

# Origins

Historical Magazine of The Archives

*Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary*

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# Origins

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Historical Magazine  
of The Archives

Calvin College and  
Calvin Theological Seminary  
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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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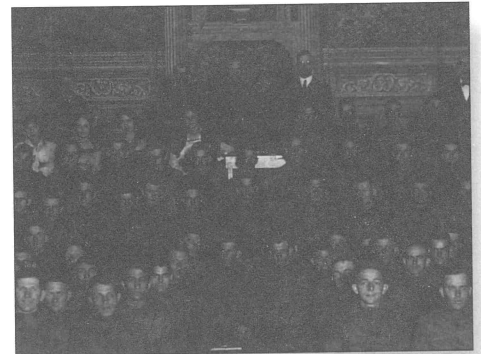
WW1 Victory Plate purchased by Venna  
Eeling Lemmen in 1919 at the end of  
the war. It came from the general store  
in Crisp, MI, that was owned by W.  
Nienhuis. Note the flags of the various  
Allied Nations. Image courtesy of  
Lemmen and Lemmen PLC.

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Rev. J. J. Weersing Charged  
Violating Espionage Act  
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# Flames in the Night: World War I Flares Up in Peoria, Iowa

Robert Schoone-Jongen

Sometime between eleven o'clock and midnight, on 13 June 1918, as Tillie Van Gorp awoke to tend to a sick child, she spotted an orange glimmer through the farmhouse window. With only a half mile of prairie between her and the fire, there was

Peoria CRC burning.  
Image courtesy of  
the Archives, Calvin  
College, Grand  
Rapids, MI.



no doubt about what she saw—the Peoria Christian Reformed Church and the neighboring Christian school were ablaze. Despite the late hour, she phoned her brother-in-law Nick, to alert him. He sped to the scene, assessed the situation, and summoned help. The church and school were beyond help. And only a shift in the wind spared the recently built parsonage that stood next to the church. Providence may have saved the house, but humans had started the fire. So the sheriff pronounced after he inspected the site in the morning, along with his assistants—the local postmaster and a member of the Mahaska County Defense Council.<sup>1</sup>

The arson assessment came as no surprise to anyone familiar with Peoria's recent past. For years tensions had been rising between the Dutch families that increasingly dominated the local population and the displaced descendants of the area's original settlers. American involvement in World War I and the incendiary rhetoric it inspired only stoked the fever. The recent state proclamation against conducting any public meetings in anything but the English language added more fuel. In truth, the Dutch Americans and their Yankee neighbors, despite their proximity, inhabited different worlds. And this alienation led to the torching of the buildings. It was neither the first nor the last incendiary incident that pitted neighbor against neighbor in Mahaska County during 1918 and 1919. There is a cautionary lesson here: fear and hatred leave lasting scars.

Peoria being ten miles northeast of Pella, it took decades for the Dutch colonists to reach that far in their search for farms. In the 1860s there were none. With the resumption of Dutch immigration after the Civil War, the Dutch percentage increased to about 10 percent of Richland Township's population in 1870. The majority were predominantly of Scots-Irish descent, families that came to Iowa from Ohio and Illinois during the 1840s, with roots traced back to the Appalachian regions of Virginia, Tennessee, and Pennsylvania.<sup>2</sup> Over the years these inhabitants had

*Robert Schoone-Jongen recently retired as Associate Professor of History at Calvin College. He has been researching and writing about Dutch-American immigrant experiences for many years, with special emphasis on communities in Minnesota, New Jersey, and Iowa.*



organized themselves into a community, complete with a township government and school district. The Methodists built a church, as did the Disciples of Christ. There were stores, a wagon shop, a blacksmith, a creamery, a tavern, and a Masonic lodge. For several years a grist mill on the Snake River processed the local crops. The locals believed they had enough of a future to plat a townsite. In up-to-date fashion, it included sixty-six-foot-wide streets to accommodate the farm wagons that would roll into town on business.<sup>3</sup> When the railroads bypassed the village, Peoria's dream of commercial significance died. The post office that gave the place its name closed in 1906, its traffic diverted to Pella.<sup>4</sup>

By the 1880s Pella's Dutch residents were pinched for land. As many farmers found opportunities elsewhere in Iowa, Nebraska, and Minnesota, many looked to buy closer to home. That brought them to Peoria. They found willing sellers among the Yankees.

