

Glimpses of the
EARLY DUTCH
SETTLEMENTS
in Michigan



As Revealed by Selections from
Manuscripts in the
Michigan Historical Collections

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

IN COMMEMORATION of the 100th anniversary of the establishment in 1847 of the Dutch colony in western Michigan, and in the hope that the information here briefly presented may inspire a more detailed study of the sources on the Dutch in Michigan, this pamphlet is issued by the Michigan Historical Collections.

BULLETIN No. 1
of the MICHIGAN HISTORICAL COLLECTIONS
University of Michigan

NOVEMBER 1947

DUTCH SETTLEMENTS IN MICHIGAN

OUTSTANDING in the history of the 1847 settlement of Hollanders in Western Michigan is the strong dominance in leadership exercised by the man who initiated the movement—Albertus C. Van Raalte. There were other vigorous personalities among the first settlers—Vander Meulen, Bolks, Vande Luyster, to name but a few—yet in the “Kolonie” the prestige of Van Raalte’s leadership was unquestioned. His actions were sometimes criticized, but his authority was supreme. Similarly, the Americans—“Engelsen,” the Dutch were wont to call them—whether dealing with the Dutch settlers as fellow-Protestants, as potential economic customers, or as sharers in political privileges, always thought of them as “Van Raalte’s people.”

Thus it was not strange that when in 1850 Paulus den Bleyker established a Dutch “kolonie” in Kalamazoo he should have turned to Van Raalte for advice and assistance. Den Bleyker’s problems of leadership were quite different, it is true, from those of Van Raalte. Van Raalte had come with limited financial means, with a relatively large group of settlers, to a region of almost unbroken forest. Den Bleyker had about \$30,000 to invest, brought only twenty-nine persons in his original band, and settled in Kalamazoo, a village of 2,500, which the Michigan Central Railroad from Detroit had reached in 1846 (Chicago, the western terminus of the road, was destined to be reached in 1852). However, despite the fact that the out-

look appeared promising, Den Bleyker lost little time, following his arrival on October 1, 1850, in turning to Van Raalte for advice. A considerable number of the letters which passed between these two interesting individuals have been preserved in the large body of Den Bleyker papers in the possession of the Michigan Historical Collections of the University of Michigan.

"I am writing you briefly to reply to your letter of greeting in which you expressed a wish to meet me," Van Raalte wrote Den Bleyker on December 19, 1850. Explaining that unexpected engagements had interfered with his plan to visit Kalamazoo, and that he would probably be unable to make the trip before the second week in January, he asked, "Since you wish to see our settlement, would it not be better that you should come here first? I welcome you with all the cordiality that you extended me when you offered me your home, and you may without hesitation make your stay with me. Should you come by sleigh, I might be able to make the return trip to Kalamazoo with you, which would be very convenient for me."

The immediate occasion for Den Bleyker's letter had evidently been his concern lest a deed he had received from former Governor Epaphroditus Ransom, who had sold his 180 acre farm in Kalamazoo to Den Bleyker for \$12,000, might not be valid. Van Raalte offered immediate reassurance on this point: Ransom, as a man interested in holding public office (he had been in office practically his entire mature lifetime) would, he was sure, not jeopardize his reputation by any irregular dealings.

Four days after this initial letter, Van Raalte wrote again. This time it was to comply with a request from Governor Ransom that he induce Den Bleyker either to enter a brokerage business with Ransom and his son, or to permit the firm to invest his money for him. Van Raalte responded to Ransom's request by simply forward-

ing to Den Bleyker a translation of the portion of Ransom's letter in which the proposition was stated.

