

Siebertje Viersen Speaks

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Siebertje Viersen was born in Driesum, Friesland, January 8, 1830. She lived a long life and died on August 25, 1910. She is buried in Oakwood Cemetery in Pella. The following narrative is taken from a talk she gave to the Pella Literary Society and which was later printed. The date was not given but is ascertained as being given in the early 1900s. She prefaced her remarks with, "Our esteemed president referred to the dangers of riches but said he also believed that through my early training in the Holy Scriptures, those dangers were not hid from me. I would say, I know this to be so 'for riches not only take themselves wings but if riches do increase, do not set thine heart to them.'" She also told her audience that we "will not go very far astray in our estimation of worldly treasures who remembers Him who become poor so that we might be rich." Siebertje apologizes for not having an "intellectual feast" or something cute and entertaining, but instead some diggings in rather old musty records for the edification of those attending.

Siebertje speaks:

When the emigrant fever broke out in nearly all the provinces of the Netherlands, it also reached Friesland and my father who was an ardent admirer of [Dominie] Scholte, whose followers were not allowed for sometime liberty of conscience and whose meetings were forcibly obstructed by dragoons; they longed for liberty and cast their eyes on the shores of Free America.

Father went in 1847 to have a consultation with Ds. Scholte at Utrecht on emigration. Returning home, he was fully persuaded to quit his business as manufacturer and ocean trader as he had vessels in trade with Russia for rye and barley, received flaxseed from Riga [a portion of Russia] and also traded with Brussels and Antwerp. Though he had been very prosperous all along, his mind was set on America.

My brother, married long ago, was childless and I stayed at his house and he entreated my father to leave me with him and promised to come over sometime to visit the relatives and he would accept me as his own child. But just before we departed, Father told him to encourage me no longer to stay with him, as he could not possibly spare me. This was a blow to me that I never forgot.

After a sea voyage of 56 days, we arrived in Baltimore. It was winter when we left the Old Country but it was summer in all its splendor when we anchored at Baltimore which, laying on an eminence, surrounded with large trees presented such a beautiful appearance that it reconciled me with a country which at heart I could curse.

Never in Friesland had we seen a sight. We had hardly left the boat when an American gentleman, as least so we presumed, slipped up to Father from among the crowd, took him by the hand, accosted him in the Frisian language by his name and bade him welcome in grand and blessed America. It was a certain Mr. Lake who had kept a hotel in Groningen, recollected Father, told us that Dominie Scholte had ordered rooms for us in his fine hotel and

that he would take care of our trunks which were addressed in care of Ds. Scholte, except for a few bundles which we carried ourselves.

At our arrival on shore, we were all dressed up nicely with our Frisian caps and our friend, Lake said, with tears running along his cheeks, that they reminded him so much of his old mother and sister. The same afternoon he took us to see the sights in the city, partly with streetcars that stopped on 15th. Street; then we proceeded on foot to admire the fine residences, in contrast with whom our royal palaces looked very small. We soon were surrounded by ladies who greatly admired our dresses and caps, from every side we heard them call, "Make haste." We found out that the American ladies were very kind and talkative.

Mr. Lake was our translator and he told us that the ladies declared our dresses and Frisian toilet the finest they had seen of any foreign countries. We then inspected a fine large store with over 400 clerks. These stores make the largest stores in the Old Country look small indeed. Next day we were transported through a part of the city to a fine large depot where those beautiful cars were waiting for us, for which we were very grateful to Ds. Scholte.

We now went west across hill and dale, cities and farms, an ever-changing beautiful panorama. After this we were transferred to the canal boat which reminded us of Holland again. The boat was drawn by a horse, only it looked better than those in Holland. But the boy who rode it was just like our boys only he sang in English. It was the first time we heard Yankee Doodle but all we could remember of it was (Sing in croaky old lady voice) "When Yankee Doodle goes to Baltimore, he can have some brandy! Yankee Doodle Dandy."

When we reached the Allegheny Mountains our boat was placed in part on a great truck and hauled up and let down by means of a huge machine which stood on top of the mountain chain. We were now in the great Mississippi Valley between the Rocky Mountains west and the Allegheny Mountains east. When we reached the Ohio River after crossing Pennsylvania we saw for the first time those giant water palaces, as these steamboats might be called.

In 1846 we saw a steamboat for the first time in Friesland and if I had to make a comparison between that one and those we saw now, I would compare it to the difference between a mouse and an elephant.

Our course now was toward St. Louis. The banks of the Ohio presented many beautiful views of scenery and cities such as Louisville, Kentucky where we stopped for awhile. As it was the 4th of July, we beheld the city and people in gala. Cincinnati, too, was worthy of admiration, especially on account of the beautiful streets lined with shade trees. At last we arrived in St. Louis where Ds. Scholte and Ds. Post were awaiting us.

