The Dutch of Highland, Indiana

David L. Zandstra

Today Highland, Indiana is engulfed in the vast urban sprawl of greater Chicagoland. If a driver is not observant while speeding on the Expressway I-80/94, Highland can be missed altogether. Highland, a town of nearly 25,000, is tucked near the Indiana/Illinois state line. An off ramp sign is all my town merits. Highland is but one of many similar towns and small cities that stretch continuously around the lower end of Lake Michigan. Currently Highland provides addresses for people whose employment is generated by the industrial and business complexes of Chicago and northwest Indiana. The population is of mixed pedigree, concentrating on various eastern European groups. The Dutch comprise perhaps 10% of the total (optimistically). Highland is a stable and prosperous town, only a fraction of which is now Dutch. While never considered as provincial Dutch as South Holland, Highland has had a strong Dutch influence for a hundred years. Today many of the leading businesses and civic leaders are of Dutch ancestry. Two Christian Reformed churches and a Christian school also maintain a high visibility for the Dutch of Highland.

The strength and continued viability of the dutch in Highland has been their ability to maintain their religious and educational commitment while at the same time accommodating to a sometimes rapidly changing environment of employment, business and neighbors. They could not afford an extended provincial existence.

There was a time not too long ago (till about 1950) when Highland was a small rural village dominated by its Dutch truck gardeners, noted for their stability and lack of color. But to more fully grasp the evolution of

Highland from an aboriginal trail to the bedroom community of today, two separate courses of events, often entwined, must be understood. First, the development of the ridge towns by the Dutch market gardeners, beginning in the 1840s in South Holland and ending about 1900 in Highland and Ross. (Ross was an unincorporated area just east of Highland.) Second, the industrial development in the Calumet region and Chicago of petroleum refineries, steel mills and other environmentally degrading factories. These two regional factors will be the basis for my remarks about the story of Highland.

Highland's specific story can perhaps be visualized as a three act play. Act one begins in the late Pleistocene Age and extends to about 1900. This is the setting. A brief lesson in regional geography is needed here to correctly see how all succeeding historical events have been influenced. During the Wisconsin glacial age, it is said, a younger and much higher Lake Michigan left a series of beaches, some well inland from its present site. These abandoned sand dunes became tree covered and stood in stark contrast to the surrounding swamps and shallow lakes of the entire area, including present Chicago. One of these dunes or ridges became the ridge road of the Calumet region. It made east/west transportation possible through otherwise trackless swamps. An early government surveyor, traveling in winter over the ice described the local area of Highland as unrecoverable marsh land. Highland's name is derived from notations on railroad surveyors' maps drawn in the 1880s. It was first spelled with an "s" at the end. After struggling through miles of swamp, they reached the sand ridge and were able to rest their feet on dry ground. It was along that sand ridge trail that the small Dutch communities of Lansing, Munster, and Highland would grow. It's name not withstanding, Highland is a low and flat abandoned lake bottom

with a narrow but high sandbank crossing it. Perhaps you may recall the serious flooding in Highland along the Little Calumet River three years ago.

Ditching and drainage, begun after the Civil War, was done by Aaron Hart, a grand scale land speculator. He realized that most of his vast swamplands could be dried enough to sell as farmland. The east-west sand ridge running through Highland acted as a natural dam. He made the cut on Highland's west edge through the ridge. Other lateral ditches were then connected to the Hart ditch to complete the project. The Dutch contribution was to deepen the cut through the sand ridge after the death of Aaron Hart. Skid boxes drawn by teams of oxen completed the removal of the sand from that trench.

The first act's historic era began in the 1840s. Highland, like most local Dutch towns, was not initially settled by the Dutch. (They did give these towns their character however.) During that time only a couple of families who owed their livelihood to subsistence farming, hunting, and trapping lived in Highland. It was the frontier. Isolation was real. The first Dutch arrived in the Calumet region in 1848 establishing the town of South Holland where they engaged in near subsistence grain and dairy farming. In subsequent years new colonies were formed in an eastward movement following the ridge trail. New immigrants and some earlier settlers would move to a site a few miles away and establish a new town built around their church. One local historian refers to this as "swarming" as bees periodically do. Roughly every ten years this kind of event happened. The town previous to Highland was Munster which also served as its mother. Highland people first attended church in Munster and jointly operated a Christian school with the Munster group for one year.

Act two of Highland's history opens in the 1890s. Dutch began purchasing land east of Munster in an area known as Highlands. They came

because it was near their fellow countrymen and in virgin condition. The town had been platted in 1884 by a local "American" entrepreneur--John Clough--who saw a future town in the country where a major wagon trail and a new railroad (1883) intersected. His street names are found in the oldest part of town. However twenty five years were to pass before a real town was organized.

The earliest Dutch arriving in Highland were a dissident lot lead by a divisive man named Jacob Schoon who established what could be described as a private church. He propounded a brand of Calvinism that is difficult to classify but was built about the idea of each member owning a part of the church. Their inability to associate with others led to their inability to associate with each other. By 1900 it more or less ceased to function. Some Dutch joined the local People's Church. (Later that congregation split into Baptist and Presbyterian churches. So today there are a few Dutch families in those two congregations.) The small edifice constructed by Schoon however had a very bright future. It became the first building of the Christian Reformed church and later the Christian school building. (There I attended first grade.)

