

Prairie sod house, typical of the time and region, similar to those made by early Sioux County settlers

A New Colony in Northwest Iowa

by

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The first immigrants from the Netherlands to settle in Iowa arrived in 1847. They crossed the Atlantic in four three-masted sailing vessels, landing at Baltimore, Maryland in June. Led by Rev. Henry Peter Scholte, more than 800 immigrants made their weary way by rail and riverboat to St. Louis. After a month's rest there they proceeded to Marion County, Iowa, where they established a village, named Pella ("The City of Refuge") by Scholte.

Among this first group was a lad of 17 years named Henry Hospers, who came as advance agent for the Jan Hospers family. He traveled with the Gerrit Overkamps, staying with them until his family arrived in late August, 1849.

First employed as a school teacher, then a surveyor's assistant for a few years, Hospers finally took up real estate. Hospers prospered as an agent, and after marrying Cornelia Welle in 1850, he built a new home and office. He won the respect and admiration of his fellow townspeople, and they elected him to the office of alderman when Pella was incorporated in 1857. Purchasing the weekly Dutch newspaper, *Pella-Weekblad*, Hospers successfully campaigned for mayor in the mid-1860s.

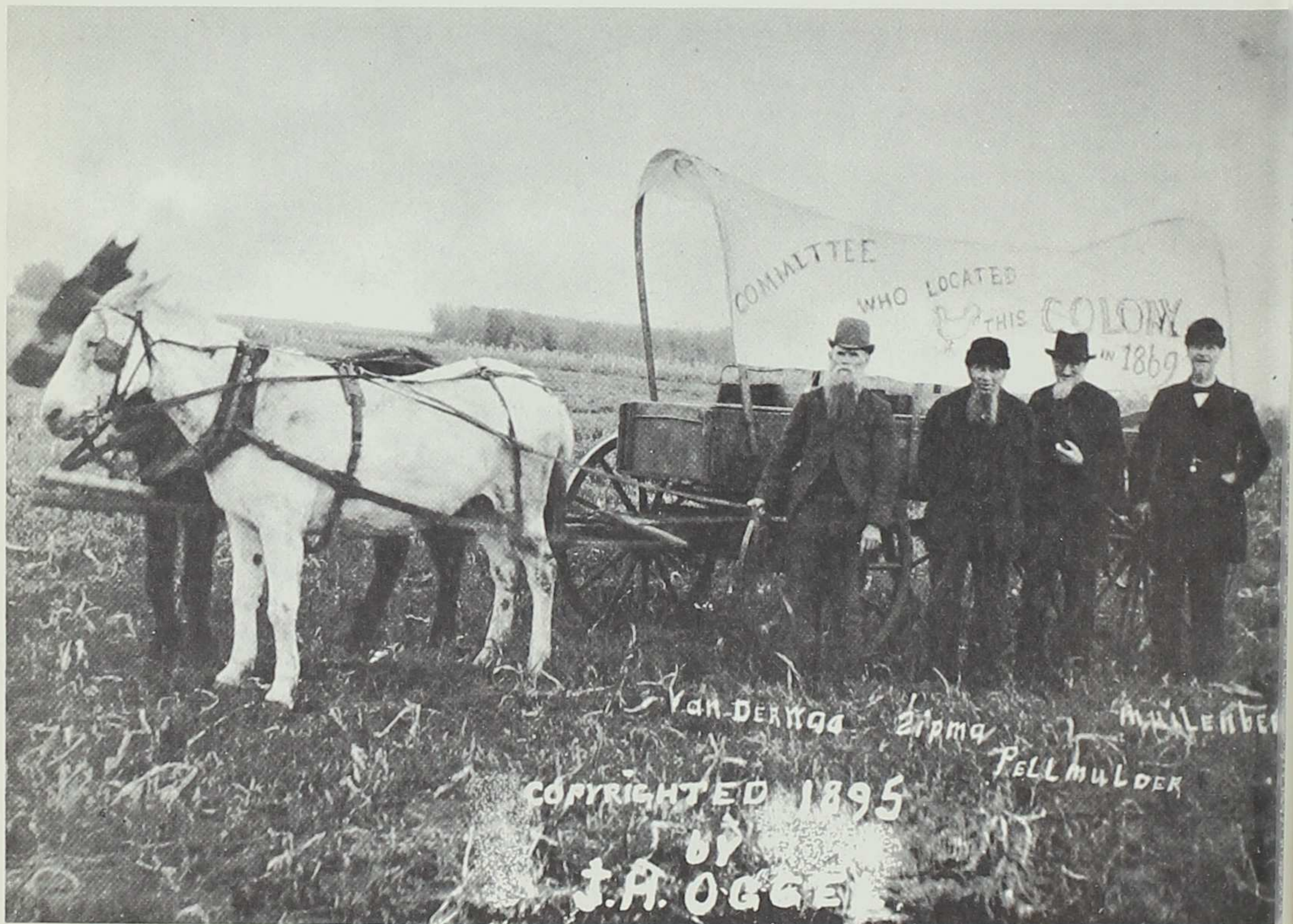
As early as the 1850s, while Dutch immigrants continued to stream into Pella, many townspeople realized that before long the area would be saturated, and they began to look for other spots with potential as settlements. On a business trip to St. Joseph, Missouri in 1860 Hospers saw long lines of covered wagons headed West, carrying families in search of cheap land. He talked to some of the men, and they

