Belonging and dislocation: Postwar Dutch reformed immigrants in southern Alberta, Canada

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This paper uses the ideas of dislocation and belonging to examine the daily lives of post-WWII Dutch Reformed immigrants in southern Alberta. It is based on interviews I conducted with nine individuals who emigrated as young people from the Netherlands to southern Alberta during the postwar period. I focus on the challenges they faced in their new situations – some common to most immigrants such as language and cultural differences, others specific to this group in this place such as the work methods and tools they were expected to use. My goal is to expand the existing literature on this group of immigrants by discussing ways in which the challenges they faced influenced their journey toward creating senses of belonging and identities within their new context. Working from this discussion, I show how the immigrants I interviewed created new senses of belonging in southern Alberta by centering their identities in their families and church communities and then moving outward into other areas of their lives.

Key terms: Alberta history; Dutch reformed churches; identity; belonging; history of everyday life; post-World War II Canada.

Introduction

By the act of migration, migrants separate themselves from familiar places and situations. Often they leave behind family, friends, and a familiar language. Arriving at their destination, immigrants are faced with a variety of challenges. Some of these challenges result directly from their change of place and culture, both of which affect relationships and self-understanding in significant ways. This article seeks to explore these challenges in terms of “belonging” and “dislocation” (or “not-belonging”). The dislocation created by migration threatens immigrants’ identities; it forces them to re-create themselves in a new context and in relation to new people. The migrants from the Netherlands who came to Canada during the post-World War II era were no different. Much of the (sparse) scholarly literature on this group of people focuses on how quickly they seem to have
adapted and how easily they seem to have integrated into Canadian culture. However, my article focuses on the challenges they faced in their new situations (some common to most immigrants such as language and cultural differences, others specific to this group in this place such as the work methods and tools they were expected to use) in order to emphasize that these challenges should not be lightly dismissed, as other scholars seem to have done, because they had a great impact on these immigrants’ journeys toward creating senses of belonging and identities within their new context.

Of the 105,000 Dutch immigrants who came to Canada in the decade after World War II, 17,200 settled in Alberta concentrating in central and southern Alberta where other Dutch families had settled previously (Sas 1957, 64). This article is built on the life-stories of nine postwar Dutch immigrants – five men and four women – who immigrated to southern Alberta from the Netherlands between 1948 and 1957. I conducted conversational-style oral history interviews in English with these individuals during the summer of 2014. A few things are worth noting about this group of interviewees: Firstly, all of my interview participants chose to remain in (or return to) southern Alberta. Therefore this study does not reflect the experiences of immigrants who chose to return to the Netherlands or who permanently relocated to other parts of Canada, although I do provide some discussion of the latter. Secondly, only one of my participants originated from an urban center in the Netherlands; the rest came from rural communities as did the majority of immigrants during the early years of the postwar Dutch emigration due to the push and pull of various national and personal factors (see Ganzevoort 1988, 62-66; Gerritsen 2005; Moogk 2006, 2-4; Palmer & Palmer 1985, 158; Schryer 1998, 44, 48-49; Troper 1993, 258-260; VanderMey 1983, 50). Undoubtedly, this rural background influenced their experiences and their perspectives in southern Alberta. Thirdly, all of my interview participants were members of Protestant Reformed churches, both in the Netherlands and in Canada. This similarity creates a rich pool of information about the experiences of Reformed Dutch immigrants in southern Alberta, but does not allow me to address the experiences of non-religious or other religious immigrants who also emigrated from the Netherlands to Canada in the immediate postwar period. The experiences of these groups of people deserve further study as well. More information about my participants is included in Appendix I. In this article I focus on the stories and experiences which my participants shared with me during our conversational interviews. I use these to show how my interview participants experienced dislocation through immigration, a lack of belonging in their new context.

1 I received permission to interview from the University of Lethbridge’s Human Subject Research Committee in the spring of 2014 (protocol number UofL 2014-026). All participants agreed in writing to be identified by their real names in any publication resulting from my research.
context, and a few of the ways in which they re-created their self-understanding in southern Alberta.²

While there are a small number of scholarly works which discuss postwar Dutch immigrants in Canada (Ganjevoort 1988; Horn 1997; Hutten 2001; Ishwaran 1977; Sas 1957; Schryer 1998; VanderMey 1983), only one scholar’s work focuses specifically on those postwar Dutch who came to the province of Alberta. In 1985, historian Howard Palmer co-authored a book with his wife Tamara Palmer entitled Peoples of Alberta: Portraits of Cultural Diversity, which looks at many of the immigrant communities within Alberta as part of a broad narrative regarding Alberta as a destination for migration. Their chapter, ‘The Religious Ethic and the Spirit of Immigration: The Dutch in Alberta’, gives a generalized narrative of the Dutch in Alberta and emphasizes the success-over-adversity story. Their chapter on the postwar Dutch in Alberta is still the only academic work focusing on this group of people; it was republished in 2009 in an anthology on immigration and settlement in western Canada edited by Gregory P. Marchildon. Although the broad narrative of the Dutch in Canada does in some ways reflect the experiences of the Dutch immigrants who came to southern Alberta during the postwar period, the broader narrative does not do justice to the specific challenges which some of my interview participants faced precisely because of their destination in southern Alberta or to the larger picture of their daily lives. For example, Anne Van Arragon Hutten (2001) focuses on the Dutch immigrants who settled in eastern Canada and she only briefly mentions the challenges of work in the beet fields which many Dutch immigrants to southern Alberta faced; conversely Albert VanderMey’s (1983) extensive work discusses the immigrants who came to southern Alberta only in terms of their arduous labour in the beet fields with little discussion of other aspects of their lives. This paper works toward filling these voids in the existing scholarship on postwar Dutch immigrants in Canada.

To explore the experiences of my nine interview participants, I first look at the theoretical concepts of dislocation and belonging as discussed by sociologist Vanessa May (2013). I then look at the central role of “home” – both the place and the people – as a place of belonging in the lives of my interview participants. The third section of this article focuses on the many daily ways these postwar Dutch immigrants became dislocated because of their immigration. I discuss language difficulties, daily work for both men and women, including the unfamiliar work

² It is also worth noting that my research necessarily reflects my own position as a quasi-insider to the Dutch community in southern Alberta. Although I have no Dutch heritage, three of my husband’s grandparents were born in the Netherlands and immigrated to southern Alberta during the postwar era. Many of my interviews began with my participants recognizing my last name and asking how I was related to so-and-so, members of my husband’s extended family whom they knew. These connections helped me to gain the trust of my interview participants.
methods and the tools they were required to use, cultural expectations which were incompatible with their new situations, and the resulting emotional “break downs” incurred by too much stress. I look at a few of the ways the postwar Dutch immigrants whom I interviewed navigated the differences between “us” (Dutch immigrants) and “them” (Canadians), emphasizing ways in which my interview participants negotiated cultural expectations to increase their senses of belonging. Lastly, I look at a few of the ways in which increased agency, social mobility and acceptance by Canadians influenced and were influenced by my interview participants’ growing sense of belonging in southern Alberta.

Theoretical background

Sociologist Vanessa May argues that belonging is central to identity because where and with whom we belong determines how we understand ourselves, as well as how the people around us identify us (May 2013, 3). She claims that our self-understanding, or “identity,” is based in our sense of belonging with one or more groups of people (May 2013, 79, 96). Because belonging is always in relation to other people, May claims that identity is relational; it is embedded in society and culture (May 2013, 4). We see ourselves as “belonging” with one group of people, but not with another. May also claims that understanding who we are not is necessary for understanding who we are (May 2013, 79). For the postwar Dutch in the Netherlands, the “pillarized” social system of the Netherlands helped to clarify where they belonged by creating several large-scale categories of “us” and “them” within Dutch society (Kennedy & Zwemmer 2010; MacDonald 2008; Platvoet 1983; Schryer 1998). Since all of my interview participants belonged to the Calvinist Reformed social “pillar” in the Netherlands, it is not surprising that religion continued to be foundational to their self-understandings and to their senses of belonging in their new southern Albertan context, as discussed below.

