

Christiaan Verwayen and the Lost Disabdera Settlement

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In 1847 a group of seventy-five Dutch emigrants left the Netherlands to seek a better life in the United States. Their destination was Iowa. They felt like an oppressed group that was persecuted by the Dutch government because of their religion. They had been treated like second-rate citizens who could not get certain positions in society because of their beliefs. So they left to form a Dutch colony where they could worship in freedom and have equal rights.

To many of you this sounds familiar and you may even think you know this story already. These could be Dutch Seceders. But, the people I am talking about here were not Seceders but Roman Catholics. They planned a Roman Catholic colony and they got far. The colony never happened but two-thirds of the group's members settled near one another in Ottumwa and Keokuk, Iowa.

It is a unique group because according to one of their leaders they left specifically for religious reasons. As you all know there were more groups like this, but these others were all non-Catholic. And as with the other groups that left Holland in the nineteenth century, economic reasons played no small part in their decisions to emigrate.

Almost all the people in the group came from around Nijmegen. I was born in Nijmegen myself and when I saw a copy of the passenger list for the first time and the birth places of all 75, it was like cycling through the villages in the area where I grew up.

The literature about Dutch emigration makes slight mention of this group, under the leadership of the attorney Christiaan Verwayen and the shop owner Christiaan Auwerda. Bertus Wabeke refers to them, as does Henry Lucas and Henk van Stekelenburg wrote about them on more than one occasion. Lucas had the most challenging quote about them. "The most persistent inquiry fails to reveal the fate of the group led by Verwayen and Auwerda." With this statement he certainly did his best to discourage fellow researchers interested in these Roman Catholic emigrants. During his research Van Stekelenburg had a bit more positive result. He found a letter, dated October 1847, from Wapello County, Iowa, published in 1848 in a Dutch Roman Catholic periodical, which gives a clue to where the group had gone but no one pursued the lead. But the Verwayen-group did not disappear into thin air, did not scatter to the degree that Lucas suggests and was even a magnet for many other Dutch Roman Catholics.

Christiaan Verwayen, the leader of the group, was certainly not a shy man. As an attorney and the

editor of a paper called *De Batavier* (The Batavian), he made it known that he disagreed with the policies of King Willem I, and later his son Willem II. In his newspaper he fulminated against the discrimination of Catholics for jobs in public office. By Dutch law, religion should play no role but Protestants got all the governmental jobs. Protestants also were the ones who were the teachers in the schools and this was seen as an injustice by non-Protestants. In an article in *The Batavian* (December 1843) there is an example of an outcry over the situation in Neerbosch, a village near Nijmegen. The Protestant teacher there has no pupils in his class but he did get a salary, while the Roman Catholic teacher, who has all the children, was not receiving any salary from the Dutch government. This inequality started immediately after French rule disappeared in 1815 but got worse after Belgium became an independent nation in 1830. With Belgium independence the largest portion of Roman Catholics stopped being Dutch citizens and there was no longer any reason to even pretend that Catholics got their share of the available jobs. Interestingly, four years after this article in *The Batavian* we find a Roman Catholic schoolteacher from Neerbosch on the *John Parker* on his way to New Orleans.

In *The Batavian* Verwayen kept publishing articles critical of the government. The position of Roman Catholics in the Netherlands is characterized as "legal slavery." When he accused the whole Dutch parliament of perjury Verwayen was arrested. At first there was confusion over the arrest because Verwayen was not the author of the article. The man who supposedly was had to stand trial and Verwayen was called as a witness. He refused and that was the reason he spent several months in prison. The accused writer was never convicted because the court did not find enough proof that this man had indeed written the article, despite his statement that he had written it. Verwayen milked the whole affair for his cause and it certainly helped in the emancipation of Dutch Roman Catholics. *The Batavian* stopped publishing in 1845 after its second year of publication.

His co-organizer Christiaan Auwerda was also from Nijmegen. He owned a shop but in records concerning his emigration also is called a merchant. Supposedly his brother was involved in recruiting emigrants and he was supposed to form a second group. In the 1847 letter Auwerda explains to his readers how clever investing in the growing and shipping of corn can only lead to nice profits. Auwerda followed his own plan. In the US federal census of 1850 Auwerda's property is estimated to be worth 2,000 dollars.