impressed him with their courage and their determination to make new homes in the West.

When he returned to Pella, Hospers talked to his friends about establishing another Dutch colony while government lands were still available. Many of them expressed an interest, but outbreak of the Civil War delayed definite plans for some years.

After the War interest revived. In the late 1860s, an immigrant association of 44 members sent a three-man committee to investigate conditions in Texas. However, while in New Orleans, the three men fell into the hands of a thief who stole all their money. Another association sent a few families to Kansas to found a settlement, but extreme drought conditions there forced the families back after only two years. A few families went to Oregon and Nebraska, but they, too, found conditions unsuitable.

In 1867, Jelle Pelmulder focused attention on Iowa once again when he wrote to land offices in the northwestern part of the state for lands. Hospers credits Pelmulder as "the first draftsman of the plan to settle a Dutch colony in northwestern Iowa." Meetings in Pella throughout the winter and spring of 1868-69 generated much interest in this plan, interest that Hospers helped to sustain and promote with heavy publicity in the *Pella-Weekblad*. As chairman of a committee to investigate land in northwestern Iowa, Hospers learned promising information from another Pella citizen, H. J. Van der Waa. For the past two years Van der Waa had rented land near Pella, selling a third of his crop each year to pay the rent. He and his wife had decided that Pella land prices were too costly for them to ever own their own farm, and Van der Waa wrote to W. S. Harlan, a



H. J. Van der Waa, S. A. Simpa, Jelle Pelmulder, and Hubert Muilenburg pose before the wagon they drove to investigate Storm Lake in 1869. The photograph was taken in 1895. (from *The Orange City Centennial Book*, 1970)

land agent near Storm Lake, to ask about availability of land in the northwest. When Harlan replied that homesteads were plentiful, Van der Waa went to Hospers' printing office to have bills of sale made up. He told Hospers of his discovery.

Hospers wrote to Harlan as well, and he, too, received an auspicious reply—one favorable enough, at least, for Hospers to call a meeting at his newspaper office. A large crowd gathered for the meeting and chose Van der Waa, S. A. Simpa, Hubert Muilenburg, and Jelle Pelmulder to investigate the Storm Lake area. The assembly unanimously passed a resolution to seek a

place for settlement that would provide an "abundance of cheap land and opportunity for agriculture on an extensive scale." The site should be large enough to form a community "compatible with our national character as Netherlanders, where Netherlanders may find a hospitable welcome."

