The California Gold Rush and a Few Dutch Argonauts from Pella

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One hundred and fifty years ago the national press reported with single-minded intensity the news of the discovery of gold in California, and a surge of humanity pressed westward with such urgency and focused purpose they soon assumed identity as the 49ers. In quick succession following the War with Mexico, the Treaty of Guadeloupe Hidalgo, and James Marshall's detection of yellow tracings in the south fork of the American River on John Sutter's property, a frenzy of excitement seized Americans and other nationals as conversation centered on "gold, Gold, GOLD." By the end of the year 1849 nearly 100,000 residents exclusive of Indians were in California; a state census late in 1852 reported over 223,000. These gold seekers comprised a species of entrepreneurs virtually unrivaled in American historical annals.

In correspondence of February 1848 promoting settlement in the Pella colony, Hendrik P. Scholte commented that "the rapid change from our ominous and oppressive conditions in the Netherlands to one of space and freedom [in America] caused some dizziness." His reference was to certain Dutch farmers in Marion County who quickly acquired sizeable landholdings on the Iowa frontier considerably larger on average than was common in the Netherlands. But the quest for gold in the Far West that emerged a year after Scholte's observation fits into this euphoric state of mind as well. Beginning in 1849 and continuing for several years numerous gold seekers streamed through Pella as part of the California Gold Rush.

This traffic flow of "men-on-the-make" brought welcome economic growth for the colony, for the Dutch prospered as suppliers of staples, livestock, and equipment needed by the Argonauts. One resident living on the main road through the Pella area explained the exchange:

> We sold everything we had to the trekkers to California. Then we bought all we could from neighbors who did not live along the State Road and sold it to the trekkers. For a bushel of Indian corn we got a dollar: everything for a dollar – that was easiest. A yoke of oxen brought $50 or $55; a cow $20 or $25. But the trekkers could stand it. Some of them carried cooks and slaves in their train. One man from Davenport, Iowa, arrived driving 350 head of cattle. He had on the road two other droves, each of the same number.

Unlike the man from Davenport, most Dutch residents, committed as they were to their rural ethnic enclave, did not catch gold fever. But in the early 1850s at least eight men from Marion County succumbed to the heady enthusiasm and achieved local distinction, perhaps a mixture of envy and notoriety depending on the observer's point of view, by joining the hordes heading west to discover gold and strike it rich. They included Geert Dykstra, Hendrik Slot, Jan de Moor, Engel Verploeg, and Engel's relative Dirk van Zee, all five of whom were fellow passengers on the *Pieter Floris* during the voyage to America in 1847. Others were

Cornelis Jongewaard, an 1847 emigrant sailing on the *Nagasaki*, and Leendert van der Meer and his brother-in-law Izaak de Vries, who were part of the Van der Meer/Van den Bos family network that came in 1849 on the *Franziska* from Overschie and Geervliet in Zuid-Holland. Three of the eight--Dykstra, Verploeg, and Jongewaard--were not part of traditional nuclear family households, although they did have relatives among the original Pella pioneers of 1847-49.

With the exception of De Vries, all were single men, and none exceeded the age of 32 when they headed west. As such, they fit a profile of adventurous persons eager for a chance to see even more new places than what they had already seen in their transplanting from the Old World to the New, an occasion to express manly independence, and an opportunity to hit "pay dirt." In short, from their perspective these young men with minimal personal resources in the Pella area probably figured that they had little to lose and everything to gain by trying their luck in the California gold fields. As hopeful entrepreneurs, they were seeking venture capital.

In the winter of 1849-1850 Geert Dykstra and Hendrik Slot, both Frisians and the latter from Dantumadeel, became the first Dutch Argonauts. They chose the all-water route of 17,000 or 18,000 nautical miles to California, a decision not unreasonable at that time despite its vast distance, since water travel was customary to Netherlanders and a 2000-mile overland passage was far more daunting. They journeyed down the Mississippi River to New Orleans by steamboat and then sailed around the Horn to San Francisco during the season when navigation was best in the southern hemisphere. Either they walked or took a river steamer or sloop for the last hundred miles to the diggings on the western slope of the Sierra Nevadas. Their ocean voyage was in a conventional, and likely not too sea-worthy, freighting ship, and the trip lasted up to eight months. In 1850 and thereafter, some California-bound men were able to secure quarters on a clipper ship. Here they experienced the exhilaration of sailing under a vast canopy of canvas and cutting ocean waves, although by week three or four stark alternatives of baking sun or soaking waves usually extinguished the travelers' excitement, as boredom set in. Still, clipper ships promised fleet passage to California within three months. Speed, however, came at a cost, $300 and up per passenger. It seems doubtful the Dutch gold seekers could have financed the luxury transportation of a swift clipper, even if available.