But belonging also has to do with specific people, places and material objects. Vanessa May defines belonging as “the process of creating a sense of identification with, or connection to, cultures, people, places and material objects” (May 2013, 3). May contends that places and material objects are part of our sense of belonging because we live in sensual bodies and continually experience life through our senses (May 2013, 133-138):

Our embodied and sensory connection to the material world of places and objects is of crucial importance to our sense of self. In addition, social changes are acutely experienced on the material level. Changes in the material landscape have a profound effect on the self and our connection to the world because belonging is partly based on the familiarity of our sensescapes or sensory geographies. (May 2013, 148-149)
We do not usually notice our sense of belonging because when we belong in a place or with a group of people, things are familiar. However, we do notice when we no longer feel that we belong – when we become dislocated. Dislocation can occur because the self has changed or because the surrounding world has changed (May 2013, 6-7). Obviously, the latter occurs during migration and influences the former. The changes in the surrounding “culture, people, places and material objects” disrupt the migrant’s sense of belonging and therefore his/her self-understanding or “identity”. After immigration, the immigrant is forced to recreate this sense of self by finding or creating new places, things and groups with which to belong as well as finding new ways to connect with the people who are left behind (May 2013, 107).

A new place

In coming to Canada the postwar Dutch immigrants left behind all the familiar places to which they belonged. One of the first situations which created a jarring sense of dislocation was their arrival at their new accommodations – a place in which they did not belong. For most postwar immigrants, their Canadian sponsor provided their housing. Often this housing was less comfortable than what they had been used to in the Netherlands. Gerard Schalk shared with me an oft-told story about his family’s arrival at their first house on their sponsor’s farm near Coaldale, Alberta in 1951:

So, and then we come to a place and the truck started to slow down and we already see, “Yeah, it looks a nice place coming up.” All trees on one side and the front. And then we come to an entry and we drove in, and here is a nice house there on the side, and along the other side there is all trees and in the back there is all trees, it’s just totally surrounded by huge trees in green and it’s all, you know, it’s like, hidden away. And this nice little house there. And then, on the other side, there’s another nice little house there. “I wonder if that’s our house.” No, no, nicely painted and everything. No. And the truck keeps on going, and we’re going past some graineries and we’re going past a big barn [...] and on the other side there is a cow barn and we keep on going. And then we come to the end, and [our sponsor] goes right through it and out of the trees and here we’re out in the field and then, ahead of us, there is a little house, not painted, or there’s no paint on it or nothing, it’s just bare. And he drives up along there, “Ok, here, you’re home.”

[GS, 8-9]

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3 Page numbers indicate pages in interview transcripts. Each interview is indicated by the initials of the interviewee(s). For details about the interviews see Appendix 1; for details about the interviewees see Appendix 2.
As Gerard indicated, a small unpainted house in the middle of a prairie field was not a nice welcome for his family. They had lived in a much nicer home in the Netherlands. Others of my interview participants shared similar descriptions of their first house in southern Alberta. Ann Wielinga Bosker, who immigrated to southern Alberta with her family in 1948, described her family’s first house near Iron Springs and how they used the resources they had to improve it:

And so we ended up there [Iron Springs] and we had a small home and our furniture was [shipped from the Netherlands] in these big wooden crates or whatever you called them. We had three of them. And one of those, we used as a porch to the house ‘cause it was a small house we lived in. A beet house, we called it. [...] But a lot of immigrants lived in little houses like that. And so, that’s what we did, the first year, we worked there in the sugar beets. [PB&AWB, 2]

Lena Van Westenbrugge Van Pelt’s family’s sponsor had made other arrangements and he no longer needed their labour when they arrived in 1953. The family found other accommodations in the small city of Lethbridge but their house was not a single family dwelling. It was sort of a boarding house in which several families lived. As Lena explained:

Figure 1. Not the most welcoming landscape: the view of southern Alberta’s fields from the Schalk family’s first little house, 1951. Photo in the possession of Gerard Schalk. Used with permission.
We lived upstairs and we had two tiny bedrooms with Father and Mother and four kids and then there were... across the hall from us there was a little old man, he had one little room. And then there was one bathroom that was shared with three suites downstairs and all of us upstairs.  

[CP&LWP, 25]

Places such as “home” hold significant meaning for many people and through migration these places are lost. Several of my interview participants discussed how they and their families (which included parents, dependent children, and adult children) worked toward re-creating “home” in their new context. Making a “home” out of these less-than-lovely living situations took some creativity, hard work, and a few familiar items from the Netherlands. Johanna Guliker Grisnich, who immigrated with her family in 1951, explained that their sponsor at Iron Springs kindly supplied them with paint and wallpaper to spruce up their little “beet house”. She quite proudly showed me the before and after pictures of how they used that paint, along with some rocks, flower seeds and tulip bulbs which they brought from the Netherlands, to turn their “beet house” into a home [GG&JGG, 13-14]. Those seeds and bulbs from the Netherlands made a big difference in the re-creation of “home”, according to Johanna.

The inside of their first houses quickly became very cramped as the large Dutch families sorted out sleeping arrangements. Often the house was only one level, divided on one side into the living and eating area while the other side of the house was the sleeping area. The Guliker family of eleven managed in their little four-room house because there was a separate “bunk house” where the six boys slept [GG&JGG, 5]. Gerard Schalk explained how his family squeezed their eleven members into three bedrooms: one room for the parents and baby boy, one room for the five oldest boys (two of whom were adults) and one room for the two girls (the oldest was also an adult) and the second youngest boy. The five oldest boys had the biggest bedroom which, Gerard explained, had two double beds which just fit into the room.

[B]ut in order to get into bed, you have to climb over [the footboard] because there is no room between the beds. [...] And if you want to make the bed, then you have to sit on one bed and then make the other one. And then sit on that bed and make that one because that’s the only way to do it.  

[GS, 9]
Figures 2 and 3. Turning a house into a home: the Guliker family’s beet house before painting (top) and after painting (bottom), 1951. Photos in the possession of Johanna Guliker Grisnich. Used with permission.

Somehow the five Schalk young men managed to make it work for two years.

Living in such tight quarters with so many people was difficult; however, having left behind so much of what was familiar, family became very important as the one stable factor in the immigrants’ lives. Family provided a place to belong when everything else in their lives was unfamiliar. Sociologist Steph Lawler asserts that families “are at the heart of understandings of identity both through the ‘doing’ of family relationships and through understandings of kin groups and one’s place within them” (Lawler 2014, 49-50). Sociologist and anthropologist K. Ishwaran, writing about a postwar Dutch immigrant community in Ontario, describes the Dutch immigrant family as “a cohesive and well-knit group” which he says “acts as a social security system, taking care of its members when sick or in financial trouble or in some other kind of crisis.” Ishwaran concludes that “[t]he family, therefore, is the most important single institution in Dutch[-Canadian] life. It provides the context in which most people spend their lives” (Ishwaran 1977, 30-31).

Figure 4. Many postwar Dutch emigrated as a family unit. The Schalk family of ten had a family photograph taken just before they left the Netherlands for Canada, 1951. Gerard’s sister’s fiancé (not pictured) also emigrated with them. Photo in the possession of Gerard Schalk. Used with permission.

