

LANGUAGE AND THE CHURCH:
CASE STUDIES FROM PELLA, IOWA

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Note: Where no other documentation is given, the paper and the citations contained in it are based on personal interviews with sources living in the Pella area.¹

Had Henry P. Scholte had his way, this paper would never have been written at all. The town's founder envisioned a center of educational, cultural, and political activity where English would predominate in both secular and religious education. Indeed, it was Scholte's dream that Pella would soon take its place among the "other more exclusive" American towns.² Hopes were expressed that the state capital might be moved from Iowa City to Pella (rather than to Des Moines). In contrast to most immigrant publishers, Scholte preferred to produce a newspaper in the English language.³ When Scholte penned the first anti-slavery tract published west of the Mississippi, he signed it as the product of an "Adopted Citizen" of the United States.⁴ Though church affairs in Scholte's secessionist congregation were conducted in Dutch, Scholte himself repeatedly took an anti-ethnocentric stand, declaring that in Christ there was neither Dutch, German, nor American, but only citizens of the new Kingdom.⁵

Subsequent waves of immigration to Pella, however, were often prompted by less idealistic considerations. Unlike Scholte's followers, these individuals had experienced the turbulence of the Netherlands at mid-century, frequently came with more severely limited financial means, and hence were prompted as much--if not in fact even more--by the prospect of economic opportunity than by the chance to practice the tenets of a separatist sect. Hence, it is really not very surprising that the growing Dutch-American population in Pella reverted in the 1850s to a strong preference for the use of the Dutch language, and simultaneously demanded the introduction of the Reformed faith. By 1855, the cornerstone was laid for the town's first Calvinist congregation (today: First Reformed Church of Pella).⁶ Appreciable numbers of migrants from the Netherlands continued to arrive in Pella throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, and with them came a renewal of linguistic and cultural ties with the fatherland.

The dominant role of the Dutch language in nineteenth-century community life in Pella often obscures the important fact that English was always the language of upward mobility. Studies on the economic history of Pella show that the "Americans" (and those who had cast their lot with them) enjoyed a particular advantage in commerce and management.⁷ Less than a decade after the founding of Pella's First Reformed church, a second congregation was inaugurated for those who wished, and received, an exclusively English-language order of worship.⁸ When, decades later, the switch from Dutch to English became firm and final throughout the community, it rested upon long-standing and well-established precedent.

The last truly dynamic revival of Dutch ethnic pride (excluding today's commercial manifestations of such impulses) came with the Boer War, an event that received extensive coverage in Pella's Dutch-language newspaper, the *Weekblad*.⁹ Any positive feelings that one might have had about being part of the Dutch Diaspora, however, were vigorously challenged by the events of World War I.¹⁰

Accounts abound from Dutch-American communities throughout the United States of discrimination arising from confused identification of the Dutch with the German enemy. Peculiar to Iowa, however, was statewide legislation placing a virtually total ban on the use of any foreign language outside the most private home circles.¹¹ The sting of this mandate was especially acute in Pella, where the local citizenry had shown its patriotism through record sales of Liberty Bonds, and where the *Weekblad* was wont to publish such statements as "wij zijn Amerikanen door keuze" (we are Americans by choice).¹² There are still older members of the community who recall the extreme shock that they and their families experienced when United States marshals visited the local worship services to verify compliance with the regulations regarding foreign language use in the church. It was at this period that Governor Harding, who had promulgated the infamous 1918 language prohibition, stated that it did no good to pray to God in any foreign language since "God will only be listening in English."¹³ As one scholar put it, Iowa's ethnic groups became "casualties of the war on the homefront."¹⁴ Long-simmering animosities between the Dutch and their American neighbors bubbled to the surface. Particularly in those rural areas where feelings of ethnic pride were strongest and where young Dutch-American farmers were able to claim exemption from military service on the basis of the productivity of their family farms, hostilities found expression

in the destruction (frequently by arson) of churches, parochial schools and personal property. Suddenly, as many older sources recall, American citizenship became much more attractive to native Dutchmen who had been lax about completing their petitions for naturalization.

