The Dutch Urban Experience
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Dutch immigrants settled in American cities from coast to coast—New York, Paterson, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Grand Rapids, Chicago, St. Louis, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.[1] By the early twentieth century, more Dutch lived in cities than in the countryside. The 1920 census reported that 56 percent of foreign-born Dutch lived in cities of 2500 population or more. In 1930 over 60 percent were urban, and another 16 percent were classed as rural non-farm. This left only one-quarter (23 percent) living on farms.[2]

The Midwestern Dutch were more rural than those on the East and West coasts, where more than two thirds were urban. Yet, compared to other ethnic groups, the Dutch were among the least urbanized; in 1920 they ranked 17th. Only Scandinavians were less urban than the Dutch. Yet, the fact that upwards of three fourths of the Dutch lived in cities had a profound affect in terms of cultural outlook, social institutions, work patterns, and ultimately, on rates of acculturation.

The urban Dutch experienced more of a cultural uprooting than did those in the farm colonies and small towns, such as Holland, Pella, South Holland, Orange City, Sioux Center, and many other places, all of which were tight, homogeneous communities. Densely populated and rapidly growing cities were another matter. They could be very threatening to

[1]See, for example, Peter De Boer, *Coming of Age in Prospect Park* (1996); Marian Schoolland, *A Goodly Heritage* (1957); Henry Stob, *Summoning Up Remembrance* (1995); and the historical novels by Peter De Vries, *Blood of the Lamb* and Edna Ferber, *So Big*.

[2]Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920, Population, 772-73.

Dutch immigrants, who mostly came off the farm. The risk of being uprooted and losing one's cultural identity and heritage was far higher in cities.

Diversity

The Dutch in Chicago not only lived among Jews, Blacks, Poles, Bohemians, and Italians in Chicago, they were diverse among themselves and hailed from all social strata, regions, and religions of the Netherlands. Three quarters were Calvinists, and the rest included Catholics, Lutherans, Unitarians, Socialists, Jews, and the nominally churched.[3]

Thus, the religiously diverse Dutch faced a city full of other nationalities. They lived and worked in this "salad bowl" environment. When Rev. Albertus Van Raalte visited the small Dutch Reformed group near the city center in 1852, he found "the ravages wrought by error, worldliness, and quarreling to be great. Some had joined the so-called Spiritualists, one young man had gone over to the Romanists, others dispersed themselves among all kinds of denominations, many lived in indifference and sought the world, while others who confessed the name of the Lord lived in isolation. One of the chief causes of all these woes," Van Raalte added, "was to be sought in the lack of the ministry of the word and pastoral care."

The small nucleus of true believers had begun meeting for worship in homes under teaching elders. After several years of informal worship, in 1853 they organized the First Reformed Church. The elders had to carry on for another six years, until 1859, when the fledgling body successfully called a minister. This lengthy time without ecclesiastical leadership or fellowship forced them to turn inward and to kept outsiders at arms-length,

[3]Robert P. Swierenga, *Dutch Chicago: A History of the Hollanders in the Windy City* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002). The only previous work is Amry Vandenbosch's M.A. thesis, published as *The Dutch Communities of Chicago* (Chicago: Knickerbocker Society of Chicago, 1928). The two standard histories of the Dutch in America devote only a few pages to the Chicago city Dutch. See Jacob Van Hinte, *Netherlanders in America: A Study of Emigration and Settlement in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries in the United States of America*, Robert P. Swierenga, general editor, Adriaan de Wit, chief translator (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985; reprinted Grand Rapids, MI: Historical Committee of the Christian Reformed Church, 2003), and Henry S. Lucas, *Netherlanders in America: Dutch Immigration to the United States and Canada, 1789-1950* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1955, reprinted Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989).

especially Catholics. The Chicago Dutch Reformed became realists about American society; few were melting pot idealists.

