

## Dr. A.F.H. De Lespinasse, the Man from Helmus

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I had been intrigued by A.F.H. De Lespinasse, the first doctor in Orange City, for some already, and had even begun some preliminary research in contacting descendants, when I received a letter from a retired surgeon in the Netherlands for information about this doctor. Dr. Reynders had already done a lot of work on the family and medical career and was able to give me much valuable information--much more than I was able to reciprocate.

The little I had known about this medical doctor had come largely from daughter Frederika's memoirs in Charles Dyke's folksy history of Sioux County, published in 1941, and some material I obtained from descendants. Already then I wondered why this man had chosen to live in Orange City in 1874--his values, connections and education were vastly different from those of the majority of the settlers. Knowing him even better now, I am no closer to a solution.

Adolph Frederik Henry was born in Delft, in 1819, the oldest son of a medical doctor--the translator of a pamphlet in 1831 with the memorable title: THE BODICE OR CORSET, SEEN AS MEANS OF EXTENDING HUMAN LIFE, CONTRIBUTING TO LASTING HEALTH. His ancestry was French, and through an illegitimate alliance, Swedish--both from aristocratic lineage. AFH graduated from the University of Utrecht with a degree in medicine in 1842 and obstetrics in 1843. From the time he was a student until the end of his life AFH was an indefatigable writer. As student he described the sorrow of student life, attacking university and student customs. With a number of well-known poets (including Isaac Da Costa) he published the collection AURORA in 1841, and wrote plays (one was performed in the Amsterdam theater), comedies and satirical pieces.

After graduation he returned to the eastern part of the Netherlands, where he was raised to practice medicine. Medical personnel were hired and under the jurisdiction of the town council. After a short stint in Deventer, AFH was hired by the Town Council of Voorst in 1843. His appointment did not come without difficulties and this was due to his lack of a degree in surgery. This lack plagued him in subsequent appointments as well. The council in Voorst appointed him anyway. A similar ineffectual objection arose in Vaassen, the town where he practiced the longest. Ultimately he moved back to Hasselt, the town where he was raised and where his father had a practice. By this time he had married, and ultimately became the father of four children.

In Hasselt he did not seem to have had the same problems with the city fathers. Quite the contrary, for in 1866 the council presented him with a clock with inscription, noting the gratefulness of the citizenry for "demonstrated zeal during the cholera

epidemic." According to Frederika he had also received a medal for "civic services" from the king of the Netherlands, apparently for Hasselt having the lowest mortality rate in the Netherlands that year. This claim has not been substantiated; it is doubtful that there were any verifiable statistical data gathered then. Frederika also asserted that he was known in the Netherlands for his "fever and ague" drops. This was no doubt the same medication that he advertised in Orange City. He must have been an able doctor. For example, he opposed blood letting at a time when this was still seen as efficacious, even though it was no longer practiced on all illnesses.

He continued to write even when he should perhaps have been taking surgery courses. Some of these reflect his field of study and experience. In 1854, "urged by friends," he published an ALPHABETIC MEDICAL GUIDE, an aid to medical memory, and with one of his brothers he produced a book obstetrics.

His writings reflect that he read widely as well--not only Dutch, but also German and French publications. It was primarily due to his acquaintance with articles in a German magazine about the first French medical congress that ultimately led to the founding of the first national medical society in the Netherlands. De Lespinasse had been a member of the Zutphen medical society since 1845, but such regional societies operated independently from other such societies. He suggested a Dutch congress modeled after the French one and organized by regional societies working together. This was seen as too potentially dangerous politically--fellow members suggested that he down scale his proposal in order not to jeopardize his job. The society approved the final plan to promote the founding of medical societies elsewhere, with a goal the establishment of close ties. The closer alliance led eventually to the establishment in 1849 of the Netherlands Society for the Promotion of Medicine.

That medical matters were not his sole interest can be seen in his multifarious writings, which were not without recognition. The obituary of De Lespinasse in the NEDERLANDSE SPECTATOR described him as "an able literary figure and poet, a clever and original scholar" and referred also to the loss his death meant to his friends in the Netherlands. Apart from plays, poetry and writing on medical matters, De Lespinasse published frequently in Masonic journals. Shortly before his departure in the United States a lengthy compilation of prose and poetry had been written from 1845-1868 was published. The book is an ardent affirmation of Freemasonry in the most idealistic terms, not infrequently chiding the brethren for violating its principles. By that time he had risen to the rank of "orator," and was the "Presiding Master" of his Lodge just before leaving for the U.S.A.

