

FRISIANS IN THE UNITED STATES

*Compliments of  
Marten Ten Hoor*

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Reprinted from MICHIGAN ALUMNUS QUARTERLY REVIEW  
December 8, 1951, Vol. LVIII, No. 10

THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC

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WHEN one undertakes to make a survey of historical events which are widely separated in space and time, a general "motif" or connecting idea is very useful. Such a general interpretative principle brings order and continuity into the multiplicity of data. Without it, a historical survey can be no more than a chronological listing of dates, names, and places. To be sure, a "motif" usually involves the error of oversimplification, but the wise reader will allow for this.

Two events suggest such a motif for this study. On June 3, 1945, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, there was held a religious service entirely in the Frisian language, and conducted by a native-born Frisian—the Reverend B. D. Dykstra, from Orange City, Iowa—in celebration of the liberation of the Province of Friesland from the Nazis. One hundred and sixty-three years before that event, in February, 1782, the legislature of the autonomous state of Friesland voted to recognize the independ-

ence of the American colonies, the first official and formal recognition of the new republic by any governing body. The motif suggested is obvious: the recognition of independence and self-determination, no matter how unorthodox the gesture or how small the company. This, too, is a recurrent theme in the record of the thoughts and activities of the Frisians in the United States of America.

THIS record spans more than three centuries in time and more than three million square miles in space. Obviously, so brief an article as this cannot be representative; it can only be suggestive, and then only through the medium of facts, not of interpretations. Since 1820—there are no records before this date—only about 260,000 Netherlanders have emigrated to the United States, whereas the total population was increased by more than 130,000,000. From 1847 to 1850, the peak years of the mid-nineteenth-century Dutch immigration, about 12,000 Netherlanders arrived in America. It is not known how many of these were Frisians. It has been estimated that in 1922, in Kent County, Michigan, one of the high-concentration points of Dutch population, there were 13,000 Frisians, by birth or descent, in a total population of about 200,000. In the great melting pot of America, the Frisians were therefore only a very small ingredient. Militating against the preservation of their ethnic identity, there was also the

MARTEN TEN HOOR was born in the Friesland of whose contribution to America he writes, but has lived nearly all his life in this country and received all his academic degrees from the University of Michigan (A.B. '13, A.M. '14, Ph.D. '21), where he was one of that noteworthy group of graduate students of the Wenley-Lloyd era who have since occupied important professorships of philosophy. Dr. ten Hoor was for seven years Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Tulane University and since 1944 has held the same position at the University of Alabama. A Dutch translation of this study will form a chapter of a forthcoming book on the Frisians which is to be published in the Netherlands.



fact that to all lay Americans and to most scholars the Frisians were not a separate ethnic group but simply "Dutchmen" or Hollanders.

In view of all this, one would not expect to find much recorded information about the experiences and accomplishments of the American Frisians. That this record is nonetheless remarkably extensive is to be attributed to several causes. In the first place, there is the characteristic strong and vital ethnic self-consciousness of the Frisians themselves. The first generation of immigrants definitely marked themselves off from other Dutchmen by their language; less obviously so by their racial traditions and characteristics. This separation would have had even more vitality had they not in the area of religion been absorbed in the non-Frisian-speaking congregations. Another explanation of the survival is to be found in the fact that many of

them left the old country and settled in the new as distinct racial groups, although it must be confessed that this was also true of emigrants from the other provinces. Finally, there is the fact that some of their leaders, especially in the field of education and literature, systematically evoked or fostered the Frisian spirit even to the third and fourth generations. To these activities we shall later make more specific reference.

There were two high points in the three centuries of Dutch immigration to the United States: the New Netherland period, 1624 to 1664, with the present area of New York City as the concentration center; and the Middle Western period, 1847 to

1850, with Holland, Michigan, and its immediate environs as the center. In the records of New Netherland very few individuals are identified as Frisians. In *Hollanders Who Helped Build America*, a current biographical work by B. H. M. Vlekke and Henry Beets, few of the "Knickerbockers," as the descendants of these early colonists are called, identify the province from which their ancestors came, though they are, on the whole, very proud of their Dutch origin.