Inevitably, the Dutch absorbed all of the stereotypes typical of a polyglot population, especially regarding Jews and Blacks. Growing up, I heard every slang word for the various ethnic groups, including the "N" word for blacks. Yet, my parents' and grandparents' generations could show respect to individuals of other groups and even claim them as friends and business associates. My grandfather and his brother, partners in Swierenga Bros. Produce Commission House on Randolph Street, took on an Italian partner who was a practicing Catholic. My father dealt with many Jews in his trucking business, and developed quite close personal relationships. He learned enough Yiddish to get by, and our family attended several Jewish weddings and bar mitzvahs. Blacks who operated freight elevators or worked as shipping clerks were called by name and treated with respect. The point is that the group was stereotyped, while the individual was respected. Inconsistent perhaps, but very human.

For goods and services, the Dutch patronized non-Dutch merchants and tradesmen, if the price was right. No problem. But for services that brought craftsmen into the home, such as painters and decorators, plumbers, electricians, etc., only fellow Dutch Calvinists would do. No way would the wife and children be put at risk by allowing "outsiders" into the home. This required fellow believers that one could trust implicitly.

Being a small minority in a big city meant that, by all expectations, the Chicago Dutch should have rapidly Americanized, intermarried, and disappeared as an ethnic group. Indeed, this happened to those who joined American denominations such as the Presbyterians, and to Dutch Jews and Catholics who joined German congregations. One exception was St. Willibrord Church in Roseland-Kensington, which was formed in the 1890 and counted 200 Dutch families; it closed in the 1970s. Several Holland Presbyterian and one Holland Unitarian churches also existed briefly. Only the Calvinists, with their Dutch language churches and schools, staved off assimilation for several generations.

Enclaves

The Dutch Reformed collected in enclaves. In the 1840s three distinct neighborhoods emerged—the "city Dutch" on the near West Side, and the "country Dutch" in South Holland (first called Low Prairie) in 1846, and in Roseland (first called High Prairie) in 1849. The country Dutch were

truck gardeners, while the city Dutch became teamsters, trash collectors, and cement contractors. Roseland and South Holland were essentially Dutch colonies. From these three "nests," centered in their Ref- formed churches, came all the other settlements in greater Chicagoland, most notably Englewood in the 1880s and Summit in the 1890s, which were colonies of the West Side Groningers.

By 1900 there were 3,000 Dutch on the West Side, 3,000 in Englewood, 7,000 in Roseland, and 1,000 in South Holland. The rest were scattered across the city center and North Side.

The M factor—Mobility

Mobility was a defining characteristic of the Chicago Dutch, as it was of American society generally. But while individual families were on the move, the unique aspect of Dutch Chicago was that the entire community pulled up stakes in concert, sold their beloved churches and Christian schools, and relocated en masse. Upward mobility and white flight were both centrifugal forces pushing them ever farther out from the central city.

The westsiders relocated five times, ending up in Elmhurst. They abandoned the city first, and then Cook County as well. The move from the Old West Side (14th & Ashland) was primarily white flight, but the exodus from Cicero was as much a desire for better housing and social amenities as it was a desire to leave behind neighbors deemed to be undesirable.

The southside settlements of Englewood, Roseland, and South Holland were more stable, but eventually white flight pushed the Dutch out there too. Englewood lasted for 75 years (1880s-early 1960s), Roseland for 125 years (1840s-1970s), and South Holland for 160 years (1840s-2000s).

Churches

Churches stood at the center of social life for the Dutch, whether rural or urban, and Christian schools were added to the mix in the 1880s for the Christian Reformed. By the 1920s, greater Chicago counted twelve Reformed and seventeen Christian Reformed congregations. The West Side had two Reformed churches and four Christian Reformed churches, Englewood and Roseland had four of each, and South Holland had one of each denomination. Each church anchored its neighborhood and marked the Dutch Reformed as a people of faith who took their Calvinist heritage seriously.

While it was true that the Dutch Calvinists could live from the cradle to the grave within their ethnic cocoons, most rubbed shoulders with "outsiders" in work and play. Children faced the "world" first in the public schools. After leaving school, usually at age 16, they worked in non-Dutch businesses, factories and shops, or they serviced them as teamsters and craftsmen. Young women worked as domestics for Americans; and housewives shopped at the food and clothing stores of non-Dutch merchants. Try as they might, it was impossible for families to isolate themselves and especially their children from the economic and cultural life of the city, despite setting up Christian schools and banning "worldly amusements." The urban walls were porous.

