

# Ethnic Persistence and Change: The Experience of a Dutch-American Family in Rural Iowa

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IN 1877 a Dutch family emigrated from the town of Winterswijk in the province of Gelderland to Sioux County, Iowa. The household included Hendrik Beltman, 44, his second wife Janna, 34, their two children John Henry, 12, and Hendrika, 10, and Hendrik's older, unmarried brother, Hendrik Jan, 51. Hendrik began farming in northwestern Iowa amid other Dutch settlers on land that his great-grandson's family continues to work today as a family farm. In 1878 Hendrik and his family joined the Dutch Reformed church in nearby Alton, establishing membership in a vital social institution of the local ethnic community. Many of Hendrik's descendants are members of that congregation today. In 1991 that church was the site of a wedding uniting one of Hendrik's great-great-granddaughters and a young man of Dutch descent.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Family history records in the author's possession. These consist of a collection of miscellaneous documents, including wills, land records, mortgage papers, receipts, newspaper clippings, and notes regarding family recollections. See also the Manuscript Population Census for 1880, for Nassau Township, Sioux County, Iowa, 205; Robert P. Swierenga, *Dutch Immigrants in U.S. Ship Passenger Manifests, 1820-1880* (Wilmington, DE, 1982); idem, *Dutch Emigrants to the United States, South Africa, South America, and Southeast Asia, 1835-1880* (Wilmington, DE, 1982). Janna Grooters, who  
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The experience of this Dutch-American family in rural Iowa spans five generations and more than a century of time, beginning with their emigration from Europe and resettlement in the United States. At the heart of their story is the tension between cultural persistence and adaptation that has been the focus of many other studies of immigrants and the ethnic experience in the American countryside. The mechanics of land acquisition and intergenerational transfer of property show enduring family strategies designed to maintain land holdings and agrarian livelihoods; but some flexibility within the strategies—for example, use of partible or impartible methods of inheritance—affected farm size and property subdivision. Tied to these strategies were patterns of retirement that remained remarkably similar across generations, always relying on support provided by the produce of the land and the sense of family. The family farm was indeed intergenerational. The land transactions as well as important farm management decisions exhibit how the family managed capital and in the process minimized risk, thus ensuring economic survival and occupational stability.

These family strategies did not operate within a cultural vacuum, nor was the family preoccupied with capitalistic pursuits. Family members were ethnically Dutch. Their settlement patterns, community connections, church involvement, marriage practices, and language retention reflected the influence of ethnicity and the strength of ingrained values and mores. Cultural legacies, tempered by practical adjustments, provided a holistic framework for the family's farming tradition, its ethnoreligious identity, and its social interaction. The blend of old and new ways was, however, dynamic, never static. The synthesis of continuity and change shaped important decisions by this Dutch-American family regarding such diverse aspects as farm operations, improved living standards, family size, and choice of spouses.

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married Hendrik in September 1867, was the stepmother of the two children. The natural mother of the children was Hendrik's first wife, Aaltje Nyhof, whom he had married in 1863; she died from pneumonia in May 1867, twelve weeks after the birth of her daughter. Hendrik remarried in 1867.



Scholarly specialists have long recognized that concentrated ethnic settlements in rural America have shown certain cultural persistence that has influenced family structure, the pace of assimilation and acculturation, response to the dictates of the market economy, intergenerational transfer of land ownership, and a wide range of cultural values and practices. Some historians a generation ago emphasized environmentalism and its impact on rural life to explain an apparent lack of ethnic distinctiveness in the American countryside. In brief, their argument was that any singularity on the part of rural immigrants, particularly with respect to hard economic realities and fundamental agricultural practices, was submerged in the lava flow of the capital market, technological advances, commercial farming, and modernization, shaped as they were by the dictates of geography, climate, soil fertility, and individual finances and ingenuity. In contrast, a new generation of historians has focused more on local residential patterns, farm inheritance, demographic characteristics, marital choices, and church and school affiliation. They have concluded that immigrant rural folk were less passive and amalgamated than the earlier historians suggested. They have also found more continuity than discontinuity between Old World and New World peasant experiences, especially when analyzing processes rather than outcomes. These recent studies have rekindled interest in the importance of ethnicity in rural America and reminded us of its composition as a pluralistic mosaic.<sup>2</sup> The following longitudinal account of a single stem family over several generations gives flesh to these historians' generalizations. At the

2. Recent bibliographical essays include Brian Q. Cannon, "Immigrants in American Agriculture," *Agricultural History* 65 (1991), 16-35; and Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Immigrants in Nineteenth-Century Agricultural History," in Lou Ferleger, ed., *Agriculture and National Development: Views on the Nineteenth Century* (Ames, 1990), 303-42. See also Robert P. Swierenga, "Ethnicity and American Agriculture," *Ohio History* 89 (1980), 323-44. The classic statement of environmentalism was Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1931). Interpretations that find modest correlations between cultural traits and farming activities include Allan G. Bogue, *From Prairie to Cornbelt: Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1963); Terry G. Jordan, *German Seed in Texas Soil* (Austin, 1966); and James T. Lemon, *The Best Poor Man's*

same time, it provides other Iowa families with a context within which they may interpret their own histories.

BEFORE THE BELTMANS EMIGRATED, at least four generations of the family had lived in the municipalities of Lochem and Laren in Gelderland. Some family members clustered in a small area or neighborhood (*buurschap*) known locally as the "Ampsen op Beltman"; others lived across the provincial border in Overijssel, near Diepenheim. Baptism, marriage, and death records as far back as the 1720s document the family name and testify that most Beltmans were farmers (*landbouwers*) and members of the Dutch Reformed (*Hervormde*) church, the Calvinist state church of the Netherlands. Into this familial warp and woof Hendrik Beltman was born on January 28, 1833, at Borculo. In the late 1850s he lived in Neede. By the mid-1860s he and his family were members of the Winterswijk *Hervormde* church, and Hendrik was engaged in commercialized farming, specializing in the buying and selling of cattle. His brother Hendrik Jan worked as a farm laborer.<sup>3</sup>

The Beltman brothers were not landowners; they farmed as tenants on property belonging to J. W. Heesen and Johan Gerhard ten Houten, who had purchased a farm of about 50 hectares (125 acres) in 1863 for 11,000 guilders (equivalent to about \$40 per acre) at a government tax auction. This place, known locally in Winterswijk as Kolenbarg, was a compact agricultural unit, not a village farm, consisting of a house and

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Country: *A Geographical Study of Early Southeastern Pennsylvania* (Baltimore, 1972). Important revisionist monographs include Aiden D. McQuillan, *Prevailing over Time: Adjustment on the Kansas Prairies, 1875-1925* (Lincoln, NE, 1990); Robert C. Ostergren, *A Community Transplanted: The Trans-Atlantic Experience of a Swedish Immigrant Settlement in the Upper Middle West, 1835-1915* (Madison, WI, 1988); Walter D. Kamphoefner, *The Westfalians: From Germany to Missouri* (Princeton, 1987); Jon Gjerde, *From Peasants to Farmers: The Migration from Balestrand, Norway, to the Upper Middle West* (Cambridge, 1985); John G. Rice, *Patterns of Ethnicity in a Minnesota County, 1880-1905* (Umea, Sweden, 1973); and Frederick C. Luebke, ed., *Ethnicity on the Great Plains* (Lincoln, NE, 1980).

3. This and succeeding paragraphs are based on family history records, including a genealogy tracing ancestors back to 1711. D. W. Wilterdink of Winterswijk, Netherlands, provided the facts on the Kolenbarg farm and the tenancy status of the family.





*A contemporary view of the house and farm buildings of the "Kolenbarg" farm, located near Winterswijk in the province of Gelderland, the Netherlands. Hendrik Beltman and his family worked this farm as tenants from 1866 to 1877, prior to their emigration to Sioux County, Iowa. The Beltmans did not live in this house. Their house burned down a couple of years after the Beltmans emigrated, and the owners built a new house in 1882, which still stands today as shown. All of the photographs used in this article are from Beltman family records in the author's possession.*

buildings surrounded by shade trees, a nearby garden, fenced meadows, grain fields, a marshy area, and a peat-ground. Crops common to the inland sandy soil of the eastern Netherlands included winter and spring rye, barley, buckwheat, and potatoes.

The Beltmans moved from Neede to Kolenbarg in October 1866, but within a year Hendrik's first wife Aaltje died. Hendrik continued to reside on the place and soon brought his second wife Janna there. However bucolic and homey this farm was, it was not for the Beltmans to own. The family worked the Kolenbarg farm until July 4, 1877, when they sold their livestock, harvested crops, hay, equipment, and other personal possessions in preparation for their departure to America. At the time their capital resources may have amounted to the equivalent of \$1,500 or more.

The unfavorable prospects for sustaining the family's economic position in Winterswijk or doubts about the opportunities for improving that status undoubtedly led Hendrik and Janna to decide to emigrate to the United States. Perhaps the most significant factor affecting the family strategy was the parents' concern for the future of their children, John Henry and Hendrika, if they stayed in Winterswijk. As tenant farmers, the Beltmans surely held little hope of attaining land ownership in Gelderland, much less of passing landholdings on to their children. In the Netherlands generally, a chronic scarcity of land as well as accompanying sharp price increases for land during the middle decades of the nineteenth century severely limited agricultural opportunities for tenant farmers who wanted to become landowners. Even if the Beltmans entertained such aspirations, government policy limited their children's prospects, for intergenerational land transfer was strictly controlled in the Netherlands.

By law, a farm either had to be subdivided equally among children, or one of the children had to buy the interests of the others as well as pay the state for the right of redistribution (*soulte*). The first approach, a partible custom of inheritance, ensured equity and a landed base for descendants' livelihoods, but inevitably led to smaller landholdings per owner and a concomitant decline in socioeconomic status in a society where wealth and status were inextricably connected. With the second choice, an impartible method of inheritance, a unit of land of stable size survived across generations and the heir maintained the status associated with the estate, but it meant landlessness for other heirs and portended a loss of security for most family members. Most important, impartible division depended on one heir's ability to buy out the siblings and pay the *soulte*. If the heir proved unable to do so, the land was sold at public auction, except for the home residence, which remained with the family. Such displacement could reduce children, whether married or not, to the tenuous status of tenants or day laborers. This statutory arrangement intensified the incentive to migrate from country to city or overseas, and it predisposed emigrat-



MAP 1



Source: Robert P. Swierenga, "Dutch," in Stephan Thernstrom, ed., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge, MA, 1980), 284. Reprinted by permission.

ing farmers to seek areas with abundant land.<sup>4</sup> However immaterial laws pertaining to land transfer might have been to the Beltmans' daily life as farm tenants, they were part of the cultural environment for the rural family.

Furthermore, the Geldersche Achterhoek—the region near the German border in which Winterswijk lay (see map 1)—had been a source of much Dutch emigration since the

4. Peter R. Priester, "De Economische Ontwikkeling van de Landbouw in Groningen 1800–1910," *A.A.G. Bijdragen* 31 (Wageningen, 1991), 493–96; Robert P. Swierenga, ed., "The Cause of Dutch Emigration to America: An 1866 Account," *Michigan* 24 (1979), 56–61. I am indebted to Professor Swierenga for sharing the Priester source.