REFORMED CHURCH, VRIESLAND, MICHIGAN, 1870

Bastiaen Jansz Krol, of Harlingen, was probably the first Frisian to emigrate to the United States. His intention was to serve as a lay preacher, but he ultimately became the second director of the colony and was largely responsible for establishing enduring peaceful relations between the colonists and the Mohawk Indians. The best-known Frisian in American history is undoubtedly Petrus Stuyvesant, from

1647 to 1664 governor of New Netherland. He was a son of a Frisian clergyman and was for a time a student at the University of Franeker. A vigorous and somewhat spectacular figure, he was one whose life and character made him an object of controversy in history and of satire in literature. In his nickname, Hardkoppige Piet, "Hardheaded Pete," Frisians will see an indication of an alleged racial characteristic. The journals of Captain David Pietersz de Vries, from Hoorn, in the West Frisian island of Texel, adventurer, navigator, trader, colonizer, and geographer, are one of the important sources of information concerning early



voyages of discovery and life in New Netherland. Captain de Vries, whose estate on the Hudson was called "Vriesendael," was finally driven away from the colony by the depredations of the Indians, whom he had done his best to befriend and pacify. Two other early colonists from Friesland deserve mention: Samuel Meyer, a rabbi from Leeuwarden who is reported to have established twenty-eight synagogues in the New World; and Pieter Schuyler, who in 1674 came from Wieuwerd to Pennsylvania as American "bishop" of the Frisian Labadist sect but in his new environment unexpectedly developed into a tobacco grower and slave trader.

The Knickerbocker Dutch, including such Frisians as there were among them, were gradually completely absorbed in American life. The record of the life and activities of the Frisians in the United States would have been a very slim one indeed had it not been for the second wave of immigration, 1847 to 1855, which ultimately resulted in the distribution of Frisians from California to Massachusetts, with substantial concentrations in Chicago, Illinois; Pella, Iowa; Grand Rapids and Holland, Michigan; and Paterson, New Jersey. (In this connection it is interesting to note that the current telephone directory of New York City lists only 5 Stuyvesants whereas the Grand Rapids, Michigan, directory lists 140 Dykstras.) Some other well-known locations of Frisian groups, in addition to those named elsewhere, are Bellflower, California; Goshen, Lafayette, and New Paris, Indiana; Hebron, Illinois; Orange City, Iowa; Whitinsville, Massachusetts; and Bundi and Emden, Minnesota. The Frisians in some cases recorded their old-country origin in place names; e.g., there are four Frieslands (in Michigan, Minnesota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin) and two Harlingens (in New Jersey and Texas).

Two settlements deserve special mention as outstanding examples of group move-

ments which accounted in part for the early vitality of Frisian traditions in the United States. In 1847 a group of Frisian Reformed Secessionists, numbering forty-nine adults, under the leadership of the Reverend Marten Anne Ypma, founded the town of Vriesland, in Ottawa County, Michigan. They settled in the heart of what in a few years became a second New Netherland, for groups came there from other Dutch provinces and, like the Frisians, named their settlements after their origin—Holland, Zeeland, Drenthe, Overijssel, etc.

The Vriesland group left principally to escape religious persecution, with quartering of soldiers as a contributing factor. The motives of a second group were mainly economic. In 1853 a group numbering ninety-two persons left Harlingen on their way to America. Their leader was Oepke Haitzes Bonnema, a wealthy philanthropic grain-dealer who paid the passage of the entire party. They were shipwrecked in the Bahamas, reëmbarked for New Orleans, sailed all the way up the Mississippi, and finally founded the village of New Amsterdam, in La Crosse County, Wisconsin. Records indicate that this town numbered some two hundred houses in 1880, but it is now a ghost town, a relic of the heyday of the great lumber industry.

There were other group movements of varying sizes. In 1847 a party of Frisians from It Bildt and Barradeel settled in Lafayette, Indiana. A number of Frisians were included in the groups which founded Holland, Michigan, and Pella, Iowa. In 1849 a Frisian colony was established in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, of which a well-known Frisian, Worp van Peyma, was a leading member. A group of Mennonites—who take their name from the Frisian, Menno Simons (1492-1559)—left Balk, Friesland, to escape military training and wandered over large sections of the United States. A number of them finally settled in New Paris, Indiana.