Although the end of World War I also brought an end to the language prohibition, and most Pella churches returned to the long-established use of Dutch in worship services, several important changes took place in the wake of the wartime experience.

On the homefront, members of the older generation who may have acquired functional fluency in, but not necessarily a mastery of, the English language suddenly became less adamant in insisting on the use of the ethnic language by their children and grandchildren. One source made the important observation that even within the family circle, growing up in Pella had clearly come to mean increased use of, and reliance upon, the English language. Several individuals recall older members of the family conceding that such change was inevitable "for the children's sake." A retired minister observed that when there was an expressed insistence upon use of the Dutch language, there was perhaps less interest in communication and more in an attempt to provide "a check against being absorbed in the morals and the custom of the time."¹⁵

An overview, however, of just who used which language where and when, suggests that there was anything but uniformity of opinion concerning the merits of introducing English or maintaining Dutch in the churches.

In 1917, one year prior to the introduction of Iowa's prohibition against public use of a foreign language, the Third Reformed Church took the bold step of including English in its dedicatory service.¹⁶ The congregation lagged behind many of the others in town, however, by not including a daytime service in English until 1925. Both the pro-English and pro-Dutch constituencies of the congregation were strong enough in 1938 that a series of special prayer services for the crops (still recalled by older members of the fold) needed to be conducted in two parallel sessions: one in Dutch and one in English. When there were no longer enough speakers of Dutch to warrant regular services in that language, members of the Third Reformed Church joined forces with First Reformed Church, where services in the language of the fatherland continued to be conducted until the mid-1950s.

First Reformed Church, one of the first churches in town to introduce English services in 1918, was also among the last to give up its Dutch services. Even after regular services ceased in 1942, a Dutch-speaking minister was maintained until 1955.

In the earlier decades of this century, Pella's First Christian Reformed Church included a large number of dairy farmers who simply were unable to complete their chores in time to be in town for the 9:30 a.m. service. Initially it appeared that a convenient solution would be to offer a morning service in English for the "townsfolk" and a Dutch service (presumably for a more rural constituency) in the afternoon. The potential difficulties that might be spawned by such a system are obvious, especially if (as visitors to Pella such as Jacob van Hinte recounted) the pro-Dutch faction in the Christian Reformed Community was fighting tooth and nail to maintain the ethnic language not only because of sentimental attachments to the culture of the forefathers, but also because of a belief in the link between piety and language use.¹⁷ By 1929 it was felt that the most amicable and fair solution would be to rotate both languages and time slots so that any individual attending services at a given period of time would hear an approximately equal number of sermons in both languages.

In nearby rural Peoria, the sudden transition from Dutch to English in 1918 was rapid and well-nigh complete.¹⁸ In 1919, however, exactly the opposite took place, and Dutch was wholly reinstated. This period marked the beginning, however, of one of the most gradual and incremental changes from Dutch to English in the area. The switch only became complete in 1943, when the congregation was no longer able to find a Dutch-speaking minister. This congregation continues to host the only regular Dutch-language service now held in the area: the annual Peoria Psalm Sing. If anything, attendance at the Psalm sing is growing. Although no attendance figures are maintained, the author would estimate that close to 200 individuals were present and took an active part in the service in the spring of 1991.

As indicated in the preceding paragraphs, the definitive point of transition from Dutch to English varied from congregation to congregation. Typically the transition began with the language mandate of World War I, and underwent a gradual change as it became evident that the younger members and attenders of the church preferred English. The definitive choice in favor of English might come as early as 1932, as in the case of Leighton's Ebenezer Reformed Church, or as late as the mid-1950s, when Pella's First Reformed Church discontinued its regular Dutch services (offered until then for its own members and the members of other Reformed churches in the community). In more instances than not, the fate of Dutch-language services was sealed by the inability of a congregation to find a pastor fluent in the Dutch language.