Only one of the immigrants whom I interviewed migrated without his family. As the youngest son in a family of nine children, Peter Bosker felt he was not really needed on the family farm so he decided to emigrate in 1949. He came to southern Alberta by himself, at the age of twenty [PB&AWB, 13]. Peter Bosker’s
situation was unique among the immigrants I interviewed because he did not have any family in southern Alberta to ease the dislocation which came by moving so far away from everything familiar. The other eight immigrants I interviewed, who migrated together with their families, experienced at least some continuation of what was familiar and their families continued to provide a sense of belonging. Historian Anne Van Arragon Hutten writes that, for herself as a Dutch immigrant child in eastern Canada, her family provided “a comforting security. Everything around us had changed, but our parents remained the same, and family dynamics continued unchanged for many years” (Hutten 2001, 182).

New but familiar people

Another vital aspect of belonging for the immigrants I interviewed was their church connections. The immigration field men who helped to place my interview participants and their families with sponsors in southern Alberta were all members of Dutch Reformed Churches. In most cases these field men connected the new immigrants with a Reformed church and from there my interview participants met other like-minded immigrants with whom they formed relationships. Although my nine interviewees all identified themselves as “Reformed”, their devotion to their own specific Dutch Reformed denominations was very important to them. At the end of World War II, there was one Reformed denomination in southern Alberta – The Christian Reformed Church (CRC). The CRC was established in the Nobleford/Granum area in 1905 by an earlier wave of Dutch immigrants (VanderMey 1983, 302).

When the post-WWII wave of Dutch immigrants came, the importance of home-country differences among Dutch Reformed people evidenced itself within Alberta’s religious scene. The new immigrants divided themselves into separate groups on Sundays based on a variety of theological differences, which are beyond the scope of this paper, and within a few short years these different groups had connected with like-minded groups from other areas and had solidified themselves into distinct denominations. Beside the original Christian Reformed Church denomination, during the postwar period there was also the Reformed Church in America (RCA), which was organized in southern Alberta by some RCA missionaries from the United States, the Netherlands Reformed Church (NRC), which was a more conservative church, the Canadian Reformed Church, which was founded in southern Alberta following a disunion over doctrine in the Netherlands, and the Free Reformed Church (VanderMey 1983, 304; Schryer 1998, 125-126; Ganzevoort 1988, 100-101).
Among my interview participants, there was fairly equal representation of each of the first four of these church denominations (see Appendix 2). Because of the importance which postwar Dutch Reformed immigrants placed on their home-country identities as Reformed people and because of their devotion to their own beliefs on a variety of theological issues, the postwar Dutch Reformed immigrants in southern Alberta created places of religious belonging which were separate from Canadians and also separate from each other. These divisions resulted in the numerous Dutch Reformed church denominations discussed above.

Despite denominational differences, belonging with fellow church members was a common theme among my interview participants. Both Ann Wielinga Bosker, who attended the CRC church in Iron Springs with her family, and Johanna Guliker Grisnich, who attended the NRC church in Coalhurst with her family, described how important weekly church services were to them. Johanna said: “We were very happy that we could go to church on Sunday to hear the word of God but also to meet some [Dutch] people [GG&JGG, 6]. Ann explained further: “You know, you look forward to [going to church] because you met with other [Dutch] people and other [Dutch] kids, and that” [PB&AWB, 3]. Gerard Schalk, who attended the CRC church in Lethbridge with his family, described how Sunday church services and the socializing which occurred around the service times
created a group of people with whom he and his family came to feel that they belonged:

So then after the morning service, there was Sunday school [...] And then there was catechism classes and so, and the rest the people, they just milled around, outside or inside, and talked and talked and talked and catch up and see where you’re from. “Where are you from and what do you know?” you know. And “Where are you at and what are you doing?” [...] Everybody’s stranger when you come but in the end, you’re so tightly connected that you’re like family, you know.

[GS, 13]

During the postwar period, services at all of these Dutch Reformed churches were conducted in the Dutch language. Many scholars have shown that religious services and gatherings help migrants through the period of adjustment to their new culture (Bonifacio & Angeles 2010; Bleszynska & Szopski 2010; Cadge & Ecklund 2007; Ebaugh 2010). More specifically, studies on Dutch immigrants in Canada have emphasized that postwar Dutch Reformed immigrants prioritized religion (particularly their own understanding of a variety of theological details) above ethnicity (MacDonald 2008, 171; Palmer & Palmer 1985, 164; Schryer 1998, 317; VanderMey 1983, 207). In other words, religious belonging was more important to them than ethnic belonging. For my interview participants, the relationships which they formed with like-minded Dutch people at their specific Reformed churches created a support system which became a place of belonging for them. Also, the anticipation of meeting together on Sundays gave the new immigrants the hope they needed in order to persevere through the difficult weeks of changes and challenges as they adjusted to their new life in southern Alberta.

A new language

Although families and church congregations served as groups with whom my interview participants felt a sense of belonging and these groups were a vital life-line of mutual encouragement and support, all nine of my interview participants discussed the ways in which the rest of their daily lives in southern Alberta during the first few months was unfamiliar and discordant. For all of the immigrants I interviewed language played a key role in their sense of dislocation in southern Alberta. When I asked Peter Bosker, who immigrated on his own in 1949, whether he missed home, he replied that he did not really miss home until Christmas time. He explained: “I did miss it [home] the first Christmas and New Year’s. Yeah. Then you miss your old home, you know? Your familiar Christmas songs and stuff like that. And, well, they were all Christmas songs here too, but for me, it was all
English yet and I didn’t understand all of these words that you were singing” [PB&AWB, 19]. Many things were unfamiliar about his first Canadian Christmas but what stood out in his memory was the English language and the English Christmas carols which were so different from what he knew in the Netherlands.

The immigrants I interviewed dealt with the language problem in different ways. Gerard Schalk took an “English as a Second Language” course during his first winter in Alberta. This course gave him thirty hours of language instruction and practice together with other new immigrants [GS, 25]. Other immigrants used their jobs as a way to improve their English. Alice Van Spronson Tam’s first job was as a housekeeping assistant at a Catholic rectory in Lethbridge. Her employers were four priests and a blind housekeeper, who was no longer able to do the housekeeping work but was still fully in charge and knew exactly what needed to be done. She gave the orders. Alice explained that her employers were very gracious with her as she learned to communicate in English. Although she had studied English in school in the Netherlands, she explained that it was British English and the English spoken in southern Alberta was “a little different” [AST, 8]. She recalled one humorous incident of her stumbling attempts to use English and her employers’ gracious response: She was making breakfast for the first time at the rectory – eggs, bacon, etc., which was very different from the breakfast she was used to in the Netherlands – bread and a cup of tea. She tried to ask how they wanted their eggs and bacon cooked but she couldn’t come up with the right words. Their response was very gracious, Alice explained: “I can still see them sitting there looking at each other: ‘What are we going to do?’ [...] And then, one of them spoke up and he said: ‘Do you mind, that if you do make a mistake in the way we talk English, that we correct you?’ And I said: ‘Please do! That’s the only way I can learn.’ ” [AST, 8-9]. Although she indicated how embarrassed she was at not being able to communicate clearly during that breakfast, Alice was very grateful to her first employers for their assistance in her language development, emphasizing that “they were so good to me” [AST, 9]. Other immigrants found that their employer was not as helpful in teaching them English as they had thought he was. Gilbert Grisnich explained that when he and his family arrived in southern Alberta in 1948, his family’s sponsor was Hungarian and didn’t speak English well either. Since this man was their primary non-Dutch contact, Gilbert laughingly recalled that his father began speaking English with an Hungarian accent [GG&JGG, 9-10].

