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What Possessed Them?

Leadership credibility of the Dutch immigration to Colorado in 1892-93

When I emigrated to North America in 1951, my parents asked, "What possessed him?" And other Dutch people, I am sure, raised the same question in the nineteenth century when relatives or friends decided to cross the ocean for the unknown and uncertain New World. One may well ask this question about the leaders and immigrants of the ill-fated Dutch settlements in Colorado in 1892-1893.

Let me begin with a few introductory remarks. Economic conditions in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century seem to have been the primary reason why individuals broke up their homes to emigrate to an unfamiliar world. In addition, in the first half of the century, religious and, to a far lesser degree, political factors played an important role.¹ The desire to worship without government interference led many people to leave in groups rather than individually, and often under the leadership of a minister.² Good examples of these group movements are those which came under the leadership of Albertus Christiaan Van Raalte to Holland, Michigan,³ of Hendrik Pieter Scholte to Pella, Iowa,⁴ of Cornelis Van der Muelen to Zeeland, Michigan,⁵ of Maarten Anne Ypma to Vriesland, Michigan,⁶ of Seine Bolks to Overisel, Michigan.⁷ The power of their religious convictions held these groups together and led to the success of their settlements. For that reason they

became the focus of the Dutch presence in North America.⁸

In the second half of the nineteenth century, religious and political considerations faded into the background as reason to emigrate.⁹ Economic considerations became much more of a decisive factor in making the decision to pick up one's stakes.¹⁰ In the Netherlands the years between 1850 and 1880 were exceptionally favorable for farmers, since the demand for agricultural and cattle-raising products was great.¹¹ And the burgeoning laboring class supplied the needed labor force for working the fields. But the proliferation of large families among the working class also led to an oversupply of laborers; as a result there were hardships.¹² Unemployment was on the rise, and so were food costs. For many, economic conditions remained as bad as they had been in the forties.¹³

Meanwhile, improvements in steamship and railroad transport made the trip to the United States much more comfortable. The time required for crossing the ocean had been reduced to about ten days.¹⁴ (In contrast, in the forties the "Southerner" on which Van Raalte and his party sailed, took about 54 days to cross the Atlantic.¹⁵) Furthermore, new laws and regulations afforded the emigrants better protection than before. One of the actions of the United States

government was the opening of Ellis Island, the well-known disembarkation center in New York City, in 1892.

The Dutch emigrants of the forties and fifties were a strong-willed people and left their native soil full of confidence and hope for their future. Those of the eighties and nineties left without even the slightest faith in their own ability or hope for their future.¹⁶ Their emigration was promoted, however, by the commercial interests of transport companies.¹⁷ Van Hinte labels it "trafficking in human beings."¹⁸ The Dutch consul-general in New York City reported in the early nineties that a good number of Dutch immigrants had knocked on his door asking for assistance. Many of them had been duped by steamship, railway and land agents with beautiful promises and had been carelessly sent off by naive though well-meaning persons.¹⁹

But then a cleverly organized venture of group emigration of Dutch farmers and laborers to Colorado was undertaken, under the leadership of Albertus Zoutman and Cornelis W. Vander Hoogt, in the second half of 1892 and in 1893. Colorado had been admitted to the Union in 1876 as the 38th state and was promoting itself as a haven for new settlers. The immigrants were, of course, joined by others who hoped to find in Colorado a better life. At first, gold and silver mining drew many; then the promise of the land for agriculture. The land-hungry farmers from the east moved west. The choicest lands of Kansas and Nebraska had already been taken up, and now the farmers advanced into Colorado.²⁰ A brochure was published in 1884 under the title of *Immigrants' Guide to the Great San Luis Park*.²¹ It praised the region as the best

farming land in the world, with the waters from the Rio Grande available for irrigation.²²