By no means all of the towns and cities where Frisians are found were settled by organized groups. In the course of the long journey inland from the seaports on the Atlantic, numbers of immigrants dropped off here and there. Albany, New York; Toledo, Ohio; and Lafayette, Indiana, are cases in point. Newly arrived Frisians found countrymen in most unexpected places. The Oepke Bonnema group were suddenly hailed from the dock at Davenport, Iowa, "*Hwer komme jimme wei?*" "Where do you come from?" To which a passenger responded, "*Ik bin fan Wolvegea.*" "I'm from Wolvegea." In the course of time, individuals and some small groups, moved by the pioneering spirit, sometimes effectively stimulated by railroad agents and real estate promoters, fanned out from the original settlements to new locations farther west and northwest and extended the Frisian outposts in the United States.

All these Frisians made a substantial contribution to the conquest of the frontier and, in general, to the subsequent development of the culture of their adopted country. They found American democratic institutions much to their liking and rather quickly associated themselves with them. Records indicate, for example, that within two and one-half years of the settlement of the Vriesland, Michigan, colony, almost the minimum possible period, forty members of the group became naturalized American citizens. Many of their young men served in the Civil War, apparently only on the Union side.

IT APPEARS that the Frisians nevertheless maintained their racial identity to a remarkable degree. With respect to this matter, three fairly distinct periods can be discerned. During the first period there was of course a carry-over and survival of the culture of the old country, such as occurs in the case of any immigrant group. The duration and faithfulness of this carry-over

were more than normal, however. Among the reasons for this we must mention the characteristic Frisian traits of individualism, stubbornness, and intense racial consciousness, which in the new country may to some extent have been stimulated by the obvious need of differentiating themselves from the other Netherlanders. No doubt, the establishment of colonies predominantly if not exclusively Frisian was a contributing factor. Together with colonists from other provinces, they had the opportunity of organizing their own churches or joining already established Dutch congregations. Although the Frisian language was not used in religious services, membership in these groups helped to point up and maintain their separation from the Americans.

No accurate study has been made of the period and extent of the survival of the language. Only loose reports are available. These indicate that not much more than ten years ago, on the streets of Friesland, Wisconsin, children could be heard talking Frisian in their play. As late as 1914 the writer knew families in Ellsworth, Michigan, in which only Frisian was spoken in the home. Survival of the language was of course promoted by the arrival of new immigrants from the mother country. In spite of all these factors, the Americanization of the second and third generation descendants of the colonists has brought as a natural consequence the disappearance of the language as a means of daily communication. In this connection it should be remembered that, although during this transition period there was a bilingual conflict between the imported Dutch and the native English, there was never any such conflict between Dutch and Frisian.

THE PERIOD of cultural carry-over gradually faded into a period of increasing dilution and absorption and forgetting. During this second period, however, the descendants of the Frisian colonists and new arrivals from the home



province were winning for themselves positions of influence and prominence in local communities and, in some cases, in the national scene. Even an incomplete survey of the record indicates that, considering their numerical inferiority, this record is a creditable one. In the biographical dictionary *Hollanders Who Helped Build America*, a representative but by no means all-inclusive work, in which the province of birth or descent is not given in numerous cases, 43 of the 528 subjects are recorded as Frisian-born or of Frisian descent. The distribution by occupations is interesting: 17 professors, 5 journalists, 4 businessmen; lawyers, ministers, and university presidents, 3 each; architects and engineers, 2 each; librarian, artist, politician, government employee, 1 each.