Richland Township's ethnic transformation, while dramatic, was hardly unusual. Ethnic farmers, like the Dutch, tended to take the long view, one measured in generations, not crop cycles. Their English-speaking neighbors were more impatient, anticipating bigger returns in smaller time intervals. The Dutch viewed farming as a heritage, more than as a scheme to gain wealth. Of course,

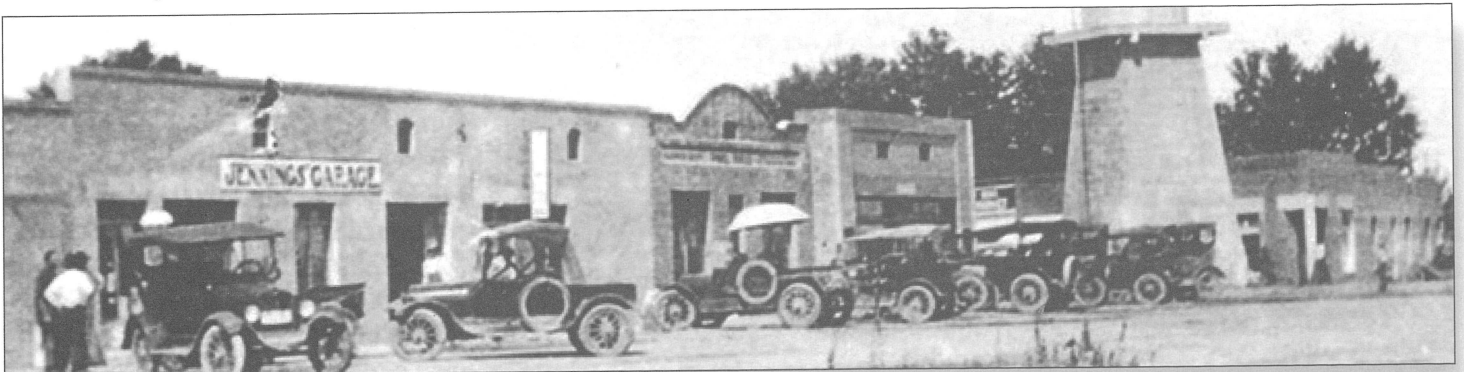
they hoped to earn profits; they had to. But the bottom line meant more than money in the bank.<sup>5</sup> When the English-speaking holdouts saw the successes of their new neighbors, a spirit of envy descended upon the land. The last version of Peoria's plat map, drawn in 1913, told the tale and set the stage for what happened that June night. The 1913 town site was surrounded by farms owned by Dutch Americans. To the English speakers this meant "being squeezed" by foreigners.

The Dutch ascendancy in Richland accelerated. By 1894 their numbers warranted organizing separate congregations. That year a Christian Reformed formed in Peoria, and a Reformed one in nearby Taintor. In a little over ten years the Peoria congregation included 50 families, 113 communicants, and 303 souls. Seven years later those numbers had all increased by about 25 percent or more. The total number of Dutch households in the township jumped from 32 percent in 1900 to 46 percent in 1910. By 1920 the percentage would stand at 68 percent. While the Dutch presence swelled, the township's total population dropped, mirroring the county-wide trend. In 1900 Richland had 1,213 residents; in 1920 the number stood at 909, a 25 percent reduction.<sup>6</sup>

Such coma-inducing statistics struck fear in the hearts of the old settler families. The remaining families increasingly found themselves tenants

or hired hands, while the Dutch became owner-operators. When a Dutch farmer did rent, his landlord was generally a relative, usually his father. In other words, generations of Dutch Americans formed an economic covenant with each other to promote the well-being of their particular family. Intermarriages created an even more knotted skein in which in-laws and cousins interlocked to complicate what appeared to be a simple linear fathers-to-sons line of succession. And they were prospering during a period of unprecedented prosperity in rural America.

The years 1910-1914, adjusting for inflation, were the most profitable years American farmers ever enjoyed. A majority of the nation's population still resided in rural areas, meaning there were a large number of rural people doing well as stewards of the land. A closer look at the numbers shows one major division—ethnic (immigrant) farm communities were outpacing communities dominated by families from "American" backgrounds. The immigrant communities tended to rest on deep religious roots as well. In Richland Township, that contrast between the Dutch and their American neighbors was particularly stark. The 1915 Iowa State Census asked each respondent to identify their religious affiliation. The Dutch respondents overwhelmingly pronounced themselves members of either a Reformed or a Christian



Peoria, IA. Image courtesy of the Archives, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, MI.



