**Example of Dutch Settlement in Grand Rapids** **Henry Ippel**

**The Brickyard**

An area in Grand Rapids, Michigan, increasingly populated by residents of Dutch descent in the last quarter of the 19th century, was called the "Brickyard." It is a rather peculiar, yet descriptive, name for what was then the eastern edge of the city. Already in 1852, the demand for bricks in the growing city encouraged the establishment of a brick factory utilizing the clay found on the eastern fringe of the city. Shortly after the Civil War, more factories were formed, one by three Dutch entrepreneurs, Martin Klaassen, Anthony De Heus and Frank Overbeek. By 1890 there were three substantial brick and tile manufacturers listed in the city directory and five years later these companies were united into the Grand Rapids Consolidated Brick and Tile Company which continued brick making in this area into the 20th century.[1] This concentration of kilns, storage sheds and clay pits therefore earned for the eastern portion of Grand Rapids the popular name "Brickyard," pronounced "Brikyaat" by the Dutch and Cegielnia (tseh-gel-nyah) by the Polish.[2]

The city of Grand Rapids, like many other American communities, experienced spectacular expansion in the last quarter of the 19th century. By 1900, Grand Rapids had 55,000 more people than it had twenty years earlier. In these two decades Dutch immigrants were a significant portion of that growth so that by the turn of the century, as David Vanderstel has written, "There were in excess of 23,000 Dutch individuals in the city or 27

percent of the total population."[3] The Brickyard became a popular place for the settlement of Dutch families after it was incorporated into the city in 1891 and residential plots were laid out in the areas not used by the brick makers. Its proximity to the city and easy access to the downtown business and shopping center as well as factories made it an appealing community. A mile and a half walk to and from one's place of employment or the larger retail stores was not considered too taxing, even after a ten-hour day at the counter or assembly line. Moreover, cheap housing was available on narrow streets and alleys on small lots. Remnants of the Dutch settlement are still evident in the street names where real estate developers were opening up new plots--streets named Holland, Zeeland, Van Dine, Stormzand, Doezema, Barendse, Vanden Berg Kornoelje and Maris. Indeed of the nineteen street names which appear to have a Dutch or Netherlandic connection in the Grand Rapids Directory of 1900, nine are found in the Brickyard and the other ten scattered throughout the city.

Actually the Dutch enclave was only a small part of the Brickyard. In fact, the Dutch were primarily concentrated within a three- or four-block area on the south and north side of a main thoroughfare, Fulton Road. To the north of this enclave was the Polish population who referred to their neighbors as the "Hollandria."[4]

This island on the eastern edge of the city possessed more cohesion than simply the fact that the people lived in close proximity to each other. Such proximity is difficult to imagine today, except in tenement house districts or modern high-rise developments or the teeming concentrations in third world countries. In 1900, for instance, Doezema Alley had thirty

homes, twenty-eight of which were occupied by Dutch families, or Barendse Court with twenty homes, sixteen occupied by Dutch families or Dennis Street with twelve homes all occupied by the Dutch. Vanderstel has described a portion of the Brickyard--an 800-food square area clustering 103 Dutch households--he calls it "the most densely populated Dutch section of the city of Grand Rapids."[5]

A further factor in establishing strong communal ties was the provincial and gemeente origins of the residents. Vanderstel's research concludes that the "neighborhood possessed an overwhelmingly Zeelandsche character." This was popular knowledge as well; just as the Dutch in Grand Rapids knew of their fellow citizens living in the Brickyard, so too they were aware that this community was to a large degree "Zeeuws." Moreover, because at the time of the 1900 enumeration, over 60 percent of the resident Dutch households had emigrated since 1880, their ties were still very strong with the Dutch homeland. Undoubtedly these ties were most evident in the predominant language and dialect spoken in the Brickyard. "Americans" or Polish folk venturing on the streets or into the neighborhood stores would immediately be aware that they had entered a Dutch ghetto.

The insular character of the community was enhanced by the numerous businesses operated by their fellow Dutchmen. Dutch residents had no urgency to go far afield for groceries, meat and basic staples or services. These were all available within the community. At the turn of the century the Brickyard and sixteen grocery stores run by Dutchmen on the main thoroughfare, Fulton Road, and in simple front room shops on nearby alleys. The Buys general store, for instance, was the major "emporium" featuring not

The church was also concerned about its neighborhood. An attempt was made to close the saloon on Fulton Street and a ban was also sought on the sale of peanuts and ice cream by street vendors on the Sabbath.[13]

How long did this cohesive Dutch settlement in the Brickyard remain? What indications do we have that the ethnic community was breaking apart?

