story of his birth in Indonesia and his education in the Netherlands, France, Belgium, and England, citing his various degrees. He recounted how, after teaching for two years at the Brussels Academy,

and after teaching in South Africa for a season, he had come to Pella in the spring of 1892. He also gave an account of being hired as an assistant professor of the National University of Illinois located in Chicago; in that capacity, he claimed, he was allowed to grant degrees. He seemed not to hide anything; however, every now and then his memory failed him.

After van Angelbeek's testimony, the district attorney Howell interrogated him so forcefully that after two hours the defendant burst into tears, and the trial had to recess for fifteen minutes so that he could compose himself.

The prosecution called a number of witnesses to testify. Among them was the teacher, Miss Boyd, from Kentucky. She was impeccably dressed and garnered as much attention as the defendant. She stated that she had read the advertisement in an educational journal and sent in her \$5 to the National University of Illinois. After getting no response, she sent a detective to Chicago, who, in no time, found out that there was no such university and soon made the connection to van Angelbeek. Because she had come forward, more people who had sent in \$5 without response were willing to step forward and testify.

Among them were four young men who also testified that van Angelbeek had promised them positions as tutors for the sons of rich families traveling abroad, provided that they had certain degrees.³⁸ When they told him that they had no such degrees, he offered to procure the diplomas for them for a fee.³⁹ Finally, Prof. F. W. Harkins, as chancellor of the National University in Chicago, a legitimate institution, testified that van Angelbeek had used his university's good reputation to mislead people by slightly changing the name and making references to it.

In defense of van Angelbeek, Bousquet argued that his client had acted in good faith and had also been the dupe of the people in Chicago who ran the scheme. He should not be found guilty of the crime unless it could be proved that he was the instigator of the scheme resulting in the charges. And about those daughters of his who needed a governess—he had misspoken and had really meant the daughters of other wealthy Europeans. Bousquet also argued that his client had already been found guilty in the press, which was not fair.



John Simpson Woolson, the judge at van Angelbeek's trial.

The defense called two witnesses to testify for van Angelbeek: Adam Van Nimwegen, a successful house painter in Pella, and Henry H. Westerhoff, who worked in the Peables Drug Store.⁴⁰

Both testified to the stellar character of the accused.

After deliberating most of the evening and night, the jury delivered its verdict the following morning: Guilty. The court sentenced van Angelbeek to

a year in jail and imposed a stiff fine of \$400 and all court costs. Expecting to pay only a nominal fine, he was visibly shocked at the outcome. He was remanded over to the Lee County jail in Keokuk, Iowa.⁴¹

Out of Jail

Such was van Angelbeek's power of persuasion of his innocence, and his demeanor at the trial, that both Attorney Bousquet and Judge Woolson believed him and not the jury, and they were able to revoke his sentence and procure his release from jail. On the afternoon of June 26, after being confined for only one month, he was allowed to go free. The newspapers do not state who paid the fine and the court costs, but it may be assumed that a few well-to-do citizens of Pella, who still believed in the young man's innocence, had passed the hat.

Immediately upon his release, van Angelbeek traveled to Dispatch, where he intended to continue to teach at the academy.⁴² He also went on a character restoration offensive. In a letter to the editor of *De Grondwet*, he explained his innocence and included statements made by his attorney and the judge. He added that, having the best interest of the academy at heart, he would explain his actions to the public. Even before his release from jail he had sent a letter to the *Cawker City Public Record* (Cawker City, Kansas), which it printed in its 8 June 1893 issue:

The [*Cawker City Public*] *Record* of April 13th, on authority which we believed to be reliable, warned the people of a wolf in sheep's clothing who was conducting a school not far from this city, but did not mention his name or the location of the school. A few days later we received a letter (type written) signed [by] A. J. Van den Heuvel, President, requesting us to "withdraw those statements in your next issue." Having nothing to with-

draw, we published the letter. (April 20th). Rev. Van den Heuvel has since called at this office and denies either having written or authorized such a letter. Van Angelbeek is the fraud who wrote the letter and who was then acting as principal of the "Academy and Training School" at Dispatch, Smith County. The letter was written by him to cover up his crookedness and delay exposure among the people whom he was defrauding at the time and hoping still further to swindle. He was then under bond to appear at the Federal court at Des Moines and answer to the charge of using the mails for fraudulent purposes. He is a polished rascal. His swindling operations are not confined to this country but were begun in Europe, and continued in South Africa and then going to Paris and later to this country, but his operation will have to be deferred for a while by order of the United States Court at Des Moines.

Vanden Heuvel, who had been in Rilland, Colorado, during van Angelbeek's trial,

continued to have full faith in his friend's innocence and welcomed him back in Dispatch with open arms.⁴³ Van Angelbeek was present at the July 24 Dispatch council meeting and

was asked several questions regarding the school; after answering satisfactorily, he was accepted as a member. This decision, however, was dependent upon the approval of the full congregation. To that end, the council instructed its clerk, Jan Vande Riet, to write a letter to the Department of Education of the South African Republic

to gain some background information on van Angelbeek.

Exposed!

It is not clear exactly when Vande Riet sent his letter, but the one he received back was dated 15 July 1893 and mailed from Pretoria, South Africa. In this eight-page letter, Gabriel Adolf Odé, Secretary of Education for the Republic, listed the many and sundry deceptions perpetrated by one R. A. van Angelbeek.

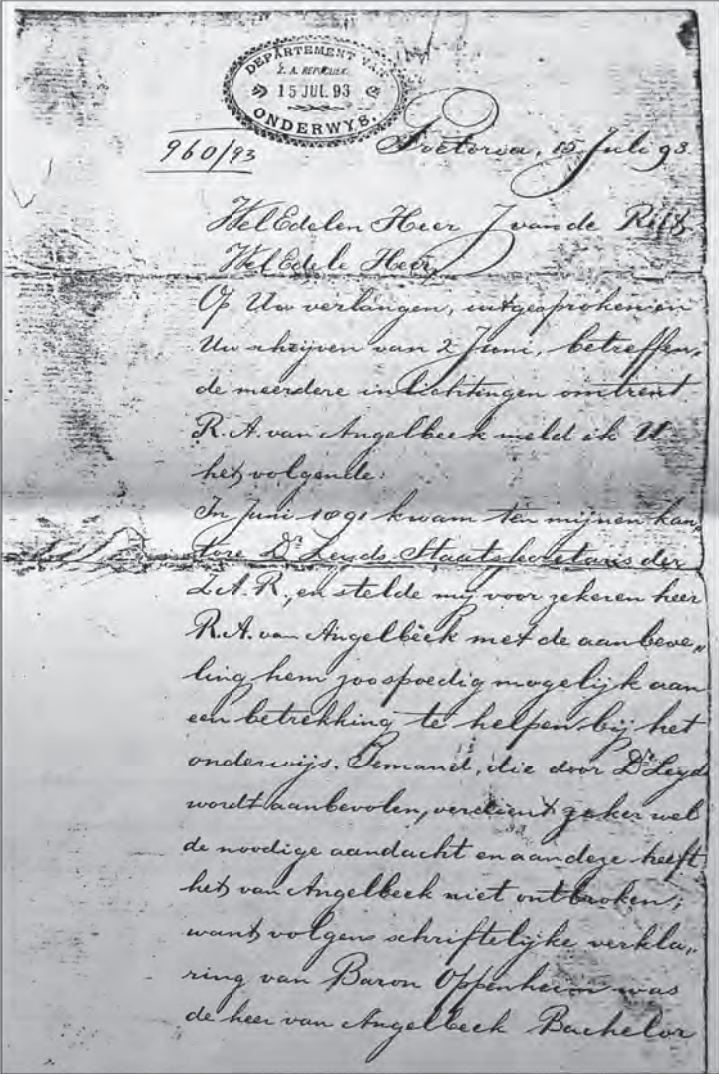
This letter probably took a couple of weeks to reach Dispatch, but when it did, the judgement came swiftly and without hesitation. At a meeting on August 21, the Dispatch CRC congregation decided with a unanimous vote to discontinue the academy and dismiss van Angelbeek. Pastor Vanden Heuvel was not at the meeting. The Dispatch correspondent for the Dutch-language newspaper *De Grondwet* wrote a terse notice for the 26 September 1893 issue: "The school or academy here has been entirely terminated. The flame has been dowsed. Mr. van Angelbeek left suddenly. Despatch [sic] Kansas, 20 September 1893."

Last sightings

We'll never know how his friend's obvious duplicity affected Vanden Heuvel. There is some evidence that Vanden Heuvel may have suggested to van Angelbeek that he contact Theodore C. Henry, whom Vanden Heuvel had met in Colorado when he visited there. *De Grondwet* reported on 5 December 1893 that van Angelbeek was working as a land agent in Colorado for Henry, the main investor in settling Dutch immigrants in the San Luis Valley.⁴⁴ Vanden Heuvel himself left Dispatch only two years later, in 1895, taking a call to a Christian Reformed congregation in Cleveland, Ohio. He later served churches in Iowa, New York, New Jersey, and Michigan.



Reverend Arie Vanden Heuvel, minister at Dispatch Christian Reformed Church and friend of van Angelbeek. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.



Letter from Gabriel Adolf Odé to Dispatch Christian Reformed Church. Courtesy of Leroy Stegink.