1830s. Of all the Dutch provinces, Gelderland ranked second in total emigrants between 1835 and 1880 (12,600) and third in the annual rate of outmigration (32 per 1,000). The Achterhoek accounted for over half of this emigration, and Winterswijk, the seat of municipal government, was a primary contributor to this population flow. Between 1840 and 1850, 20 percent of Winterswijk's population emigrated to America. The community was located on generally poor, inland sandy soil supporting small farms and cottage textile industries, and it was near northwestern German areas from which many emigrants originated during the 1830s through the 1850s. Thus, local residents such as the Beltmans were surely familiar with the experience of people who had emigrated, and they were undoubtedly exposed to various informational sources such as letters from American relatives back to kin in the Old Country as well as promotional publications in the local press by transportation officials, land agents, or spokesmen for immigration bureaus from state governments in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

The Beltmans' decision to emigrate preceded the long-term economic depression that plagued scattered farming districts of the Netherlands—including the area around Winterswijk—from 1878 to 1895. Indeed, in 1877, the year the Beltmans emigrated, the annual rate of Dutch emigration

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5. Robert P. Swierenga, "Local Patterns of Dutch Migration to the United States in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," in Rudolph J. Vecoli and Suzanne M. Sinke, eds., *A Century of European Migrations, 1830-1930* (Urbana and Chicago, 1991), 134-57, especially 153; Kamphoefner, *Westfalians*, chap. 1. The Dutch referred to American letters as "bacon letters" [*spekbrieven*] because they praised the large amounts of cheap meat available in the New World. See Jacob Van Hinte, *Netherlanders in America: A Study of Emigration and Settlement in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries in the United States of America*, ed. Robert P. Swierenga (Grand Rapids, MI, 1985), 7, 156. For a sample of early promotional literature specific to a Dutch settlement in Marion County, Iowa, see Robert P. Swierenga, ed., "A Place of Refuge," *Annals of Iowa* 39 (1968), 321-57. At least two Beltman families emigrated from Overijssel in the late 1840s, one settling in Overisel, Michigan, the other relocating to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Two other Beltman couples moved to Allegan County, Michigan, in 1860 and 1870. Thus, by 1870, several members of the extended Beltman family had emigrated to other Dutch enclaves in the United States. See Robert P. Swierenga, *Dutch Households in U.S. Population Censuses 1850, 1860, 1870*, 3 vols. (Wilmington, DE, 1987), 1:50.



was at its low point for the late nineteenth century. Out of a total national population of 3,925,000, the Beltmans were counted among the mere 603 citizens who chose to emigrate that year. By 1881, the annual rate of outmigration would swell from that low point of 15 per 100,000 to 181 per 100,000.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the precise cause—the exact interaction of push and pull influences that tipped the scales in favor of leaving kith and kin, familiar landscapes, and community ties—the Beltmans chose the bold course of relocation across the ocean and an anticipated better life in a new place. Residential relocation had been a familiar strategy for this Dutch family in its search for economic survival and improvement; now the move became transoceanic rather than merely internal. The social and economic mobility that this particular intercontinental geographic migration ultimately produced—a transition from the status of tenants to that of wealthy landowners and landlords within a few years—surely exceeded the emigrants' most optimistic expectations.

Placing emigrants within a demographic framework also helps to explain the migration process. Family backgrounds, for example, could affect destination and livelihood choices. The Beltman family's social structure resembled that of many other Dutch emigrants of the late nineteenth century. The typical Dutch emigrant, according to one historian, had rural origins, was occupationally associated with farming, and held a middling economic status. The average size of an emigrant family was 4.3 persons; the average age of the father was 36, the mother 33.5, and the children 8.3.<sup>7</sup> Although Hendrik was ten years older than the average, and the children were

6. Robert P. Swierenga, "Dutch Immigration Patterns in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in Robert P. Swierenga, ed., *The Dutch in America: Immigration, Settlement, and Cultural Change* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1985), 15–42, especially table 1.6 on 29 and 36–38; idem, "Exodus Netherlands, Promised Land America: Dutch Immigration and Settlement in the United States," in J. W. Schulte Nordholt and Robert P. Swierenga, eds., *A Bilateral Bicentennial: A History of Dutch-American Relations, 1782–1982* (Amsterdam and New York, 1982), 127–47, especially table 1 on 129.

7. Robert P. Swierenga, "Dutch Immigrant Demography, 1820–1880," *Journal of Family History* 5 (1980), 390–405; idem, "Dutch International Labor Migration to North America in the Nineteenth Century," in Mark Boekelman and Herman Gansevoort, eds., *Dutch Immigration to North*

likewise slightly older than usual, in most other respects the Beltmans were characteristic of the great folk movement of which the family was a part. For such emigrants, seeking good land for a family farm was a logical step toward achieving economic security.

THE BELTMAN FAMILY of five left the Netherlands in the summer, departing from Rotterdam, the most usual port of embarkation for emigrants. They took passage on the ship *W. A. Scholten* of the Netherlands-American Steamship Company and arrived at New York City on July 24, 1877, after a voyage that seldom exceeded twelve days. Dutch emigration records officially designated Hendrik Beltman "not well to do," and the family chose third-class steerage accommodations costing about \$15 per adult.<sup>8</sup> Yet Hendrik was clearly not an impoverished immigrant. During his first year of settlement he was able to make substantial purchases of land, livestock, and equipment. Clearly, the family was not emigrating out of desperation driven by poverty; rather, they were moving as part of a rational and practical adjustment to improve their condition in life and to secure a better future. In the 1870s the best prospects for that appeared to be the booming prairie regions of the American Midwest where other Dutch folk had already established settlements offering the promise of a good livelihood among people of similar ethnicity and values. There they could transplant roots and nourish family life within a relatively secure framework that retained "Dutchness" while holding out the prospect of economic viability. The Beltmans were exercising risk circumscribed by caution and a conservative cultural perspective.

From New York the Beltmans rode by train to Chicago on one of the main trunk lines and then to Le Mars, Iowa, on

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*America* (Toronto, 1982), 1-34. For a concise summary, see idem, "Exodus Netherlands," 137.

8. Swierenga, *Dutch Immigrants in U.S. Ship Passenger Manifests*; idem, *Dutch Emigrants to the United States*; Van Hinte, *Netherlanders*, 602-3; Henry S. Lucas, *Netherlanders in America: Dutch Immigration to the United States and Canada, 1789-1950* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1955), 476; Philip Taylor, *The Distant Magnet: European Emigration to the U.S.A.* (New York, 1971), 151.

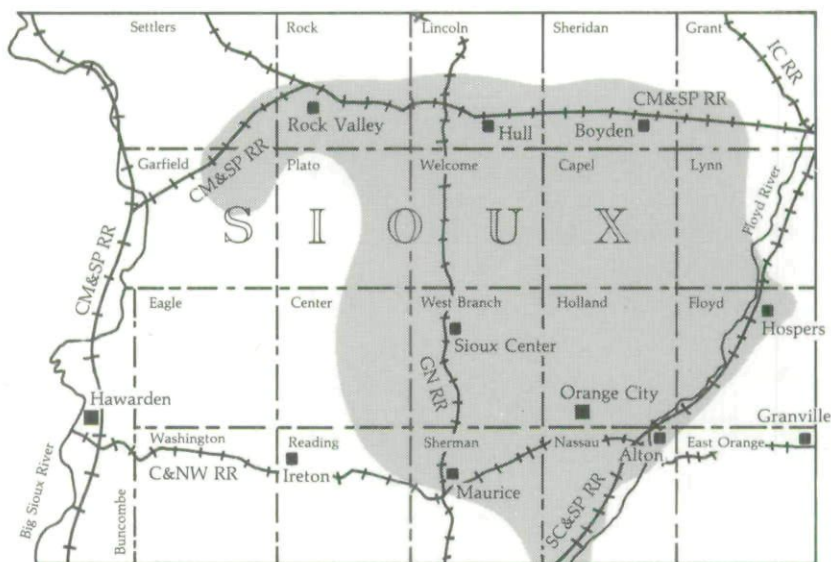


the Illinois Central Railroad. Traveling second class, the fare for the five immigrants for the entire distance came to about \$110. The travel time from New York to Le Mars, a distance of approximately 1,300 miles, was slightly over two days. From Le Mars they could have ridden by wagon or they could have taken the St. Paul and Sioux City Railroad the last fifteen miles to their ultimate destination of East Orange (later Alton), Iowa, in the northwestern corner of the state in Sioux County. There a Dutch community had been rapidly developing since 1869 with initial settlement in Holland and Nassau townships and the townsite of Orange City. This ethnic enclave was a "daughter colony" of the Dutch concentration centered at Pella, Iowa. With good rail service providing essential market connections after 1872, the colony flourished. In 1880 Sioux County's population was 5,426, of which 1,196 were Netherlands-born; perhaps as many as 2,500 or more were of Dutch descent (see map 2).<sup>9</sup>

Proximity to other Dutch immigrants and the availability of land in a pioneering area presumably influenced the family's decision to reside in the Orange City settlement, but how did the Beltmans become aware of this ethnic colony? They may have learned about it through the immigrant recruiting efforts of Henry Hospers, the Dutch-American mayor of Pella from 1867 to 1871 who also served on the Iowa State Board of Immigration. In 1870 the board commissioned Hospers to

9. On railroad fares and travel time, see Taylor, *Distant Magnet*, 96, 166; Chicago, *Burlington & Quincy Railroad Papers*, miscellaneous circular no. 82, Newberry Library Archives, Chicago; *Appleton's Timetables for 1883*, Newberry Library Archives. Dr. Richard Bremer of Chicago provided me with the information from the last two sources. See also William Silag, "The Conquest of the Hinterland: Railroads and Capitalists in Northwest Iowa after the Civil War," *Annals of Iowa* 50 (1990), 475-506. On the Dutch in northwest Iowa, see generally Charles L. Dyke, *The Story of Sioux County* (Orange City, Iowa, 1942); G. Nelson Nieuwenhuis, *Siouxland: A History of Sioux County* (Orange City, Iowa, 1983); Van Hinte, *Netherlanders*, 463-521; Lucas, *Netherlanders*, 339-51; Jacob Van der Zee, *The Hollanders of Iowa* (Iowa City, 1912), 127-35, 140-49, 179-87; Herbert J. Brinks, *Write Back Soon: Letters from Immigrants in America* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1986), 84-89; Gerald F. De Jong, "Four Generations of a Dutch American Community," in Boekelman and Gansevoort, eds., *Dutch Immigration*, 221-37; idem, *The Dutch in America, 1609-1974* (Boston, 1975), 152-53.

MAP 2  
SIOUX COUNTY



*Shaded portion shows general area  
of Dutch settlement in about 1905.*

Great Northern RR  
Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul RR  
Illinois Central RR  
Chicago & Northwestern RR

go to the Netherlands to promote immigration to Iowa. By then Hoppers was also the lead colonizer of the Sioux County Dutch settlement, with personal real estate interests tied to its development. From November 1870 to January 1871 Hoppers operated out of an office in Hoog Blokland, near Gorinchem; he traveled and lectured widely throughout the Netherlands, advertised about Iowa in newspapers, and distributed one thousand copies of an eight-page pamphlet titled "Iowa—Should I Emigrate to America" and five thousand copies of a brochure titled "Iowa—The Land for Emigrants."<sup>10</sup>

10. Hoppers lectured in Gorinchem, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Utrecht, Heerenveen, Gerenden, 's-Hertogenbosch, Dordrecht, Klundert, Axel, Leeuwarden, Dronrijp, and other places. He published information in *De Heraut*, *Het Nieuws van den Dag*, *De Provinciale Friesche Courant*, *De*



If the Beltmans absorbed some of the information Hospers was spreading, they may have remained skeptical about professional immigration recruitment. Clearly, the timing was not right for them in 1870-71: the children were still very young, finances may have been inadequate, or other factors may have deterred emigration. By mid-decade, however, a more intimate influence figured into the strategy: family relatives served as a source of information and provided the personal ingredient that evoked trust and conviction. Janna's brother, Berend Jan Grooters, had emigrated at age 18 in 1866 from Eibergen, Gelderland, to Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he worked in the furniture factories. In 1873 Berend and his wife Jennie, both 24, moved to Sioux County and began farming. Thus, in 1877 the Beltmans were relocating near relatives. Few family ties held them to their Dutch homeland, for both Hendrik and Janna's parents were deceased by that time. The Beltmans were, in effect, part of a migration chain.<sup>11</sup>

Presumably correspondence flowed between the kinfolk, and the "American letters" from Berend undoubtedly entered into the Beltmans' decision about when to emigrate, how to travel, and where to go. Berend may have informed his relatives that by 1877 the economic depression that had gripped the United States for four years was lifting. He may have told them about the plagues of grasshoppers that devastated the wheat and oats crops of Sioux County farmers during the mid-1870s. That consideration could have been offset by comparing land prices in northwest Iowa to those in Gelderland and noting the obvious opportunity for land ownership awaiting immigrants. At any rate, correspondence surely dictated the involvement of Hendrik's brother-in-law

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*Wekstem, De Bazuin, De Heusdensche, De Haarlemmer, and De Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant.* Van Hinte, *Netherlanders*, 588-89; Van der Zee, *Hollanders*, 120-21, 151-54.

