

## Klaas G. Feyma, Minnesota's Carpenter Correspondence

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America can be a lonely and strange place for the immigrants who arrive on its shores. Its size encompasses a cultural diversity which can be bewildering for the newcomers and an immensity of space which can be equally frightening. So it is only natural that in a hostile and alien environment, immigrants try to develop an infrastructure of their own, to maintain contact with people of similar backgrounds as they scatter to the ends of the North American continent.

During the high tide of Dutch immigration to the United States in the second half of the 19th century, weekly Dutch-language newspapers provided a vital link among the far flung colonies which appeared throughout the Upper Midwest and Far West during the years 1870-1920. Besides helping people keep up with world and national news, current events back in the Netherlands, and church affairs, these newspapers also chronicled the comings and goings in the dozens of Dutch settlements which bloomed on the prairies of the Great Plains and in the forests and foothills of the Rockies.

Local events were dutifully reported by a cadre of amateur journalists who took the time to let everyone know how things were going in their particular locations. Their dispatches combined social events with a steady barrage of boosterism extolling the unique virtues of their divinely blessed settlements. The weather was always good, the crops always in hopeful condition. The people were always contented in their new found paradise, living in a veritable Lake Wobegon. Others were always urged to join the wise ones who had come early to a given area. And by all means, Dutch folks should come to the new settlements before all the good land was taken up by Germans, Norwegians, Swedes, Bohemians, or whichever other group was vying for the new sod.

One of these chroniclers was Klaas Gerben Feyma. For the better part of thirty years he was the source of news which appeared in Orange City, Iowa's weekly *De Volksvriend*. He wrote about both Friesland, Minnesota and nearby Sandstone, Minnesota. Located halfway between the Twin Cities and Duluth, the colony attracted over one hundred Dutch households in 1896. They came to improve upon the lives they had led in places such as Westfield, North Dakota; New Amsterdam, Wisconsin; Randolph, Wisconsin; Holland, Nebraska; and Pella, Iowa. A few even came from the mother colony in Western Michigan. By 1901

the majority of the families had headed for other homes.<sup>1</sup>

Feyma bought eighty acres of farmland near Friesland on April 21, 1896. Born in Holwerd, Friesland, on May 16, 1849, he learned to be a carpenter. In 1877 he married Fronkje Van Schepen. Seven years later he, his wife, and their three oldest children crossed the Atlantic to the United States. For two years they lived near Buffalo, New York where he worked as a farm laborer on both sides of the Canadian border. In 1886 they moved to Dresbach, Minnesota, a little town located across the Mississippi River from La Crosse, Wisconsin and closely associated with the Friesian colony of New Amsterdam, Wisconsin.<sup>2</sup>

In the winter of 1895-96 Feyma joined dozens of others in responding to advertisements for a new Dutch colony which was starting in Pine County, about 90 miles north of the Twin Cities. The region had gained national attention a few years before when a devastating forest fire roared through the area. The fire effectively ended the lumber business in the region. So the railroad company which controlled the area hired real estate developers to sell the land to prospective farmers. Theodore F. Koch was the dealer who recruited among the Dutch colonies in the upper Midwest. He sold thousands of acres during that first winter.<sup>3</sup>

Feyma's name first appeared in *De Volksvriend*, in Koch's ads which listed people who had purchased land in the colony. Then Feyma co-signed letters to the editor extolling life in the new colony. Considering what his English language talents were at the time, it was just as well that Feyma communicated in Dutch. In one of the few extant samples of his English writing style of the period we find this statement, "Mijn two boys are worken on the new road West of Miller and the let the half of the pay next stand on the land."<sup>4</sup>

In July 1900 some would-be buyers came to Friesland and returned to Iowa convinced that the colony had no future. The Hagerty, Iowa correspondent who reported this trip concluded his article with this statement, "It appears, as we hear it, that there are more woods and stones there than anything else; and the folks who are there admit that there's only one Iowa."<sup>5</sup> One week later Feyma wrote to the paper and for the first time he took up the cause for his new home using his own name and his own words,