Van der Waa offered the group his team and wagon for the journey, and the group agreed to pay him a dollar a day. On the morning of departure, Van der Waa traded his team of horses for fresh, young, never-harnessed mules, and spent the better part of two hours attaching the new team to his wagon. Finally he and the others managed

to get the mules harnessed, and the group set off "in quick time." (They had placed a covering over the light wagon and packed enough provisions to last them for the four-week journey.) Their route took them through Newton, Story City, and Webster City, to Fort Dodge, where they rested for a day or two. They traveled westward from there, following the stakes of the Iowa Falls and Sioux City Railroad (later taken over by the Illinois Central) to Storm Lake before pushing on to the small settlement of Cherokee. Here they rested for a day and learned that west of Cherokee was open and unoccupied country. Ten more miles west the Dutchmen stopped for a close look at the soil, sub-soil, drainage, and water-level. Satisfied, they agreed they had found an excellent spot for a colony. The land was good, and for miles in every direction they saw no sign of a settler's cabin.

The committee moved westward into Plymouth County, where they camped along the Floyd River at Melbourne. It was Sunday, May 9, 1869. The German settlers at Melbourne invited them to attend their worship service. The Dutchmen did not understand German, but their spirits were high, and they felt the minister delivered a good sermon.

The two-weeks' journey ended the next day in Sioux City. At the land office they notified the agents of their interest in land west of Cherokee. The land office told them land was available not only at Cherokee, but also in Sioux, Lyon, and O'Brien Counties. Because the group had no authority to sign for the land, they returned to Pella.

On June 1 the committee presented its report, and in glowing language favored settlement, adding that "[we] could not find words enough to describe the beauty of Northwestern Iowa, especially the neighborhood of Cherokee." At a meeting

in Pella later that month those seeking homesteads made their first declaration before a county clerk and signed applications. Homesteads would be distributed according to lot, and 60 men signed for shares in a townsite. The new settlers chose a name for the future town—"New Holland"—and one-third of the land on the townsite was granted to Hospers. Eighty-six men signed up for homesteads, and another 13 indicated their intention to buy additional lands. The future citizens of New Holland signed for over 18,000 acres at this meeting.

A second committee of Hospers, Leendert Van der Meer, Dirk Van den Box, and Van der Waa, was formed to make a definite selection of land for the colony and to secure the land in accordance with the national homestead and preemption laws. Authorized to determine a site for the town and do whatever was necessary to provide for the new colony, the committee hired Van der Waa at \$2.50 per day for the use of his team and wagon.

Henry Hospers took the train to Sioux City—a spur line of the Northwestern having reached that city the year before—while the other members of the committee traveled overland in Van der Waa's wagon. Hospers met them with bad news—land speculators had grabbed all the land in the Cherokee region after learning of the intentions of the Pella people.

The land officials told them, however, that both Sioux and Lyon Counties were still open for colonization. The group stocked up provisions, arranged for a surveyor to accompany them, and started out early the next morning for Sioux County. Accompanied by Wynn, the surveyor, the

committee traveled along the wagon road from Sioux City as far north as Le Mars, then nothing more than a store and a few homes. The next morning the five men followed the course of the Floyd River to a farmhouse near Seney, where they spent the night. Next morning they came to a point between the border of Plymouth and Sioux Counties, the southern corner of present-day Nassau and Sherman Townships. They marked the spot with a mound of earth. From this point Wynn directed measurements due north using compass and chain, a procedure familiar to Hospers from his days with American surveyors back in 1848-50 around Pella.

Step-by-step, the surveying party moved northward over the Sioux County prairie. It was early in July. The sun was warm and the sky above a deep blue, marked here and there with white, billowy clouds. Below lay gently rolling hills and valleys covered with the waving prairie grasses and scattered clusters of brightly-colored wild flowers. As the men from Pella walked over the rich and fertile prairie soil, now and then one of them would exclaim in his native tongue, "Oh, what a beautiful sight! Such rich soil! Where could one find a better country? Would that our friends and relatives back home could see this now!"

By midday the group reached a point marking the northern corner between present-day Nassau and Sherman Townships, having measured off exactly six miles. They rested and ate lunch and then sent one of their party with the team and wagon east to the Floyd River to make camp and prepare the evening meal.