Ds. Post had been all over the country that was our goal as a missionary, and he as guide went with a committee of five persons to explore the country West. Father was chosen from Friesland but being prevented by sickness he appointed Peter Viersen as his substitute in his place and told him if possible to rent a house, so that when we arrived we would have lodgings. Though Ds. Scholte had promised to build us a shanty, yet Father rather chose to live in his own house. So Peter Viersen rented the pottery of William Welch for our family and hired help.

As soon as our explorers, led by their guide, had found the right place, they immediately bought all the farms they could for the colony and having made due preparations for our arrival, they then returned to St. Louis, which they had left just left five weeks previous.

Our ambassadors told us of their success and those among them that were experienced farmers told us that not only was the soil as rich as could be expected in the country laying on the divide between two rivers, the Skunk and the Des Moines. But also, he said that the soil contained everything necessary for a successful colony, such as clay for bricks and pots, rocks for foundations, sand and lime for building, and coal and wood for lumber and fuel.

After they had given us such a glowing description of their journey, we were eager to pack our goods again and go on board the steamer that would bring us up the river to Keokuk, then only a small place. This was our last journey by rail or boat, henceforth we had to make our journey of 120 miles in wagons. The teamsters were in attendance with their teams, our goods were loaded and soon we found ourselves headed for Pella, which was yet to be.

The journey was one never to be forgotten, along rough roads, up hill and down, all the time with the fear to be precipitated headlong into a ravine, it often looked a good deal like a ship in a storm that is tossed up and down on the billows. The farther we went the thicker the timber became and the fewer people we met. Sometimes we did not see one log house for miles and hardly anything like a village until we came to Pella. At a distance we espied a large shanty, Dominie Scholte had kept his promise!

When we reached the shanty, we met Mr. Welch, the potter, with his two sons-in-law, Wellington and Levi Nossaman, to take us along. The season was much in our favor, the vegetable garden of Mr. Welch was well provided with potatoes, carrots, beans etc. In the morning the girls of Mr. Welch would come after me and offer us greens for which they would not accept anything but for which Father paid royally.

They liked us and our customs very well. We were now living in the pottery and as our custom was, we had coffee at 10 o'clock. Wellington Nossaman, somewhat of a wag, would put a cup in his shirt bosom and put it down by our cups and Mother would pour in his as well as ours. When Father had taken a farm two weeks later, Mr. Welch and his folks brought us over and one of his daughters stayed with us some time to teach us how to bake bread and roast the coffee beans.

There were two log houses on our farm on which Peter Viersen settled in one. They were shingled in such a way that we could see sun, moon and stars through them. We were surrounded on every hand by prairie and timber. Certainly, the prairie was gloriously decked with flowers. Wild roses, sunflowers, ladies slippers, etc. made quite a sight that was not to be surpassed by the hand of any artist.

Here too were the children of nature, the Indians, who often came to visit us and whose greatest delight was to shoot with bow and arrow a rooster or hen. Once when eight of them came over to visit us with very dark faces, they led us up to a large mound they said contained the bodies of some Indians, such mounds were often met with in Nebraska and Dakota.

The woods contained an abundance of deer, turkeys, geese (Father once shot three of these with one shot) wolves, raccoons, guineas, partridges, pheasants, and prairie chickens. On these they wasted no ammunition but trapped them. My brothers brought home every day a half load and provided Pella the whole winter with game. They were never without a supply and it was a good deal better sport than to learn French lessons with Miss Pruin. My brothers found the country like the elite of the Netherlands is now hankering for hunting.

Not long ago I saw in one of our papers how high officials from the Old Country were having a high time hunting in Minnesota and other Western states. With the woods full of

game and the rivers full of fish of the best kind, this was indeed Eldorado to my brothers, who, except for a few hours of study, were gone out all day in the woods chasing the game that was hit through the brush and undergrowth.

In my imagination I can see them yet coming back in high glee with ruddy faces all aglow from the exercise and their pants a good deal the worse for wear. At night when the moon rose, they went to look for the turkeys that roosted in the trees. "Sis, will you have a cup of coffee ready when we come back?" "Yes, if you don't come back after eleven." I would reply. The lamps we had brought with us were of no use now. The oil that we used in them was not to be had here at all, but instead, lard by the barrel.

Father used to kill 50 to 100 hogs in the fall, to be sent by team to Keokuk, the lean fat was rendered and the lard was set off in barrels. In the pottery of Mr. Welch we could make our lamps to perfection, the heavy wick always kept the lard thin and gave a great light that I could see by to sew or read nicely. Once becoming sleepy and beginning to bow to the lamp, the two long strings which belonged to my cap caught fire and before I became aware of it, I had burned my cap and my eyebrows, but as luck would have it I had a pail of water standing quite near into which I dipped my head and saved myself from further burning.

When the boys came home they told me that I looked kind without eyebrows and I had to guess how many turkeys they had shot and that was four from 7 to 11 o'clock p.m. For the boys it was a real paradise but for me it was more like a living sepulcher and the only thing that sustained me was the hope of earning enough money to go back to Friesland.

After having lived for about four weeks in this miserable log house, there came along a pump peddler who tried hard to sell father a pump. But our draw-well served two purposes, first to draw water and second to use as a signal post. At 9 o'clock we used to hang on it a flag to let the hands know that it was coffee time and this served the whole neighborhood.