11. Family history records; Grooters family genealogical record, dated 4 November 1941, in author's possession. On chain migration, see Wilbur Zelinsky, *The Cultural Geography of the United States* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1973), 26-33; Ostergren, *A Community Transplanted*, 181-85; Kamphoefner, *Westfalians*, 70-105; Gjerde, *From Peasants to Farmers*, 137-67.

in the critical matter of land purchase for the Beltmans, for Berend made the financial arrangements for buying a tract before they arrived. On February 17, 1877, Elisha Van der Mast, a land speculator who had paid a fee of four dollars for a homestead patent only the day before, issued a warranty deed to Hendrik Beltman for eighty acres of land two miles south of Orange City in Nassau Township; Hendrik, via Berend, made a cash payment of \$500, or \$6.25 per acre, for this parcel.<sup>12</sup>

THERE THE FAMILY SETTLED and established their first home and farm enterprise. The residence that Hendrik built as soon as possible the first year was a simple, clapboard-sided house of four rooms, undoubtedly reflecting the practical concerns of necessity and survival. The land upon which the family settled was not entirely virgin prairie; some of it had standing grain waiting to be harvested when the immigrants arrived. Berend Grooters had probably sowed the grain seed in the spring. In a letter written on April 18, 1878, to W. Grooters, his cousin by marriage who was living in Winterswijk, Hendrik observed, "The land that our brother bought for us pleases us well. There were good crops on the land which were worth as much as what the land cost us. We were very busy because the crop was ready to be harvested when we got here. When that was done, we had to build our house. We built a fine home." Hendrik provided other revealing information in that letter.

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12. For an example of an "American letter" and its role in international migration, see Robert P. Swierenga, ed., "News from the Dutch Colony of Pella in North America, June 1854," *Annals of Iowa* 48 (1986), 155-58. For the land purchase, see family history records and Deed Book H, 388, Sioux County Courthouse, Orange City, Iowa. The infestation of grasshoppers in Sioux County lasted from 1873 to 1879. See Van Hinte, *Netherlands*, 490-91; Van der Zee, *Hollanders*, 160-77; Nieuwenhuis, *Siouxland*, 79; "Joe Rexwinkel's Nassau Township, Sioux County," in Henry S. Lucas, ed., *Dutch Immigrant Memoirs and Related Writings*, 2 vols. (Assen, Netherlands, 1955), 2:250-54. The latter is a reprint of an article that appeared in the *Standard Historical Atlas of Sioux County Iowa* (Chicago, 1908). Joe Rexwinkel was the father-in-law of Alice Beltman, a daughter of John Henry Beltman and granddaughter of Hendrik Beltman. The Rexwinkel family moved to Nassau Township in the fall of 1873 from Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin, settling about a mile from the Beltman property.



We have 40 laying hens and two turkeys which is the extent of our livestock. We have bought only enough furniture to get along with except that my wife has a new cabinet for clothes.

We have had a very mild winter and an early spring which pleased us well. We have been busy planting trees. We staked out a grove where we planted 2000 trees. Most of them are about 10 feet tall and 150 fruit trees which are as thick as my arm. We have planted grape vines, plums, pears, and so forth.

In March we sowed all our barley, wheat, and oats. Everything—sowing and reaping, is done here with machinery. They have machines that cut the grain and bind it into shocks. These cost \$300. We rented an old one for one year for which we paid \$12. We can also cut grass with it.

We are well pleased with being here, and we have bought another farm with it which is 80 acres and has a house and barn on it. It cost \$800. We have rented it out for one-third of everything that is produced there. We have rented it out for a year to people from Gelderland. We have another 80 acres added to ours which we will farm ourselves. We paid \$700 for this 80, and it lies right next to ours but does not have buildings on it.

We have three work horses, two are 6 years old, black, and one is 5 years old who is brown, and I paid \$100 for each of them. I also bought a wagon from S. G. for \$80, and two cows and paid \$26 for the one and \$27 for the other one. We still have three hogs, and we have already butchered three hogs. The fattened hogs are not very expensive—they cost 4 cents a pound. Butter costs 10 cents a pound and eggs cost 10 cents for 12 eggs. Wheat costs 92 cents per bushel which is 56 pounds by Dutch weight and American money. We still have about \$200 worth of wheat that we can sell.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to revealing the considerable financial resources he was able to draw on, Hendrik's comments indicated that he immediately adopted a technological innovation foreign to his customary way of farming in the Netherlands.

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13. Translated copy of Hendrik Beltman's letter of 1878 in the author's possession; original in the Archives at Heritage Hall, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

He saw the utility of the mechanical reaper employed by American farmers since before the Civil War, and he lost no time learning how to operate it. On the other hand, he initially continued to sow small grains with which he was familiar—cereals similar to those raised in the inland sandy soil region of the eastern Netherlands from which he had emigrated. By 1879, however, with 110 acres of a quarter-section under improvement, he showed a willingness to experiment with corn and flax. Corn was alien to Dutch farmers, but they were very familiar with flax. When immigrants noted that ravaging grasshoppers ignored flax, this fiber enjoyed brief popularity among innovative farmers seeking a locust-proof crop. In 1879 Hendrik planted sixty-two acres in wheat, twenty in corn, twelve in barley, ten in oats, five in flax, and one acre was a potato patch. By then, too, he had thirty swine. He was beginning to combine corn production with hog raising to achieve the conventional corn-hog mixed farming pattern of the Corn Belt. His brother-in-law, perhaps a bit more acculturated, had gone even further: on his sixty-five acres of improved land, Berend had thirty-five acres of corn, nineteen of wheat, five of barley, five of oats, and one of potatoes. He owned fifty-nine hogs.<sup>14</sup> Between 1880 and 1885 Sioux County farmers generally shifted from wheat to corn as a preferred crop (see table 1 for comparative acreages per farm).

Furthermore, Hendrik's letter revealed that he quickly set about altering the treeless landscape of Sioux County's rich, rolling prairie to provide sheltering groves, but also, perhaps, to make the oft-described "sea of grass" conform more closely to the countryside he had left in Gelderland with its timbered farmsteads and tree-lined meadows, fields, and ancient road-

14. Manuscript Agricultural Census for 1880, for Nassau Township, Sioux County, Iowa. The census also listed a value of \$2,000 for Hendrik's farmland and buildings, \$150 for machinery, and \$450 for livestock. Besides pigs, Hendrik owned three horses, four milk cows, four other cattle, and seventy chickens. He had 45 acres of unimproved grassland, including 8 acres of hay for mowing. In 1879 the value of his total farm produce was \$135. In comparison, Berend Grooters reported a farm produce value of \$265, despite working about half as many acres as Hendrik. Apparently the greater corn-hog production mix he practiced paid off.



ways. The fruit trees and vineyard served practical needs, but also reflected an Old World cultural idea of self-sufficiency that may not have been environmentally well suited to north-west Iowa.<sup>15</sup>

Hendrik was not engaged exclusively in subsistence farming, however; he was also keenly aware of the commercial imperatives of agriculture. Even as a former tenant farmer in Gelderland, he had been involved in commercial farming, and he recognized the need to make farming pay in order to survive and prosper. In this respect, no adjustment to an American approach to farming was necessary. After itemizing several critical expenditures required to carry out farm operations, Hendrik ended his letter with the reassuring observation that he still had a surplus of wheat on hand that he could sell for a profit.

Hendrik's letter illustrates how an immigrant farmer simultaneously adapted to new ways while retaining culturally familiar patterns of behavior. In the process he blended self-sufficiency and commercialized agriculture in his farming practices. For him husbandry would continue to reflect the duality that was so characteristic of an agrarian livelihood: it was both a way of life and a business enterprise; a complex economic pursuit committed to the profit motive, but also a unique vehicle for preserving a family and social organization that was more traditionally value-oriented than obsessively capitalistic.<sup>16</sup>

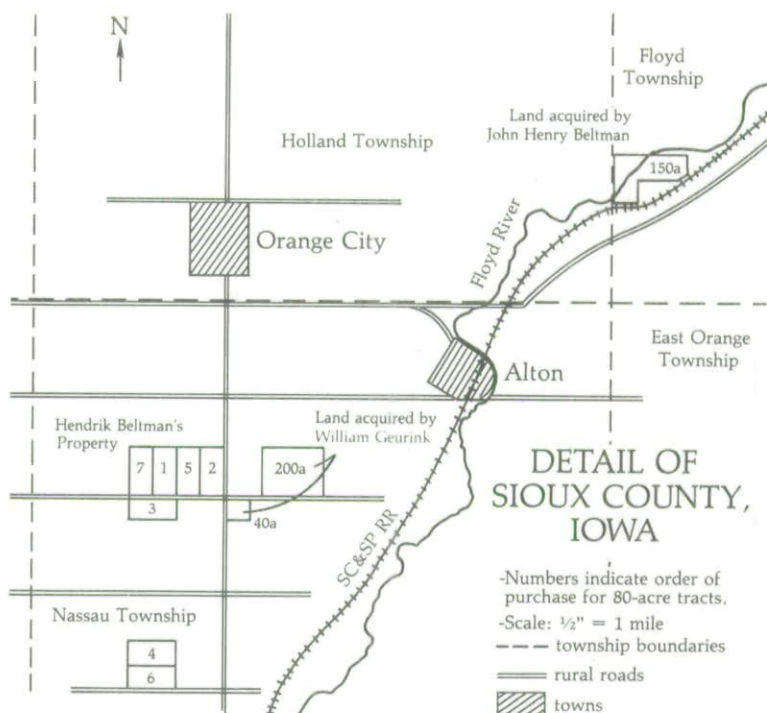
Hendrik accepted the framework of land survey, sales, and management within which Americans operated, and he

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15. Another practical motivation drove Iowa farmers to plant trees: in 1868 the Iowa legislature gave taxpayers an annual deduction of \$100 for ten years from the assessed value of real and personal property for every acre of trees planted, up to five acres, provided the trees were less than eight feet apart and growing healthily. Likewise, each acre of fruit trees planted less than thirty feet apart earned an annual tax deduction of \$50 for five years. See Van der Zee, *Hollanders*, 181.

16. Literature on the dual nature of farming is extensive, but see, for example, Jeremy Atack and Fred Bateman, *To Their Own Soil: Agriculture in the Antebellum North* (Ames, 1987), 12, 272-73; John L. Shover, *First Majority-Last Minority: The Transforming of Rural Life in America* (DeKalb, IL, 1976), chap. 1; Wayne C. Rohrer and Louis H. Douglas, *The Agrarian Transition in America: Dualism and Change* (Indianapolis, 1969).

MAP 3



exercised his financial capacity to acquire property and carry on farming within that given structure. In his letter of 1878 Hendrik indicated that he had already purchased a second and third parcel of land of eighty acres each (see map 3). He immediately turned the second tract, which had farm buildings already on it, into a tenant farm. Thus, within his first year as an immigrant farmer, he had become both an owner-operator and a landlord.