I have been here for four years now and am still well satisfied with the country. For ten years I lived in Winona Co. For myself there is but one Minnesota. Here one does not need to burn dry cornstalks and corncobs; there is plenty of wood here. Also

there are no hot winds here; no more strong winds like there are in some other states. And what the earth produces is more abundant. Sure there are stones and woods, but be assured that these things abound in other places. If you would visit Friesland now, then those of you who are uninformed could survey the potato crop. And the same is true for all the other produce here. Iowa is a land for corn. I think that corn does not pay more than 10-12¢ per bushel, but potatoes pays 25¢ and yields four times as many bushels per acre here as corn does, therefore it is better to plant potatoes. Hay grows well here and we have the highest market prices here. I say for myself there is only one Friesland.<sup>6</sup>

This was the first of what proved to be several hundred articles he would write for *De Volksvriend*, over the next 28 years.

He struggled financially as a farmer in the Friesland colony; so did most of his neighbors. His wife's death in 1897 left him with seven children to raise. He decided that there would be more work in Sandstone. Within a year of his first literary effort he signed his land back over to Koch and moved to Sandstone, six miles away. From that vantage point he extolled the advantages of farming in Pine County while he worked building houses on lots he purchased in Sandstone itself.

His children all followed his example and left the land. Only one of his sons even attempted to farm; the attempt was brief. Klaas' oldest son ran a variety store, Feyma's 5 & 10, in Sandstone and served as the town's mayor for two years during World War One. Two other sons became carpenters, eventually moving to California in 1923. A fourth son died of the flu while serving in France during 1918. His three daughters married a carpenter, a railroad fireman, and a farmer/real estate dealer/railroad section hand, respectively. So none of his family members matched the yeoman ideal, which Feyma extolled for years.<sup>7</sup>

But Feyma never lost his fascination for things agricultural. His articles were filled with the latest crop conditions and price information. He variously promoted the cultivation of cabbages, kohlrabi, corn, rapeseed, potatoes, cucumbers, wheat, barley, rye, and buckwheat. In his later years he also championed the raising of chickens. His passion for chickens led to the construction of his own backyard chicken coop. He engaged in learned discussions on the relative merits of various feed regimens, including sour milk.<sup>8</sup>

Another ongoing crusade and theme was his espousal of Prohibition as well as vigorously

advocating the wonders of pure Minnesota well water as an alternative to beer, or any other alcohol. He was especially strong on the well water issue when a bottling plant opened in Sandstone to serve business establishments in the Twin Cities.<sup>9</sup>

In short much of Klaas Feyma's writings can be classified as rank boosterism. He loved Sandstone and the little Dutch church he attended. He loved his children and relentlessly covered their progress in life. And later his paternal boasting was extended to his grandchildren.

He remained surprisingly reticent, however, about his own personal problems. He did mention his long dead wife, especially at the end of May each year when he would help tidy up the cemetery where she was buried. He never made any direct contemporaneous references to his son's death during World War One. His first references to that did not appear until almost a year after the fact, and then in the context of reporting a conversation he had with a young girl who sat by him on the train one day. She had come to Minnesota from France to escape from the war and noticed that Feyma was wearing a gold star on the lapel of his coat. When John's body was returned to the United States and buried in Sandstone, Feyma wrote a lengthy account of the funeral.<sup>10</sup>

He wrote because he missed the company of fellow Dutchman, both Friesians and those from other provinces. He wrote to try to maintain contact with those of the generation which formed the bulk of the *De Volksvriend's* readers during the first quarter of the twentieth century. He wrote because he thought his opinions on issues might sway others to see things his way, and to follow in his footsteps into the woods of east central Minnesota.<sup>11</sup>

He wrote to promote harmony and unity among his fellow countrymen. He reacted to those who took up the pen to knock one community. At various times he publicly called to account contributors who saw fit to question what Feyma claimed on behalf of Sandstone. He had lengthy exchanges with correspondents from nearby Maple Lake, Minnesota and far away Ripon, California.<sup>12</sup>