Reformed congregation. The non-Dutch residents, also overwhelmingly, professed no religious affiliations at all.<sup>7</sup> And when the increasingly marginalized old families looked for signs of Dutch presence, and prosperity, they only needed to look to a few acres on the north edge of Peoria at the collection of buildings the Dutch congregation began building during the summer of 1894.

The first Peoria Christian Reformed Church was a simple balloon frame building commonly found on the plains. A crew with a few hammers, a plan, and a foreman could erect one of those structures in a matter of days. They also built a modest parsonage, a house indistinguishable from any of the houses standing on the surrounding farmsteads. The congregation could afford this in the face of a time of severe national depression and regional drought. By November 1894, the congregation began the search for a minister. One arrived before the end of the year. With a pastor in place and services being held twice each Sunday, more residents that were Dutch arrived in the community. In 1904 the congregation expanded the building by purchasing, and moving, half of the defunct Peoria Creamery building. In 1909 a school building rose on a site next to the church. During 1911 the church building was remodeled and expanded, the better to house the crowds on Sunday and to accommo-



Richland and Prairie townships in Mahaska County. Image courtesy of Hixson Plat Map Atlases of Iowa, University of Iowa Libraries, Map Collection.

date the pipe organ the congregation had purchased in 1909.<sup>8</sup>

A new minister arrived in 1914, a newly minted dominee who very quickly became a household name in the Christian Reformed denomination, Rev. Harry Bultema. Between writing sermons, leading societies (including the new singing society), and visiting those in need by car, Bultema spent hours writing intricate theological tomes and numerous articles on the Bible's prophetic themes. With war breaking out in Europe, the thoughts of many turned to apocalyptic visions of the present and the belief that the Second Coming might be imminent.<sup>9</sup> Bultema proclaimed these ideas both near and far in the pages of *The Banner* and *De Wachter*, and in

pamphlets and books. His notoriety brought him attention and a call to a much larger congregation in Michigan. His successor in Peoria, Jacob J. Weersing, quickly proposed that the congregation seriously consider building a newer, larger parsonage. When the replacement structure burned during construction, the congregation simply built another one early in 1917.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, the Peoria Christian Reformed Church stood as a thriving symbol to the decline of Richland's old order. And that hurt. And it hurt even more when they could hear the sounds of the church's services, especially during the summer months when the church windows were open. The services were exclusively in the Dutch language. Compounding the alienation, the Christian school existed, in part, to keep the Dutch language alive for another generation. When it expanded into a full-fledged day school, the public school population suffered a noteworthy decline, jeopardizing its future. The Dutch spoke their own language during their weekday visits in town. They intermarried exclusively within their own circle. And they seemed to think of themselves as a superior lot, given



Peoria CRC. Image courtesy of the Archives, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, MI.

how their version of the community was grounded in their church.<sup>11</sup> God was prospering their efforts, or so they liked to think, and say. And they were prosperous, on land that had failed its previous owners. That hurt.

Then, in April 1917, the United States of America declared war on Germany. President Woodrow Wilson's war message to Congress caught the apocalyptic spirit that Rev. Bultema's books and sermons exuded. "It is a fearful thing to lead this great peaceful people in war, into the most terrible and disastrous of all wars, civilization itself seeming to be in the balance."<sup>12</sup> Earlier, in this same speech, the President addressed an obvious fact, that the United States was an ethnically divided country. There were "millions of men and women of German birth and native sympathy, who live among us and share our life. . . ." Most of them will do the right thing and support the American effort against their relatives. But, "[i]f there should be disloyalty, it will be dealt with a firm hand of stern repression. . . ." The disloyal would be a ". . . lawless and malignant few." To make that point absolutely clear, the United States Government unleashed a torrent of propaganda, promoting loyalty by portraying the enemy as beasts and barbarians.

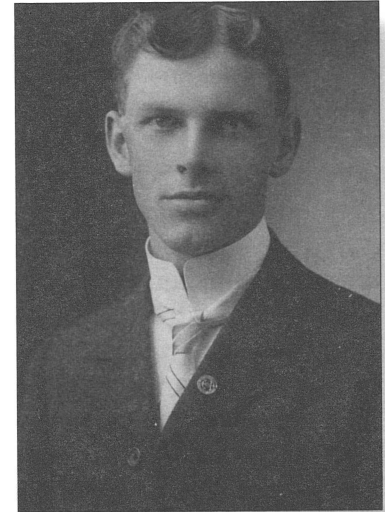
For Dutch Americans the war posed some very real problems. The British allies recently had brutally suppressed the Boer Republics in South Africa. Dutch Americans had rallied to the cause of their distant cousins during the Anglo-Boer War, with mass rallies and fundraising, some of it taking the form of Thanksgiving Day offerings in Christian Reformed churches.<sup>13</sup> Dutch immigrants had heard school lessons in the Netherlands, had heard the stories of what the French had done to their homeland when Napoleon created the Batavian Republic during the

