

On the Periphery: Dutch Immigrants in California's San Joaquin Valley

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The San Joaquin Valley in California exemplifies the opposite of the urban setting. It is farm country. Located between the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the east and the Coastal Range to the west, the San Joaquin Valley boasts some of the richest farmland in the world. The Valley, as it is called locally, stretches sixty miles from east to west and 250 miles from north to south. Rainfall averages about ten inches per year, but the San Joaquin, Kings, Kaweah, and Kern Rivers from the snow-capped Sierra Nevada Mountains and wells provide irrigation water. Today farmers grow an astonishing assortment of agricultural products using irrigation and the abundant California sunshine. Agriculture has attracted people to the San Joaquin Valley since the late 1800s.

The Dutch were one small group of people who settled in the Southern San Joaquin Valley. Dutch immigrants who arrived between 1890 and 1940 participated in the agricultural economy. The first Dutch immigrants bought small tracts of land in colonies from companies that had substantially inflated the value of the land. Poor soil quality forced many early settlers to leave. However, the Dutch pioneers paved the way for later Dutch immigrants who also worked in agriculture. These immigrants were Calvinists, Catholics, and the un-churched. In 1912, the Calvinist immigrants in Kings County united and formed the Christian Reformed Church in Hanford. The mixture of these different Dutch immigrants created a unique community. Not only were the Dutch immigrants diverse themselves, they were only one small group in a cacophony of different ethnic groups. The rapidly changing agricultural

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state of affairs lured many people. These contextual issues had a profound affect on how this peripheral Dutch community developed and how they negotiated the transition from being Dutch to being Dutch-Americans.

Agriculture dominated life in the San Joaquin Valley from the time of the first white settlers and underwent significant changes in the late nineteenth century when the first Dutch immigrants were arriving.¹ The first white settlers in the San Joaquin Valley brought cattle to graze in the mid-1800s. These settlers grew the old Spanish longhorn type of cattle for the hides because beef had limited commercial value.² As the demand for beef increased with the Gold Rush, the type of cattle in the Valley changed to ones more suited for beef production. Ranchers also raised sheep and hogs. However, the supremacy of livestock grazing did not last.

In 1874, the grain farmer gained the upper hand in the Valley when the California legislature passed the “No Fence” law. This law held the ranchers responsible for the damage their livestock caused to the grain farmers’ crops. Because barbed-wire fencing was not yet readily available, only the most opulent ranchers could afford wood to fence in their land. Many ranchers were forced to sell their land or engage in other forms of agriculture.³ With the annoyance of livestock gone and a continued population growth, the wheat market exploded and created bonanza wheat farms encompassing hundreds and thousands of acres. The expansion of the Southern Pacific Railroad helped expedite wheat farming’s development by providing transportation of harvested grain to the population centers.⁴ This dry land wheat farming, relying only on winter rains, reached its zenith in 1884 at the time irrigation was about to change agriculture in the San Joaquin Valley the same way the “No Fence” Law had ten years earlier.⁵ While wheat farming relied on annual winter rains, fruit orchards and grape vineyards needed regular water throughout the summer. Farmers controlled the flow of water coming down the mountain rivers and dug artesian wells to irrigate their orchards and vineyards. Fruit

¹These changes are succinctly summarized in Marion Nielsen Jewell, *Agricultural Developments in Tulare County, 1870-1900* (M. A. thesis, University of Southern California, 1950).

²Wallace Smith, *Garden of the Sun* (Fresno: Max Hardison, 1939), 170.

³*Ibid.*, 187-88.

⁴*Ibid.*, 217.

⁵*Ibid.*, 251.

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farming was more profitable than wheat farming but required large amounts of start-up capital. Consequently, many large wheat farmers sold their land as smaller subdivisions in the form of colonies.⁶ According to San Joaquin Valley historian Wallace Smith, “the founding of colonies and the introduction of horticulture . . . began to change the aspect of things.”⁷