The Dutch settlement venture in the San Luis Valley failed spectacular-

Gorichem and Surroundings) under the lurid headline: “Van Angelbeek is

ly, with Rilland CRC organizing in January 1893 and disbanding in December. When and how van Angelbeek disappeared from Colorado is not known.⁴⁵

It seems that van Angelbeek returned to Europe—to London, England, rather than the Netherlands. The 15 January 1898 issue of the Saturday Advertiser, published in Pella, translated and published an article that had first appeared on 22 December 1897 in the Dutch newspaper De Drie Provinciën, Gorichem en Omstreken (The Three provinces;

found in London in a State of Death from cold. A sad History of a promising Life.” The author, Mr. Henderson, a Dutch expatriate living in London, wrote in detail about the sad circumstances of a once so promising young man. The Vrije Hollander (the Free Dutchman) of Orange City, Iowa, picked up the story, stating that this was certainly the well-known Rudolf van Angelbeek, who resided in Pella, adding a little moral lesson for the youth, “that devious ways lead to sad endings.”⁴⁶ The Pella Weekblad of 28 January 1898, was quick to refute the allegations, arguing, “The rumors that have been published in various newspapers regarding R. A. van Angelbeek, who earlier had lived in this city, are totally fabricated!” In other words, “Fake news!”

Although it is not clear when it took place, British records list the marriage of one Rudolf Albert van Angelbeek of Fulham, London, England, on 14 April 1900.⁴⁷ He was 33 years old by then and still protective of his purported educational status. On the marriage form he wrote “Ph.D. and Certificated Teacher of Languages.” His thirty-two-year-old bride was Martha Southwell. She was born in Euxton, Lancashire, and listed in the 1881 English Census as a “Milliner and Dressmaker.” Fulham was a prosperous area of southwest London in

1900 Marriage solemnized at the Registrar Office in the District of Fulham in the County of London								
No.	When Married.	Name and Surname	Age	Condition	Rank or Profession	Residence at the time of Marriage	Father's Name and Surname	Rank or Profession of Father
165	Fourteenth April, 1900	Rudolf Albert van Angelbeek Martha Southwell	33 years 32 years	Bachelor Spinster	Ph. D. and Certificated Teacher of Languages	31, Horden Road, Fulham, 31, Horden Road, Fulham,	Jacob Johannes van Angelbeek (deceased) Henry Southwell	L.L.D. Wine Merchant
Married in the Registrar Office according to the Rites and Ceremonies of the by Certificate before me, R. A. V. Angelbeek, Ph. D. M. Southwell John Edwin Barber Walter Rutledge L. Liveridge Registrar Deputy Assistant Registrar								

Marriage Certificate of Rudolph van Angelbeek and Martha Southwell, 1900. Quarter 2, vol. 1A, p. 698, General Register Office, Southport, England.

the Borough of Hammersmith, where the couple lived at 31 Horder Road. There are no records of children.

In the late summer of 1907, van Angelbeek had made a trip to the Netherlands to attend the funeral of his sister, Elizabeth, who died on July 30 in Zeist.⁴⁸ Mysteriously, he died on the *SS Batavia* on his way back to London in September.⁴⁹ There is no

mention of a maritime accident during the month of September in any of the Dutch or British newspapers. Nor does his name appear in the Dutch or British Civil Registries of deaths. After his death, Martha moved to Staffordshire, where she lived in Newcastle-under-Lyme until her death at age forty-seven in September 1915.⁵⁰

Unlike the search for Martha's in-

formation, a search of van Angelbeek's name for the month of September 1907 in Dutch and English newspaper obituaries, as well as a search on gravestones and tombstones, comes up empty. It seems that his much sought-after fame blazed for a time and then flickered out without any fanfare. 

Endnotes

1. *The Gazette* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa) of December 23, 1892, page 2, describes van Angelbeek as handsome and nautically dressed.

2. One of his siblings had died at the age of two; three more siblings would be born in the Netherlands, of which the youngest two would also pass away as infants.

3. *The West Australian* (Perth, Australia: 1879–1954) on: <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/23835021#titleModal>; accessed May 26, 2020. Leijds is described as, “He is rather a good-looking man, and his sharp appearance is a considerable indication of his character. He is tall and slender, his face is one with energy written upon it, and his eyes are dark and quick.”

4. “The French baron Eugene Oppenheim. Baron Oppenheim was also involved at this time in a dubious business venture in South Africa and was jailed by a Belgian court in 1900 for falsifying accounts.”

<https://www.dulwichsociety.com/journal-archive/72-summer-2011/632-acacia-grove>; also see *New York Times*, May 30, 1914 headline, ARREST PROMOTERS FOR BIG BANK FRAUD.

5. *De Standaard*, June 5, 1891.

6. Victoria College, now the University of Stellenbosch, dates back to the start of the Theological Seminary of the Dutch Reformed Church in 1859. Originally called Stellenbosch Gymnasium, its foundations were laid in 1863, and in 1874 an Arts Department was established. The school started with 120 students and two professors of Mathematics and Natural Sciences. In 1866 the institution was named Victoria College in honor of Queen Victoria's golden ju-

bilee. In 1879 a proper college building was erected for more space.

7. Eight-page letter dated July 15, 1893, from the Secretary of Education, Gabriel Adolf Odé, Pretoria, Republic of South Africa, to John van de Riet, elder, Dispatch CRC, Kansas.

8. Population Registers 1810–1936 Emmikhoven en Waardhuizen; Almkerk, Noord Brabant. Vanden Heuvel was a baker's assistant; his father a laborer.

9. Renzo (1878–1947); Derkje (1879–1890); Jan (1881–1882); four more (Richard, John, Dora, and Dirk) were born in the United States.

10. In 1871 the Rotterdam Post Office was first established in northeastern Osborne County to service the growing community. Twenty years later this post office was renamed Dispatch (after the way the mail was “dispatched” by horseback) and moved to a county road intersection on the Smith-Jewell County line that became the center of the Dispatch community.

11. The Independent Baptist Church was founded in 1844 in Pella, preceding the Dutch; Central College was founded by the Baptists.

12. *Buffalo Morning Express and Illustrated*, Buffalo, NY, December 10, 1892.

13. One wonders if van Angelbeek had also forged these letters of introduction.

13. *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, IL) December 8, 1892, 2.

14. *Idem*.

15. Vanden Heuvel may have advised him to apply at Central College in Pella as professor, which he apparently did but was not hired.

16. This was Adam Van Nimwegen, who had built up a successful paint business. He also testified for the defense.

17. The original Chautauqua Lake

Sunday School Assembly in western New York, founded in 1874 by John H. Vincent and Lewis Miller, began as a program for the training of Sunday-school teachers and church workers. At first entirely religious in nature, the program was gradually broadened to include general education, recreation, and popular entertainment.

18. *Buffalo Morning Express and Illustrated*, Buffalo, NY, December 10, 1892, 3.

19. Lit. D., EN.U., Doctor of Literature, Fellow National University.

20. *Idem*.

21. *Pella Weekly Herald*, September 16, 1892, 8.

22. *Buffalo Morning Express and Illustrated*, Buffalo, NY, 10 December 1892, p. 3. A guinea was worth £1.01 (one pound and one shilling).

23. In December 1892, the *Des Moines Register* sent out an undercover reporter pretending to be an applicant student to the National University in Chicago, assuming it was one and the same van Angelbeek's, and harassed the chancellor, who protested, but a large account of this interview ended up in the paper.

24. *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago, IL) December 8, 1892, Thursday, 2.

25. Was van Angelbeek aware of the law that using the United States Post Office for fraudulent purposes constituted a federal crime?

26. John Simson Woolson (1840–1899) was a United States District Judge of the United States District Court for the Southern District of Iowa.

27. Dispatch Christian Reformed Church was organized in 1872 by Dutch settlers. The community became known as Rotterdam, Kansas. In the late 1860s

there were many Dutch settlers in the Holland, Michigan area needing more land. They found a place in central Kansas where there was still land left to be homesteaded. These Dutch settlers came in the late 1860s and early 1870s by covered wagons or by train to the end of the railroad line at Solomon City or Waterville, Kansas.

28. Congregational meeting minutes
March 8, 1893, Arts. 1 and 2.

29. Rev. E. Breen of Firth, Nebraska,
in *De Grondwet*, June 6, 1893.

30. Dispatch CRC Congregational meeting minutes Art. 1.

31. Dispatch CRC Council meeting May 8, 1893. Unfortunately, the Iowa Classis Minutes for this period are no longer extant.

32. The village was named after Rilland in the province of Zeeland, the Netherlands.

33. Jacob Van Hinte, *Netherlanders in America, A Study of Emigration and Settlement in the 19th and 20th Centuries in the United States of America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), 675.

34. De Wachter, March 1, 1893, 3; *De Grondwet* of March 21, 1893, published Vanden Heuvel's translated article that had appeared in the *San Luis Valley Courier* on February 25, 1893. Vanden Heuvel had taken an intense interest in the Dutch settlements in Colorado. Crook (Logan County, Colorado) Holland CRC was organized May 18, 1893. For more on this and the Dutch settlements in Rilland and Alamosa, Colorado, see Peter De Klerk's "The Ecclesiastical Struggle of the Rilland and Crook CRCs in Colorado in 1893" in *Perspectives on the Christian Reformed*

Church: studies in its history, theology, and ecumenicity: presented in honor of John Henry Kromminga at his retirement as President of Calvin Theological Seminary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1983).

https://archive.org/details/perspectivesonch0000unse_r6e2.

