

Stellingwerff's *Amsterdamse Emigranten* and Pella History

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There are at least two reasons for reviewing Jan Stellingwerff's book, *Amsterdam Emigrants: Unknown Letters from the Prairies of Iowa, 1846-1873* [*Amsterdamse Emigranten: Onbekende brieven uit de prairie van Iowa*] (Amsterdam, 1976). The first is because the Dutch American Historical Commission has undertaken a project to translate the book into English and publish it. The second and more important reason is because the book is a unique primary source on the founding and early history of Pella.

The Dutch American Historical Commission is a consortium of four West Michigan institutions--Hope College, Western Theological Seminary, Calvin College, and Calvin Theological Seminary. The purpose of the Commission is to encourage, coordinate, and support the publication of crucial historical works concerning Dutch immigration to America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To date, the Commission has republished two books with the Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, both classics written in 1955 by the noted Dutch-American historian, Henry S. Lucas. The first, republished in 1989, is *Netherlanders in America: Dutch Immigration to the United States and Canada, 1789-1950*; and the second, republished in 1997, is *Lucas's Dutch Immigrant Memoirs and Related Writings*. These books were long out of print and much sought after by those interested in the history of the Dutch in North America. *Netherlanders in America* is now sold out and *Dutch Immigrant Memoirs* soon will be out of print again.

Early in 1999 the Commission undertook its most ambitious project yet--the translation and publication of Stellingwerff's massive tome of 400 pages, together with its 60 illustrations and photographs, several in full color, that enhance the text. Dr. Walter Lagerwey, professor emeritus of Dutch Language, Literature, and Culture at Calvin College, has been engaged to translate the book and Eerdmans will likely publish the finished product as a volume in the Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America. The one stumbling block is money. Translating this large book and publishing it in English will cost \$20,000, and the Commission has very limited funds derived from small annual assessments paid by the member institutions.

The Commission chose the *Amsterdam Emigrants* project because this book is one of the most important primary works dealing with the origins of the emigration of Christian Seceders from the Netherlands to the midwestern colonies, particularly Pella. Yet, the book is wholly inaccessible to those who cannot read Dutch. Moreover, documents relating to Pella's history have been unduly slighted in the published works on Dutch immigration. Only two pamphlets of Scholte, *Eerst Stem uit Pella* [*First Voice from Pella* (February, 1848)] and *Tweede Stem uit Pella* [*Second Voice from Pella* (Fall, 1848)], and Sjoerd A. Sipma's *Belangrijke Berichten uit Pella* [*Important Reports from Pella* (1849)], have been translated and published. A English-language typescript of Jan Berkhout's pamphlet, *Brief uit Noord-Amerika* (1849), translated by John J. Dahm Sr., is available at Calvin College. Yet to be translated is the important book, *De Hollanders in Iowa: Brieven uit Pella van een Gelderschman* (1858).

The Stellingwerff book contains a collection of some 110 letters written during the first twenty-five years of the Pella emigration, 1846-1873. Eighty-eight are in the Høveker-

Wormser Collection at the Free University Library in Amsterdam, and 21 are in the Scholte Papers in the Central College Library, Pella. Johan Adam Wormser and Henricus Höveker, who were related by marriage, were prominent Amsterdam Seceders. Höveker was a bookseller who in 1837 became the publisher of Scholte's religious journal, *De Reformatie* [The Reformation], the magazine of the Christian Seceded Church in the Netherlands. Wormser, a legal functionary, was an intimate friend of the Christian political leader Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, the intellectual Jewish convert Isaac da Costa, and many Seceder ministers. Wormser used his base in Amsterdam to help the Seceders in Iowa establish their colony. On request, he sent goods for the home and farm that were scarce and expensive in frontier Iowa.

The Höveker-Wormser Collection includes some 60 letters that Wormser received from Amsterdam Seceders who had emigrated to Iowa, especially his dear friends, Diedrich and Christina Budde, who settled in Burlington in 1847, and his older brother Andries N. Wormser, who joined the Buddes for a few months in 1848. Wormser's correspondents also included several letters each from the primary immigrant leaders, H.P. Scholte and A. C. Van Raalte. Stellingwerff is a great grandson of Höveker and Wormser, and he inherited all these America letters and gave them to the Free University Library, of which he was then the director. By merging these documents from both sides of the Atlantic, Stellingwerff provides, as it were, a two-way international conversation about the founding of Pella.

The letters give both American and Netherlandic perspectives on the key issue in the minds of the immigrants themselves and of their relatives in Holland, that is, was immigration a wise decision or a major mistake? In the early days this was an open question. The Buddes, for example, were positive about their decision to settle in Burlington and their letters urged family and friends to join them. These are typical America letters or "bacon letters" (*spek brieven*).