Shortly after they resumed their measurements—on a hill some distance to the north—a figure on horseback appeared, silhouetted against the sky. They

stopped work to watch the stranger approaching them at a gallop. Growing larger and larger, as he came nearer the figure began to assume definite shape—the shape of an Indian, armed with a rifle.

The surveyors realized that they had left their guns in the wagon, now out of sight—and out of reach—behind them. The Indian reined his horse abruptly and came to a dead stop in front of the men. Hospers acted as spokesman for the surveyors. He later described the encounter:

The Indian gazed in wonder at us, and appeared to be fascinated with the moving needle on the compass. He was also, no doubt, in wonderment at our likely "Dutch" appearance. And we, of course, were amazed to see him. He may have noted our apprehension at his unexpected appearance. We may have looked more like fearful men than as immigrant surveyors. Whether we spoke to him in Dutch, German, English, or French, it made no difference. All he could reply was the typical "Ugh." He would only shrug his shoulders in answer to our questions. On both sides then, the conversation was without meaning, and the Indian sensing this perhaps, turned his horse and left as quickly as he had come.

The surveyors returned to their measurements. Just before sunset they arrived at campsite along the banks of the Floyd River. Their cook had hot coffee, bacon, and bread waiting. They ate and they talked about the surprise visitor, about the day's work.

Darkness settled. One of them discovered off to the south a flickering campfire. They could see men were walking around the fire. They must be Indians. Hospers said the Indian the surveyors had seen earlier was probably down there. The five Dutchmen, isolated, in country far from home and unfamiliar, decided to take turns guarding the camp throughout the night. Some of them went inside the tent, tried to



A party of surveyors (courtesy Division of Historical Museum and Archives)

sleep. No one heard a sound for a few hours. Then the shout went round the camp: "Boys, here they come!"

The men in the tent rushed out, excited, expecting the worst. But the guards could only point to a distant clump of bushes. The group investigated the clump and found that what the guards had thought were bloodthirsty warriors stealing upon them in the night were a few tall reeds bending slightly in the breeze. Satisfied that no one was sneaking about after their scalps, the men changed guards, and all was quiet once more.

The next morning the men continued surveying, and in a few days they returned

to Sioux City. In the office of the surveyor the committeemen drew lots to choose homesteads for themselves and their relatives, according to the prior agreement. The three who had come by wagon returned to Pella while Hospers stayed several days longer to complete the legal paper work, making out over 80 affidavits in the name of the Pella Association.

Settlers could obtain public lands in two ways—homesteading and preemption. The Preemption Act of 1841 legalized settlement prior to purchase. Settlers who staked claim to public-surveyed land and

labored to improve the land could buy up to 160 acres at \$1.25 per acre. Under the Homestead Act of 1862, an individual could enter a claim for up to 160 acres of surveyed public land and gain the title by continuous residence, improvements within five years, and a fee of \$26. Or, if the homesteader wished to gain full title earlier, and could prove six months' residence and improvement on an acre or more of land, he could do so by paying \$1.25 per acre.

In 1862, preemption was extended to include unsurveyed public land, while the Homestead Law continued to apply only to surveyed land. Both laws were recognized simultaneously and consequently a person could claim as much as 320 acres, 160 under preemption and 160 under homesteading.

In September, 1869 some 75 men with 18 wagons, teams, plows, plenty of provisions, and accompanied by three surveyors, journeyed to Sioux County. Homesteads and claims were staked out, and some preliminary plowing was begun to comply with the law. For most of them this was their first sight of the land where their future lay. As their sharp steel plows cut into the virgin prairie, turning the sod, they offered prayers of thanksgiving and praise to God. As one said, "This is God's leading. To the glory of God alone!"

All 18 members of Sioux County lived in the Big Sioux River valley along the western border. Calliope (Hawarden), a small village in the southwest portion of the county along the east bank of the river, served as the county seat. One of its four or five log cabins was the courthouse.

