

**“Wear a Flag in Your Lapel and I’ll Meet You at the Depot”:
Theodore F. Koch and Dutch-American Settlement in Pine County, Minnesota**

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It is 1896. Down at the Union Depot on 3rd Street in St. Paul, Minnesota dozens of trains pass through each day. Many days there is a man who paces back and forth looking into the windows of the coaches. He is in his early forties, a rather stocky fellow sporting a beard (sometimes full, sometimes a vandyke) steel rim glasses and dark, rather wiry hair.

This denizen of the depot inspects the debarking passengers, apparently on the look out for some sign. Soon it becomes clear that his quarry are all wearing tri-color flags in their lapels. They greet each other in a German sounding language. If it is late in the day, the stocky man leads the group to a nearby hotel for the night. If it is in the morning they all board a coach of the St. Paul & Duluth Railroad. They will ride north to milepost 91, a new depot on the line, a place called Friesland.¹

Friesland, Minnesota was the invention, the dream, and the investment of the stock man with the beard and glasses. His name was Theodore Frederick Koch. He was one of that army of land dealers who often determined the locations settlers actually came to call home.

For months during 1896 and 1897 he inspired dozens of Hollanders to visit his new colony. In the early days he convinced many to buy his lands, selling thousands of acres at \$5 to \$8 per acre. And for years he kept trying to lure the prospects and convince the visitors that Friesland was their ticket to a bright economic future.

Within a year the village had two Dutch churches, a weekly newspaper, general store, real estate office, produce warehouse, and blacksmith shop. Farmsteads were sprouting in the burned over pine forests. Hayfields and potato patches were replacing poplars and pines as over fifty families wet up housekeeping within a few miles of the depot.

Koch learned the colonization business from several disparate sources. From his father, who managed a farm in the Netherlands for a German nobleman he learned about crops and animals. From American farm machinery exporters he learned the value of demonstrations. From German merchants in the Ruhr he learned high finance. From his own commodity brokering business he learned the value of cash flow, high volume, and low overhead.²

His brokerage business brought Koch to the United States in the company of registered Friesian-Holstein cattle bound for California. During the summer of 1885 he viewed the country through the slats of a cattle car. He even heard gunshots in the night in Dodge City, Kansas. He also learned of the profit potential of selling land for

While the human component of the colony may have been less prosperous folk, Koch used their numbers as his way of convincing other buyers that his colony would be a successful one. Testimonial letters to the editor from the happy settlers also figured prominently in his promotional efforts. These testimonials read almost like excerpts from Koch's own advertisements. They included assurances that settlers could confirm the truth of everything which "the gentleman Koch" had told them. In fact the Friesland story was true beyond their own dreams.

The bottom line of Koch's advertising was always "Trust me." He was always at pains to distinguish himself from the "unscrupulous" land dealers who had taken advantage of the poor and naive, leading them to several notable disasters in Colorado and Montana. He was the land agent who had scoured the west looking for just the right locales that Hollanders could develop with the unique skills which had crossed the Atlantic with them. He could pick the right places because he knew soil, having been a farmer himself. He had warned them ten years before to stay out of Mississippi and Texas. He had warned them not to go to the Dakotas in the 1880's. He was the one who had told them that Prinsburg was going to be a farmers' paradise. He reminded those who had doubted his word that the believers had tripled their money in ten years. You could even ask them! Now it was 1896 and Friesland was the second chance for those who had failed to listen to him a decade before when he said Minnesota was the true land of opportunity.

Koch said "trust me" because he was putting his own money on the line in Friesland. He had done this in Prinsburg, now he was doing it again. He visited the new settlement several items a week. He was building a demonstration farm just a mile from the station, he was shipping in livestock, building apartment houses for the newcomers to live in until their own homes were ready. He was loaning money and providing work opportunities for those who lacked the cash for the downpayment. He was ensuring the success of a bilingual newspaper by editing it himself until he could locate a permanent editor.