Utilizing the colony system, land was sold to small farmers in allotments of 5 to 40 acres drawing settlers to the San Joaquin Valley. A single colony could include hundreds of small farms. Early maps of Fresno and Tulare Counties show many of these colonies.⁸ The Central California Colony was one of the first colonies and demonstrated the productivity of this type of system. According to the 1907 *Fresno County California Historical Atlas*, “Before this colony was settled, wheat was grown on the land now occupied by it, and netted annually not more than \$25,000, while only one family lived on the 6 sections; now the same land yields an annual cash return of from \$500,000 to \$700,000, while nearly 200 families have comfortable and happy homes on it.”⁹ Colonies not only offered small pieces of land, often with generous lease or ownership offers, they also helped the tenants learn how to grow fruit. Most colonies were formed purely for economic reasons. The 76 Land and Water Company founded a colony concentrated around the city of Traver in the 1880s. Farmers quickly settled on the colony’s 30,000 acres.¹⁰ Some colonies were ethnically based. For instance, Swedish immigrants established a colony at Kingsburg, which was distinguished because of its “racial homogeneity and . . . religious tone” according to Wallace Smith.¹¹

⁶A very good overview of the agricultural colonies can be found in Virginia Emily Thickers, *Pioneer Agricultural Colonies of Fresno County* (Master’s thesis, University of California, 1942) and in Smith, *Garden of the Sun*, 400-446.

⁷Smith, *Garden of the Sun*, 251.

⁸See *Map of Tulare County, California* (Visalia, CA: Chapman and Gordon, 1867); *Map of Tulare County, California* (Visalia, CA: Baker, 1876); *Official Historical Atlas Map of Tulare County* (Tulare, CA: Thos. H. Thompson, 1892); *Historical Atlas Map of Fresno County* (Tulare, CA: Thos. H. Thompson, 1891); and *Fresno County California* (Fresno: William Harvey, Sr., 1907).

⁹*Fresno County California Historical Atlas* (Fresno, CA: William Harvey, Sr., 1907), 13.

¹⁰Smith, *Garden of the Sun*, 420-22.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 425. Other ethnic groups included Germans, Finns, Danes, Syrians,

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Though the colony system was a common method used to improve the land, large landowners and corporations also developed land. In the *Official Historical Atlas Map of Tulare County*, the writer called the Paige and Morton Company's land holdings "the largest orchard in the State." It had a "very systematic" management and employed from 250 to 500 people.¹² The capital invested by large and small farmers in irrigation and horticulture changed agriculture in the San Joaquin Valley from bonanza wheat farms to orchards and vineyards.

The first Dutch immigrants to the San Joaquin Valley arrived in the early 1890s during the height of the colony system. These Dutch settlers bought land from Dutch capitalists who tried to establish colonies. The first attempts by the Dutch to colonize in the San Joaquin Valley were in Merced and Fresno counties.¹³ In Merced County, the Holland California Land Company painted an "irresponsibly rosy" picture of agricultural opportunities, according to Jacob Van Hinte. The company sold over 1300 acres in 1889 and 1890. The Dutch immigrants bought land for \$160 to \$200 per acre. The company told them agriculture would provide a pastoral lifestyle.¹⁴ Many immigrants were not ready for hard work needed to start a farm but a bigger disappointment was the poor quality of the soil. Water and roots could not penetrate the "hard pan," a hard layer of soil only a few feet under the surface. The colony fell apart by the end of 1891 as colonists sold their land for as little as \$10 per acre.

A similar situation occurred in Fresno County. P. J. Koch and R. Mack, both Californians, organized the Fresno Land Company to sell land to Dutch immigrants in 1890. They sold land within the Perrin Colony, five miles north of the city of Fresno. The *Official Historical Atlas Map of Fresno County* called this attempt "most interesting" and "very successful

Japanese, and Chinese.

¹²*Official Historical Atlas Map of Tulare County*, 20.

¹³Van Hinte, *Netherlanders in America: Migration and Settlement in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries in the United States of America*, 2 vols. 1928, reprinted in English translation, Robert P. Swierenga, general editor, Adriaan de Wit, chief translator (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985); Henry S. Lucas, *Netherlanders in America: Dutch Immigration to the United States and Canada, 1789-1950* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1955, reprinted, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989).

¹⁴Van Hinte, *Netherlanders in America*, 644.

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this far” in 1891.¹⁵ Even with these promising reports, the soil of the Perrin Colony also had hardpan. By 1919, Fresno County historian Paul Vandor called the colony a “bare faced swindle.”¹⁶ Despite the problems with hardpan in both Fresno and Merced counties, some hardy immigrants remained and fought to establish farms.