We hear again about Verwayen in November

1846 when he is mentioned as a secretary of the committee that will make preparations for the emigration of Dutch Catholics. The committee consists of "well-to-do Catholic families." This refers no doubt to Verwayen and Auwerda but also to Van Gendt and Kramer, all of whom are from Nijmegen and considered well-to-do in the local emigrants listing of 1847. The purpose of the committee was to establish a Dutch Catholic Colony along the Missouri River in the United States. Anyone who wanted to join should register by the end of November for a departure by the end of February 1847. Verwayen had probably looked into what happened with the Seceders. The periodical *Catholijke Nederlandsche Stemmen* (Catholic Dutch Voices) reported on Scholte's plans on a regular basis and not in a negative tone.

On February 20, 1847 there was indeed an official departure of a group of emigrants from Nijmegen led by Verwayen and Auwerda. By steamer the group sailed to Rotterdam and then to Antwerp, Belgium. From there the group left for New Orleans on 26 February. Newspapers put the number of the first group at 120. Supposedly a second contingent numbering 200 persons would leave within a month of the departure of the first. Little is heard of the first group. They sailed to New Orleans and arrived there on 26 April. According to the immigration records in New Orleans there were 75 Dutch passengers onboard, all but five of whom were from the Nijmegen area. I mention these numbers because there is reason to believe there was a second ship but so far I have not been able to find it.

In the Netherlands there was quite a bit of publicity about Verwayen and his departure. There were reports in the Roman Catholic paper *De Tijd*, but also in the *Leidsche Courant*, the *Utrechtse Courant* and the *Nijmeegsche Courant*. This is by no means a complete listing. On the heels of Verwayen's departure Father Theodore van den Broek started his campaign to interest people in emigrating to Wisconsin. There must have been some distant relatives of the travelers on the *John Parker* that joined Van den Broek, but there is no indication of any direct contact. It is likely though that the much publicized departure of Verwayen was to the advantage of the recruitment efforts of Van den Broek.

An intriguing question is how the plan evolved between the advertisement in November 1846 and the arrival in New Orleans in April 1847. At the time of departure there was still the plan to establish an independent colony for Roman Catholics and newspapers report that the place would be named Disabder. This means 'Away from Abdera'; in ancient literature Abdera is the City of Ignorance or

Stupidity. For Verwayen, that city was Nijmegen. Almost all Dutch emigrants in the Verwayen group indicated that their destination was Iowa.

Supposedly the original plan was to settle along the Missouri River but this changed along the way. It is not clear when and why exactly there was a change in plans. Did it have to do with plans of Scholte? Or with the fact that there was publicity about Iowa becoming an American state at the end of December 1846? In any case, the group did not settle along the Missouri River in a settlement named Disabdera. Most did go to Iowa.

The Auwerda family history tells us that right after their arrival in New Orleans the Dutchmen witnessed a slave auction in New Orleans, at the time one of the most important American centers of slave imports. After that Verwayen and his group—or at least a large number of them—sailed up the Mississippi River. An infant in the Auwerda family was buried in Natchez, Mississippi. According to a little biography of another passenger, A.J. Vanderpoll, published forty years later, the group arrived in Ottumwa, Iowa in May 1847.

We do not know exactly what happened to the group right after their arrival except for that contained in the letter Christiaan Auwerda wrote from Ottumwa to Nijmegen in October 1847. The edited letter was published in *Catholijcke Nederlandsche Stemmen*. If there ever was a voice encouraging people to emigrate and follow in his example it was Auwerda's. "I wished that I had every Dutchman with some means of existence here for a couple of days," writes Auwerda, "to convince them how foolish it is to stay in his country where all sources of prosperity have been exhausted and to go and live in a country where even for the poorest there is ample way to make a living and where the taxes are so low that one hardly notices them." And if after reading the letter people thought that Auwerda exaggerated about the possibilities, the editors attempted to remove any remaining doubts by adding that Auwerda is a man who can be trusted to tell things as they are.