These transactions were more involved than the correspondence suggested, however. Hendrik personally acquired the second eighty from the Dutch settlement's principal colonizer, Henry Hospers. A speculator had alienated the land from the General Land Office in September 1876. Within a month Hospers had acquired the mortgaged property. Hendrik paid Hospers \$762.50, or about \$9.50 per acre, for the parcel, assuming the remaining mortgage on the property



of \$400 at 5 percent for four years. He made a cash payment of about \$350 and received the warranty deed for the land on January 26, 1878. By 1879 Hendrik was working the land himself, and on November 7, 1881, he paid the obligation and cleared the lien against the farm. Approximately one-fifth of this eighty consisted of poorly drained slough. Although it was unsuited for tillage, it did produce the grandest of prairie vegetation: slough grass five to six feet tall which, when cut and cured, became premium quality hay for horses. On February 27, 1892, Hendrik found it necessary to mortgage this property to cover a loan of \$1,800 at 6 percent from the Mutual Benefit Life Insurance Company. On March 29, 1900, he paid off that debt.<sup>17</sup>

The third piece of land Hendrik mentioned in his letter (tract 5 on map 3) belonged to Berend Jan Grooters, who acquired rights to it by paying a four-dollar fee for a homestead patent on August 28, 1877. Although in his correspondence Hendrik spoke of personally farming this tract, this may have been in the form of work exchange with his brother-in-law, for he did not achieve title to the land until October 10, 1888. Berend was the true owner for ten years, during which time he encumbered the land with mortgages that he refinanced four times. By 1888 a lien of \$1,050 at 7 percent rested on the property. This Hendrik assumed as part of a consideration of \$2,900 which he paid to his brother-in-law. By so doing Hendrik may well have spared Berend the trauma of foreclosure and a serious financial setback. On November 1, 1892, Hendrik extinguished the assumed mortgage.<sup>18</sup>

17. Deed Book I, 129; Mortgage Books B, 583; 34, p. 578; and 54, p. 464, Sioux County Courthouse. For an introduction to farmland mortgages, see Allan G. Bogue, "Land Credit for Northern Farmers, 1789-1940," *Agricultural History* 50 (1976), 68-100, especially 85-92. The 1892 debt of \$1,800 was due in 1897, but Hendrik had to extend the terms for three more years. Mortgage Book 46, p. 481, Sioux County Courthouse.

18. Deed Books H, 563, and W, 570; Mortgage Book V, 136, Sioux County Courthouse; family history records; Henry Beltman, *90 Years with Uncle Henry* (Garden Grove, CA, 1984), 1-5. The original homestead certificate is in the author's possession. The price of this land came to about \$36 per acre.

Even before Hendrik had ownership of his brother-in-law's former property, he sought other acquisitions in the booming Sioux County land market of the 1880s. On October 30, 1882, he bought eighty acres of land lying across the road southward from his home place. The tract, owned by the Iowa Falls & Sioux City Railroad Company, had been included in the state land grants of 1856 to help finance railroad construction costs. Hendrik paid the railroad \$616 cash, or about \$7.50 per acre, for this parcel. On January 13, 1890, when he needed capital to finance family expenses, he mortgaged this land for \$1,300 with the Aetna Life Insurance Company. He repaid that loan on January 11, 1896.<sup>19</sup>

On March 28, 1885, Hendrik bought another eighty acres, located two miles south of his farm and previously owned by Gerrit Jan and Grada Leusink. This land was encumbered with a mortgage of \$300, which Hendrik assumed as part of the purchase price of \$2,000, or \$25 per acre. He paid off the debt within three months. Four-and-a-

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19. Deed Book O, 456; Mortgage Books 29, p. 470; 44, p. 149, Sioux County Courthouse; family history records. In 1856 Congress gave Iowa a land grant of four million acres to subsidize railroad construction. Four railroads, one of which was the Dubuque and Pacific, received state land grants. The Iowa Falls and Sioux City was the western Iowa segment of the Dubuque and Pacific. Each of the four railroads obtained a donation of land of all odd-numbered sections for six miles on both sides of the railroad right-of-way when track was actually laid and accepted by the state. If prior disposal of land by the federal government precluded filling this quota within the six-mile limit, the companies could select alternate sections up to sixteen miles from the track. In July 1870 rail service was completed between Sioux City and Iowa Falls, via Fort Dodge, Cherokee, and Le Mars. The railroad land Hendrik Beltman bought lay ten miles north of the track line into Le Mars. The Illinois Central acquired control of this railroad and its land assets. See Richard C. Overton, *Burlington West: A Colonization History of the Burlington Railroad* (Cambridge, 1941), 81-83; *Census of Iowa for 1905*, xiv; Silag, "Conquest of the Hinterland," 476-78, 488-93. In 1864 Congress assigned the St. Paul and Sioux City Railroad a land grant of all the odd-numbered sections for ten miles on both sides of the railroad right-of-way. Within the bounds of that donation settlers were limited to homesteads of 80 acres, instead of the normal maximum of 160 acres. Outright purchases of land were not, however, under such restriction, but this provision may have predisposed the land market to deal in parcels of 80 acres in size. See Van Hinte, *Netherlanders*, 473; Van der Zee, *Hollanders*, 134-35; John Bell Rae, *The Development of Railway Land Subsidy Policy in the United States* (New York, 1979 [reprint of a 1936 dissertation]), 76-80.



half years later, on November 7, 1889, Hendrik acquired an adjacent eighty from Martin Winter for \$2,240, or \$28 per acre. This transaction was subject to a mortgage of \$700 at 7 percent, which Hendrik assumed and paid off on June 6, 1892.<sup>20</sup> Thus, by the end of the decade and just thirteen years after he arrived in America, Hendrik owned 480 acres of land almost debt-free. Only two eighties had liens against them. Frugality, hard work, and a decade of favorable climatic and financial conditions enabled the immigrant to achieve prosperity in the Dutch settlement in Iowa.

THE YEAR 1890 brought major adjustments for the Beltman family. The marriage of both of Hendrik and Janna's children forced the family to consider the future succession of farm operations and land ownership. At the same time, they had to meet immediate financial demands and provide for new households.

Hendrik and Janna's 24-year-old son John Henry married 19-year-old Jacomina Van Amerongen on March 6, 1890. The young couple began their 41-year-marriage farming the eighty acres immediately adjacent to where the elder Beltmans lived, land earlier homesteaded by the Grooters. Before the wedding, the Beltmans built a four-room, story-and-a-half house on the site. Over the course of the next thirteen years, Jacomina gave birth to eight children; in 1908 a ninth child was born, a girl who lived only nine days before succumbing to jaundice.<sup>21</sup>

The daughter Hendrika also celebrated her wedding on March 6, 1890. She married William Geurink when she was 23 and he 24. Ultimately they had a family of seven children; two children died in infancy. This couple took up initial residence in the house and on the land a half-mile east of the Beltman home place, which had served as rental prop-

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20. Deed Books T, 407, and X, 569; Mortgage Book U, 419, Sioux County Courthouse; family history records.

21. Family history records. The Van Amerongen family emigrated in October 1887 from their home in Twello near Apeldoorn, Gelderland, to Orange City, when Jacomina was 17.

erty for a year or two, and they remained there until 1898.<sup>22</sup> Although future ownership of this tract of land was not guaranteed, it was undoubtedly implied. Thanks to the generosity of her parents, Hendrika thus brought a substantial dowry to her marriage in the form of immediate occupational opportunity as well as a place to live. That dowry gave the couple an initial advantage in establishing a new household.

Indeed, through land distribution complete with dwellings Hendrik and Janna delivered to the best of their ability and in an equitable manner the prospect of a secure future to both of their children. They accomplished this in a timely, premortem manner that reflected their managerial ability, the limited size of their nuclear family, and the financial success of pioneer farming in fertile Sioux County. In establishing the children they had incurred costs, however, for on January 13, 1890, Hendrik and Janna mortgaged their home place and the eighty acres they had acquired from the railroad for \$1,300 each to the Aetna Life Insurance Company. They paid off this total debt of \$2,600 on January 11, 1896.<sup>23</sup>

In 1898, twenty-one years after their emigration from the Netherlands, Hendrik, 65, and Janna, 55, moved once more, this time to the village of Alton about three miles from their farm, where their church was located. When they left their home place, the Geurinks moved onto it. The Geurinks lived there until 1920, when they relocated to Orange City. The eighty acres where the Geurinks had begun farming was consolidated with the operations of John Henry and Jacomina in 1898 to form a parcel consisting of a quarter-section of land (tracts 2 and 5 on map 3). The Geurinks in turn managed a quarter in the same section, because they operated the Beltman home place eighty and the eighty lying immediately westward (tracts 1 and 7 on map 3). The latter property was Hendrik's last purchase of farmland. In 1892, at age 59, he bought it from his neighbor Arent Van Wechel, who had two

22. Family history records. The Geurink family emigrated from Zarsezeld in Gelderland and arrived in Alton on August 6, 1881, when William was 15.

23. Family history records; Mortgage Books 29, p. 470; 44, p. 149, Sioux County Courthouse.



liens against the property dating from 1888 and totaling \$3,080. Hendrik acquired the parcel for \$3,000, or \$37.50 per acre, and assumed the existing mortgages. By 1900 this land was debt free.<sup>24</sup>

The immigrant's age may have deterred him from further farmland purchases, but the severe economic depression crippling the nation between 1893 and 1897 may have been another factor. On the other hand, Hendrik appeared relatively impervious to the financial stress, for he entered those years of crisis with a debt burden of about \$3,500; he extinguished some of that in 1896 and the remainder by 1900. Clearly, the depression of the mid-1890s was not ruinous for the Sioux County farmer, and his management of capital and investment in land proved prudent. At any rate, Hendrik also owned the eighty acres across the road from his home place to the south (tract 3 on map 3); in 1898 he divided its operation and management equally between his two children. Thus, at Hendrik and Janna's retirement, when John Henry and Hendrika's husband were each 33 years old, each second-generation family took over management of 200-acre farms. All of the property, however, remained under the ownership of Hendrik Beltman. Part of the produce of these combined farming operations, as well as returns from renting out the 160-acre farm two miles to the south (tracts 4 and 6 on map 3), supported Hendrik and Janna's retirement in Alton.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, Hendrik and Janna Beltman came to own a total of 560 acres of land, truly a sizable domain for Dutch immigrants who were formerly tenants owning no land at all and who came from a homeland where the typical landholdings of farmers seldom exceeded twenty-five acres. Indeed, their property holdings in Sioux County were greater than the norm for Nassau Township. By 1900 the Beltmans were the second-largest landowners in the thirty-six-section area; the average amount of land owned by farmers in the township

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24. Family history records; Deed Book 29, p. 562, Sioux County Courthouse. In 1897 Hendrik, then 64 years old, extended the terms of the mortgage on the 1892 piece of land and added a lien of \$900. Abstract of Title, Sioux County Courthouse.

25. Family history records.

was 168 acres. Moreover, on July 6, 1898, the couple bought three adjacent lots in the village of Alton at a total cost of \$150; on one of those lots they built a house.<sup>26</sup>

Once in possession of this aggregate property, the Beltmans practiced the European custom of partible inheritance in which the landholdings of the older generation were allocated equally to the children during the parents' lifetime. In turn, when the parents retired, their support was ensured through assistance from children who were not yet legal owners of land but for whom that was virtually a pledge. In the process the stem family remained intact, allegiance to the community endured, and persistence of ethnic identity and cultural values received support. The "perennial family" survived from the first to the second generation in the New World environment. Whatever adjustments the Beltmans made regarding new farming practices or the mechanics of land acquisition, its financing, and its transfer were functions of the larger family strategy to achieve economic security and preserve cherished familial values.<sup>27</sup>

26. Abstract of Title for Alton lots; Deed Book P, 320, Sioux County Courthouse. For average Dutch landholding, see Hille de Vries, "The Labor Market in Dutch Agriculture and Emigration to the United States," in Swierenga, ed., *The Dutch in America*, 78-101, especially table 4.4 on 94. The table shows that for Gelderland in 1888, 22,325 land users occupied land units of 1-10 hectares (hectare = 2.46 acres), 4,351 were on 10-20 hectares, and 2,312 had over 20 hectares. Comparable national figures were 108,677 for 1-10 hectares, 30,004 for 10-20, and 26,197 for over 20. For farm ownership in Nassau Township, see *Standard Historical Atlas*, map of Nassau Township, p. 19. The largest landowner was A. J. Pennings with 720 acres; J. H. Brinks, the third-largest landowner, held 480 acres. With one exception, all landowners in the township were Dutch or German. The average landholding for the eighty-one Dutch landowners was 160 acres; for the fifty-one Germans, 178 acres. The mode for the township was 160 acres. Compare Van Hinte, *Netherlanders*, 505, whose estimate of 240 acres as the average amount of land owned by farmers in Sioux County in the 1890s is too high.

