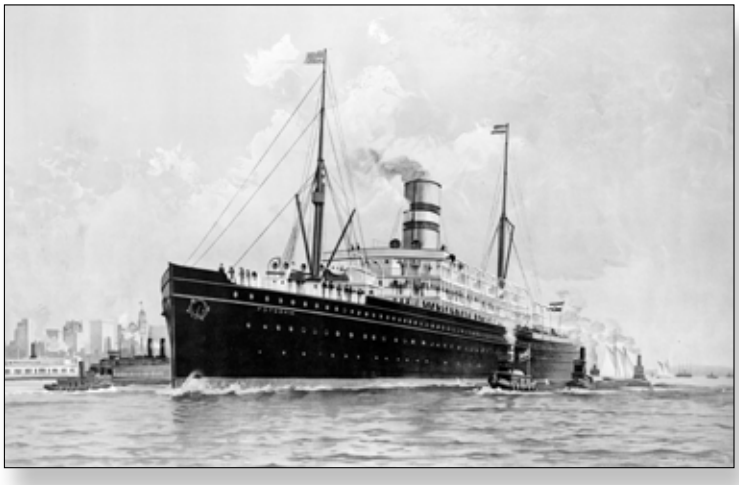
A Short-Lived Dream: Theunis Wispelwey Comes to America

Robert Schoone-Jongen

Theunis Wispelwey climbed aboard a trolley car for the first time in his fifty-year-old life on July 6, 1910. The direction sign read "Paterson," the city at the other end of the line from where he stood—the Lackawanna Railroad Terminal on the waterfront in Hoboken, New Jersey. Six blocks to the north stood the Holland America Line's 5th Street pier. Theunis, with his wife, Jeltje Oppedijk (48), and their children, Tjeerd (24), Klaas (22), Aukje (21), Dieuwke (16), and Hantzen (13), had debarked that morning from the S. S. *Potsdam*.



The SSt Potsdam, the ship that brought the Wispelwey family to the United States. Courtesy of the Library of Congress. LC-D4-43305.

Since the Wispelweys had crossed the Atlantic in second class, they came ashore at the pier and avoided the immigrant processing center at Ellis Island. Theunis had $137.00 worth of Dutch guilders in his pocket—seed money for a start in their new country. Once they had retrieved their trunk and bundles of belongings, they found Grietje (Margaret) Atsma, their guide to the trolley line and their new home in Passaic.[1]

The Wispelweys arrived in the United States as millions of other did: by ship, with a known destination and assistance from forerunners they knew. But traveling second class on the *Potsdam*, with the extra amenities they could afford to pay for, set them apart from the most common immigrant experience of steerage class and Ellis Island. What would happen to Theunis less than two weeks later placed his family into a very exclusive group who experienced a tragedy that could have permanently broken their spirit.

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Margaret Atsma actually spotted the Wispelweys among the passengers who had just debarked down the gangways. Her husband, Willem, hailed from the same village as the Wispelweys—Heeg, Friesland. Willem had been living the United States for 25 years and made his living delivering ice in the summer and coal in the winter. July 6 being a Wednesday, and July a very busy time for ice deliveries, Willem delegated Grietje to meet the newcomers. She escorted them to the flat he had rented for them ten miles away in Passaic.