Most of the Dutch led a separate but parallel existence with the "American" neighbors. Isolated by religious beliefs, a separate school, language, and partially by occupation, their involvement was limited to business and civic affairs. In 1908 these Dutch settlers organized a congregation and began holding services in the unused Schoon church. The following year a much larger sanctuary was constructed and the old building was converted into a Christian school in 1909. The next year, 1910, the town of Highlands was incorporated. There were three hundred persons within the town limits. Of the six elected officials, one was Dutch. In succeeding elections, the Dutch even with strong majorities in the

electorate, seldom bothered to nominate more than one of their group for public office. The early business district consisted of two vegetable processing plants, a kraut factory and the Meeter Pickle Factory; two churches, Peoples Church and the Dutch Christian Reformed Church; a blacksmith shop opened by John Kortenhoven; two general stores, an American owned business and the Groot and Harkema store; two schools, the public school and the local Dutch Christian school; two train depots; several homes and considerable pasture. The Farmers and Merchants Bank, owned by Hank Van Till and John Groot, was added in 1914.

At the same time that Dutch began settling in Highland, two other factors occurred that mightily influenced the entire Calumet region and particularly the Dutch farmers to grow numerically and prosper financially--the development of the onion set industry and the steel industry.

While looking for new crops, farmers in South Holland experimented with the production of onion sets. The onion is a biennial plant that the Dutch growers modified to produce a large edible bulb the second season instead of a seed head. While using some of the sets for their own gardens, most were sold across the continent to other onion growers. A local industry, complete with its own marketing agents and even the inventing of machinery, quickly evolved. During the 1930s and 1940s over 75% of the world supply was produced in the Calumet region, Highland contributing its share too. Even today remnants of this former monopoly still operate. This was, in my estimation, the most creative era of the Dutch gardeners and probably the most financially rewarding. If the old bromide "necessity is the mother of invention" is so, the production of onion sets is classic proof. While quite profitable, the raising of onion sets was very labor intensive and back breaking work. Machinery and tools to speed up or eliminate hand labor were invented by several growers and then sold to others. Personally

speaking, the least satisfying task was weeding the seedlings. Crawling on ones knees day after day under a relentless sun while slowly moving across an endless sea of green gave me a vision of what eternal damnation is about. It was truly a religious experience. It also helped catapult many young men away from farming to any other occupation some became ministers. Later when I read of the curse placed on Sisyphus in Greek mythology, I became convinced that the Greeks too had once raised onions or perhaps were Chicago Cub fans.

At the turn of the century the captains of the American steel industry selected the southern tip of Lake Michigan as the prime site for their new and greater mills. That location was and is close to the industrial heartland of the USA. Also iron ore was easily available by lake freighter, coal was available by rail from Midwest mines, and limestone was close at hand in local quarries. The South Works, US Steel Gary, Inland Steel, and others located there. These labor intensive industries drew large numbers of immigrants seeking employment. Several working class cities sprang up in a matter of years. The Dutch who disliked factory work welcomed this change because all those neighborhoods became peddling routes for their produce. The growers in Highland had been raising cabbage, tomatoes, onions, and sugar beets for years, supplying on contract their harvest to factories such as the kraut works of the Libbey Company in Highland. Poor or nonexistent roads prevented them from supplying the Chicago markets. Also Roseland, the Dutch community near Pullman on the city's far south side had historically done that. However with a vastly increased tax base of the steel mills, the subsequent road improvements gave the Highland farmers access to the Chicago markets as well. At the same time the Roseland vegetable gardens were being converted into subdivisions.

It was the steel mills that radically changed the Dutch enclave of Highland (as well as the other Dutch towns). Not only did they give the Dutch a greater degree of prosperity but opened their lives to people, ideas, and values to which most had never been exposed. Eventually it was the mills that also turned the Dutch farms into suburbs of Chicago. A kind of symbiosis occurred between the Dutch and the steel towns. For in addition to a market, these communities also supplied needed labor particularly during the great Depression and the Second World War. A more cosmopolitan attitude toward "outsiders" developed. Delivering produce to homes each day and working in fields with mill workers families softened attitudes of isolation and insulation. Some lifelong friendships developed. When one of Highland's favorite sons, the late Bartel Zandstra, ran for county wide public offices, local political pundits were miffed that a Dutch Protestant farm boy could sweep the solid Polish Catholic precincts of the mill towns. The answer was quite simple. Zandstra and his brothers had peddled many of those neighborhoods and had labored in the vegetable gardens with many of those young men. They simply knew and trusted each other. However the church and school of Highland's Dutch remained sacrosanct.