In further support of this contention, a few names are mentioned. The individuals are worthy examples, though not necessarily the most outstanding and certainly not the only examples. Representing a family which arrived in the middle of the seventeenth century, there are Edwin Berry Banta, retired journalist; John C. Banta, corporation president; and Russell Vincent Banta, engineer—all descendants of Epke Jacobse, of Harlingen. Stanley M. Isaacs, formerly borough president of Manhattan, now a member of the City Council, lawyer, Jewish leader, and philanthropist, is a descendant of Samuel M. Isaacs, of Leeuwarden, who came to the United States in 1839. The following, active in the first quarter of this century, were native-born Frisians: Dr. Henry Hulst, physician, pioneer in deep X-ray therapy, and one of the early presidents of the American Roentgenological Society; Ate Dykstra, editor of *The Christian Workman*, pioneer labor leader and politician in Grand Rapids, Michigan; Foppe Marten ten Hoor, clergyman, editor of *De Gereformeerde Amerikaan*, for twenty-five years professor of systematic theology at Calvin Theological Seminary; William

F. Hofstra, lumberman, founder of Hofstra College, at Hempstead, Long Island.

A survey of available records of the activities of Frisian-Americans during the last twenty-five years produces a great many more names, for it was in this period that the second and third generations came into their own. Space permits mention at this point of only a few individuals, and then for special reasons. Among the "elder statesmen" of this period not mentioned elsewhere are Dr. Clarence Addison Dykstra, onetime city manager of Cincinnati, Ohio, later president of the University of Wisconsin, and at the time of his death provost of the University of California at Los Angeles; Bernard J. Mulder, editor of *The Church Herald*, official organ of the Reformed Church in America; Dr. Lee S. Huizenga, who died in a Japanese prison camp in 1945, distinguished medical missionary and authority on leprosy.

A survey of information seems to justify some general conclusions concerning the occupations and interests of the Frisian-Americans. Few, apparently, have become industrialists and "big businessmen." Many are engaged in agriculture. A large proportion have entered the ministry and the other learned professions. Particularly worthy of notice are the extent and influence of their participation in the educational life of the United States. Frisians were active in the founding, and continue to be influential in the development, of the two educational institutions established and supported by Dutch immigrants—Hope College and Calvin College and the theological seminaries associated with them. A large proportion of the graduates and students of both are of Frisian descent. Hessel O. Yntema, one of the original settlers of Vriesland, Michigan, was also a founding trustee of Hope College. His son Douwe B. became a professor there, as did his son Dwight B., in turn. The former's other five children, after graduating from Hope, also



distinguished themselves in education and scientific research. Two of the three original professors of Calvin Theological Seminary were Frisian born, Gerrit Klaas Hemkes and Gerhardus Vos. Not less than a dozen members of the current faculty are of Frisian descent.

The faculties of numerous universities and colleges of American origin which are scattered over the length and breadth of the land include, or recently included, a number of Frisian-Americans, many of them graduates of Hope and Calvin. For example, eight of about twenty-five professors of philosophy of Dutch descent are native-born Frisians or first-generation Frisian-Americans. Here follow a few names to indicate the variety and spread of Frisian-American scholars: Albert Hyma, historian, University of Michigan; Adriaan van Maanen (deceased), astronomer, Mount Wilson Observatory; Peter Andrew van der Meulen, chemistry, Rutgers University; Gerardus James Holwerda, comparative literature, University of Southern California; Ole Niehuis de Weerdt, psychology, Beloit College, Wisconsin; Oets Bouwsma, philosophy, University of Nebraska; Jacob van der Zee, political science, State University of Iowa. These scholars and their many colleagues have made substantial contributions to the advancement of knowledge in their respective fields.

In the field of literature, four Frisian-Americans have attracted considerable critical attention. The most prolific and best known of these is David Cornel de Jong. His works include several novels and numerous poems and short stories which have been published in leading American magazines. Critics have differed considerably in their evaluations of his work. The novels have been accepted as important and substantial works, but the consensus seems to be that the author has just missed greatness. A much favored novel, *Old Haven*, has been translated from the English into

six languages. Meindert de Jong, younger brother of David C., has become well known as an author of children's books. Henry K. Pasma has contributed fiction and historical and religious articles to several American periodicals. His novel *Close-Hauled* was well received. The most recent writer in this group to attract extensive favorable attention is Feike Feikema. His first novel, *The Golden Bowl*, received much praise. Critics agree that he writes with extraordinary power, and it is generally expected that he will make his mark in American literature. In the field of musical composition, William Bergsma, a member of the faculty of the Juilliard School of Music, is coming to be regarded as one of the leading younger American composers.