1790s. To those Dutch who belonged to the dissenter churches, French Enlightenment ideas had irredeemably corrupted the Hervormde Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church), which had inspired the secession of 1834.<sup>14</sup> For the folks in the Pella area, the persecution that followed the *Afscheiding* had literally driven their parents and grandparents to these prairies under the leadership of Rev. Scholte in the 1840s. Now, as Americans, could they be expected to defend the very nation that had corrupted their European homeland? Many Dutch Americans asked these questions, sometimes publicly. One of them, in Minnesota, stated he would rather return to the Netherlands before fighting on the side with the French.<sup>15</sup>

Rev. Jacob J. Weersing was among those who wondered about such things. He considered becoming a lawyer before opting for the ministry. When the government promoted Liberty Loans to finance the war, Weersing allegedly referred to the funds as "blood money." When the federal government allowed draft exemptions for young men working in agriculture, Weersing (allegedly) advised members of his congregation how they could take advantage of this provision in the law.

Among the English speakers, these legal subtleties were lost. What they heard was a foreign language being spoken in a place where English had once prevailed. And, as for that language, who could tell the difference between Dutch and German anyhow? If Dutch-speaking young men stayed home, and Dutch farms continued to prosper, while English-speaking young men did their duty and submitted to the draft, well, where was the justice in that? And farmers were thriving in the wake of the war. Grain prices in the United States had soared since the outbreak of the war in Europe. While Europeans set about

killing each other and dragooning their young men in military service, someone had to feed those soldiers. And American farmers did just that, at least for the British and French soldiers. The Germans were cut off from the world markets by the British



Rev. Jacob Weersing. Image courtesy of the Archives, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, MI.

blockade. That new parsonage the Peoria Christian Reformed Church built, twice, in 1916 was being paid for by the profits farmers earned from European sales. World War I was good for business on American farms.

All the disappointments of the decades that the English speakers had endured turned into fear and resentment of these foreign speakers in their midst. Those fears and resentments

## PEORIA PREACHER PUT UNDER BONDS

Rev. J. J. Weersing Charged  
Violating Espionage Act  
—Held to Grand Jury.

MUST STAY OUT COUNTY

Pella Chronicle, 21 May 1918. Image courtesy A Digital Archive of the Pella Public Library, Pella, IA.

began to boil as American involvement in the war entered its second year during the spring of 1918. A year's worth of government anti-German propaganda took a toll on the entire nation. Public figures like Theodore Roosevelt inveighed against all things "foreign." He even said that if a minister did not place the flag above the cross on the church steeple, his church should be closed. And American churches, overwhelmingly, rallied to the nation's colors. Billy Sunday's revival meetings would begin with the "Star-Spangled Banner." Churches, including those attended by Dutch immigrants, began sprouting American flags in their sanctuaries. Pious Protestants, including Billy Sunday, regularly sang "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" during church services, words that had been penned during the Civil War by a devout Unitarian. But in Peoria, and elsewhere, a few devout souls questioned these trends.<sup>16</sup>

The broader Christian Reformed church fell into line with the spirit of the time, in a sort of "yes, but" way. Rev. Henry Beets, *The Banner's* editor, featured presidential proclamations on the front cover at Thanksgiving

## ONLY ENGLISH TO BE USED IN PUBLIC

Governor Harding Issues  
Dramatic Proclamation Against  
Foreign Languages.

TO PREVENT SUSPICION!

*Pella Chronicle*, 30 May 1918. Image courtesy  
A Digital Archive of the Pella Public Library,  
Pella, IA.

and Decoration (now Memorial) Day.<sup>17</sup> He published a lengthy lecture by Calvin College's history professor, R. B. Kuiper, with the unsubtle

title "Christian Patriotism."<sup>18</sup> The denomination recruited ministers to serve as chaplains to the armed forces, in cooperation with the Young Men's Christian Association. Each week *The Banner* featured reports from the chaplains about how "our boys" were being shepherded through the brambles of military life. What was not published is worth noting. Nowhere did Beets espouse pacificism, or advocate for conscientious objection to the war. He used his editorial columns to push churches to switch services to English as soon as possible. He specifically denounced consistories that hid behind arcane voting requirements in their articles of incorporation to throttle the members who wanted English services. And when the denomination's synod met in June 1918, the first vote approved of support to President Wilson, whose secretary, Joseph Tumulty, sent a telegram acknowledging its receipt.<sup>19</sup>