Here the country Dutch had the advantage of geography. Their communities were more ethnically pure and culturally tight, although, of course, no place, no matter how rural and isolated, was an island.

Urban living also has had long-term effects on religious acculturation in Dutch Reformed churches. One influence was Yankee pietism, preached from the pulpits of mainline Protestant churches and promulgated on radio station WMBI of the Moody Bible Institute. Every Dutch Calvinist home had the radio dial fixed on this station with its free will preaching and hymns from morning to night. There were few Kuyperian immigrants and academics, except for several teachers in the Chicago Christian High School, to counteract Moody pietism and Arminianism.

In liturgy and polity, the Reformed churches in Chicago are traditional. "Holding the line" in the church brought a sense of stability in an otherwise rapidly changing environment. The church was a cultural island where tradition was desired and valued. So Chicago churches were among the last to install women in office and to fight "worship wars." Apart from congregations in the colony of South Holland, no churches in the 1990s have experienced major secessions. Chicago churches give full and faithful support to denominational ministries.

Schooling

Schooling was the issue that cut right through the heart of the Reformed communities beginning in the 1880s. Education became a battleground because immigrants brought with them the Dutch model of free Christian schools developed by Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer and promulgated by Abraham Kuyper. At the same time, the increasing cultural diversity and secularization of the public schools frightened

devout parents. As Rev. Peter Moerdyke of Chicago's Trinity Reformed Church, a weekly columnist in the *Christian Intelligencer* (the denominational weekly), noted: "The public schools of this city are on the whole sadly destitute of moral instruction, and not a few teachers often betray their infidelity or enmity by disparaging comments or insinuations regarding the Christian religion, especially the Holy Bible."[4]

The die was cast when in 1907 the president of the Chicago Board of Education declared the Bible an "unsuitable" and even "dangerous" book for children "whose intellect is not completely developed." Three years later, in 1911, the Illinois Supreme Court banished the Bible and religious instruction from the public schools.[5]

The push for "value neutrality" unsettled Reformed Church leaders, but the national synods in 1892 and again in 1957 gave ringing endorsements of public education. "Keep church and State separate forever," declared the 1892 pronouncement. This resolution was a reflection of the denomination's two centuries of assimilation. No Yankee Protestant could have stated it better. For the Reformed Church, Christian schools were un-American. Public schools were the key to building a democratic society, and Christian students there would be "salt and light."

Cornelia De Bey, the youngest daughter of the Rev. Bernardus De Bey of Chicago's First Reformed Church, exemplified this process perfectly. Baptized and raised in a Christian Seceded Church in Groningen, she was educated in Chicago's public schools (no Christian schools existed at the time). As an adult she became a militant member of the Chicago Teachers' Federation, and won an elected seat on the Chicago Board of Education from 1905 to 1908. Christian day schools were anathema to this liberal icon of Chicago.[6]

Christian Reformed leaders acknowledged the need for salting secular society, but they saw even more clearly the threat of secularization. The rise of Darwinian evolution as the new orthodoxy in the public schools frightened them, as did the child-centered, social values taught by John

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[4]*Christian Intelligencer*, 4 March 1903, p. 137.

[5]*Onze Toekomst*, 25 October 1907.

[6]Mary Pieroni Schiltz and Suzanne Sinke, "De Bey, Cornelia Bernarda," 214-16, in *Women Building Chicago, 1790-1990*, Rima Lunin Schultz and Adele Hast, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2001); Hans Krabbendam, "Serving the Dutch Community: A Comparison of the Patterns of Americanization in the Lives of Two Immigrant Pastors" (M.A. thesis, Kent State University, 1989), 84-86.