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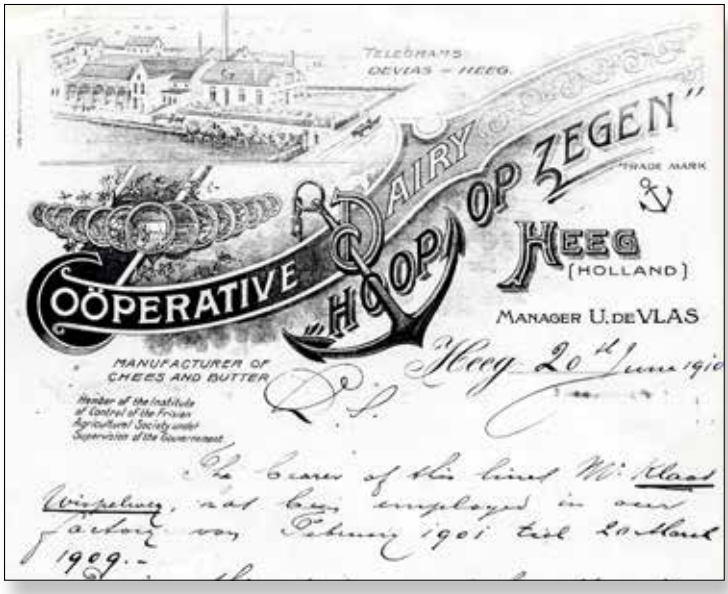
As the trolley headed west, it climbed a spindly iron bridge to the top of an escarpment far higher than any hill the Wispelweys had ever seen in the Netherlands. Then they crossed the Hackensack River meadowlands, passed through a couple of boroughs, and finally entered Passaic. They alighted at a stop on Main Avenue while the trolley continued to Paterson, another five miles beyond. The eight of them walked uphill until they reached their destination at 249 Autumn St. Hollanders lived to the right of them, to the left of them, and above them on the second floor. It was the weather that first shocked the newcomers, mid-July in the Middle Atlantic area being the time of high heat, high humidity, and the barest of breezes.

Heeg lay in the southwest of Friesland on an inland lake called the Heegermeer. For thirty years families had been leaving the area, hoping for better prospects in the Passaic Valley. Wybren Hooghiemstra, a shoemaker, had moved there in the 1880s. Watze Pruiksma, a butcher, had left with wife and six children in 1895. His four sons were all butchers. Jelle, Klaas, and Arjen ran a shop in Paterson and Jetze one in Passaic.[2] Watze's store in Dutch Hill was only a few blocks from Hooghiemstra's cobbler shop on Main Avenue. Willem Atsma, whose stepfather was related to Jeltje Wispelwey, lived within shouting distance of Pruiksma's store. Atsma had left the same year as Hooghiemstra. Roelof Bulthuis had gone to Paterson in 1894, although he had moved on to farm in Kansas.[3] Most recently Theunis's friend (or supervisor) Aelse Sinnema had settled in Paterson in 1907.[4] Like Atsma, Sinnema made a living selling things.

For years the folks in Heeg stayed in touch with the immigrants by mail. Then some of the departed returned for visits. Watze Pruiksma first visited



Letter of recommendation to take to the United States from the Cooperative Dairy in Heeg, Friesland. Image courtesy of the author.

just five years after he had immigrated; he came a second time in 1907.[5] Bulthuis visited that same year, and Atsma came back early in 1910.[6] From them Theunis heard tales of American abundance and opportunities. The fact that these people had the time to recross the ocean, and could afford it, spoke volumes.

In 1909, Theunis Wispelwey found his life at a crossroads—a mid-life crisis. His family was being fed and housed adequately. His sons were gainfully employed and his daughters nearing a marriageable age. But at forty-nine he saw few prospects for promotion at the creamery where he worked as a cheesemaker. Son Klaas seemed to be on the brink of leaving home. He had taken a position an hour away at Warns, also as a cheesemaker, and had started living there during the week. He also had a girlfriend whom he intended to marry. Tjeerd, the oldest son, clerked for a local notary. He too might need to move on for advancement. Theunis had spent most of his life in the municipality that included Heeg. In winter he could ice skate to his birthplace at the other end of the lake: Hemelumer Oldeferd. He had moved several times before settling in Heeg in 1901, with every stop but one in that municipality.

Hearing the stories from people like Pruiksma, and actually seeing him, helped fuel Theunis's dissatisfaction. And so, he began to talk of little else but America and started to explore how to get there. To his sons his determination seemed more of an obsession. In the words of one fellow villager, Theunis Wispelwey was "self-assured."[7] His visits with Bulthuis and Pruiksma seemingly cinched the matter. By the fall of 1909 Wispelwey began planning his family's move to Passaic—and they all would have to go together, because he said so.