The trip and relocation introduced Dykstra and Slot to Hispanic culture and great environmental variation--from Catholic missions to cantinas, from tropical weather to the Horn's frigid zone, from dolphins to burros, from coastal harbors to mountain streams and forests. And it exposed them to an array of humanity of incredible diversity that gave new meaning to interpersonal incompatibility. All this stood in sharp contrast to their usual contacts within the homogeneous ethnoreligious community of Pella or their earlier provincial neighborhoods in the Netherlands. Another singular characteristic of the gold miners' world was that it was overwhelmingly male--just over 7.5 percent was female; it was not a place of families.

The two Dutchmen came to know foothill mining camps scattered along rivers such as the American, Yuba, or Feather that flowed into California's Central Valley. There they accumulated some gold through the standard techniques of placer mining that garnered a prospector an average daily income of less than an ounce or about $20 through much hard work and a good dose of luck. There they also coped with a locally inflated economy and a subsistent living standard famous for misery and miserliness and interrupted only by reckless

debauches and the rare exuberance of a gold discovery. Although occasional bonanzas sustained optimism and forestalled general disillusionment, for many miners except the most stubborn, reality eventually set in, and their western tour came to an end. After two years Dykstra and Slot returned to Marion County. The 1860 census affirmed that Dykstra, now 42, was married to Geertje Buwalda. Their household included three children and a boarder, and they farmed on land in Summit Township valued at $2000 with an additional $800 of personal property. Similarly, Slot, now 29, was married and farming nearby in the same township. Both men had successfully reentered the socio-economic mainstream of the Dutch enclave in Iowa, not as King Midases but as ordinary farmers.

After 1851 or 1852 many communities in the Midwest and elsewhere contained a returned gold seeker or two. They provided an "atmosphere of experience" for others who were either enchanted by their stories or scared off. Invariably some had to go "see the elephant," as the great exotic adventure of going to California was called at mid-century. In 1853 Jan de Moor, Dirk van Zee, and Engel Verploeg caught the infectious "California Mania," but since De Moor apparently died in California and Van Zee reportedly took up permanent residence there, I have found details only about Verploeg.

Originally Engel Verploeg came to Pella courtesy of one of his uncles, Koenraad or Stephanus Van Zee, who paid for his passage of $85 and for whom he worked to repay the debt. (Koenraad Van Zee was farming 110 acres in Lake Prairie Township in 1850.) Presumably having accumulated only minimal resources during a few years in Marion County, Engel hired on with a 30-wagon caravan passing through Pella and assumed duties as an ox-driver to earn his keep during the six-month journey westward. Of the several overland routes available by the early 1850s, an Iowan would have used the Mormon-Oregon-California Trail, the least expensive, shortest, most direct path, but still one fraught with perilous desert crossings and posing dangers associated with illness, accident, bad weather, and more. Engel later recalled seeing the remains of wagon train equipment, skeletons of horses and oxen, and graves along the route, testimony to the toll the overland passage took. But his observations also confirmed common reports about the tremendous waste of goods found along the trail that the 49ers abandoned as they discarded many frivolous possessions and surplus supplies to lighten their loads on the long way west. The Dutchman saw firsthand an early roadside consequence of littering Americans.

Once in California Engel shrewdly perceived that easier, and perhaps more profitable, gain might be achieved, not by grubbing for gold like a gopher through placer mining, but by provisioning prospectors. So he raised garden crops and sold his fresh produce to hungry miners with dust in their pokes. They were only too eager for a healthy variation in their dreary diet of "flap-jacks," "pickle pork," jerky, or other dried rations, all of which contributed to nutritional deficiencies and related diseases such as scurvy and dysentery. This way Engel reportedly accumulated $5000 during five years (although one source says two years) in the gold fields.