Two weeks later, on January 9, 1851, Van Raalte wrote again—this time in considerable detail. He explained why he had not gone to see Den Bleyker: "I have from the first refrained from meeting you because I did not wish to take responsibility upon myself; and because experience has taught me that the newly arriving Hollanders must as a rule learn by experience rather than by advice." Mentioning that "various men" were seeking to have him use his influence "to persuade you to invest your capital off-hand in partnerships," he not unnaturally offered arguments to induce Den Bleyker to "begin business among this Holland people. Growing up amongst ourselves and with a number of Americans in our midst who are dependent upon us, will give you opportunity to undertake business and to grow along with it."

"From the very first I realized," Van Raalte went on, "and time has confirmed me in the opinion, that Western Michigan's great need is for a trading center and for the provision of a direct travel route which will afford Wisconsin the shortest route to the Eastern States. By the compelling law of nature, the development of a settlement here will meet this need, for here is a safe and beautiful harbor running six miles into the interior, into land which, because of its rich soil and its exceptional harbors, will give rise to a settlement, to which and through which the direct route will run. Within 15 years, if God does not visit special judgments upon us, our harbor will be the focus of various highways by rail and plank road; and when the old plan for a canal to unite Lake Erie with Michigan Lake is revived, this will be the place where it will join with Michigan Lake. These were my convictions from the beginning and now many Milwaukee, Detroit, and Grand Rapids papers, etc., etc., are full of the idea

and point to the glowing reports which the engineers have made of our harbor. You see it is my firm conviction that this settlement and area have a great destiny. I find constant confirmation of this in the efforts of Americans who by offers are trying to secure a firm foothold and undertake business here, efforts which are increasing now because of the growing hope that Congress may even this year grant 10 thousand dollars to begin harbor works. Even one thousand dollars could provide us with a wharf on Michigan Lake, where a pile-driver and materials already lie prepared, sufficient to put us in touch with the largest steamboats, etc.

“There is, too, the revival of a plan to erect a steam engine on the edge of deep water for driving two saws and two pairs of millstones and at the same time providing for the sale of as much steam as a turner’s shop and iron foundry and several other branches of manufacture would need. This business you could very well undertake. I should be willing to do so with you, and in any event I can make it possible for you to carry out this plan. Many Hollanders have, contrary to my counsel and advice, foolishly squandered their money. I should be sorry to see the actual advantages of the new venture come only under the control of the English [Americans]. I am willing to undertake the matter, and for your capital give you security in real estate, and if it please you, later give you as partner half or, if need be, more than half, as soon as you are convinced of the soundness of the business.”

Further requests for advice prompted Van Raalte to write again on January 22, 1851. After detailed instructions as to legal procedure to be followed in the transfer of property, he offered words to fortify Den Bleyker against discouragement:

“That in the midst of all this you should feel a sense of burden in America I can readily understand, but be-

lieve me, Bleyker, America inspires me in every way with a deep sense of gratitude and I draw freer breath here despite all the heavy responsibilities of a full sphere of activities. I am convinced, however, that you in your sphere, during your life, will have to taste the bitterness of being a stranger in a strange land. Yet everyone who in rightness of heart establishes himself here will find himself not in a strange land but in peace and spaciousness. Though on this I love to pour out my heart, yet enough for the moment.

“. . . . In the beginning, because of ignorance and suspicion I frequently experienced ingratitude. Yet God, who molds the hearts of men, makes my heart live completely in that of the Holland people and to serve them is not a burden to me. I myself was once an immigrant, sitting, with my family and a hundred souls around me, on our trunks, and boxes. I experienced all the immigrant's sense of rawness and bleakness. . . . This experience has so gripped my heart that it has been possible for me more than for many a Hollander, to serve with sympathy and understanding. I feel, indeed, that it is my duty before God, the stranger's keeper, to serve, though I sometimes feel restrained in that service by the unmannerliness of the people I meet.”