35. Pierre H. Bousquet (1835-1908). Full life story in *The Pella Chronicle*, February 20, 1908.

36. Defendants released on their own recognizance need only sign a written promise to appear in court as required. No bail has to be paid, either to the court or to a bail bond seller.

37. *The Los Angeles Herald*, May 26, 1893.

38. *Omaha Daily Bee*, January 18, 1893. Since there are seven US states with a city named Winchester, it is not certain in which Winchester this man resided.

39. *Iowa State Register*, May 19, 1893.

40. *Pella Blade*, May 30, 1893.

41. John W. Wright and William A. Young, *History of Marion County, Iowa, and its people* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1915). Being a resident of Pella, van Angelbeek should have been incarcerated in the Marion County jail. However, Marion County did not have a decent jail at the time, and thus he was sent to the one in Lee County. It is curious that, since this was a federal offense, and the trial was held in Des Moines, Polk County, he was not incarcerated in a federal prison, or at least in a state prison in Iowa. Perhaps Bousquet and Woolson arranged this, as a county jail would have been less traumatic than a state penitentiary.

42. *De Grondwet*, July 18, 1893.

43. *De Wachter*, July 16, 1893.

44. Theodore C. Henry, the president of the Empire Land and Canal Company, from which the Holland-American Land and Immigration Company (incorporated 18 August 1892) supposedly had bought the land in the San Luis Valley. These families went ahead and bought land south of Alamosa, directly from Henry. https://dutchamericans.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/1987_3_deklerk.pdf, 5. For more on T. C. Henry, go to:

<https://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/theodore-c-henry/18164>.

45. Peter De Klerk "The Alamosa disaster," *Origins* vol. 4, 22-26. (Number 1, 1986).

46. *De Grondwet*, January 11, 1898.

47. General Register Office Certified Copy Application #12090149-1 issued August 20, 2021. Marriage place: Fulham, London, England.

48. www.wiewaswie.nl.

49. <https://records-myheritage-libraryedition>, Grand Rapids Public Library, Grand Rapids, MI; <https://www.genealogieonline.nl/en/stamboom-sijmons/1535150.php>; after Elizabeth's death, van Angelbeek had only one sister left living in the Netherlands and two in Indonesia. His other siblings had all passed away by this time. Elizabeth had been married to Gerrit Gerard Dirk Adolf van der Werff (1855–1932), a banker.

50. 1911 England Census summary books: Staffordshire District 09, Ecclesiastical Parish St. Giles; Ancestry.com England and Wales Civil Registration Death Index 1837-1915.

Comfort to Spare, pt 1

James Calvin Schaap

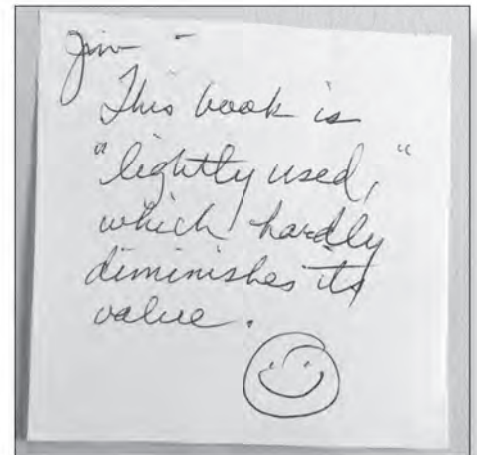
We don't know much about Aunt Gertie's death. It happened on a foggy night in November of 1949, in a lakeshore mist that made travel so difficult that her mom and dad—my grandparents—had warned their daughter that it would be prudent to stay home rather than travel all the way to Milwaukee. But they didn't listen—Gertie and her three companions. And there was an accident. And Aunt Gertie was killed. No one else was hurt.

Aunt Gertie was not a child. She was 24 years old, a teacher at the new Christian school, a block east from our house and a couple more blocks east of downtown, where her parents lived. No matter her age, she was their little girl.

Somewhere along the line, a book of meditations found a place in our library, a gift from my mother, who was Aunt Gertie's only sister. It's a slim volume, published by Eerdmans in 1946—14 meditations aimed at grieving parents. A CRC pastor named Rev. J. K. Van Baalen wrote *Comfort to Spare*. He had cause and experience, having lost a son in the war just concluded.

The book likely came my way in a box of other books and photographs Mom was getting rid of after Dad's death. Her intentions were clear; she left a sticky note in the inside cover.

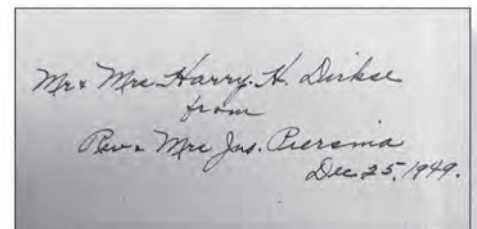
The handwriting—including the smiley face—is very much hers. I have no doubt she was implying with what she wrote that, while she hadn't herself spent weeks and weeks with *Comfort to Spare*, something about the book was significant enough to note.



Mom's sticky note. Unless otherwise noted, all images provided by James Schaap.

Mom wasn't a reader, but her intense spirituality alone recommended the book, even if she hadn't read it herself. She was always concerned about her closeness to God, as she was about mine, her son's.

The note is stuck on the inside cover beneath the top of the page



Note in Grandma Dirkse's handwriting.

where there's an even more impactful notation in my Grandma Dirkse's handwriting.

"Mr. and Mrs. Harry Dirkse" are my grandparents, the couple who lost Aunt Gert a month before Christmas that early winter. Rev. John Piersma was their young preacher. The date suggests that the book was a Christmas gift, but Aunt Gertie had been

James Schaap taught at Dordt University for 37 years. He has published short stories, novels, and devotional books, as well as works of history on a variety of topics, notably *Our Family Album: The Unfinished Story of the Christian Reformed Church* (1998).

killed just a month before, and Van Baalen's mission is clear: "These pages are written with the definite purpose of aiding in the transfer of Christians" from those "whose faith falters" to those "who receive a new joy."

Only twice does Van Baalen reference World War II, a war that took the lives of almost 415 thousand American troops, one of them his son. That *Comfort to Spare* was never a best seller doesn't mean he didn't have many potential readers.

I had gone to our library to find something new for our devotions and come back with a skinny little brow-beaten book I'd never before noticed. When I opened it, I realized I was holding family history.

My sisters, three and five years older than me, have faint memories of those painful days after Aunt Gert's accident. The younger sister, who was five, remembers how Mom tied her daughter's shoestrings with an intensity she has never forgotten. The older sister recalls thin drapery over the coffin in Grandma's dining room. I was two. I have no memories.

My mother told me more than often how Aunt Gertie had stopped at our house after school to play with me, the baby. What kind of mood I'd been in, I don't know, but I was contrary, to be sure. Mom claimed that I'd told Aunt Gert to go home. Mom didn't cry when she remembered. She smiled, telling me.

But the book's two inscriptions reminded me of the scarcity of memories I have of anything surrounding that fatal accident. Gertrude Dirkse's death wasn't spoken of much, but that doesn't mean her being killed didn't color our lives, my life.

It seems almost unfeeling to see the newspaper account of the car accident wedged in amid the headlines of the edition that carried it, seems wrong to be forced to wrestle your attention away from a lumber yard fire across

the state, or President Truman asking Congress to pass a civil rights law. It was November 11, 1949, and Grandma Dirkse, then 56 years old, already had reason for sadness that Armistice Day: in France, late summer 1918, her only brother, Edgar Hartman, had been killed in "the war to end all wars."

The story of Gertrude Dirkse's death is in the second column, a bit more than halfway down—"Miss Dirkse of Oostburg Dies in Crash." She's "Miss Dirkse" on the front page as well as on the second, I suppose, because her elementary school students knew and spoke of her as such.

The accident

Back then, U.S. highway 141 was the best road from Milwaukee to Green Bay. It hugged the Lake Michigan shoreline and ran right past Oostburg and into Sheboygan. Lakeshore fog still quilts the region at times. Somewhere amid the few stories I know of Aunt Gertie's death is Mom's recollection that her parents didn't want their youngest daughter to go.

giving greater n will be long p beliefs on nded our form of the world s and freedom ately violated ten and wom- atically per- religious be- are being ion into a tool re not only y threaten to nd hardwon civilization. ew barbarism, that of an- are the acts ive of other as brothers." heavy empha- legislation to practices in de doubt that eal for such (6 column 3)	Javonte with Truman and other high democratic officials. (AP Wirephoto). Miss Dirkse Of Oostburg Dies In Crash Miss Gertrude Dirkse, 24, Oostburg, was killed instantly at 2 a. m. today when the car she was riding in struck an arterial stop sign near Knellsville, at the junction of Highways 84 and 141, about a mile north of Port Washington. The young woman was a passenger in a car owned by John Joose of Cedar Grove, and driven by Calvin Verhulst, 24, of Oostburg. The fourth passenger in the car was Mrs. Calvin Ver- hulst. Mrs. Verhulst and Joose suf- fered slight injuries in the acci- dent. (Continued on page 6, column 6)	hours before Krug, and par- he had written a strong letter policy, the pu- comment. Friends said felt that Mr. Tr- "been able to e- than that." Letter Ve- The president ter of resignati- after Krug cont (Continued on p Union Partic In Ca Delegates to the Wisconsin Carpenters con- day convention
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News story about the accident in *The Sheboygan Press*.