Four enterprising young men from Sioux City organized the county in February, 1860. Frederick M. Hubbell, acted as county clerk, holding this office for about a year before moving to Des Moines. Hubbell spent the rest of his life in Des Moines,



Henry Hospers

where he was known as a successful real estate man, railroad financier, and insurance executive. He became Iowa's wealthiest man, perhaps Des Moines' most prominent citizen.

The next spring several wagon trains left Pella for Sioux County. Hendrik J. Van der Waa, who had made the journey three times before, led the first train. That spring and summer other groups followed with their families, livestock, and household goods. Arriving at their homesteads or claims, they erected temporary shelters. Some made crude dwellings called "dugouts"—sod houses with foundations cut into the east or south side of a hill. Some built temporary shanties with lumber bought in Le Mars, 15 miles away. Others lived for weeks in tents or covered wagons,

building more secure dwellings of wood before winter. The men, whose ages averaged 38 years, spent the summer and fall breaking the prairie sod and constructing their homes.

Wagon trains to Pella passed through Fort Dodge, Storm Lake, and Cherokee, following stakes for the projected railroad from Dubuque to Sioux City which would eventually offer quicker transportation to the Dutch colonists.

Tjeerd Heemstra, one of the first to settle, set up a general store on his farm a mile south of the townsite, and was elected to the county board of supervisors that fall. Jelle Pelmulder, who had been a school master in the Netherlands, was elected clerk of courts, a position he held for many years.

Although mayor of Pella and well established in business, Henry Hospers decided to join his friends in northwest Iowa. As president of the townsite company, Hospers made a number of trips to the new colony during the spring and summer of 1870. He publicized the new enterprise in his newspaper, the *Pella-Weekblad*, and in other Dutch publications in Michigan and the Netherlands.

Hospers arranged for surveyors to plat the town in the new colony. Once the northeast quarter of section 32 in Holland Township was decided upon, they marked a public square, staked out lots, and named streets. Hospers called the settlement Orange City after William the Silent, the Prince of the House of Orange-Nassau, who led the Dutch in their war for independence against the mighty forces of the Spanish Empire in the 16th century.

Four more townships were given Dutch names: Holland, Nassau, East Orange, and Capel (Kapel) — named after the ancestral home of the Van Oosterhout family.

During the summer of 1870 the first buildings in the townsite were erected. The carpenter, A. J. Lenderink, built his house across the street from the village square, now Windmill Park, then put up a frame schoolhouse on the square.

In July, 1870 the State Board of Immigration commissioned Hospers to travel to his homeland to promote Dutch immigration to Iowa. Fearing the Netherlands might become involved in the Franco-Prussian War, Hospers delayed his departure until October and arrived in the Netherlands early the next month.

Home again after 23 years, Hospers hurried to the village of Hoog-Blokland, which he hadn't seen since a boy of 17. His arrival caused great excitement among the villagers. Friends and relatives called on him at the home of his uncle, William Middelkoop, or stopped to chat with him on the streets.

Hospers soon placed this advertisement in a number of Dutch newspapers:

Mr. Henry Hospers, Mayor of the City of Pella, in the State of Iowa, United States of America, specially commissioned by the Board of Immigration of the said State of Iowa, will remain in the Netherlands until the 15th day of January, A.D. 1871, for the purpose of giving detailed information to all who wish to emigrate to Iowa, about the country, climate, and prospects of said State. All letters will be promptly answered without charge; and further notice will be given at what places and times persons interested can have a general conference with him.

During the next two months Hospers held over 20 conferences in different cities. Saturdays he answered letters, Sundays he accompanied the Middelkoop family to the village church in Hoog-Blokland, which he had attended as a boy. Taking time off on such days he called on old friends and relatives. A visit to his old home revived child-

