

Lynden - A Home Far Away from Home  
the Rev. Arnold Briuk.

Documentary material about the Dutch colony in Lynden and others in the far Northwest is not abundant. Heritage Hall at Calvin College in Grand Rapids has gathered a number of informative clippings from De Wachter, De Grondwet, Volkvriend, and The Banner. Dorothy Koert, herself a descendant of early settlers in the Lynden area, has compiled A Portrait of Lynden, a paper-bound book, replete with family histories, and filled with pictures. Jacob Van Hinte writes briefly about Lynden in his Netherlanders in America and Henry S. Lucas, similarly, in his volume bearing the same title. Henry Beets, really the pioneer historian of the Christian Reformed Church, De Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk in Noord Amerika, touches on the Northwest very briefly but chiefly as something incidental to his treatment of the Home Mission efforts of the Christian Reformed Church. For the rest, I have drawn freely on personal and family recollections. My father and mother came to Lynden as a Home Missionary couple in 1899 and later returned to make their home in Lynden in 1914, when I was a year and a half old, and there I spent my formative years until 1931 when I came Grand Rapids to attend Calvin College. My mother lived to a venerable 92 years and her mind was clear to the last and her reminiscences extremely interesting and informative.

Whatcom County is the most northwesterly county in the United States. Its northern border is the Canadian border. Its western shores are washed by the tides of the Pacific Ocean, specifically Puget Sound; almost miraculously warmed by the Japan current. Its eastern border climbs into the heights of the Cascade Mountains. To the north, just beyond the Canadian border, rise the Selkirks; the Twin Sisters lie to the Southeast. The peaks of the Canadian Rockies to the Northeast are commonly known in that area as "The King Brothers." Whatcom County contains within its borders and as its singular possession, the Nooksack River, which is totally contained within the county.

As Dorothy Koert writes, Nooksack is the name of an Indian tribe, a river, a town, a valley, a river boat. The rise and fall of this little river spells the wealth and disaster of many homes built in its fertile valley. Thousands of families, ours among them, feasted on huge Chinook Salmon dip-netted out of its waters.

On the plateau above the Nooksack the first house in the Lynden area was built by a squatter named Patterson. It was a rude but sturdy log cabin and later served as the temporary home of the Judsons, the first family to truly establish the reality of Lynden. Later still it served as the first school in the area. Phoebe Judson gave Lynden its name. As she and

her family made their way painfully along the Nooksack river in search, as she said, of her ideal home, in March, 1972 she saw the site of the Patterson cabin, was reminded of a line of poetry, "On linden, when the sun is low," changed the "i" to "y" because it seemed prettier, and called the place "Lynden". Eventually the Judsons, after spending a precarious year in the abandoned Patterson cabin, built a substantial house which was still standing when I went to college in 1931. They continued to be leading citizens of Lynden, which, under their leadership, was incorporated as a town in 1891.

The beginning of Dutch settlement in Lynden should really be traced to the visit of Gerrit Veleke, who came over from Oak Harbor, a little Dutch settlement on Whidbey Island in Puget Sound, to the main land and found a "little lumbering town", writes Lucas, almost abandoned, because the depression of 1893 had forced the shingle mills, upon which Lynden depended, to close down. Veleke found many houses simply standing open and empty, with furniture of sorts in them, whose owners and former occupants had simply moved out and moved on to find opportunity somewhere else. Veleke found that the soil was very fertile and could be bought for \$20 to \$25 an acre. The following year Veleke returned to Lynden, and brought with him Herman Oordt and Douwe J. Zylstra. D.J. Zylstra, incidentally, is the grandfather of Marian Vanden Berg, wife of Dean Emeritus John Vanden Berg of Calvin College. An article, written by Zylstra, appeared in the De Grodwet, describing the opportunities in Lynden, good soil, cheap, an equable climate, no crop failures, no violent storms, no bitter sub-zero temperature. (Records indicate that in 1893 the temperature had dropped to the unbelievable level of 10 or 12 below zero--this may have contributed to the exodus of the depression-burdened early settlers. Our family never reported a temperature of even zero.) From that time the Dutch trek to Lynden began.