In time, delayed or faulty communications between Engel and his family eventually caught up with him. Belatedly, Engel learned that his widowed mother, Aartje Van Zee Verploeg, and six surviving siblings (and perhaps his maternal grandfather Engel Van Zee) had arrived in Pella from the family's provincial home in Herwijnen, located along the Waal River in Gelderland, in the same year, 1853, that Engel had left Iowa for California. The Verploegs were chain migrating on the course set by Engel and his uncles' families in 1847. Engel

further learned, however, that on his family's journey across ocean and land tragedy knew few bounds. Successively, while aboard ship, a sister died from measles and his father Hendrik succumbed to grief; both were buried at sea. Within days of landing, a maternal uncle and a brother also died. Even before the family's emigration, another brother had drowned in the Netherlands and a sister had died in infancy. The difficulties for Engel's mother were surely exacerbated when she discovered that her son was not in Pella as expected, but had vacated for the Far West. Fortunately for her, two of her brothers and their families were living in Marion County to provide some kinship support.

Accordingly, when finally aware of his family's losses and hardships, Engel returned to Iowa by a ship along the west coast to Panama, on foot across the Isthmus, by ship again up the Gulf to New Orleans and then mostly by walking overland to Pella. By the most efficient transportation of the day such a journey was possible in five to six weeks, but Engel's return must have been more prolonged. Moreover, the Isthmus transit, exotic to any traveler with its tropical flora and fauna and its Hispanic cultural attractions, posed special environmental challenges from infestations of mosquitoes, fevers, and cholera. As of 1855 rail service was available across Central America following the completion of the Panama railroad, but Engel seemed to prefer walking when he could. "Why spend money--$25 for a 47-mile train ride--on unnecessary travel convenience?" the frugal Dutchman might have reasoned.

We should note too that Engel's exit from California also coincided with the passing of the early boom years of the Gold Rush when many miners subsequently turned to low-paying jobs with joint-stock, deep-mine companies, shifted to farming or other trades, became drifting prospectors endlessly searching for El Dorado, or like Engel headed back East. By 1857, when the bulk of the surface diggings were exhausted, the flush times were over in California. Indeed, economic reverberations from this cresting contributed to a serious financial setback for the nation.

Once back in Marion County Engel traded his fortune in gold for Iowa's complement--land. In August 1858 he bought 47 acres of farmland in section 35 of Lake Prairie Township. Within seven months Engel, now 35, married Paulina Buwalda, only 18. In 1860 the Verploegs had an infant son and recorded in the census $1000 worth of real estate and $400 in personal property (an aggregate value considerably less than the $5000 allegedly acquired in California). Interestingly, Paulina was a sister to Geertje, the wife of Geert Dykstra. The women were two of five daughters of Abram and Aaltje Buwalda, a Frisian family from Ee that traveled to America as co-passengers with Engel and Geert on the *Pieter Floris* in 1847. Thus, the men could share the bond of having married sisters as well as exchanging endless stories about their experiences "out West." And they had plenty of time to embellish their tales and become accomplished local raconteurs; for in 1902 both men died in the Pella area, Engel at 79 and Geert at 84.

In 1852 or 1853 the last trio of Dutchmen, Cornelis Jongewaard, Leendert van der Meer, and Izaak de Vries, traveled the overland route west to the gold fields, either to California or to the Rogue River area in Oregon. Here the Gold Rush spawned the mining camp of Jacksonville that lasted from 1852 to 1854. The Argonauts may have visited both gold fields. Information is extremely sketchy.

Jongewaard and Van der Meer, like the five men discussed earlier, were unmarried. Even the departure of single young men, if they were part of a traditional family unit, as four of them were, seriously affected that institution. Parents had to witness the separation of a

son, or siblings a brother, and the social and economic structure of the family as a whole required adjustment and adaptation. Parents often saw a son's departure as a youthful whim of dreaming about riches. With the perspective of age, parents were accustomed to a lifetime of hard work and daily attention to routine duties to provide for family needs. Few therefore approved of living out the fantasy of discovering gold nuggets in a mountain stream. Aging parents expressed particular concern of being left without adequate care and attention if a son headed west. Not only parents but brothers and sisters as well who remained behind had to "take up the slack" within the family work force, especially if they were all contributors to operating a family farm, as most Pella Dutch were. Some siblings may have had their own ambitions frustrated by a departing brother. One person's indulgence was to another a neglect of obligations. Finally, mothers, especially, were almost universal in opposing a son's departure. Would their wanderer go the way of the "prodigal son," not in the sense of succumbing to riotous living, but by foolishly chasing endless rainbows, not to mention the pot of gold? Parents' greatest fear, of course, was never to see their offspring again.