Passaic loomed large for two reasons: the familiar people who lived there and the church they had organized. For as long as the Wispelweys could remember, they had been part of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands, remaining loyal to it through the schisms and upheavals that had disturbed it since the 1500s. Each Sunday most of the villagers faithfully attended services in the local church. By 1905 the people who had left Heeg for Passaic had joined other Hollanders (mostly Frisians) to organize the Northside Christian Reformed Church in the Dutch Hill neighborhood. Jetze Pruiksma was a charter member and faithful member of its council. For people like Theunis, moving to that far off city would come with the solace of keeping the tradition of Sunday worship in a familiar style.

In a series of letters Jetze Pruiksma

provided the details about how legal immigration worked in the United States and legal emigration worked in the Netherlands—which documents to secure, where they could be obtained, and how soon in advance they were needed. He also agreed to swear that upon their arrival the Wispelweys would be able to provide for their own needs. Pruiksma and Willem Atsma would find a place for the newcomers to stay and provide basic furnishings. With this information in hand, Theunis began to publicly announce his intension to leave in the spring of 1910.

He gave his supervisor at the creamery notice during September 1909. Soon afterward, Klaas had a difficult conversation with his girlfriend, announcing that he would follow his father to New Jersey. She refused to go with him. Klaas also informed his supervisor at the creamery of what was coming in the spring. At home, discussions turned to which relatives had first option on the furniture Theunis and Jeltje had received from their relatives as presents. The legal matters required trips to the administrative offices in Sneek, ten kilometers away. There they bought a steamer trunk and shoes and had their passport pictures taken. They also sat for a formal family portrait.

During May and June 1910, the household contents were either claimed or sold at auction. Theunis and Klaas said goodbye to their employers and co-workers. Klaas left with a letter of recommendation from his boss (written in stilted English) and the recipe for making cheddar cheese.

Theunis bought second class tickets from the local Holland America Line agent. On June 21 they loaded the trunk (24"x22"x36"), two suitcases, bundles of sheets and blankets, a satchel secured with ropes, and four cloth bags (one of which contained their clogs) onto a wagon. From Heeg they rode to Stavoren to catch the ferry to Enkhuizen. From there they went by train to Den Haag, where they stayed for two days with Jeltje's brother, seeing the sights of the big city. Then it was back on the train to Rotterdam and a walk from the central station to the quay of the Holland America Line, where the *Potsdam* lay moored. At 4:00 p.m. that afternoon, Saturday, June 25, the tugs pulled the ship out into the channel.

The Wispelwey family in the Netherlands, 1909. Image courtesy of the author.

The Wispelweys had experienced their first ever ferry and train trips in the span of less than a week. Having paid their way out of the purgatory of steerage class, the Wispelweys enjoyed a ten-day voyage with meals in a dining room, including a choice of meats! They enjoyed cabins with real beds, showers, ocean breezes, and met fellow passengers who were not from Heeg, many of them not even from the Netherlands. Sunday provided two shocks: the meager turnout for the church service and the chaplain's very short sermon. On July 1 and again on the 5th, ship doctors screened all the passengers for diseases; the Wispelweys passed. The ship docked on schedule. Upon debarking, even before the oppressive weather hit them, the family was shocked at the noise they heard, a din that did not abate when Margaret Atsma led them onto the street for the walk to the trolley line.

249 Autumn Street was a two-story wood frame house. The Wispelweys occupied the first floor. It had running (cold) water, a kitchen with a stove better than the one they had used in Heeg, three bedrooms, access to the basement, a privy out back, and very little ventilation—given how close the houses were on either side. They sweated profusely in their woolen clothing, and their wooden shoes were not suited for walking on steep pavement. Willem Atsma arrived late that first afternoon to deliver a free block of ice, and Jetze Pruiksma brought a free box of groceries.