In Iowa that spring, Governor William L. Harding decided to do his part to enforce national unity. On 23 May 1918, he issued an executive order banning the use of any foreign language in any public meeting, including church services, anywhere in the state. This "Babel Declaration" even banned telephone calls in foreign languages. To the zealous, the governor's decree became a license to inflict retribution on those who dissented.<sup>20</sup>

In Peoria, the governor's decree further poisoned an already toxic situation. Rev. Weersing's questioning of the war and the Liberty Loans and his alleged assistance in providing advice about draft deferments aroused some in the English-speaking community to issue threats against both him and the Christian school. Some threats arrived in writing. But Rev. Weersing regarded them seriously enough to take precautions for his personal safety. Decades later, Hermina De Leeuw, the daughter of the pastor of Pella's First

Christian Reformed Church, remembered the sound of the secret knock on the front door that signaled Rev. Weersing's furtive arrival. Her parents opened the door without turning on the lights, to hide their visitor from curious eyes. For three days he remained in the Pella parsonage, his horse hidden in a trustworthy parishioner's stable. The De Leeuw children were sworn to secrecy, lest the wrong people discovered the Peoria pastor's whereabouts.<sup>21</sup>

As for the Peoria Christian School, the rumors became even more ominous. Apparently, during its early years the school had flown the Dutch flag, rather than the American flag. When the English speakers voiced their objections to that, the school board relented and replaced it with the American flag. During the spring of 1918, when the time came for the annual school picture, Rev. Weersing allegedly banished any patriotic insignias from the group portrait. With their minister disappearing before threats of tar and feathers, the school board voted to suspend classes for the remainder of the school year, lest some vigilantes raid the town during the day.

Word of the threats and rumors spread beyond Peoria to the county seat, Oskaloosa, and from there to state officials in Des Moines. In this atmosphere, during March 1918, Weersing publicly defended himself against disloyalty charges in a letter to the editor submitted to the newspapers in Pella, Oskaloosa, and New Sharon. In it he exhorted his fellow Dutch Americans to buy Liberty Bonds and obey the draft laws, "... since the USA is involved in the war and we are enjoying the benefits of the flag that floats over this nation it is your duty to protect that flag, and we must do it and will."<sup>22</sup>

The Peoria church council considered preventative measures, just in



case something bad happened to the community. Already in 1917, even before the United States entered the war, the elders and deacons discussed increasing the insurance coverage on their building. One day after President Wilson asked for a declaration of war, the consistory voted to buy ten fire extinguishers. To mollify the local demands to support the war effort, the elders and deacons voted to cooperate in the Red Cross activities in the vicinity and mandated that Rev. Weersing spearhead the effort. But the Richland Township Red Cross was split between Dutch and non-Dutch, prompting the consistory's decision to affiliate with the chapter in Oskaloosa.<sup>23</sup>

Then the sheriff came for Rev. Weersing during the latter part of April 1918. The warrant stated he had violated the Federal Espionage Act. Pella's newspaper editor recited the list of accusations against Weersing, things that led the English speakers to prefer charges against him. Several weeks earlier, Weersing had appeared before the state Defense Council to defend his less than zealous reactions to the Liberty Loan appeals. The Council warned him to be careful, and loyal. The editor opined, "From reports we get in one way or another, Mr. Weersing appears to be a regular little *Kaiser* (emperor) over around Peoria." After noting that Weersing was of German stock, the editor continued, "A pastor of a church ought to feel a responsibility upon him to lead his people to the most active and zealous support of the government in the war, and one who fails to do so . . . is unworthy to hold the office of pastor." America was under attack from within by foreigners who bring ". . . their un-American ideas with them, and we must insist that they either become Americans in fact or return to their home lands." If the people of Peoria could not support the public school,