Such a brochure presumably served as a model for the brochure entitled *De emigratie van landbouwers naar Noord-Amerika, San Luis Vallei, Staat Colorado* (The immigration of farmers to North America, San Luis Valley, State of Colorado), published by the Holland-American Land and Immigration Company in 1892.²³ Since the Immigration Company advertised heavily in Christian daily and weekly newspapers,²⁴ this venture had appearance of being based on a Reformed principle. The three members of the Board of Directors were also of strong Reformed persuasion: Maarten Noordtzijs, Professor of Semitic languages in the Theological School at Kampen, Karel de Vidal St. Germain, the Superintendent of the Municipal Buildings in Kampen, and Jan de Boer, landowner and assessor of the Township of Almkerk.²⁵ The Incorporation papers do not mention a Reformed principle, however.²⁶ And Zoutman and Vander Hoogt, the two representatives of the Immigration Company in Colorado, certainly did not show any Reformed principle either in their actions toward the immigrants or in their personal lives.

The Holland-American Land and Immigration Company was organized and started to advertise emigration to the San Luis Valley in Colorado in August, 1892.²⁷ The prime mover behind the organization was Albertus Zoutman, a young man of twenty-one years, who had been in Colorado a few months for health reasons.²⁸ Though he had only worked in an office in Denver for a short time, and later had assisted a realtor who worked on the layout of irrigation

ditches, he brazenly promoted himself as being an "agriculturalist and state observer of the United States of North America, stationed in Alamosa, Colorado."²⁹ To prospective inquirers at the main office of the Immigration Company in Utrecht, he even claimed to be an engineer who would not work for less than \$10.00 a day.³⁰ On his travels through the Netherlands to promote the cause of emigration, however, it became quite apparent that Zoutman had no knowledge of agriculture. He was also very vague about the real situation in Colorado, although the brochure published by the Immigration Company in 1892 stated that the 15,000 acres of land it held had been bought after long, careful and competent inspection.³¹ It also said that Zoutman himself, together with impartial experts, had investigated the land³² and that he had not spared any pain or money in doing so.³³ The truth was, however, that the greater part of the 15,000 acres the Immigration Company supposedly had bought was of very poor quality. Since he was the only one who had been in Colorado, Zoutman was the key figure in the Immigration Company. He did not hesitate to take advantage of his position. The members of the Board of Directors were in the palm of his hand.³⁴

What possessed Zoutman when he launched this scheme of emigration to the San Luis Valley in Colorado? Obviously little more than greed. When the Immigration Company was incorporated on August 18, 1892, Zoutman purchased 1500 of the 1526 shares for \$150,000 (\$100 per share). In fact, however, he put no money on the table.³⁵ When on May 5, 1892, the land was purchased from Theodore C. Henry, President of the Empire Land and Canal Company, a deal was struck between

Zoutman and Henry, that as part of the purchase price of \$183,750 Henry was to receive \$75,000 worth of shares from the Immigration Company.³⁶ Keep in mind that the shares of the Immigration Company were worthless, since there was no money behind it. Apparently Henry was suspicious of Zoutman's scheme, for before he was willing to accept the shares of the Immigration Company he wanted to see the company books. Since Zoutman never showed the books to Henry, the "big land deal" never materialized. I suspect that the \$75,000 would eventually have disappeared into Zoutman's pocket and that of his companion, Vander Hoogt. The Immigration Company was just a front. In the end the immigrants who came to Colorado under the auspices of the Immigration Company were the victims.³⁷

The Incorporation Papers stated that Zoutman was "to perform everything."³⁸ Since there was a stalemate between the Immigration Company and the Empire Land and Canal Company concerning the land purchase near Alamosa, the representatives of the Immigration Company investigated lands in the Platte Valley. After putting \$1,000 down, the company bought 32,000 acres for \$450,000 near Crook, Colorado, on January 26, 1893.³⁹ It was in this area that Zoutman could now make arrangements for the immigrants to obtain building materials to build their homes. He arranged for loans from the bank. He made a contract with the Oxnard Beet Sugar Company of Grand Island, Nebraska, to grow sugar beets for them. But when Zoutman left the Immigration Company in May 1893, it became apparent that only a very small part of the acquired goods and services had been paid for.⁴⁰ As a result, all the possessions of the Immigration Company were seized.⁴¹

Those immigrants who had put some of their own money into their dwellings lost it when the creditors went to court and filed liens against the Immigration Company and the immigrants. These claims totaled \$9,666.⁴² Zoutman was shown to be totally unsuited for his position and had duped the immigrants into trusting him.