Atsma said that he could help one of them find a job at a local paper

mill. Tjeerd, thinking he could be a clerk, began work on Monday as a production worker on the night shift alongside a bilingual Hollander. As for cheesemaking, the Wispelweys' upstairs neighbor, carpenter John Klapmust, had never heard of anyone doing that in the Passaic Valley, where the local dairies delivered milk door to door. Whatever cheese the stores stocked seemed to come from

Northside Christian Reformed Church and parsonage in 1935. It looked much the same in 1910. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

Wisconsin. On Sunday, when they attended services at the Northside church, Theunis and Klaas met Atte Spaanstra (also from the same municipality), who moved houses for a living. He needed extra help to manually dig a deeper basement underneath a nearby house.

Father and son agreed to do the work—very hard work, especially for the fifty-year old Theunis. Spaanstra's offer, Atsma's largesse, and the tab Pruiksma began keeping of their purchases at the store created a sense of obligation for the independent Theunis. And he became discouraged, not to mention very sore and blistered.

Aelse Sinnema, formerly Theunis's supervisor at the creamery, lived five miles away in Paterson. Pruiksma said that the trolley from Hoboken ended in Paterson, so seeing Sinnema required climbing on board, paying the fare, riding to the end of the line, and then walking to Sinnema's house in the heavily Hollander Over the River neighborhood. Pruiksma used his telephone to make the arrangements for Theunis and Klaas to meet Sinnema on Monday, July 18 at 7:00 p.m. By then Sinnema would be done with his day's work as a drug salesman, and his wife (whom he had met in Paterson) would have tea waiting for them.

When Theunis and Klaas spoke to Sinnema, he confirmed that no one made cheese in the area. But many Hollander men worked as cutters and ironers at the Manhattan Shirt Company on River Street. He would introduce Klaas to the person who did the hiring. As for Theunis, he would need to keep looking for an opportunity. With that, the Wispelweys walked back to the trolley barn on Ellison Street and found the car displaying the sign "Hoboken" for the trip home. The car pulled out of the barn, turned right, and then right again onto Main Street. It rumbled through the city's business district, the Peoples Park's Hollander enclave, and then on through Clifton.

Apparently Theunis spent the hour on the trolley lost in his own thoughts, saying little to Klaas. Given that it was dark at 10:15 and that this was their first time riding the line eastbound, it was understandable that neither father nor son noticed when the trolley made the scheduled stop at Summer Street until the car started moving again.

At that moment Theunis realized their mistake and reacted.

The newspaper headline the next day read, "Fatal Leap From Car: Man Jumped When Conductor Failed to Pull Bell Rope."[8] Within seconds Theunis yelled (presumably in Frisian) for the car to stop and leaped out the side onto the pavement. He landed on the side of a cobblestone, pitching to the side, hitting his head on the pavement, and suffering a fractured skull. Klaas had reached out to grab Theunis as he leaped but could not grasp him in time. The car stopped, and the police and an ambulance were summoned. One hour later father and son were transported to Passaic General Hospital, where Theunis was pronounced dead twelve days after he had arrived and less than a month after leaving Heeg. When Klaas was asked to sign the form to release the body to an undertaker, for the first time ever he wrote, "Nicholas Wispelwey," his American name. It was midnight.

It took Klaas about twenty minutes to walk from the hospital to home, where he broke the horrible news to his mother and sisters. When Tjeerd came home from the paper factory in the morning, Klaas gave him the grim news. He also walked the short block to Pruiksma's grocery store to let Jetze know. The undertaker the hospital summoned visited the house to finalize arrangements. He was a Dutch immigrant himself, Jacob Vonk, a native of Texel, who had been supplementing his livery business with undertaking for the past three years. His fee would include acquiring a burial plot in the Lodi Cemetery, securing the death certificate from the hospital, preparing the body, and transporting the remains to the house for viewing and later to

the cemetery for burial. As Vonk left, he nailed crepe to the door posts.

