

Frisians in Sioux County; from *heitelân* to Homeland

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Introduction

Thousands of Dutch Frisians migrated to the United States between 1880 and 1914. Especially a specific area in the North of the province known as *De Bouwhoek*, where farming is particularly determined by agriculture, provided the United States with Frisian inhabitants.

The traditional sea clay areas, are the cockpit of Dutch migration to the U.S. in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. From this type of soil in the provinces of Groningen, Zeeland, and Friesland the percentage of emigrants is the highest. Over half (55 percent) of all emigrants in the period 1835-1880 originated from the countryside of these provinces.¹ The choice of a rural clay area for investigating the migratory process is also dictated by reasons of socio-economic characteristics. In his pioneering quantitative research dealing with Dutch overseas migration, Robert Swierenga concludes that despite some religiously driven emigration, ultimately economic conditions in the countryside were decisive.² Since unemployment rates usually are higher in regional centers, it is obvious to consider the clay areas as very peripheral and hence likely to produce a high percentage of overseas migrants.

To put the Dutch overseas migration in regional perspective, I chose to study the northern Frisian area because the agrarian depression particularly affected this part of the province. The stagnation in the business cycle in Friesland took a more serious turn than in Zeeland or Groningen and it lasted longer.³ Since individual and local factors in migration usually are influenced by major socioeconomic forces, the agrarian depression seems to be an important circumstance to take into account.

The choice of the Frisian clay area also is determined by the fact that in the last two decades of the nineteenth century Friesland faced many labor disputes. The Frisian labor

¹R.P. Swierenga, "Dutch International Labor Migration to North America in the Nineteenth Century," in *Dutch Immigration to North America*, eds. H. Ganzevoort and M. Boekelman (Toronto: The Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1983), 1-34.

²R.P. Swierenga, "Dutch Immigration Patterns in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in *The Dutch in America*, ed. R.P. Swierenga (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1985), 15-42.

³H. de Vries, *Landbouw en bevolking tijdens de agrarische depressie in Friesland (1878-1895)* (Wageningen: H. Veenman & Zonen, 1971), 13-16.

movement considerably contributed to the Dutch labor movement as a whole.⁴ R.P. Swierenga found that in the 65 years before 1880, the occupation of laborer (*werkman, dagloner*) was listed most frequently among the Dutch emigrant males of 20 years and older.⁵ This datum can suggest a causal relation between labor unrest and migration to the U.S. Furthermore, it is often said in the popular idiom that Frisians are very attached to the soil. They are enamored by tradition and attachment to the fertile cultivated lands. In the Frisian national anthem one meets the phrase: "Flean op! Wij sjonge it bêste lân fen 'e ierde, It Fryske lân fol eare en rom" [Arise and sing, the best country on earth, the Frisian land filled with honor and glory]. If this is an apt characterization, one wonders why so many exchanged their native soil for the unknown spacious American lands. What was promised to them? "Nobody emigrates without a promise!"⁶

The agrarian crisis of the late nineteenth century had a great impact on Frisian agriculture. The drop in prices during this depression affected differently the diverse agricultural products, but it finally resulted in the adaptation of new cultivation schemes. Broer J. Soolsma from the city of Franeker in 1899 mentioned some changes in a letter to his family in the city of Paterson, New Jersey:

Nowadays in this environment a lot of sugar beets have been raised and this has been real profitable for farmers and laborers because it is easy raising for the farmers and many laborers are needed for this crop. This time a year hardly enough hands are available for lifting, decapitating and transport, thus the workman makes good money nowadays...Green peas now are raised a lot too, this is important for the poor people too, while there are households that own 7 to 8 Guilders a week with that, with selecting the peas. This is done by the wife and children, the husband has another job too, so the situation here is not burdensome at the moment.⁷

Between 1878 and 1895 the Frisian clay areas were heavily affected by the depression, and it was not until 1905 that the region regained its strength. In socio-economic perspective, the low prices were the result of the high prices for agricultural products during the two decennia before 1877. In the *Bouwhoek*, where the farmers became very wealthy during the boom period of the 1870s, the drop of prices had a huge impact. The situation of the land laborers really became untenable and because of the agricultural nature of the province, these workers did not easily find employment outside of agriculture.