27. For more studies on the conclusions suggested in this paragraph see Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Peasant Pioneers: Generational Succession Among German Farmers in Frontier Minnesota," in Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude, eds., *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Formation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1985), 259-92; Robert C. Ostergren, "Land and Family in Rural Immigrant Communities," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 71 (1981), 400-411; Mark Friedberger, "The Farm Family and the Inheritance Process: Evidence



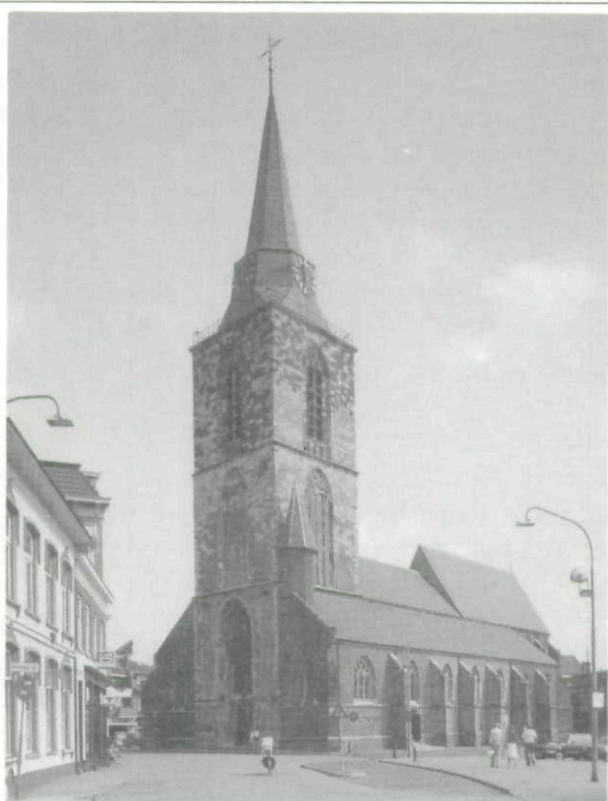
ATTAINMENT OF THESE GOALS was critically abetted by the Beltmans' residence within a culturally homogeneous community that manifested a unified ethnoreligious orientation. For example, all but one of Hendrik's land transactions involved another party of Dutch origins. This underscores the existence of a territorially defined ethnic settlement in which familiar customs were practiced, the Dutch language was spoken, and other Dutch folk were present with whom to do business and exchange work. By the 1890s this settlement encompassed eight towns and all or parts of sixteen townships in Sioux County (see map 2).<sup>28</sup>

The Beltman family was part of the local trading zones of the towns of Orange City and Alton, but perhaps more importantly, the Beltmans were anchored to the ethnic enclave through their church association, which provided group identity and organizational affiliation, established a core of friends and neighbors with shared beliefs and perceptions, and preserved and shaped values and ideals. Just as acquiring land was necessary for family farming, so the church was essential to their lives. It was the axis of a communal support matrix, maintaining cultural ways while helping the immigrants adjust to life in a new environment. Near the end of his letter of 1878 when asking his cousin about a clergyman, Hendrik commented wistfully, "Here we have no service," in apparent contrast to the situation he had known

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from the Corn Belt, 1870-1950," *Agricultural History* 57 (1983), 1-13; idem, "Handing Down the Home Place: Farm Inheritance Strategies in Iowa, 1870-1945," *Annals of Iowa* 47 (1984), 518-36; Sonya Salamon, "Ethnic Differences in Farm Family Land Transfer," *Rural Sociology* 45 (1980), 290-308; idem, "Ethnic Communities and the Structure of Agriculture," *Rural Sociology* 50 (1985), 323-40; John G. Rice, "The Role of Culture and Community in Frontier Prairie Farming," *Journal of Historical Geography* 3 (1977), 155-76; Jette Mackintosh, "Ethnic Patterns in Danish Immigrant Agriculture: A Study of Audubon and Shelby Counties, Iowa," *Agricultural History* 64 (1990), 59-77; and Allan G. Bogue, "The Ethnic Farmer in the Middle West," and Robert C. Ostergren, "Environment, Culture and Community: Research Issues and Method in the Study of Scandinavian Settlement in the Middle West," in Steffen Elmer Jorgensen, Lars Scheving, and Niels Peter Stilling, eds., *From Scandinavia to America* (Gylling, Sweden, 1987), 134-75 and 176-98.

28. Van der Zee, *Hollanders*, 179-89, 201-3; *Standard Historical Atlas of Sioux County*.



*The Dutch Reformed (Hervormde) Church of Winterswijk as it appears today. Here the Beltman family worshiped and held membership prior to their emigration. In Alton, Iowa, they joined the local Reformed church in 1878. Family members of the fifth generation continue to belong to this American counterpart to the church in the Netherlands.*

in Winterswijk, where the Beltmans had been members of the *Hervormde* church. His concern was soon assuaged.

In 1877, the same year the Beltmans arrived in Sioux County, twenty-seven families from town and countryside joined to form the East Orange (later Alton) Reformed Church, a Dutch Calvinist congregation aligned with the Reformed Church of America. The congregation used the Dutch language during Sunday morning and afternoon services and Wednesday evening mid-week services for several



decades, although as early as 1878 Sunday School classes for children were available in English. Not until the years after World War I, an era marked by intense assimilationist pressures, did church members concede by gradual stages to the use of English in services. In December 1937 the pastor preached the last sermon in Dutch.<sup>29</sup>

Hendrik Beltman and his family became members of this congregation on August 31, 1878. They helped build the first church sanctuary, which parishioners dedicated with an appropriate ceremony on June 12, 1881, and Hendrik served in the church as deacon and elder.<sup>30</sup> This church would be an essential part of the lives of the Beltman family into the fifth generation, providing an important cultural continuum that preserved ethnic identity and values. The Dutch Calvinist tradition upheld such ideals as order, discipline, perseverance, sacrifice, and prudence; and parishioners respected honest and diligent labor that fulfilled the admonition to "sow fields and plant vineyards and reap a fruitful harvest" (Ps. 107:37). However intangibly, these values translated into careful stewardship of the land and good husbandry, qualities that sustained the integrity of property ownership and bolstered the importance of maintaining the family farm.

HENDRIK BELTMAN left no personal account of his farming practices over the years to allow us to track concretely his changing agricultural activities and relate them to ethnic customs. But census statistics for Sioux County provide a guide to reconstructing his farm operations, placing them within

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29. Alton Reformed Church records; Nieuwenhuis, *Siouxland*, chap. 16; De Jong, "Four Generations," 225-28; Beltman, *90 Years*, 1-5. In June 1878 Rev. John Warnhuis and his family arrived to take up pastoral responsibilities. They came from the Abbe Reformed Church of Clymer, New York, a town to which Gelderlanders from Winterswijk had immigrated a generation earlier. In 1881 the Alton church building cost \$5,125, and 80 families were members. By 1900 fifteen Reformed and six Christian Reformed churches existed in Sioux County. The town of Alton, however, was never exclusively Dutch Reformed. A large element of German Catholic farmers from Luxembourg lived primarily east of the Floyd River in Nassau Township and spilled over into East Orange and Floyd townships. They organized a parish in Alton in 1880.

30. Alton Reformed Church records; Beltman, *90 Years*, 1-5.

the context of the local agricultural economy and population composition, and allowing a rough assessment of cultural influence at work (see table 1). These numbers show the rapid settlement process of the 1880s and reveal general agricultural expansion over time in farm size, acres under cultivation, and livestock production, as well as increased use of machinery. Between 1880 and 1890 farmers turned from growing wheat to raising more corn, other small grains, and hay. By 1900 wheat acreage made a dramatic comeback.

Was this indicative of a "cultural rebound" in which immigrants, who initially planted crops similar to their American neighbors, returned to a traditional Old World cereal after attaining a degree of security within a decade or two of settlement?<sup>31</sup> A clear association between Old and New World crop production patterns is difficult to prove with agricultural statistics at the county level, for Netherlands-born immigrants never dominated the population of Sioux County. Native-born Americans, Germans, other nationalities, and native-born Dutch-Americans moving in from eastern Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, and elsewhere also lived in the county, and these residents, reflecting native or acculturated patterns of farming, influenced local agricultural practices to create a blended composite defying discrete analysis. Additionally, agricultural information specific to Dutch immigrants at the sub-county level is not available after 1880. Finally, in the eastern Netherlands the principal grain crop of farmers in the late nineteenth century was rye, not wheat, so the return to wheat in Sioux County did not reflect the influence of an ethnic preference.<sup>32</sup>

31. Jordan, *German Seed*, 93-94, 156-57, 192-93, 199, has found evidence of this experience among Germans in Texas.

32. D. W. Wilterdink of Winterswijk provided information on Dutch farming and rye production. Tony Aberson of Alton, Iowa, emigrated from Oosterbeek, Gelderland, in 1911 at the age of 16. In an interview on July 4, 1992, he related that Dutch farmers near Oosterbeek raised primarily rye, barley, potatoes, and "a little bit of wheat," but knew nothing about corn before coming to America. See also Jan Bieleman, "Agrarian Change in the Dutch Province of Drenthe, 1600-1910," *A.A.G. Bijdragen* 29 (Wageningen, 1987), 681-85. Professor Swierenga generously shared this source.



TABLE 1  
AGRICULTURE AND POPULATION TRENDS IN SIOUX COUNTY, 1880-1910

	1880	1885	1890	1895	1900	1905	1910
Number of farms	908	1,484	2,083	2,270	2,451	2,373	2,715
Acres per farm	149	195	189	182	194	188	175
Improved land as % of total farmland	68	50	89	93	95	94	92
Acres of corn per farm	26	30	46	54	55	64	59
Acres of wheat per farm	42	22 <sup>a</sup>	30	38	52	18	5
Acres of oats per farm	11	15	27	30	22	27	34
Acres of barley per farm	4	3 <sup>a</sup>	13	14	13	—	11
Acres of hay per farm	13	2 <sup>a</sup>	22	15	16	18	21
Horses per farm	3.8	4.2	6.3	6.2	6.5	6.6	7.6
Milk cows per farm	3.0	3.3	5.1	4.0	5.4	7.0	7.3
Other cattle per farm	5.5	8.8	12.1	11.8	17.7	20.5	17.9
Swine per farm	23.8	24.1	47.8	29.1	61.3	43.9	45.9
Value of land per acre (\$)	10.30 <sup>b</sup>	—	27.98 <sup>b</sup>	37.10 <sup>b</sup>	38.94	51.72	107.68
Value of machinery per farm (\$)	237	—	280	—	309	—	595
Total population	5,426	11,584	18,370	21,406	23,337	24,021	25,246
Native-born	3,618	7,680	12,150	14,499	16,865	17,678	18,451
Foreign-born	1,808	3,904	6,220	6,907	6,472	6,343	6,795
Foreign-born as % of total population	33.3	33.7	33.8	32.3	27.7	26.4	26.9
Netherlands-born	1,196	1,818	3,561	4,325	4,290	4,407	5,032
Netherlands-born as % of total population	22.0	15.7	19.4	20.2	18.4	18.3	19.9

Sources: *Census of the U.S., 1880, 1890, 1900, 1910, Population and Agriculture; Census of Iowa for 1885, 1895, 1905.*

<sup>a</sup> Local farmers raised 18 acres of flax per farm in 1885, the second-highest flax production by county in the state. See page 16 for an explanation of the temporary attractiveness of flax.