But Andries Wormser and family had such a sour experience--two of their children died from scarlet fever within a month--that the family returned to Amsterdam after a few months. His missives provide a rare example of anti-America letters. During his brief time in Iowa, Wormser wrote strong letters home recommending that all but the very desperate stay put in the Netherlands. He bitterly condemned immigrant leaders for hoodwinking their followers and he castigated settlers like the Buddes who would encourage family and friends to come to an early grave in Iowa or Michigan. This was a self-serving effort, Wormser explained. "I recall that when we were still at home and we read a letter and the contents were not as favorable as we would wish, they were considered derogatory. Later when it was apparent that a return was not possible, better news is written in order to attract family and friends" (Wormser letter 30).

Despite his pessimistic outlook, Andries Wormser was an accurate observer of frontier Iowa. He gave detailed descriptions of early farm implements, crops and livestock, and buildings. He was a realist, little given to the spiritual reflection and pietism that characterized most Seceders. "Here we are in a wasteland," he wrote, "that at first made a deep impression on us but later bored us because of its sameness" (Wormser letter 30). When difficulties befell the immigrants, Andries blamed the dominies, especially Van Raalte and Scholte, for leading them out.

The Pella bookseller, Jan Berkhout and his wife, similarly criticized Scholte and offered a jaundiced view of the immigrant experience in four letters in the Stellingwerff

collection. "One busies himself here as a mole in the earth, trying to keep one's head above water, but with few exceptions, failing to do so. And if we found on the Lord's Day what we missed in Holland for such a long time, then I believe our move to America would have been worthwhile. But...the calling to the ministry is denied here. Scholte will preach once in a while but no more." Berkhout's wife noted that "we dare not send truthful letters to Holland--one should be quiet about such matters." She also noted that "all the women here are slaves rather than mistresses of households" (Wormser letter 43).

The carping letters of the Wormsers and Berkhouts are quite remarkable because they are so unusual. Indeed, I know of few other immigrant letter collections that convey such a negative tone as theirs. Herbert Brinks had no such letters in his book, *Dutch American Voices*. Yet, their unhappy experience was very typical; only Wormser's decision to remigrate was atypical. The best estimates are that fewer than 5 percent of Dutch immigrants remigrated in the nineteenth century. Most could not afford to return, even if they desperately wanted to do so.

Stellingwerff's book also contains 20 letters of Hendrik (Henry) Hospers and a travel diary kept by his father Jan (John) Hospers, both in the Scholte Papers. Stellingwerff copied them while on a research trip to North America in 1974. Hospers' letters are upbeat and positive like the Buddes, entirely the opposite of Andries Wormser's missives.

Henry Hospers came to Pella in the first wave in 1847 and John Hospers arrived two years later, coming on the same ship as A. E. Dudok Bosquet, A. C. Kuyper, and Jacob Maasdam. Both father and son became leaders in the Pella church and community. Henry opened a real estate office and practiced law. In 1861 the father and son, with eight others, purchased Scholte's defunct Pella Gazette and launched the Dutch language newspaper, Pella's *Weekblad*. Henry served as mayor of Pella from 1867 to 1871 and then became the leaders of Pella's daughter colony in Sioux County. The town of Hospers testifies to his business acumen as a real estate promoter and politician.

The second half of Stellingwerff's book contains a long series of letters from Diedrich and Christina Budde to Johan Wormser and his wife in Amsterdam. The Buddes were East Frisians who had lived in Amsterdam for many years before emigrating to America. The letters were sent to the Wormsers over a span of 25 years beginning in 1847. Unfortunately, Wormser's side of the correspondence has been lost in Iowa. The Buddes recount the loneliness and hardships of a working class, immigrant family to open a farm on the Iowa frontier and to keep their Dutch Reformed faith alive in an American setting. They founded a Reformed Church in Burlington where Diedrich frequently led the worship services and taught catechism.

The Budde letters tell of ordinary day to day life in the nineteenth century and the struggles against physical deterioration, contagious diseases, and the death of children. Christina's letters provide a woman's view of life as an immigrant in early Iowa. Despite the difficulties they remained unfailingly optimistic, unlike the pessimistic Andries Wormser.

The Buddes had the true American spirit. Diedrich was industrious, trustworthy, and generous. And Christina knew that the children would benefit from their sacrifices. God had led them thus far and He would continue to carry them. This couple is an example of devout Christians whose faith guided and sustained them in one crisis after another.

Stellingwerff's book reveals the central role of the Amsterdam Seceders in nurturing the new denomination, and it sheds much light on the interrelationships among the Seceder leaders

in the Netherlands and in America. The letters show that Pella pioneer families such as the Buddes, Berkhouts, Hospers, and Wormsers, were city-bred folks who had to make a sudden adjustment to the harsh conditions of the Iowa frontier. These Amsterdammers left a 600 year-old city of 200,000 inhabitants, with well established institutions, to settle in a country barely 70 years old and a state that had come into existence that very year, 1846.