Several things may explain the lure of the far Northwest. Land was cheap. In Sioux County, Iowa, writes Van Hinte (p. 755) the land was already climbing beyond the price Dutch immigrants could pay. Others had the experience related in the Saga of Klaas De Vries in the recent issue of Origins, who found that the free land of Canada's prairies was purchased at the price of almost unbearably hard climatic conditions. They were drawn by the articles in De Grodwet and Volksvriend to a climate and conditions that reminded their home-sick hearts of the Netherlands. They saw a land close to the sea, where it rained abundantly, and seldom snowed, where small farmers could make a good living and enterprising souls could do even better. Lynden and Oak Harbor sounded indeed like "Home" even though so far away from home.

Dorothy Koert gives 1897 as the first year of the great Dutch migration to Lynden. Her own forbears may have come at about that time. The Koert family was well-known in the

Lynden area. Next to the little farm which was my boyhood home, there was a tract of uncleared land which must have belonged to the Koert family. At least a gate about a quarter mile west of our gate was always known to us as "Koerts Hek."

Since the Dutch are known throughout the States and Canada by the fact that they maintain their own churches and schools, the growth of Dutch immigration to Lynden can be tied to the beginnings of the first church of Reformed persuasion. The Christian Reformed Church, was, in fact, the first non-Catholic church in Lynden. The little Catholic mission to the Indians which became the Roman Catholic Church in Lynden, is a little older.

The impetus toward the beginnings of the Christian Reformed Church in Lynden was given by Henry Beets, then serving his first charge, the First C.R. Church of Sioux center. when he was later Editor of the Banner in 1907, he wrote in that paper that he traveled to Lynden and circulated a petition for organization of a church. This was in May of 1899. This petition, apparently, led to the decision to send a Home Missionary to Lynden, and that Home Missionary was Rev. Abel J. Brink, my father. He had recently married Hattie Mulder, who was serving as companion-housekeeper for the aged Mr. and Mrs. William Berkey, founder of the furniture making empire of Grand Rapids. The two newly-weds set off for the far west with little but their commission and their idealism to sustain them. For at least a great part of the long train trip, with no dining facilities on the train, no lunch rooms at way stations along the line, were a loaf of bread which I dare say my mother had baked herself, and three lemons, probably as preventative for traveling sicknesses.

The train came to the end of the line and what must have seemed to be the young missionary and his bride, the end of civilization, at the New Whatcom station, which I must assume was another name for what is now Bellingham. From there to Lynden the only means of transportation was a horse-drawn stage, the only road was a "corduroy" road through trackless forests. The stage arrived on a September Saturday evening in Lynden before the general store run by D.J. Zylstra. The stage driver set their luggage on the board walk, thrust his head into the store doorway and shouted "Here's your preacher!" This was my parents' introduction to their first charge!

They probably spent the night as house guests of the Zylstras. Sunday morning the little congregation gathered in the Odd Fellows lodge hall that they used for a meeting place. My father, who was, all his life, a stickler for punctuality, was in the pulpit when Fred Bierling, the other member who normally read the sermon for the service, when Zylstra didn't, arrived a trifle later. The surprised look on Bierling's face was my father's first reward for his preaching!

Because the preacher had arrived before they had really made all adequate preparations for him and his wife, they housed them in a log cabin, probably one of those that had been abandoned by people who moved out during the depression of 1893. The first rude furniture my father improvised from the trees around, of which there were plenty. My mother jokingly recalled she did not need a dust pan. "If I swept the dirt around a little, it fell through the cracks in the floor."

In time, however, they were able to rent a reasonably comfortable frame house for \$1.00 a month. Their own furniture arrived from the east by freight. And there they served for the rest of 1899 and through most of 1901. Immigrant families came apace. Once they arrived as the preacher himself had arrived, unheralded and with no place to go. They, of course, often landed at the minister's house. My mother recalls times when she would bed down whole families on the living room floor on an arm-load of straw from the horse barn. To feed them, she had her home-made bread and huge kettles of pea-soup. She often fed her growing brood of children on the same simple hearty fare. When I was a boy, and I was the seventh child, my mother baked no less than 26 large loaves of bread a week!

Life for Missionary Brink and his wife, Hattie, was rugged in the frontier days in Lynden. There were few roads and those were almost always muddy. My father said, jokingly, that the mud was not as bad as Iowa mud. If, in Iowa, you wanted an eighty-acre farm, all you needed to do was put your foot down and when you pulled it up, there was your farm! But the Lynden mud was hard to get around in. In the first days in Lynden, both of my parents donned high boots and walked to the farms and homes to visit their people. Later my father had a horse and rode horse-back through the woods. He told me that often, coming home in the dark, he had no way of knowing how to find his way through the trackless forests, so he would lie flat on the horse's back and let it find its way. When the horse stopped, he could jump off. He knew he was at home! The main street of Lynden was a broad expanse of rutted muddy ground still peppered with stumps that hadn't been removed. Removing stumps that were left from the lumbering operations was a task that occupied the spare time of many farmers for decades. The stumps were blasted with dynamite, then the blasted roots were pulled out by means of horses or "donkey engines" and pulled onto huge piles around a still standing tree and eventually, when the weather was favorable, set afire. It was a bon-fire wonderful to behold!