Offsetting these considerations, however, were positive possibilities. The Argonaut might return wealthy and be generous enough to enrich others in the family. And some vicarious pleasure had to lay in having a family member with enough courage and boldness to take the road less traveled, even if it appeared a bit unconventional. The adventurer may have been exercising an independent, even radical, choice at odds with the collective spirit of the ethnic community by striking out to the West, but he was also repeating the act of separation from a larger society and the willingness to migrate that initially brought the Netherlanders to Pella. Sons were doing again what parents had done only a few years earlier, albeit under different circumstances and for reasons more brazenly materialistic. Were they some of the first among their immigrant neighbors to be acculturated to an American norm of going for quick riches? Or were they merely robust examples of a more deep-seated, universal behavioral urge to grasp for gold? Perhaps a case could be made that the majority of Pella residents who resisted joining the scramble for "geld" was more culturally expressive of a kind of Dutchness--avarice bridled by moderation and restlessness tempered by prudence. One way or the other, the young Argonauts must have caused gossip and raised a few eyebrows in the close-knit Dutch community.

Unlike seven of the eight gold seekers, Izaak de Vries had a wife and son from whom he was taking leave. If Isaak dreamed of finding an easy fortune, his spouse Jannetje van der Meer likely viewed his departure differently. Izaak may have rationalized his sabbatical as a one-time opportunity to realize prosperity and guarantee the family's future, but Jannetje, like many wives of gold seekers, may have objected. Begrudging consent often came reluctantly only after a firm promise of ultimate return and much assurance of bringing back gold. Left alone, Jannetje would have to bear certain deprivations and sacrifices for the short-term that added stresses in her life. The couple had already lost a daughter on the oversea voyage in 1849. Izaak's exit meant the family was deprived of its primary provider, which would burden Jannetje with added household responsibilities. But it also probably put more strain on the Van der Meer family network whose members might need to provide timely assistance by lending money, offering help during sickness, being emotionally supportive, or even sheltering and feeding the ones left behind. Jannetje was not facing abandonment, to be sure, but Izaak's farewell had to have had special poignancy, creating a range of human emotions from sadness to worry, hope mixed with fear, anticipation and resentment.

In fact, it turned into tragedy and grief, for family folklore records that Izaak was murdered in Portland, which was perhaps another incident of a greenhorn immigrant "done in" by some frontier tough. Whatever the case, here was another event for community comment, and it left Jannetje a widow in her mid-20s. Quick reconstitution of family life was essential for survival in a mid-nineteenth century rural society. Hence, Jannetje, clearly a woman of endurance and practicality, soon remarried a widower, Gerrit Ellerbroek, who had a son, and together the couple had two more children. In 1859, however, Gerrit died after "unbelievable hardships," and Jannetje, again promptly, married a third time--to Luitje Mars. They eventually had three children and lived on a 230-acre farm, 90 of which was under improvement and valued at nearly $2000 in 1860. Descendents affirmed that the farm in Black Oak Township in Mahaska County belonged to Jannetje.

In the meantime, by the end of 1855 Cornelis Jongewaard and Leendert van der Meer were back in Pella, with the benefit of trail experience and perhaps a new appreciation of reality and human frailty, even if they did not attain great wealth. In 1856 both men got married and soon were leading more settled lives. By 1860 Jongewaard, now 32, had a wife named Ellen S. and three children and was farming on land in Black Oak Township valued at $1,000. Van der Meer, now 30, was married to Antje van den Bos, and they had two children as well as two boarders as part of their augmented family. Van der Meer, in partnership with his brother Dirk and brother-in-law Dirk van den Bos, operated a steam-driven sawmill, one of a half dozen saw services for the burgeoning Dutch community. Van der Meer valued his real estate at $1,400. For comparison, the average taxable wealth, a figure combining the value of real estate and personal property, for the Dutch-American taxpayers in 1860 was $1,106.