But as the years accumulated he also began to question the religious divisions which separated the small communities in his part of Minnesota. When Feyma proposed that the churches of Sandstone, Ogilvie, and Pease, which were within fifty miles of each other, should cooperate in sponsoring a mission fest, he was rebuffed by the minister of the Pease Christian Reformed Church. The *dominie* told Feyma that such a meeting could not be arranged. However, the Pease congregation started to cooperate with the Ogilvie Christian Reformed Church to hold just such a meeting that very year. Sandstone was

excluded since it was affiliated with the Reformed Church in America, a fact not lost on Feyma.<sup>13</sup>

He, like many of his contemporaries, lived in a very limited world. He himself did not travel much. Mostly he went to see his relatives and friends back in Dresbach. He also went to Pease and Ogilvie on a fairly regular basis. Often these trips combined business (selling picture frames and gravestones) with the pleasure of seeing people who had moved away from Friesland and Sandstone. What is truly remarkable though is how his views changed as he got older. Instead of becoming more mired in his prejudices and opinions, Feyma seemed to grow with the years. This change of outlook is notable in two particular instances: his views on religion and his views on geography.<sup>14</sup>

Feyma was a charter member of the Reformed church of Friesland and then of the Reformed congregation in Sandstone. In fact the active life of the Sandstone church was co-equal with his residence in the town. He moved to town in 1901; the church was organized in 1903. He died in 1928; the church held its final service in 1929. While he never served as a church officer, his devotion to the congregation showed in his close friendships with most of the ministers, his constant attendance at services and all other church functions, as well as his work on the building which was located just up the street from his house.<sup>15</sup>

While his membership was in the Reformed church, his theological views began to change under two influences. One was the events which surrounded the First World War. The other was his concern for the spreading of the Christian gospel which transcended denominational lines.

World War One obviously colored his quite apocalyptic view of the world as the new year of 1919 dawned:

What will the year bring? This is still hidden from us. The war is over, one says, and everything will be as it was before, with dance halls and picture shows. This is taking hold in our country and everyone is already forgetful. There are six million people dead from the flu in just three months time. And they are still dying daily. This is a sign of the times found in God's Word. When we read the pamphlet by Prof. Kuiper about the four horses, which is included as a bonus on this year's tear off calendar, the thin one is still here, thus a quarter of mankind will die. And that is now so, as the prophecy foretold along with sickness as well as by the sword, fire, and hunger, and still no attention is given to the signs of the times, rather 'peace and no war.' The Lord

gave us 120 years, as he did for the people of Noah's time, who also watched until the end. We have to do so today. Parents, tell your children and pray, and read God's Word with them. 'A good tree cannot bear evil fruit.'<sup>16</sup>

The significance of the ark recurred in his writings. In 1920 he offered this observation on the contrasts between Noah's Ark and the Titanic.

Two Big Boats

One boat to Life

One boat to Ruin.

Here's how it came about.

The first big boat took a long time to build.

The second took less time.

The first was the Ark built by Noah in Asia more than 2500 years before Christ. The second boat was the Titanic built in England and finished in the year 1911 after Christ.

The Ark was built under the prompting and plan of God. The Titanic was built under the prompting and plan of a famous architect.

The Ark made just one voyage; the first was the last. The Titanic also made just one voyage; the first was the last.

The Ark carried all the passengers over the highest mountains. The Titanic carried almost all aboard to the bottom of the ocean.

The Ark, built in truth and faith, survived. The Titanic, built without truth and faith, was shattered.

When Noah was warned of danger, his eye looked upward; and all who were with him survived. When the Captain of the Titanic was warned of danger, he did not listen; and all who were with him found their graves in the ocean depths.

The Ark was built at God's command. The Titanic was built because of haughtiness and worldly pride.

The Ark was a likeness of salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life. The Titanic was a likeness of pride and ingenuity, of the earthly kingdom of this age, and was named after the heathen god Titan, who was the strongest of the gods.

The Ark was God's salvation boat. The Titanic was man's burial boat.<sup>17</sup>

Further evidence of this theological bent was Feyma's association with Rev. Harry Bultema. By 1922 Feyma was subscribing to the *Bereer*, Bultema's publication.<sup>18</sup> When Bultema came to Minnesota in 1925 he stopped in the Sandstone area.

