# Holland Home Beginnings: A Gendered Perspective

Suzanne Sinke

In 1892 a group of Dutch American men and women from around Grand Rapids, Michigan drew up the constitution and bylaws for the Holland Union Benevolent Association, a legal step necessary before founding a home for the elderly. The origins of what from the beginning was called the Holland Home were not particularly unusual in light of similar activities in care for the elderly in this period. Yet ideas about gender and ethnicity imbued various aspects of the Holland Home with a Dutch American twist, and help explain its development in subsequent years. They also point to one alternative pattern in the creation of non-profit homes for the elderly. The Holland Home in Grand Rapids became a model for other Holland Homes among Dutch Americans.[1] The Dutch brought with them ideas about elder care which sometimes blended, and other times conflicted with developing American patterns. One aspect of that interplay regarded gender ideology, and that is the story I will tell today, focussing on the first thirty years of the Home's existance.

When the Holland Home came into being its founders based aspects of its organization on several precedents. One came from the Netherlands, where community homes for the poor and aged were commonplace by the mid-1800s. Yet the trustees also wanted a specific religious tie, and hence they used as their model Veldwijk, a Christian home for the mentally ill. The idea was for the two primary Dutch American denominations, the Reformed Church and the Christian Reformed Church, to cooperate in establishing an institution which advanced the basic theology shared by these two groups, and yet was not tied to one denomination, and which would get state support.[2]

On the American side, the precedent was even more specific. The constitution and by-laws of the Dutch group were an almost verbatim copy of those of the Union Benevolent Association (UBA) of Grand Rapids. The UBA began in 1847 when a group of prominent women met to discuss the needs of sick and needy persons in Grand Rapids. The group worked through women's groups in various churches, dividing the town into districts and assigning two visitors for each.[3] When the state opened a school for needy children shortly after the Civil War, the women of the UBA focussed their efforts on a home for the "aged, infirm, and helpless."[4] In 1873 they filed a charter as the Union Benevolent Association. This then was the local predecessor of the Dutch American group.[5]

Several aspects of the UBA highlight gender ideals for the group. The Anglo-American UBA originally consisted only of women. By 1873, when they drew up the by-laws for the new home which would serve both the sick and aged, they stipulated "The number of Trustees of the corporation shall be ten, one-half of whom shall be men and one-half shall be women. . . ."[6] Another section noted that the head of the home would be the Matron, "standing in the same relation to each member of the household as the mother or mistress of a private family"[7] Women continued for some time to handle the visitations and recommendations of persons into the home, the predecessors of social work casework.[8]

By all accounts the driving force behind the Holland Home was Reverend Adriaan Kriekard. Few women took part in the formal organization in 1892. Of the twenty-eight

original subscribers, only four were women, and as far as I was able to discern, all were married to men who were also part of that twenty-eight.[9] That the by-laws called for a board of trustees of twelve, including *one third women* was very unusual among Dutch Americans. In order to even meet that number, one woman had to be summoned from her home to sign the document. Compared to the Union Benevolent Society, where women had organized the association, and then granted men one half the seats, the Dutch American practice was considerably more conservative. Given the role of Dutch American women in reform generally, however, this was a major step. As the editor of *De Standaard* , a local Dutch-language newspaper, wrote of the inclusion of women on the board: "That testifies to real progress among our Dutch people and the framers of the constitution have earned a compliment."[10]

What made the inclusion of women on the board even more astounding was the type of work the board undertook in coming years. It is not surprising that the board operated at least part of the time like a church consistory. The president and vice president were ministers, and several (if not all) of the male board members were on the consistories of their various churches. In the surviving board minutes from the period 1896 onward, the group debated in their monthly and then bi-monthly meetings whether someone should be allowed into the home, partly based on their financial situation, but also on their moral character.[11] Frequently the board took up disciplinary measures concerning "inmates" in the home. In disciplinary matters the board mimicked consistory policies most closely.[12] Rarely did the board have to go beyond a reprimand. But what broke gender traditions among the Dutch Americans was the presence of women at these discussions of disciplinary measures at all. Further, Emma Heyboer, the woman who served the longest in the most positions on the Board in these early years served on the Committee of Inquiry, which did the background research on people seeking admission.