Dewey in the education department of the University of Chicago. Parents wanted to guard their children as much as possible from these Modernist heresies. By 1905 Christian teachers from across the Midwest met in Chicago and decided to develop their own textbooks to counter evolutionary teachings.

If doctrinal beliefs dictated the founding of Christian schools, traditional cultural considerations also motivated many parents. They wanted their children, especially at the high school level, to socialize with "their own kind." The likelihood of marrying within the Dutch community was greatly enhanced by the Christian school experience.

In Chicago more Reformed Church parents sent their children to the Christian schools than in West Michigan or Iowa, especially at the secondary level. Chicago Christian High School always had a Reformed Church contingent among the students and faculty, but the proportion declined after the 1950s.

In urban settings, the long-term impact of schooling decisions was huge. In rural colonies, public schools reflected community mores, since teachers and students were primarily Dutch. But in big cities, Reformed Church youth outmarried and joined non-Dutch churches to a far greater extent than did Christian Reformed youth. Public schooling speeded up the process of assimilation by at least a generation or two.

Schooling affected church retention rates in another way, it impacted fertility rates. The Dutch historically had large families, but the American culture of individualism encouraged the use of birth control. This, public education and Americanization inculcated Reformed Church members earlier than Christian Reformed members with the desirability for birth control. As a result, in the postwar period 1950-65, Reformed Church birth rates were at least 20 percent lower than Christian Reformed Church birth rates.[7]

The impact of these forces can be seen in membership rates in Chicago. First Reformed and Trinity Reformed, the mother churches on the Old West Side, had a combined membership in 1899 of 1,400 souls, while First Christian Reformed Church had 1,250 souls. One hundred years later, in 1999, the eight Christian Reformed congregations in the western

[7]Gary D. Bouma, *How the Saints Persevere: Social, Factors in the Vitality of the Christian Reformed Church* (Monograph Series No. 4, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Monash University, Australia, 1994, 19-20, table 2.3.

suburbs had a total of 3,800 members—more than a three-fold increase. In telling contrast, the six Reformed congregations in the western suburbs had 1,080 members, a loss of 25 percent. Thus, in 1999, the Reformed Church had barely one-fourth the membership of the Christian Reformed Church, even though it had been more than 10 percent higher a century earlier.

The inbred socialization process in the Christian Reformed Church because of Christian schooling was a factor in its growth, but equally important before 1930 was the success of the junior denomination, the "Dutchy" church, in gathering in most new immigrants.[8]

Unions

While schools affected the entire family, fathers were most impacted by the other major pressure point. This came in the workplace with the rise of labor unions. First in manufacturing in the 1890s, and subsequently in the 1920s and 1930s in teamstering, the crafts, and service industries, the Dutch Calvinists were forced to deal with unions. Should they be unequally yoked with secular socialists under the banner of labor solidarity? Most wanted no part of unions. Of course, rural Dutch never faced such issues, except briefly during farm strikes and "holiday movements" in the Depression decade.

When the Knights of Labor (a secret society) struck the Pullman Works in 1886 seeking the eight-hour day, the small Dutch contingent crossed the picket lines under police protection and helped break the strike. In the big

[8]Membership statistics show that most Reformed Church (RCA) membership losses and Christian Reformed Church (CRC) growth occurred in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1950 RCA membership in the western suburbs declined by nearly half (1450 to 797, or 45 percent), while CRC congregations grew more than three-fold (1250 to 3876, or 310 percent). But in the last fifty years, after immigration was a minimal factor, RCA membership actually increased, largely through evangelism, by 35 percent (797 to 1,080), while CRC congregations managed to hold their advantage (falling only slightly from 3,875 to 3,800 souls). Membership totals in 1999 for the western suburban RCA congregations in the Classis of Chicago are: First RCA (Berwyn) 100, Downers Grove 226, Lombard 171, Summit (Bethel) 207, Stickney 155, and West Chicago 221, for a total of 1080. CRC congregations in Classis Northern Illinois are: Berwyn (Ebenezer) 150, Elmhurst 956, Faith (Elmhurst), 965, Lombard 712, Naperville 148, Western Springs 487, Wheaton 344, and Winfield 44, for a grand total of 3,808. See Christian Reformed Church, *Yearbook*, 1999, and *Minutes of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America*, June 1999, Swierenga, *Dutch Chicago*, Appendix 5, "Church Membership, 1853-1978," 804-09.