<sup>b</sup> The prices per acre of land for 1880 through 1895 are slightly inflated as the figures are based on the value of land and buildings. The statistics for 1900 through 1910 represent only land value.

More likely, the renewed popularity of wheat in 1900 reflected a shift to a cash crop less vulnerable to the dry years and the vagaries of the commodity price structure of the mid-1890s. Wheat, reaped in late July, might provide a harvest sustained by spring moisture, while corn burned out over the course of a long, dry, and hot summer. Wheat prices also fared better during the economic depression of the mid-1890s, while corn prices plummeted. By 1900, farmers had converted some marginal land as well as oats and hay acreage to wheat, but by 1910 wheat was clearly an insignificant crop among Sioux County farmers. The statistics of 1900 suggest a temporary economic adjustment, for the increase in livestock also slowed during the decade of hard times. Survival depended on a strategy that emphasized a traditional regional crop, but not one that was culturally distinctive. When the crises passed, earlier farming trends resumed, and the improved economy and better weather conditions after 1900 fostered this process.<sup>33</sup> Thus, through the years corn grew to primary importance; oats and hay, necessary as animal feed, held strong secondary positions; livestock production expanded (except for the toll of hog cholera); and mechanization intensified.

EVENTUALLY, the management and cultivation of Hendrik Beltman's land passed to his heirs. He and Janna continued their life together for a total of almost thirty-five years, but in August 1902, Janna died at the age of 59. In April 1904, Hendrik married Grada Koerselman Scholten, a widow living near Alton. Hendrik was then 71, Grada 60. Grada, from Zutphen, Gelderland, shared provincial origins with Hendrik. She outlived her second husband, dying in November 1939 at the age of 95. As for the patriarch Hendrik, he died of pneumonia on November 21, 1911, then 78 years old.<sup>34</sup>

33. Richard G. Bremer, *Agricultural Change in an Urban Age: The Loup Country of Nebraska, 1910-1970* (Lincoln, NE, 1976), 9-10; Brian W. Beltman, "Rural Renaissance in an Urban Age: The Country Life Movement in Wisconsin, 1895-1918" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1974), chap. 1.

34. Family history records. The Scholtens emigrated to the United States in 1868, residing in Chicago. Other Dutch folk had established an urban



To safeguard intergenerational land transfer and family farm succession, Hendrik and Grada had entered into an Ante Nuptial Contract, dated April 26, 1904. In this agreement the two stated that neither party acquired any rights through marriage to the real or personal property of the other. Both retained independent control of their present or future property.<sup>35</sup> Each retained their separate incomes and support from their respective property holdings and their children. In turn, ten households involving their children were potentially affected by Hendrik and Grada's union.

Hendrik had drawn up a will on April 25, 1906, which divided his property equally between his two children. When the estate was settled on January 21, 1913, John Henry and Hendrika each received 200 acres of land and half of the town property. Another 160 acres of land were not specifically distributed to the heirs. Rather, the estate sold the farmland to Hendrik's son-in-law William Geurink for \$26,400, or \$165 per acre. Three married children of the Geurinks and one son of John Henry Beltman eventually took up residence on separate tracts of land that had once belonged to their grandfather Hendrik.<sup>36</sup>

FAMILY STRATEGIES for property transfer and economic succession prevailed in succeeding generations with some significant variations. Both second-generation households in the Beltman family, those of John Henry and his spouse and Hendrika and hers, accumulated additional property in order

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ethnic neighborhood in the city known as "Groninger's Corner," named for the provincial origins of many immigrant Netherlands. After the Chicago fire of 1871 the Scholtens moved to Sioux County and homesteaded near Alton. See Hans Krabbendam, "The West Side Dutch in Chicago," *Origins* 11 (1991), 4-8; Herbert J. Brinks, "Netherlands in the Chicago Area," *Origins* 1 (1983), 1-7.

35. The Ante Nuptial Contract is contained in family history records. The Scholten property consisted of three eighths; two in the names of Scholten sons and one in Grada's name. See *Standard Historical Atlas*, 19.

36. Hendrik Beltman's will, family history records; Deed Book 41, p. 497, Sioux County Courthouse. For a discussion of Norwegian wills and intergenerational land transfer, see Arnold Strickon, "The Forms of Ethnicity in a Norwegian-America Farm Community," in Jorgensen, Scheving, and Stilling, eds., *From Scandinavia to America*, 257-58.

to establish their children as agricultural operators in the community, just as their parents had done for them. Unlike the first generation of Beltmans who had responsibility for only two children, however, the second-generation parents faced a much larger challenge because of greater fecundity. But they also enjoyed substantial advantages over their forebears in meeting that challenge. They did not have to undergo the disruptive impact of the migration experience with all its attendant costs, emotional and material. They also had the good fortune to pour their energies into farming during an era commonly known as the "golden age" of American agriculture (the late 1890s through World War I), and they continued to reap the benefits of the high fertility and productivity of some of the best arable land in the Midwest.<sup>37</sup>

William and Hendrika Geurink were particularly successful in amassing landholdings for subsequent transmission to their children. They eventually acquired ownership of 600 acres of land, 360 of which were obtained either by inheritance or purchase from Hendrik Beltman. The remaining 240 acres were bought from other property owners: forty from William's father Evert for \$1,600, or \$40 per acre, on February 24, 1897 (which William later sold); 200 from Jacob Cleveringa for \$23,000, or \$115 per acre, on December 27, 1907; and forty from John Henry Beltman on December 29, 1915 (as detailed below). All of this land was located within a mile of the Geurink farm (see map 3). Upon marriage, four of their children, three boys and one girl, received allotments of 100 acres each to start agricultural livelihoods as tenants to their father. Two other daughters married men whose occupations were nonagricultural, but they eventually received 100-acre shares as well: one rented her share to another sibling; the other sold hers outright upon getting title to the land. A final daughter received compensatory but equal financial assistance in lieu of land. All of the siblings of this third generation settled within twenty miles of their parents' home, and each of the four tenant farmers ultimately pur-

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37. On the "golden age" of agriculture, see Beltman, "Rural Renaissance," chap. 1; and Fred A. Shannon, "The Status of the Mid-Western Farmer in 1900," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 38 (1950), 491-510.



chased his or her 100-acre share from their father in the late 1930s at about half the market price.<sup>38</sup>

Two examples must suffice. William and Hendrika's oldest son Henry, upon marriage at age 27 in 1920, assumed responsibility for his parents' home place (his grandfather Hendrik Beltman's tract 1) as a tenant. On February 29, 1936, Henry, then 43, purchased this eighty acres as well as twenty more lying across the road to the south (part of Hendrik's tract 3) from his father for \$4,200, or \$42 per acre, on a contract basis of \$200 per year until paid. Another son, Gerrit, became a tenant farmer to his father upon marriage at age 24 in 1923 on his parents' west eighty (Hendrik Beltman's tract 7). On May 12, 1937, Gerrit bought this parcel and twenty more acres (part of tract 3 again) from his father for a similar price and on similar terms to his brother's.<sup>39</sup> The Geurink family thus practiced a premortem, partible method of inheritance and generously provided for the children, but despite the land acquisitions of the parents, each heir ultimately received a smaller allotment of land than the Geurinks had obtained from Hendrik Beltman, largely because of family size.

John Henry and Jacomina Beltman had a family of four sons and four daughters. Like their cousins, the Geurinks, these children fared well in the social universe of rural Sioux County, but for some, success was not tied to agricultural endeavors.<sup>40</sup> The eldest son, Henry Beltman II, received a

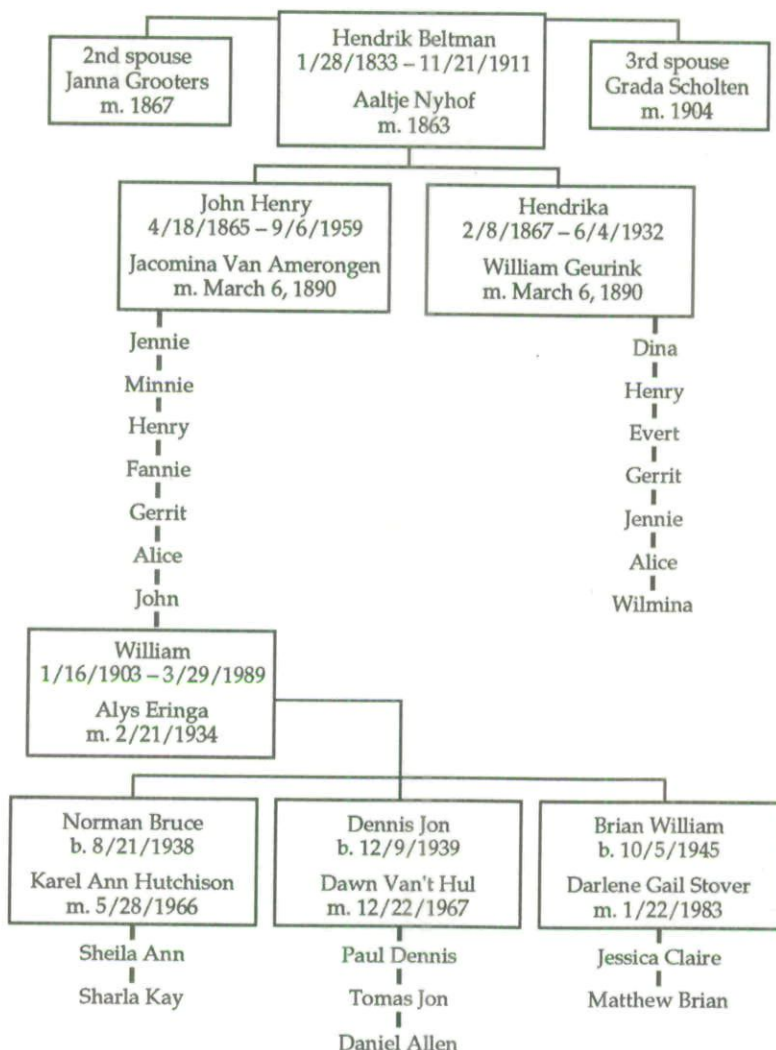
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38. Family history records; Deed Books 34, p. 355; 38, p. 438; 45, pp. 39, 44, Sioux County Courthouse; Alice Wiersma, daughter of William and Hendrika Geurink, interview with author, Orange City, Iowa, March 1992.

39. Deed Books 55, p. 474; 56, p. 433, Sioux County Courthouse. The contracts also required interest of 7 percent on any amount of the annuity that was past due. For comparison, the average price of land in Sioux County in 1935 was \$105.47 per acre; in 1940, \$98.69 per acre. Prices reflected the Great Depression. See *Sixteenth Census, Agriculture, Iowa, 1940*, vol. 1, part 2, p. 131. The price and payment terms William Geurink negotiated with his children in the late 1930s funded his retirement. On two of the parcels once belonging to William Geurink, grandsons continue to farm. One, a great-grandson of Hendrik Beltman, farms on the southern 160-acre tract once part of the latter's landholdings.

40. Information for this and the next several paragraphs depends on family history records as well as Abstract of Title from Sioux County Courthouse. See also Beltman, *90 Years*, 19-45.