then they should leave the United States.<sup>24</sup>

Weersing was remanded to the courthouse in Ottumwa, charged, and then released on bail with the stipulation that he stay out of Mahaska County. He remained in hiding, apparently at the parsonage of the Prairie City Christian Reformed Church in Jasper County.<sup>25</sup> The local zealots rode into Peoria one night, intent on having their way with the minister. But they found the parsonage empty. The consistory granted Weersing an extended vacation, which he used to visit his relatives in Zeeland, Michigan. They also voted to defend themselves and their *dominee* in writing. Clerk Charles Stuursma's letter appeared in *De Wachter* on 12 June 1918. Stuursma asserted that the tensions arose from envy. The Dutch farmers prospered, while their English-speaking neighbors wallowed in debt. Jealousy was the issue, not patriotism. "Regarding the duties of good citizens our people are the equals of all the others." When local "rowdies" tried to bully the Dutch into conforming to their 'higher' standard of patriotism, Rev. Weersing had complained to the authorities. His public defense had further incensed the "rowdies," inspiring them to level even more accusations against him to those same authorities, and increasing the threats again Dutch speakers. Through it all, Weersing had always been open with the authorities, affirming his loyalty to the nation. "For the accusations were based on lies and had no basis." Weersing was arrested for his own protection. "We readily concurred that the authorities had reason to worry about the so-called 'mob' that had no regard for the law." The consistory anticipated their minister's return when the situation calmed a bit.<sup>26</sup>

In the middle of Weersing's exile, on 23 May, Iowa's governor issued his

proclamation against public use of foreign languages in public meetings. This gave the anti-Dutch crowd yet another excuse for hating the Peoria congregation. Only now, their hatred had the governor's own sanction. His proclamation enjoyed widespread support, especially in those areas of the state where immigrant farmers had been replacing native-born farmers. The proclamation sent sheriffs and deputies into churches on Sundays to enforce compliance. Some congregations simply ceased services. The edict even countenanced wire-tapping, since only English would be permitted on public utility lines. Here was executive authority expanded to the max, in the name of patriotism and loyalty. Governor Harding reveled in the positive response. There was pushback about church services, leading him to gradually relent on that clause.

Then, with Dutch banned from worship services, the Peoria Christian School standing empty, and Rev. Weersing exiled to Michigan, on Thursday, 13 June 1918, under the cover of darkness, someone doused the school building's exterior with kerosene and lit it. There was a quarter moon that night, enough for the arsonist to see without a lantern. As the school burned, the church ignited as well, the buildings being located within yards of each other. The new parsonage Rev. Weersing had asked for stood on the other side of the church. But the wind shifted while the church and school burned, sparing the house. The sheriff arrived in the morning, investigated the scene with two assistants, and declared the fire arson. The intensity of the blaze had obliterated any evidence pointing to who the assailants might have been. However, the Peoria fire proved to be the first of several attacks on Dutch-associated buildings and individuals in the area. On 16 October the Sully

**PEORIA CHURCH  
AND SCHOOL BURN**

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**Fire Thought to be of Incendiary  
Origin Due to Feeling on  
War Questions.**

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**WERE IN TROUBLE BEFORE**

*Pella Chronicle*, 20 June 1918. Image courtesy  
A Digital Archive of the Pella Public Library,  
Pella, IA.

Christian School caught fire. It stood ten miles north of Peoria in Jasper County. Damage to the building was limited. During February 1919, when a Dutch farmer purchased a farm near New Sharon, the house burned to the ground. On 27 February 1919 the New Sharon Reformed Church was destroyed by fire. During the following May, someone tried to bomb that congregation's parsonage. During July a local elevator, owned by a businessman known to be on good terms with the Dutch, caught fire under suspicious circumstances. Then, in September 1919, arsonists torched a straw pile on a Dutch-owned farm near New Sharon. That blaze spread to the nearby barn, destroying it.<sup>27</sup>

The farm fire provided the break the fire marshal needed to solve the case. During December 1919 the arrests and indictments began, and the trial dates set. These headlines turned to spectacle when Iowa's flamboyant Attorney General H. M. Havner arrived in Oskaloosa to assume ownership of the investigation. He announced his bid for governor three days after the indictments were announced. Amid the excitement, a legal case emerged. Eight men in the northwestern part of Mahaska County had conspired to rid their area of Dutch neighbors, by intimidation if possible, by force if required.

The conspirators all came from old American families. Most of their families had come to Iowa before the Civil War, established themselves in the Mahaska County area, and stayed there for several decades. The conspirators had agreed among themselves that a road two miles west of New Sharon should form the border between "real" Americans and their Dutch competitors. Any Dutch person living east of that line must be removed, "burned out" if needed. Hence, the attack on Gysbert Vos's barn. One final distinction among the conspirators: none of them claimed any religious affiliation.<sup>28</sup>

Charles Gosnell, Luther Howell, Roy Steen, Chanley Lundy, John Calvin (yes, John Calvin!) Jarard selected the targets, wrote threatening letters, hired the arsonists, and paid for their services. Jarard, Gosnell, and Steen were brothers-in-law. Howell and Steen were tenants; Lundy, Gosnell, and Jarard were owner/operators. Jarard owned in excess of three hundred acres in Prairie Township. Other than his brother-in-law, Jarard found himself literally surrounded by Dutch neighbors—Vermeer, Pothoven, Van Gorp, and Kloosterman.<sup>29</sup> Luther Howell seemed to be the leader. He hired the arsonists, Tom Davis and Roy Eflin, transported them to the scenes of the crime when needed, and paid them in cash provided by the other conspirators.