At other times, the language barrier could cause serious problems. Peter Bosker discovered at the end of his one-year contract with his sponsor that his

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[4] Peter Bosker attended the original Nobleford/Granum CRC church which had already transitioned to using English for services. However, when the postwar immigrants began arriving in 1948/49, the church began conducting services in Dutch again (Heinen 1981, 57).
limited ability to communicate in English made finding a job much more difficult [PB&AWB, 15]. Johanna Guliker Grisnich learned that language problems could complicate interactions with healthcare practitioners. When Johanna was expecting her first baby several years after immigrating, she became very sick. The Canadian doctor told her she had toxemia⁵ and sent her home on strict bed rest. She and her husband did not know what toxemia was until after their baby was born and they had company from church visiting. The man exclaimed, in Dutch, that Johanna had been very sick with niervergiftiging – kidney poisoning! Now Johanna understood what had been wrong. Fortunately, she had followed the doctor’s instructions. Though the baby was born several weeks early, after some time in the hospital both mother and baby were fine [GG&JGG, 38-39]. Language challenges such as these created dissonance in my interview participants’ lives and underscored their lack of belonging in southern Alberta. However, as their ability to communicate in English increased, the language-related problems decreased.

Two of the Dutch immigrants I interviewed learned to speak English at school. They were both twelve years old when their families immigrated to southern Alberta so they continued their schooling in Canada. Ann Wielinga Bosker and Lena Van Westenbrugge Van Pelt’s parents placed them and their younger siblings directly into local Alberta schools. Both girls were put back several grades from where they had been in the Netherlands because they couldn’t communicate in English, but as they caught on to the language they were bumped up to a higher grade. Ann described her experience of learning English at school:

And I actually went to school there in Iron Springs. We went to school... the bus picked us up and went to school – in grade one because we didn’t know a word of English. And then, later on we got into grade three. The way we learned the language, we had some pictures and words and we had to put the right pictures by the words [...] And that’s the way we learned, slowly on. Then we got [bumped up] to grade three. But I think the teacher was, maybe, quite frustrated with all the immigrant kids. [PB&AWB, 2]

Since Ann was twelve years old when she arrived in Canada and turned thirteen one month later, being put into grade one with the much younger children was certainly frustrating. Dutch Canadian historian Anne Van Arragon Hutten claims that Dutch immigrant children’s first experiences of school were often traumatic. It was not that anything went dramatically wrong at school but rather that, with their world turned upside down through immigration, being forced into an unfamiliar school environment with the sounds of an unfamiliar language

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⁵ Toxemia, now called “pre-eclampsia”, is a potentially life-threatening complication of pregnancy.
everywhere, these children were completely overwhelmed (Hutten 2001, 89-90). Lena was more fortunate because her school in Lethbridge had a class for immigrant children to learn English. [CP&LWP, 20]. She also described herself as a very outgoing child who was eager to try the language even if she made mistakes [CP&LWP, 54-55]. As Ann and Lena learned the language and became more comfortable with Canadian culture their sense of belonging in southern Alberta grew. Lena was able to finish grade nine and Ann finished grade seven. Both girls were then in their mid-teens. At that point, their parents took them out of school so that they could start working full-time and contribute to the family income [CP&LWP, 23-24; PB&AWB, 6].

Men’s daily work

The type of work which my interview participants did on a daily basis and the material objects with which they interacted also shaped the way they understood themselves. Particularly for those immigrants who worked in southern Alberta’s agricultural industry, the material surroundings, the tools, the methods and often even the work itself were different from what they had known in the Netherlands. Of the nine postwar Dutch immigrants I interviewed, four of them worked in the sugar beet fields when they first arrived. While most Dutch immigrants who immigrated as agricultural labourers had some experience with agriculture, and although sugar beets were grown in the Netherlands, this did not mean that they had hands-on experience working in beet fields. Among the immigrants I interviewed, one family had been dairy farmers in the Netherlands, another family were chicken farmers, the father of another family had been a military mechanic but his father had owned a greenhouse. Further, Dutch-Canadian historian Herman Ganzevoort explains that even if Dutch immigrants had been farmers in the Netherlands, Canadian farming methods were different. Alberta’s farmers ploughed less deeply (to prevent the strong winds from blowing the dirt away), and Canadian farmers made less use of manure, which the Dutch considered a highly valuable resource (Ganzevoort 1988, 88).

The work involved with sugar beet crops was labour intensive and involved many tools and methods which were new to my interview participants. There were three hoeing phases during growing season and then the harvest. The first hoeing was the most labour intensive because it was for both weeding and...
thinning out the small beets plants, and the work was done with a hand-held hoe, a small shovel, or with the hands. Alice Van Spronson Tams explained:

Because the beets were just sown in a row. And we had little shovels like that. [Indicated six inches in size.][...] Little shovels, yeah. And then you had to have, I guess, a foot between [each plant], something like that. So you have to go in between. But these two or three were too close. You had to bend down and pick them by hand. [AST, 8]

The next two hoe phases were mainly weeding. Then harvest came. Johanna Guliker Grisnich, whose family worked in the beets for four years, explained that their sponsor had a beet lifter machine which loosened the beets in the ground. Then she and her family pulled the beets up, shook off the dirt, and laid them in rows [GG&JGG, 7-8]. Later they had to pick them up again, chop off the leaves, and load them into trucks. Gilbert Grisnich elaborated a little further on his experiences:

You know, there was actually a plow that would lift the beet up but it fell back in the hole. So, they were loose. So then we came along and grabbed two beets and just throw them all [into rows] ... half a mile and then back again. And then the farmer had a bit of a stone boat. He leveled the ground a bit and then we had a knife with a little hook on there. And you pick up the beet. Grab the beet. Chop the leaves off. Throw them in the middle. And then the farmer loaded them all. [GG&JGG, 8]

Gilbert and Johanna went on to explain that chopping the leaves off of the beets could be quite dangerous. For women with smaller hands, it was often difficult to hold onto the large sugar beets which could be the size of a football. I asked Gilbert and Johanna whether anyone ever lost a thumb and Gilbert responded: “Yes. Oh yeah. It happened” [GG&JGG, 8-9].

Farming in southern Alberta also involved irrigation which was not a common practice in the Netherlands. Gilbert Grisnich explained in detail how he flood-irrigated the beet fields before irrigation machinery was introduced. The irrigation canals brought the water to the field and there was a “ditch digger” machine which created channels for the water across the field; however, ensuring that the water actually got to the plants was done entirely by hand, shovel, and gum boots. It was a time-consuming process. Although they only irrigated the beets twice in a summer, it took a full month to irrigate just one quarter section of beets and then there were other crops to irrigate as well [GG&JGG, 54-56].