He said "trust me" because he was the one who even told the negative side of life in this new colony. He warned his readers that Friesland's road system was primitive. Clearing tree stumps was not easy either. Slackers need not bother to come to his colony, only those who were willing to work, and work hard. But success was certain. Just as he had assured them that Prinsburg would succeed, it would happen again in Friesland. He cautioned prospective buyers that I had taken Prinsburg ten years to thrive.¹⁰

Koch assured readers he had nothing to gain personally from sales of railroad land. Apparently he did not consider free passes on the St. Paul and Duluth, and related roads, as compensation, more the 20% commissions he collected on every sale when the going rate was 3-5%.¹¹

When detractors questioned his claims and said the land's most abundant crop would be rocks, he had the skills to defend his colony with words written in several different languages. Even a vice consul of the Dutch government vouched for his truth and virtue. His credibility was sealed when he arranged his own appointment as a vice consul. He also helped his colony by cultivating good political contacts in the state and county governments.¹²

And he was persuasive. He convinced approximately 125 householders to follow him into the woods. Even hardships could not dim the dreams of some. Many did move away within a year or two. But those who stayed continued to believe. While the earliest endorsement letters may have been the work of touts, the apologies continued to appear in the columns of the Dutch newspapers long after Koch himself had moved on to other dreams and other projects.

Koch honestly believed that this colony was going to work. For the better part of ten years he was a fixture in the area. When many purchasers fell into arrears he was the one who advised the railroad on who deserved a break and who deserved foreclosure. Koch underwrote several of the financially weaker ones. In 1901 he bought the remaining railroad land after concluding that the corporate bosses had no intention of living up to their promises to help the venture. Koch went into the road business and the ditching business to save his colony. This was the part that few people saw. This is what separated him from the real con men who had deceived so many in the previous years.

Koch was a salesman, but he was no Harold Hill gouging the gullible Iowans. Koch was a believer. He believed that sheer will could make prosperity happen. If people used their wits and possessed both a strong back and mental grit, the outcome was certain. Anyone could succeed. He wrote in one of his ads, "Friesland, Minn. is the land for the poor as well as the wealthy man; for both high and low; but above all for those who love to work and understand that 'work ennobles.'" ¹³ With exhortations like these flowing from his pen, it should come as no surprise that Koch's great American hero was Theodore Roosevelt.

Years later, in private interviews, he admitted that Friesland had been a bad idea. His colonists were not as aggressive as he. They resisted the farming innovations he tried to introduce into colony. They refused to help build the roads which would promote more settlement. They also refused to vote for the necessary bond issues to underwrite ditching and road construction. That they would not cooperate in these things, is testimony to the straitened financial situations which had brought them to Friesland in the first place. He conceded that farming in the Minnesota pine forests was not the same as on the prairies. He had overestimated what scientific farming could do with newly cleared lands and underestimated the inevitable result of attempting to farm marginal lands in years when the prices were not high.¹⁴

As coal replaced firewood, as cars replaced horses, and railroads brought cheap produce to the Twin Cities from far to the south and west, economically marginal places like Friesland could not compete in the new, broader marketplace. Despite the best of efforts and intentions rape seed and cabbages, potatoes and cheese could not turn red ink into black. Thus Koch's dream was gradually erased as the forest was left to reclaim what had been its own. One settler compared farming in Friesland to a rooster building a nest from sticks.

However, Koch was a promote and when there was nothing left to promote in Minnesota, he moved on to other places. By 1905 he could not locate large open tracts of land in Minnesota, so he looked to the south. He first moved to Port Arthur, Texas and lured about one hundred Dutch farmers to the area. They stayed for a year until a hurricane roared in from the nearby Gulf of Mexico. Koch then spent his time coaxing German Catholics to the King Ranch lands near Corpus Christi. He also developed a beach resort which was blown away in another hurricane. During World War One his German owned assets were seized by the U.S. government. This marked the end of Koch's greatest adventures. He lived well for another twenty years, but never again did he succeed in moving hundreds to pull up stakes and follow him into a new agricultural promised land.

