

Early Dutch Settlement in Minnesota

Edited by Henry S. Lucas

THE ACCOMPANYING sketch, written in 1897 by the Reverend Herman Borgers, a minister of the Dutch Protestant group known as the Reformed Church in America, presents a succinct, yet fairly complete, statement of the settlement from 1856 to 1897 of Hollanders in Minnesota. It was prepared for a celebration held at Holland, Michigan, on August 26, 1897, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of Dutch immigration to the United States. There is no evidence that Borgers actually read the sketch on that occasion, and it was not published with most of the other papers listed on the program. It was, however, preserved by the public-spirited Gerrit Van Schelven, who subsequently bequeathed it to the Netherlands Museum at Holland. With the permission of Mr. Willard Wichers, director of the museum, the narrative is published now, when the hundredth anniversary of the beginning of immigration from the Netherlands in 1847 is at hand.

Borgers, who was born in the Netherlands on November 13, 1844, immigrated to the United States, attended Hope College in Holland, and there also studied for the ministry at the Western Theological Seminary. Subsequently he served Reformed churches in Dutch settlements at Cedar Grove, Wisconsin, from 1874 to 1881, at Polkton, Michigan, from 1881 to 1883, and at Greenleafston, Minnesota, from 1886 to 1893.¹

His varied experiences with Dutch immigrants after they settled in the Middle West enabled him to write from firsthand observation. One can only regret that he did not write a longer account, filled with details about the picturesque life of the Dutch pioneers, their triumphs and their tribulations. But his account, as it left his hands, seems nearly complete. He does not notice those few Hollanders

¹Edward T. Corwin, *A Manual of the Reformed Church in America* (formerly *Ref. Prot. Dutch Church*), 1628-1902, 336 (New York, 1902).

who, according to one authority, settled near Audubon in Becker County, but about whom little appears to be known.² Nor does he say anything about the two families of Friesians who in 1853, after crossing the ocean with a large number of their countrymen from Harlingen and suffering shipwreck in the Bahamas, left their friends, who settled at New Amsterdam, Wisconsin, and bought lands a short distance east of the village of Houston in southeastern Minnesota.

In preparing this manuscript for publication, the editor has made only a few verbal changes and a few in punctuation. The Christian names of most of the settlers have been spelled out, but where, in spite of persistent inquiry, it was impossible to discover such names, the text has been left as the author wrote it.

THE HOLLANDERS IN MINNESOTA, 1856-97

Herman Borgers

While a few isolated Hollanders and Holland families are scattered throughout the State of Minnesota and especially in St. Paul and Minneapolis, distinct settlements are to be found in Fillmore County; Kandiyohi, Chippewa, and Renville Counties; Pipestone, Nobles, and Rock Counties; and in Pine County.

I. Fillmore County. Of all the Dutch settlements in the state of Minnesota, Greenleafton in Fillmore County is the oldest. During the spring of 1856 a group of Hollanders left Alto, Wisconsin, in search of cheap lands and a favorable location for a new colony. This group was composed of Derk Alink, his wife, and children, who traveled in two wagons each drawn by a yoke of oxen; Willem Boland and his wife in a wagon also drawn by a yoke of oxen; and Arend J. Nagel, a muledriver who drove one of Alink's wagons. From Alto they slowly traveled southwards through Wisconsin, northern Iowa, and southern Minnesota, through areas where there

² A. D. Van der Gon Netscher, "Emigrate uit Nederland. Kolonisatie met Nederlanders in Oost-en West-Indië," in *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-, en Volkenkunder van Nederlandsch-Indië* ("Contributions to the Study of the Languages, Geography, and Peoples of the Netherlands Indies"), 8:89 (Third Series, 1873).

were cultivated as well as uncultivated lands, through timber and prairie. Having no specific spot in mind, but being bent on exploring the country, they traveled in a roundabout way westward along a route so circuitous that today they would not be able to find it again. Finally, on May 19, weary of travel, they halted in Fillmore County on the spot which now is Alink's farm, unyoked their weary oxen, and said "Here shall be our dwelling place."

During the autumn of that same year other Hollanders joined them: Berend Nagel and his wife, their sons Derk and Gerrit, and daughter Diana. Meanwhile Alink erected his house—the first in the new Dutch colony. Boland and his wife spent the summer in their canvas-covered wagon. They built a log house of one room, as had done the Nagel family. These houses were little better than mere huts and scarcely kept out the Minnesota storms. But the newcomers rejoiced that they had accomplished so much. Other people had settled at some distance away, but had little to do with these strangers. To the west stretched a vast prairie dotted with forests. Hardly a road was to be found anywhere.