The means, methods and tools of farming grain were also different in southern Alberta. Gilbert Grisnich explained a farming mistake his father made when he first rented his own land in southern Alberta, because he assumed that
Alberta’s farming practices were the same as in the Netherlands. Gilbert explained:

[I]n Holland you only seed about an inch deep because there is lots of moisture, eh. And you get your rain on time. So, Dad did the same thing here. Usually my older brother got some advice from Ano Neiboer [...]. But that, I guess, they didn’t ask, so when the crop came up, it was uneven because they only seeded it an inch deep, eh. What was in the moisture came up, the other not. So that was an uneven crop. And luckily we got some rain so then it caught up, right. [GG&JGG, 52]

Inexperience and lack of advice sometimes created problems, as the Grisnichs discovered. Gilbert also mentioned that when his father started farming rented land on his own, they plowed with horses as they had done in the Netherlands [GG&JGG, 19, 52]. While the farm machinery used by southern Alberta’s farmers may have been exciting for some immigrants, their inexperience with it also highlighted that they were new to the area (Heinen 1974, 11). When Peter Bosker arrived in southern Alberta, he worked as a farm hand as he had done back home in the Netherlands for his father. Since his sponsor, George Poelman, didn’t actually need extra help on his farm near Granum, Alberta, Peter found work with his neighbour Bert Hildebrandt for six weeks and then with other farmers in the area [PB&AWB, 15]. Peter had never seen a combine harvester in the Netherlands or a John Deere tractor, but Bert Hildebrandt had a combine and Peter operated it [PB&AWB, 21]. The use of a combine shows that grain harvesting was a less labour-intensive process on the Hildebrandt farm than on the Bosker farm in the Netherlands where the reaping, threshing and winnowing would have been done separately. The harvest results were also different. Peter explained that the Bosker family farm in the Netherlands produced rich, heavy crops. When he arrived in southern Alberta in August of 1949, however, it had been a dry summer and the crops were average, at best:

[When I came there, yeah. That was harvest time, August. The grain was yay-high [indicates quite low]. You can see the ground, the dirt. And I said to them: “What is this considered, a good crop or a poor crop.” I don’t know. He said: “Average. Average crop.” [...] So they had a very average crop. 20, 22 bushels to an acre. That is pretty poor.] [PB&AWB, 18]
Peter’s opinion at the end of this explanation shows that he was comparing the southern Alberta crop with his experience of crops in the Netherlands. This is a natural way for new immigrants to orient themselves in a new place. Yet, as historians Marilyn Barber and Murray Watson point out, immigrants begin to feel settled only when they can adopt the new country’s reference systems, making comparisons with what they know and have experienced in Canada, rather than comparing Canadian experiences with their home country (Barber & Watson 2015, 132).

Not all Dutch immigrants worked in agriculture. Among the Dutch I interviewed, two families worked in other sectors and were able to continue in the career for which they had trained. Lena Van Westenbrugge Van Pelt’s father was a carpenter in the Netherlands. The Van Westenbrugge family immigrated to southern Alberta in 1953 after their home was destroyed when the dykes broke in Zeeland, the Netherlands. They were expecting to work in the beet fields but
when they arrived their sponsor had found other workers and no longer needed them. This created a lot of joy, as Lena expressed: “Phew, was I happy because we didn’t have to work in the beets” 25). Their field man found the Van Westenbrugge family housing in Lethbridge and Lena’s dad found work with a construction company. When he was laid off that winter, he jumped at an opportunity to start his own business. Lena’s husband, Cornelius, told the story:

[Dad Van Westenbrugge] wasn’t working. He had to go to the doctor clinic for something. [...] And the doctor said: “What kind of work do you do?” Well, he said: “I’m a carpenter but I have not enough to do at the moment. I was laid off at Oland Construction.” Well, the doctor said: “There’s a door that needs planing because we can’t close it.” “Oh,” Dad said, “I’ll look after that.” After that, Dad never was in want of any work. He worked for doctors and lawyers and all, remodeling houses, remodeling. And he started like that. [CP&LWP, 32]

The Van Westenbrugge family’s situation had advantages and disadvantages. One advantage was that Mr. Van Westenbrugge was able to continue working in his field of expertise, which meant that he (and his family) experienced less dislocation than other families whose daily work was new to them. However, his employment was not guaranteed during the first year in Canada, as it was for those immigrants who had a contract with a sponsor. There was surely some stress on the family when he found himself without a job that first winter although, fortunately, his unemployment did not last long.

When Hugo and Elizabeth Van Seters were looking into emigrating from the Netherlands in the mid-1950s, they were interested in going to Alberta because Hugo’s brother and sister were already there. However, many people urged them to look elsewhere. Hugo told the story this way: “And they all said: ‘Don’t go to Alberta. [...] Unless you want to go into the agriculture business and unless you want to hoe beets. Don’t go there.’ And I said: ‘Well, why not? They have cars down there.’ ‘Yeah,’ I said, ‘I repair cars.’” [HS, 4]. It was with this determination to continue working in the automotive industry that Hugo and Elizabeth and their baby boy immigrated to southern Alberta in 1957. Hugo’s brother helped arrange a job for him as a “body man” at the Hillman automobile dealership, which was a familiar setting for Hugo even if it was a step down in the business hierarchy [HS, 7-9].

At this point it is important to explain that the Van Westenbrugge and Van Seters families immigrated in different migration waves than the immigrants I interviewed who worked in agriculture. In 1952 the Canadian government relaxed its immigration policy a little, allowing non-agricultural immigrants into Canada (Troper 1993, 262). One important result of this policy change was that some
immigrants who immigrated later were able to continue working in their field of expertise and therefore able to maintain a little more of what was familiar to them, in comparison to the immigrants who worked in the beet fields. The six immigrants I interviewed who arrived in Canada before 1952 all spent a year or longer working in agriculture. The three immigrants I interviewed whose families immigrated after 1952 were involved in other industries. Among the immigrants I interviewed, therefore, their time of arrival in Canada likely influenced their ability to work outside of the agriculture industry.

**Women’s daily work**

The working experiences of Dutch immigrant women in southern Alberta were similar to the men’s experiences in some ways and different in others. Johanna Guliker Grisnich and Alice Van Spronson Tams worked actively alongside their fathers and brothers in the sugar beet fields, and both women expressed how difficult working in the beets was for them. Both Johanna and Alice also discussed the work they were responsible for at home. On rainy days when she could not work in the fields, Johanna was in charge of mending, since she had taken four years of education at what she called a “private sewing school” [GG&JGG, 4]. She explained: “The sewing machine [was] on the table and I had to mend all day” [GG&JGG, 7, 25]. This was no small task considering the wear and tear which her family’s clothing experienced through their work in the beet fields. Housework was familiar to these women, but the tools they had at their disposal and the house itself were new and in many cases very foreign. The Dutch immigrants brought with them to southern Alberta only what they could carry in suitcases or pack into the large wooden crates which were shipped on a different vessel from the one on which they travelled. Therefore, many possessions were sold or left behind, including household appliances. Vanessa May points out that because belonging is partly tied to material objects, their removal can be damaging to one’s identity and increase the feeling of dislocation which immigration creates (May 2013, 148-149). Two of the men I interviewed expressed repeatedly that they felt immigration had been particularly hard on their mothers [GS, 10-11; GG&JGG, 17, 26, 50]. When I asked them what they meant, both men talked about the changes in house work tools and methods which their mothers (and older sisters) faced.

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7 Although my interview participants were clear that women were involved in both the outdoor and indoor work, the same double work standard for men was absent from my interviews, with two brief exceptions: Johanna Guliker Grisnich and Gilbert Grisnich each mentioned that their fathers often helped their mothers with the housework as well as working in the beet fields [GG&JGG, 7, 17].
Cooking, cleaning and washing all had to be done differently. In the Netherlands, according to my interview participants, most women cooked using gas stoves, many (if not most) had running water and flush toilets in the home, and the women washed clothing using some form of washing machine [AST, 16-17; GG&JGG, 5; GS, 2, 10]. Anne van Arragon Hutten claims that many Dutch women also had at least a Saturday maid who helped with weekly chores and bathing children (Hutten 2001, 106). My interview participants’ situations in Canada were not simply different from what they had known in the Netherlands, they were a step back in time. When they arrived in Canada, the women I interviewed (and the mothers and sisters of two of the men) had a wood or coal stove with which to cook and bake, no running water in the home, an outhouse instead of a toilet, a washing board for the clothes, and no maid.8 Add onto this the very heavy, dirty

8 It is important to note that while the Dutch immigrant women had many modern appliances in their homes in the Netherlands, these appliances were not necessarily the norm in Canada during the postwar period. Joy Parr’s analysis of the production and sale of household appliances such as gas or electric stoves, refrigerators and electric washing machines during World War II and the decade following shows several trends. First, Parr shows that through the war years more Canadians were purchasing wood stoves than gas or electric ones and that wringer washing machines (these could be powered by hand or by gas or electricity) were the standard purchase until 1966, when automatic washing machines finally surpassed them. Second, she explains that, during the war, electric stoves and refrigerators were a luxury item, not something that all

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Figure 7. The Guliker family takes a moment from their work in the beet fields to pose for a photo, no date. Photo in the possession of Johanna Guliker Grisnich. Used with permission.
work which, in many cases, most of the family was doing in the fields each day, and it becomes easy to understand why Gilbert Grisnich stated repeatedly that “the mothers had it the toughest” [GG&JGG, 17, 26, 50].