Rev. Arie J. Vanden Heuvel, the Northside church's pastor, arrived at around 2:30 to offer condolences and arrange the service. He suggested conducting it on the 21st in the church building, located about three blocks away, since the house was so small. Vonk arrived with the body soon afterward.

While the family mourned and mulled over what had happened to them, the Dutch Hill immigrant community did its own arranging behind the scenes. Two elders from the church stopped by to offer their sympathy on behalf of the congregation. One of the deacons arrived to offer financial assistance, which the family declined. Knowing of the family's needs, neighbors arrived with hot meals, luxuriously including gravy for the meat and potatoes. The Northside consistory met to accept the Wispelweys as full members and arranged to pay most of the funeral expenses. The deacons convinced Jacob Vonk to reduce the bill by half, and the church paid the balance. On his own, Jetze Pruiksma paid the cemetery's fee and placed the amount ($35) on the tab he had been running for the family, telling Klaas to pay whenever he could.

With "Heit" lying in the Lodi Cemetery, "Mem" determined to remain near her husband's grave. Given their bills, the family could not afford the fare in the near term. Tjeerd continued to work the night shift in the paper mill, and with Sinnema's help Klaas secured a job as an ironer at the Manhattan Shirt Company. He commuted to work on the trolley.

A few months after Theunis's death, Klaas did send an inquiry to his employer in Warns, asking if he could have his old job back at the creamery. He received an answer during January 1911. Indeed, he could come back with the assurance that housing arrangements could be made for the entire family if he were to accept the offer. But given his mother's unwillingness to leave Theunis behind in Lodi, Klaas concluded that he had to remain with her in the Dutch Hill neighborhood.

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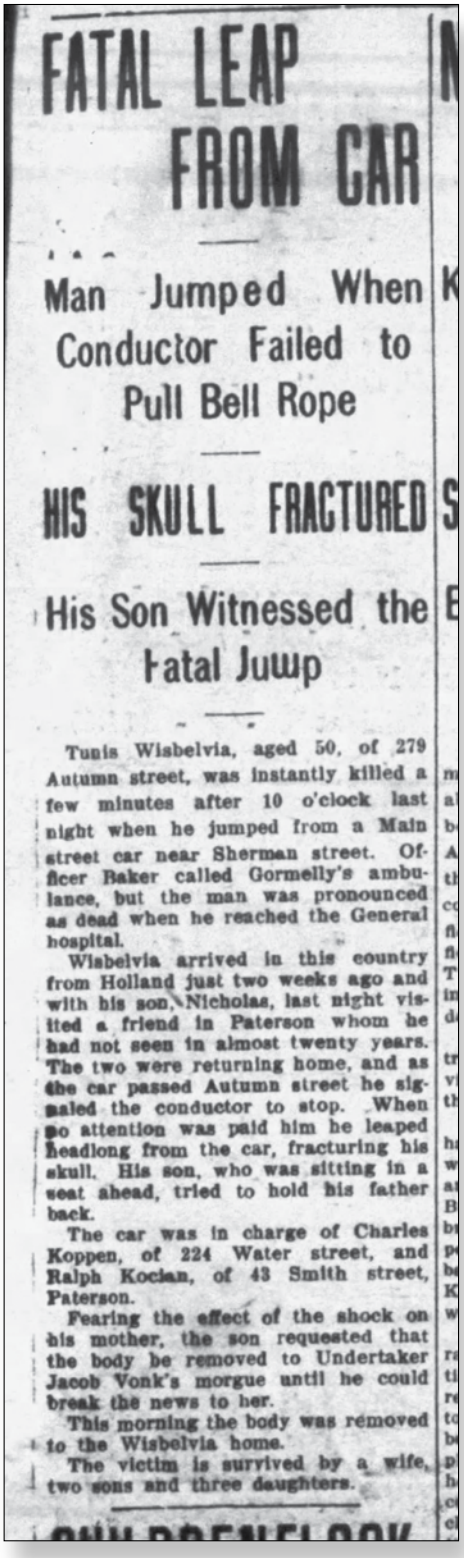
Clearly, Theunis Wispelwey's sudden death so soon after his arrival in the United States was not a common immigrant occurrence. Yet what subsequently happened to his wife and children was common, albeit with a Dutch accent. These Frisians became Dutch Americans on their way to becoming simply Americans.