Studies of gold rushes generally agree that a trip to a mining area was intended to be a temporary venture, not a permanent relocation that implied traditional resettlement. Still, it was a change of place that involved an extended duration of time, often a couple of years or more; it was not a mere lark of days or weeks. The objective was tangible, instant wealth in the form of gold, not the more long-term asset of land. Thus, people willingly undertook a journey demanding considerable commitment in terms of finances, determination, and human capital to take a chance to acquire great riches through what might be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. In the entrepreneurial process they had to balance risk and reward for themselves and their families. For those few individuals who were without any kinship ties, the effort entailed few, if any, complications except personal concern. But most gold seekers had family connections, and their decision to leave home had great present and future impact on the family, for good or ill. Yet many were willing to go on a hardship tour to the West, leave loved ones, and endure a prolonged absence from family. They did this for the sake of riches and the fortuity of eventual financial independence for self and family. It was a chance to secure venture capital to be applied to more long-term, sedate investments that promised security and stability for a family household.

It is significant that three of the eight Dutch Argonauts did not return to Pella; two of them became fatal casualties of their quest for gold. Thus, the risks were surely high in this venture, as a mortality rate of 25 percent confirms. Equally significant, however, the majority of these men did not abandon ties to their kinfolk or their ethnic community, as their ultimate return to Marion County clearly shows. Family and home drew them back after their dalliance with the pursuit of quick riches. Finally, what also bears mentioning is that only one of these gold seekers was seduced by California's wondrously attractive climate. Iowa's seasonal

variations and even daunting winters did not dissuade the rest of them from returning to the Midwest. Kinship connections and bonds of ethnicity overcame any attractions posed by exposure to a balmier place or the short-term excitement of being part of the California Gold Rush. If nothing else, the survivors carried forever special memories, and some acquired enough capital from prospecting to "grubstake" an Iowa farm and win a wife.

The experiences of these men might become mere anecdotes in the history of Pella, except that we rediscover some of them on the road again in the next three decades. In the 1860s Verploeg, Jongewaard, and Van der Meer were instrumental in a large exodus by two groups--one by the overland route and one by the Panama passage--to Oregon and their subsequent return to Pella. In 1870 Jongewaard and Van der Meer were among the 253 pioneers who homesteaded "free land" on 29 sections in Sioux County, Iowa, and in the process permanently established another Dutch enclave in the Midwest. Finally, in 1882 Van der Meer was once again among the leadership coterie that guided about 100 families to Douglas County, South Dakota, to found a third Dutch colony on the prairie-plains that endures to this day. Their knowledge of travel routes and destinations, as well as their accumulative migration experiences, served the new population movements of the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s. These veteran trekkers were a valuable resource for future reference. All this enhances their exceptionalism among the usually persistent Pella Dutch, to be sure, but it puts their stories in a more meaningful context. To borrow Robert Swierenga's phrase in his book *The Forerunners: Dutch Jewry in the North American Diaspora* (1994), they were another kind of forerunner. These bold entrepreneurs were rare Dutch participants in a great event of wide-ranging national significance now a century and a half old--that legendary drama of thousands of persons flocking to California to search for gold.

A Note on Sources

This story is informed by the standard works on Dutch-Americans of Jacob van Hinte and Henry S. Lucas, both entitled *Netherlanders in America* [short title], as well as the older histories on the Iowa Dutch by Kommer van Stigt, Cyrenus Cole, and Jacob van der Zee. In addition, I used the two volume compilation, *History of Pella, Iowa, 1847-1987*, that contains alphabetically-arranged family recollections, which I shifted and winnowed to try to eliminate inconsistencies and contradictions that invariably arise in a work of this kind. Further, I relied on Robert P. Swierenga's books of lists: *Dutch Households in U.S. Population Censuses 1850, 1860, and 1870, Dutch Emigrants to the United States, etc.*, and *Dutch Immigrants in U.S. Ship Passenger Manifests, 1820-1880*. Family histories on the Notebooms and the Roordas also proved helpful. Finally, Richard Doyle's 1982 Kent State University dissertation, "The Socio-Economic Mobility of the Dutch Immigrants to Pella, Iowa, 1847-1925," is essential for any understanding of historical Pella.

For general background and interpretive observations on the California Gold Rush, I depended on Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *Days of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the American Nation*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1997), Linda Peavy and Ursula Smith, *Women in Waiting in the Westward Movement: Life on the Home Frontier* (Norman & London, 1994), Jo Ann Levy, *They saw the Elephant: Women in the California Gold Rush* (Norman & London, 1992), John Walton Caughey, *The California Gold Rush*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1948), and Rodman W. Paul, *California Gold: The Beginning of Mining in the Far West*, ((Lincoln, 1947). I take responsibility for any interpretive errors.