So much for Zoutman. Cornelis W. Vander Hoogt was 34 years old when he came to North America for the first time in January, 1892. Born in 1857, he was brought up in the city of Kampen in the Netherlands. As an adolescent he went to Amsterdam to live with his brother and worked as a store clerk. He claimed to have studied at the Universities of Heidelberg and the Sorbonne.⁴³ However, I have found no proof of that. During my efforts to trace the life story of Vander Hoogt it has at times been difficult to separate truth from fiction.

He had been a shareholder in at least a dozen companies in the Netherlands which all folded within a few years of their formation. Of one company, the Zuid-Afrikaansche Handel-maatschappij (South African Trade Company), he was co-director. Still, for some reason, whenever he wanted money the other director had to sign the check. In 1889 Vander Hoogt had requested a check for 1,000 guilders. On his way to the bank to cash the check, he changed the one into a two.⁴⁴ For that he was forced to resign from the company.⁴⁵

In April 1890, Vander Hoogt took out 15 shares for 1,200 guilders each (18,000 guilders in total) in the Naamlouze Vennootschap, Mijnbouw Maatschappij "Odin" (the Odin Mining Company Ltd.),⁴⁶ but put no money on the table for them.

When the company was in financial straits, it took him to court in January 1891 to force him to pay up. The outcome of the case was inconclusive, however,⁴⁷ since the company folded some time later.

In December 1890, he bought 25 shares for 1,200 guilders each (30,000 guilders) from the "Mijn- en Landbouw-Maatschappij Oranje" (Orange Mining and Agricultural Company).⁴⁸ Maarten Noordt zij, President of the Holland-American Land and Immigration Company, had also taken out 5 shares (6,000 guilders). From this company Vander Hoogt embezzled close to 12,000 guilders in May 1891, and 6,000 guilders in December 1891, probably to pay the 18,000 guilders he owed to the Odin Mining Company. His embezzlement gave rise to a court case in Amsterdam in 1892, but again there was no conviction.⁴⁹ On January 1, 1892, he left the Netherlands for England, and on January 6, travelling first class, he left for North America from the city of Liverpool.

In later years, he became secretary of the Bureau of Immigration of the State of Maryland in Baltimore, serving from 1896 to 1900. His salary was about \$1,100 a year,⁵⁰ yet during that time he managed to travel and to stay frequently in New York City.⁵¹ How he managed that on his salary is difficult to answer — unless, of course, he had some hidden source of income. In 1904 he was arrested for blackmail in New York City. After he had spent about a month in jail,⁵² his case was dismissed, because the plaintiff did not show up in court.⁵³

To return to 1892, Vander Hoogt spent a little more than a month in North America after the embezzlement of the 18,000 guilders. In March 1892, he was back in the

Netherlands, and by September or October 1892 he was again in the United States of America.⁵⁴ In November 1892 he went to New York to welcome the immigrants to the New World. He and Zoutman, who had arrived a day earlier than the immigrants on November 25, 1892, accompanied them by train to Alamosa. Shortly after the immigrants arrived in the San Luis Valley in December 1892, some of the colonists handed their money over to Vander Hoogt and Zoutman at their request, just for safekeeping, as they claimed. First, the money was placed in the local bank in Vander Hoogt's name. When the colonists learned of this, he was forced to change the account into the name of the Immigration Company.⁵⁵ A few days later, when it became known that the Company did not have a square inch of land to its name in the valley, four of the immigrants who had turned over their money filed suit against him. As a result, the court ordered him to return the full amount, \$7,386.⁵⁶ There can be little doubt that if the four immigrants had not gone to an attorney, they would never have seen their money again. A few months later, in May 1893, Vander Hoogt left the Crook settlement and went to live in New York City.