By 1915 Tjeerd became Theodore, was married, and clerked in a hardware store. Eventually he owned a successful auto parts supply store in Montclair. Aukje, Dieuwke, and Hantzen became Ida, Julia, and Hannah. Ida married John DeBoer, a fellow Frisian immigrant who earned a living in various ways. They lived in Dutch Hill for the rest of their lives. Julia worked as a servant in the Passaic area until she married Adam Muller, an immigrant from Baarn, Noord Holland. He worked as a foreman in the Manhattan Rubber Company in Passaic. Hannah went to work in a silk mill after completing her schooling. She married Fred Brower, who had been born in Haarlemmermeer, Noord Holland, and worked as a driver.

Jeltje remained Jeltje, except for an appearance as "Elsie" in a city directory. Since she never remarried, she lived with her children: first Nicholas, then Theodore, and finally with her daughter Ida. Through all the changes she always remained in Dutch Hill, within walking distance of Pruiksma's grocery store and Northside Christian Reformed Church. In this way she lived much



FATAL LEAP FROM CAR

Man Jumped When Conductor Failed to Pull Bell Rope

HIS SKULL FRACTURED

His Son Witnessed the Fatal Jump

Tunis Wisbelvia, aged 50, of 279 Autumn street, was instantly killed a few minutes after 10 o'clock last night when he jumped from a Main street car near Sherman street. Officer Baker called Gormelly's ambulance, but the man was pronounced as dead when he reached the General hospital.

Wisbelvia arrived in this country from Holland just two weeks ago and with his son, Nicholas, last night visited a friend in Paterson whom he had not seen in almost twenty years. The two were returning home, and as the car passed Autumn street he signaled the conductor to stop. When no attention was paid him he leaped headlong from the car, fracturing his skull. His son, who was sitting in a seat ahead, tried to hold his father back.

The car was in charge of Charles Koppen, of 224 Water street, and Ralph Kocian, of 43 Smith street, Paterson.

Fearing the effect of the shock on his mother, the son requested that the body be removed to Undertaker Jacob Vonk's morgue until he could break the news to her.

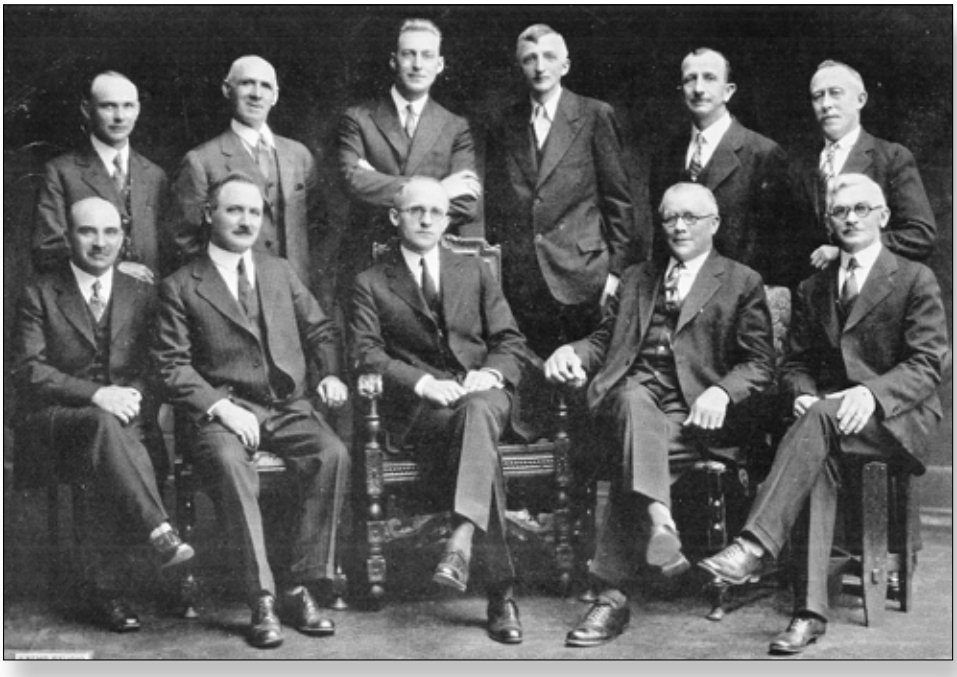
This morning the body was removed to the Wisbelvia home.