It is hard to pinpoint exactly how many of them stayed together and went all the way up the Mississippi and Des Moines River to Ottumwa. The Iowa census is incomplete. The first state census of Iowa 1841-1849 registers several people of the group and places them in Wapello County in 1847, among them Verwayen himself.

We have to take a closer look at the church records. By 1850 the federal census offers useful information. It seems that 65 percent of the group, or 46 persons, are in Keokuk or Ottumwa. One man, shoemaker Anthony Van Kan, is in St. Louis and has married. The Damhuis family is in Rice, Illinois.

Some other members of the group obviously are not in Iowa and I have not yet been able to find them.

It is remarkable how many people followed that first group, but not as a second group. In the same year that Cornelis Bongers and Antoon Haps sailed from Mill, two other families from the same village emigrated to the U.S. They were Johannes Bongers, a brother of Cornelis, and Theodorus Boudewijns. A third brother, Henricus, emigrated with his wife in 1851. They all ended up in Ottumwa. Arnold Schevers was joined by two of his brothers and one of their children before 1850. All of them carpenters, they ultimately lived in the same boarding house in Keokuk. Late 1849 Verwayen and his wife, Louisa Mumm, were followed by Edward Mumm and his wife but also their mother Mary Mumm. Arnold Liebers from Groesbeek must have let the people in his village know that everything was going well because within three years he was joined by Gerhard Derks and family, also from Groesbeek. The Iowa state census of 1856 lists other Dutch families and some, like Zwart, Vandeloo, Mol, Bonekamp en Tennesse [Teunissen?] can be found in the church records as witnesses at weddings or sponsors at baptisms. A direct link with any of the other Dutch emigrants, through family or village, has yet to be established.

Not much is known so far about how the people in the Verwayen/Auwerda group communicated with the folks back home. They must have written letters, like the one that Auwerda sent. Jan Janssen, originally from Ubbergen, married fellow passenger Catherina Derks from Gennep and by 1850 they already had their first child. Wouldn't they have communicated that somehow to the folks back home? Speaking about Auwerda, he returned to the Netherlands in 1848 for family reasons. It is likely that he reported back about how everybody was doing and he probably gave advice to people who were thinking of emigrating. Also, he may have tried to persuade some to emigrate. When Auwerda returned again to the States in 1850 he sailed on the *Adelaide Metcalf* from Le Havre to New York together with the Van den Berg family from Nijmegen. As far as we know, these people did not go to Ottumwa. Between 1847 and 1863 Auwerda and some of his family members made the trip between the Netherlands and the U.S. five times.

From the census information we know that most of the Dutch immigrants worked as farmers or laborers. Auwerda is a farmer and so are Vanderpoll and Vangent. Jan Janssen is a laborer and so is Haps. Remarkably enough, attorney Verwayen is also a laborer, whose real estate is valued at a meager 100 dollars. Bongers is a drayman and Scheevers is a carpenter. A.H. Kramer, who was a butcher in

Nijmegen before he emigrated, is a painter in Keokuk.

The people in Keokuk and Ottumwa must have been in constant contact with each other, especially during the first ten years after 1847. Verwayen lived in Ottumwa for a while but early in 1850 he moved to Keokuk, which is where he is listed in the 1850 federal census. Johannes Bongers, on the other hand, first lived with his wife in Keokuk. After she died, he married a woman from Ottumwa. For a while they continued to live in Keokuk, but then they moved to Ottumwa. Johannes Bongers spent the rest of his life there. Henricus Bongers, who came over in 1851 with his wife Brigitta Roelofs, must have passed away not long after his arrival. Brigitta remarried Frances Boudewijns, who is from the same village as she and her late husband. They have two children, born in 1857 and 1859.

Looking at the church records one can get the impression that there is a split in the group, which seems to correspond with the status. At baptisms the rich sponsor each others' children and so do the poor. In the case of the Verwayen/Auwerda group rich and poor roughly coincide with city and country. Auwerda is a wealthy man and he is from the city Nijmegen, Haps is poor and he is from the village of Mill. Fate brought them together on the same ship but otherwise their personal lives do not willingly intersect.