The press reported the density of the fog that November night, so heavy the driver was on the wrong side of the road, which caused the accident. The Calvinist in me is will-

ing to grant you that 24-year-olds are not, across the board, without their share of bedevilment, even Christian school teachers; but even with what little I know about the accident or the others in that car that night, I don't believe that the driver's being on the other side of the highway was a result of inattentiveness or inebriation. If there's one aspect of the story that was often repeated, there was, all around, deep fog. Whatever long silences surrounded the accident, I don't think there were any scandals. Her death was simply too painful to speak of.

My older sister says she remembers hearing that Aunt Gertie's date was driving but was not the car's owner. He knew best the way to wherever they were going.

The other couple were married. They'd all come from staunch Dutch Reformed families. For better or for worse, it's not easy to find some villain; even the cops claimed the cause was lake fog.

On October 11, 2002, 53 years later, ten people were killed, and some three dozen others injured, in one of the most horrendous fatal traffic accidents ever recorded, involving forty cars and trucks. That grisly mess occurred in the morning, in deep lake-shore fog, just eight miles north of the place where the accident occurred in which my Aunt Gertie was the only passenger in the car to be killed—on November 10, 1949.

No one expects to bury his or her child, even in war. All of us foresee, someday, standing at the gravesite of our parents, but no one imagines burying children. Still, no matter whether it's crib death or a freakish car accident, life can suddenly flip. That's true for all of us, faithful Christians as well as those who invest elsewhere. We all suffer.

Miss Dirkse

Aunt Gertie graduated from Sheboy-

gan County Normal School, which she'd likely attended for a year or so before taking a job at some area country schools. Even though I've never seen any record of her abilities, I can't help but think Gertie Dirkse was a wonderful teacher. I'm told frequently that her sister, my mother, was.

But a new school movement had been brewing in the neighborhood. In Oostburg, a couple of years earlier, some had begun to discuss establishing a "Christian" school. Those who weren't advocates thought that even the word choice was a redundancy since virtually all the teachers in public schools were church members. No board would hire atheists. Oostburg children, some claimed, were already getting a "Christian" education.

In September of 1947, the Oostburg Christian School opened its doors. Aunt Gertie had left a teaching job in a country school and was among the Christian school's very first faculty. I was born during the first year of the school's existence. I know little or nothing about the conversations—and arguments—that went on in the years immediately following the war. People who long for a Christian school, who by choice send their kids to a school other than "ours," the public school, can be seen as ingrates, sickeningly self-righteous "holier than thou."

In a village of overflowing spirituality, the movement to establish a Christian school had to have been difficult for my family—and divisive.



Gertrude Dirkse.

Christian school supporters would have had to legitimize their desire for a separate education time and time again by playing the God card—"A *Christian* school is something God wants us to do," etc. They had to feel called.

My grandparents, including Rev. Schaap and his son and daughter-in-law, my parents, were all in on Christian education, deeply consecrated "Christian school people." I wouldn't doubt they gave up friendships with the brick-and-mortar they invested in a Christian school. They may have suffered more than their share of derision for being separatists who thought of themselves as "just a little bit better."

Two years later Grandpa and Grandma Dirkse must have suffered painful separation from God for the way he had plucked Gertie Dirkse out from this world—and out of her Christian school classroom. What was he thinking when he tossed her out of the car like a rag doll? Her Christian school mission ended in that fog. Who would tell her precious children she was gone? Why did God let that happen?

I don't know how or when the young preacher and his wife gave my grandpa and grandma *Comfort to Spare*, but it couldn't have been more than a month after the night they heard a knock, pulled themselves out of bed, and met a pair of cops lugging horrible news.

The comfort in *Comfort to Spare* is described, explained, and offered specifically to believers like my grandparents, to all

who hold on to faith in a living God, sometimes only tenuously.

The readers of *Comfort to Spare* are not unlike those in the pews of the churches that Pastor Van Baalen served at Twelfth Street in Grand Rapids or Mt. Vernon, Washington, where he was when he and his wife received the grim news of their son's death in France. Van Baalen was not writing meditations about grief; he was ministering to "covenantal" believers like himself, people whose particular grief few can handle, preaching to the choir, all right—to a chorus who have lost their voices.

The late-night visit

What happened in my grandparents' home when the police came with shocking news of her death is a story often retold.

They lived downtown, where my grandfather had a blacksmith shop that had, through the years, become a Mobile filling station, with its big red horse logo. The police didn't come until late, so late that downtown Oostburg was not full of shoppers or worshipers at either of the two big churches within a block of their house. Their bedroom was upstairs. I'm guessing that when they opened the door they were in their housecoats.

The story goes like this: Grandpa



Center Street in Oostburg in the 1950s, with the Mobile filling station on the right and First CRC's steeple visible on the left.

listened to the police and fell apart. He broke down and cried inconsolably at the worst news any parent could imagine. He lost it.

Grandma comforted him, I'm sure, but the story moves further. Even in Grandma's profound grief, the first thing she did was look up at the cops and tell them she couldn't imagine doing the kind of work they had to do. What an awful job, she said, and then invited them in.

Those widely different reactions make *Comfort to Spare* a textbook. The story often told about Grandpa and Grandma that very night draws the scene Van Baalen says is at the heart of his goal in the book: one believer falls into grief, while the other believer sustains it, rises above it.

When sorrow suddenly comes—and it usually does—Christians are divided into two groups. There are those who, temporarily at any rate, collapse. Their faith falters. And there are those who receive a new joy, hitherto unknown by them, the avowed and recognized work of the Holy Spirit, whose temple they are by the grace of their heavenly Father and as a result of the merits and the intercession of Jesus Christ their Savior and Lord.

I don't know anything about what might have been Grandma's "new joy," but what happened at the front door of the house in downtown Oostburg late that night could have been a documentary study of the distinction *Comfort to Spare* draws.

Van Baalen adds this: "These passages are written with the definite purpose of aiding in the transfer of Christians from the first group into the second," because, he says, he has been led to believe that among grieving Christian parents, there are "far too many . . . in the first category."

Whether Grandpa and Grandma's uniquely personal reactions at that moment did or didn't occur may not

be as important to my parents, who passed the story along, as the fact that today their grandchildren all know the story, even though no one else was there. The story's truth may rest in something other than the literal. Grandpa's understandable collapse contrasts with Grandma's seeming strength because the differences illustrate how my sisters and I—and my mother—came to define our Dirkse grandparents, specifically the spiritual temperament and legacies each of them carried: Grandpa was effusive, emotional, at times weak. Grandma was always tougher, stronger.

A cult

But what has this to do with me? Or the community I grew up in?

One of my friends, years ago, was a "jack Mormon," a rebel who paid no heed to anything Brigham Young ever said or wrote. He laughed it off, in fact, even though his royal Latter Day Saints kin left ruts across the Plains when they left Nauvoo on their "Great Trek" to Utah. Raised a Mormon, Wally was deliberately unreligious. He was a good teacher, but he didn't regard the old ways with any respect. That religion stuff was way behind him.

Another good friend had once been Protestant. He grew up in or around Detroit and talked about what he perceived as the emptiness of the church his parents attended on religious holidays. Wally and John were friends of mine, good guys. They liked to drink and smoke up now and then—it was the early 70s, and neither was married. I liked them both and they liked me, all of us teachers at a new high school on the far northern edge of Phoenix.

I don't remember that we were juiced the night they asked me what we Reformed folk did. It wasn't one of those questions that amble out of loosened minds and never should be

aired. They weren't serious so much as interested and mystified.

"Schaap," they said, "are you in a cult?"

I giggled. They just wanted to know for sure. "No," I told them. "Of course not."

The huge commitments my wife and I made to the little church we attended seemed to them mysterious, and, well, slavish, as powerful as they were private.

I wasn't in a cult, I told them. I'd just spent two years outside the doors of any church. I thought myself capable of quitting and free to do just that. I wasn't in a cult; I was just Christian Reformed, and I didn't know how to explain that.

That was 1975, and the simple fact is that I have stayed with the church and the faith.

Why?

The catechism's answer is clear: because a sovereign God, as he promised, holds me, as he has promised, in his hands. I know that, but I'd just as soon not say it right now, because sometimes it's far too easy to play the God-card.

Besides, the question is not "Why am I Christian Reformed?" The question is "What are the roots of this uniquely strong commitment in me?" It is deep, after all, and probably a great deal more tribal or cultic than I could or would have cared to admit that night at John's apartment.

A kid named Jeffry Krebs, a junior with an able mind in the very first class I ever taught, once told me what he really wanted to know someday about his English teacher: "Mr. Schaap, what makes you tick, anyway?"

I'm 74 years old. Even when I think I'm denying it, I am almost ridiculously religious. I have spent a lifetime writing devotions, even though I've never been or wanted to be a preacher. After a fashion, I am in

a cult; after all, I neither hope to be nor think I can or ever will be free of a faith that feels for all the world to be right there in my DNA. Mr. Krebs, when you asked, I don't know that I could have told you what makes me tick. In fact, I'd like to know the answer to that question myself.

Maybe something is to be discovered in the story of a freakish car accident one misty lakeshore night more than seventy years ago, at a time when I was not yet two—maybe something in Van Baalen's little volume of postwar meditations, something to be understood in what they offered to a mom and dad who received the book as a gift and, I'm almost sure, read it while grieving.

Maybe something here will help me understand what makes me tick. This family story isn't just about my Dirkse grandparents and Van Baalen's book; it's about the Schaap family too, and it's about me.