It was not just the pastor, however, who appeared to lack the necessary fluency in the Dutch language. If Sunday School or Catechism Class involved learning any material in Dutch, it was usually the perfunctory memorization of isolated material from the creed or from the Psalter. In other words, Dutch was heard or even read by some members of the younger generation, but was seldom spoken by these functionally bilingual young people in a church context. This treatment of the Dutch language as an artifact (rather than as a means of communication), along with the scheduling of English services and Sunday School at times that often kept young people from spontaneously socializing on site with older members of the church, inevitably lead to a decreased sense of linguistic commonality across generational lines. As one woman put it, the Sunday School pupils would "just fool around in the kitchen" while waiting for the Dutch language services to end, and would only then go to Sunday School, i.e., after the church had been "cleared" of the older generation and the traces of its Dutch-language piety.

In a very few instances, members of the younger generation craved contact with "real speakers" of the Dutch language. This situation, however, was definitely the exception rather than the rule. One woman reported her experience in the period immediately after the first World War: "When I was eighteen or nineteen we had a minister in our church who had just returned from the Netherlands. He had just finished his thesis and beside that he was a brilliant student. We still had three services on Sunday. The afternoon service was in Dutch so [my cousin] and I faithfully attended. I'm ashamed to say that it was more to learn some modern Dutch than it was to worship. I don't suppose it did any harm. The minister . . . was very proud of the fact that his degree was earned and not honorary."¹⁹ The more commonly reported experience, however, was that of an ever-increasing schizzoglossia. Sensing somehow that their Dutch was not all together "proper," many younger members of Pella's churches in the post-World War I era retreated from use of the Dutch language in any but the most colloquial contexts. This set up a vicious cycle in which speakers became more convinced than ever that their Dutch simply "was not good enough," and as a result chose to withdraw even more from the use of the language in any formal contexts, including, often, the use of the language in church. At the same time, these individuals increasingly sensed that their English would never be as good as that of the "Americans" in the community. As a result, many speakers from this generation have the perception that they were never in total mastery of their first language (Dutch) nor fully in control of the one language in which they did have some formal training (English). In the meanwhile, the schools where English had always predominated became even more exclusively anglophone and any instruction in Dutch would typically be in isolated modules offered in the parochial schools. Literature exists to suggest that instruction in Dutch would typically take the form of enrichment units that might be offered for a few years and then, in the face of demands perceived to be more urgent, would be dropped altogether from the curriculum.²⁰

It is certainly no cause for wonder that the churches of the Pella area had difficulty locating Dutch-speaking pastors in the decades following World War I. Any younger candidates would have belonged to the generation of individuals for whom speaking Dutch was perceived as exercising an antiquated skill, useful at best in dealing with representatives of a rapidly obsolescent culture.

As a sidelight, we might note that Pella's last Dutch-language newspaper, the *Weekblad* ceased publication in 1942. There was absolutely no pressure to do so because of the war, but rather, as documented in several sources and explained in the final issue of the *Weekblad* itself, because it was no longer possible to find the necessary personnel with a firm technical grasp of the Dutch language.²¹

Ironically, one of the most decisive blows to the use of the Dutch language in Pella's churches came with the influx of post-World War II immigrants from the Netherlands. Though many of these individuals continue to use Dutch among themselves and admit having been grateful for initial efforts by the church to use Dutch until they had acclimated linguistically to the American scene, most preferred to Americanize as rapidly as possible. In preparing my volume *Pella Dutch*, I encountered countless children of the post-World War II migrants who recounted uncommonly strenuous efforts by their parents to discourage the use of the Dutch language. Although there was some sense of disillusionment arising from the critical situation in the Netherlands that forced so many individuals to come to the United States and Canada, there was no sense of shame about being Dutch. Rather, the decision to use the Dutch language as little as possible was part of a conscious effort to make the transition to American life as quick, efficient, and final as possible. To this day, I find it easier to strike up a conversation in Dutch with a person who is reticent about the supposed imperfections of her or his homegrown Pella Dutch, than with a native of the Netherlands who has determined at all costs to speak with the Americans in their own language.

