Holland, Michigan In Transition

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The Dutch immigrants who founded Holland 146 years ago brought with them to their adopted homeland a common bond and purpose which made them truly homogeneous. Their religious convictions, language, social conventions, mores, and economic status bound them together and marked them as a unique enclave in their American environment. The problem faced by their versatile, gifted leader, Rev. A.C. Van Raalte, was how to introduce his Dutch followers to American culture while preserving the values of their heritage. For him it was urgent to hold the immigrants together. He greatly feared that their most precious inheritance, their faith, would be threatened if they scattered and lost their identity in the new and strange environment. He therefore established a settlement in Western Michigan known as the Holland Kolonie, a cluster of small farming communities with "stad Holland" as its central focus. All of these communities were named after their Dutch places of origin.

In this presentation it is my intention to show how this originally homogeneous Dutch Kolonie was gradually but surely "Americanized," (a question-begging term, to be sure), and that now, after 147 years of assimilation into American life, it has been transformed from a "small Dutch town" into an American small city, lately declared to be "urban," with all the accompanying favorable and unfavorable changes which seem inevitably to accompany such a shift. This shift is of comparatively recent origin, and it is very dramatic, almost resembling an explosion. I will try to show that the transition from Dutch homogeneity to ethnic diversity had its seeds

in the vision of A.C. Van Raalte for his Michigan Kolonie. It should prove to be informative to compare this development of the Holland Dutch enclave with the story of two other American communities whose experiences, no doubt, vary greatly from that of Holland.

It seems hardly necessary or possible in the limited time allotted to this presentation to recount the history of the early years of the Dutch colonization in Western Michigan. The story is recorded in great detail and with careful documentation by able historians such as Henry Lucas, Jacob Van Hinte, Albert Hyma, and Aleida Pieters, among others.[1] The Dutch immigrants had a common origin, a common language, similar Reformed convictions, and similar economic backgrounds. The magnetism of Van Raalte's personality persuaded waves of new Dutch immigrants to join those already in the Kolonie. When Bernardus Grootenhuis, Van Raalte's capable assistant, took a census of the Holland community in 1850, he listed 1829 persons, virtually all of them with Dutch names.[2] To be sure, when the Dutch arrived, they soon discovered that they had been preceded by individuals who could properly be called Americans. There was George N. Smith, a Vermonter, who had attempted to give Christian leadership to a band of Ottawa Indians in the area. Among the names listed by Grootenhuis one also finds mention of H.D. Post, H.G. Post, N.F. Post, E.H. Langdon, W. Brownson, J. Grove, and A. Brown. However, the presence of those non-Dutch persons had minor impact on the Dutch immigrants. The Immigrants had to get along with little assistance from their American neighbors. The Holland Kolonie was pretty much isolated in its new environment and soon discovered that it also could look for very little aid and comfort from its native land.

Rev. A.C. Van Raalte, however, was not eager for his Kolonie to remain isolated. If we are to understand future developments in the new community, it is essential to consider his role in those developments. The immigrants who followed him to Western Michigan were almost totally dependent on his leadership. He had carefully planned the immigration project. Not only were his followers aware of his plans; advance notice had also been sent to the Reformed brethren in America. As a result, upon arrival in New York harbor, his group was met by Rev. DeWitt, a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church in New York. At Albany they were greeted and assisted by Rev. I. Wyckoff. At Detroit, Van Raalte sought assistance from civic and religious leaders, several of whom bore non-Dutch names. These helpful contacts with "Americans" deeply impressed him. Upon arrival at the site of the new settlement, once more non-Dutch people such as the Rev. G.N. Smith, Isaac Fairbanks, H. Post, and others gave timely assistance to the struggling colonists.

In this light, it is not difficult to understand why in 1849 Van Raalte and his colleagues warmly welcomed Rev. Wyckoff when he came from Albany to the Kolonie with an invitation to affiliate with the Dutch Reformed Church in America. The invitation was accepted, and thereafter the churches of the Kolonie looked for fellowship to a long-established Americanized Reformed Church instead of looking overseas for aid and comfort.