Cooking and baking with a wood or coal stove was a new experience. Gerard Schalk described his mother’s experience with the coal stove in their first Canadian home:

Here she [Mom] comes with that big furnace, but she’s never seen a coal furnace in her life. We had a coal and wood stove [in the Netherlands] that was used in the winter for heating in the front rooms and so on, but for the rest, cooking was done on a gas thing, you know. So, she had to learn, and yeah, we all did, of course, to, first of all, get that thing started. This big monster, you know. And then, how to keep it going and how to make sure that the dampers were open and that you didn’t get smoked out and that there was water in the reservoir on the side of it [...]. [GS, 10]

Gerard’s expression, “this big monster”, indicates the extent to which the wood cook-stove disrupted the family’s feeling of familiarity and “home”. The stove was a constant reminder of difference and dislocation. During my interview with Gilbert Grisnich and Johanna Guliker Grisnich, we spent some time discussing how Johanna baked bread with a wood cook-stove. Johanna explained that the stove was not just a fire box but was an old-fashioned stove in which the wood and fire went in one compartment of the stove and next to that there was an oven which the fire heated. There was a dial on the oven which indicated how hot the oven was, so once the mixing, kneading and rising was done and the oven was the right temperature, the bread would go in to bake. Johanna affirmed that it took a while for her and her mother to learn how to bake bread on that wood stove [GG&JGG, 25-26]. After the explanation of how to bake bread, Gilbert added that the old fashioned stove also made life physically uncomfortable. Even during the summer when temperatures could reach 30 degrees Celsius, the stove still had to be lit and the women had to cook the meal [GG&JGG, 26]. Until they became confident in using it, the wood cook-stove was a constant reminder to the Dutch immigrant women and men of their dislocation and lack of belonging.

One further connotation of the wood or coal cook-stove in southern Alberta was brought up by Gerard Schalk. During World War II in the Netherlands, gas for cook-stoves became scarce and some households were forced to do their

Canadians had. Third, Parr shows that production of these items lagged behind the demand for them in Canada throughout the postwar period. This last point indicates that many Canadians continued using the older versions of household appliances through the postwar years. Thus, although the Dutch immigrants may have felt deprived of important conveniences, their Canadian sponsors and neighbours may not have seen the situation that way (Parr 1999, 27-29, 67-69).

cooking on small wood stoves which were normally used just to heat rooms. Gerard Schalk explained that, during the war, his mother was forced to use their room-heating wood stove to cook meals. Other families, he claimed, invented small little stoves with only one burner on which they could cook meals by keeping a small fire lit with little pieces of wood and paper [GS, 2-3]. Primitive conditions, therefore, were not a new experience for the Dutch immigrants. However, the experiences they had during World War II in the Netherlands were difficult and threatening. Facing similar experiences in their new home in southern Alberta was not reassuring.

**Stress and emotional breakdowns**

Sometimes the hard work, pressure, stress and the unfamiliarity of things became too much to cope with. Three of my interview participants discussed ways in which normal cultural expectations in the Netherlands were incompatible with their new location in southern Alberta. For instance, the immense value which the Dutch placed on household cleanliness was, in some ways, an inappropriate value for the realities of southern Alberta. Gerard Schalk recalled that his mother experienced intense emotions one day over ruined work and ingrained expectations that were too hard to meet in southern Alberta with the antiquated tools that she had. As usual since their arrival, she had washed dirty clothes for eleven people by hand in a tub with a washboard. Gerard explained:

> And a Dutch woman is as clean as can be as far as that wash had to be just white like snow, you know. That’s what you expect. That’s what you’ve learned, you know. And so, she stands there by the hour, scrubbing on a scrub board, trying to get stuff clean, you know. And then hanging it out on the clothesline. [...] And, so then she had Dad’s nice white shirt, Sunday shirt, you know, had it washed and so then she wanted to iron it, of course. And so, we’ve got these ironing irons and yeah, you’ve got to put them on the stove [to heat] and so. She’d used them before but that time she forgets to wipe them down. And so she goes on Dad’s nice shirt and here she’s got soot from the top of the stove on that nice white shirt and here she’s got to go through the whole thing and wash it again. [GS, 10-11]

Gerard conceded that the frustration of ruined work that day brought on a flood of tears for his mother. The very first big Canadian purchase for the Schalk family was a used washing machine. As Gerard explained: “it just was impossible for Mom to keep that up” [GS, 11].

Johanna Guliker Grisnich’s mother also found that the stresses of dislocation and ingrained Dutch expectations which could not be met in southern Alberta were sometimes just too much to handle emotionally. Gilbert Grisnich
explained that his mother-in-law was a very clean woman: “Everything had to be spick and span in the house.” But that was simply impossible when caring for a family of eleven people, who worked in the beet fields and lived together in a small, cramped house [GG&JGG, 50-51]. As Johanna’s daughter Edith Grisnich explained, Johanna’s mother had a “nervous breakdown” [GG&JGG, 50]. Edith also discussed how Johanna’s mother insisted that her six sons have polished black shoes each Sunday for church. However, this expectation was also ill-suited to southern Alberta where the dust clung to those beautifully polished black shoes, ruining the mother’s expectations [GG&JGG, 50]. Although Gilbert and Johanna chose not to mention these stories, their daughter Edith felt that these stories were an important part of her grandmother’s experiences and challenges in southern Alberta. While Gilbert and Johanna seemed reluctant to engage in these stories and Johanna did not comment, Gilbert provided the above explanation which he felt was important. For some immigrants the deep-rooted expectations of cleanliness, combined with outdated tools for house work and the unfamiliar routines they required, added to the stress of feeling dislocated from the people and places they knew and loved.

As discussed earlier, the age of my participants at the time they immigrated influenced the types of experiences they had during their first years in southern Alberta. Ann Wielinga Bosker, who immigrated at the age of twelve and attended school in southern Alberta for three years, experienced another form of dislocation when she finished school and began working during her midteen years. Ann attended school in Iron Springs and then later in Raymond. When she was fifteen, her parents removed her from school and she began working as a housekeeper for the parents of the girls with whom she had been going to school. While she stated that “it was ok”, her tone of voice as well as other comments she made intimated that being downgraded from equal status with her classmates to being their parents’ maid was a humbling experience. She was also very quick to add how glad she was that her children were able to pursue higher education and obtain better jobs [PB&AWB, 6]. Historian Anne Van Arragon Hutten claims that for rural families in the Netherlands, especially before 1950, it was very common for parents to remove their children from school in their early teen years and send them to work. Hutten says that this home-country expectation often continued in Canada among immigrants from rural areas (Hutten 2001, 175). Ann Wielinga Bosker worked for her neighbours for one year and then found a job as a live-in housekeeper for a lawyer named Mr. Davidson in Lethbridge [PB&AWB, 6]. Moving to Lethbridge allowed her to distance herself from the awkwardness of working for her classmates’ parents. She was also able to earn a little more money: $45 a month on top of room and board, though she still contributed to the family income [PB&AWB, 5]. Several others of the Dutch
immigrants I interviewed discussed how they or their sisters worked as housekeepers [GG&JGG, 26-27; GS, 15; AST, 8]. In fact, as historian Herman Ganzevoort attests, it was very common for Dutch immigrant young women to work as housekeepers (Ganzevoort 1988, 102). Yet, as Ann Wielinga Bosker’s story illustrates, the experience sometimes created an unhappy sense of not belonging and highlighted the differences between “us” and “them”.