Feyma reported, "On September 19, Rev. H. Bultema from Muskegon, Michigan visited his friends hereabout, and ...other friends in Ogilvie. Sunday G. Postma, A. Kalk, and K. G. Feyma visited him in the Methodist church in Ogilvie where he preached three times. We were greatly inspired by his preaching. It was worth the trouble to make the 50-mile trip; we were able to listen to him in the morning and afternoon. We had opportunity to meet many friends from Pease and Ogilvie."<sup>19</sup>

In addition, beginning during the World War One years, Feyma began to express his support for traveling evangelists of various backgrounds. He remained wary of anyone associated with the Russellites and faith healing. But he was impressed with the efforts of a Baptist revivalist of the region as well as itinerants, including a Pastor Laurondson, a.k.a. the Lumberjack Evangelist. Feyma wrote, "May he be blessed! There are always such that don't come to church." A week later he reported "The gospel tent is full most evenings; the man appears to be well pleasing; at least he is preaching. And that cannot be bad, as long as he bases it on God's Word." He also expressed support the Rev. Billy Sunday, particularly regarding that evangelist's very strong endorsement of Prohibition.<sup>20</sup>

In his final years, Feyma also expressed his admiration for the work of Aimee Semple McPherson and the other preachers associated with the Four Square Gospel movement. When he found himself in Los Angeles, the one thing he wanted to see in the entire city was the Angelus Temple, McPherson's headquarters. In what proved to be his final submission to the *Volksvriend*, Feyma wrote,

A letter from my son from Ventura, Calif. He writes that they had a revival meeting there: Rev. and Mrs. Hydanus from the Four Square church. The meetings grew each day so that he extended the preaching from two to three week and save many souls through his preaching.... Rev. Hydanus is originally from Randolph, Wis., and is Frisian by birth. He must be an outstanding preacher. Yes, the Four Square preachers are doing a great work in God's kingdom, bringing sinners to the right path; they are all great workers for the Lord.<sup>21</sup>

McPherson's influence on Feyma may account for this cryptic remark on July 29, 1926, "If one looks carefully the women are doing a great work in the world; always ready to help in the religious realm, they stand in the forefront as in the past. And then some say: women must not lead, they must be silent. We find that as well from others; the greatest number coming to church are women and they are the most zealous helpers." This is from the same man

who had written just four years before, "Sandstone now has a woman mayor... Yes, we have a wonderful world; it will not last long if the women are at the helm of the State."<sup>22</sup>

The tiny Sandstone Reformed Church found itself cooperating with its theologically congenial neighbors. As more and more of the Dutch young people married into non-Dutch families, the ties to the Reformed church loosened and other congregations replaced the little church in the Gunntown section of Sandstone in their affections. In this manner the Reformed became a part of the broader community, cooperating in prayer services with the Norwegian Lutheran congregation, the Swedish Mission Church and the Congregationalists.<sup>23</sup> Dutch funerals were almost invariably held in the much larger Congregational church, including Feyma's own.

The other great experience which changed his outlook was the chance to finally travel to other parts of the United States. Feyma spent the winter of 1925-26 in Ventura, California living with two of his sons. He never recovered from the experience of having Christmas dinner on the lawn in the shade of oak trees in nearby Wheeler's Springs. "It astonished me to be sitting there in the shade of a great oak. And that we in the middle of winter were there under the leaves hanging from the tree and able to thank the Lord for all His great blessedness and be allowed to observe Christmas amid the high mountains. How great is the Lord!"<sup>24</sup> Seeing citrus trees in bloom in January left a permanent mark on him.