Still, in the early years women's functions on the Board generally were limited to areas considered "women's" concerns. All board members served on at least one committee related to the Home. Women composed the [Home] Management committee for the most part, which oversaw conditions in the home, and complaints about or from staff.[13] This committee could employ cleaning personnel after the full board approved of the financing for this, and they handled which resident went into which room with which roommate, clothing distribution, and funeral arrangements for those without relatives nearby. It reported on deaths, and sometimes on activities in the Home, and its members relieved the house "parents" when they went on vacation. For several years this committee was made up exclusively of women. A related area, another where women actively took part, was the Committee on Necessities, which handled issues of supplies and furnishings. Women were not officers for the board in the first thirty years. Board women's other duty was as liaisons with women's groups in various churches. This they coordinated through the efforts of the Ladies Home Circle, which I will discuss later. In any case the "Lady trustees" as the minutes referred to them by the 1910s, remained limited in the kinds of functions they performed.

Because in nearly all cases the board minutes did not elaborate on who said what or who got involved in issues of debate, I could not discern how active women trustees were in meetings. The chairs gave their committee reports, so at least one woman had to speak at nearly every meeting. All meetings opened and closed with prayer, and women trustees never led these devotions. Neither, however, did most male trustees get the chance. For women, praying in public, that is in mixed company, was still unusual and controversial in Dutch

American churches.[14] For them as well as for most of the men there was also the issue of religious hierarchy. Prayers for the most part in the first twenty years were left to one of the ministers or another religious leader, first Rev. Kriekard, and then his successor Rev. Kolyn or Professor Broene.

The women on the board were not the only ones active with the Home. A women's auxiliary started shortly after the Home opened "'to make life easier for the inmates of the Home.'"[15] The minutes for the group have disappeared up to the 1930s, and the first mention of them in existing board minutes appears in May 1897, when the board thanked the "Ladies Home Circle" for their good services. Thereafter the board thanked the group periodically, though rarely more than once in a year. Like the name Holland Home itself, from the outset the "Ladies Home Circle" sported an English name, despite use of Dutch in its meetings and minutes up through the 1930s. Basically, the group united representatives from various women's circles at the Dutch American churches, particularly in Grand Rapids.[16] The main functions were to promote fundraising among these women's groups, as well as to encourage women to donate goods and time to the Home. Lists of contributors, published in the *Holland Home News* (also in Dutch, despite the name) as well as recorded in trustees' minutes, indicated that various women's groups contributed to the Home periodically.[17] They held "annual" rummage sales, though the existing records do not confirm if they actually were annual. The Ladies' Home Circle took over paying the nurse in 1903, a commitment of fifteen dollars a month. In any case, they were financial contributors to the home on a regular basis by the turn of the century. They even gave "pocket money" to residents who otherwise had none.

When the Home opened its major new facility in 1912, the Ladies Home Circle provided the furniture, household supplies, curtains, bedding and other supplies either directly or through financial gifts which bought most of the furnishings.[18] The group continued to be a major support for furnishings and for volunteers. The Circle also served to bring together the women of various congregations periodically. The December 1917 edition of the *Holland Home News* reported on a recent meeting of the Circle at which seventeen churches had representatives. Each brought a donation, as did a few individuals. In addition the *News* reported how various women had donated a large amount of food to make Thanksgiving a feast for Home members.[19]

The contributions specifically by women's groups, while welcome, were not solicited as assiduously as one might expect. By 1899 the board had hired a fund-raiser working on salary plus commission. How often they had such people on staff was unclear, but frequently there was a man out visiting the various denominational strongholds around the country and sending back funds.[20] One attempt by a woman who had been active with the Home to use her contacts with "hundreds of women" around the country to raise funds for a new building, much along the lines of what took place with children's homes and hospitals, met a quick refusal from the board.[21] Rather, a month later, they hired a local (male) solicitor to do the same--but not targeting women's groups. They later hired other men for similar purposes. So while the Ladies' Home Circle could work to organize women in Grand Rapids churches to assist with the Home, men, not women, were the main target for funding philanthropy as far as the board and the solicitors were concerned.

The thirty-year anniversary celebration booklet for the Home explained that the Ladies Home Circle was the brainchild of Mrs. Izaak De Pagter, Mrs. William Pos, and Mrs. Adriaan Kriekard. That the booklet appeared in English as well as Dutch and referred to the women

using their husband's names revealed something about shifting ideas of gender roles for the immigrant group. In the 1890s, when the Home was founded, married women's names regularly appeared in public documents, including obituaries in Dutch language newspapers as the woman's birth name, a hyphenate, or with the woman's given name, married name, and a "nee" to provide her birth name. To refer to a woman as Mrs. with only her husband's name [Mrs. John de Jong] was not common in Dutch America. The language shift taking place in various Home-related publications included adopting some American norms, naming patterns being one obvious gender role shift.[22] It would not be for another decade before the Ladies Home Circle would shift over to English to take notes, and most of the Home publications remained in Dutch until after World War II. Yet women and men were adopting certain aspects of the surrounding community's norms.