Rev. John C. Schaap

Grandpa Schaap holds forth from the pulpit he filled in Oostburg Christian Reformed Church from 1932-1946, in a sermon I have on tape. What's there doesn't commend his dynamism. A preacher may not have had to be a stemwinder to keep the pews full those many years ago, but I can't help thinking that listening to him twice a Sunday for 14 years might have been a

struggle. He wasn't flighty, nor certainly overly passionate. My guess is that he was, at the end of his ministry, a bit stodgy.

In 1945, his wife—my Grandma Schaap—



Reverend John C. Schaap.
Courtesy of Heritage Hall.



Postcard image Third Street Avenue, looking north, in Sheldon, Iowa, 1910. Courtesy of Northwest College Archives.

died. My mother used to say that Mother Schaap was almost unimaginably sweet, an angel. On the Schaap side, I come from very sweet people.

Grandma Schaap had been sickly for months. Over the years, her thin and frail body had given birth to ten children, one of whom died when that little girl was only three or four, a surprising death that still scares up stories from her grandchildren, all of whom are elderly, but most of whom know the story by heart.

Grandpa Schaap was born here in the States, not in the Netherlands, even though both of his parents and his older siblings were immigrants. In 1868, Grandpa's parents, Cornelius C. and his wife, Neeltje, left the island of Terschelling because there was no *Gereformeerde* congregation, no breakaway church. A *Hervormde* church was not far away in Midsland, a darling Dutch hamlet nearby. But C. C. and family formed a group of doctrinaire Calvinists weary of the modernism they felt gathering in the national church they left behind. They left Terschelling because they wanted the old-time religion, not more of the apostates.

They came to America with similarly minded religious folk and wandered west to German Valley, Illinois, where someone knew the preacher or had a relative—some connection, anyway.

Soon they moved farther west, stopping again for a time in Parkersburg, Iowa, before moving to even more remote Newkirk in Iowa's far northwest corner, the last area of the state to be settled by Euro-Americans. Soon enough, they went another hundred miles west to Harrison, South Dakota, where two lean years wiped them out and swept them back to Sheldon, Iowa, where C. C., a North Sea sailor, ran a clothing store.

I'm not sure why their youngest child, my grandfather, went into the ministry, but he did, first off to college in Michigan and then to seminary, where a few years later he got a degree and married a professor's daughter, Gertrude Hemkes. My pedigree is full of piety. (Or is it that my piety is full of pedigree?)

In 1905, when Grandpa Schaap was in Bemis, South Dakota, his first charge, he took a train to Orange City, Iowa, to see his parents, who had moved there in old age. One Sunday,

immigrant father and preacher son hitched up the wagon and drove down the road a few miles to Carnes CRC, in a town that is no more. Rev. John C. Schaap filled the pulpit that Sabbath day, morning and afternoon services.

That night the two of them returned, and that night C. C. died, having spent his last day on earth listening to his son preach. In a Christian's world, that life had a kind of storybook end.

My parents were thrilled when Grandpa Schaap baptized me in February of 1948 in the church across Main Street from the Dirkse home and gas station. "Does this outward washing with water itself wash away sins?" the catechism asks. The answer is unequivocal: "No, only the blood of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit cleanse us from all sins."

Then why baptize?

He [God] wants to teach us that the blood and Spirit of Christ remove our sins just as water takes away dirt from the body. But, even more important, he wants to assure us by this divine pledge and sign that we are as truly cleansed from our sins spiritually as we are bodily washed with water.

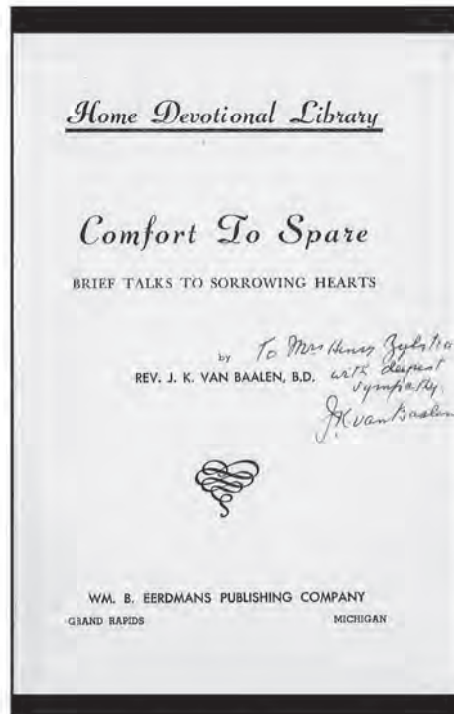
I'd have to reach some significant distance into my family tree to find anyone who believed anything to the contrary.

All of this is my inheritance. No one I know would call it a cult—maybe a fellowship. But I understand the question.

Comfort to Spare

And what of the book, itself a major character in this story?

"Well, sir," said a sympathizing man to the present author, "your son gave his life for the liberty of others, and you may well be proud of his great sacrifice to make possible the victory over evil which the world enjoys today."



Title page of *Comfort to Spare*, signed by the author, with a note of sympathy to Mildred Zylstra on the death of her husband Henry in 1956.

As this slight introductory mention makes clear, during the world war just concluded, "the present author" lost a son in the service of his country. Throughout the meditations, Van Baalen does not put his loss on display—barely mentions it. He knows enough about grief to understand that healing in others means being circumspect about your own. He needs only to say that he knows.

What became clear to me rather quickly is that my grandparents could hardly have missed themselves and their loss in the way the *Comfort* begins. "War casualties have ended," he says, first paragraph, first meditation—"for the United States, at any rate. The great Atlantic and Pacific wars have come to a stop almost as abruptly as they began." Then, he walks into the caricature Calvinist preacher. He could barely seem more callous.

That the pre-war annual army of

37,000 victims slain on the American highways, reduced because of fewer cars and less gasoline, is jumping to its former height as a result of more and better gas and a great amount of drunken driving, has not yet aroused the nation. On to normalcy!

Van Baalen could be sharp-tongued, and although he couldn't have known he would be read by parents who had just lost a daughter to an automobile accident, Grandpa and Grandma could not have helped noting the painful irony of what the pastor said. He could be brusque, even contrary, dismissive in a manner that may have been more acceptable 75 years ago.

Denominationally, he was not thought to be reactionary, or even conservative. Still, reading his meditations at times made me grimace. "It is a wonderful thing to be a Christian," he says, to begin the sixth meditation; then he adds a line that made me wince: "I mean, to be a true Christian, not merely one in name."

Many who pay scant attention to the word *Christian* would still be such if other believers would stop trying to determine who is or is not a *true* Christian. Us-and-themness is Sunday School spirituality that takes altogether too much joy in assigning grades of righteousness. I wasn't impressed.

But what would my grieving grandparents have thought of what they were reading?

The more meditations I read, the more I couldn't help but believe that the Piersmas' gift of Van Baalen's med-



Reverend J. K. Van Baalen.
Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

itations was not only appropriate, but welcomed, not because Van Baalen was orthodox, but because both *what* he says in *Comfort to Spare* and *how* he says it fit my grandparents with surprising exactitude.

What do I know about them, about my grandparents?

Grandma Dirkse and her faith

Mabel Hartman's family immigrated to this country in the early 1840s for economic reasons—they wanted a better life. They were religious, but they weren't *Afgescheiden*, which is to say they were not religious separatists like my grandparents on my father's side, or Grandpa's people on my mother's.

Grandma Dirkse left me a leather packet full of notes from her father, including a receipt dated January 30, 1897, from Central House, Random Lake. It proves nothing at all, but what it notes reinforces what little my mother ever said about her Grandpa Hartman, Grandma's father.

This Central House was an inn and a tavern, one of countless such road-houses throughout Wisconsin in the years before, and after, prohibition: "FINE WHISKIES AND CIGARS" and "FRESH BEER ALWAYS ON TAP." Somebody was brewing it right then and there.

"Livery," the \$7 charge, suggests that "D. Hartman" stayed overnight at the Central House, which is un-

derstandable. Random Lake is not a great distance from Oostburg, where Great-grandpa Dirk did business, just twenty miles or so.

With a team, people might travel as far as thirty miles a day, but let's just assume that he made a few sales in Random Lake that day. That he would choose—if he could afford it—to stay over and start back toward home in the morning makes good sense. Still, his staying there likely furrowed some righteous brows in Oostburg.

My mom remembered one story about her Grandpa Hartman, the time her mother, my Grandma Dirkse, drove to Sheboygan, her little daughter in tow, pulled up outside a tavern on Indiana Avenue, then walked in with her daughter, and located her father at the bar. According to Mom, that day her mother shooed her father home in no uncertain terms.

Was he drunk? I don't know. What I do know is that Mom's recollection of all of that was fuzzy. She was very young, she said, but she had never forgotten the incident because it was so unusual, nothing she remembered having ever been repeated. She didn't like to talk at all about him.

Grandpa Hartman was often on-the-road, a traveling salesman—a good one, presumably. But when Mom would offer that description, some disdain would be there in her eyes. It was not for *him*, perhaps—I don't think Mom knew him all that well—but for the profession, as though his drinking and philandering came with the profession.

