

ORIGINS

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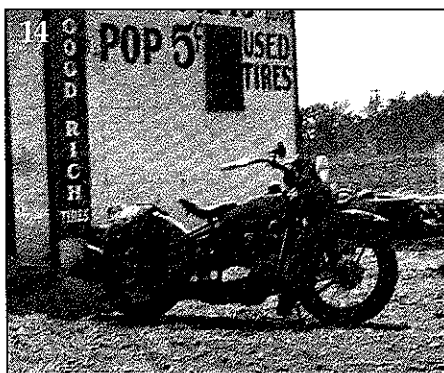
ORIGINS



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Cover: Minuteman illustration from WWII bond advertisement which appeared in 1942 Calvin College *Prism*, p. 143

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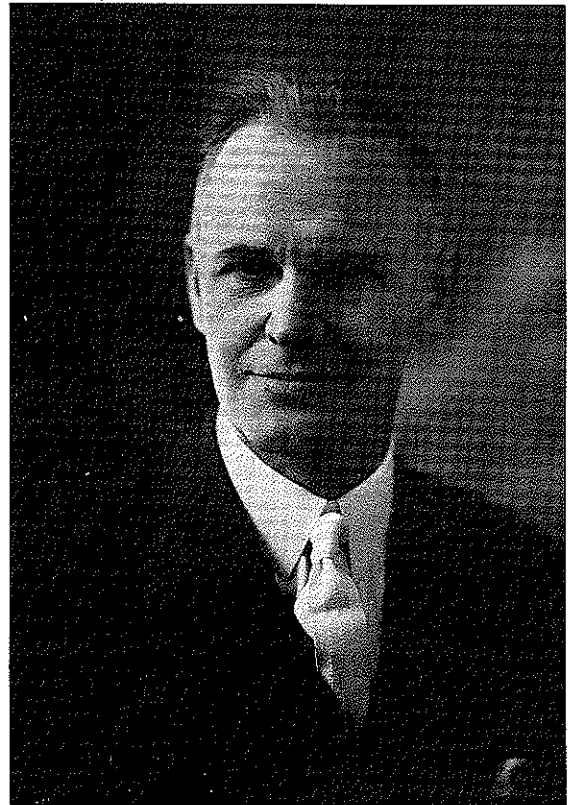
Origins is designed to publicize and advance the objectives of the Archives. These goals include the gathering, organization, and study of historical materials produced by the day-to-day activities of the Christian Reformed Church, its institutions, communities, and people.

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Peoria, Iowa The War Years 1917-18

by Garret Pothoven*

Lunt, Strong, Wehile, Castner, Timbrel, Fleming, Lundy, Sheesley, Johnson, Spain, Allen, Swank, Keller, Dunwoody, Engel, Jackson, Boyd.



Rev. J. J. Weersing

There were more, but I can recall only these right now. All of them gradually sold their farms to the Dutch people, who, on the whole, were better farmers than the Americans, and most of them prospered. This fact, too, I be-

*Mr. Pothoven, a retired Christian school teacher living in Jenison, Michigan, wrote this piece as a letter to his niece.

Charles S. Ward, *The Minnesota Commission of Public Safety in World War I: Its Formation and Activities*).

¹⁵Burt I. Weld, letter to Henry W. Libby, 19 Apr. 1918, *Commission of Public Safety, Minnesota Historical Society*.

¹⁶Murray County Herald 2 May 1918:1.

¹⁷Murray County Herald 9 May 1918:4. Reprinted in *Edgerton Enterprise* 17 May 1918.

¹⁸Burt I. Weld, letter to S. W. Fraser, 6 May 1918, *Commission of Public Safety Papers, Minnesota Historical Society*.

¹⁹Edgerton Enterprise 10 May 1918:4.

²⁰Edgerton Enterprise 31 May 1918:1.

²¹Edgerton Enterprise 7 June 1918:1.

²²Edgerton Enterprise 7 June 1918:4.

²³Edgerton Enterprise 21 June 1918:1.

²⁴Edgerton Enterprise 21 June 1918:8.

²⁵Fred H. Baldwin, letter to Henry W. Libby, 1 July 1918, *Commission of Public Safety Papers, Minnesota Historical Society*. *The Nonpartisan League was a farmer protest group which asked for state-owned grain elevators, stockyards, packing houses, and state-financed crop insurance. The Commission of Public Safety regarded this group as a dire threat to the war effort and went to great lengths to suppress its activities during the primary election campaign of 1918. The NPL supported the unsuccessful candidacy of Charles A. Lindbergh, Sr., Republican, for governor. (Cf. Carol Jenson, "Loyalty as a Political Weapon: The 1918 Campaign in Minnesota." *Minnesota History*, Summer 1972, pp. 43-57). While many Dutch residents of southwest Minnesota joined the NPL, Nick De Boer did not. His brother did. Of the six men cited in the letter, only two of them were actual members of the NPL. (Cf. *Nonpartisan League Membership Lists, Nonpartisan League Papers, Minnesota Historical Society*.)*

²⁶Edgerton Enterprise 4 Oct. 1918:1. Two of Edgerton's storekeepers were Dutch.