By the 1920s the role of the Ladies' Home Circle was somewhat ambiguous. In particular, the board sought make it an official auxiliary, which would mean loss of some autonomy.[23] Up through 1922, the Circle remained officially outside the Home's formal organization. Its gifts, while numerous, remained gifts which the group donated from time to time, including the salaries which they paid some years. The tri-monthly meetings contrasted with the board's bi-weekly (and frequently more often) gatherings.

In addition to the Ladies' Home Circle the Home in the 1910s also had the "Willing Workers." This young people's group, divided into Men's and Women's categories, performed volunteer tasks and some fundraising, but did not put major emphasis on representatives from each local congregation. It was a common pattern in the two denominations of the time. Young people formed groups where they practiced the patterns of older conduct, but could speak English.[24]

In addition to board trustees, Circle members, and young women's willing workers, a fourth group of women involved with the Holland Home were the staff. Of these, I could uncover the most information on the matron and later nurse, though records note cleaning women who stayed for varying periods of time. On cleaning women the primary characteristic which the board noted was "as cheap as possible." Like many "homes," this one sought a familial atmosphere. But while the Yankee counterpart called only for a matron to serve as the house "mother," the Holland Home constitution called for a matron and superintendent, to act as "parents." The board even referred to the matron and superintendent as "mother" and "father" in many early writings. To fill these roles the board specifically hired couples without young children.

Though the Home did not accept persons with major physical problems requiring special care, the board soon recognized the need for medical assistance on a more than sporadic basis. Local doctors (all male) donated their services, but the board knew from a early date that it would advantageous to hire a nurse. It debated the issue for several years, primarily because of the expense involved. Finally, in 1907 "Miss Kriens" joined the staff. She not only improved medical care and record-keeping, but soon took over the role of mother (and superintendent) as well. Kriens particularly impressed the board when she turned down a raise of five dollars a month (one third of her salary at the time), indicating she was involved in "the service of the Lord."[25] Her Christian attitude in a conflict with the Home "parents" helped create support for her on the board, which dismissed the matron and superintendent and promoted Kriens to "director" of the Home. She remained in this position for several years.

Needless to say this saved a substantial amount of money, but it also indicated a willingness by the board to allow a woman to serve as the head within the Home, at least temporarily. By the time the Home moved to its new quarters in 1912 she was joined by a male superintendent. The board listened to her request for another nurse--one from the Netherlands--and by 1919 the Home had three women nurses working for them.[26] They were paid at the same rate as the janitor.[27] Through these early years, the Home was shifting between an ideal of "parental" supervision and one of expert care. The Dutch pattern was to combine the two, finding persons who would act paternally or maternally, and yet also had the training to fulfill the more demanding tasks.

The other group of women prominent in the history of the Home were "inmates." In the early years men were the majority of the Home residents. The financial policy was one factor in this imbalance. While the Dutch Americans tried to accommodate some less fortunate individuals, most of those accepted into their Home from an early date paid a significant admission fee and/ or agreed to pay a regular upkeep fee (or--frequently--had someone pay for them).[28] Once someone was accepted it was generally for the remainder of that person's life. The contracts stipulated this as well. In practice some people moved out (and on rare occasions back in) as family circumstances changed.

In 1901 the trustees of the Home published a notice aimed at the Dutch congregations of Grand Rapids, indicating they would take someone for one dollar a week. The congregations, in addition, had to agree to hold special collections twice a year for that individual. In practice, however, the minutes from around this time indicated that many people had contracts stipulating $2.50 per week.[29] This combined with competition for space, which was present from the outset, and led to the building of a major new facility in 1912 and its expansion again in 1917.[30] Within the first decade, it was clear that many of the residents of the Home were not poor. Perhaps, given the lack of pensions they would have eventually faced that prospect, but when they entered the Home, many had the wherewithal to pay a substantial sum. Because women generally had fewer financial resources, this meant women were less likely to be able to afford the Home on their own. Those who entered the Holland Home faced strict policies, including ones against strong drink, later one against smoking, and various restrictions on where one could go and when. The board heard complaints on all these policies and others more often than they appreciated. Legally, they could always dismiss a resident, and yet they rarely did even in extreme cases. One exception was a man who complained often and publically about the food at the Home. He was transferred to the county poor house.[31] Women and men residents faced a similar move into dependency when they entered the Home. They had to follow the rules as set by the Home and the requests of the "parents" or face discipline.