The president of the Immigration Company was Maarten Noordtzij, a well-respected professor at the Theological School in Kampen. What possessed him? Probably the persuasiveness of Vander Hoogt and Zoutman enabled them to recruit a man of his stature for the position of president. Moreover, Vander Hoogt and Noordtzij were from the same city and must have known each other. It was no secret that Noordtzij had a keen interest in the social issues of the day.⁵⁷ He knew that economic conditions

were not very good in the Netherlands in 1892. The idea of the emigration of farmers and laborers to the New World, proposed by Zoutman and Vander Hoogt, naturally appealed to him. But did such interest qualify him to head an Immigration Company? After the distressing news about the situation in Colorado had reached the Netherlands, public opinion there was quite ready to say no. It claimed that he did not know enough about colonization or agriculture to be a reliable guide, and that for lack of first hand information he had had to rely too much upon what others (i.e., Zoutman and Vander Hoogt) had told him about what was going on in Colorado.⁵⁸

In December 1892, Noordtzij went to North America to see at first hand what the trouble was in Colorado. After his arrival the colonists tried to convince him that Zoutman and Vander Hoogt were unsuitable and incompetent for their assigned task. Noordtzij turned a deaf ear to the pleas of the colonists. What possessed Noordtzij to stick with Zoutman and Vander Hoogt? That is difficult to say. Noordtzij may not have known much about Zoutman's background, but he must have known about Vander Hoogt's. The incident of the 1,000 - 2,000 guilders check in October, 1889 had appeared as a news item in *De Standaard*,⁵⁹ a newspaper to which Noordtzij certainly subscribed — the newspaper of Abraham Kuyper. And what about the 18,000 guilders Vander Hoogt had embezzled from a company in which Noordtzij was also a shareholder?⁶⁰

To the bitter end Noordtzij defended Zoutman, Vander Hoogt and the Immigration Company. Finally the curatorium of the Theological School expressed its desire that

Noordtzij should withdraw from the Immigration Company — for the welfare of the school.⁶¹

The predicament in which the immigrants found themselves rested squarely on the shoulders of Zoutman and Vander Hoogt. Noordtzij also, as President of the Immigration Company, carried in large measure the blame for the failure of the Dutch settlements in Colorado. The three of them did not know enough about colonization or agriculture to be reliable guides for such a monumental enterprise. However, Noordtzij did not try to line his own pockets as Zoutman and Vander Hoogt attempted to do. Noordtzij probably lost money on this venture.

The first immigrants who came under the auspices of the Immigration Company arrived on American shores on November 25, 1892, and the last of them on May 25, 1893. In all about 365 immigrants, men, women and children, came to Colorado.

The expectations of the first arrivals (about 200) were very high. On the train from Hoboken, New Jersey, to Alamosa, Colorado, Zoutman and Vander Hoogt had fanned to the limits their excitement about their new environment. Colorado was a paradise, the "Italy of western North America"⁶² with comfortable summers and winters, never too warm nor too cold. A few days after their arrival, however, the temperature plummeted to 30 degrees below zero.⁶³ The flimsy construction of the two wooden buildings in which the 200 immigrants were housed, the poor quality of the soil on which the Immigration Company had only an option, and other factors, brought home the stark and painful reality

that they had been duped. A reporter from a Denver newspaper, who gave quite an accurate account of the immigrants' situation, entitled his article on the front page, "Boldest of Swindles." Having been in Colorado only a month, a number of immigrants near Alamosa broke with the Immigration Company; the rest followed the company to Crook, Colorado.

Cornelis A. Sluijs, one of the immigrants, had approached his father-in-law concerning the content of the brochure published by the Immigrant Company urging people to emigrate to Colorado. His father-in-law answered: "Even if there is only some truth in the brochure, it is better to be there than to stay here."⁶⁴ But Sluijs could not tolerate the falsehoods of Vander Hoogt and Zoutman and he bluntly told them so. As a result, he and his family were kicked out of the colony.⁶⁵

The immigrants' arrangement with the Immigration Company was that the company would make available everything that was needed. They were in the company's employ, receiving wages and board for their services. They were to buy land, horses and implements, lumber, etc. from the company. If they paid by instalments, the company would charge them interest. Many of the immigrants came to Colorado with very little money and were therefore dependent upon the company. Since the company was Zoutman and Vander Hoogt, the immigrants were in their clutches.