However, in 1857 four churches of Classis Holland seceded from the Dutch Reformed Church and organized what eventually became the Christian Reformed Church. The seceders viewed the union with the Dutch Reformed Church as a repudiation of their secession in the Netherlands. Henceforth this seceding group sought help and guidance from sister churches in the

Netherlands. Even Van Raalte's own church, the First Dutch Reformed Church of Holland, which united with the Christian Reformed church in 1884, supplied its pulpit exclusively with Dutch-born ministers until 1910. Thus conflict arose in the Kolonie between the Dutch Reformed churches, who, by openness to Americanized churches of the East, declared their desire to assimilate with their adopted brothers, and the fledgling Christian Reformed Churches, who clung for many years to their native Dutch religious inheritance.

For many years the Reformed and Christian Reformed churches maintained a dominant presence in Holland, but never an exclusive presence. Already in the early years of the Kolonie, such non-Dutch churches as Methodist and Episcopalian were established in Holland. Eventually the number of these non-Dutch churches proliferated until today they outnumber the churches of Reformed Dutch origin.

Another very significant factor that encouraged Americanization in the Kolonie was Van Raalte's vision of establishing an academy, which was realized in 1851. With the assistance and encouragement of the Dutch Reformed church in the East, this venture developed into a full-fledged college in 1866 and, in time to the formation of a theological seminary in Holland. The faculty members of the academy were of American vintage, English speakers, bearing such non-Dutch names as Taylor and Phelps. The establishment of these educational institutions was influential in turning the attention of the Dutch enclave toward the greater American scene. At the same time, it attracted both professors and students from the broader American community.

In spite of these influences opening the door to ethnic diversity in the first fifty years of the Kolonie's history, it seems clear that from both the viewpoint of outside observers and that of Holland's original enclave, the Dutch remained aware of their origins. The Reformed and Christian Reformed churches grew at a steady pace, and the Dutch language was used in most services, especially in the Christian Reformed churches, until the early years of the twentieth century. Even in Van Raalte's First Church (which later became Christian Reformed), the consistory minutes were written in Dutch until about 1915.

As the nineteenth century came to a close, forces encouraging ethnic diversity began to appear, largely through industrial expansion which attracted some non-Dutch laborers into the work force, although the labor force continued to be predominantly Dutch, according to a study done by Gordon W. Kirk.[3] As the twentieth century opened, the business leaders of Holland began to actively seek a greater share of American prosperity for their town. In 1912 the Board of Trade and Commerce issued an attractive illustrated brochure entitled "Holland, the Gateway of Western Michigan for Chicago and the Great West."[4] In glowing terms it displayed the religious, cultural, and economic opportunities in Holland open to anyone seeking to establish a business.

Several industries with national markets set up business in Holland. A prominent example of such an industry was the Holland Furnace Company, established in 1906. The history of this company has recently been published by Donald van Reken, a Holland local historian, who has carefully documented the development of the company.[5] The founders of this company

were non-Dutch entrepreneurs from outside of Holland, men with names like Kolla, Landwehr, Nystrom, Cheff, McLean and Howell. Such non-Dutch names began to assume prominence among Holland residents. The work force, however, was large of Dutch ancestry. The Holland Furnace Company drew national attention not only by the sale of its product, but also by promotional stunts, such as bringing movie stars like Dorothy Lamour and famous athletes like Rocky Marciano to Holland. The citizens of Holland watched with amusement the introduction of these samples of the glamor of the American life-style into its conservative enclave. Although the history of the Holland Furnace Company ended in disaster, I cite is as an example of industries located in the Dutch community by "outsiders" who saw great potential in a community with a stable and industrious work ethic. Among other industries with national markets advertised in the 1912 brochure were the H.J. Heinz Company, the Donnelly-Kelly Mirror Company (note the non-Dutch names), the Bush and Lane Piano Company and the Holland - St. Louis Sugar Company. In the first half of the twentieth century there were no fewer than eight furniture factories in Holland, all of them with national markets. Gradually but persistently the outside American life style and culture were making their mark on the once homogeneous Dutch enclave.

