Prinsburg, Minnesota - A Study in Ethnic Purity on the Prairie

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Prinsburg, Minnesota: Population 550, one Christian school, two churches (one denomination), a large grain elevator, one gas station, one bank, one cafe, one firehouse, one tile plant, some contractors, and several turkey barns.

Prinsburg is located one hundred miles due west of Minneapolis, Minnesota. The terrain is relatively flat with heavy soil. Before extensive ditching projects were completed much of the area was wetland. It is located thirty miles north of the Minnesota River on a transitional plain which leads to the lake and forest region of Central Minnesota.

The Dutch were led to the area through the promotional efforts of the Prins & Zwanenburg Company of Groningen, the Netherlands. These financiers were active throughout Europe as immigration agents for several American railroad companies. One client was the Milwaukee Road. This company held extensive land grants throughout Iowa, Minnesota and Dakota. One of its Minnesota claims included tens of thousands of acres along a line roughly parallel to the Minnesota River.

Prins & Zwanenburg were represented in Central Minnesota by a trio of young entrepreneurs: Martin W. Prins Jr., Theodore F. Koch, and Nils C. Frederiksen. During the fall of 1884 these three promoters assumed control over 34,000 acres of land located in four townships in three different counties. While the land they bought was actually owned by another railroad, the Milwaukee Road stood to gain since the settlers would live

within a morning's walk of its tracks. And the land dealers would bring prospective buyers to the site on Milwaukee Road trains.[1]

The actual townsite was selected during the summer of 1885 after several families had already moved into the area. The plat filed in Kandiyohi County on January 2, 1886 called for a town of standard dimensions: 16 square blocks separated by 66-foot wide streets, 60x140 foot residential lots and 30x140 commercial lots. The streets were assigned names familiar to Dutch immigrants: Rembrandt, Da Costa, Bilderdyk, Rubbens, and Groninger. The first mention of the town in advertisements referred to it as "Prinsville" and "Prince Town." "Prinsburg" was chosen as a condensation of the Dutch banking house's name.[2]

The town was eleven miles north of the Milwaukee Road and fourteen miles south of the St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba Railroad. Early settlers envisioned a north-south railroad cutting through the town, but that never materialized. No railroad came to the village until 1922, when the Minnesota Western was built from Minneapolis toward South Dakota. This modest rail line served Prinsburg for approximately forty years before abandonment. Its only real impact on the development of the town was to determine the location of the grain elevator and the retail businesses which usually neighbored these structures in the towns of the Great Plains.

Prinsburg's physical isolation prevented it from attracting the usual platoon of Yankee entrepreneurs who inhabited the Main Streets of the Midwest during this period.[3] The town never developed the way Prins and Koch envisioned. It had sporadic direct mail service for its first thirty years of existence. Seldom was there ever more than a lone general store and a blacksmith shop as retail and service trade within the colony was drawn to nearby railroad towns--first Olivia and Renville to the south and

later Clara City and Raymond to the west. Residential development also proved to be a disappointment. The original plat was vacated in 1914 as the church became the focus of the town, rather than the unsalable Main Street lots.[4]

A church, a few homes, and a store, no railroad within miles, and only primitive dirt roads leading to it. These physical realities served to make Prinsburg the sort of place one would go only for a very specific reason. And there was really only one reason to go there, to attend church.

Prinsburg was supposed to be a Dutch enclave. It was envisioned and promoted as such from the very start. Prins and Koch chose the area specifically because the soil conditions were supposed to resemble those in the Netherlands. The early propaganda claimed the climate also resembled the old country. Even before there was a settler on the site, Prins and Koch called the township "Friesland." When settlers actually organized the local government they opted for the name "Holland Township."[5] The city of Prinsburg was incorporated in 1922.

Endorsement letters written by Dutch dominies were prominently displayed in the advertisements. When prospective buyers arrived on the trains, a Dutch salesman greeted them at the Olivia depot and escorted them through the territory, assiduously steering the prospects over the trackless prairie to the proper township site.

Many disputed the early claims of the area's suitability. Furthermore Prins and Koch controlled only odd-numbered sections of land. Opponents of the new settlement feared that the Dutch would be absorbed into a sea of "foreigners" when the even-numbered sections were bought. The threat seemed plausible since there were already Germans, Norwegians, Swedes and Bohemians

in the area. To alleviate these fears, Theodore Koch bought most of the state lands in the vicinity and offered them to the Dutch.[6]

A Dutch town, with a Dutch church and Dutch neighbors--all at an affordable price. This was a very powerful magnet which drew dozens of families from older Dutch settlements, especially in western Michigan, northern Illinois, eastern Wisconsin and southeastern Minnesota.