⁴T. van der Wal, *Op zoek naar een nieuwe vrijheid. Een kwart eeuw arbeidersbeweging in Friesland 1870-1895* (Leiden: Universitaire Pers, 1972), 369-74.

⁵Swierenga, "Dutch International Labor Migration," 1-34.

⁶This statement was made by Hans Magnus Enzensberger in his *Van der Leeuw*-lecture in Groningen entitled "Die grosse Wanderung" [The great Trek]. This lecture was published in H.M. Enzensberger, *De grote trek* (Groningen: De Volkskrant, 1992), 16.

⁷Letter of Broer J. Soolsma and his wife Taekje A. Lantinga from Franeker, Friesland to G.W. Poelstra in Paterson, New Jersey, November 7, 1899. Calvin College Archives.

The conclusion is that in the nineteenth century the Frisian economy was subject to an increasing one-sidedness and this poor economic structure caused a relative decline. The pillars of the 18th century Frisian economy: the carrying-trade, the peat-digging, agriculture, and the industry for a local market, had lost their strength as closely interacting certainties. At the turn of the century only agriculture still had its significant meaning. Except for the dairy industry, hardly any new industries found their way in Friesland. The position of Friesland in the national and international traffic became very unfavourable because the *Zuiderzee* lost its importance to the *Noordhollandsch* and the *Noordzee* channel. Friesland lost its independent economic -and also political- position and according to J.L. van Zanden this can be attributed to the processes of economic and political integration in which the province got involved in the nineteenth century.⁸

Rural Midwest: Sioux County, Iowa

Frisians emigrated to all kinds of places in the United States, except for the southern states. They also settled in urban areas like Paterson close to New York, and Chicago's southside. In the rural Midwest Frisians found a home in the dairy state of Wisconsin, in South Dakota, and in Minnesota. Around the turn of the century they also went to Iowa, where they settled in Sioux County where they had a long migration tradition. Being in the center of this midwestern settlement, the illustration of Frisian immigration by the Sioux County case is most obvious.

The midwestern agricultural frontier in the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s had been a challenge to Frisian settlers like Sjoerd Aukes Sipma, Tjibbe Geerts' brother Anne van der Meulen, and Jelle Pelmulder. Their accounts came from Pella in Marion County's very fertile, sprawling, rolling government lands, and later on from the daughter settlement Orange City in Sioux County's rich, deep prairie soil. In Friesland these experiences aroused much interest, especially since they were published.⁹

In 1870 an 1847 pioneer from Pella came to visit his fellow pioneers in their new environment in Sioux County. He found only a few newcomers who lived in log houses, and a load of planks that expressed future plans. But in the same year Orange City was founded, with a main street called after "William".¹⁰ Several newcomers of Frisian origin played a decisive role in the development of the Sioux County daughter settlement. Tjeerd Heemstra,

⁸The decline of Friesland's position in economic and political sense is best described in Van Zanden's, *De economische ontwikkeling* and summarized in his article "De Friese economie in de negentiende eeuw," *It Beaken* 1/2 (1992): 7-14.

⁹For references concerning correspondence of the first Frisian Pella settlers see Chapter 3.1. For a Frisian look on the Iowa frontier see the letter of 1848 of Sjoerd Aukes Sipma translated and edited by R.P. Swierenga, "A Dutch Immigrant's View of Frontier Iowa," *Annals of Iowa* 38 (Fall 1965): 81-118; For the history of Pella see besides H.S. Lucas and J. van Hinte: J. van der Zee, *The Hollanders of Iowa* (Iowa City: The State Historical Society, 1912); *Souvenir History of Pella, Iowa* (Pella: The Booster Press, 1922); *History of Pella, Iowa 1847-1987* 2 Vols. (Dallas: Pella Historical Society, 1988-1989).