TABLE 2

BELTMAN FAMILY TREE  
1833-1992



formal education imbued with a strong element of Dutch cultural identity. He was nurtured in the Alton Reformed Church, attended rural elementary school, and matriculated at the Northwestern Classical Academy in Orange City, a four-year parochial high school supported by the Reformed Church in America. Later, he graduated from Hope College in Holland, Michigan, a core institution of higher education for the denomination, and Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey, and became an ordained clergyman in the Reformed church. The second son, Gerrit, became an agricultural tenant to his father-in-law and ultimately climbed the "agricultural ladder" to own with his wife a farmstead three miles away from his father. The third son, John, not enthusiastic about farming, received an education at the Academy as well as at Hope College, and then entered the business profession as a retailer. Each of the four daughters married men who became farmers in northwest Iowa, all within twenty miles of the Beltman parental home. These farmers began as tenants within their respective families but in time attained the status of owner-operators. The youngest son, William, showed a strong inclination to farm, and eventually he managed the operations on the home place. The timing for this, however, depended on his parents' retirement from active direction of farm affairs.<sup>41</sup>

In the meantime, John Henry tried to acquire land for his children, although he did not prove as successful in this regard as the Geurinks. In March 1913, shortly after the distribution of Hendrik's estate, John Henry, who was then 47 years old, bought 120 acres of land with buildings less than ten miles from his farm (see map 3). He paid a market price of \$18,700, or about \$156 per acre, for the property; he made a cash payment of \$12,000, and financed the rest by assum-

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41. See Richard A. Easterlin, "Population Change and Farm Settlement in the Northern United States," *Journal of Economic History* 36 (1976), 45-75, especially 67, 70-71, on why farms tended to succeed to younger sons. Easterlin also suggests that increasing limits on intergenerational land transfer influenced subsequent birth rates and farm family size, so that with fewer children, parents could continue to provide well for their offspring. The third, fourth, and fifth generations of Beltmans tend to confirm this.



*In 1914 the John Henry Beltman family posed in front of the family home located on the farm immediately adjacent to the Hendrik Beltman home place. This house underwent extensive enlargement and remodeling in 1912. Family members pictured are, from left to right, Gerrit, Henry, Minnie, William and John (both seated), mother Jacomina, Alice, Fannie, and father John Henry. Jennie, the oldest daughter, was not present for the photo-taking; she was now married. Subsequently, the family of William Beltman lived in this farm house, and today his son Dennis and his family live here.*

ing existing first and second mortgages on the real estate in the amount of \$6,700 loaned at 5.5% interest by the Mutual Benefit Life Insurance Company. John Henry acquired this farm from Doris and Kate Sorgdrager, who chose to liquidate their holdings to release themselves from the burden of substantial debt. Through this property meandered the Floyd River, which was notoriously prone to springtime flooding, creating substantial nonarable pasturelands. Thus, from an owner-operator perspective, this farm may not have been a highly desirable tract, but was acceptable as income property. From this investment John Henry received an immediate return in the form of rental income, which continued until he died. His second daughter Minnie and her husband Arie Lucas, who were married in March 1915, figured among his





*This photo also dates from 1914. It shows the new barn John Henry built in 1910 as well as other farm buildings and the family home in the background. Pictured here standing are Henry (home from college for the summer) and William, both holding the span of four horses, and Gerrit. In the auto are father and mother in the front seat, John in between, and daughters Alice and Fannie in the back seat.*

early tenants. Some years later John Henry added an adjacent thirty acres to this holding, thus making it a 150-acre farm. In time, this place served as a "starter farm" for other kinfolk: two of John Henry's granddaughters and their husbands began married life as tenants to their maternal grandfather.

This sizable outlay by John Henry in 1913 was only one of several major capital expenditures during those prosperous farming years. In 1910 he had built a large modern barn complete with stalls for seven teams of horses and a milking capacity for twelve cows. In 1912 the Beltmans completely remodeled their home, expanding it from the original story-and-a-half structure with four rooms on the ground floor to a two-and-a-half story house with seven rooms downstairs and five bedrooms upstairs as well as a bath on both floors. The house was also equipped with lighting, heating, and running water provided by, respectively, a carbide gas generator, a coal-burning furnace, and a gasoline-powered motor-driven pump. In 1914, as the ultimate symbol of prosperity, John Henry purchased a new Model T Ford. One other noteworthy

expenditure had ethnic as well as financial significance. In the winter of 1912-13 John Henry and Jacomina made a "pilgrimage" to the Netherlands, traveling overseas with two other local Dutch-American families, the Wissinks and the Mennings. This sentimental journey to visit the Old Country, walk again on familiar streets and fields, see former homes, and renew old friendships and kinship ties lasted several weeks. It must have been a treasured experience and one that reenforced ethnic identity.

How was all this financed? Aside from the gains the Beltmans received from profitable commercial farming during very prosperous agricultural times, they also had the advantage of a large domestic labor force within the family household. The children, while adding to the parental responsibilities and expenses, performed numerous age- and gender-specific tasks that contributed to the farm output. John Henry also employed the services of hired men, usually young Dutch immigrants who worked as farm laborers for a season or two before moving on. The Beltmans also benefited from the property settlement made in 1913 after Hendrik Beltman's death. On January 21, John Henry received a cash distribution of \$13,200 (half the total) from the sale of Hendrik's southernmost 160-acre tract at \$165 per acre to William Geurink. John Henry also received a landed inheritance of 200 acres, but on December 29, 1915, he converted forty acres (half of tract 3 on map 3) into cash by selling the land to his brother-in-law for \$7,600, or \$190 per acre. Finally, on October 4, 1916, John Henry and his sister Hendrika sold the three Alton lots for \$3,200, and each received half of the proceeds.<sup>42</sup> These cash receipts helped fund the family's improved living standard as well as the acquisition of addi-

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42. The Manuscript Population Census for 1900 recorded that Berend J. Hofmeyer, then age 22, was a farm laborer among the John Henry Beltman household. He was the son of a neighboring family who emigrated from the Netherlands in 1882. Note also that Deed Book 45, p. 39, indicated that John Henry carried a mortgage of \$3,500 at 5 percent on the forty acres he sold to his brother-in-law in 1915; thus, selling the land extinguished that debt. Moreover, Grada Scholten was not an owner of the Alton town lots, but she did issue a quit claim deed on November 10, 1916, to the purchaser, for which she received one dollar. Grada went to live in a smaller house in Alton.



tional land with a view to the future well-being of the children in ways that minimized financial risk.

John Henry and Jacomina of the second generation, like his parents, were concerned about their children's future in another way, more cultural than material. Conventional economic ambitions did not overwhelm ethnoreligious commitment. The family continued active participation in the Alton Reformed Church. John Henry sang in a men's choral group, taught a Bible class, and served as deacon, elder, and treasurer in the church over a period of twenty-two years. When occasionally the church was without a resident minister, John took charge of the services. Jacomina was an experienced organist, having served in that capacity in a large urban church in Apeldoorn in Gelderland prior to coming with her family to Orange City in 1887 when she was 17. Her musical efforts assisted the congregation in the singing of the Dutch Psalms. The Beltman family of parents and eight children were visible parishioners; the church, in turn, shaped their social and cultural perspectives and nurtured their values. The impact was most dramatic with the eldest son, Henry II, as noted; among his clerical services were a stint as missionary to China from 1920 to 1926, a term as president of Synod in 1949, and pastoral service as minister to the elderly with the Garden Grove Community Church in Orange County, California.<sup>43</sup>

John Henry and Jacomina resided on the family farm until their retirement in 1923, leaving management of the farm in the hands of two sons, Gerrit and William. When John Henry was 58 years old, the couple moved to Alton, as his parents had done twenty-five years earlier. They lived there five years, but then in 1928 returned to the family farm, where Jacomina died in April 1931 at the age of 60. Her husband lived until September 1959, dying when he was

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43. Beltman, *90 Years*, 1-14, 58-90, 116-18, 140-49. William and Hendrika Geurink and their seven children were also members of the Alton Reformed Church; some of their grandchildren and great-grandchildren remain a part of that church. Robert Schuller, nephew of Henry II, son of Jennie (the oldest daughter of John Henry and Jacomina) and Anthony Schuller, and great-grandson of Hendrik Beltman, is pastor of the Garden Grove Community Church.



94. During the last twenty-eight years of his life John Henry lived out his retirement in the homes of three of his children, sixteen of those years with the family of his youngest son on the Beltman home place. His retirement was also partly supported from rental income received from the tenants who operated the 150-acre farm John Henry had purchased during his active years of farming. At the time of his death that annual rent payment amounted to \$1,500.<sup>44</sup>

THE THIRD-GENERATION HEIR to the Sioux County land was William Beltman, who took over principal farm management in 1928 when he was 25. While living with his widowed father on the farm, William, at the age of 31, married Alys Eringa, then 24, in February 1934. Their marriage of fifty-five years produced three sons. At the age of 40, William, with his spouse, attained ownership of the family farm. That property transfer displayed subtle variations on an old theme. John Henry sold the home place to his youngest son in a way that did not reflect favoritism over the other siblings. In contrast to other familial land transfers, this method was impartible, which kept the farm size stable at 160 acres. As John Henry received the payment for the land from his son, he distributed most of it to his eight children in equal allotments. The appraised market price was \$125 per acre; William and Alys agreed to pay \$20,000 for the farm on March 31, 1943. They paid \$14,000 in cash, some of which was borrowed from a sister of Alys, and financed the balance by a mortgage from the local bank. In less than three years, on July 10, 1945, they paid off the farm debt, an accomplishment largely due to substantial agricultural income realized during wartime and clearly aimed at eliminating financial risk.<sup>45</sup>

44. The estate sold this 150-acre farm in 1959 for \$30,000, or \$200 per acre. John Henry's will divided this settlement equally among his children. In the late 1950s farmland values were again cyclically depressed.

45. Family history records; Deed Book 62, p. 168, and Mortgage Book 125, p. 33, Sioux County Courthouse. Alys Eringa's parents emigrated separately as single individuals from the province of Friesland in the early 1890s and after marriage in 1893 settled near Running Water, South Dakota, another enclave of Dutch ethnic settlement. After farming there for about three decades, they retired in Orange City in 1926.

The timing of this intergenerational land transfer of 1943 reflected risk avoidance in another way; it occurred after the Great Depression of the 1930s. During those years of bank failures, low commodity prices, and general loss of confidence in the nation's economic vitality, some farm families delayed property transfers in order to avoid the threat of farm loss through foreclosure. If an intergenerational sale required the buyer to mortgage the land and that buyer failed to meet loan repayment obligations during hard times, the farm was placed in jeopardy. This portended a serious blow to parents and all children since everyone's security was tied to the land, whether retiree, owner-operator, or siblings entitled to a share of the inheritance. The safest practice in this context was to postpone the transfer, avoid unnecessary financial exposure, and keep the land mortgage-free.<sup>46</sup> The Beltmans did all this during the 1930s, although there is no evidence that they did so by conscious design. Admittedly, another factor delaying transfer may simply have been the younger Beltmans' personal financial capacity in the 1930s, as they faced the expenses of starting a family amid years of general economic collapse and carrying on farming when harvests were poor due to mid-decade droughts.

Having successfully survived the Great Depression, William and Alys still reflected its psychology through their rapid payment schedule during wartime. They sought to attain security by placing profits in real estate but liquidating indebtedness as quickly as possible. Land acquisition for them was not expansionistic nor speculative, but attested to a desire to possess clear title to the land and avoid the danger of loss of the farm. Significant, too, in this transaction of 1943 was the dramatic drop in the value of farmland from the time when John Henry did land business in 1913 and 1915. The latter bargained during an era of long-term inflation that affected land values. William and Alys negotiated a purchase after the Great Depression when farmland prices

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46. Family history records. Compare Frank Yoder, "Staying on the Farm: Surviving the Great Depression in an Iowa Township, 1920-1950," *Annals of Iowa* 51 (1991), 53-78.



were sharply devalued, although by the early 1940s those prices had begun an upward swing once more.<sup>47</sup>

The succession of land from the second to the third generation of Beltmans was not as inclusive and bountiful as it had been for the previous generation. In part, this was a normal function of the economic maturation of an area from a pioneering stage to one of stability in which land acquisition was now limited due to population saturation and accompanying increases in the price of land. As one historian has remarked, in the post-settlement era "availability of unclaimed arable land declined drastically, closing off the opportunity for new settlement or the expansion of existing economic units without infringing on the property of others."<sup>48</sup> This was precisely the situation for John Henry; nevertheless, he still operated within an ethnocultural milieu that inspired him to try to help secure the economic security of his progeny within circumscribed possibilities. Moreover, he provided for his own in a way that might have seemed innovative to his Old World agrarian ancestors: by putting two of his sons through institutions of higher education.