Interestingly, the Wormser, Budde, and Scholte families were originally all Lutherans from Germany who had settled in Amsterdam, where they joined the Restored Evangelical Lutheran Church, a vital, free church movement. During the religious revival known as the Rèveil, which began in the 1820s, these families joined the Hervormde Kerk and then, following the Afscheiding (Secession) of 1834, they became Calvinist Seceders, subject to government persecution with the rest. Indeed, Scholte's magazine, *The Reformation*, is filled with reports of church services broken up by police or soldiers, the quartering of troops in parishioners' homes, and expulsions and sheriff's sales of property to satisfy the heavy fines.

But Scholte, Wormser, and Höveker were too independent minded to stay with the new Seceder denomination. Within a short time, Wormser and Höveker withdrew and Scholte was deposed. All became independents, worshipping in the house churches apart from any denominational structure. Clearly, these thrice seceders took their religious life seriously.

The six Scholte letters and two Van Raalte letters published by Stellingwerff are very important sources. Scholte's letter of May 1847, written from New York shortly after he arrived, outlines his thinking about the merits of Iowa over Illinois for the planned Dutch colony. Scholte here also mentions offhand that Van Raalte intended to link up with the Reformed Church in America, centered in New York and New Jersey. This was fully three years before Van Raalte actually took this controversial step and long before his own correspondence gives any hint of such intentions.

Scholte's August 1848 letter describes the formation of the government in Pella, his role as justice of the peace and school inspector, and the development of infant industries. In this letter Scholte takes a swipe at Van Raalte for blatantly recruiting new immigrants to Michigan at the expense of Pella. In his letter of January 1849, Scholte implores a rich widow in Amsterdam to lend him \$8,000 to avoid personal bankruptcy in a land deal involving the Des Moines River lands for which the state was demanding payment (Wormser letter 29).

Van Raalte's brief letter of January 1848 from Allegan, Michigan to Wormser reveals a growing sense of confidence that the Holland colony would survive. Van Raalte confesses: "When I look back upon this past year I feel my soul giving thanks.... God has heard my voice.... He has helped me to plant an entire people. For three years I feared that I would go to my grave without having been effectual and now I stand astonished that God has given me such a strong arm to accomplish my desire" (Wormser letter 10).

Van Raalte's lengthy letter of March 1864 to Rev. A. M. Donner in the Netherlands is eye opening. It was written from Pella while he was mentoring First Reformed Church in the calling of Donner to serve as its pastor. In the letter to Donner, Van Raalte excoriated Scholte for creating in Pella a "Babel" of religious confusion. "I have been concerned about Pella for many years," Van Raalte noted. "I was aware that God's people were shamefully scattered and that the worship of God and the religious life of the community had been forgotten.... For years we had to endure the mess and Pella was a profanation of God's name and a stigma to our Dutch people." If Donner accepted the call, all this would change for the better. And do not fear Scholte. Most people are "disgusted with his speculative, secular enterprises and there

is a thirst for a spiritual, fruitful ministry.... He has lost all respect among Americans and Hollanders.... Scholte will leave Pella sooner or later if he can only liquidate. That lion of the street is dead--as dead as a worm.... May God raise him up from the dead..." (Wormser letter 60). Needless to add, these erstwhile friends and associates in the Seceder church movement in the Netherlands had long parted company in America.

Van Raalte's assessment of Scholte's situation in Pella is confirmed in the letters of others. We learn from Diedrich Budde as early as January 1848, barely six months after Pella's founding, that Scholte refused to organize a church, believing someone else should take the initiative. Many children could not be baptized, as a result. A year after the church was finally organized, Scholte was suspended from the pulpit by the congregation. He was preaching premillennial sermons about the imminent return of Jesus and allowing laymen to teach and dispense the sacraments. Said Jan Berkhout, "No father is seen or referred to when a child is baptized--only the mother appears as though she were a harlot. She stands up with her child and the speaker comes up without addressing the mother and baptizes in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen. That is all." Berkhout added that Scholte's actions in church and in business life had given "America such a bad name that they [Yankees] would kill him if the Hollanders would agree to it" (Wormser letter 39).

The colonists also criticized the lavish home Scholte built on the square in Pella, when everyone else lived in squalid huts and dugouts with roofs of straw. But the biggest cause of grumbling was Scholte's delay in giving a timely financial accounting of his land dealings on behalf of the colonists. When he did so after several years, that festering boil was finally lanced.

Some rumors that circulated in the Netherlands about Pella are laughable. In July 1849 an Amsterdammer reported: "News came that Pella had fallen to the Indians and had been plundered and burned and that a Dutch woman had perished in the flames." Of course, nothing of the kind ever happened (Wormser letter 37). Although not always flattering, these letters provide a first hand picture of daily life, farming, travel, church worship, politics, and almost every aspect of pioneering among the Iowa Dutch immigrants. Since Henry Lucas's book, *Dutch Immigrant Memoirs*, virtually ignored the Pella colony, and because other primary documents are few, Stellingwerff's book is all the more important. It is the one remaining primary work concerning the 1840s Seceder immigration to America that is not in print in English. We hope that those interested will join with the Dutch American Historical Commission to see this ambitious project to completion.