For decades he had told others that Minnesota was the healthiest place on earth. The cold was healthy, the summer heat was healthy, the well water was healthy. Even the snowstorms were good since they provided moisture for the future crops and work for the laborers. But after a winter in the sun, he never wrote that way again about his adopted state. Two years later, as winter was approaching one more time, Feyma noted that an old friend of his from Texas was going to visit California in the winter. He rhapsodized, "It is a joy to see the fruits on the trees. Minnesota is a healthy state, and inexpensive to live in, but...o, the winters are so long! Fresh air and good drinking water we have aplenty."<sup>25</sup>

His weather observations that winter at home in Sandstone included, "At present tolerably cold; it freezes the joints. Fortunately there is a lot of firewood here; but it is bad for the girls with their silk stockings; they want to look good and must try to be in style." He then related a story about girls stranded and frozen in a car which ran out of gas in northern Minnesota and how his son-in-law the railroad fireman had been marooned for 20 hours in his locomotive in a snow drift at the head of freight

which included five cattle cars. They crew had nothing to eat and the cattle mostly froze to death. "It was a surprise storm."<sup>26</sup>

When a sleet storm hit the area in February, he called the weather "remarkably good; but the ground is still covered with a deep snow." The icy streets and paths led him to write, "Then the people of California can be very thankful that they live in a good land with roses, where they can run outside in slippers, when it isn't raining."<sup>27</sup>

A week later Feyma announced that he would be going to St. Paul to stay with his daughter for a few days. Its location was "a bit further South."<sup>28</sup> When he returned nine days later, he was suffering from a severe cold, which developed into pneumonia, which in turn brought about his death at the age of 78.

This carpenter correspondent had shared his opinions and observations with thousands for decades. He had helped to build a Dutch settlement in the pine forests of Minnesota. He had also literally helped to assemble and dismantle some of its largest buildings. While he failed as a farmer there, he always professed his thanks to the man who had lured him there, Theodore F. Koch.<sup>29</sup> Feyma was a man who had rarely left his home county and became convinced that there was no reason to move beyond the horizons God had placed him in. But when he finally ventured beyond the forest he was willing to change his assessments of home, as he was exposed to new climates.

Here was a man who never stopped professing his joyful faith to anyone who would read what he wrote. And as he traveled he scattered tracts along the way in post offices and railroad stations, as well as handing them out to companions sitting beside him in the coach cars. His was a happy life with many sorrows. But his faith sustained him to the very end.

He inadvertently wrote a fairly good epitaph in the final words he penned to the editors in Orange City. "Yes, the Four Square preachers are doing a great work in God's kingdom, bringing sinners to the right path; they are all great workers for the Lord."<sup>30</sup>

For almost 30 years, Klaas G. Feyma described Sandstone's economic ups--the quarries, the cement plant, the pickle plant, the water bottling plant, and the creosote plant. He kept his readers informed about the events on the Main Street and Commercial Street, down by the depot and out on the surrounding farms. He chronicled the coming of the car, the airplane, and the bus. He let a wider audience know about Sandstone's social scene, even about the Saturday night in 1922 when a fundraising party at the Temperance Hall was raided by the police because the rowdy crowd was consuming copious amounts of bootleg liquor. On balance his writings

illustrate the glacial process of assimilation to which most immigrants were subjected.

Feyma began by describing the Dutch segment of Pine County's population to other Dutch people living elsewhere in North America. As the years passed he and his remaining compatriots became an integral part of that community. This was best symbolized by Sandstone replacing Friesland as the center of their world. It was also reflected in the demise of the Sandstone Reformed Church, its members opting to join the local Presbyterians and Congregationalists, or the Sandstone Bible Church. Feyma's interests reflected his role in this assimilation. While he continued to use Dutch words, his purview became increasingly American. At first he seemed hopelessly parochial; as his experiences changed, so did his outlook. He was being melted in the American pot.

Carpenter, faithful correspondent, inveterate tract distributor, gravestone salesman, chicken raiser, failed farmer, successful father, immigrant, social commentator and observer, framer of pictures and repairer of wooden chairs. Klaas Feyma led a varied and full life. He may have been one of the millions of little people whose names are never listed in the indices of the history books. But a look at his life and writings certainly helps us better understand what it meant to be a Dutch American immigrant in the United States a century ago.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Robert Schoone-Jongen, "Friesland, Minnesota: The Little Town That Couldn't." *Origins* vol. XV, no. 2, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> This summary of Feyma's life is drawn from several sources: "K. G. Feyma Dies After Short Illness," *Pine County Courier*, March 22, 1928, p.1, St. Paul and Duluth Railroad Land Contract # 4743, Northern Pacific Railroad Collection, Minnesota Historical Society, and *De Volksvriend*, May 21, 1914.