Koch's siren song was dimple and direct, a message a Calvinist farmer could easily understand, "If you are willing to work and don't harbor unrealistic expectations, come to Friesland, even those of you who have only money enough for a railroad ticket. If you wish to have a good life and are able to work and dream, then you are welcome in this new colony, as both Hollanders and settlers; and in a few years your future will be your own, as lord and master of your own estate."¹⁵

Real estate promoter's hyperbole? Maybe so. The words are an irresistible blend: part peddler, part preacher rolled into staccato cadences reminiscent of Richard Sears' catalog. And they are in Dutch! Right here in *De Volksvriend*! That must count for something.

And it won't hurt to just look, will it?

So maybe we should catch the next train north to St. Paul. There's a special excursion leaving next Thursday from East Orange (Alton). It says here they'll pick people up in Hospers and Sheldon, too! Come on along! Mr. Koch will be there to meet us at the station in St. Paul. He ways the hotel will put us up real cheap, and feed us breakfast, too! And if we buy a piece of land, the whole trip will be free!

Oh! And don't forget that little Dutch flag for your lapel.

¹ *De Volksvriend*, January 30, 1896. Advertising Supplement. This full page included the suggestion that arriving passengers should identify themselves for Koch by wearing or waving Dutch flags.

² Theodore F. Koch, *Memoirs of theodore F. Koch*. [Unpublished typescript, 1935]. Vol. 1, pp. 16-40 summarize Koch's early business activities.

³ Koch, *Memoirs*, pp. 43-53.

⁴ For a general description of Koch's career see Robert Schoone-Jongen, "Theodore F. Koch: Dutch-American Land Promoter." *Origins*. Vol. XI, No. 2, 1993, pp. 322-44 and "Cheap Land and Community: Theodore F. Koch, Dutch Colonizer." *Minnesota History*. Vol. 53, No. 6, Summer 1993, pp. 214-224.

⁵ Advertisements for the Theo. F. Koch Land Co. appeared weekly in issues of *De Volksvriend* and *De Wachter* among other publications.

⁶ *De Volksvriend*, January 30, 1896.

⁷ *De Volksvriend*, March 19, 1896.

⁸ *De Volksvriend*, Feb. 13 and March 12, 1896. *De Wachter*, March 4, 1896. Advertisements in these issues listed approximately fifty individuals who had either bought, promised, or stated their intention to affiliate with the colony. One account of a disgruntled buyer can be found in Fanny H. Smith, *Hanenburg-Rozendal: "A Goodly Heritage."* [Privately published, 1986], p. 256.

⁹ Much of this general description of the settlers is drawn from the author's database on the Friesland Colony. The database is based on information gleaned from the Minnesota State Census of 1905, the Federal Censuses of 1900 and 1910, and news items datelined Friesland, Hinckley, Groningen, and Sandstone, Minnesota which appeared in *De Volksvriend* during the period 1895-1917. Much of the material will appear in an article tentatively titled "Friesland, Minnesota: A Little Town That Couldn't," scheduled to be published in *Origins* in the forthcoming issue.

¹⁰ This is a compilation of claims Koch made in advertisements which appeared in *De Volksvriend* during the period January-June, 1896.

¹¹ The St. Paul and Duluth Railroad Company copies of all land sale contracts noted the percentage the company paid to each of its land agents. Only Koch received 20%. Others, who he undoubtedly had contact with since they were working in the same general area, were paid at the lower rate. (St. Paul & Duluth Railroad Co. Land Contracts, Northern Pacific Railroad Collection, Minnesota Historical Society.)

¹² Koch served as a vice consul for the Netherlands government during the period November 11, 1902-April 14, 1910. (Letter from A.C. van der Zwan, Official at the Research Section, Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, to author September 13, 1991.)

¹³ *De Volksvriend*, May 21, 1896, p. 4.

¹⁴ "Notes taken during an interview with Mr. Theodore Koch, September 11, 1934." (Unpublished typescript in the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society) p. 10.

¹⁵ *De Volksvriend*, May 21, 1896, p. 4

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