In gathering material for the book *Pella Dutch*, I asked my sources whether they felt that there was any connection between language facility and piety. Of those who responded (all of whom would have experienced some aspect of Pella's linguistic transition) approximately one-third felt there might be such a connection, approximately one-third rejected the idea, and approximately one-third remained undecided.²² Although the issue of language use in Pella's churches has long since been resolved and one encounters the use of Dutch only occasionally at funerals or at special services such as the Peoria Psalm Sing, a memory seems to linger of an era when language, culture, and piety were inextricable elements of a heritage that, though now expressed in a new idiom, lives on in Pella and its churches of the Dutch and Reformed tradition.

Endnotes

1. I wish to thank Ms. Erin Glendening of Pella for sharing useful data and valuable insights that complemented the corpus of information gleaned from my own past and present work with interview sources. Though not cited in this paper, two publications provided significant inspiration and insight: Elton J. Bruins, "The Reformed Church and Acculturation," in *The Dutch in America, Immigration, Settlement and Cultural Change*, ed. Robert P. Swierenga (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1985), 175-90, and the same author's *The Americanization of a Congregation. A History of Third Reformed Church of Holland, Michigan*, The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, vol.2 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1970).
2. Scholte presented a visionary editorial outlining aspirations for Pella's future (including hoped-for political prominence) in the *Pella Gazette* for February 1, 1855.
3. For an overview and sampling of Pella's journalism in comparison to that of other Dutch-American communities, see Philip E. Webber, *Pella Dutch. The Portrait of a Language and Its Use in One of Iowa's Ethnic Communities* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1988), 48-68, and especially 51, note 22.
4. *American Slavery, in Reference to the Present Agitation of the United States. By an Adopted Citizen.* (Pella: Gazette Book and Job Office, 1856).
5. See the opening essay of the second (and final) volume of the messianic/eschatological *De Toekomst* (Pella: Henry Hospers, 1868), 1-3.
6. For Pella's churches, see *History of Pella, 1847-1987*, 2 vols. (Pella, Iowa: Curtis Media Corporation for the Pella Historical Society 1988-89), vol. 1, 97-117 (esp. 101-103) and vol. 2, 119-28.
7. Richard L. Doyle, *The Socio-Economic Mobility of the Dutch Immigrants to Pella, Iowa 1847-1925*. Ph.D. dissertation, Kent State University, 1982, *passim*.
8. *History of Pella, 1847-1987*, vol. 1, 104-106.
9. See Webber, *Pella Dutch*, 60-62, and the sources there cited.
10. *Ibid.*, 62-64, and sources cited.
11. On Iowa's language prohibition, see Nancy Derr, "The Babel Proclamation," *The Palimpsest* 60 (1979), 98-115.
12. This appears repeatedly, e.g., as the heading for a front-page ad in *Pella's Weekblad* for October 19, 1917.

13. Quoted by Derr, "Babel Proclamation," 114.
14. *Ibid.*, 115.
15. Cited by Webber, *Pella Dutch*, 56.
16. Though not specifically focused on issues of language, congregational histories may be gleaned from *History of Pella, 1847-1987*, vol. 1, 97-117 and vol. 2, 119-28.
17. This idea is reflected in the writing of Jacob van Hinte, *Netherlanders in America. A Study of Emigration and Settlement in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries in the United States and Canada*, ed. Robert P. Swierenga, transl. Adriaan de Wit (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1985), 368-69, 398, and *passim*.
18. A work meriting wider circulation is James P. Dahm and Dorothy Van Kooten, *Peoria, Iowa. A Story of Two Cultures. 1852-1984* (Privately published, 1984); it provides excellent background and a basis for assessing data from direct interviews.
19. Cited by Webber, *Pella Dutch*, 67.
20. *Ibid.*, 115-136.
21. See L. Boland's parting note in the *Weekblad* for December 31, 1942.
22. Webber, *Pella Dutch*, 34-35; the questionnaire itself is contained in Appendix A, 105-14.