The connections that we see suggest a lively community in the Ottumwa area that for a while had a strong Dutch component. There was until 1850 no Roman Catholic church in Ottumwa, so people had to go to Eddyville, which is about 16 miles to the northwest. The St. Mary's church there was served by Father John Kreckel who had no less than twelve counties to serve. From Kreckel's notes, he worked in the area from 1853 until 1899, it is clear that the Dutch were an important part of the church life in Eddyville. Of the seven notable parishioners. Egidius Liebers (who was called Father Liebers because he always served mass), James Walsh, Hugh Clarke, Henry Lamers, Arnold Jansen, Jan Jansen and M. Bonekamp, Kreckel mentions, five are Dutch. Looking at the number of baptisms in the church between 1850 and 1869, fifty-nine, about 5 percent, were infants from parents, one or both were Dutch.

I wondered if there was a Dutch link between Ottumwa and Pella, the village founded by the Protestant Dutch and only about 40 miles northwest of Ottumwa. One of the links was Father Kreckel who as a circuit-riding priest also served Marion County. The other possible link was the Welch family which, through William Welch, was instrumental in the founding of St Mary's Church in Pella. In Ottumwa there was a Michael Welch,

perhaps related, who was active in the church. In the letter of Auwerda that I quoted above, he mentions that there are "about a thousand Seceders" at a distance of "twelve hours from here."

Many of the families stayed in the area for several generations. In 1879 a marriage takes place in Ottumwa between John Van Gent and Johanna Bongers, whose parents came over on the same ship. The death records of the twentieth century show a number of the familiar names living and dying in Ottumwa far into the 1940s. Other former members of the Verwayen/Auwerda group move away. John Haps, who came over when he was nine years old, moves away and ultimately joins the Confederate cause. During and after the Civil War he is also a newspaper publisher in Mississippi and later in East St. Louis, Illinois. He ends up in Mississippi, where he died in the Jefferson Davis' Confederate Soldiers Home in Biloxi in 1924. Eventually the Auwerdas spread out as did the Vangents, Vanderpolls and others.

That leaves us with the question of what became of the instigator of the emigration and the leader of the group, Christiaan Verwayen. He is listed on the passenger manifest of the *John Parker* as farmer. In the census of 1850 while living in Keokuk Verwayen is listed as a laborer. He seems not to be doing too well in the new country. His name in the census is distorted and written as "Vawyer," as if he didn't even bother to spell it properly anymore. The house he lives in is owned by his mother-in-law, who bought half a block of property in February 1850 for \$1,200. His brother-in-law and his mother-in-law his neighbors on one side, a Dutch family with the last name Henry on the other. In the next few years Verwayen and his wife Louise have three more daughters, two of whom die at a very young age. In the Iowa census of 1856 nothing much seems to have changed for Verwayen. He's still living in the same place with Louise and two daughters.

By December of 1858 Verwayen is back in the Netherlands because that is when his son was born in Venraij. Possibly the family went back after hearing of the death of Verwayen's mother in April 1857. I speculate that Verwayen's wife had health problems after delivering her son, so they did not to return to the U.S. Louise died in 1861, which left him with three children, age 12, 9 and 3.

The failed emigration of Verwayen stands in sharp contrast to the success of that of his brother-in-law, Edward Mumm. Mumm arrived in November 1849 with his wife, his mother and two sisters. Thus far I have not found a subsequent trace of the sisters. Edward lists his profession as physician in the census of 1850 but he starts a career as a bookkeeper. He becomes a court clerk, practices law and serves in

many public jobs, among them as a member of the City Council of Keokuk.

Van Stekelenburg points out that Verwayen was not very successful as a lawyer, publishing *The Batavian*, or the cigar factory that he wanted to found in Nijmegen in 1846. His emigration also seems to have been full of hardships, though some in that group had a much different experience. Verwayen died in 1875, at age 65. What he did in the years after returning to the Netherlands we don't know. He seems not to have left any record about his American adventure either. The fact that the most persistent inquiry to date fails to reveal the fate of Verwayen after he returned to the Netherlands, simply means the research has to be continued.

SOURCES

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