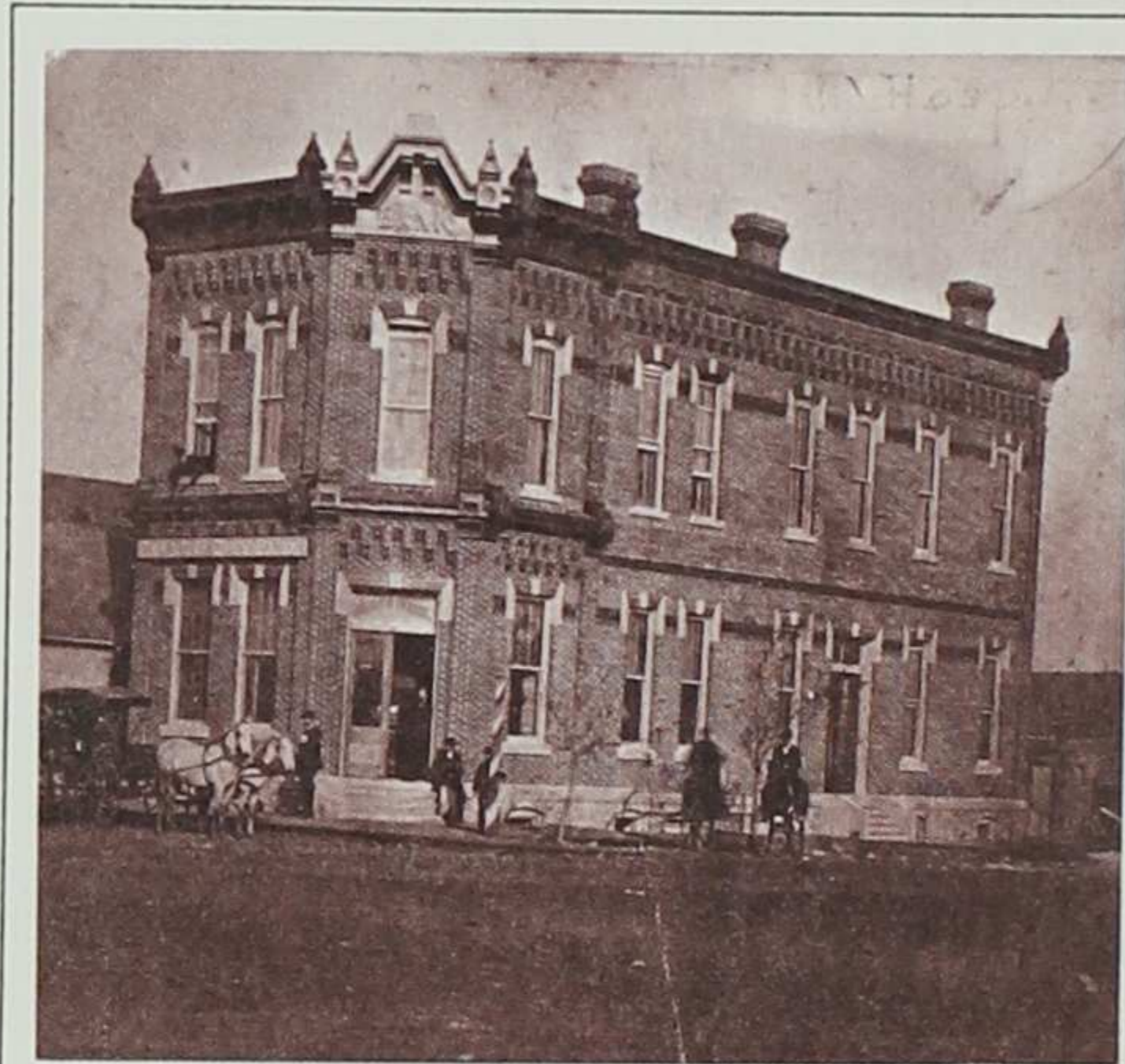
hood memories, and time passed swiftly. Before leaving, he placed notices in various Dutch newspapers, giving his address and stating he would answer all letters from those requesting information.

Hospers returned to Pella around the first of February, 1871. His report to the Board of Immigration for Iowa revealed that many people with large families were interested in Iowa, some of considerable wealth, "willing," he wrote, "to leave those comforts behind, in order to better the positions of their children." Some were taking steps to emigrate and others planned to move the next year after selling the property. Mechanics and capitalists, professional men and farmers, factory owners and workers, contemplated the move.