Culturally, as the twentieth century progressed, efforts were made to reinforce the community's awareness of its Dutch heritage. Under the guidance and inspiration of the late Willard C. Wichers, a Netherlands Information Bureau was established to preserve Dutch artifacts of Holland's early history. Around 1930 an annual Tulip Time Festival was initiated. Curiously enough, the idea of celebrating the tulip was inspired by a non-Dutch Holland High School biology teacher, Miss Rogers. The parade of bands

which climaxed the festival featured Dutch dancers shod in wooden shoes. A sign of ethnic transition could be seen as Mexican and Asian students wearing wooden shoes participated in the dances. The acquisition of an authentic windmill from the Netherlands is the latest reminder of Holland's origins.

How should we evaluate these efforts to remind the town of its Dutch beginnings? Do they indicate a genuine interest in Dutch culture? Or are they simply reminders of a quaint Dutch past, useful mainly for seeking national attention while enjoying beautiful flowers and watching a good show? Some of my immigrant friends who have come to Holland since World War II express feelings of "culture shock" as they witness the incongruities which accompany Holland's efforts to celebrate its origins. To them wooden shoes are quaint, but hardly meaningful as an expression of Holland's heritage. The commercialism accompanying a national festival lends it the air of a carnival. The visiting crowds must be entertained.

On Sunday, February 9, 1947, two years after the close of World War II, the city of Holland opened a year of centennial celebration. At Dimnet Chapel on the campus of Hope College the celebrations were officially launched with appropriate speeches reminding the citizens of their Dutch heritage. It seems ironic that at about that same time, noticeable changes that would inevitably lead to diversity in the ethnic composition of the town became evident. The year 1950 may well be considered a turning point in the city's ethnic history. This can be illustrated by noting the census population statistics for Holland from 1950-1990.

1950 - 15,858

1960 - 24,777

1970 - 26,479

1980 - 26,281

1990 - 30,745

In the forty-year period that I have tabulated, the city nearly doubled in population. But note that in the 1990 census, out of a population of 30,745, only 12,841 persons, or approximately 40 percent, claimed Dutch origin or ancestry. This is significant in a study of ethnic changes in the town.

Now let me present the census figures for the Hispanic population of Holland in recent decades.

1970 - total population	26,479	Hispanics	1,769	or 6.7%
1980 - total population	26,281	Hispanics	2,911	or 11.1%
1990 - total population	30,745	Hispanics	4,347	or 14.1%

When other minorities such as Blacks, Asians and Native Americans are added to the Hispanic figure, we find a total minority population of 4,753 persons or 18.7 percent of Holland's total population. Statistically it seems clear that as the Dutch presence diminishes, the presence of Hispanic and other minorities increases.

The present conference of the A.A.D.A.S. has as its theme "The Dutch and Their Neighbors in Transition." I have attempted to describe the ethnic transitions which have taken place in Holland since its founding, and especially since 1950. The statistics I have presented call for some explanation. Two questions come to mind. What were the circumstances that brought about this transition, especially since 1950? What are the effects on the quality of life accompanying the transition?

In the 1950s and even prior to that, migrant Mexican workers found their way to Holland to help in the harvest of such crops as pickles, beans, blueberries and sugar beets. The farmers who raised these crops and the industries which processed them needed their help, and welcomed them. The word was soon passed along to the families and friends of these workers that Holland was a favorable place to establish families. Although the Mexicans who settled here felt isolated and sometimes unfairly treated by their predominantly Dutch neighbors, the movement persisted. The rapid, almost explosive increase in business and industrial activity in Holland in the last three decades served as a magnet for many poor Hispanics, who found not only employment but also a city with a reputation for strong family life.