In conclusion, this case study shows how one group managed to combine aspects of two cultural traditions, the Dutch idea of religiously-based care with public support, and the American one of female philanthropy. At the Holland Home, women helped launch the Home, but it primarily the work of male religious leaders. Women were members of the board of trustees from the outset, and they continued to provide many of the volunteers, all the nursing staff, and a significant proportion of both group and individual financial supporters through the Home's early years. Men, nonetheless, determined many of the key policies, including the degree to which women could be involved in the Home activities. Men kept control of the administration, avoiding the feminizing of philanthropy which was notable in non-ethnic

organizations of the time period. Patterns of men's and women's participation related to larger ethnic and religious ideals. By limiting women's options, men in the group not only retained their own power, they also reinforced a particular form of patriarchal relations. By creating a broad spectrum of institutions in which people could live "in, but not of the world," or more specifically with few important contacts outside the ethno-religious circle, the Dutch Protestants managed to limit gender roles shifts. In the process they created what has become the largest non-profit provider of care for the elderly in Michigan.

The author would like to thank Helen Vanbeek of the Holland Home, as well as the staff members at Heritage Hall at Calvin College, the Joint Archives of Holland [Michigan], and the Grand Rapids Public Library for their assistance in collecting information for this paper.

## Endnotes

1. Other ethnic groups also established homes for the elderly in this time period. For a foray into this issue see N. Sue Weiler, "Religion, Ethnicity and the Development of Private Homes for the Aged," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 12 (Fall 1992): 64-90.

2. Notably, the founder of Veldwijk also migrated to the United States, and his daughter became a major supporter of creating a similar home for the mentally ill on this side of the ocean. See my manuscript "Mommy State, Daddy State: Social Welfare in International Perspective," paper presented at the Social Science History Association Meeting, 1993. The idea of state-supported, religiously based institutions was coming to fruition in the Netherlands around the turn of the century, a system called *verzuiling*.

3. [Marion Louise Withey], "Historical Sketch of the Union Benevolent Association of Grand Rapids, Michigan" in *Manual of the Union Benevolent Association of Grand Rapids, Mich. 1887* (Grand Rapids: J. Rookus, 1887), p. 3.

4. Withey, "Historical Sketch," p. 5. The pattern in Michigan was a common one for this time period in the northeast and midwest: dividing services for the poor among disabled, elderly, and youth categories.

5. The Adriaan Kriekard manuscript collection at the Joint Archives of Holland contains a newspaper clipping in English "A Holland U.B.A." which reports the meeting of a group to incorporate the "'Holland Home Association of Grand Rapids,' and also to erect a suitable and convenient 'Home' on the plan of our excellent U.B.A. Home on College avenue."

6. "Articles of Incorporation" in *Manual of the Union Benevolent Association*, p. 8.

7. "Articles of Incorporation," p. 15.

8. For a brief overview of this organization's history see Richard Harms, "'Welfare' Health Care: Seeds for a Hospital," *Grand Times* (June 1992), p. 31; or look at the more extensive and specialized work by Sybil E. Hole and Jacqueline Anderson, *Blodgett Memorial Medical Center School of Nursing History: 'A Century of Caring' 1886-1987* (Grand Rapids: D & D Printing, 1990).

9. Emma Heyboer (nee Stoel) was married to John Heyboer [sometimes spelled Heiboer or Heijboer], confirmed by "Wedded Fifty Years" *Grand Rapids Press* (6 June 1926) and "John C. Heyboer taken by death" *Grand Rapids Press* (23 May 1927), both in Grand Rapids Public Library manuscript scrapbook, v. 18, p. 105; I suspect the same for Lena Campman and Henri Campman, Anna H. Molenaar and Tjerk Molenaar, and Berendina Grebel-Schonevel and Jacob Grebel.

10. Adrian Kriekard manuscript collection, Joint Archives of Holland. Editorial in *De Standard* without title, but follows article "De Holland Mutual Benevolent Home Association."

11. The minutes of the board are found in a series of bound volumes located at one of the current Holland Home facilities. The first set of minutes from 1892 on are not present. Of the remaining volumes I consulted the first three: 1896 to 1900, 1901 to 1910, and 1910 to 1917. All the board minutes were in Dutch, though there were instances where the loss of correct language usage and shift to English (particularly with loan words) were evident, especially by the last volume of minutes.