Hospers made up his mind to join the new settlers in Sioux County. He sold his properties and real estate business, arranged to dispose of the *Pella-Weekblad*, and resigned as mayor. His father objected strongly and begged him to stay, but 40-year-old Hospers was determined to go.

In the spring of 1871 Hospers contracted with a Pella carpenter named Gleysteen to build a store and house in Orange City. By June the house was ready. The Hospers family reached Le Mars by way of the Illinois Central; horse and buggy took them the final 15 miles to their new home. When Hospers walked into his store, which had opened a few months before, someone remarked, "There is the father of the colony, from now on, everything will go well."

The "Pioneer Store" was located just north of the village square. Many settlers were short of cash and Hospers soon set up a system where "store orders," took the place of money. Hospers issued these orders to those he employed for jobs such as plowing or cutting hay. It was then up to Hospers to transfer these bills of exchange



Built in 1884, Hospers' bank was called the Orange City Bank. It still stands. (courtesy of the author)

into legal currency.

During 1871 the village of Orange City acquired eight houses and a number of businesses, including a hotel, barbershop, blacksmith, and a shoe store. Houses, barns, and graineries were going up on the countryside. Farmers planted trees for shade and windbreaks, and set out fruit trees.

From the start Hospers was a leading figure in the colony and after building an office just east of the village square from which he conducted his real estate business, he continued to be its most ardent promoter. He supervised the townsite company, was notary public, attorney-at-law, and trustee of Holland and Floyd Townships. For a few months he served as village postmaster and county superintendent of schools, but he resigned these posts when elected to the board of supervisors in the fall of 1871.

The Hospers house soon proved too small for the family of eight. Within a few

years Hospers had a larger house, a prefabricated structure made in Pella, erected on the corner of the block where the post office now stands. Hospers had trees and shrubs planted, and in time it came to be called "Maple Corners." An invalid friend, Hendrika's (Hospers' second wife) nephew, and Henry's brother Cornelius shared the house with the family. Visitors to Orange City often stopped at the Hospers home. On one occasion, when unexpected company arrived just before dinner, the Hospers served a hastily prepared batch of pancakes, to the satisfaction of all.

Occasionally, wealthy parents in the Netherlands sent hard-to-manage sons to Hospers, requesting that he watch over them. He did what he could, but at times they caused him much anxiety and grief.

Some visitors from Holland were more pleasant to receive. In November, 1873 the Hospers family entertained the distinguished Dr. Cohen Stuart and his wife. Dr. Stuart had come from the Netherlands as a delegate to the Sixth Conference of the World's Evangelical Alliance held in New York City. When Hospers learned that Dr. Stuart was in New York he invited him to visit Orange City.

Hospers met the Stuarts at Fort Dodge and accompanied them to Le Mars. After a chilly buggy ride the last 15 miles, the party arrived at the Hospers home early Saturday evening. Here after a warm greeting from the Hospers family and Rev. Seine Bolks, they sat down to enjoy a hot meal.

The next day, Sunday, dawned clear and crisp, with a slight breeze. Later Stuart described the scene as "The little settlers' town with its widely scattered wooden houses, and beyond, here and there, at a great distance, a little blue cloud of smoke rising from the green field of this or that farm hidden in the fields of undulating

prairie." As Stuart walked the two blocks to church, families arrived in buggies and wagons. Others rode horseback. The school house on the public square served as a house of worship. Stuart preached at both morning and afternoon services and later described his feelings as he faced the pioneer audience:

Would that my friend Bosboom, who understands so well the charm of light and brown and knows how to put feelings and even poetry into a stable or a landscape, would that he were here for a short quarter of an hour to catch the ray of light which the pale winter's sun causes to play through the little open side-window against the dark wainscot and upon so many quiet and pious upturned faces; or would that Rochussen could reproduce that audience with a few of his ingenious, characteristic figures: men with quiet power and strength written in their bearing and upon their faces, and women some of whom were nursing children, with hands clasped in prayer . . . I have seldom if ever been more inspired by an audience than the one in the midst of which I was permitted to stand that morning, and if I returned any of the inspiration which those hearers unconsciously gave to me, that Sunday morning on the prairies was not entirely lost for eternity.