But in spite of the hardships incidental to their pioneer life, this little Dutch community grew steadily. In 1856 arrived Willem Boland's mother, his brother Hendrik and wife, and Jan, an unmarried brother. During the following year came Willem Vriege and his daughter who became the wife of Arend Nagel. These people possessed the courage necessary to cope with frontier conditions, make the sacrifices required to conquer the primitive character of life far removed from civilization. Their markets at Prairie La Crosse and other places along the Mississippi River were as much as 70 miles distant. Lumber and other building materials had to be brought in from those places. Wheat and corn had to be transported in ox-drawn wagons. Primitive log houses and dugouts had to serve as homes—some of them may be seen even at this date. The prairie had to be broken, for not a furrow had ever been turned here; stores where they might procure necessities did not exist. Such were the privations and hardships of their life; they were enough to put Dutch persistency to a severe test.

The first winters proved especially severe, chiefly because the

settlers were not prepared to face the rigors of a new environment. This is illustrated by the tale about Arend Nagel, who with two others undertook to bring supplies from Preston, a town twelve miles distant. So difficult was the journey through the ice-encrusted snow and so sore became the feet of their oxen that the travelers were forced to abandon their bags of flour in a grove and later even to part company with their bobsleigh. One night the snow fell so deep that the settlers had great difficulty getting out of their primitive abodes. In those days there were no articles specially adapted to winter wear, such as rubber shoes and rubber coats. Ordinary leather shoes had to serve during winter.

Some time elapsed before the colonists could provide for their religious needs satisfactorily. Their first meetings were held in a school house. Soon the German Evangelicals came to preach and some of our Hollanders alternated their services occasionally. The Reformed Church was not officially organized until 1869, but a nucleus of the church had existed ever since 1856, which managed to maintain some services. In August, 1869, Dominie Pieter Lepeltak came, who served as pastor until April, 1877. This was the formative period of their church. A Miss Anna Greenleaf, a member of one of the eastern churches of our denomination, furnished all the money necessary for the erection and furnishing of the present church structure. In honor of her generosity this settlement was named Greenleafton. Other pastors followed: Dominie Harmen Van der Ploeg, 1878-1882; Dominie Jacob B. De Jonge, 1883-1885; Dominie Hermanus Borgers, 1886-1893; and Dominie Albert Oosterhoff, from 1895. During Borgers' pastorate the church was renovated and greatly improved at an expense of about \$600, and now is a substantial structure. A new barn has been built recently and plans for a new parsonage are actively being considered. This church at the present time has a membership of 60 families, in all 132 souls.

There also is a Dutch Presbyterian church, organized in 1876, with a membership of 20 families. Its pastors in the order of their service were the Rev. J. W. P. Roth, Sr., J. W. P. Roth, Jr., Sysko Redens, G. I. Bloemendaal, and the present incumbent, K. Tietema. The organization and subsequent history of this church did not

spring from a legitimate need of the community but had its origin in dissatisfaction and dissension. At no time did this church have any but a tentative existence, although under the present incumbent there are signs of improvement. Only 50 members are enrolled, 15 of whom do not attend because of distance. The Reformed Church, on the other hand, has had a more successful existence; yet had the Hollanders as a settlement been united religiously and ecclesiastically they might have accomplished much more. At least there might have been one other prosperous Dutch church five miles to the west, where, in the German Evangelical church above mentioned, the Hollanders at present constitute a majority.

The settlement of Greenleafston at present forms a Holland community about 4 by 12 miles, numbers about 320 souls, and is situated south of the Chicago, Milwaukee, and Saint Paul Railroad, all parts of the colony being between 12 to 20 miles south of Preston. Years ago these distances were felt to be disadvantageous, but now no more. Our settlement is a quiet rural section. God has abundantly blessed our people. The soil is incomparably rich; during all these years crops generally have been abundant and there has never been a failure. Today there is little room for expansion and all growth can come only through the reduction of the size of the farms which, it must be granted, really are too large. The price of land in Greenleafston generally is at least as high or higher than anywhere else in Fillmore County. Three of the first settlers still are living: Arend J. Nagel, Willem Boland, and Mrs. Derk Alink. On May 19, 1896, there was a quiet and pleasant commemoration of the 40th anniversary of settlement on the Alink farm, with fitting thanks for divine blessing and guidance.