After the initial successes, more Hollanders came to the area as experience proved that despite the horrors of the Minnesota winters, the climate and soil ensured a reliable harvest. A plat map of the township Opublished in 1905 listed land owners with almost exclusively Dutch surnames, except on the sections which formed the eastern and southern perimeters of the township. In that nether world were a couple of Swedes, Germans and Yankees. A Lutheran church was timidly placed just over the line in another county.[7]

This ethnic concentration of land ownership helped create a high degree of cultural isolation in Holland Township.

Prinsburg's promoters went to great lengths to assure prospective settlers that they would live only among their follow countrymen. One incentive offered from the beginning was Dutch churches. Within months of the arrival of settlers, the process of organizing congregations began. Ministers from both major Dutch denominations were early buyers in the area. Early settlers and salesmen were often chosen for their demonstrated leadership in their churches as well as their ability to farm.[8]

Prins and Koch gave free excursions to ministers who would inspect the land and report their findings in the Dutch language press. In addition the dealers promised to finance farms for ten years at 7 percent. Once twenty families were in the area, the company offered to underwrite the

construction of a church. Four times they were obliged to fulfill the promise to congregations in the Prinsburg area.[9]

The presence of a Dutch church served as proof that a real settlement had been born. This in turn diverted others from settling in other new communities on the Plains. When the Dakota, Nebraska and Kansas settlements experienced drought and financial troubles in the 1890s, Prinsburg loomed even larger as a desirable location for those hoping to develop family farm operations.

But the forces which enabled Prinsburg to include more Hollanders also served to cut it off from non-Hollanders. The lack of anything but Dutch services and Dutch businesses and Dutch farmers presented a formidable barrier to anything but Dutch settlement.

Those of the Dutch who did not conform to the religious norms of the community found themselves isolated. One family affiliated with the Unitarian church. They promoted a Unitarian Sunday school and took a certain delight in challenging the sensibilities of their more traditional neighbors. Another dissenter described his orthodox neighbors as "smug," "complacent," and withdrawn "into their tight little communities where they talked and listened only to each other."[10]

Driven in part by the presence of theological "undesirables" the Prinsburg Christian Reformed Church supported the establishment of a Christian school in 1910. The Christian school continued to supplant the public schools until the last one in the Prinsburg district closed during the 1960s.[11]

Thus families with school-age children who were not of the Dutch community faced a great obstacle to adequately educating their children. Their alternative was to locate closer to those areas which still supported

public education. Clara City, a railroad town founded by Koch seven miles to the west of Prinsburg, as well as towns such as Renville and Olivia were more likely to receive those non-Hollanders interested in living in the area, or those Hollanders not interested in Christian education.

The labor intensive agricultural methods which prevailed until well into the 1930s encouraged large families. These large families in turn enabled the Christian school to grow, which in turn helped Prinsburg Christian Reformed Church to flourish, which in turn allowed Prinsburg to remain an exclusively Dutch community for many decades.

Another crucial factor in Prinsburg's staying power has been the economic prosperity the area enjoyed. When Prins and Zwanenburg claimed the area to be a farmer's paradise they were not dealing solely in hyperbole. Early visitors reported digging test holes and discovering two feet or more of high quality topsoil with a hard clay substratum which held rainwater well. As Theodore F. Koch expanded the colony, he arranged to ditch much of the marsh land, creating even more of this phenomenally fertile farm land.[12]

In addition Prinsburg was growing as a farm community at the moment that Minneapolis and St. Paul were burgeoning into major commercial and food processing centers. Its proximity to the Twin Cities made it a part of the new commercial patterns developing in the Upper Midwest, giving the Prinsburg farmers an economic boost which none of their Dutch countrymen could duplicate anywhere else in the prairie settlements which developed in the 1880s and 1890s.

Many of those who first came to Prinsburg were not recent arrivals or poverty stricken refugees. Instead they were Hollanders, who wishing to remain farmers and seeing prospects for their sons dwindling as the price of land climbed in places like Chicago, sold their Illinois lands for a

sizeable profit and headed off to Minnesota. Selling their lands for $200 per acre they bought Prins and Zwanenburg's land for $8. Koch emphasized the family side of the equation, pointing out that a father with cash from Illinois land could easily afford to buy enough in Minnesota to set up himself and his sons, develop the land, erect the necessary buildings, and do it all for cash.