“Us” and “them”

The differences between “us” (Dutch immigrants) and “them” (Canadians) were very pronounced during the immigrants’ initial year or two in southern Alberta and it was the acceptance of family and Dutch friends at church which created a place of belonging for the postwar immigrants. As discussed above, the various Reformed churches of southern Alberta became a place of belonging for many Reformed immigrants. Outside of church, the immigrants viewed the people with whom they came in contact as “other”. Alice Van Spronson Tams provided an example of feeling very different from the “other” – Canadian young people. Alice recalled that at her first job as a housekeeper in Lethbridge her employers felt that she needed some things for herself. So, they gave her some extra money to buy a swimming suit, exercise clothes, and gym shoes, and they provided her with a pass to the YMCA so that she could go out in the evening and “mingle with other young people” [AST, 9]. As Alice shared this story with me it was apparent that she deeply appreciated her employers’ generosity. When I asked her about her activities at the YMCA her response dealt with issues of belonging. She said: “I did go, but I did not feel comfortable going because I was not used to that. But I liked swimming because that’s what we did in the MULO [secondary school in the Netherlands]. [...] And gymnastic I did too. I did that, but mingle with other young people, I did not feel comfortable with” [AST, 9]. As a new immigrant, having only been in Canada for a few months at this time, Alice did not feel that she belonged with the Canadian young people – they were the “other” – and so she kept her distance. However, swimming and gymnastics were activities with which she had a connection from previous participation at her MULO school in the Netherlands. Here she was more comfortable and felt that she could maybe belong, at least with the activity. While Alice’s use of the YMCA facilities was unusual for a new Dutch immigrant, it was connections like these which began the process of creating a new sense of belonging and a new identity for the immigrants.

Minimizing visible and audible differences was another way to lessen the gap between “us” and “them”. While the Dutch immigrants were similar to most Canadians in terms of physical colouring (“whiteness”), there were other visible and audible differences. Even as the Dutch immigrants learned to speak English, their Dutch accents still set them apart. Historians Marilyn Barber and Murray
Watson point out in relation to postwar English immigrants to Canada that even though immigrants may be “invisible” in terms of physical appearance, they can still be “audible” as soon as they begin speaking (Barber & Watson 2015, 102). One visible and audible difference which one of my interview participants discussed involved the traditional Dutch wooden shoes. Lena Van Westenbrugge Van Pelt explained that her family brought to southern Alberta all their wooden shoes from their home in Zeeland. They had intended to continue wearing them for work around the yard as they had done at home in the Netherlands. However, not only did the shoes stand out visibly, since Canadians did not wear wooden shoes, but the noise made by wooden shoes while walking was also unusual in Canada. Lena only wore her wooden shoes one time after immigrating. She explained:

Dad always sent me out to do errands if there was something to be done because he knew I’d come home with the right thing. But the first time I went to mail a letter, I went in my wooden shoes to the post office but, that only happened once because every step I took, somebody’d [demonstrated how people looked around and stared]. [...] I went up town with them once, that was the end of it. None of us kids wanted to do it. [CP&LWP, 55]

Once Lena realized how much she stood out from the Canadians around her while wearing her wooden shoes, she refused to wear them again. In this case, the desire to belong within the new culture ended Lena’s connection with traditional Dutch wooden shoes.

**Creating new belonging**

Once the families of the immigrants I interviewed were able to re-negotiate their contract with their sponsor or find new employment, they could make more decisions for themselves. Making decisions, such as where to live, increased their senses of belonging in southern Alberta. For example, the Wielinga family left their sponsor’s farm as soon as they were able. Having found employment with a dairy farmer near Raymond, a small town south of Lethbridge, they moved closer to his farm. A few years later, the Wielingas bought a farm in Ontario and moved there. However, Ann Wielinga Bosker and her older sister stayed in Lethbridge because they had jobs as housekeepers and their boyfriends lived in Lethbridge [PB&AWB, 2]. These two girls had come to feel that they belonged in Lethbridge with their Christian Reformed Church friends and boyfriends more than they belonged with their parents and siblings, especially when faced with the possibility of relocating again.
Other immigrants also chose to move to another part of the country. Similar to the Wielinga family, the Guliker family moved on in search of a better place to belong. Johanna Guliker Grisnich’s family worked in the sugar beet fields for four years before moving to the Fraser Valley in British Columbia where they rented a dairy farm. The climate there was similar to the climate in the Netherlands and there was better access to conveniences such as running water in the home [GG&JGG, 53]. Johanna moved with her parents, promising to help her mother, who was not well, for one more year before she married Gilbert Grisnich and moved back to southern Alberta and the Grisnich dairy farm [GG&JGG, 7]. Like Ann Wielinga, Johanna’s sense of belonging was shifting from belonging with her immediate family to belonging with the man who would become her husband. For Ann and Johanna, the people with whom they belonged were much more important than the spaces in which they lived, although those spaces still played a part in their sense of belonging.

Decisions about what type of work to do also helped some immigrants increase their sense of belonging. The Schalk family worked in the beet fields for two years and then moved into the city of Lethbridge. The men and older daughters found employment wherever they were able. Gerard’s sisters worked as housekeepers; his younger sister lived with an older lady in Lethbridge who needed help and a companion. Gerard and his father worked on road construction crews for a couple summers and in the winter they found other odd [GS, 14, 15-16]. Gerard explained that he was always able to find some work somewhere:

> Always try and find something, yeah, yeah. You find a labour job. You work in a construction, until you find something better, you know. [...] Never say die, just... you got two good hands that the Lord’s given you, use them. You know. And if there’s nothing else to do, then you go and help some neighbour or a friend or so, you know, doing something or fixing something. [GS, 18]

This positive attitude and stubborn determination helped many postwar Dutch immigrants continue when things became difficult. Even if the options were limited, Gerard chose the active option rather than the passive option. Gerard’s ability to act and make decisions within Canadian society illustrates his increasing sense of belonging in his new country.

Several of my interview participants also discussed their increasing sense of belonging in southern Alberta in terms of social mobility. Once her family moved to Lethbridge, Alice Van Spronson Tams began working at Lee’s Food Market, a Chinese grocery store in Lethbridge’s north side, until she was offered

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9 Gilbert and Johanna later moved back to the Fraser Valley where they raised their children.
a job at the Imperial Bank through her brother’s new connections there [AST, 15]. Working at a bank was certainly a step up from housekeeping and unskilled labour at a grocery store. Another woman who secured a higher status job was Lena Van Westenbrugge Van Pelt. She left school after four years, having finished grade nine, and found a job working for the Alberta provincial government. [CP&LWP, 23, 57]. Lena explained her good luck this way: “And then I got a job at the government. You had to write a civil service exam in those days, and me comes right out of school, there was lots of questions that was fresh to me. [...] So, then I got the job” [CP&LWP, 23]. The ability to obtain better-paying and higher-status jobs illustrates how these two women had become more connected to and more comfortable in Canadian society.

