In the City, But Not of the City:
Dutch Truck Farmers in the Calumet Region
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At the extreme southern edge of Chicagoland, in an area known locally as the Calumet Region, Dutch Reformed truck farmers work the rich muck soils on both sides of Ridge Road from South Holland and Lansing, Illinois eastward to Munster, Highland, and Ross, Indiana. At one time all these villages were populated with a significant percentage of Dutch, centered around their Calvinist Churches.[1]

My thesis is that these Dutch market gardeners deliberately kept themselves isolated culturally and religiously, and yet, they were

[1]This report is based almost entirely on personal recollections of local Dutch gardeners and peddlers. A few facts and dates were taken from the standard written histories of the Calumet Region and Dutch immigration. Most of the facts and stories mentioned have been gathered over a lifetime of conversations and observations with these Dutch farmers. Being raised on a large truck farm and working as a gardener supplied considerable material. The following individuals, most now deceased, were interviewed (their business names, if known, are also indicated: Dick Douma, John De Vries (De Vries Brothers), Albert and John Elzinga (Elzinga Brothers), Dick Kuiper (Dick and Jake Produce), Duurt and Case Kuiper (Kuiper Packing), Garret Leep (Spring Farm), Peter Peerbolt (Harris Seeds), Martin Porter (Porter's Produce), Martin Rispens (Martin Rispens Seeds), Louis Rottier (Rottier Produce), Herman Scheeringa, Jake M. Scheeringa (Jacob M. Scheeringa Farms), Martin Siderius (W and S Produce), William Terpstra, Arnold, Charles B., and William B. Zandstra (Zandstra Brothers Farm), John B. Zandstra

inevitably bound in a mutual interdependence with nearby urban areas of greater Chicagoland. As a market place and a source of labor, those industrial neighborhoods were essential to their survival. And both cultures benefited from this connection.

Background

When the Dutch first settled the Calumet Region in the late 1840s, they were isolated geographically by vast swamps and a near total lack of roads or trails. Early farming was little more then subsistence. Prior to the rise of a produce business in the Calumet Region, the Roseland area of Chicago, another Dutch Reformed enclave founded at the same time, served a similar role until suburbanization forced the farmers to move further south. It was only after improved roads were built at the turn of the twentieth century that the Calumet Region had reasonable access to the Chicago markets. In addition, other new industrial cities such as Gary, Hammond, Chicago Heights, Whiting, and East Chicago also became market places for the Dutch farmers.

Unlike Midwestern grain and livestock farmers, the Dutch were never at the mercy of the railroads even though they had easy access to them. Market transport of perishable produce was better served by horse and wagon and later by primitive trucks. Railroads were reserved for local passenger trips to shop and to visit family and friends in Roseland, and for freight delivery from the downtown department stores of Montgomery Ward and Sears. That the Dutch were not dependent on the railroads may explain in part their disinterest in the Populist farm movement.

After 1900 several canning companies, such as Libby, McNeil, and Libby, built large facilities to process vegetables grown under contract with local farmers. Tomatoes, pickles, and cabbage all figured prominently in the business. Sugar beets were also grown under contract for American sugar companies. Curiously, a government subsidy allows farmers to raise sugar beets at a profit, since it was a very labor-intensive crop. The subsidy, still in effect today, is perhaps the oldest in agriculture. It is deemed necessary to maintain a domestic supply of sugar.

Raising vegetables on contract had its limitations, which the Dutch farmers soon discovered. When their contracts were filled, or when processors for whatever reason rejected their produce, they were stuck with unsold crops. These Dutch Calvinist growers simply could not allow

good produce to rot. They took to the streets of nearby industrial neighborhoods and discovered a ready market for surplus produce. Peddling was born. Sugar beets and contract vegetables were slowly weaned from the Dutch farm economy. The last of that economy ended in the 1960s.