<sup>3</sup> See Schoone-Jongen, "Friesland" and "Theodore F. Koch: Dutch-American Land Promoter." *Origins*, Vol. XI, No. 2, 1993, pp. 32-44, "Cheap Land and Community: Theodore F. Koch, Dutch Colonizer." *Minnesota History*. Vol. 53, No. 6, Summer 1993, pp. 214-224.

<sup>4</sup> See Klaas Feyma to Hopewell Clarke, 12-27-98, Contract # 4743-Northern Pacific Railroad Collection. MHS Collection).

<sup>5</sup> *De Volksvriend*, July 19, 1900.

<sup>6</sup> *De Volksvriend*, July 26, 1900.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Census, Pine County, Minnesota, 1920; also *De Volksvriend*, September 6, 1923 and February 26, 1925.

<sup>8</sup> Numerous articles he wrote during the period 1920-1925 referred to raising chickens, either his own or his farmer friends in the region. (see: *De Volksvriend*, April 13, 1922 and for the sour milk recipe see August 9, 1923).

<sup>9</sup> *De Volksvriend*, July 1, 1915, December 20, 1915, January 29, 1920.

<sup>10</sup> On his encounter with the French refugee see *De Volksvriend*, September 11, 1919. For his account of the return of his son's body see *De Volksvriend*, August 16, 1921 and August 25, 1921.

<sup>11</sup> *De Volksvriend*, April 29, 1920.

<sup>12</sup> One of his responses to the Maple Lake correspondent can be found in *De Volksvriend*, November 6, 1919. For a response to

the Ripon, California correspondent see *De Volksvriend*, January 13, 1921.

<sup>13</sup> *De Volksvriend*, September 27, 1923.

<sup>14</sup> Two typical travel accounts can be found in *De Volksvriend*, May 16, 1917 and September 11, 1919.

<sup>15</sup> Sandstone Reformed Church membership record [photocopy of the original in the author's collection] and numerous articles in *De Volksvriend*, especially referring to his long time friendship with Rev. William Stegeman, September 24, 1925, August 18, 1927, August 25, 1927, October 11, 1927.

<sup>16</sup> *De Volksvriend*, January 16, 1919. Also see his comments in the November 7, 1918, issue.

<sup>17</sup> *De Volksvriend*, March 25, 1920.

<sup>18</sup> Bultema was a Christian Reformed minister who left that denomination over pre-millennialism, see Thomas Boslooper, "Grace and Glory Days," by, *Origins* vol. 9 no. 1 (1991): 24-30.

<sup>19</sup> *De Volksvriend*, April 20, 1922, October 1, 1925. In an article which appeared in the February 16, 1928, issue Feyma called attention to Bultema's encounter with an earthquake which occurred while he was leading a tour group on the Mount of Olives outside of Jerusalem. Apparently he was not alone among his Dutch neighbors in his support of pre-millennial views. He mentioned only two places where Sandstone's Dutch young people went for post high school education. One of the them was Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. The other was a decidedly non pre-millennial institution—the University of Minnesota.

<sup>20</sup> On the Lumberjack Evangelist see *De Volksvriend*, September 1, 1921, and September 8, 1921. For his comment on faith healers see *De Volksvriend*, February 23, 1922, on Billy Sunday see *De Volksvriend*, January 29, 1920.

<sup>21</sup> *De Volksvriend*, March 8, 1928. It should also be noted that Feyma's son Jacob affiliated with a Four Square Gospel church in Ventura, California, remaining active in it for many years. Klaas attended services in this church when he visited his son in 1925-26.

<sup>22</sup> *De Volksvriend*, July 29, 1926 and March 23, 1922.

<sup>23</sup> *De Volksvriend*, January 13, 1927.

<sup>24</sup> *De Volksvriend*, January 14, 1926.

<sup>25</sup> *De Volksvriend*, October 6, 1927.

<sup>26</sup> *De Volksvriend*, January 26, 1928.

<sup>27</sup> *De Volksvriend*, February 16, 1928.

<sup>28</sup> *De Volksvriend*, February 23, 1928.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*