Apparently he could not refrain from returning to the theme of the opportunities for Den Bleyker in the settlement at Holland. He painted a bright future for the man willing to invest in business there:

“Everybody knows that this place is the most excellent point for a tannery. That is why from the beginning I have had requests from Americans to let them have a site along the waterfront for such a purpose. If there were only more capital among the Americans to undertake business, they would come here in large numbers. One cannot, if he has any knowledge of the geographical situ-

ation and the fine harbor facilities, fail to admit that the favorable location, etc., is striking, and that the law of nature has designated this point as a staple center for commerce in Western Michigan. Many ignorant Hollanders, because of their lack of spirit, desire a fat table in servitude more than the building of a fortune for themselves and their children by exertion and perseverance. These persons may relay to you unfavorable rumors, but, Bleyker, do not allow yourself to be misled. In the last number of 'De Hollander' there was an article in English about newspaper reports of how other areas desired to be connected with us by plank roads (someone will be able to read it for you) and you can gather from this what informed Americans are thinking.

"The newness of the place can only be of advantage to you, the ice has been broken and business has taken root. . . . the wheels [of business] begin to hum and it is not difficult to become a property owner; land is just ready to rise in value. For what price could you have bought your farm twelve years ago? Since that time it has made its increase and it is not likely that it will go through another such rise. And what in contrast may the same amount of land in this colony be worth twelve years from now, especially that along the waterfront? We may expect the same increment, indeed, we may expect, in the ordinary course of nature, a greater one for lands along the waterfront. The sellers in Kalamazoo are now enjoying their increase. No, Bleyker, if I were not convinced that your capital would be doubled I would not speak so boldly to you. You would, of course, have to follow the right leads, for there is no art in squandering one's money in foolish ways. There are many who have learned not by counsel but by hard experience. Capital can increase greatly here in good and constructive ways. However, if people with evil intent should come here with capital,

they would crush the young and gulp down the weak. God save us from such a curse."

It was, indeed, because he was convinced that Den Bleyker was a man of character and ability that Van Raalte was so eager to have him come to Holland. "It is true that I do not know you personally", he wrote, "but I have testimony from various sources which reveal you as a man whose religious principles, I believe, agree with mine; as a man who is capable in affairs, not narrow in spirit, and who does not seek to exploit others. We need business men of such character, who are endowed with means I feel that I must use opportunities, especially when God in his providence provides them and puts me in touch with them."

Van Raalte did not stop with arguments; four weeks later he offered Den Bleyker land along Black Lake free of payment—"as much as you need and at whatever point you choose." Den Bleyker accepted the gift, choosing frontage on Black River. The land was presented on condition that Den Bleyker take active measures in building saw and grist mills to be ready for use in the Fall. In April Van Raalte reported the purchase, for four hundred dollars, of a house for Den Bleyker.

Van Raalte's inducements were effective, though not permanently so: Den Bleyker moved to Holland in 1852, but remained there for only a few months. There is no specific record of why he returned so promptly to Kalamazoo, but one suspects it was in large part because he had fared well there from the very outset. His economic success is clearly reflected in a letter he wrote in November, 1853, to Dirk Tanis in Texel, The Netherlands. Tanis had written Den Bleyker the previous spring saying that he would like to come to America. Den Bleyker was enthusiastic in his reply:

"It was with pleasure that we received your letters

which arrived some time ago. They found us in good health. We were grieved to hear of the death of your son.

“Your Honor seems to be very curious about me and about this country. My friend, if I were to spend a month with you I could tell you more about it than I can write. As to what you had in mind [that is, coming to America] I am pleased that you think so about it, and I find myself in agreement with you. But to give you advice—that is not so easy, for it is common experience that when the venturer suffers reverses the adviser suffers great reproach, since it is not generally enough recognized that the Lord has in His hands every man’s course and all that befalls him. He directs all according to His wise counsel. I am willing, however, to tell you how I feel. . . . In the first place the land and all other things such as grain and cattle are now so expensive where you are that you could profit by coming, for everyone knows that when one has had high tide, ebb tide usually follows. Here we have a free land and it is a good land, especially for such a person as you who understands farming and is able to buy a good farm, for the land is still cheap here, although increasing in price each year. This very summer I was offered a farm close to the city for 12½ dollars per acre and another farm for 22 dollars per acre. This was good land, with house and barn, fencing, and a good apple orchard. At that price you cannot afford to go into the woods to buy land and clear it. Farms have been offered me on which the cost of the house and of planting the fruit trees was more than the price for which they were offered. When the Americans can sell for cash it is easy to deal with them. I sold my farm on the prairie—327 acres of the best land—for \$6000. He [the purchaser] has ten years to pay, with interest at 7 per cent for the unpaid balance. I believe that he will be able to pay for it with the produce and still have money left.