Economic Setting

To better understand the business of Dutch market gardening, one must take account of the cultural and economic setting of Chicagoland a century ago. South Chicago and Northwest Indiana were in the throes of rapid and heavy industrial growth. Names synonymous with capitalism operated in the region. Pullman, McCormick-Deering, U.S. Steel, Inland Steel, Swift, Armour, and others employed thousands of immigrants, mostly from eastern and southern Europe. Even many Dutch, desperate for income and work, took temporary employment with these companies. Ethnic neighborhoods evolved, often within walking or streetcar distance from the factories and plants. Each neighborhood had its own particular ethnic flavor. With little money and no refrigeration, food needs were a daily project. Corner stores and street peddlers supplied fresh food as well as other needs. Another strong and necessary tradition in those neighborhoods was storing food for the long winter months. Canning, preserving, drying, pickling, "krauting," or storing summer's abundance was an annual ritual. Dutch gardeners were a natural compliment to this industrial working population. Produce was often customized to meet the various ethnic requirements. Size, maturity, variety, season—all were matched to their customer's desires.

Life of a Farmer

A rigid daily and seasonal work schedule evolved in market gardening. The winter months, while not as hectic as summer, were a time for major projects, such as digging a new well, clearing land, arranging to rent parcels, and constructing new buildings. However, the most consistent winter task was hauling manure from the Chicago stockyards to spread and renew the organic content of soils. Manure, of course, was a by-product of the meat packing industry that supplied fresh meat to Chicagoland and the East Coast. At first, the railroads delivered gondola cars of manure to local sidings for about $26 a car. Growers were

responsible to unload them in a few days or face monetary penalties. Occasionally, the manure arrived frozen, which required a slow backbreaking effort, not unlike mining in the Yukon. One farmer picking his way through a frozen load remarked, “If I had killed both my mother and father, I’m still good for this.” Another source of fertilizer was “sand manure,” as the Dutch called it. This was a sand-manure mix that shippers spread in the cattle cars to absorb the waste. Dutch farmers also removed this mix; the work was back breaking but the fertilizer was free! Farmers later trucked the manure directly from the Chicago rail yards to their fields. Until the 1950s, all this work was done by pick and fork.

Before leaving this subject, it is necessary to understand that manure is not just manure. Animal source, heat content, compaction, and nitrogen content all played into the value and use of this basic resource. While any kind of manure could be spread over their fields, only sheep manure, for example, with heavy straw content was reserved for its heat content. Regardless of the weather, sheep manure never froze. Some of the best was reserved for the germination of seeds in the cold frames beginning in February and March. Surrounded under and about, the glass covered cold frames got the spring transplants safely under way. There was a balancing act involved. Too little or too much heat and the seeds could be cooked or grow too rapidly. The plan was always to have seedlings ready at the earliest safe time, usually late April or May.

One bright spot for the gardeners was the annual visit of the seed salesmen, usually representing the Woodruff, Martin Rispens, or Joseph Harris companies. Their visit usually meant a free calendar, perhaps cigars, or a box of candy for the wife. Later, caps and jackets became standard fare. The growers always feigned disinterest or reserve. It was a duel that both parties relished. The salesmen also introduced new and improved varieties to growers, who were always seeking to improve production. One of the few variables that farmers could control was the quality of their seed. The best was none to good.

Other springtime tasks, such as planting large onion sets for green onions, meant working all day on one’s knees on cold spring soils. The chilling effects on legs and hands contributed to a lifetime companionship with arthritic pains. The sowing of seeds and transplanting of seedlings continued well into summer, until the growing season ended with the approach of fall.

Throughout the summer, the most dismal and despised task was weeding. These Calvinists understood well where weeds came from and why they were necessary. Weeds were reminders of a fallen creation. Weeding began in the cold frames and continued through fall plowing. The relentless need for weeding was easily equated with the unquenchable flames of hell.

The daily cycle during the growing season became a fine tuned routine that taxed the physical limits of the men and their families. The workday began usually a little past midnight, when a load of produce, which had been prepared the day before, was delivered to one of the city's open markets or to neighborhood routes and stores. In Chicago the Randolph Street Market and the 71st Street (or State Street) Market were busy places from one to six in the morning. In these wee hours, wholesale grocers, shopkeepers, tavern owners, and even homeowners came to buy their daily produce needs. Some loads were brought to the South Water Market on a commission basis. Many growers sold both wholesale and retail. To avoid the night work and stress of the markets, some growers hired other farmers to deliver and sell their crops. Several of these growers became full time peddlers who sold on commission for farmers preferring not to peddle.