Travelling in and around Lynden was comparatively safe, but sometimes chancy. My mother tells of a time when she was going home after having gone to the general store. It was pitch dark and she was picking her way along the board walk

which she knew ended not far from home. As she stepped off the end of the walk she stepped on a sleeping pig which roused with a snort and ran off, nearly upsetting her and her groceries, and scaring her quite properly.

Credit had to be a way of life. My father received a check from the Home Mission Board once in three months. He had to make a trip on horseback to New Whatcom to cash it, and the trip took from 7:00 in the morning till 6:00 at night. He received his cash in twenty-dollar gold pieces. During the three months between checks, people simply trusted each other. Sometimes, that trust had to stretch through half a year or more. That system of mutual trust endured for many years. When, after serving as an itinerant missionary for fourteen years, traveling, usually on horseback, so that he became known as the "cowboy preacher", my father's health failed. The family moved back to Lynden, where they could take advantage of that system of trust. In those days there was virtually no fund from which retired ministers were supported. The "emeritus kas" was almost nil. There was no other source of help. Our family arrived in Lynden with just one dollar to their name. This one dollar they paid to close the deal on a ten acre piece of virgin timberland east of Lynden. All the rest that was needed to clear that land, to build some buildings on it, to provide for a family of nine souls, was done on credit, virtually all to one man. William H. Waples, affectionately known as "Billy" Waples, who steadfastly maintained that he had never lost a nickel on Hollanders and built a fortune on that trust. The space does not permit of my telling the tales of miracle that our family experienced before that enormous debt was paid.

That trust system was built into the very warp and woof of the Dutch community from its earliest beginnings. In the first year my parents were in Lynden, a twelve-year-old girl in the congregation died. The people had no money, and the nearest undertaker was in New Whatcom twenty miles away. So my father made a casket, my mother lined it with white sheeting material, and washed and dressed the little girl's body, and so their first funeral took place. Then and there, my father vowed this need not happen again. He persuaded everyone to pledge a very small amount, perhaps no more than ten cents, each time there was a death among them. The money so collected was then given to the bereaved family to make possible a suitable funeral. This was the origin of the Monumenta Society which is still in existence, and has, in the course of years, supplied Lynden with the Monumenta Cemetery across the road from the public cemetery west of town. Even a recent Banner article in which the supposedly rigid provincialism of Lynden was spoken of as being illustrated by a Dutch cemetery as against an American cemetery, failed to understand the touching Christian charity that lay in the origins of this interesting phenomenon. The principle of this

burial society has been adopted by a goodly number of Christian Reformed ministers who have organized the Christian Reformed Minister's Fund. The present membership of this group numbers 850 and each time a death occurs they contribute \$3.40 each and the family of the deceased minister receive \$2,550.

During that first year, my mother chided my father that he did not make work of organizing their few families into a church so that the sacraments could be received. His reply was, "If you plan to build a tall building, you lay a deep, strong foundation." He may have been thinking of the experience of Missionary J.W. Brink (not a relative) who in 1896 organized a church in Oak Harbor, which soon merged into the United Presbyterian Church. Although, in those years, there was some talk of merging the Christian Reformed denomination with the United Presbyterian Church, my father was firmly loyal to the Chr. Ref. tradition. This abortive attempt in Oak Harbor is reported by Van Hinte, who says he gained his information from the book of Henry Beets, De Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk in N.A.

However, on July 11, 1900, the organizational meeting was held, apparently entirely under the leadership of my father. Today, the organization of a new congregation requires the presence of a special committee of classis. In that time, no doubt, the distance from Iowa made such an arrangement an unnecessary luxury. Four consistory members were chosen, and the decision was made to call a minister. The little group scarcely knew any other minister than their little Home Missionary, and so it was a foregone conclusion. The tiny consistory then had to meet to formalize a call. The following conversation is said to have taken place.

"Nu, wie kan een beroep-brief schrijven?" to that question there was silence!