Two dissatisfied Dutch colonists from Merced County, Louis C. Lens and Albert Slotemaker did not give up on the idea of creating a successful Dutch colony in the San Joaquin Valley. They started the Queen Wilhelmina Colony in Tulare County, in part of the county that would become Kings County in 1893.¹⁷ Located in what was then known as the Mussel Slough or Lucern Valley, the Queen Wilhelmina Colony benefited from good soil with no hardpan. This colony was also close to the water of the Kings River. The *Official Historical Atlas of Tulare County* showed the location of the colony in Section 29 of Township 17 South Range 22 East.¹⁸ In an effort to boost interest in the young Kings County, the *Hanford Daily Democrat* published *Kings County Resources Illustrated* to present “her inducements in the investment of capital and the establishment of homes and industries.”¹⁹ This book included many short descriptions of farms in Kings County including the Queen Wilhelmina Colony. When the book was published in 1897, the colony was still going strong.²⁰ Lens served as its capable director and Slotemaker was an experienced fruit grower. According to *Kings County Resources Illustrated*, “When examples are wanted to show what can be done on small home tracts of land, the Wilhelmina Colony is constantly pointed out.”²¹ The colony included the Dutch land owners Hyde with 40 acres,

¹⁵*Historical Atlas Map of Fresno County* (Tulare, Calif.: Thos. H. Thompson, 1891), 13.

¹⁶Paul E. Vandor, *History of Fresno County with Biographic Sketches of the Leading Men and Women of the County Who Have Been Identified with its Growth and Development from the Early Days to the Present* (Los Angeles: Historic Record Company, 1919), 264.

¹⁷Van Hinte, *Netherlanders in America*, 656; Lucas, *Netherlanders in America*, 397.

¹⁸*Official Historical Atlas of Tulare County*, 49.

¹⁹*Kings County Resources Illustrated* (Hanford, CA: W. W. Barnes, 1897), title page.

²⁰Van Hinte had said it had ended already in 1893.

²¹*Kings County Resources Illustrated*, 146.

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Blydenstein with 27.5 acres, Rebel, Benner, Loutendam, and Herwoert with 20 acres each, Martens and Sower with 15 acres each, Dorsten with 12.5 acres, Schener with 10 acres, and Repping with 5 acres. Lens kept 120 acres for his own endeavors.

Lens advertised the colony to prospective immigrants in a pamphlet entitled “Investing in the Queen Wilhelmina Colony” published in the Netherlands in 1893.²² He wrote his pamphlet to advise investors because “many families and individuals . . . became disappointed because they did not know the quality of the soil” before they arrived in the Merced and Fresno colonies.²³ By planting nearly 10,000 fruit trees in March 1891, Lens assured potential investors that “the bad impressions people in Holland had obtained through different colonists in California was the reason that this colony was not announced before I had established it to demonstrate that this excellent soil was suitable for fruit farming” in the Queen Wilhelmina Colony.²⁴ Lens provided a detailed list of expenses for the colonists. The land would be sold for \$125 per acre with the total costs from \$5000 to \$6000 to begin farming. He used specific figures from the Paige and Morton Company to illustrate market prices for crops.²⁵ It was a purely financial endeavor. Maintaining a separate community or religious identity was not a major consideration. The only mention of church by Lens was in his description of Hanford as “a place with large banks, churches, schools, an opera house, and three packing houses.”²⁶ While it is unclear what happened to this colony, Lens surfaced again in Spokane, Washington in the late 1890s.²⁷ Even if the colony did not last beyond the nineteenth century, it led the way for other Dutch immigrants.

Later Dutch immigrants also participated in the agricultural development of the San Joaquin Valley. Many Dutch immigrants after 1900 came as farm laborers and eventually progressed to owning their own farm. For instance, Peter Verhoeven immigrated in 1908 from Nieuw

²²Louis C. Lens, *Geldbelegging in Californië en de Queen Wilhelmina Kolonie* (Rotterdam: P.M. Bazendijk, 1893). Translations are the author’s own.

²³Ibid., 4.

²⁴Ibid., 7.

²⁵The Paige and Morton figures were also published in the *Daily and Weekly Register* and printed in the *Official Historical Atlas of Tulare County*, 13.

²⁶Lens, *Geldbelegging*, 8.

²⁷Lucas, *Netherlanders in America*, 416.

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Vennep in the Haarlemmermeer. He worked as a farm laborer on two different farms before buying his own.²⁸ Gerrit Boogaard Sr. had a much more difficult time buying his first farm. He arrived in Hanford in early 1909 from Woubrugge and moved his family over 6 times in search of a good farm to lease. Farm ownership eluded him until the 1940s.²⁹ In *The Story of Kings County*, Julius Jacobs called the Dutch immigrants “very successful.”³⁰ He listed some of the first Dutch residents as those of the Wilhelmina Colony but also mentioned other important Dutch residents such as J. A. Verkuyl and the Warmerdam, Tos, and Van Groningen families.