The wholesale markets tended to be very coarse places. The language, including metaphors and similes, was visceral and often of the basest kind. Many of the Dutch growers had a distinct dual personality—the crass market behavior and the clean home demeanor. The coarsest conversations at the market by upstanding church elders were not considered a double standard; it was mandatory to do business. Rarely did women work the markets. No Dutch women, to my knowledge, ever made an appearance. The few women who did were as vulgar as the men, or they were selling something other than tomatoes.

A hard nosed ethic required that all deals had to be settled very promptly, usually three days, or farmers were black-balled. Most transactions were cash, which meant farmers always carried huge amounts of money on their person. Remarkably few robberies occurred.

Meanwhile, back on the farm the wives and children arose at first light of day to begin harvesting for the next day's produce shipment. Breakfast was served about seven o'clock, after an hour or two of work. Then came the mid-morning lunch break, a noonday dinner followed by a

catnap, and finally, a supper to close the day, but only if chores and work were done. Throughout the day, bunching, picking, washing, trimming, boxing, and loading took place in anticipation of the next midnight departure.

The only time this process was modified was on Sunday night, or really Monday morning after midnight, to avoid transgressing the Sabbath. To solve this problem before refrigeration was available, the farm family had to go into the fields after midnight and cut and prepare a load for market. It made for long days. As the season wore on, farm families suffered from a progressive and collective sleep deprivation and they had no relief until after the first killing frost. More than a few farmers were involved in accidents caused by a lack of sleep. Before motor trucks, some farmers slept near the markets in hotels for transients, better known as "flophouses," or they let the horses take them home. There were several favorite watering holes along the road home where for the price of a few beers a fine lunch was thrown in. That was too good of a deal to resist. Many business deals were also consummated over these meals. According to legend, it was at these stopovers that the Dutch were introduced to sweet corn as human food rather than animal feed.

The actual delivery and peddling was regularly assigned to that person most able to face a dangerous and duplicitous world. The father initially took this job. Going there as a young man was a kind of passage into manhood. When a father passed that duty to one of his sons, it was both an honor and a curse. To receive that task meant high respect but also the responsibility to bring home the money. It was at this point that a naïve and isolated Dutch boy had to face the perils of the "loose women," Catholics, and Yankees—it could be anything. To brace him for this duty, the matriarch of the family would upbraid her son of the dangers of this world before his departure. However, to be successful he had to be gregarious, a little worldly, clever with words, and hard nosed in business. But there was no turning back. The returns were often already spent.

Selling the produce was a kind of art form seen in oriental bazaars. All prices were negotiable but roughly based on availability that day, who the customer was, and the general quality of the produce. Language barriers, while real, were usually resolved by learning a few basic words of the various ethnic groups with whom the peddler did business. English, of course, served as the lingua franca. Occasionally, Dutch farm boys in

the city were exposed to sad violations of the Ten Commandments. Many neighborhood mothers taught their children to steal from produce carts when the farmer carried an order into a home or store. In desperate times, parents might even offer their young daughters' virtue in exchange for a few bags of cabbage. The peddlers themselves were not guileless. One common trick, for example, was to place oversized pickles on the bottom, with choice sizes on top. Once an enterprising Dutch peddler, when asked whether large pickles were on the bottom of a bushel of choice pickles, replied (in English): "Aren't they beautiful?" adding in Dutch, "and de groote sitte ondern" [and the big ones are on the bottom]. The pickles sold.

The Greens Business

Edna Ferber in her classic novel, *So Big*, created a stereotype of dimwitted Dutch gardeners raising and peddling cabbage, tomatoes, pickles, and asparagus. While these were mainline crops that launched the peddling business and endured to the end, the moneymakers were leafy vegetables—turnip greens, mustard greens, collards, and spinach greens. Today these are known as "soul food." During the depths of the Great Depression and the decades following, such humble crops proved to be the most lucrative.

The transition began as farmers, often desperate to expand their market share to stay in business, discovered a large demand for such vegetables. What had led to this demand was the extensive migration of both blacks and whites from the South to the industrial areas of Chicagoland. Although displaced from their sharecropping by the Depression, they still yearned for their traditional southern diet of greens. These crops were diet staples, not luxury foods. Demand was strong and daily.