The victim is survived by a wife, two sons and three daughters.

News story of the accident in the Passaic Daily Herald, 19 July 1910. Courtesy of the author.

as she had in Heeg. When she died in Ida's house in 1931, Northside's minister conducted the service in the house. Her children then buried her next to Theunis in the Lodi Cemetery.[9]

Nicholas continued to work as a presser at Manhattan Shirt Company for over a decade, except for serving in the United States Army during World War One. In 1923 he married Henrietta Sundermeyer, who had grown up near Paterson. Soon afterward he started his own landscaping business, which he operated until his retirement in 1960. Over the years Nicholas served as an elder and deacon at Northside Christian Reformed Church and secretary of the board for the Christian Sanitorium Association, the psychiatric hospital the Passaic Valley Dutch immigrants opened in 1917. He never returned to Heeg, but he kept two mementos until his death in 1977: the handwritten letter of reference from his supervisor at the creamery and the recipe for cheddar cheese. Decades later, Nicholas's account of his father's leap from the trolley remains a central event in the family's coming-to-America story. It inspired his son John to compile the account of the family's move to America and Theunis's death, upon which much of what appears here is based.[10]



Theodore Wispelwey, a deacon in the Northside CRC church council in the 1930s, standing third from the right. Willem Atsma is standing first on the right. Image courtesy of Heritage Hall.

Nicholas in his U.S. Army uniform, 1918. Image courtesy of the author.

Endnotes

1. Passenger manifest. *SS Potsdam, 6 July 1910, p. 129, Holland America Line Second Class ledger entry 4949 (Rotterdam City Library).*

2. Jelle, Klaas, Arjen, and Jetze anglicized their names to Charles, Nicholas, Orie, and Jesse. Three of them paid homage to Watze by naming a son Walter.

3. Passenger manifest SS *Amsterdam 11 June 1894 (2nd Class).*

4. Passenger manifest SS *Potsdam 16 May 1907.*

5. Passenger manifest, SS *Nieuw Amsterdam 14 October 1907. His 1900 visit is documented by the death notice of his wife recorded in Sneek on 28 July 1900. See also death notices in Leeuwarder Courant 31 July 1900 2, 8 September 1900, 2.*

6. Passenger manifest SS *Rijndam 15 March 1910.*

7. John Wispelwey, *A New Place (In Nije Plak) (Midland Park: De Wachter Publications), 1995, 46.*

8. *Passaic Daily Herald, 19 July 1910, 1.*

9. *Passaic Daily Herald, 9 March 1931, 2.*

10. The author wishes to express his deep appreciation to Theunis's great-granddaughter, Rhonda Wispelwey Klein, for lending a copy of John Wispelwey's memoir and a number of family mementos.

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Cover photo:
Calvin Students at the Michigan Student Volunteer Conference in 1924. You can see a Calvin sign in the center back and a Calvin pennant at the center front.

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