Even with success, the number of Dutch immigrants remained small. According to the U.S. Census records for Kings County, the number of Dutch immigrants rose steadily from only four in 1890 to 240 in 1930.³¹ Never accounting for more than 1% of the total population of the county, the Dutch immigrants were the fourth largest immigrant population after Mexican, Portuguese, and Italian. Forty years after the founding of the Queen Wilhelmina Colony, the number of Dutch immigrants and those with at least one Dutch parent was 526.³² The small size of the Dutch immigrant community influenced its development. These Dutch immigrants mixed with each other across religious differences. Calvinists were the majority but Catholics and the un-churched made up a significant

²⁸Ray Verhoeven, interview by author, 18 February 2003, Hanford, Calif., digital recording, author’s personal collection.

²⁹Gerrit Boogaard, interview by author, 19 February 2003, Hanford, Calif., digital recording, author’s personal collection.

³⁰Julius L. Jacobs, *The Story of Kings County*, (n.p., 1955), 76. Available at Kings County Library.

³¹U.S. Department of the Interior, *Eleventh Census of the United States, 1890: Population of the United States, Part 1* (Washington, D.C., 1895), 74, 612; U.S. Department of the Interior, *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900: Population, Part 1* (Washington, D.C., 1901), 76, 738; U.S. Department of Commerce, *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Abstract of the Census with Supplement for California* (Washington, D.C., 1913), 600; U.S. Department of Commerce, *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920: Population, Part 3* (Washington, D.C., 1922), 113, 124; U.S. Department of Commerce, *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930: Population, Volume 3, Part 1: Alabama-Missouri*, (Washington, D.C., 1932), 252, 267.

³²U.S. Department of Commerce, *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930: Population, Volume 3, Part 1: Alabama-Missouri* (Washington, D.C., 1932), 252 and 267.

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minority. For instance, of the 526 Dutch immigrants and persons with at least one Dutch parent in 1930, only 266 were members of the Dutch speaking Christian Reformed Church in 1932. According to Ray Verhoeven, the Calvinist Peter Verhoeven family visited with the Catholic Rayven and Verhul families.³³ The Gerrit Boogaard family was photographed with the Marbus and Sprutenburg families who did not have any church affiliation.³⁴ This crossing of religious lines in the Dutch community occurred within a specific context of being a small group of immigrants in an agricultural setting surrounded by many different groups of people.

Not only did the Dutch immigrants mix with each other, they also assimilated into the broader community. They dealt with Americans in agriculture as laborers on their farms, renters of farms, and as their fellow farmers. They quickly learned English, sent their children to the local school, and wanted to be American success stories. However, religion was another matter for the Calvinists. While the Catholics joined the local parish, the Calvinists formed their own church and retained their Dutch Calvinist identity. The Calvinists formed the Excelsior Society in 1909 to read sermons and sing Psalms in the Dutch language. The formal organization of the Christian Reformed Church occurred in 1912 under the direction of home missionary Rev. Jacob Bolt.³⁵ The church organized with 44 communicant members, 70 souls, and 4 consistory members.³⁶ It grew steadily from the original 16 families to 55 families in 1927. Services were conducted exclusively in Dutch until 1921 when one service a month was held in English. A slow language transition eventually ended in 1949 with all services being held in English.

³³Ray Verhoeven, interview by author, 18, February 2003, Hanford, Calif., digital recording, author's personal collection.

³⁴Postcard No. 5, Gerrit Boogaard Sr. Family Postcards, author's personal collection.

³⁵He was the home missionary sent by Classis Pella to work in California. He was working in the Redlands Christian Reformed Church and passed through Hanford on a trip to San Francisco where he had tried to organize a Dutch church in that city.

³⁶From a manuscript read at the 40th Anniversary Celebration in 1952; Congregational statistics from the Anniversary Program, 1 May 1987, both in the author's personal collection.