Most Americans have heard of stories of the Dust Bowl on the American Great Plains of the 1930s, which compounded the economic distress. But the Calumet Region also suffered from drought. Field crops withered and leafy crops such as the greens were especially susceptible. Worse yet, in the 1930s no farmers had irrigation systems to supplement rainfall. The local drought was proportionally as severe in the Midwest as on the Great Plains. The solution for local growers proved to be a gift of geography. Much of the local area had naturally been swamps. Some spots were still too moist to farm. Areas as far away as Cedar Lake and Knox,

Indiana were broken up and sown with greens. They were farmed till the rains returned. Some of those spots around Cedar Lake have not been farmed since.

The greens market proved to be a financial savior to the gardeners of the Calumet Region. Some growers went almost exclusively into greens production. This eager market allowed those economically strapped farmers to service their debts and even permitted them to make some major improvements on the farm, such as new buildings, machinery, and refrigeration.

Non-Dutch Farm Workers

One aspect of truck farming that so far has gone unmentioned was the need for large amount of labor to plant, weed, and harvest the vegetables. It was intensive hand labor; mechanical harvesters had not yet been invented. In fact, to a large degree fresh produce has always demanded hand harvest.

The renowned fecundity of Dutch couples supplied a significant part of the labor force. On the road where the Zandstra family farmed, there were at least a half dozen gardeners each with no less than ten children. One neighbor, when informed by the midwife that this wife had given birth to another son, candidly remarked, “I think we got another weeder.” Children were an economic asset. Blessed was he who had a quiver full of them. But this was still not enough.

The Dutch hired help from the same industrial neighborhoods where they peddled produce. Wives and children of mill workers were glad to supplement their primary wage earner’s income. Slovaks, Polish, Italians, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and many other eastern European immigrants joined the Dutch in the fields. They found farm work to be reprise of old world work. At times during the Depression or during labor strikes, this meager farm pay became their sole source of income. Each morning before sunrise, Dutch farmers drove their trucks to local industrial neighborhoods, where they picked up a load of these laborers. In late afternoon they brought them home the same way. During and following World War II, large numbers of urban teenagers were hired to replace young men who went into the service. In later years, Mexican migrants from Texas became a regular source of seasonal labor.

In more recent years, this same relationship between city dwellers

and Dutch gardeners continued but in a slightly altered form. Mexicans who first came from Texas as seasonal migrant farm workers decided to stay by taking industrial employment. Often wives and children continued to work in the vegetable fields. This group also came with its peculiar cultural tastes which growers soon met. Crops such as cilantro, tomatoes, plus many varieties of peppers, such as jalapenos and pablanos, became staples in Dutch farmers' fields.

Life long friendships were established between these eastern Europeans Catholics, Mexicans, and the Dutch Calvinists. A fear of Catholicism, instilled in the Dutch from their youth, sometimes was lost as they worked together in the field. As later generations of Dutch farmers and their non-Dutch laborers branched out into other activities, such as in small businesses, politics, and social activities, these groups continued to support each other.

One of the last phases of this powerful connection of Dutch gardeners and the local urban areas has been the Pick-Your-Own business, which thrived for thirty years from about 1965 to 1995. Growers again modified their harvesting by allowing city dwellers to enter their fields and select their own produce. For some pickers it was a recreational day on the farm. Others were retired industrial workers who had come north during the Depression or had emigrated from Eastern Europe. Most had been reared in rural settings before migrating and now sought to touch that experience again in the afternoon of their life. Specialty crops such as purple-hulled peas, crowder peas, squash blossoms, white eggplant, sweet potatoes, and leek were introduced to meet the palate demands of these pickers. But as these customers died, so did the vitality of the U-Pick business.

Currently, this special relationship of the Dutch growers and the city folk is almost gone. With high-speed transportation both over the road and even by air, many of these vegetable crops are available fresh year round at local super markets. Beginning in the 1950s, these same Dutch gardeners began selling their land to meet the ever-expanding demand for housing and shopping malls. In this terminal process the Dutch again supplied the basic ingredient, land, for a rapidly expanding urban Chicagoland. They took their newfound wealth philosophically to the bank and to Florida. A goodly number of charitable causes benefited as well.

In conclusion, the Calvinist farmers of the Calumet Region stood

at a discreet distance from the “outside world” through their cultural institutions, but they willingly built bridges to local industrial neighborhoods, as their livelihood required. Both markets and a work force were found there. The Dutch were indeed in the city, but not of the city.