strike of 1894, called in sympathy with the American Railway Union led by the socialist Eugene Debs, the Dutch Reformed were again prepared to cross the picket lines. Fifty Pullman workers met at the First Reformed Church in Roseland to discuss strategy. The pastor, Rev. Balster Van Es, urged them to return to work, but the meeting was broken up by union activists, some no doubt Reformed church members, who packed the room. But the violence at the company gates was so severe that it proved impossible to cross the lines, even with National Guard troops on hand. After two months, the company gained the upper hand and began hiring replacement workers; one quarter of the first 800 were Hollanders.

In the 1920s union goons threatened scavengers who refused to join the Teamsters Brotherhood. Union agent "Dago Dan," Dan Tognotti, a henchman of Al Capone, applied the pressure by coming around in person to sign men up. One scavenger, Henry Evenhouse, joined the teamsters willingly, but this was a reflection of his socialist sympathies as a young farm hand in Groningen exploited by a "groote boer." But Evenhouse stood in marked contrast to his fellow Dutch Reformed owner operators, many of whom opposed secular unions on both ideological and religious grounds.

Some, such as Peter Ter Maat, had to pay a stiff price. In 1927, after Diego Dan and his union goons had threatened Ter Maat for refusing to sign up, he declared defiantly: "I'm bomb proof, fire proof, and shot proof." A short time later, two men pulled him out of the cab of his truck at the Cicero dump at 31st and Cicero Avenue and backed his loaded vehicle into the abyss of the pit. It is still there. Union thugs had struck another scavenger some years earlier, setting fire to the barn behind his home and killing his team and destroying his dump wagon.[9]

Evenhouse's positive union outlook, which he imbibed from the state church pastor in his village, was confirmed by his "dominie" at the First Christian Reformed Church of Chicago, Dr. John Van Lonkhuyzen. This Netherlands-born pastor was a disciple of Dr. Abraham Kuyper, who taught that Christians must claim for Christ every square inch of God's creation. This included teamstering. Christian Reformed folk, however, only begrudgingly tolerated this viewpoint. In 1912 the regional assembly, Classis Illinois, had barred all union members from holding church

[9]Swierenga, *Dutch Chicago*, 594-95.

offices, and the classis didn't reverse itself until the 1950s.[10] Most Dutch teamsters by then had followed Evenhouse into unions; but intimidation rather than principle impelled them. If they wanted to work and eat, they had to pay union dues. In the midst of the Great Depression, in 1934, the Chicago and Suburban Scavenger Association, which was 90 percent Dutch, succumbed to union threats and political pressure from the city Democratic political machine, an agreed to a closed shop contract with Local 731 of the IBT. In 1937, Monarch Laundry of Roseland, one of the largest laundries on the South Side and owned by Bernard Vellinga, a Christian Reformed member, entered into a closed shop contract with the Laundry Workers International Union. This, after his largely Reformed workforce had formed a local under the Calvinistic Christian Labor Association (CLA). The Laundry Union refused to recognize the CLA and forced Vellinga to fire every worker who would not join, or be subject to ruinous picketing. He caved.

Only in 1954 did the Christian Reformed Church synod allow the issue of union membership to be decided by each congregation, and few Chicagoland consistories barred union members any longer.[11]

Mutuality

Apart from Christian schools, the two sister denominations in Chicago practiced mutuality to a far greater extent than did their fellow congregants in rural areas. The Chicago Calvinists cooperated in benevolent societies such as the Self Help Society, in buying plots in designated "Dutch sections" of local cemeteries such as Forest Home, in establishing the Holland Home for the Elderly, in elite social clubs such as the General Dutch League and the Knickerbocker Society, and in church recreation programs in softball, bowling, and basketball. Later, they jointly supported Elim Christian School, Trinity Christian College, Holland Home, Rest Haven retirement and nursing homes, etc. But some activities remained separate. Funeral directors catered to either Reformed or Christian Reformed members, and for summer Bible camps; Reformed families preferred Billy Sunday's Winona Lake Campground while Christian Reformed families went to the Cedar Lake Bible Conference.