One last influential factor for all immigrant families was how they were treated by Canadians. Acceptance by Canadians went a long way in helping all postwar immigrants feel that they belonged. Alice Van Spronson Tams told me how thankful her family was for their sponsor, a Mennonite man named Henry Allart, who was extraordinarily generous to them. Many times, he went out of his way to help them. First, he allowed Alice to leave the family contract to work as a live-in housekeeper in Lethbridge during their first year in southern Alberta. Then, once the family’s one-year contract was up, he encouraged Alice’s father Joseph Van Spronson to look for work as a mechanic in Lethbridge, since this is where his training lay. Joseph took that advice and found a job the first day he began looking. The sponsor also found them a better house to live in that second year, still older, but a big improvement on the beet workers’ house. Then, only a little while later, Allart found a suitable house in Lethbridge which he purchased on behalf of the Van Spronson family and then allowed Joseph Van Spronson to pay him back as he was able [AST, 13-15]. Henry Allart’s generosity to the Van Spronsons, therefore, had a vast impact on the family’s ability to improve their situation which in turn increased their connection to and sense of belonging in southern Alberta.

Conclusion

Through migration, the postwar Dutch immigrants I interviewed left behind the familiar people, places and things which informed their sense of belonging and therefore their old identities. Belonging and identity had to be re-created in southern Alberta and this process deserves attention. The first place with which they began this re-creation was their new accommodation. Though at first it caused an isolating sense of dislocation, some of the immigrants I interviewed were able to turn that house into a home with some hard work and familiar objects which they brought with them. Those immigrants who migrated together with their families also found that they were not entirely dislocated. Their families as well as their church congregations became the axis around which their lives
revolved, and these relationships provided a sense of security, continuity and belonging which they all so deeply needed. All immigrants face the challenges of adapting to a new culture and many also have to learn a new language; the postwar Dutch who came to southern Alberta were no exception. Some of my interview participants also dealt with the additional challenges of unfamiliar work, methods, and tools. As the postwar Dutch immigrants I interviewed grew accustomed to life in southern Alberta, and as they gained the ability to act in meaningful ways by taking charge of their place, work, and relationships, their sense of belonging increased. Centering their new identities in their Dutch Reformed immigrant communities, the immigrants I interviewed moved outward from that place of familiarity and belonging to create their new lives in southern Alberta.

References


**Appendix 1: Interviews**


Gilbert Grisnich and Johanna Guliker Grisnich. Interview by Author. Fort MacLeod, AB. June 23, 2014. Interview recording and transcript in the possession of the author. [GG&JGG]


### Appendix 2: Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year of birth</th>
<th>Place of birth</th>
<th>Family occupation</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Year of imm.</th>
<th>Age at imm.</th>
<th>Location in Alberta</th>
<th>Occupation in Alberta</th>
<th>Church membership</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peter Bosker</td>
<td>1929</td>
<td>Groningen</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>Agricultural School</td>
<td>1949</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Granum</td>
<td>Farmhand</td>
<td>CRC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ann Wielinga Bosker</td>
<td>1935</td>
<td>Friesland</td>
<td>Marine Sailor/Farmer</td>
<td>Grade 7 (Canada)</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Picture Butte</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>CRC</td>
</tr>
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<td>Gilbert Grisnich</td>
<td>(1932?)</td>
<td>Hoofddorp, S. Holland</td>
<td>Dairy Farmer</td>
<td>Grade 7 (Netherlands)</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Iron Springs</td>
<td>Beet Worker</td>
<td>Netherlands Reformed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johanna Guliker Grisnich</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>Leiden, S. Holland</td>
<td>Chicken Farmer</td>
<td>Private Sewing School</td>
<td>1951</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Picture Butte</td>
<td>Beet Worker</td>
<td>Netherlands Reformed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerard Schalk</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>Nieuw Vennep, S. Holland</td>
<td>Grocer/Chauffeur</td>
<td>Agricultural School</td>
<td>1951</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Coaldale</td>
<td>Beet Worker</td>
<td>CRC</td>
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<td>1932</td>
<td>Schoonhoven, S. Holland</td>
<td>Military Mechanic</td>
<td>MULO School</td>
<td>1951</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Coaldale</td>
<td>Beet Worker/Housekeeper</td>
<td>Canadian Reformed</td>
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<td>Cornelius Van Pelt</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>Ridderkerk, S. Holland</td>
<td>Machinist/Motor Draftsman</td>
<td>Agricultural School</td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Lethbridge</td>
<td>Farmer – Research Station</td>
<td>RCA</td>
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<td>(1941?)</td>
<td>Moriaans-Hoofd, Zeeland</td>
<td>Carpenter/Contractor</td>
<td>Grade 9 (Canada)</td>
<td>1953</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Lethbridge</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>RCA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hugo Van Seters</td>
<td>1931</td>
<td>Dirksland, S. Holland</td>
<td>Miller</td>
<td>Upper Vocational School</td>
<td>1957</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Lethbridge</td>
<td>Auto-body Repair</td>
<td>Canadian Reformed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

About the author

Lisa L. Schalk recently completed her Master of Arts (History) degree from the University of Lethbridge (2016). Her research was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council’s Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship Award and the resulting thesis was entitled ‘Re-creating Identities: Postwar Dutch Reformed Immigrants in Southern Alberta.’ Her interests also include church history, history of the family, history of racial issues and many other areas of social history. Lisa is also a full-time mother of three busy preschool-age children.

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Appartenance et dislocation : les immigrants néerlandais après la guerre de 1940 dans le sud de l’Alberta (Canada)

Le présent article utilise les concepts de dislocation et d’appartenance pour examiner la vie quotidienne d’immigrants membres de l’Église réformée venus dans le sud de l’Alberta après la guerre de 1940. Il est basé sur des interviews que j’ai menées avec neuf personnes qui ont émigré jeunes des Pays-Bas vers le sud de l’Alberta à cette époque-là. Je me concentre sur les défis qu’ils ont affrontés dans leur nouvelle situation, certains étant communs à la plupart des immigrants (langue, culture), d’autres spécifiques à ce groupe (méthodes de travail, outils à utiliser). Mon but est d’augmenter la littérature existante sur ce groupe d’immigrants en discutant des manières dont ces défis ont influencé leur parcours vers la création d’un sens d’appartenance, une identité, dans leur nouveau contexte. À partir de là, je montre comment les immigrants que j’ai interviewés ont créé de nouveaux sens d’appartenance dans le sud de l’Alberta en centrant leurs identités d’abord dans leurs familles et leurs églises, puis en se tournant vers d’autres aspects de leur nouvelle vie.

Thuishoren in ontwrichting: Na-oorlogse Nederlandse immigranten in zuid-Alberta, Canada

Dit artikel gebruikt de concepten “ontwrichting” en “thuishoren” voor een onderzoek naar de dagelijkse levens van na-oorlogse Nederlands-Hervormde immigranten in het zuiden van Alberta. Het is gebaseerd op interviews die ik hield met negen personen die als jonge mensen van Nederland naar Alberta emigreerden in de periode meteen na de tweede wereldoorlog. Ik besteed aandacht aan de moeilijkheden die ze op hun pad
vonden in hun nieuwe situatie; sommige daarvan deelden ze met de meeste andere emigranten, zoals taal- en cultuurverschillen, en andere behoorden meer specifiek tot deze groep in deze locatie, zoals onbekende werkmethoden en gereedschappen. Mijn doel is om bij te dragen aan de bestaande literatuur over deze groep immigranten met een discussie van de manier waarop de juist tegenslagen en moeilijkheden die ze moesten overwinnen van invloed waren op hun groeiende gevoel van thuishoren in hun nieuwe omgeving en het ontwikkelen van een nieuwe identiteit. Ik laat zien hoe de immigranten die ik interviewde nieuwe manieren vonden om zich thuis te voelen in zuid-Alberta door zich diep te wortelen in hun familie en kerkgemeenschappen en van daaruit nieuwe mogelijkheden te onderzoeken.