A recent spate of knifings and shootings in Holland and an increase in gang activities have made the citizens apprehensive. Could these activities fairly be attributed to the growing ethnic diversity of Holland? Or do they simply reflect a broader national problem? Already in 1966 the City of Holland established a Human Relations Commission "to promote amicable relations and mutual respect between and among racial, cultural, religious and other groups within the greater Holland Community." This is clear evidence that diversity in racial composition is now a fact of life to be reconed with by the people of Holland. Complaints of discrimination are now heard by the police, the schools and by employers. Over 10 percent of the students in the public schools now clamor for special attention due to language problems. Problems arising from English spoken as a second language rather than as a primary language are being vigorously debated, especially among the Hispanics.

Religiously, churches founded by people of Dutch origin are still most prominent in the community. Intermarriage between persons of different denominations has become common. A perusal of church services in the Saturday newspaper reveals an almost incredible proliferation of churches, including several Hispanic churches. Respect for Sunday as a day of rest and worship has greatly diminished. Large chain stores now do flourishing business on Sunday, ignoring the long-standing tradition of respect for the sacredness of that day.

Although Holland, named nostalgically after the motherland, continues to honor its tradition of "Dutchness" in a variety of ways, that acknowledgment of heritage has become more a delight in the quaintness of early life styles than a meaningful and vibrant appreciation of the significant cultural and religious contributions brought by the Dutch to the New World. Holland has been and currently is being transformed from a homogeneous Dutch enclave with deep religious convictions into a bustling urban center, preoccupied with obtaining its share of the American Dream, freedom, diversity and opulence.

Let me close by reading to you a brief excerpt from a speech delivered by Marvin Lindeman to the Michigan Historical Society on October 10, 1947. It was delivered in Holland and was entitled "A Non-Hollander Looks at Holland." Mr. Lindeman, although courteous, presents a dim view of the Dutch in Holland as he views the situation in 1947. He denigrates them as being stodgy, unprogressive, ultra-conservative and clergy-dominated. Near the end of his speech he makes this outburst: "What this town needs is an awakening to the fact that we are living in 1947, not in the medieval age. We have to be more broad-minded about things. Holland has the natural

advantages to be a big razzle-dazzle city, and we ought to come out of our sleep. Got to apply some vision and imagination! It's high time that the ministers quit confining the town to a straight-jacket. Let the church stick to its place and stop its domination of every move the town makes."[6]

Now it is 1993, nearly fifty years later. The razzle-dazzle" has arrived! Holland is getting to be "big" and the ministers are losing their hold on the people. Business is booming and the "Dutch" no longer dominate! Rev. Van Raalte would be amazed to see what time and circumstance have done to his vision for a Christian community living out of its faith.

Holland has arrived!

END NOTES

1. There is no definitive biography of A.c. Van Raalte in English. Albert Hyma has published a biography entitled Albertus C. Van Raalte. William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1947. It is very limited in its usefulness for scholars. A biography of Van Raalte in the Dutch language was published in 1915. It is entitled Een Pelgrims Vader, by J.A. Wormser. Nijverdal, 1915. Three accounts of the settlement of the Holland Kolonie offer great detail and are thoroughly documented:
   Henry Lucas, Netherlanders in America. Reprint by Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1989.
   Jacob Van Hinte, Netherlanders in America. Translated from the Dutch. Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1985.
   A.J. Pieters. A Dutch Settlement in Michigan. The Reformed Press, Grand Rapids, 1923.

2. The census taken by Bernardus Grootenhuis listing all persons in the Kolonie by name in 1850 can be found in Hope College's Van Wylen Library, Archives.

3. Gordon W. Kirk, Jr., The Promise of American Life. The American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, 1978.

4. The Board of Trade Brochure can be found in the Archives at Van Wylen Library, Hope College, Holland, MI. It is dated 1912. Its many pictures give a good conception of buildings in Holland in 1912.

5. Donald van Reken and Randall P. Vande Water, Holland Furnace Company. Privately printed, 1993.

6. Michigan History. Vol. 31 (1947). P. 414.