12. First an individual member of the board might hear of something and discuss it with a Home resident. Then trustees from the Committee of Order and Discipline (all men) would go to the home to inquire and reprimand the resident if necessary. Finally, the resident might be brought before the entire board. If the resident repented and asked forgiveness the board would generally let him or her stay in the home. Otherwise the resident had to leave under a clause in the contract for care which stated the resident had to follow the rules set by the board. A typical contract in 1905 included the clause "He promises to submit to the supervisors and rules set out for the inmates of the Home, and to be helpful as much as possible in the maintenance of order, and in the activities which are desirable for such an institution." Contract found in board minutes book of 1901-1910. I explored some gender issues based on consistory cases along with other sources in "Give Us This Day: Dutch Immigrant Women in two Protestant Denominations, 1880-1920," *Amerikastudien* 38 (1993): 425-439.

13. Emma Heyboer, longtime chair of the committee, reported that at the first home committee members had to visit the home two or three times a week in addition to the regular committee meetings, "to give the service staff supervision and instruction, and to listen to the many impracticable deficiencies that old people perceive." "Comm. van Directie," *Holland Home News,* 22 (June 1915), p. 2.

14. Even women speaking aloud in church was considered a very liberal position in the Reformed church, the more liberal of the two denominations. See the Rev. Bernardus de Beij letter collection, in which he describes this to a relative in the Netherlands. Heritage Hall Collection.

15. "Living Portraits of 100 years" in Auxiliary History file at Holland Home.

16. *Holland Union Benevolent Association* [Thirty-year anniversary booklet] (Grand Rapids: n.p., 1922), p. 13.

17. Yearly reports in *Holland Home News* indicated the group had difficulty gaining the participation of all the local churches, a fact they frequently bemoaned. For example, the report for the year ending May 1915 noted that seventeen congregations had participated in giving: twelve Reformed and five Christian Reformed. "If all the congregations participated, we would have an abundance of money and then the old complaint would not slip from our tongues, that there are always so many congregations who shirk this." "Jaarvergadering van de Ladies' Home Circle: Het Jaarlijksch Report," *Holland Home News*, 22 (June 1915), p. 3.

18. Auxiliary history file, Holland Home.

19. "Ladies' Home Circle," *Holland Home News*, 24 (8 December 1917).

20. To add to these efforts, the board occasionally printed sermons or other devotional literature by ministers and sold them. For example the Home's founding father, Rev. A. Kriekard published his sermon "Voorhenlieden geen plaats. Leerrede gehouden op den eersten Kerstdag" (no date); in 1914 the group published Rev. C. Doekes' "De Offeranden Gods." Doekes was a Reformed minster in Nieuwdorp, province of Zeeland, in the Netherlands. Kriekard also translated a historical sketch of the history of the Reformed Church in America into Dutch, a pamphlet which went on sale in 1898. Heritage Hall Collection.

21. Board minutes 1 July 1909. Holland Home Archives.

22. The most obvious case of the change was a case in the HUBA board minutes from 1 September 1898 when the secretary was writing up some information about Emma Heyboer. The minutes show "Mrs. Joh" with "Emma" written over the "Joh" and then Heyboer. I go into this shift in detail in my book manuscript, "Home is Where You Build It: Dutch Immigrant Women in the United States, 1880-1920," chapter 3.

23. *Holland Union Benevolent Association* [Thirty year anniversary booklet] , p. 13.

24. I discuss this division, seen especially in church women's groups such as missionary societies, in my book manuscript, "Home is Where You Build It." The *Holland Home News* in the 1910s would sometimes carry reports of the Ladies' Home Circle next to those for the Young Men's Club, see for example 20 (January 1914), p.1.

25. HUBA Board minutes, 7 November 1907, Holland Home Archives.

26. Kriens resigned due to poor health in 1914. "Uit het Home," *Holland Home News* 21 (May 1914), p. 1.

27. HUBA Board minutes: 6 October 1910; 6 March 1919.

28. For example, commissioners from the local Board of Poor, required that the two sons of a woman in the Home either pay for her or take her into one of their homes. This indicated that local authorities worked in conjunction with the Home Board. HUBA Board minutes: 3 September 1896.

29. Minutes of the board of trustees, 26 September 1901, p. 41 insert to Jan. 1901 to March 1910 volume.

30. See *Holland Union Benevolent Association: A Home for Aged People* [thirty year anniversary booklet] (Grand Rapids: n.p. 1922), pp. 23, 30.

31. HUBA Board minutes: 7 July 1898.