The activities of all these Frisian-Americans have of course called a certain degree of attention to the history and culture of Friesland. This has been done more pointedly and effectively, however, by individuals and organizations whose conscious purpose it was to do so. There are, first of all, the six Frisian societies in the United States: the oldest (1893) is *Utspanning troch Ynsparing*, of Paterson, New Jersey; the youngest (1949) is *Us Memmetael*, of Racine, Wisconsin; the others are *Friso* (1909) and *Gysbert Japiks* (1933) of Grand Rapids, Michigan; *It Heitelan* (ca. 1936) of Orange City, Iowa, and *Fier van Hûs*, of Springfield, South Dakota. In 1943 all joined in addressing a manifesto to Queen Wilhelmina which requested for the homeland Frisians greater recognition of "the inalienable rights of self-preservation and self-development as a distinct people." Although some prominent American liberals personally supported the manifesto, other Americans and Frisian-Americans questioned the wisdom of this action at a time when the world was in such great need of unity and coöperation.

Greatest credit for stimulating interest and spreading information about things



Frisian is due the Frisian Information Bureau, of Grand Rapids, Michigan, "dedicated to the promotion of a better knowledge of Greater Friesland." It was organized in 1943 with Lolle P. de Boer, librarian, bibliographer, and genealogist, of Los Angeles, California, and Bernard J. Fridsma, of the Calvin College faculty, as codirectors. Since 1946, the latter has been sole director. The bureau publishes a monthly bulletin, the *Frisian News Items*, maintains a book service and a loan library, and supplies other publications with articles on Frisian life and culture. It is a nonprofit organization and is supported by contributions.

Among other sources of stimulation and information, past and present, the following may be mentioned: the exhibit of Frisian life and culture in the Grand Rapids Museum in October, 1949, which included Frisian and Frisian-American literature, Makkum earthenware, Hynljippen furniture, and Snits copperwork; the Frisian dwelling-room exhibit in the Chicago Art Institute; the publications and radio programs of the Netherlands Information Bureau in New York and in Holland, Michigan; the outstanding collections in the Harvard University, New York Public, Newberry (Chicago) and University of California libraries; a survey of Frisian literature (by B. J. Fridsma) in the *Encyclopedia of Literature*; scattered American doctoral dissertations on Frisian subjects; historical studies of the Frisians in the United States by Henry S. Lucas, himself a Frisian and professor of history in the University of Washington.

THE PRESENT and third period is a period of increasingly rapid assimilation of the Frisians into the American people and into the American scene. When we turn, in conclusion, to the consideration of the future of these Frisian-Americans, we pass from reporting to prophecy. Certainly, the influence of past accomplishments will

persist for some time. However, if the Frisian-American population is not periodically and liberally infused with "new blood" from the homeland—and in view of the current immigration policy, this does not seem likely—intermarriage, first with non-Frisian Netherlands and later no doubt increasingly with Americans of other racial stock, will result in a dilution of Frisian characteristics or a mixture with others. It is not possible to estimate the survival power of these characteristics with any degree of accuracy, for we cannot identify in advance the various elements which are to be fused, nor can we measure mathematically the respective roles of heredity and environment. In numerous individuals certainly, and in some few small groups which have been able to maintain their racial identity possibly, the characteristics of which Frisians are so conscious, and so proud, will survive. We can be sure that some Frisian-Americans will be true to tradition and will continue to supplement the Dutch national motto, *Je Maintiendrai*, "I shall maintain," with their own "provincial" amendment, "our racial characteristics."

There is a Frisian saying which runs as follows: *De Fries stiet nea oan'e kant fan it meartal*, "The Frisian is never on the side of the majority." If we were to risk a general characterization of outstanding Frisian-Americans whom we have known or who have come within the range of this study, this saying could be accepted as suggesting it. In America, as elsewhere, the Frisian tends to be an individualist and, in consequence, a member of the opposition. His critics ascribe this to his innate stubbornness; he himself likes to think of it as the consequence of a love of freedom, of a need for self-determination—the *motif* of this study. When he is most complimentary concerning himself, he insists that it is a manifestation of his passion for complete self-realization, that is, for perfection. Whatever the true explanation, he usually finds himself with the minority.