Vanderstel, you recall, identified an 800-foot square area which contained 103 Dutch households in 1900. By 1910 the number of households had increased to 146. After that date there was a steady decrease for several decades. In 1920, 130 households; in 1930, 117 households; in 1940, 116 households (thirteen more than in 1900!). Then in the post-World War II era, the number of households decreased dramatically. By 1950 there were 77; in 1960, 53 and in 1970, only 36 of the households in this area were occupied by families with Dutch names.[14]

Using the available membership statistics of Dennis Avenue Christian Reformed Church, we can obtain answers as well to these questions. For instance, in 1920, twenty-five years after the organization of the church, 900 of the 1,100 members still lived in the Brickyard area. By 1930, 700 of the 1,000 members had residence in the Brickyard; by 1940, 600 of the 870 members remained in the area and by 1953, 450 of the 885 members' homes were in the Brickyard. Or if we look at some of the streets where so many of the members resided we see a similar decline. In 1920 Mack Avenue, which was actually a narrow alley, had twenty-six families; in 1930, there were twelve families and in 1953, eight families. Baldwin Street which was very close to the church and Christian school, had eighty-three members in 1920 and

fifty-five in 1930 and Stormzand Court, another narrow alley, had forty-three members in 1920 and only eight in 1930.[15] Fewer and fewer of the church families were living in close proximity to the church and school. The close-knit community was breaking apart. Families were relocating eastward as new real estate developments opened up and were scattering to more desirable areas made accessible when automobiles became more popular and available.

The removal of the Dutch from the Brickyard was not always reflected in the business enterprises in the area. In 1920 the Dutch monopolized the business activity much as they had twenty years before. There were a few changes: a garage, several electrical stores, a jewelry, and men and women's apparel had hung out their shingles, but the only non-Dutch businesses were a Purity Tea Grocery and an "A & P" store. By 1930 a few more changes: a dentist, two physicians, dry cleaning establishments, real estate offices, but the only non-Dutch were five chain grocery stores and a Loveland's Drug Store. By 1950, however, the number of non-Dutch businesses had definitely increased and this trend continued in the post-World World II era.[16]

Obviously it is more difficult for businesses to relocate and moreover it was not necessary for them to do so because the population in the area, although decreasingly Dutch, was still stable and goods and services were still required in the community. The new generation Dutch families however were affected by the American dream. The predominant language of the area was no longer Dutch, the number of heads of families working in factories was decreasing, the affluence which came in the post-World War II era were

evident signs that change had occurred in the Dutch population. This change also motivated relocation to more commodious homes, with larger lots, with a place to store their automobile. And their institutions followed them. By 1955 the Baldwin Street Christian School and the Dennis Avenue Christian Reformed Church had left for a location a mile or so distant from the Brickyard and in 1968 the Third Reformed Church no longer felt comfortable in its old Brickyard location and also moved. Only the original English-speaking Bethany Reformed Church remained although it had long ceased to be a parish church. And this past summer it too decided to relocate and so the Brickyard has lot its last Dutch Reformed witness!

The Dutch enclave in the Brickyard is no more. The churches and school established by the Dutch are no longer located here. Only seven elderly members of the former Dennis Avenue church have their residence here. The Dutch names on the store buildings along Fulton Street have dwindled to two --a bakery and a garage. No longer are the Dutch in Grand Rapids concentrated in areas such as the Brickyard.

## END NOTES

1. Grand Rapids City Directory, 1859-1900.

2. Eduard Adam Skendzel, "Mme. Lipezynshi--Queen of the Poles," Grand River Valley History, X, No. 2, Spring (1992). Pp. 2, 6, 7.

3. David G. Vanderstel, The Dutch of Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1848-1900: Immigrant Neighborhood and Community Development in a Nineteenth Century City. (Ph.D. Dissertation, Kent State University, 1983). Pp. 146-47.

4. Skendzel, P. 2.

5. Vanderstel, P. 238.

6. Grand Rapids City Directory, 1900.

7. Third Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan, History of Third Reformed Church (Centennial Year, 1975). Pp. 1, 3.

8. A brief history by Willard Ver Meulen, The History of Bethany Reformed Church (1893).

9. The history of the Dennis Avenue Christian Reformed Church is chronicled in A Century of Work and Worship: Dennis Avenue-Mayfair Christian Reformed Church, 1893-1993 (1993).

10. The Baldwin Christian School history is found in 100 Years--His Abiding Love, Creston-Mayfield Christian School, 1890-1990. Pp. 5, 6, 7.

11. Grand Rapids City Directory, 1920.

12. A Century of Work and Worship, Pp. 10, 15.

13. Ibid., Pp. 12, 15, 99.

14. Grand Rapids City Directory, 1910, 1920, 1930, 1940, 1950, 1960, 1970.

15. Dennis Avenue Christian Reformed Church Directory, 1920, 1930, 1940, 1953.

16. Grand Rapids City Directory, 1920, 1930, 1950.