Grandma Dirkse never said it, but I certainly get the sense that Dirk J. Hartman, my great-grandfather, wasn't much of a father. A bit of a rebel, a second-generation American



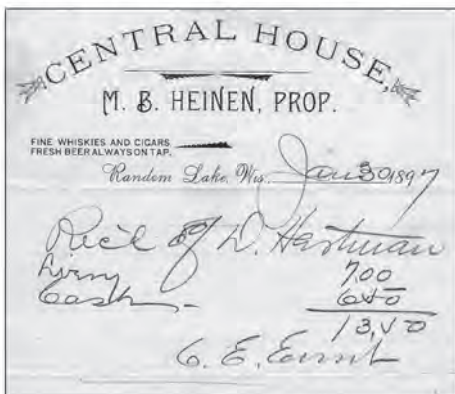
D. Hartman business logo from envelope.

of some standing, he didn't abide the strict moral codes of the Dutch Calvinist world into which he was born and in which he was raised. He was a member of the Reformed Church in America in town, unlike my grandfather's strict family, who worshiped at the CRC, the breakaway church across the street. Grandpa and Grandma were, in the language of the time, "unequally yoked"; theirs was a mixed marriage.

A friend of mine here in Iowa told me that his grandma and family left Oostburg in the 1890s and came all the way out to northwest Iowa to live because she did not want her husband to have anything to do with her brother and his business back in Oostburg. Her brother's name was Dirk Hartman.

If by "God-fearing" we want to describe life in a particular home, I'm willing to believe Grandma Dirkse's childhood home may have come up a bit short. She told me once, with a wry smile, that she'd learned the Heidelberg Catechism in the Dutch language, even though she didn't know how to speak Dutch. Her own grandparents were among the earliest mid-century Dutch immigrants to America, having arrived in the late 1840s. She was already third-generation American.

That Grandma Dirkse didn't collapse the night the police came to her door makes sense. She was 56 years old when her daughter was killed, but her life had borne more than its share of strife and sadness. This included, in 1918, the death in France of her



Central House bill for D. Hartman.

brother, her only sibling, a death that wasn't confirmed until two years after November 11.

I am not suggesting that Grandma Dirkse didn't feel the burden the moment the two of them were told of their daughter's death; I'm simply speculating that Grandma may have been better equipped than her husband by her experiences to deal with the soul-wrenching news.

Many years later, her neighbor lost a son who was hit by a train. That boy's sister told me that she would never forget how Grandma Dirkse was the first person to come over to their house that night, how she picked up around the place, not saying much at all except how she felt for their loss. In other words, Grand-

That the event was a dance meant that their going—at least Grandpa's going—was an act of rebellion, a dance being *verboden*. Good Dutch Calvinist kids of their time foreswore such sin, or claimed to.

That it was a dance mattered to Grandma's telling of the story, but so did their late-night return. I'm guessing that Great-grandpa Dirkse would not have known his son was out dancing with his date. What he would know was that his son and girlfriend finally pulled up far past the time they should have.

On the front porch of the house just a bit west on Main Street, when young Harry drove up, his father was waiting. When young Harry got down, his father said nothing but

father, the preacher's son, determined not to allow my older sisters to attend. The church warned against "the dance" in the same breath as card-playing and movies—all "worldly amusements." Dad said no go. My sister wasn't pleased.

Grandma Dirkse suggested to her son-in-law, a preacher's boy—probably whispering it—that she thought it wouldn't hurt either him or his daughter if he'd just lighten up a bit.

Did they love each other—Grandpa and Grandma Dirkse? I have no reason to believe or suggest they didn't. But they were created of different materials, wholly different genres of spirituality. They knew the same catechism, but Grandpa could shed tears simply by reciting the first question and answer. Grandma had learned those answers in Dutch, a language she didn't understand.

What happened at the front door after the accident that night was that Grandpa, the blacksmith, fell to pieces. Grandma helped him, I'm sure, then looked up at the cops and told them she couldn't help feeling for men whose job it was to walk up to front doors late at night carrying shocking news of death.

To me, to imagine that Mabel Hartman Dirkse was the strong one, as Van Baalen describes believers in *Comfort to Spare*, seems accurate.



The Dirkses.

ma Dirkse befriended her neighbor at a time that neighbor most needed befriending.

Grandma Dirkse told me only one story about her husband way back when the two of them were young. They took the horse and buggy all the way out to Hingham, a small town that might have been, back then, an hour away. There was a dance, she said—I remember that specifically—and when they left the party it was already pretty darn late, with the two of them still facing the long ride home.

kicked him solidly, powerfully.

There was no outrage in Grandma's tone. She wasn't calling what happened abuse. A town full of Reformed fathers might well have done the same thing, back then. Training up a child "in the way he should go" meant not sparing a battery of swift kicks. Grandma wanted me to know that Grandpa Dirkse came from a strict place. Her father would not have treated her similarly.

Years later, Oostburg High School began to sponsor its own dances. My

Grandpa Dirkse

Both of my parents remembered the Depression. They were kids in the '30s, but they remembered the suffering from kitchen-table stories. Through the years I've referenced those stories occasionally as my links to the era. Because they feature my own family, they make the Depression more than simply what's in the textbook.

Oddly enough, those stories happened across the street from each other. My mother grew up in down-

town Oostburg, where her parents' house and her father's business stood at the heart of the village. Just across the street and a few hundred feet east stood the old Christian Reformed Church, a church with two front stairways. The parsonage right next door was where my dad spent his teenage years after Grandpa Schaap accepted Oostburg's call in the early 1930s.

When Dad would talk about the Depression, it was mostly about hoboes. He claimed that his mother's loving heart used to draw crowds. Back then, men would hop trains that ran a half block away. Somehow, they would know which houses were most beneficent. My Grandma Schaap, Dad said, couldn't say no, which meant the church parsonage drew hoboes by the dozen.

In the worst of times, Dad used to say, there was no money, which meant for Grandpa Schaap, the pastor, that there was no salary. Although some older kids were already out of the house, sometimes, Dad claimed, he'd go to the back door and find a box of vegetables or even meat. Farmers—and there were many in the congregation—"paid" the preacher from their gardens. That salary was scant but wonderful.

Mom's Depression story was tougher. She said she remembered her dad crying at supper some nights because there simply wasn't any money, nor was there much food. They had no garden out back, and his penniless customers, farmers who dropped off potatoes across the street at the parsonage, needed their horses shod and their shares sharpened if they were going to get a crop in. If Grandpa Dirkse were to turn their work down, they'd go bankrupt. For the community's sake, Grandpa had to work with no cash flow.

Grandpa Dirkse crying at the supper table is an image I have tried to pass along to my children because it's humbling to have a sense of how your own family lived through troubled times almost a century ago.

But Grandpa Dirkse's story also says something about him, because while it's safe to assume that other local businessmen found themselves buried in the hard times, not all of them sat down over a bowl of pea soup and shed tears in front of their kids. Grandpa Dirkse did, but then, by all accounts, Grandpa Dirkse cried more often than most people do. He was delicate emotionally. My dad didn't reference any suppertime tears.

The preacher who gave *Comfort to Spare* to my grandparents a month or so after Aunt Gertie's death told me, years ago, that when Grandpa Dirkse died in 1954, he told a friend, a man not as pious as my grandfather, that the consistory should have believed Harry when he'd complained to them about how sick he was. That story was meant, even for me, Harry Dirkse's grandson, as a joke I'd get. He assumed I knew Grandpa may have quite regularly gone over the line with emotions.

Oostburg, Wisconsin, was, back then, a very small town—population no more than a few hundred, almost exclusively Dutch-American, which is to say Dutch Reformed, Dutch Calvinist. Not all Dutch Calvinists are created equal, of course, but the temperament Grandpa Dirkse exhibited may have found its source in a peculiar emotional character that was, back then, very much an outgrowth of the Dutch Calvinist piety many immigrants took with them when they left the Netherlands and came to America. ☺

Comfort to Spare, pt 2

James Calvin Schaap

Grandpa Dirkse was a deeply emotional man, perhaps to the point of being troubled. He carried his Christian faith out front in a manner I've come to believe was fundamentally different from both his wife, my grandma, and my Schaap grandparents. This manner was not unique to him, however. Doctrinal differences may lie somewhere beneath the individual expressions of faith of my grandparents, but those differences probably had less to do with orthodoxy than with personality, sensitivities, and a certain kind of piety.

Conventicle tradition

In the early 1800s, the gospel most familiar to state church congregations in the Netherlands was influenced by the Enlightenment. Its "Onward and upward" theology of human potential didn't remedy our sad state with

divine grace but appealed instead to human dignity: "pull your life together and dream dreams, see visions. You can do it"—rely on your own human potential.

When the old confessions and piety were absent from seminary curriculums and rarely heard from the pulpit, many devout people of lower social rank gathered in homes and barns to recover on their own the dynamic warmth of the gospel. House churches ("conventicles," as they were known) sheltered expressions of rich personal piety that believers felt to be absent-without-leave from the pulpit. Grandpa Dirkse came from and practiced a vibrant emotional faith that almost certainly emerged from the spiritual hothouse we call "the conventicle tradition" or Pietism.

This conventicle tradition was not unique to the Netherlands or even new. For years, small groups of pious believers met for worship on their own. Lay preachers flourished and began, in some places, to usurp the order and rule of the organized church.

By 1830, worship in most conventicles was fairly well defined. Psalm singing, Scripture reading, and prayer dominated. In addition, the meetings featured regular readings from the confessions and the "old fathers" (John Calvin was first among the patriarchs). Precise theology mattered less than hearty emotional piety and sometimes what others might have thought an unhealthy fascination with one's own sin.