II. Kandiyohi, Chippewa, and Renville Counties. There is a settlement of Hollanders at Renville and vicinity dating from the spring of 1886. It had its origin in the real-estate activities of the Chicago firm of Prins and Koch, which in the autumn of 1884 had bought for the purpose of a Dutch settlement about 3,500 acres of prairie land from the St. Paul and Duluth Railroad. In the spring of 1885 they began to advertise in papers in The Netherlands and in

Dutch papers in this country. At the same time they placed their local agent, a Mr. Pieter Haan, in charge of their interests at Olivia, situated in Renville County. Soon many Hollanders from different states came to investigate the company's lands. Almost every visitor was well pleased with the prospects for farming and many bought land with the intention of settling there in the spring of 1886. Among the first to come were: Derk Bunkersberg and Willem Van Arum with their families, from Amsterdam in The Netherlands; Gerrit Knot and family from Maywood near Chicago; Simon Dykema and family from Chicago; Derk Ritzema and family from Grand Rapids, Michigan; Hilke Fischer, John Flynn, and Corolas Van den Einde with their families from Michigan; Jan Van Akkeren and family from Oostburg, Wisconsin; Albert K. Kleinhuizen from Roseland, Illinois; Dutmur Zuidema and Bouke Terpstra and families from Indiana; Ewe Bolt and Albeertis Huizinga and families from Iowa; and a number of others from New York, Ohio, the Dakotas, and other states.

These pioneers were earnest, energetic souls. With a determined will and fixed purpose they came, with God's help, to build homes for themselves and their families, to induce the wild, naked prairie to bring forth its hidden treasures in response to diligent and intelligent farming. Not a house or tree was to be seen for miles, nor were there any landmarks to set off the land they had bought. Hard work it was to break the thick, tough hide of this prairie sod. Digging wells, building homes, and erecting shelters for their cattle meant much labor. But they accomplished all these things and laid a firm foundation for the future. Soon the fertile soil brought forth an abundance of crops, stimulating the hope of ultimate success and encouraging those whose hearts had faltered.

Soon these Hollanders thought of organizing a church. In response to a request from them to the Classis of Iowa of the Reformed Church in America, two ministers came in May, 1887, and organized a Reformed congregation.³ Soon after this ministers of the Christian Reformed Church also came to organize a church of their own. In

³ The Classis of Iowa is a governing body of the Reformed Church in America, consisting of ministers and representative elders in the Iowa district.

1887 they built a church in Prinsburg, four miles west from Roseland, at a cost of \$500, an equal sum having been contributed by the firm of Prins and Koch. This company had made similar promises to the Reformed people, but no Reformed church was erected until 1892, a delay detrimental to the growth of that church because many were weaned away from the Reformed Church when there was no church they could attend regularly. At the present time (1897) the membership of the Reformed Church living at Prinsburg is about 30 families, at Roseland about 40. Some of the Reformed people, however, joined the Christian Reformed Church whose center, as we have observed, is Prinsburg. This congregation, whose present pastor is Dominie J. H. Schultz, has a membership of about 60 families with about 300 attending services, while the Reformed Church has about 200. The total area of the settlement is about 20 square miles.

In adjoining Chippewa County to the west there is a settlement of Hollanders at Clara City 12 miles west from Roseland. Here, however, they do not constitute a compact Dutch population as at Prinsburg and Roseland. They form only about half of the population. Recently (in 1896) a Reformed church was organized, but was joined with the Roseland congregation and now is served by energetic Dominie Cornelius Kriekaard. Apart from these two purely Holland churches there are two other congregations, each possessing its own church. These are East Friesians, who use the Dutch tongue in their services. The first of these is Bundi near Clara City; the second Emden, located in Renville County, six miles north and one mile west of Renville, thus adjoining the Dutch settlement of Prinsburg and Roseland to the north. Both these churches belong to the Christian Reformed Church and are in a flourishing condition, under the united charge of Dominie Potgieter.

Not all the Hollanders living in this region, however, belong to these churches. At Clara City there is a German Presbyterian, a German Lutheran, and a Roman Catholic church, and each of these has some Dutch members and some Dutch-speaking East Friesians. At Raymond, a village generally regarded as belonging to the Dutch

colony, eight miles northeast from Clara City on the Great Western Railroad there is a Methodist Episcopal church to which a few Hollanders belong. At Renville also some Hollanders have joined the Methodist Episcopal church. The other Hollanders living there attend the churches at Emden, Prinsburg, or Roseland, while a few have abandoned churchgoing altogether.