Davis and Eflin were in their twenties, both veterans of the armed forces, and both scratching a living as landless laborers in the community. Eflin had arrived in Mahaska County a few years before, when his mother divorced her second husband in Missouri and moved to a modest house in New Sharon. Roy had apprenticed in the navy before the United States entered the Great War. Between spans of unemployment, he worked as a farm laborer. Davis was a Mahaska County

native. By 1918 he had already been in and out of a marriage, fathered a child, sustained a head injury while helping build a mausoleum in the New Sharon cemetery, driven a dray wagon, and served a four-month stint in the army. Howell had hired Eflin, who hired Davis to assist him. They

**PELLA CHURCHES  
ALL CONFORMING**

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**Dutch Services Now Held Only  
for Those Who Cannot Un-  
derstand English at All.**

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*Pella Chronicle*, 27 June 1918. Image courtesy  
A Digital Archive of the Pella Public Library,  
Pella, IA.

all admitted their involvement in the Sully Christian School fire, the burning of the Reformed Church in New Sharon, the burning of Vos's barn, and the attempted bombing of the Reformed parsonage in New Sharon. In Sully they used papers in a teacher's desk as the accelerant. Coal oil did the dirty work in New Sharon and on Vos's farm. And coal oil had been used in the abortive bombing. None of them admitted to the fire in Peoria. However, the fire marshal believed the same substance had been used for the first fire. The same hand that had written threatening notes to people like Gysbert Vos had penned letters sent to people in Peoria. While circumstantial, the evidence seems convincing.

By the spring of 1920, the powers that be in Mahaska County had lost their zeal for finding the final truth. They had a conviction and several confessions. Roy Eflin was serving a ten-year sentence in the Anamosa State Penitentiary. Tom Davis had escaped that fate by first turning state's evidence against Eflin, then convincing a jury that his head injury

**KERK EN SCHOOL VERBRAND**

Des Moines, Ia. Staats autoriteiten onderzoeken naar de oorzaak van de vernieling der Hollandsche kerk en school te Peoria, Iowa, verleden Donderdag nacht, met een verlies van \$25,000. Geschil onder de burgers over het gebruik van vreemde talen in beide inrichtingen, en dreigingen, leiden tot de gedachte dat de brand van opzettelijken oorsprong is.

"Church and School Burned," *Volksvriend*, 20 June 1918. Image courtesy of the Archives, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, MI.

had rendered him incapable of thinking for himself. The judge directed the jury to acquit him. Howell was also declared not guilty in his trial. The rest of the conspirators either pled guilty or had their charges dropped for lack of evidence. In truth, 1920 being an election year, the county judge and state's attorney had little reason to keep the proceedings on the front pages of the newspapers. By April 1920, the matter had disappeared from view.<sup>30</sup>

But the "Hollander Fires" did not disappear from the memories of those who experienced them. The Peoria congregation built a new, more elaborate, church in 1919. The school was rebuilt and reopened that same year. Only a month after the fire, the congregation held its annual Mission Fest and raised hundreds of dollars for various causes, including the denomination's ministries to the troops in the armed forces. The

Reformed congregation in New Sharon rebuilt in short order, as well. Both congregations have lived to their centennial years, and beyond. Rev. Weersing never returned to Peoria, accepting a call to a church in Hull, Iowa. After a stop in Chicago, he migrated to California, where he remained a fixture in the Christian Reformed church until his death in 1976. For a time Gysbert Vos remained on his farm by New Sharon. But he eventually relocated to another one nearer Pella, where had been born. The conspirators all lived to old ages. Several of them were buried in the Friends Cemetery in New Sharon, ironically given their non-Quakerish behaviors as adults. H. M. Havner did not become Iowa's governor. Roy Eflin was pardoned by the governor after serving just over a year for his crimes. The Dutch "takeover" of farmland to the east of Pella did not end with the fires. In that sense, they won the argument, and the fight.