¹⁰The city was named after the royal house of the Netherlands, while the main street was referring to King *Willem van Oranje*. Van Hinte, *Nederlanders in Amerika*, 1:21.

for example, left with his family of nine children from Michigan, where they had lived in the Van Raalte [a Dutch clergyman who left with many followers in 1847] colony for twenty-three years. He began the first retail business on his farm two miles from Orange City.¹¹ Henry Hospers, Dutch businessman and former mayor of Pella, Iowa, started a general store in Orange City and opened the first bank, the Orange City Bank. Hospers also had been asked by the Iowa State Board of Immigration to represent them in The Netherlands in an effort to promote Dutch immigrants to settle in Iowa. Thus, in 1870 he spent about four months in his native country, holding mass meetings, granting interviews, and answering letters.¹² The new settlement in Sioux County was promoted even before any actual development concerning the infrastructure had taken place. And news from the settlers' front later on became available. Th.M. Oostenbrug immediately after his journey in 1882 wrote to Friesland that there was no place for laborers in Sioux County because everybody became a farmer or worked as a tradesman. Thus he advised Frisians:

Sell what you possess, and then make the journey to Iowa and behold the beautiful uninhabited creation, such land of milk and honey in abundance and for sale for acceptable prices. A tenant farmer in The Netherlands can start his own farm here easily. Clear away the yield, clear away the Dutch majesty, because it is poverty and it will remain poverty!¹³

In the early seventies travel and transportation was eased by the completion of a section of the St. Paul and Sioux City Railroad. The Frisians in Sioux County got their first railway station at East Orange, four miles east of Orange City. A few years later in 1874, Henry Hospers began publishing *De Volksvriend*, a weekly newspaper in the Dutch language, to help attract and encourage emigrants to come to Sioux County. Frisians like Ebele de Groot from Hallum, Djurre de Boer from Arum, and Jacob Douma from Tzummarum and their families later on got involved.

Without manpower socio-economic improvement was impossible. Migrations from Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, and the Netherlands boosted Sioux County's population to 5,426 in 1880 and 24,021 in 1905. In 1875 the Orange City settlement, which also held the county seat, inhabited 468 families. 30,000 acres were being tilled, and some 200,000 bushels of wheat were raised that year, according to *De Volksvriend*. Destructive grasshoppers in the seventies visited the area several times, putting many settlers in destitute

¹¹Tjeerd Heemstra was born November 8, 1824 at Marrum, Ferwerderadeel in Friesland. He married Sijke Hoekstra on March 19, 1846. The couple emigrated to Michigan in 1847. Heemstra died at Orange City, Iowa April 13, 1901. See *The Centennial Book Orange City, Iowa 1870-1970* (Orange City: The Ad-Visor, 1970), 51.

¹²G. Nelson Nieuwenhuis, *Siouxland; A history of Sioux County, Iowa* (Orange City, Iowa: The Sioux County State Historical Society, 1983), 110; J. van Hinte, *Nederlanders in Amerika*, 2:35.

¹³Letters of Th.M. Oostenbrug from Hospers, Iowa to Roodkerk near Leeuwarden, June 11 and December 18, 1882. Oostenbrug left in 1882 and from his first letter it appears that he had a farm in Friesland, which he sold before departure. I am indebted to F.J. Koning for this information.

circumstances. However, pioneer farming in those years put some firm roots in Sioux county's soil.¹⁴

Investigating the census data for the state of Iowa, it appears that by far the largest number of Frisian immigrants could be found in one county, namely in Sioux County. In 1900 402 people of Frisian origin and their descendants were traced here. Marion County had 85 and Muscatine County 15. The group of linked Frisians in Sioux County included 200 immigrants.¹⁵ That means that I connected data of 200 Frisians before they left Friesland and after they settled in Iowa.

An interesting question is to assess the impact emigration had on the economic prospects of the Frisian immigrants. The occupations of the Sioux County settlers show a remarkable homogeneous pattern. In 1900 58 percent of the workforce (137 in number) labored in the agricultural sector. A few immigrants worked in handicrafts (like a blacksmith, two carpenters, and an oilseed crusher), and the remainder had jobs in the service sector. Of the farmers five were in vegetable gardening. Compared with the jobs these settlers had in their native country, only one had been a cattle farmer, two had been general farmers, while five had worked as *gardeniers*. One was a baker. All the others held no independent positions in Friesland, but had been hired mostly by farmers as laborers or had been unemployed. Generally, three quarters of the workforce entered different occupations from those held in Friesland. This indicates high transoceanic occupational mobility between the Netherlands and the United States. Studies of occupational mobility of the Dutch in Grand Rapids or Holland, Michigan and also of Pella, Iowa, reveal that in those areas it was lower than for Sioux County. Richard Doyle points out for Pella that only 42 percent of the workforce entered an occupation different from the one in The Netherlands. David Vanderstel concludes that more than 50 percent of the Dutch Grand Rapids settlers experienced transoceanic job mobility, while Gordon Kirk points to almost 60 percent of the Dutch in Holland, Michigan, who entered other professions after migration.¹⁶