At the close of one brief decade of development, this settlement of Dutch-speaking people numbers about 1,500, to whom ought to be added 1,000 East Friesians, who together own no less than 360 farmsteads. During this period these people have helped to build two villages, Prinsburg and Roseland, totalling about 1,000 souls and situated on the Minnesota and Western Railroad.⁴ These villages provide all necessaries and even luxuries for the colony. Most of the business in both places is in the hands of Hollanders. These people provided for their religious needs and also developed their educational opportunities. They have erected 20 schools for their children, and, in addition high schools in the villages. They have built more than 20 expensive bridges over creeks and rivers, and opened 200 miles of good roads. The desert blossoms like a rose, the wild grasses and heavy sod have vanished—made room for beautiful gardens and golden grain where but a few years ago the buffalo, fox, wild cat, skunk, and other animals roamed freely. The psalm of praise:

Hoe lieflijk, hoe vol heilgenot,
O Heer der legerscharen God,
Zijn mij Uw huis en tempelzangen!

—Psalm 84, verse 1.

has supplanted the call of wild beasts.⁵ All this has been effected with Dutch arms and Dutch hearts, through the blessing of the Most High.

Truly our people—Dutch as well as East Friesians—have pros-

⁴The reference is to the Minnesota Western Railway, a short line that still serves Prinsburg and Roseland. It extends from east to west through the southernmost tier of townships in Kandiyohi County. *Ed.*

⁵The verse, which reads in translation: "How sweet, how filled with saving comfort, O Lord God of mighty hosts, are thy house and songs of praise," is from the Dutch psalter used in the religious services of the Hollanders.

pered. The soil is rich, the rewards of labor are rich indeed. Few misfortunes have come to this colony, the climate is healthful, there have been no serious epidemics, and there has never been a crop failure. The settlement is expanding rapidly, and land has doubled in value in the one decade since the first settlers made their homes here. The original purchase price was \$8 per acre; but there are many who would not sell it at \$25. Not a few who came with nothing in their hands now own farms free of all encumbrance. Had they remained in the Old Country they perhaps would have to end their days in some charitable institution. And still there is room for hundreds of Dutch families. Mr. Pieter Haan, who sold land to Hollanders 10 or 12 years ago, is ready to provide all comers with whatever they need.

III. Pipestone, Nobles, and Rock Counties. The earliest settlement of Hollanders in Pipestone County was established at the village of Holland in 1887. The first settlers were D. Van Beck, H. Beyers, G. Van den Berg, E. Lokhorst, and E. Van Essen and their families, all from Alto, Wisconsin; D. Mouw from Sioux City, Iowa; and J. H. Ubrechtsen from Oostburg, Wisconsin. Other Hollanders followed, chiefly from Sioux County, Iowa, a colony only about 70 miles to the south.

These settlers at once thought of their religious needs, and so on May 22, 1888, the Classis of Iowa of the Reformed Church organized the congregation of Churchville, the center of the Dutch colony situated $7\frac{1}{2}$ miles north and $3\frac{1}{2}$ east from Pipestone and 5 miles north from the village of Holland. The church and parsonage were erected partly by funds provided by the church. The congregation, which at present has a membership of 28 souls, has been served by Dominie Gerrit Dangremond and also at times by Jan Willem Kots, at that time a theological student at the Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, but later a dominie.

The soil of this county is excellent for farming, resembling that of Sioux County, Iowa. The farms prospered, and never suffered reverses except in 1893 and 1894, when the very general drought ruined all crops so that scarcely nothing was raised. Today this land

is worth from \$15 to \$25 an acre. This prosperity is reflected in the character of the villages where the farmers transact their business. The village of Holland has two stores, a blacksmith shop, two grain elevators, two churches—one Lutheran and one Presbyterian. Here two Hollanders are engaged in business. Pipestone, a larger and more thriving place situated on several railroads, furnishes a good market. The people of this vicinity are eager for more Dutch settlers, and there is plenty [of] room for them. Surely, God Who has so richly blessed the first settlers of this region also will reward newcomers.