"Zoo, dat kan ik wel," said Dominie Brink.

And so the unprecedented took place, the minister wrote his own letter of call! The stipulated salary was to be \$500.00 per year, plus the parsonage, which was rented for \$12.00 per year and fuel which consisted of wood, which was in thriving abundance all around them. The Dominie also had to write out the Form of Subscription that he and the consistory members were to sign and that form, in my Father's handwriting, is in the archives at Heritage Hall and was signed by succeeding office holders for, I believe, 75 years!

Although it was all so primitive, so simple, so much a foregone conclusion, my father insisted that the amenities be followed. The call had to be sent to Iowa to be approved by the nearest minister who was to serve as the Counselor or Moderator.

Meanwhile a human-interest story from my mother:

There was a cherry tree on the grounds of their rented parsonage. The cherries were ready for picking. My mother wanted them picked so that she could can them. But my father was not to be moved from the pathway of technically exact procedure. "We may not stay here," he said, "the call hasn't been approved yet and I haven't accepted it yet." So, in spite of my mother's exasperated protests, he simply invited the youngsters of the congregation to help themselves to the cherries. The cherries got "canned" but not quite as my mother had intended!

Finally on July 29, 1900 the glad Sunday arrived when the call was publicly accepted, the Lord's Supper and baptisms took place, there were several confessions of faith, and the First Christian Reformed Church west of the Rocky Mountains was launched! There were thirteen families and one single man. It is interesting that although a few had come to Lynden directly from states farther east, the majority came from Oak Harbor. Apparently, many had found, as Klaas De Vries did, that Oak Harbor appealed to them first, but the cramped conditions of trying to fit into the limited land space of an island, besides, it may be, the abortive effort of 1896 to start a church, drove these families to Lynden. In any case, Lynden became the magnetic center that drew later families from the prairies of Iowa, Nebraska, the Dakotas, Montana, Alberta, Canada and so on.

However, one technicality had not yet been met. The new minister had not been formally installed. This was done almost a year later, on June 2, 1901 by the Rev. Westenberg. I found that the records I researched referred to him as "J." Westenberg. I could not find that there was a J. Westenberg, but there was a G. Westenberg serving in Peoria Iowa, and therefore a member of Classis Iowa of which Lynden had to be a part. It is recorded that he came to act as Church Visitor for the Classis, and while there, installed my father in his office.

The church was organized, not without some difficulty. But the Dutch people in Lynden were used to overcoming almost insurmountable odds.

It is easy for historians to refer to Lynden as "a lumbering town." That tells very little about what lumbering meant in that day. Besides, a great deal of that lumbering had to be done by Dutch small farmers or tradesmen or artisans who had known nothing but the low-level plains of Holland. They came into a world of towering trees. There were cedar trees known to be 16 feet in diameter. The stumps on our little farm revealed that the trees had been as much as ten feet in diameter and no doubt towering a hundred feet into the

air. These trees had to be felled, not with machinery, but by hand, strong backs and shoulders swinging huge double bit axes. Then these logs, trimmed of their branches, must be snaked into clearings and finally to a primitive saw mill. The comparatively mild climate had been great for growing huge trees, but, as Van Hinte quotes Whitaker, it was "a worker's climate, not for idlers."

Henry Lucas mentions that the Roo brothers were Hollanders who built a saw mill. That saw mill was fairly close to where our little farm was and where I was reared. When my parents bought the ten acres they meant to farm, their first problem was getting it cleared. They sold the standing trees for lumber at a rate of \$1.00 per thousand board feet. This was prime, first growth Douglas Fir! Later my two older brothers worked at the Roo mill, and that mill was moved closer in to Lynden town. The Lynden mill operated for several years. They didn't know what to do with the saw dust. They set it on fire and it smoldered and smoked night and day. Finally, when the mill was razed, the still smoldering saw dust was buried and the land leveled off for the building of homes. Years later that smoldering saw dust still occasionally burst into flame! Fortunately it rains a great deal in Lynden. A minister came there from New Mexico and he became so depressed by the cloudy rainy weather, he drew the draperies in the parsonage, turned on the lights and made believe it was night!

The huge supply of large cedar trees led to the making of cedar shingles. The trees were cut into blocks of cedar about 4x2x1 feet in size, called "shingle bolts" these, in turn, were cut into cedar shingles by motor-driven band saws. The shingle mills of west Washington were as famous as the lumber mills. Washington state was the leading producer of lumber in the country as early as 1910 and it all came from the western one third of the state! Incidentally, in Western Washington, if you went into a bakery to buy the long oblong raised doughnuts usually called "long johns" in Michigan, you asked for "shingle bolts." The shape was about the same as a real shingle bolt.