The Prinsburgers were a tough lot as well, people who were driven to succeed by a number of factors. They wanted to prove they could succeed in a place that the Norwegians and Swedes were leery of settling. Their Calvinist religious convictions equated faith and work as essentially one. The hardships which they had to overcome in the early years, especially during the first winters, were often as daunting as any group of pioneers had faced. Blizzards, bugs, sod huts, prairie fires, the entire catalog was part of their trial, their "starving time." But they did not leave.[13]

On a less exalted level the development of the milling business in Minneapolis gave the Prinsburgers a ready market for their wheat and other grains. They saved large sums in transportation costs, and thus increased their profits. The Twin Cities market became even more accessible when in 1887 James J. Hill further extended his empire into the region by building a new line which passed a mere seven miles from Prinsburg. Through arrangement with Hill, Koch secured rail service for the colony at Clara City, a great improvement for those living in the western part of the colony.

These significant improvements in profit margins allowed the Prinsburgers to experiment as markets and technology changed. As the wheat belt moved west and north into the Dakotas and the Red River Valley, they turned to other crops and different products, such as sugar beets and

turkeys, and after the Second World War the soybean. Others signed on with Minnesota Valley Canneries to grow sweet corn and peas.

As technology created a labor surplus other Prinsburgers looked to moving dirt for other than agricultural purposes. Beginning in the 1950s the Duininck Brothers Company developed into one of the largest highway construction firms in the Midwest, eventually expanding their operations as far afield as the Caribbean and Texas. Along with this excavation company, a drainage tile plant opened. Others started a business building steel farm buildings. The town ceased to be only a church and school town, or retirement village, it also became the home of construction foremen and the clerical staff which balanced the books of the construction companies.

This prosperity, based first of all on agriculture and later on other income sources, enabled the Prinsburgers to weather the Depression and other agricultural crises of the last sixty years with fewer problems than many other rural communities experienced.

Finally, Prinsburg has been characterized by a remarkable degree of social cohesion.

A glance at the current telephone directory as well as a glance at a list of land buyers Prins and Koch published in 1887 shows a remarkable continuity of family names. As one would expect in a rural ethnic community such as Prinsburg, an incredibly complex interrelationship has developed through the years. It's the sort of place where "everyone is related to everyone." One learns to be very careful about what one says about whomever, simply because the one to whom you are talking is probably a relative of "whomever." While many find this stultifying, it is also one of Prinsburg's sources of strength. Those who can accept this will stay, those who cannot will probably leave.

Prinsburg is a place where people have consciously chosen to stay. The construction companies have maintained their bases there, even when the bulk of their business may be elsewhere. This desire to stay is inextricably bound up with the Dutchness which has characterized it from the beginning. It is the Dutchness which makes the Prinsburgers feel as if this is home.

As is the case in all rural communities the economic realities have driven many away. From Prinsburg the first stop was often Willmar to the north, which spawned a Christian Reformed church in the 1950s. And there is Minneapolis to the east. Others have left to go to college in the expected places (Sioux Center and Grand Rapids) never to return.

But for those who have stayed life has not changed that terribly much. There are now two churches in Prinsburg, a sign that all has not been harmonious. But to which ever congregation one belongs, Sunday morning still ends at a relative's house for coffee. And the conversation will still be about the relatives and the minister, the obituaries and the births, which teachers will be staying at the Christian school next year, and which ones will go elsewhere.

This also provides a formidable defense against outside intrusion. Since most everyone knows where they fit in Prinsburg's social structure, it is difficult for newcomers, especially those who have not married into the community, to feel completely at home. The social support system which has helped the community weather all the storms, be they natural, social, religious, or economic, has made it self-assured. This self-assurance has made it durable and adaptable. But it has also made it a community set off from its neighbors. Its neighbors look at it with a combination of curiosity, envy, suspicion and admiration.

On July 2, 1885 a group of Hollanders stood on a trackless prairie. The surveyor marks indicated this spot as the Southwest Quarter of the

Southwest Quarter, Section 15, Township 117 North, Range 36 West of the Fifth Principal Meridian. They stood in the middle of what was going to be the main street of a new town, took off their hats and sang in unison two verses from the Psalms: "May the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion." (134:3) and "Remember, O Lord, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old." (25:6). They also sang the first verse of the Neerland's Volkslied. The purpose of the little service was "to as it were dedicate this ground to be a place for Hollanders."[14]

Section 15, Township 117 North, Range 36 West is still Dutch. It is the geographical center of Holland Township, the City of Prinsburg, Minnesota. From Brouwer and Breems to Wieberdink and Wubben for more than one hundred years the Dutch settlers have stayed on this land, five generations in one place. This is a remarkable achievement. In their minds the Maker of heaven and earth has, indeed, blessed them. Their fierce desire to keep what they inherited materially and spiritually has enabled them to stay rooted in the colony which Martin Prins and Theodore Koch envisioned as a little bit of Holland on the Minnesota prairies. Prinsburg is a monument to those who two visionaries, but even more it is a monument to the faith, tenacity and determination of the generations of Dutch Calvinists who knew that they were unique, liked it, and wanted to stay that way.