Credits

50th Anniversary: Ebenezer Christian Reformed Church of Leota, Minnesota (*Privately printed*, 1945)

50th Anniversary: Ebenezer Christian Reformed Church of Leota, Minnesota (*Privately printed*, 1945)

50th Anniversary, Edgerton Christian School (*Privately printed*, 1967)

The war years were difficult for many people in the Peoria church. To begin with, all the Dutch people were suspected of being pro-German. At least they were called that. Being of Dutch ancestry and speaking the Dutch language very likely brought on this label. However, there was no basis for it. All our people were loyal, patriotic Americans. Of course, our young men who were subject to the draft did use every legal means available to avoid being drafted. Rev. Weersing, our pastor during that era, assisted them in every possible way and, I presume, was successful in some cases. Who likes to go into the army? But this was not to the liking of our American neighbors (*Amerikane* we called them). Consequently, a lot of ill will developed, especially toward Rev. Weersing. When it came to buying war bonds, Rev. Weersing encouraged our people to do their part, and, as a result, our people did better in that regard than the other members of the community. For this our people should have been commended, but instead it brought on further jealousy. At this time there were still many American people in the Peoria community. I can recall the names of many of these who lived within three or four miles of Peoria: Appel, Rice, Gosnell, McKissick,

lieve, was a source of jealousy.

Gradually real hostility developed. Rev. Weersing's life was threatened, and county authorities advised him to leave the community. My father took him to the train in Oskaloosa. He related later that he was glad when Rev. Weersing was safe on the train. They had some anxious moments while waiting for the train. Apparently there were some hostile people hanging around the depot. To my knowledge, Rev. Weersing never returned to Peoria, unless he did so in secret. Certainly he never returned as a preacher.



Rev. C. De Leeuw

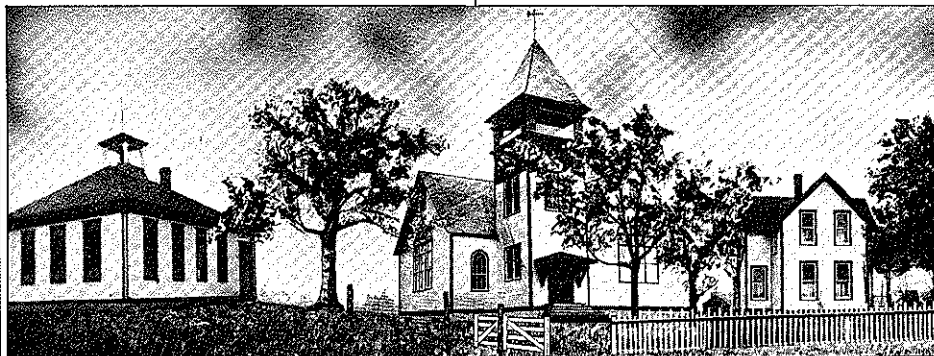
Soon after Weersing left, the services on Sunday had to be in English. What the source of this order was, I do not know, nor how long it was in force—very likely for the duration of the war. Mr. Hietbrink, our school principal, was called upon to lead in the first English service. The consistory must have decided just before the service that this change should be made; Mr. Hietbrink was already sitting in church when he was asked to lead the service. Few elders could use the English language well. Later on

my dad and Jake Rus alternately took over this responsibility. He and Rus could speak and read the English language better than the others, but I am sure that they, too, felt their inadequacies. I might add that later, when Dutch services were again held and reading services had to be resorted to, it was usually K. Stuursma and Charles Stuursma who took turns in reading. Both were very capable of that.

Another evidence of community hostility was that our church properties were threatened. The Reformed church in New Sharon was the first to go up in flames. This church was never rebuilt. Then the Christian

school in Sully. Thus alerted, the Peoria people decided to protect their properties by having a few men stand guard at night. In this they took turns. How long they did this I do not know. When things appeared to be calming down, they discontinued the guard, but one night soon after that both the school and the church were burned to the ground. When the news reached us, my dad and others went down there, but nothing could be done. I was too young and was not allowed to go along, so my mother and I watched

Peoria, Iowa, Christian Reformed Church and Christian School, destroyed by American nativists



School group at Peoria Christian School, c. 1910



the flames from our front yard.

I am sure these were anxious weeks and months for the Peoria people, especially for my father, as he was active in church affairs and was close to Rev. Weersing. In later years I have heard some people discredit the seriousness of the situation. Maybe they had a point, but then it is always easy to criticize after it is all over and if you were not too involved in the matter and did not assume any responsibility. That there was hostility toward the Dutch people is evident from what happened not only in

Peoria Christian Reformed Church, rebuilt after the fire



Peoria but in New Sharon and Sully as well. One day Mr. Hietbrink was physically assaulted on his way to the store by a young punk living in the neighborhood.