He could be judgmental, (as the content of the compilation already implies) opposing bombast and frivolity among his Masonic brethren. When this criticism was not received kindly, he was piqued and would retaliate in cutting ways. He was frequently criticized for his contribution to the radical--socially and politically--DE DAGERAAD, a magazine for the so-called "Free-Thinkers."

Was it his irascibility and chafing against established ways that caused the subsequent cold should with the Lodge? The minutes of his Lodge were lost in the war, but enough is known to suspect expulsion. His death was not mentioned in Masonic journals--unheard of for men of his rank. His lodge's 150th anniversary booklet omitted his name, and for the year he was Master of the Lodge, another name is substituted. Could this have driven him to emigrate, at the age of 51, with two young daughters who no doubt had been securely cared for by grandparents, aunts and uncles after their mother's death?

Whatever happened, AFH remained a steadfast Freemason. A Xeroxed copy of a photograph of his grave marker, no longer present in the Orange City cemetery, showed Masonic symbols. The novel by his granddaughter-in-law, *THE BELLS OF HELMUS* (hence the title), a thinly veiled disguise of Orange City, had the townspeople speak with shame of the old doctor (modeled after AFH most certainly) as having been buried "with his trowel and square." (Bells, 126) *The VOLKSVRIEND* merely stated after AFH's death that "his body was interred." With the hostility of Freemasonry in Dutch Reformed circles a Masonic graveside ceremony might have been a deliberate omission.

Could there have been other reasons for leaving the Netherlands in 1869 or 1870? One obituary in the Netherlands stated family reasons. Although he had remarried in 1868, he left for the U.S.A. without his second wife, the former Maria Ida Kuypers, oldest son and daughter. Gijsbert came later, either in 1871, or 1873 (censuses differ). The oldest daughter seems to have been on good terms with her stepmother, for the latter signs her contribution to Antoinette's poetry album, in 1871, as "your very loving mama, I. de Lespinasse Kuypers." AFH, the most likely to have made a contribution as sole remaining parent and author, does not appear, although everyone else in the family does. Was there perhaps a crisis in which the oldest children turned from their father, at least temporarily?

AFH's first place of settlement had been Chicago, and he is listed in the Chicago Census of 1870 as widower! This certainly indicates some kind of break with Ida, whose obituary, nine years later AFH's death, stated that she was his widow. Along with daughters Albertina and Frederika, the census also listed Charlotte Bax, age 25, unmarried and a boarder. Frederika writes that her father was married a "handsome Dutch" woman soon after coming to America, and that a son was born, but the only proof that it was this boarder and probably housekeeper at first) whom AFH had married appeared in a very brief entry in *DE VOLKSVRIEND*, upon her death in 1879: "Dr. A. F. H. de Lespinasse's young 35-year old wife G. Bat dies in Orange City." The name was corrected in the following issue. Frederika, briefly, referred to Charlotte, only one more time--her death. Was the obscurity a deliberate attempt to keep a low profile? If it was bigamy it is especially ironic since AFH in all his writings stressed the "zedelijk leven" = the moral life.

Misfortune followed him in Chicago, where, according to his daughter, biographer, he lost money in the Chicago fire. He had investigated in a great deal of property, although the census listing does not indicate a huge capital. Thereupon he moved to Shenandoah, Iowa, where he had bought land and tried to farm, but another fire there also consumed his capital. While there he began writing a book about Iowa, dedicated to his friend "of 38 years", the well-known encyclopedist, A. Winkler Prins, published in Amsterdam in 1875.

The book is an extensive and helpful guide on geography, climate, cost of land, tools, the law, but is also full of outrageous generalizations, misconceptions and condescending judgment of Yankee life. In a section on "Yankee tricks" he warned against Americans who can cheat you cold-bloodedly by day and who at night can be concerned about the expansion of Christianity and your money will be used "for the evangelism of Buddhist Japanese." [Iowa, p. 18] The final pages were written after his visit to Sioux County upon the invitation of the founder of Orange City, Henry Hospers. He described the settlement more positively, and he seems to have been invited to move there.

It is thus in Orange City that he wrote his next, and slimmer, guide to Dutch immigrants, this time about Sioux County only. [THE NIEUWE NEDERLANDSCHE VOLKPLANTING IN SIOUX COUNTY, IOWA, EENE BY UITNEMENDHEID GESLAAGDE ONDERNEMING, Amsterdam, C.L. Brinkman, 1875] The book has similar helpful facts and advice and, as the subtitle, "A Pre-Eminently Successful Enterprise" suggests, is less negative. His previously jaundiced attitudes, he claims, were caused by his living amidst Low Germans, the Irish and Yankees, but in Sioux County he breathed in the "wholly other and better atmosphere" of his fellow countrymen. In 1878, excerpts of this book were published serially in issues of DE VOLKSVRIEND, while at the same time churches in Pella collected money for the "suffering in the West." His wholehearted and "truthful" recommendation of Sioux County, in spite of the grasshopper devastation, is probably genuine enough.