Life in Highland from its incorporation in 1910 to the end of World War II was mundane Hoosier country with a Dutch twist. Farming activities were predictable day by day, season by season, and year by year. The Dutch maintained their numerical advantage through some immigration and their renowned fecundity. Children, while regarded as a blessing from God, also were cheap field hands in the truck gardens. The Dutch language began to fade, a casualty of World War I. The town's population increased from 300 at the time of incorporation to about 3,500 in 1945. Till then it was possible to recognize everyone in town. The northwest corner of Highland which was mostly pasture for Dutch farmers became Wicker Memorial Park in

1924 when dedicated by Calvin Coolidge to veterans of World War I. It was known as the Dutch park since by default, they had almost exclusive use of it. Each Independence Day and Labor Day a large Dutch festival celebrating Christian schools and foreign missions was held there. They remained popular till the 1950s. Before 1920 both the original church and school buildings were replaced. Contact with the growing non-Dutch element in town was fairly well defined to business transactions, local politics, school yard fights, and farm work. Marrying someone outside the Dutch community was quite rare. Finding someone to marry who was not already a close relative occasionally required looking to other distant Dutch communities as in the days of Abraham and Isaac.

Controversies in the Dutch community usually centered about theology or farming. Religious issues of great import included the use of hymns as well as psalms in church services and the correct order of the eternal decrees of God. The Highland Dutch while enjoying a good verbal fight, were not schismatic in their church allegiances. The church was remodeled and enlarged in 1939. In agriculture the debate was often over the comparative merits of new commercial fertilizer and the traditional manure or whether a motor truck was a superior peddling rig than a horse drawn wagon. Occasionally there were Dutch exoduses of various sizes from Highland and the Calumet region to attempt western farming. The largest occurred during World War I when several families migrated to Montana. They returned poorer but wiser. A Dutch farmer's co-operative trying to unite the membership in common causes and group purchases never really succeeded; by nature the Highlanders trusted few others and preferred privacy in business matters. They feared that if such things were done together, a neighbor might somehow gain some economic advantage.

Declining economic conditions after World War I and the Depression of 1929 forced more and more farmers into other kinds of employment. Skills related to and needed in a rural community such as carpentry and blacksmithing were typical choices. The largest business in town was the Dutch operated Pleasant View Dairy.

Probably the most colorful episode in the Highland Dutch record was the so called Milk War in 1932. Nick E. Leep while setting up what became Pleasant View Dairy, was caught up in a violent confrontation between the producers who needed more money for their milk and several large metropolitan dairies who did not want any more competition. After suffering vandalism to his equipment, mugging of drivers, and threats of violence, the Dutch banded together to pick up and deliver his milk under armed escort. There were even standoffs with guns drawn and a hijacking of trucks. Fortunately no one was killed during the year long episode. But the Dutch were not to be intimidated. Today the dairy continues to prosper.

Act three begins after World War II. In less than 10 years Highland was transformed from a sleepy farm town to a fast growing suburb. The business district along the Old Ridge Road filled with various retail outlets. Land formerly devoted to cabbage, tomatoes and corn was converted to housing subdivisions. Highland's population jumped from 5800 in 1950 to 17,000 in 1960 and reaching its present figure of 25000 by 1970. The growth ceased only because the area was filled up. Nearly all of the new residents were non-Dutch. Most came from old industrial neighborhoods where the Dutch had formerly peddled their produce. With the advent of better incomes and new minorities, those people chose to move south to towns such as Highland. Several new public schools plus a Catholic school were built and other churches were added to serve these new residents. Peddling died with the coming of the super markets and the automobile. Even supplying the Chicago

markets weakened as rail and highway transportation improved, making fresh produce from anywhere available.

Within the Dutch enclave a few immigrant families arrived following World War II. Their added numbers plus a growing resident population led to the construction of a larger Christian school in 1951. Three expansions have been required since to meet the growing student population. A second Christian Reformed church was added in 1953.

At the same time more Dutch, often children of former gardeners, became shop owners and servicemen serving the new urban population of Highland. Others took up employment or started business related to the building boom happening in town and elsewhere. Contractors, electricians, plumbers, carpenters, masons--to mention a few. Some found jobs in the many factories, mills, and stores in the Calumet region; work that traditionally had been shunned by the Dutch. A new Dutch bank, the Bank of Highland, was also organized in 1970. Few moved elsewhere to try farming again.

Internal changes too were evident in the Dutch of Highland. With the collapse of the Roseland Dutch community in the 1960's Highland received several of those displaced families. Also the isolating posture of their churches and the school was modified. As the Dutch became less ethnically isolated, other area residents sought and received entry into Highland Christian school for their children. For their school represented not only a Christian but also a quality education. The churches have in varying degrees pursued community evangelism. Marrying out side of the greater Dutch community is now accepted. As a result a variety of non-Dutch names now appear on the membership rolls of both the school and the churches.

Today the very institutions that historically gave the Dutch of Highland their cultural identity and security, the church and school, have now become the avenues of change that have opened their values to others.

Both institutions continue to serve as the pillars of the Dutch community in Highland. And both are regarded by all of Highland as important town assets. While proud of their strong and separate role in Highland's development, Highland's Dutch are also ready to share and blend with their neighbors to sustain the town's future.