The next morning the Stuarts boarded the train at East Orange for St. Paul. Stopping briefly at a station named Hospers, Stuart thought of his host. The St. Paul and Sioux City Railroad, which had been in operation about one year, was the first line to reach Sioux County, at this time but four villages—Calliope, Orange City, East Orange (Alton), and Hospers.

The county seat was moved from Calliope to Orange City, the largest of the four villages, in 1872. With a population of about 250, the town comprised over 50 buildings, including two general stores, a hardware store, a shoe store, two hotels, two land offices, a furniture store, a school, and the businesses of three lawyers, one



Henry Hospers' first house in Orange City, built in 1871 by Gleysteen, burned to the ground in the 1930s. (courtesy of the author)

doctor, and two blacksmiths.

It was impossible for the early residents of Orange City and the surrounding area to foresee the troubles that lay ahead. The first hint came in June, 1873. Suddenly one Sunday afternoon great swarms of Rocky Mountain locusts swept down from the sky, devouring all crops, pasture grass, and gardens. Only a few fields in northwest Iowa escaped the destruction.

Grasshoppers struck again and again during 1874-79. Discouraged, many settlers sold their farms and businesses, leaving the area at great sacrifice. But most settlers persevered, hoping for better times.

As realtor and local banker, Henry Hospers refused to buy up the land which now

Note on Sources

Most of the references in this article are to Jacob Van Der Zee's *The Hollanders of Iowa* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1912). Hospers published accounts of the early settlement in *De Volksvriend*, the Dutch newspaper of Orange City; other details appear in *The Sioux County Herald*. These newspapers are held in microfilm at the Division of the State Historical Society in Iowa City. Dr. Cohen Stuart's description of Orange City may be found translated in the *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, 11 (April, 1913) 240-47. The Hospers Papers are kept in the Dutch Heritage Collection, Ramaker Library, Northwestern College, Orange City. An explanation of the homestead and preemption laws was provided by Roy M. Robbins, *Our Landed Heritage: The Public Domain, 1776-1936* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962). Also useful was *Iowa: The Home for Immigrants* (1870) reprinted by the State Historical Society in 1970.

went for a low price. Instead he tried persuading farmers and businessmen to remain, giving wise counsel to all who asked him for advice and helping many with loans. Henry Hospers was convinced better times lay ahead. In his Dutch weekly newspaper, *De Volksvriend* (*The People's Friend*), he urged people to stay, insisting that northwest Iowa would become one of the most prosperous agricultural regions of the Midwest.

As the years passed conditions steadily improved. The 1880 harvests were abundant, and more settlers arrived each year. Other communities were started, including Maurice, Sioux Center, North Orange (Newkirk), Middleburg, Rock Valley, Sheridan (Boyden), Pattersonville (Hull), Granville, and Ireton.

Early pioneer leaders in Orange City dreamt of establishing a school of higher learning. The by-laws of the townsite company provided that one-fifth of the money received from the sale of lots would be

deposited in a special fund for the formation of such a school. But the economic hardships of the late 1870s postponed these plans. As the early pastor, Rev. Bolks said, "The grasshoppers flew away with our hopes."

But in 1882 Hospers, Rev. Bolks, and others, revived these plans, forming a board of trustees to direct the affairs of the projected school, the Northwestern Classical Academy. Classes began in September, 1883 with 25 students. Henry Hospers had always hoped that one day the Academy might develop into a college. This became a reality in 1966 when Northwestern College was established.

Hospers contributed much to the Dutch settlement of northwest Iowa. His professional experience as journalist, banker, realtor, and public office-holder eased many of the problems the early settler encountered. More important, Henry Hospers believed in the Dutch people and in the Iowa prairie; from this combination came a new life for the immigrants and their descendants. □