Nobles County, southeast of Pipestone County, also offered excellent opportunities for settlers, and Hollanders first settled at Leota in 1890. This region had been occupied by several other nationalities for 16 or 17 years. But in 1890 a considerable amount of railroad land was offered for sale and farmers from Sioux County investigated the prairie land and bought a good deal of it at \$10 per acre. Some of the Hollanders bought this land for speculation and rented it to other Hollanders. But many Hollanders at once took possession of their properties, the first settlers being M. Kalemeyn, G. Hofkamp, Jan Kreun, E. De Graaf, Derk De Graaf, Wolter Sterrenberg, T. Sterrenberg, H. Van der Meer, Ab. Eernisse, Willem Olivier (also spelled Oliver), D. Prins, and Abel J. Smol, all of these heads of families.

Leota, 65 miles from Orange City, Iowa, has a general store and a blacksmith shop; 40 people live within a quarter mile from the village. Edgerton, in the southeastern corner of Pipestone County, generally is a better market for the farmers. Here, too, Dutch farmers settled, especially as new settlers constantly arrived, mostly from The Netherlands. In Rock County, west of Nobles and south of Pipestone County, there are a few Dutch settlers, but I have been unable to get any information from them.

The Reformed Church has a congregation in this region, at Bethel near Leota. Founded in 1891 by the Classis of Iowa, it at first had only 13 members. Its church structure, which cost \$1,500, towards which the Christian Endeavor Society contributed \$800, was

ready for occupancy in the fall of 1892. Several futile attempts were made to secure a pastor until Dominie Hendrik J. Pietenpol arrived in July, 1895. As there was no parsonage, the dominie and his wife lived with one of the farmers until December 23 of that year, when they moved into the present commodious parsonage built at an expense of \$1,500. Today the stables of the congregation provide room for 26 teams, but this is not enough in view of the growing church. In all, 50 families now belong to this church, 62 members being in full communion.

For several years all these settlers worshipped together; but in February, 1895, came a split. The Christian Reformed Church was formed, and henceforth there were two rival congregations. The Christian Reformed group numbers about a dozen families, hold their services in a schoolhouse, and have no pastor as yet.

If good soil, favorable climate, excellent markets, and religious facilities possess any advantages, this colony promises to become a growing Dutch settlement. The newcomers usually are poor and for the most part come from Sioux County, Iowa. But they are likely to prosper, and advanced education may even attract them, for there are high schools in the neighboring villages, and at Orange City there is the Western Classical Academy. The Lord God has manifold blessings for all who come to Leota and vicinity.

IV. Pine County. Most recent of Dutch settlements in Minnesota are Friesland and Groningen, two communities about five miles apart situated in the middle of Pine County and 80 miles from St. Paul and 70 from Duluth. These places may be regarded as one settlement which owes its inception to the desire of Mr. Theodore T. Koch, General Land Agent for the St. Paul and Duluth Railroad Company, to attract settlers for the lands owned by the railroad. From February 1 to September 1, 1895, he sold about 25,000 acres to Hollanders at from \$3 to \$6 per acre; they at once began to take possession.

The soil of this burned-over pine country is a mixture of gray, yellow, and brown clay with some black soil in the lower parts. Although not quite so rich as the lands occupied by Hollanders in

other parts of Minnesota, the proverbial economy and industry of the Dutch colonist will convert these acres into good farming lands. The soil is excellent for grass, clover, potatoes, fruit, vegetables, beets, and for all kinds of fodder for hogs, cattle, and horses.

Because of the cheapness of this land, abundance of timber, and the liberal terms on which it was sold, the Hollanders came in such numbers that in 1897 there were as many as 75 families of them and in addition 50 unmarried men. Among the first arrivals were Martin Eikman from West Duluth; G. Zwakman and Jan Kooistra from Minneapolis; K. Fyema from Dresbach, Minnesota; G. Hanenburg from La Crescent, Minnesota; and J. Smit, from Harrison, South Dakota. Others came from Iowa, Michigan, Wisconsin, the Dakotas, Illinois, New Jersey, Nebraska, and Indiana.

Friesland and Groningen each have elementary schools; those who desire advanced education can go to the high schools in Sandstone or Hinckley, each of which is about five miles distant. Mr. Koch at his own expense built a church for the free use of the settlers. These have formed two congregations: a Christian Reformed Church, organized in April, 1896; and a Reformed Church organized on October 21, of the same year. Each congregation has a membership of 30 families or more.

Besides the advantages already mentioned, this region has many lakes, rivers, and creeks. It offers peculiar opportunities for poor people as well as for those who possess some money. There still are available 150,000 acres to Hollanders at the most advantageous terms. The future of this colony seems secure and promises, with God's blessing, to become a prosperous Holland settlement.



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