WILLIAM lived on the family farm for sixty-nine years, and there he farmed until retirement. During the time he managed agricultural operations, his farming practices changed with the times in a measured and conservative way. His grandfather Hendrik had been proficient as a cattle trader; William took pride in owning high-grade work horses. In the late 1920s he

47. Bremer, *Agricultural Change*, 90, 104-5; Peter H. Lindert, "Long-run Trends in American Farmland Values," *Agricultural History* 62 (1988), 45-85, especially chart on 56. For Sioux County, average land prices climbed to \$341.79 per acre by 1920, fell to \$156.75 per acre in 1930, and bottomed at \$98.69 per acre in 1940 before rising again. See *Fifteenth Census, Agriculture, Iowa, 1930*, vol. 2, part 1, pp. 893, 906; *Sixteenth Census, Agriculture, Iowa, 1940*, vol. 1, part 2, p. 131.

48. Ostergren, "Land and Family," 403. Compare Hal S. Barron, "Staying Down on the Farm: Social Processes of Settled Rural Life in the Nineteenth-Century North," in Hahn and Prude, eds., *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation*, 327-43; idem, *Those Who Stayed Behind: Rural Society in Nineteenth-Century New England* (Cambridge, 1984); idem, "Listening to the Silent Majority: Change and Continuity in the Nineteenth-Century Rural North," in Ferleger, ed., *Agriculture and National Development*, 3-23; Easterlin, "Population Change," 70-71.



and a partner achieved a personal objective of acquiring a world-class stallion. Together they bought the Belgian stud Marquis de Hemel, first-place winner at the Chicago International Horse Show in 1924, after he was retired from professional breeding service. William's attachment to fine work horses influenced his cautiousness in switching to the use of a row-crop tractor, a change he did not make until 1938. In 1939 Sioux County farmers welcomed the arrival of rural electrification. This permitted modernization of the Beltman home with electric lights, electric motor-driven water pumps, and an electric-fired, diesel-fueled furnace. It also allowed the transition to the use of milking machines for the dairy herd. In the late 1950s William did major landscaping and tiling to pasture and slough land which permitted him to increase the tillable acreage of this quarter-section by about 26 acres. Simultaneously, with pastureland converted to crop land, William discontinued dairying and concentrated on hog, corn, and soybean production. Over the years, too, he acquired new machinery and built new farm buildings, including corncribs, a chicken house, a hog barn, a cattle barn, and a silo.<sup>49</sup>

In April 1972, when William was 69, he and Alys moved to Alton, as his parents and grandparents had done years earlier. Even before this relocation the family farm devolved by way of an impartible transfer to the fourth generation. Although ownership of the land remained with William and Alys, their middle son Dennis became manager of farm operations at the age of 28. This coincided with his marriage in December 1967 to Dawn Van't Hul. The other siblings did not compete to run the farm. The older brother chose a career in construction; the younger entered the academic profession.

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49. Family history records. The Belgian horse previously belonged to Harry Stamp, a stockbreeder of draft horses in Roachdale, Indiana. For a number of years prior to 1938 the Beltmans had a tractor, but they did not use it for field work; rather, it provided stationary power from the belt drive as well as pulling power for plowing. For comparison, in 1925, 16.7 percent of Iowa farmers owned tractors; in 1930, 29.4 percent did; by 1940, 55.3 percent. In 1940, 60 percent of all tractor-owning farmers in Iowa had bought their tractors in the previous five years. In 1942, 45 percent of Iowa farms were still totally dependent on horses for power. See Robert E. Ankli, "Horses vs. Tractors on the Corn Belt," *Agricultural History* 54 (1980), 134-48.



Dennis, Dawn, and their family of three sons have operated the farm for twenty-five years now on land that has belonged to the Beltman family for more than one hundred years. As a consequence, the Iowa Department of Agriculture has designated the farm a Centennial Farm, a recognition that testifies to the success of a family strategy to maintain land ownership and to sustain a tradition of farming. This land consists of the second and fifth tracts (see map 3) owned by Hendrik Beltman by 1888 and later owned by son John Henry and grandson William. The first parcel of land purchased by Hendrik in 1877 was subsequently owned by son-in-law William Geurink and grandson Henry Geurink. Today, a portion of that land is owned by Dennis Beltman. Furthermore, Dennis, as a share tenant of his parents for almost two decades, has supported their retirement. Unlike the first and second generation of retired Beltmans, William and Alys supplemented their farm rental income with social security benefits and returns from financial investments.<sup>50</sup>

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50. Family history records.





*To see visual evidence of persistence and change in the material aspects of the Beltman farmstead, compare the photos on these facing pages of the William Beltman farm in the late 1960s, at about the time William's son Dennis assumed responsibility for operation of the family farm, with the photos shown earlier of the same home and farmstead in 1914, when it was owned by William's father (and Hendrik's son), John Henry.*

The social and church life of the William Beltman family was centered for years in nearby Orange City, where they were active members of the First Reformed Church. Beyond this, involvement in this Dutch ethnic community included attending local, private, denominationally associated educational institutions in Orange City. During the 1950s the parents sent their two oldest sons to the parochial high school, Northwestern Classical Academy, which earlier graduated two uncles as well as Alys Eringa Beltman. In the 1960s the youngest son earned a degree from Northwestern College in Orange City, a Reformed Church college. Then, in their retirement William and Alys joined the Alton Reformed Church and reestablished allegiance to the church that claimed the oldest ties to the Beltman family. William and Alys's oldest son Norman, his wife Karel Hutchison, who is of German-Dutch descent, and their two daughters are also members of this church. Norman serves as Sunday School teacher and has been a deacon and elder of the church. He is also the mayor of the town

of Alton.<sup>51</sup> It was Norman and Karel's oldest daughter, representing the fifth generation of Beltmans, who was married on August 2, 1991, in the church begun in 1877 with the help of Hendrik Beltman.

Meanwhile, in another way, the third generation of Beltmans became a part of the church's historical record, for in March 1989 William died at the age of 86. Alys, now 83 years old, is still active in her community and her church, and she continues to live in Alton, less than three miles from where her son Dennis and his family work the land that has been an integral part of the Beltmans' lives for five generations and for almost six score years. Dennis and Dawn and their three sons are members of the First Reformed Church of Orange City. Their oldest son has graduated from Northwestern College; their second son attends Hope College.

THE BELTMANS were, and are, part of an ethnically cohesive community bound by family, faith of their forebears, and attachment to the land. The sense of localism inherent in that triad has been further supported by endogamy: family members primarily married spouses of Dutch descent through the fourth generation. Both of Hendrik's children, fourteen of fifteen of the third generation, and 75 percent of the fourth generation who married chose local Dutch partners. Of the fourteen Dutch spouses of the third generation, all but two were from Gelderland; the exceptions came from Friesland. Not surprisingly, the fifth generation is more exogamous, as only 28 percent of those whose marriages are known chose Dutch spouses.<sup>52</sup> The dilution of ethnic solidarity by way of marriage coincided with a gradual spatial dispersion of family members from the core Dutch communities in Sioux County as well as less association with Reformed churches. Marital choice, ethnoreligious affiliation, and localism were inextricably mixed, sustaining and weakening in concert.

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51. Norman Beltman became mayor of Alton in 1985. One of his recent predecessors in this public office was his cousin Joe Rexwinkel, another great-grandson of Hendrik Beltman.

52. This analysis of marriage patterns is based on a record of the family progeny in the possession of the author as well as on interviews with Alice Wiersma and Alys Eringa Beltman.



The loss of foreign-language skills, like emerging exogamy, marked a weaning from an important structural support of ethnicity, further evidence of the forces of assimilation at work. The first generation of Beltmans used their native tongue both orally and in writing. The second was bilingual, but preferred the familiarity of Dutch at home and within the church and community. The third, the first native-born generation, used English as the primary means of communication, but was conversationally at ease with Dutch. The fourth generation, however, has essentially lost the use of Dutch except for quaint phrases and colorful expressions. For the fifth, Dutch is fully a foreign language. Gender differences permeated this transition from Dutch to English. By more contact through business relations, men used English more readily than women, who were homebound with domestic responsibilities and tended to learn English haphazardly from their children. The latter made the language transition through school and a youthful eagerness to acculturate to a new and different means of communication. In turn, women retained a bilingual ability longer and with greater verbal expertise than men.<sup>53</sup>

Despite the forces of assimilation, the Beltman family's strong sense of "Dutchness" remains manifest into the fifth generation even as it evolves. Through ties to the land, the community, and the church, through endogamic marriage patterns and choice of educational institutions, through long-lasting foreign-language skills and an appreciation of family traditions and kinship bonds, the Beltmans have demon-

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53. Americanizing Dutch names also reflected acculturation and gender differences. In the second generation, the son went by an Anglo version of his Dutch name, Jan Hendrik, but the daughter kept her Dutch name, shortened usually to "Rika." All the sons of the third generation had Anglo names; all the daughters were christened with Dutch names but were commonly known by Anglo derivatives. For immigrants and language, see generally Philip E. Webber, *Pella Dutch: The Portrait of a Language and Its Use in One of Iowa's Ethnic Communities* (Ames, 1988), especially part 2; Joshua A. Fishman, *Language Loyalty in the United States: The Maintenance and Perpetuation of Non-English Mother Tongues by American Ethnic and Religious Groups* (The Hague, 1966), especially chaps. 2 and 9. See also Edmund de S. Brunner, *Immigrant Farmers and Their Children* (New York, 1929); and Milton K. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York, 1964).

strated their Dutch ethnicity. This ethnic primacy has underpinned family strategies that have contributed to residential and occupational persistence, helped retain landholdings for over a century, sustained prudent financial management, and inculcated the heritage of cultural customs and values conceived generations ago. Perhaps most significantly, enduring ethnicity has supported the survival of the Beltmans' family farm. Changing market conditions and patterns of agricultural activity, adjustment and adaptation to altered technological and cultural contexts, and shifting perceptions and expectations were certainly important for this rural family. But what has not changed is of telling significance as well. Continuity in history is no less important than change. Thus, while the Beltmans have clearly reflected the process of Americanization over the generations and have amalgamated into the mainstream culture of the nation, they have remained part of an enduring subculture characterized by its agrarianism and its Dutch ethnicity.

OTHER RURAL ETHNIC FAMILIES in the nation's heartland may have similar longitudinal histories exhibiting in miniature processes that affirm, deny, or qualify generalizations made by contemporary scholars, just as this examination of a Dutch-American family has attempted to do. To amplify our understanding of ethnic persistence and change, students might reconstruct more intergenerational and transoceanic family histories within specific cultural and economic contexts to flesh out observations contained in recent studies of ethnic settlements at the township or parish level—thorough investigations that for all their impressive quantification and probing analysis still contain a disquieting vagueness, an anonymity inherent to numbers. Whatever methodological approach is used, an appreciation of Old World antecedents and traditions is imperative to explain fully the New World patterns of behavior. The ocean, in frontier-like fashion, was more akin to a cultural conduit than a fault line. Recognizing this, historians might examine across several generations rural families of different ethnic origins, ethnoreligious associations, socioeconomic strata, geographic locations, or other distinctive criteria to reveal contrasts or similarities; either case



has significance. Researchers might also be able to isolate salient causal factors if they were to make historical comparisons, incorporating pre- and post-emigration experiences, between farm families who persisted ethnically and occupationally and those who did not. Persistence may have been the key to some survival strategies; radical adjustment may explain the success (or lack thereof) of others. The contours of these different behavioral responses at the family level deserve attention as well. In many ways family history under the proper focus can be much more than genealogy. Only restricted imagination and finite source material place limits on the historian's craft.

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