After the first disappointments, the immigrants who remained near Alamosa experienced a promising new beginning; they were able to buy land on their own and not through the Immigration Company. But their

first harvest did not yield as much as anticipated, and wheat prices were depressed. With no money in the bank to tide them over the winter, the immigrants knocked on the door of the Christian Reformed Church for assistance. They held a sale for their goods and livestock and were resettled in Iowa, Nebraska and Kansas. Those who had moved to Crook were resettled earlier in Iowa by the Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church in America. The resettled immigrants picked up the pieces of their lives in their new environments. Many of them prospered and with their descendants took their places in the American world.

What possessed the immigrants? The promises in the Immigration company's brochure as to what could be earned and saved in the valley in the very first year played a crucial and influential role in their decisions to emigrate. This venture was definitely one of those get-rich-quick schemes. The immigrants were too gullible. When they walked up the gangplank, they did not know the real motives of Zoutman and Vander Hoogt. For those two it was also a get-rich-quick scheme, but at the expense of the immigrants.

NOTES

¹ Jacob van Hinte. *Netherlanders in America. A study of emigration and settlement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the United States of America* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), p. 579.

² *Ibid.*

³ Henry Stephen Lucas. *Netherlanders in America. Dutch immigration to the United States and Canada, 1789-1950* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1955), pp. 88-104.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 151-195.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 119-135.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 141-147.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 144-147.

⁸ van Hinte, p. 579.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 581.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 583.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 583-584.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 601.

¹⁵ Lucas, p. 70.

¹⁶ van Hinte, p. 601.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 605.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 601.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 605.

²⁰ Le Roy. R. Haven. *Colorado. The story of a western commonwealth* (New York: AMS Press, 1970), p. 232.

²¹ *Immigrants' Guide to the great San Luis Park; where can be had the best farming lands in the world* (Denver: Republican Publishing Co., 1884).

²² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²³ *De emigratie van landbouwers naar Noord-Amerika, San Luis Vallei, Staat Colorado* (Utrecht: De Nederlandsch-Amerikaansche Land- en Emigratie - Maatschappij, 1892). Hereafter cited as *Emigratie*.

²⁴ Advertisements offering the brochure were found in several daily and weekly newspapers, e.g. *De Oranjevaan* 12 (July 23, 1892), p. 4; *De Protestantische Noordbrabanter* 13 (August 6, 1892), p. 1; *De Standaard* 21 (August 15, 1892), p. 4. There were eighteen advertisements placed in *De Standaard* between August 15, 1892 and January 16, 1893.

²⁵ *Emigratie*, p. ii.

²⁶ Incorporation papers of the "Holland-American

Land and Immigration Company" are to be found in the State Archives, Denver, Colorado.

²⁷ See *Emigratie*.

²⁸ "Emigratie III", *De Protestantsche Noordbrabanter* 13 (17 September 1892), p. 1.

²⁹ *Emigratie*, p. ii.

³⁰ Jan van Boven. *De eerste Hollandsche nederzetting in Colorado en het optreden der Nederlandsch-Amerikaansche Land- en Emigratie-Maatschappij van nabij beschouwd* (Utrecht: H. Honig, 1893), p. 19.

³¹ *Emigratie*, p. 5.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁵ "Statuten der Naamlooze Vennootschap: Nederlandsche-Amerikaansche Land- en Emigratie-Maatschappij", *Nederlandsche Staats-courant*, 8 September 1892, pp. 6-8.

³⁶ "Boldest of Swindles," *The Denver Republican*, January 29, 1893, p. 8.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ See Article Four of the Incorporation Papers of the Holland-American Land and Immigration Company dated December 9, 1982.

³⁹ "The Dutch Colony," *The Denver Republican*, January 29, 1893, p. 8.