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The Christian Reformed Church quickly became the center of the Calvinist community and the center of the ethnic Dutch element. A 1914 article in *The Banner* alludes to the mission emphasis of the Christian Reformed Church directed towards fellow Dutch immigrants. The first pastor of the church, Rev. Leonard P. Brink reported on the progress to supporting churches, especially to Classis Pella, which had given the church \$1000.³⁷ Brink assured the church's supporters that "we are doing all we can to persuade desirable Hollanders to settle nearer Hanford, especially those who are scattered over a large territory in Kings, Tulare, and Fresno counties. We try to keep them informed as to opportunities that open up near Hanford, so that they can come closer to us, and thereby we are better able to look after their spiritual welfare, and they can enjoy the privileges of regular church life. There is altogether too much scattering of our people, all over this great State."³⁸ The Calvinists worked to consolidate the Dutch community around the church but Rev. Brink acknowledged that "there are still a great many Hollanders in our vicinity that do not attend church; some of them are of the rough, careless, indifferent sort; some are ensnared in the toils of secret societies, and deem it too much sacrifice to leave the lodge to join the Church; some who are Roman Catholics from Holland, and they are as a rule, regular attendants at the Catholic church."³⁹ The Calvinists' retention of their distinctive religion and decision not to assimilate with the other churches in Hanford was an important development of the community.

Because the church was small and isolated, the Calvinists tried to recruit immigrants. The Jan Duyst family was one of the families who arrived in Hanford in the 1920s due to recruitment. According to family historian Everett Van de Beek, their long journey to California started in 1910 when Jan and his wife Geertje and their seven children, including two married, left Spakenburg, the Netherlands for Chile with Geertje's brother and his three children.⁴⁰ They had immigrated to South America on very sketchy information. The family was especially unhappy about the absence of a Calvinist church. Three children moved to Minnesota in

³⁷Manuscript, 40th Anniversary Celebration.

³⁸L.P. Brink, "Home Missions in California," *The Banner*, 6 February 1914, 92.

³⁹Ibid., 92.

⁴⁰Everett Vande Beek, *To Lie in Green Pastures* (Santa Barbara, n.d.).

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1920, there they read out about the “paradise” of Kings County, California in 1921.⁴¹ The children in America quickly moved to Kings County and the whole family reunited in 1922 in the Hanford area. This family helped the church grow rapidly. The Koppenaal family came from an urban area in 1936. This family left Patterson, N.J. for a chance to start a chicken farm. They came because a cousin already lived in Hanford. The Koppenaal family quickly joined the church even though their cousin was not a member.⁴² Even with new immigrants, the church struggled during the Great Depression when members lost their farms and were forced to move in search of work.

In the Preface to *Faith and Family*, one of the areas Robert Swierenga called Dutch-American historians to examine was the different developmental patterns in various communities in the United States started by Dutch immigrants.⁴³ The San Joaquin Valley Dutch immigrants developed their community in a specific context, which resulted in a particular pattern. First, the original attempts at colonization failed but encouraged subsequent immigration. These early endeavors had no particular religious appeal and helped lure many different Dutch immigrants to the San Joaquin Valley. Second, as a small group, they quickly assimilated to the American culture out of economic necessity and worked hard for economic success. Third, the small number of Dutch immigrants had relationships across religious differences within the Dutch immigrant community. Fourth, the Calvinists consolidated in the Christian Reformed Church, which started as a mission church with the goal to gather the Dutch together. These four factors created the unique Dutch community in Kings County with a developmental pattern that differed substantially from other rural Dutch communities. As more and more local Dutch community histories are completed,⁴⁴ a fuller picture of the Dutch

⁴¹According to Everett Vande Beek, they read an article in *De Wachter*.

⁴²Annette Koppenaal Verhoeven, interview by author, 13 March 2003, Hanford, Calif., digital recording, author's personal collection.

⁴³Robert Swierenga, *Faith and Family: Dutch Immigration and Settlement in the United States, 1820-1920* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 2000), xx.

⁴⁴See particularly Rob Kroes, *The Persistence of Ethnicity: Dutch Calvinist Pioneers in Amsterdam, Montana* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Lawrence J. Taylor, *Dutchmen on the Bay: The Ethnohistory of a Contractual Community* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983); Trudy Selleck, “Land of Dreams

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immigration and their transplantation can be told. This kind of local history can be a rich source to discover differences in patterns of assimilation and help explain differences in Dutch-American communities today. The difference between urban and rural immigrant communities is only one of many variables that need to be examined.

and Profits: Social Networks and Economic Success Among Dutch Immigrants in Southern California's Dairy Industry, 1920-1960" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Riverside, 1995).