Nevertheless, the hatreds, bigotries, and fears that sparked the fire in Peoria and Sully and New Sharon have not disappeared. Immigrants are still seen as "others" by many and treated as lesser beings for being others. And politicians still say things about the "others" that encourage intolerance and hatred and even violence. The struggle that burned in Peoria still smolders. ❧

**Endnotes**

1. Oskaloosa Herald, as quoted in The Pella Chronicle, 20 June 1918.
2. 1913 Plat Map of Richland Township, Mahaska County, Iowa, at: <http://www.befortime.net/iowagenealogy/mahaska/platmap1913/PartOfRichlandTWPPlat-Map1913.png> <6 July 2018>
3. Ninth Census of the United States (1870), manuscript schedules for Richland Township, Mahaska County, State of Iowa.
4. <http://cdm270701.cdmhost.com/cdm/ref/collection/p270701coll6/id/67> <30 July 2018>
5. Dahm, James P., and Dorothy J. Van Kooten. *Peoria, Iowa: A Story of Two Cultures, With an In-Depth Look at the "Holland Fires," 1853-1993* (Pella, Iowa: Pella Printing Co., 1993), 18-42.
6. Jon Gjerde, *The Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830-1917*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997). Pages 319-25 focus on events in Peoria.
7. *Jaarboekje ten dienste der Christ. Gereformeerde Kerk in Noord Amerika, seven en twintigste jaargang* (Grand Rapids: J. B. Hulst, 1907), 25. Eleventh (1890), Twelfth (1900), and Thirteenth (1910) Censuses of the United States, manuscript schedules for Richland Township, Mahaska County, State of Iowa.
8. Iowa State Census of 1915, index cards for Richland Township, Mahaska County.
9. Dahm and Van Kooten, 66-9.
10. James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in America: The History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1984), 95-6.
11. Dahm and Van Kooten, 69.
12. Jacob van Hinte, *Netherlanders in America: A Study of Emigration and Settlement in the 19th and 20th Centuries in the United States of America*. (Robert P. Swierenga, ed.). (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 753, 761, 796.
13. Woodrow Wilson, War Message to Congress, 2 April 1917 <https://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/todays-doc/?dod-date=402> <30 July 2018>
14. Henry S. Lucas, *Netherlanders in America: Dutch Immigration to the United States and Canada, 1789-1950* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1955), 565-70.
15. This secession was led by Rev.



Hendrik De Cock in Ulrum, in the province of Groningen, the Netherlands, forming a new denomination, the *Christelijke Afgescheiden* (Christian Seceders). A large percentage of Dutch immigrants in the latter part of the nineteenth century belonged to this group.

15. Robert Schoone-Jongen, "Patriotic Pressures: The Dutch Experience in Southwest Minnesota during World War One." *Origins*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Fall 1989), pp. 2-8. The local newspaper reported, ominously, "His neighbors are taking up a collection for him."

16. Richard M. Gamble, "Together for the Gospel of Americanism: Evangelicals and the First World War," in Gordon L. Heath (ed.), *American Churches and the First World War* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 22-28.

17. *The Banner*, 22 November 1917, 23 May 1918.

18. *Ibid.*, 6 June 1918, 13 June 1918, 20 June 1918, 4 July 1918.

19. *Acts of Synod of the Christian Reformed Church held from June 19 to 29, 1918 at Grand Rapids, Michigan* (official English translation of the original Dutch minutes), Art. 9, 26.

20. <http://www.iowapublicradio.org/post/reflecting-anti-immigrant-sentiment-babel-proclamations-centennial> <30 July 2018>

21. Hermine De Leeuw Terpstra to Herbert J. Brinks, 6 March 1989, in Calvin College Heritage Hall Collection.

22. Quoted in Dahm and Van Kooten, 82.

23. Dahm and Van Kooten, 83.

24. Quoted in Dahm and Van Kooten, 82.

25. Dahm and Van Kooten, 83.

26. *De Wachter*, 12 June 1918, 5 (author's translation).

27. Dahm and Van Kooten, 84-89.

28. Iowa Census, 1915: Card files for Prairie and Richland Townships, Mahaska County.

29. Plat maps, 1913 for Prairie and Richland Townships. The background materials on those charged with the crimes was culled from online sources found via searches on ancestry.com.

30. *Pella Chronicle*, 13 November 1919, 1; *Booster Press*, 31 December 1919, 15 January 1920, 28 January 1920, 5 February 1920, 18 February 1920, 24 February 1920.

# Origins

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The Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary Archives contains the historical records of the Christian Reformed Church, its College, its Theological 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.