The Pietists who joined these



Adolph Tidemand, "Haugianerne" ["Low Church Devotion"] (1848). National Museum of Art in Oslo. Wikipedia Commons. The devout in Tidemand's painting are followers of a lay preacher named Hans Nielson Hauge, who had a significant effect on the Norwegian Lutheran emigrants who came to America during the mid-nineteenth century. Their experience in Norway was similar to that of the seceders who left the Dutch Reformed national church.

conventicles loved devotional literature that went deep into the reality of our sin and suffering. They required self-examination for spiritual renewal, at times locking believers into worlds that had little room for anything other than the intense drama of their own salvation.

Grandpa Dirkse died long before I could know him or his family's history well, but the stories that surround him—a very pious soul—lead me to believe that he, and likely his parents and grandparents before him, had roots in the Dutch conventicle tradition. He measured the state of his soul with uncommon seriousness, and often tearfully.

That's the man the police met, in the middle of the night, in November 1949, to tell parents their daughter had just been killed in a freakish accident in deep lakeshore fog. That's the man who the family stories say collapsed at the news.

Reading *Comfort to Spare*

It's unlikely that Grandma and Grandpa read *Comfort to Spare* together or with their children. Mealtime devotions at the "family altar" rarely deviated from the Holy Scriptures. But a few scribbled notations in the book make clear that someone did read it. The binding is in poor condition, in dire need of glue. It's a used book.

I believe both of my grandparents read it, probably separately. What I can't know is how they might have responded, what they were thinking when they read the gospel Van Baalen preached.

This much I do know: Van Baalen is not clichéd or flowery; nor does he ornament his ideas with spiritual follies. I thought he'd do at least some of that, but, if anything, he is embarrassingly matter-of-fact, sometimes emotionally cold. The very first text he chooses seems unfeeling: "If thou faint in the day of adversity, Thy

strength is small." He begins, or so it might seem, by belittling real-life throes of grief.

Grief counseling today would probably not begin with a riff on Proverbs 24:10, but Van Baalen's *Banner* obituary claims that his personality required some getting used to. He was not particularly timid, and his bluntness was behavior that others needed to look past. I couldn't help wondering what my grandma and grandpa thought when they opened to that very first verse.

Maybe nothing. Some readers waded through words uncritically.

Then again, maybe not. Maybe they read themselves into that verse and Van Baalen's commentary. Maybe both felt as though this preacher knew them fearfully well.

An older cousin of mine once told me that when he was a boy, his family visited frequently at my grandparents' house. There would come a time every Sunday when talk turned deeply



Dirk Hartman and Grandpa Dirkse.

spiritual. Such moments seemed obligatory to him, as though a visit among relatives wouldn't register with the Almighty unless something was said about the Almighty—and, of course, our helplessness before his throne. This cousin was, back then, too young to participate but too old not to take note. There they

would sit, he told me, the conversation steering into bottomless darkness. Soon, Grandma would do what she could to move the conversation away from despair because she knew that darkness was a danger to her husband, my grandpa; an abundance of sin and guilt effectively kept grace off the stage. "Your grandma tried to make the rest of 'em laugh," this cousin told me, giggling himself. "Tried hard."

What did they think of this little book? "If thou faint in the day of adversity," as Grandpa had and did, "thy strength is small." Van Baalen says that God's words "are not words of sugary sympathy. He merely looks us over, and sizes us up." And then this, rhetorically: "Callous? Unfeeling?" he asks. A page or two into this book of consolation and comfort, I couldn't help thinking he was both callous and unfeeling.

But I know this too: my practical grandmother who didn't care for syrupy spiritual talk, and her deeply pious husband who did, could have appreciated that verse too. Grandma might have read those words and decided in a moment that this preacher had a good head on his sturdy shoulders. After all, the man was right about small faith. My soul-sick Grandpa, on his own somewhere, might have read "thy faith is small," brought his hands up to his face, and said prayerfully, "That is so true, Lord, in'so?"

I couldn't help but think that *Comfort to Spare* was easier for both of them to read because what the writer said felt so very close to home.

The consolation Van Baalen offers in the meditations is mostly conventional. It's hard to imagine any parent, no matter how stout in faith, simply accepting the death of a child. Faith always suffers when parents bury children. He knew that.

Comfort to Spare tells its readers to

trust in the truth of the eternal future they've always foreseen. The Lord does not punish us with calamity, Van Baalen says, but chastens us, not to distance himself from us, but to bring us ever closer. Despite the sadness, he directs people like my grandparents to remember not only that the great I AM is in control of our lives but that his love always, always, always triumphs—all of that consolation centuries old.

But occasionally Van Baalen steps away from the expected, and when he does, I can't help but think—and feel—that my grandparents would have stayed there with him, even felt themselves drawn in closer.

In the seventh meditation, he tells the story of Dan Crawford, a Scottish missionary, whose return to his African mission station was threatened by a swollen river he needed to cross. "The missionaries camped and prayed," Van Baalen reports. Then came a miracle:

A tall tree which had battled with the river for a century, perhaps, began to totter, and then fell—clear across the stream. "The Royal Engineers of Heaven," Mr. Crawford had said somewhere, "had laid a pontoon bridge for God's servants

It's a wonderful story for TV preachers, but Van Baalen wasn't buying in. "Well, perhaps they did," he says, wryly, of "the Royal Engineers of Heaven." Then he adds, "I doubt it though."

Grandma was adept at rolling her eyes. She had to love his response. *Comfort to Spare*, she might have thought just then, offered exactly what it promised.

Van Baalen nodded to Grandpa's darkened piety too by imagining what Crawford and his party might have thought as they approached the Lord in prayer a moment before the tree fell so miraculously. He appreciated their

reliance on God, but he couldn't help but believe that what prompted their prayers was self-assessment: "The evidence is there that God has sent a serious handicap, a genuine frustration of all of our plans," he says, penetrating the possibility of their thought. Then he switches pronouns midstream to enter the consciousness of one of the missionaries—and stays there, wielding more than a little sarcasm, unusual in a meditation designed to bring consolation for grief. What he knew is that a deeply devout party might well have determined the fault to be *ours*. He speculates this way:

Maybe we are at fault. Perhaps God does not approve of us. Let's see. Oh yes, someone in the party forgot his morning devotions yesterday; and day before yesterday another member spoke harshly. It was hot, but he should not have gotten cross anyway. There you have it: it's all off, boys! God is sending hard luck to punish us.

The sarcasm really can't be missed. "That, be it observed, is exactly the way some folks react. They may be Christians, but they have little faith."

My grandparents could not have



Gravestone for Gertrude, Mabel, and Harry Dirkse.

missed themselves there—Grandpa's backward reliance on his own insoluble sinfulness, and Grandma's pragmatic skepticism. J. K. Van Baalen was speaking in language that matched the religiosity of both of them.

Things grow yet more withering as *Comfort to Spare* goes on. Van Baalen becomes angry. "I care not just what the nature of your present difficulty is," he says, baldly. He was speaking to my grandparents, in their grief, and he claimed he really didn't care about their "present difficulty," even though that "difficulty" was the shocking death of their daughter. "The greater the obstacle, the better. In that way you won't be able to take any credit yourself for its solution." He was telling my grandparents that it was flat wrong of them—for my grandfather especially—to "take credit" for the death of their daughter because of whatever sin he did or didn't commit. Her death was in no wise attributable to their sin—to *his* sin. Nothing my grandfather had done drew up all that fog.

Elsewhere he tells the story of men steering rescue vessels up close to homes where people sat crouched on roofs to escape high waters during a Netherlands flood. But the pious roof squatters wouldn't get in the boat. They refused, claiming that God had beset them with this flood, and now it was their task to suffer his wrath. Van Baalen warned Grandpa and Grandma not to weave their own sin into the equation, not to "take any credit yourself for its solution."

And then, as elsewhere, he put a prayer into their hearts and mouths. He force-fed the grieving some penitence in a manner that's very moving. "Now go down on your knees," he demands, and then he tells them exactly what to say to God almighty:

Dear Lord, I am at a loss. I do not know which way to turn. But Thou never art at a loss. I open my heart to Thee. Please, show me which way to go. Point out the next step to me. Guide me, Thou great Jehovah. I need Thy help, but there is none other. Help me then, Father, for Christ's sake. Amen.

All of this is guesswork, pure and simple. To try to read this book through the eyes and heart of my grandparents is not difficult, but it's impossible to get it right because no one can know. Still, it's difficult to believe that the kind of instruction Rev. J. K. Van Baalen offered them didn't find a hallowed place in the hearts and souls of my grandparents.

And me?—let me just say that when I read that prayer and the whole of the passage that precedes it, I tear up. I have something of my grandparents in me, I suppose, something anyway of both of them.

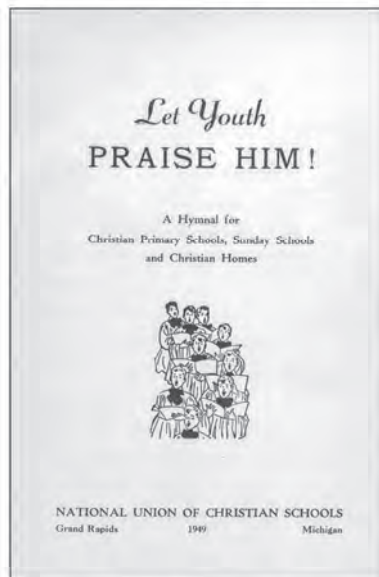
In the sixth meditation Van Baalen riffs on the promise that the blessings of the Lord make his believers rich. "All Christians are agreed on this," he says, but do all Christians believe such a promise? He seems to shrug his shoulders. "One is inclined to doubt it."