END NOTES

1. For a more detailed description of the promotional activities used by the firms of Prins & Zwanenburg, Prins & Koch, and Frederiksen, Prins & Koch to promote Dutch settlement in Minnesota see Robert Schoone-Jongen, "Cheap Land and Community: Theodore F. Koch, Dutch Colonizer," Minnesota History, Summer 1993. Pp. 214-24.

2. "Prince Town," De Volksvriend, July 9, 1885 and Theodore F. Koch, The Memoirs of Theodore F. Koch. (Typescript original in the Collection of the riviera Historical Museum, Riviera, Texas). Volume I, P. 66.

3. For a more complete study of the development of prairie towns, see Hudson, John C., Plains Country Towns. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1985. A town such as Prinsburg is classified as an "inland hamlet" by Hudson. These towns which failed to attract rail service were generally condemned to extinction unless some other factor intervened, such as the presence of a church.

4. Polk, R.L. and Co., R.L. Polk's Minnesota Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1890-1914. St. Paul: R.L. Polk & Co. (Biennial) Minnesota Historical Society Collection.

5. De Volksvriend, May 28, 1885, contained a lengthy account of a visit the editor made to the "New Dutch Colony." The article refers to the colony as lying in Smaland, Grundtvig, Friesland, and Winfield townships. Winfield Township had been settled and organized in 1879. The proposed names for the other three illustrated Prins & Zwanenburg's desire to sell land to various ethnic groups. Smaland is a province in Sweden. Grundtvig was a Danish preacher whose followers had purchased land from Nils Frederiksen in Lincoln County, Minnesota. Friesland was advertised as being the township set aside especially for Hollanders. When the local governments were organized the settlers used different names. Smaland became Roseland, Grundtvig became Rheiderland, and Friesland became Holland Township. Upham, Warren, Minnesota Geographic Names-Their Origins and Historic Significance. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1969. Pp. 105, 270, 271, 459.

6. De Volksvriend, May 28, 1885. Koch, Memoirs Vol. 1, p. 61. Minnesota State Land Office, Record of Sales for Chippewa, Kandiyohi, and Renville Counties. Minnesota Historical Society Collections. (Photocopies of relevant records in author's private collection.)

7. _____, The Illustrated History of Kanfiyohi County. 1905. P. 258.

8. Albert Kleinhuizen was the first Dutch buyer in the Prinsburg colony. Kleinhuizen came from the Dutch settlement of Roseland, Cook County, Illinois. He served as a recruiter for Koch and Prins and was the founding elder of the Prinsburg Christian Reformed Church.

9. The promise of help in church construction does not appear to have arisen from the personal religious convictions of the promoters. Theodore Koch was a Unitarian, although he had belonged to the Hervormde Kerk in The Netherlands. (cf. Koch, Memoirs, Vol. 1, p. 14.) He refers to being taught catechism by a "modern" minister in the city of Arnhem. Koch built at least two Catholic churches in his Texas colony at Riviera, a project heavily supported by the Catholic Colonization Society. (Koch, Memoirs, Vol. 3, pp. 58-60.) Also, when Koch died in 1940 the funeral service was conducted at the Unity Church in St. Paul, Minnesota (cf. "T.F. Koch, Former Dutch Consul, Dies in Texas." St. Paul Pioneer Press, Sept. 20, 1940, p. 9, and "Funeral Service for Theodore F. Koch" (typescript original in the collection of the Riviera Historical Museum, Riviera, Texas.)

10. Mork, June Molenaar, "The Dutch Immigrants." Kandi Express, May 1981, pp. 12-13. "Memoirs of Garritt E. Roelofs," Kandi Express, May 1981, p. 13. Mariel Molenaar Felt, "My Dutch Grandparents." Kandi Express, March 1984, pp. 6-8.

11. During the 1992-1993 school year, there were 183 pupils in the Prinsburg public school district. One hundred and sixty-five of these children were enrolled in Central Minnesota Christian School (letter from District Administrator to author, February 17, 1993). The other eighteen students were enrolled in the schools of the surrounding districts.

12. De Volksvriend, May 21, 1885.

13. Koch, Theodore F., "Remember the 82 Sets of Company Houses in '87?" Clara City Herald, June 25, 1937. _____, "Fifty Years Ago," Clara City Herald, June 25, 1937.

14. De Volksvriend, July 9, 1885.