Enthusiastically welcomed to the community for his writing and medical skills by the leaders of Orange City, AFH is nevertheless an odd fit. How could this "vrijdenker" fit in? His views on religion find frequent expression in Masonic writing, in which he affirms belief in a God which can be found in all faiths, and in a moral life, with the "Eternal East" as reward. According to Frederika he was one of the founders of what DE VOLKSVRIEND called the "Moderne Kerk" [and THE SIOUX COUNTY HERALD the "Dutch Free Reformed Church" [SCH, 25-1-77]. 4, 1876,] The papers printed the constitution. The document has AFH's fingerprints all over it. E.G. the church should be a place where science and religion are to be reconciled, where everything can be discussed and investigated (i.e. that is decent), where males and females and all classes have equal voting rights, and where morals are cultivated. Perhaps the second meaning for my title is clear by now.

By July of 1876 the members had a modest building (16x24), but the venture was not to last. By November of 1878 the town's carpenter bought the building for the purpose of changing it into a domestic dwelling, taking off the tower. DE VOLKSVRIEND of July 1880 reported, tongue in cheek, that the "tasteful little tower of the 'Moderne Kerk' had been metamorphized into an outhouse for the Rosenboom family."

In spite of his heretical views, his contacts with the community were always cordial, and he often sought ways to improve Orange City intellectually. In his second immigration guide he had expressed fear that Germany, which at that time was powerful and territorial, might swallow up smaller states. It was therefore important that Hollanders establish themselves elsewhere, in order to "perpetuate and maintain the Dutch national element." This in undoubtedly the background for the establishment of the society NEERLANDIA, soon after arriving, in February of 1875. De Lespinasse clearly indicated in the first speech that he did not intend to be integrated into American life, nor to advocate that for other Dutch immigrants, although he grudgingly admired the "American enterprising restless nature, the intellectual powers in which discovery and progress are primary." (VV 24 Feb. 1874) He painted with the typically 19th century brush in his description of the Hollander, distinguishable from other ethnic groups, "broad shouldered, quiet, muscular, blue and clear-eyed," and exhorted to keep speaking Dutch: our "wonderful mother language, with its round and full sounds, so much more agreeable opposite the nose and throat tones of the legally adopted 'Anglo-Saxon'". The aims of NEERLANDIA were to be broadly cultural, open to all, but specifically stated to exclude discussion on religion or political matters. The newspapers only reported four meetings, at the last of which the constitution was accepted by the 30 people present and De Lespinasse spoke on the lack of moral earnestness.

De Lespinasse was fated to undertake one more hopelessly ambitious enterprise--the founding of a medical school in Orange City! A large ad in DE VOLKSVRIEND of January 7, 1875 announced a medical course, lasting 1-1/2 years, in medical practice, surgery, and obstetrics, with A.F.H. De Lespinasse as sole docent. The Board of Trustees included Hospers and the Rev. Seine Bolks, pastor of First Reformed (and medical practitioner before AFH came to Orange City). The aim was to provide the Dutch colonies with qualified Dutch-speaking doctors. Applicants needed to be at least 19 years old, known Dutch and English, and have proof of moral behavior.

The hope was expressed that this enterprise would grow into a university for law and theology as well. It is remarkable that Hospers and the Rev. Bolks were co-opted in this De Lespinasse vision, even to the point of setting aside land for a future building. The non-sectarian sentiment of the ad was unlike their own. His anti-sectarian views, and even his Darwinian position were known to them, because they appeared in a series of articles on education published about the same time, and supported by DE VOLKSVRIEND. It is especially remarkable in light of Bolks'

vision of Christian education for he had made the establishment of a Christian academy and college one of his demands before coming to Orange City in 1872. Had the great learning and enterprising ambition of AFH intimidated these movers and shakers, or were they biding their time? Not long after AFH's death, however, the Northwestern Classical Academy was established, this time with explicitly stated ties to the church.

Although only four men signed up ultimately, the courthouse had been "benevolently adjusted" for the medical course [SCH, March 11, 1875], to be taught six evenings per week. The final dedication of the "university" had to wait, so the SCH writes, because farmers were too busy in the field. DE VOLKSVRIEND reported at length the public exams taken by two of them, one the doctor's son Gijsbert, in October of 1875, which were attended by the Board of Trustees and a number of inquiring minds who wanted to know.