¹⁴*Centennial Book Orange City, Iowa*, 12-13; C.B. Kennedy, "The Sioux County Dutch," in *The Dutch in America*, ed. E.J. Bruins (Holland, MI: Hope College, 1984), 29-40; J.W. Warnshuis, "The History of Sioux County," (manuscript, trans. by P. Vander Kooi, n.p., 1879, Calvin College Archives, Grand Rapids, MI). For figures see W.H. Bender, *Iowa* (New York, 1908), 44-51.

¹⁵"Frisians in the USA, 1900/1910, Computer Compilation."

¹⁶R.L. Doyle, *The Socio-Economic Mobility of the Dutch Immigrants to Pella, Iowa 1847-1925* (Ph.D., Kent State University, 1982), 369-70; D.G. Vanderstel, *The Dutch of Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1848-1900; Immigrant Neighborhood and Community Development in a Nineteenth Century City* (Ph.D., Kent State University, 1983), 440-44; G.W. Kirk, *The Promise of American Life; Social Mobility in a Nineteenth-Century Immigrant Community, Holland, Michigan, 1847-1894* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1978), 89. A general article on occupational mobility of the Dutch which covers the period 1835-1880 is R.P. Swierenga, "Dutch International Migration and Occupational Change; A Structural Analysis of Multinational Linked Files," in I. Glazier & L. De Rosa, *Migration Across Time and Nations* (New York and London: Holmes & Meier, 1986), 95-124.

An indicator of improvement of occupational status is also found in data on home ownership. In 1900 only two of the seventy-six Frisian households in Sioux County owned a farm free and eight owned their house free. Seven households possessed a house mortgaged, while sixteen lived on a mortgaged farm. The majority (43) of the households rented their house or farm. These data of the 1900 Census are not available a decade later, but we may assume that owning of houses and farms increased synchronically with the years spent in the new country, as was shown for the Frisians in Wisconsin.

A striking result of investigating the occupational structure in Sioux County is that most immigrants sought land. Advertisements for migration to Iowa always emphasized the excellent quality of farmlands.¹⁷ Like other western states, Iowa took a more or less active part in promoting immigration. In the early 1880s it was still possible to obtain a homestead in Sioux County. For the Frisian homeseekers it must have been attractive to invest their lives in unused lands, especially because they did not bring large amounts of capital. They found that the soil of Iowa lent itself easily to cultivation on account of its looseness and lightness. The farmers could farm on a large scale, although the new immigrants had to get accustomed to this. In 1889 the Frisian immigrant Jurjen Tjerks Dijkstra reported about the threshing machine that he bought on which his sons did custom work for other farmers in the neighborhood. This was an activity that was not practised in Friesland at that time.¹⁸ Frisian farmers had been used to intensive farming methods in their native country and they first shuddered at the sight of weeds and waste on extensive American farms. However, Dutch immigrant farmers often adopted a middle course and became relatively successful farmers in Sioux County.¹⁹ In 1910 the farmers of Dutch birth or ancestry even formed a majority among the 1,440 foreign-born and 1,275 native-born farmers in Sioux County. Referring to their conservatism and tendency to work on old-fashioned principles, Jacob van der Zee concludes his reflections on Dutch farming in Iowa in 1912 outspokenly: "they are workers, plodders, savers; and they know how to make farms pay."²⁰

Not everyone who operated a farm in Sioux County stayed at the same place for years. Biographical histories reveal that some immigrants operated a variety of farms throughout Sioux County, moving from the vicinity of Orange City to the town of Hull, Sioux Center, Sheldon, Alton (East-Orange earlier), or Maurice, all communities with a large

¹⁷For a contemporary immigrant information guide to Sioux County and vicinity see *Iowa. Het land voor emigranten* (Pella: Iowa commissie van emigratie, 1873).

¹⁸Letter of Jurjen Tjerks Dijkstra from Orange City, IA to Arum, Wonseradeel November 1, 1889.