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[10]Ibid., 595; "Classis of Illinois," *The Banner*, 18 Apr 1912.

[11]Swierenga, *Dutch Chicago*, 644-45.

The urban environment seemed to dictate joint endeavors. The Dutch Reformed were such a small minority that they had to work together in order to meet the needs of their elderly, handicapped children, and Christian schooling, youth recreation.

This spirit, coupled with adequate financial resources, enabled Chicago's Dutch to claim a number of "firsts" in ministry endeavors—Helping Hand Mission (1912), Chicago Christian High School (1918), the National Union of Christian Schools (now Christian Schools International) (1920), the Missionary Training Institute (now Reformed Bible College) (1921), and the Christian Reformed Church's denominational radio ministry—the Back to God Hour (1939).

Women's Work

On the farm, Dutch immigrant women, as Suzanne Sinke has told us, customarily worked alongside their husbands and children in the barn and the fields. This depended on family finances and the needs of childcare. Farmers considered it a badge of success in America to be able to boast that their wives did not work in the fields. Yet, farming was a family endeavor, and one could hardly thrive without a healthy wife and plenty of study sons. In cities, by contrast, only unmarried women worked outside the home. When a woman married, she quit to raise a family. This was as true for schoolteachers and nurses and for domestics. Dutch women were much sought after as domestics—the stereotype of the clean and tidy Dutch *huisvrouw* helped land such work. Later women worked in offices, the professions, and even on the factory floor. But such work was short-lived, except for spinsters.

Money—Wealth

Urban life offered more opportunities for entrepreneurship and wealth than did rural life. Farmers might become "land rich" over the generations, as farmland values increased. But in cities business opportunities and suburban land development could create vast wealth, as is shown by Chicago scavengers, businessmen, and real estate developers. Even the truck farmers around Chicago had the advantage of a steady market for their produce, which farmers in Iowa often lacked. Yes, truck farmers had to contend with wholesalers and middlemen at South Water Market, but grain and livestock farmers were at the tender mercies of railroad magnates, grain elevator operators, and mortgage bankers.

Family incomes of the Chicago Dutch very likely surpassed that of their compatriots on farms and in small cities. Even wage earners in factories and independent craftsmen enjoyed the higher wages won by unions in the city. This enabled them to build impressive brick churches. In the "prosperity decade" of the 1920s, for example, eleven of twenty-three Christian Reformed congregations dedicated imposing new edifices. New manses were also built, as well as new Christian schools and missions like Nathaniel Institute. All were impressive brick buildings designed to announce, "We have arrived!"

Americanization

The two world wars speeded up the inevitable process of Americanization. Dutch young men went off to war and came home changed, having worshiped in base chapels with fellow Christians of all denominations. The folks at home joined the war crusades with equal fervor and sacrificed willingly for their new homeland. Governments at all levels force-fed patriotism, even banning preaching in foreign tongues, as was done in the First World War. This speeded up the changeover from Dutch to English language worship services. The Second World War brought unknown prosperity to the Dutch, who had suffered much in the Great Depression. Never again would the community be stretched to the limit to survive. But with prosperity came the materialistic cultural values for which the United States is infamous. This brings the greatest threat to the Dutch Reformed community and its future.

Conclusion

The Dutch urban experience in Chicago can best be summed up is several key words—church-centered communities, Christian schools, neighborhoods, money, mobility, mutuality, and Americanization. Churches anchored each neighborhood, every generation lived through the experience of pulling up stakes and relocating farther out, success in the workplace provided the financial underpinnings for the faith community, and after the Second World War, the Dutch immigrants, now mostly third and fourth generation, had clearly become Americans. Yet, a Dutch flavor remains in church, school, and family life in the Windy City.