Once the arduous work of lumbering off the land and rooting out the stumps was over, the people became small farmers, concentrating on dairying, poultry and egg production, and later strawberries and sugar beets. In fact, almost every kind of small-scale farming had its place in the Lynden area. But it is significant that Lynden butter was the choicest butter, Lynden eggs and canned chicken landed on the markets of New York City.

The growing prosperity of Lynden reflected itself in the life of the First Christian Reformed Church. During the time my parents were there for their initial stint, the congregation continued to meet in the old lodge hall which my

father and mother had to clean up early on Sunday morning, trying to remove the remnants of the Saturday night rivalry that left liquor stains, and quids of chewing tobacco on chairs and floor. But, in a few years after my parents moved on to serve in the prairies of North and South Dakota, the church bought a half acre of land lying between Grover and Front Streets in Lynden, for \$175. Real estate had risen in value since the depression prices of \$25 per acre! There they built a good-size frame church, seating about 600 people, which shows the vision these pioneers had. When, in later years, a large balcony was added, it served for years as the largest auditorium in Lynden. The dedication of the church included, among other things, an address in English, if you please! By the Rev. Cox, a Presbyterian minister from Bellingham. In view of the language question struggle that was to follow, this concession to an English speaking, non-Christian Reformed speaker shows astounding cosmopolitanism!

In due time, under the influence of my father's cousin, itinerant missionary J.R. Brink, the decision was made to build a parsonage and a house was built so large and substantial that it served succeeding ministers for about 40 years!

Also, in 1910, the Christian School was begun. At first with one teacher, Ruby Hanover, daughter of Lynden's first tailor, served in a little rented building. Soon a good-sized school building was erected with four classrooms. This original building, augmented, to be sure, was the school in which I spent eight years of elementary training. After the thirties, a Christian High School was founded and today this great complex of splendid modern schools are a monument to the self-sacrificing idealism of the Lynden Hollanders.

Among the giant maple trees, planted in the 80's by Lynden women, that lined Lynden's streets--maple trees with leaves that were as large as elephant's ears, it was said--the most disturbing thing was what disturbed many Christian Reformed churches. It was often referred to simply as "De taal questie", the "Language question." How seriously the common folk took the Dutch language may be illustrated by a humorous incident. Our first missionaries had embarked from the port of Seattle in 1920 to begin mission work in China. My father went from Lynden to be among the local folk to see them off. When he returned he encountered old Mrs. Fred Bierling, the widow of one of the first Dutch settlers in Lynden, and the following conversation took place on Lynden's Front Street.

"Och, Dominie, hoe kan dat nu goed gaan? Moeten al die arme Chinesen nu Hollandsch leren?"

"Nee, Vrouw Bierling, waarom?"

"Maar een mensch kan toch geen Christen wezen en geen Psalmen zingen?"

Many ethnic groups, the Dutch no less, were convinced that God understood only the language they understood. The gospel simply could not be preached in another language.

Now my father was a stickler for retaining the Holland language. In our home we might not speak English. He maintained we'd learn English in due time outside. At home we would have to talk Dutch. And we did. When I started school at the age of 5 years, I spoke Dutch far more fluently than English.

But when the agitation began in Lynden to start an English speaking second church, my oldest sister said to my father: "When we sing 'Opent uwen mond, eisch van mij vrijmoedig, al wat U ontbreekt, schenk ik zoo gij't smeekt, mild en overvloedig.' I see someone with his mouth wide open and someone else pouring ice water into his throat."

My father took his cue. "Then it is time we go to the Second Church, and our family became charter members of the Second Church in Lynden, and we met in the eighth-grade room the Christian School. It was a thrill for me, as a lad of 12, to sit in the same desk for church as I did in the week for school!

There is much more that could be told about the early days of Lynden, Washington, next to the most northwesterly town in the United States--only Blaine, tucked into the corner of the Canadian border and the ocean, is more to the northwest--a citadel of Dutch courage and a monument to Dutch ingenuity and dedication. It is a town officially dry but unofficially one of the most vulnerable settings for rum-running during Prohibition. It is a town where dancing and movies and card-playing are almost universally frowned upon and only slightly indulged in. It is a town where, without a doubt, the Dutch churches and schools hold a dominant place.