The pump peddler stayed at our house for a couple of days and saw me making some embroidery and asked me whether I was willing to part with it and at how much a yard. I told him that it sold at a dollar a yard and that I had 3 yards already but that the piece I was making called for four yards which would be \$4. After three weeks the man came back and bought it, he was lately married and wanted to make his wife a present of it, and this was the first money for my journey back to Friesland.

It was our custom to let the tailor make pants for Father and the boys, and as he reckoned Holland money at par with American money, it cost more to make them than the goods were worth. Our hands, knowing how eager I was to make money, asked me whether I would make them pants for everyday wear. I told them that I did not know but I was willing to try and the contract was no fit, no pay. I ripped up one of their pants and took that as a pattern to cut after and I made it at half the price the tailor asked. At that time there was but one tailor and he could afford to say, "Go to my neighbor."

There being five boys in our family, Father and Mother considered it a good plan to have me take a few lessons with the tailor and this I did and in less than no time I made a suit for each of my brothers that fitted them perfectly. Now the neighbors, hearing of this, came to me from all over the country asking, "Miss Viersen, could you please come and sew a week at our house; we can make our dresses but can't make our men's clothes."

As I had only a little over \$4 in my fund to enable me to return to Friesland, I thought this to be a nice way of adding to my capital. Besides, rather I went out to sew than to be

always cooped up in our log house with the ten of us. It was indeed quite a promotion from student of the French language to tailoress, but I had the journey to Friesland on my mind.

Now the farmers had paid up their last cent for land, thinking if they only had a farm they could make money. My wages were 75 cents a day, finishing a coat in almost one day. The 'Viersen machine' went like the wind, the thought was always uppermost in my mind that next year I could return to Friesland. The money came in rather slow.

Whenever I was ready at some home, the first thing generally was, "Miss Viersen, could you please wait a little while until we have sold something. We don't make money as readily as in Holland, we get only 10 cents for a pail full of eggs, a pound of butter, and 1 ½ cents a pound for bacon etc. So I proposed to sew for them a year 'on time' but then said, "I must be sure of my pay." "Oh," they said, "We don't want credit that long." At the end of the year those that could not pay were in the majority. Now it was, "Miss Viersen we have no money but most everything else, fine colts, nice cows and large cribs of corn."

What could I do? The people were honest and wanted to pay, but could not. So I decided to take some pay in corn. They appointed one man, I another, and they together measured the corn that I "bought" at the market price. In this way I got quite a pile of corn and also some colts. The first span I bought of my Uncle Sjoerd and Mr. Jim Akkerman. They were a splendid match and as I came in contact with a good many farmers, I had my pick of the best. I found out that Mr. van Maren, father of H. van Maren, was a very good man and as I sewed for his family, I arranged with him to take care of colts in the winter and feed them. In the summer my colts grazed with many others in the bottoms near Galesburg, which at that time was "Uncle Sam's pasture" and all the expense I had was to go and feed them salt once a week to keep in touch with them.

So I made the arrangements with Mr. van Maren not only for the management of them in the winter but also to break them in for me in order to have them in a more sellable condition. I bought them at a year old for \$12 apiece and made, when I sold them, more than "a Dutchman's profit" or over 100%. One span that cost me, breaking in and all \$50, I sold for \$150; with three colts unbroken I obtained the same results.

When in 1848 and 1850 the gold fever broke out in California, I sold the corn for from 25 cents to 75 cents per bushel as it was then very scarce, and I was well rewarded for all my wanderings across prairies and through woods to different homes.

Let me return to the money for my going back to Friesland. After having sold the corn and the horses, my purse became ready but not I. To make money on such a grand scale was too seductive to quit at once and in as much as my purse strings expanded, did my desire to return to Friesland contract. In this way, the acquiring of property became gradually my fixed habit.

Epilogue

My talk to the Holland Literary Society ended, as I figured they all knew the rest of the story. I built business houses on the east side of the square, one that had a little overhanging cupola in which I could sit, sewing or reading, or just observing the busyness of the business district. I could see up and down Main Street. If, while sitting here, in my private observation tower, and I spied someone who owed me money, I would shout down at them

about the consequences if they didn't pay up. I always volunteered the information that if they couldn't settle with me, I would come and board with the debtors until the bill was paid. Needless to say, none wished to have me come to stay, as it was told about town that I was eccentric, and I believe I know why they felt thus. True, I was a wealthy old maid, a lonely old woman, if the truth be known.

When approached about donating toward a library, much needed by the town, I donated a generous amount and along with Andrew Carnegie, saw a Public Library built on the west side of the square. My name is on the stone façade, along with Carnegie's. They put the names in alphabetical order I guess, as his name precedes mine. This library is sort of a living memorial to me. I never did return to Friesland. Even though I could have gone back numerous times, I chose not to. I loved the little town I had watched grow into a wonderful place. I am proud to have been here at its conception.