¹⁹Jacob van de Zee describes in 1912 that the Dutch farmers in Iowa, for example, destroyed weeds especially if they could exploit the labor of their large families. Van der Zee, *The Hollanders of Iowa*, 329-36. Also B.W. Beltman, "Ethnic Persistence and Change; The Experience of a Dutch-American Family in Rural Iowa," *The Annals of Iowa* 52 (Winter 1993): 1-49.

²⁰Van der Zee, *Hollanders of Iowa*, 336.

share of Dutch immigrants.²¹ Although this mobility seems an adaptation to American conditions and possibilities, it shows that many choose to stay in the environment of their ethnic community. Even movements to places far from the original settlement or ethnic neighborhood should not be perceived as abandonment of ethnic or Old World ties.

Those Frisians who gained a foothold in Sioux County experienced economic improvement. The farmers among them certainly would not have operated a farm independently in their native country and many acquired property to an extent that would not have been possible in Friesland. Sioux County gave opportunities concerning occupational mobility and economic improvement that were hard to gain in Friesland's clay area at the time. However, Frisian immigrants were not the only settlers who exploited these opportunities. A study of the Danish immigrants in Iowa reveals that immigrants managed to achieve a substantial increase in prosperity and many had been able to take a large step upward in the social hierarchy. During the first ten years, the large majority of Danish immigrant farmers in Clay and Sharon Townships worked as farmhands, but by the time they lived in Iowa for thirty years, the great majority owned farms.²² Doyle's study of the Pella Dutch between 1847 and 1925 makes clear that farmers tended to be more successful in acquiring wealth than were many of their counterparts in the urban segment of the workforce.²³ The Frisians in Sioux County showed similar tendencies.

As settlers continued to flood into Sioux County and into northwestern Iowa, some moved on to more western areas in eastern Dakota.²⁴ The rapid population increase in Sioux County had boosted land prices and the Homestead and Timber Culture Acts, as well as new lines of the Northern Pacific Railroad forced people to consider Dakota lands. Interest in the Dakotas during the boom period of rapid settlement in the early 1880s was also increased by the favorable climatic condition prevailing in the region during those days. In 1881 in Orange City a meeting was organized to discuss possibilities in southeastern Dakota, in Douglas County. Dirk van den Bosch and Leendert van der Meer were involved in these plans and in

²¹Klaas and Aaltje Pietens-Huisman with their son left Oudega in 1883 and traveled directly to Sioux County where they were met by Fokeltje (Aaltje's step-sister) and Berend de Jong who had come there the previous year. Both couples operated different farms in Sioux County. See "A Pietens Family Chronicle," (n.p., 1979; Manuscript Herrick Public Library, Holland, MI); *The Centennial Book Orange City, Iowa*, 34-61; That many Frisians settled in the Sioux County area and that they were acquainted with each other is also clear from the letter collection of Jurjen Tjerks Dijkstra who's letters from Orange City and Middleburgh, Iowa to Arum in Wonseradeel from 1884 to 1905 have been preserved and offered thanks to R.J. Miedema.

²²J. Mackintosh, "The Lure of Prosperity; Economic Development among Danish Immigrants to Iowa," in *On Distant Shores*, eds. B. Flemming Larsen, H. Bender and K. Veien (Aalborg: Danes Worldwide Archives, 1993), 177-90. Frisian immigrants also worked as farm laborers for a few years, before investing in a farm. See letter of J.W. Bijker in *Nieuw Advertentieblad*, February 22, 1893.

²³R.L. Doyle, *The Socio-Economic Mobility of the Dutch Immigrants to Pella*, 391.

²⁴In 1889 the territory was divided into the states of North and South Dakota.

1882 these pioneers took claims in Douglas County where government land still could be obtained at a low cost. Both men had participated as leaders in the Sioux County settlement from Pella in the early 1870s.²⁵ As many other European immigrants in the United States, Frisians did not stop their geographical move in the East or in the Midwest. Especially in the nineties of the nineteenth century they were part of the immigrant stream that tried to explore the possibilities further West. Frisians also appeared eager to find out how the west was won, and ended up in places like the Galatin Valley, Montana, and Lynden, Washington. Economically, Sioux County Frisians found a homecountry in Iowa, that could measure up with the *heitelân*. Whether the Frisians in the Far West were able to succeed in this respect does not correspond with the limited time for this presentation.

²⁵Nieuwenhuis, *History of Sioux County*, 114; Van Hinte, *Nederlanders in Amerika*, 2:17.