The last intelligence about, what is variously described as "our academy" or the "De Lespinasse academy" occurred in August of 1877 (VV, Aug. 22, 1877) when Gijsbert took and passed his final exam and gave a Latin speech. He was given a degree in general practice, obstetrics AND surgery--far away from the more controlled and restricted medical world in the Netherlands AFH triumphs finally. Other exams were not mentioned. The "De Lespinasse Academy" seems to have ceased after this, at least nothing is mentioned about courses or graduates after 1877.

That he is passionate about education is indicated by the aforementioned series of articles he wrote for the two Orange City papers in late fall 1874, early winter 1875. He had served on school commissions in Vaassen, so it was therefore not surprising that he compared education in the Netherlands with that in America. Although occasionally giving American education some credit, he was especially critical of primary education. In his articles, sprinkled with Latin and French quotations, he excoriated, a.o. the lack of good training, the ease of obtaining a diploma, and the absentee rate. It is not surprising that his analyses were not taken kindly by all.

Exit De Lespinasse. Enter Dr. E. O. Plumbe, fellow physician and superintendent of schools. The latter claimed that the new School Laws, passed in 1874, had improved education. No doubt irritated by AFH's stance of European superiority he scored the "decaying civilization of continental[!] Europe and praised the liberty, education and progress of this free land." (SCH, Feb. 11, 1875) With the battle lines drawn sharper with subsequent articles, Plumbe extolled the scientific creation by Americans, invented by men whose shoe laces "even the savant De Lespinasse," might be proud to until." [SCH March 11, 1875] He sarcastically proposed that little Holland be transported to the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition to show the U.S.A. how to educate properly. De Lespinasse's article fueled the already considerable amount of anti-Dutch feeling then in the country.

De Lespinasse in his responses increased his French and Latin citations: and wickedly insinuated Plumbe's lack of erudition and suggested that he go to Europe,

such as other highly educated Americans do. Nevertheless stung by Plumbe's reactions he explained that he had intended generalities, but people have applied it to themselves, and "perhaps the shoe did fit" (SCH, Jan. 30, 1875, Art IX] It did indeed. In spite of protestations by Plumbe the educational situation in Sioux County was not good. In 1873, there was one teacher for every 35+ children in one schoolhouse, and when that teacher was only 15 or 16 years old, which occurred rather frequently, it could not be quality education. Anyone who could read or write English, and did some arithmetic could teach--Henry Hospers would give a certificate without examination. Absenteeism was rampant.

Actually Plumbe was well educated and almost as versatile as De Lespinasse. His only failure was that he could not speak Dutch and therefore not able to practice everywhere in the county. There is no doubt that the Dutch leaders encouraged settlers to go to De Lespinasse. Bolks turned patients away and sent them to AFH. He was undoubtedly an effective doctor, and reportedly never lost a patient in childbirth. Quite a feat in those days. Patients testified in the paper to his curative powers and the efficacy of his "drops against summer illnesses, chest and throat ailments" [VV, July 20, 1876]. Since cholera was a frequently returning scourge, the cholera drops continued to be made. His daughter remembered gluing onto the bottles "wing-shaped papers, with his coat of arms on it. [Dyke 419]

It was nevertheless tough going. Money was very scarce and outstanding bills plentiful. Sometimes the bill was paid in food and supplies. Increasingly the doctor had to add items for sale in his apothecary, frequently in competition with other stores: wines, paints, liqueurs, cigars, machine oil, and even "healthy cold soda water". By 1876, his son, the new doctor, began a photography studio on the premises, although he moved to a practice in Oostburg, Wisconsin soon afterward.

The last two years of AFH's life were strangely quite in the newspapers. He suffered increasingly from bronchial problems, and which ultimately caused his death. Ironically, he had proclaimed in his second emigration brochure, that the climate in NW Iowa was healthful, that lung illnesses were rare, and that it was even conducive to the healing of tuberculosis. Bolks, who is listed on the committee in this brochure, himself was frequently incapacitated by bronchitis. Nevertheless, it was a widely held notion and a common propaganda ploy to contest the salubrity of rival Dutch-American settlements in the U.S.A.

Frederika observed that De Lespinasse's life had been a constant disillusionment. No doubt his disappointments in life were due as much to circumstances as they were to his many contradictory character traits: he was both sensitive and opinionated, argumentative and committed to "brotherhood," inquisitive and set in his ways, an idealist and cynic, an egalitarian and elitist, enthusiastic in initiation and unsteady in execution.

After his father's death, Gijbert returned to the Orange City practice, which would be taken over by his half brother Henry, later. Both eventually left for the West coast, but not until after successively having practiced several decades in Orange City. Neither one seemed as driven as the father--they were not even founding members of the Sioux County Medical Society.

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*De Volksvriend*