⁴⁰ Cornelis A. Sluijs. "Brieven uit Amerika" (dated June 18, 1893), *Enkhuizer Courant* 24 (July 14, 1893), p. 2-3.

⁴¹ Cornelis Kooiman's letter, dated July 12, 1893 to B. Haagsma. This letter is to be found among Gijsbert van Tienhoven's papers, Rijksarchief, The Hague.

⁴² See court records to be found in the District Court of Logan County, Sterling, Colorado.

⁴³ "Cornelius Vander Hoogt" (Obituary), *The New York Times*, July 8, 1928, p. 21, col. 4.

⁴⁴ "Buitengewone Algemeene Vergadering van aandeelhouders der Zuid-Afrikaansche Handel-Maatschappij", *De Wereldburger* 3 (1889), p. 465-466, 469-470.

⁴⁵ News item in *De Standaard* 18 (October 30, 1889), p. 2.

⁴⁶ See the Incorporation Papers of the Naamlooze Vennootschap, Mijnbouw Maatschappij "Odin." The Incorporation Papers are to be found in the Gemeente Archief, Amsterdam.

⁴⁷ See court records of the Arrondissementsrechtbank at Amsterdam. These court records are in the Rijksarchief, Haarlem.

⁴⁸ See the Incorporation Papers of the Naamlooze Vennootschap, Mijn- en Landbouw-Maatschappij "Oranje." The Incorporation Papers are to be found in the Gemeente Archief, Amsterdam.

⁴⁹ See court records of the Arrondissementsrechtbank at Amsterdam. These court records are in the Rijksarchief, Haarlem.

⁵⁰ *First annual report of the State Bureau of Immigration*. Baltimore: The State Bureau of Immigration, 1897, p. 27.

⁵¹ A remark made by Montagu White in a letter dated February 21, 1900 addressed to Willem J. Leyds, in *Tweede verzameling* (Correspondentie 1899-1900), Deel 1, tweede band, ed. By Willem Johannes Leyds (Dordrecht: Geuze & Co's Drukkerij, 1930), p. 436.

⁵² "Webster Davis accuses a Boer War general," *New York Times*, May 18, 1904, p. 3, col. 1.

⁵³ "Boer commissioners discharged," *New York Times*, June 21, 1904, p. 7, col. 2.

⁵⁴ In the divorce proceedings against her husband, Neeltje Vander Hoogt-Roest testified under oath that "he was required to leave Holland on account of business troubles in September 1892." She understood that "he had to leave the country." The document presented in the District Court of Denver is dated December 1, 1893. See also "Boldest of Swindles," pp. 1-2.

⁵⁵ Van Boven, p. 16.

⁵⁶ See Affidavits of Attachment of Johannes de Kruijter, Adolph Heersink, Gerrit Van Dalen and Jan Zwier filed in the District Court of the 12th Judicial District, Conejus, Conejus County in the State of Colorado on December 10, 1892; see also Van Boven, p. 38.

⁵⁷ Gerrit Keizer, "Maarten Noordzij", in *Handboek ten Dienste van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland voor het jaar 1916*, 28ste jaargang (Goes: Oosterbaan & le Cointre, 1916), p. 339.

⁵⁸ "Landverhuizing naar Colorado," *Middelburgsche Courant* 136 (February 1, 1893), p. 1.

⁵⁹ News item, p. 2.

⁶⁰ See the incorporation papers of the Naamlooze Vennootschap, Mijn-en Landbouw-Maatschappij

"Oranje."

⁶¹ Minutes of the Buitengew[one] Vergadering van Curatoren der Theologische School gehouden te Kampen den 20 en 21 April 1893 (handwritten). The Minute book of the Curatorium is to be found in the Gemeente Archief, Kampen.

⁶² *Emigratie*, p. 8.

⁶³ "Boldest of swindles" pp. 1-2; Van Boven, pp. 12-13.

⁶⁴ Cornelis A. Sluijs. Letter to Nanne Groot Szoon, Enkhuizen, dated July 18, 1892.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*