Many also like to feel sorry for themselves. They make a display of their sorrow. When their kin and friends come to sympathize with them in bereavement, they give way to uncontrollable grief. Never was there such a sorrow. No one took it so hard. These work themselves up to a point where they enjoy their woe, their tears.

And Van Baalen did not like it: "All of this is morbid and unchristian," he says. "It betrays a lack of faith, for which there never is a legitimate excuse" because "faith is merely resting in God, and there is always abundant reason for that, but especially in days of hardship."

If I didn't feel something of Grandpa Dirkse in me, I wouldn't have spent all this time thinking about it. I inherited that book unknowingly from my grandparents and, a generation later, from their daughter, my mom, who very certainly had a fulsome supply of her father's penchant for piety.

I can't remember the occasion, but I'll never forget something my dad told me. "You know," he said, "my dad used to say that people who spend time fretting about their salvation really don't need to." He might well have said it more elegantly or convincingly, but the idea was that those who wrestle with their sinfulness simply don't need to because their doubt paradoxically reveals the depth of their commitment. I think my dad remembered that conversation with his father because, even though he never said it, he found it



National Union of Christian Schools
sorgbook from 1949.

hard to understand the deeply spiritual darkness his father-in-law too easily entered.

How can I say that? Because of yet another story. Dad received a job offer that had come to him because of his hard work for the cause of Christian education. At the time, I was just a kid. The National Union of Christian Schools had offered him a job in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

My dad never felt at home with the fast life the office brass liked to lead, the men he worked with in a factory in Fredonia, Wisconsin. Dad would have loved that Grand Rapids job.

But he'd gone to his in-laws, he told me, to tell them about the offer, a job offer from an organization created to support Christian education. He'd come to understand quickly, he said, that he had to turn down the Christian school job. When Grandpa heard the news, he broke into tears and said he couldn't lose the only daughter he had.

Van Baalen ended with another chorus of an idea he had brought up earlier. In the last pages of the last meditation, he returned to a mission he had already outlined.

... there are types of Christians when the first waves of sorrow have subsided. There are many who pity themselves. Others must comfort them. Even so they will admit that God is good, and add "yes, but ..." These are not free from egoism, and they suffer more than necessary because of a hidden rebellious spirit.

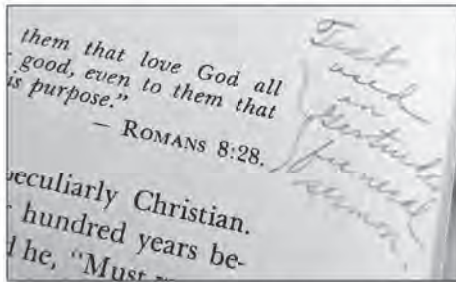
I don't think either of my grandparents could have read that without weaving its relevance into both their grief and the fabric of their lives.

The second-to-last meditation in *Comfort to Spare* adopts a rhetorical style reminiscent of Martin Luther King Jr. Van Baalen did not hint at biblical truth; instead, he hammered it home in waves of affirmations that were meant to create determined hope: "We know ... We know ... We know ... We know ..." So begin a series of four paragraphs before a final rhythmic reiteration: "We know. We know. WE KNOW!" [emphasis his]. He would not relent, listen to doubt, or abide a shred of fear or hesitation.

Are all those "we knows" effective? Van Baalen's little book is long out of print. No one has likely read it for years. Who can know its broader appeal? The question I am attempting to answer is no easier, however: "Was it effective?"

I can only speculate. Combined as it is with prayers he demanded his readers, grieving parents, to offer with him, I can't help but feel it was. Via his own bare-knuckled assertions, God's love loads determination into some readers' souls. Your mourning will turn to dancing, he says. WE KNOW it will. Despite the darkness, he knew believers have faith that their Redeemer has not left them outside his radiant grace.

People say that among the Lakota, grief had an established ritual. When someone beloved was killed, a spouse was given a certain number of days—three or four or five—to be wildly



Marginal note in *Comfort to Spare*. "Text used in Gertrude's funeral sermon."

inconsolable, to leave the band and wander aimlessly through the trees or grass, to be mad, chanting and screaming out the depth of her grief. But when that specified period was past, the grief had to be over because the band needed to be well. Four days of unending sympathy maybe, and then none, no more.

Van Baalen was not that abrupt, but it seems that his remedy for grief was something the grieving already know—reflect once more on the love of God. How can you not?

Van Baalen was not an enabler. He wouldn't allow excessive grief because his faith—and the faith of his readers—was the confidence that their precious children had already found bliss in a far better world, in the arms of their Savior's love. WE KNOW that, he says, time and time again.

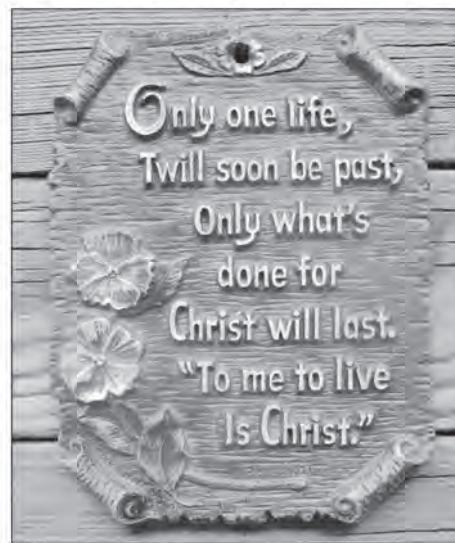
That "We Know" meditation is a

riff on Romans 8:28—"And we know that to them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose." Right there, in the book, a note is penciled in. The line beside the text says, "Text used in Gertrude's funeral sermon."

I'd like to believe that the handwriting isn't the same as the penmanship inside the front cover. I'd like to believe—and I do—that the note beside the Romans 8 passage is my grandpa's scribbles. It's hard for me to believe that Grandma Dirkse would have referred to her daughter as "Gertrude," her baptized name.

But there's more. Rev. Van Baalen ended the book with a familiar proverb: "Only one life 'twill soon be past, only what's done for Christ will last." And finally, "To me, to live is Christ."

I saw that line every day of my childhood. An old plaque in some



Plaque with proverb.

baroque calligraphy featured that line and hung from the wall beside an upstairs library.

Another note scribbled in beside those words on the final page of the book makes this thin old volume of Van Baalen meditations priceless. "Plaque on her wall selected by her." Same handwriting as that beside the

Romans 8 line, pointing out the text of her funeral service. Same handwriting—I think it's Grandpa's.

Truth be told, I didn't want to like *Comfort to Spare*. I thought it would feel old and vaguely sentimental, even superficial. It is not. It doesn't countenance sentimentality. It creates prayers for the grief-stricken who otherwise probably find it hard or even impossible to raise head or hands to God. It's tough love that I can't help but believe my grandma would have found helpful. I'd like to think she would have found the book greatly so because I can't help believing she would have approved the toughness Van Baalen brings to processing grief. Besides, in the family, she was the reader and the writer.

But I want those two scribbled-in notes to have been written by Grandpa Dirkse. I want to know he read the book too, some parts of it clearly aimed at dour, wounded believers like himself, sinners darkly concerned about sin and given to fretting through bouts of anxiety.

A family legacy

I came heir to a ton of my parents' things from their succession of slimdowns—sepia-toned pictures of great-grandparents no one else in the family has, notes and bills and receipts. I once had my dad's wedding ring but gave it to my son when, at the wedding, his ring-bearer couldn't find the one his wife had planned to put on his finger. A triangular box right in front of me holds the American flag given to us, his family, at his graveside.

But I don't have the plaque Grandpa says Aunt Gertie once chose herself for her wall. Once, we had it—my mother did. I can't believe she would have tossed it. One of my sisters has it, I suppose.

When I read what Grandpa scribbled on the final line of the Van

Baalen book, it seemed impossible not to believe that the plaque we had upstairs was the one Grandpa was pointing out, the plaque Aunt Gertie chose for her very own, and the one I grew up seeing almost every day.

I wish I had known all of that when I was a kid, but I didn't. It took me three-quarters of a century to identify what was being said in those fancy raised lines on a chunk of plaster of Paris.

Grandma would have liked for me to try to figure it all out, I'm sure, but Grandpa would have been thrilled

that, at bottom, this whole story is all about the Lord.

Then again, maybe neither of my sisters has it. Maybe it's gone, broken, and tossed. It wouldn't have been worth a dime.

Still, I can't help wishing I had it.

But then, I own that old proverb, just as fully as it owns me. Somewhere close, it will always be there, and if that means I'm part of a cult, I guess that's something I'll have to live with.

So, Jeffrey Krebs, something of this is what makes me tick, something

that was given to me, something I haven't earned or remember choosing—a stubborn, illogical faith, something people sometimes call grace.

Fifty years ago, you asked. I suppose I could have answered you then, but I think you can credit that half century with making me more sure of what I learned as a boy from a proverb on an upstairs wall.

It once belonged to my aunt, a woman I never knew. She was killed on a foggy highway some twenty miles south of the town where I grew up. ☹

for the future

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

A special issue of *Origins* focused on women and Dutch American history, with articles about topics such as single Dutch women emigrants, individual women emigrants and their experiences, and Dutch American women working in professions such as medicine.



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Thank you so much!

Calvin College students, all women, gathered around and on a motorcycle. There is no date on the photo, but the bike looks like a Harley Davidson Model J from the late 1910s or early 1920s. The image depicts how views and roles of women were evolving in the United States in the 1920s, including among Dutch Reformed women at Calvin College. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

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