After the school burned, the children of the church had to go to the public school until the Christian school was rebuilt. Church services and all other church meetings were held in one of the horse barns at the bottom of the hill. Partitions were removed, boards were used for seats, and the building was insulated in the best way possible so that it would be somewhat comfortable. This was the

place of meeting for the congregation until a new church could be built. Incidentally, the architect for the new church was a Verhey of Pella. Shortly after we began meeting in the barn, Rev. Weersing sent his farewell sermon to the congregation. My father read the sermon. I do not know the exact dates or years when all of the above took place.

The war ended on November 11, 1918. Some of the Peoria boys had been drafted and had served in the armed forces. Two of them went over to France—Walt Vander Hart and William Den Hartog. One fellow had

Comments on Garrett Pothoven's "The War Years"

The article on Peoria by Mr. Pothoven brought back many memories to me. When Rev. Weersing (1879-1976) was in Peoria, my father, Rev. C. De Leeuw (1876-1963), was minister of nearby First CRC of Pella, and they were close friends.

During the time of Rev. Weersing's danger, they had an agreement that whenever he felt it necessary, he would come to our home at night. They had arranged a secret knock that he would make at our door, which my parents would answer without using any light. On one occasion he stayed about three days, and my parents told us not to tell anyone that he was visiting us. Rev. Weersing would come on horseback, and my brother, Case De Leeuw, remembers that Mr. A. Van Duren, who lived nearby, would hide the horse in his barn.

During the time of harassment in Peoria there were rumors that the Ku Klux Klan was responsible. My

brother does not recall that and believes it was a vigilante group who believed the Dutch people were "pro-German." Another rumor was that a group of men on horseback rode through various towns where they hung up the effigy of Kaiser Wilhelm and then burned it. Whoever the group was, they let it be known that Rev. Weersing would be "tarred and feathered" if he remained in Peoria!

The friendship between my parents and the Weersings continued throughout their lifetime. Later, when we lived in Sioux Center, Iowa, Rev. Weersing was minister in nearby Hull. While we lived in Lansing, he was minister of First Cicero for many years. I remember him as a kind, friendly, courteous gentleman, and my parents admired him.

Hermine De Leeuw Terpstra
Lansing, Illinois

taken his physical and was to be inducted the very day the Armistice was signed. My father took him in that day, but with the signing of the Armistice, all inductions were stopped, and he could return home. We were all happy about that. When the news of the Armistice reached the various communities, there were great celebrations. I did not have the privilege of participating in them, but I could hear the booming of the cannons where I was. And where was that? In the cornfield, picking corn all by myself. I think many people stopped work that day and joined the celebrations. For me it was a day of mixed emotions.

Eventually everything in the community came back to normal. Both the church and the school were rebuilt. These had been trying years for the church and especially for those who held positions of responsibility. From the church *Yearbook* I learned that Rev. Weersing officially left Peoria in 1918, but I believe he left the community before that. Rev. P. Van Dyk followed him in 1919.

Thus ended a turbulent period for the Peoria church. If there had been news media at that time as we have today, all of this might have received a lot of publicity. But as it was, it received practically none. I believe there was one reference to it in a Des Moines paper, the *Iowa Homestead*. Our people received little, if any, support from local authorities, because these were not sympathetic to their cause.

I have given you some details which you did not ask for, but somehow I could not avoid it. And in reading the above, please remember that this news reporter was only a teenager at the time all this happened and that he is now writing from memory after sixty years. Hence, there may be, and very likely are, many inaccuracies and some exaggerations due to the impressionable years of youth and lapse of memory due to old age.

A Letter from France

By H. Holstege

Weis, Germany
January 3, 1919

Dear Parents:

I just wrote a letter on January 1, but this evening I received permission from the captain to write you a letter in Dutch. So I thought I had better do it right away. I will now tell you what has happened to us here in France. To write all about it is impossible because that would fill a book.

When we first arrived in France, we had to work unloading the ships. We did that for about a month. Then they sent us to central France, where we received further training to prepare for meeting the enemy. Then they sent us to a quiet area of the front where there was not much fighting. This place was Alsace Lorraine.

We were there for a couple of months. There was not much combat there, but cannonballs passed overhead now and then, and the machine

guns were sometimes very active. That did not bother us, because we were in the trenches where no gunfire can harm you. It is not easy for a cannon fired from a couple miles away to strike you. The trenches are no more than three feet wide, so, if a shot is to harm you, it must drop into the trenches. We lost almost no one, but we learned to act like soldiers under enemy fire.

Then we received orders to move. We did not know where we were going, but after a couple days we knew, for we passed through Paris. That meant we were going to a place called Chateau Thierry. It was there that the Americans had done the hardest fighting up to that time. Believe me, many a soldier asked himself, "How will I get out of here?" Soon we met the enemy. On August 1 we charged the Germans. The enemy was in a

"Over the top"



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The Calvin College and Seminary Archives is a division of the Schools' library which contains the historical records of the Christian Reformed Church, Calvin College and Seminary, and other institutions related to the Reformed tradition in the Netherlands and North America. The Archives also contains a wide range of personal and family manuscripts.