“You inquire about wild and strange animal life. Well, my friend, what notion do they give you of this country, as if here all were prey to wildness and lack of civilization? I cannot say that there is no wild life in the interior of the forest many hours from here, but even so one is safe day and night wherever he goes or stays. For the rest, all government and administration is carried on in the greatest order with justice and without revolution or compulsion. Here it is not necessary for people to crowd out others—there are fish in every little stream, and the laborer can live as well as the employer. You must not think that instruction in the schools for children is inferior to that anywhere in Holland; moreover, it is cheap.

“You ask about religion. We here are also in the world, and you know that it has, in Adam, completely and wholly turned away from God to sin, but I believe that there are some here, who through the Son, share in the Lord. You know, however, that it is written that with the delay of the Bridegroom the wise virgins, as well as the foolish, fell asleep.

“The prices of grain are: Wheat, \$1.25; Rye, 75 cts.; Oats, 40 cts.; Barley, 75 cts.; Potatoes, 37 cts. per bu.; Wool, 50 cts.; Meat, 4 cts. a lb.; Pork, 6 cts. a lb. Butter from 20 to 25 cts. a lb.

“If it should happen that you do come to America, do not stay in the eastern states as your brother-in-law has done. Do not allow yourself to be misled by deceiving people, for many Americans there sell all their goods and come here. So why should you stay there? If you should come, bring nothing except your clothes and the bedding you use, and neither tools nor apparatus, for all these things are better here than where you are. But if you could bring the best kind of Texel sheep, that would be worth a lot. As for me if I could get 6 good sheep with two good rams to secure the breed I would be willing to pay

60 to 70 gulden apiece for them. There are no breeds here except the English and the Spanish—all long-tails. Very fine wool but little of it.

“The Kalamazoo area is healthful and it is one of the pleasantest places one could find in America. There is also a fine community of Hollanders here. Now, my friend, I hope that I have given you a sufficient account and that I have satisfied your request.”

For the 327-acre farm sold for \$6000, Den Bleyker less than three years before had paid about \$5000; the 180-acre Ransom Farm, which lay almost in the center of the city, was steadily becoming more valuable to him. It is small wonder that he was not attracted to the more primitive and less promising community at Holland. Van Raalte seems not to have been offended by Den Bleyker's decision: correspondence between them continued for several years.

One may well ponder how the history of Van Raalte's settlement might have been altered had Den Bleyker chosen to join forces with him permanently; likewise how Den Bleyker's withdrawal from Kalamazoo would have affected that community. Of this we have abundant evidence, however: Den Bleyker's decision brought no disaster to either settlement. Both flourished, and the two leaders lived long enough (Den Bleyker died in 1872, Van Raalte, in 1876) to be confident of a prosperous and secure future for the Dutch settlements they had founded.

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Fortunately for the historian, both Van Raalte and Den Bleyker left large collections of personal papers which will yield bountiful information to historians undertaking to tell the story of the Dutch settlements in Holland and Kalamazoo. The Van Raalte papers are now owned by Mr. William B. Eerdmans, of Grand Rapids,

and were recently used by Professor Albert Hyma in preparing his "Albertus C. Van Raalte and His Dutch Settlements in the United States." The Den Bleyker papers were acquired by the Michigan Historical Collections of the University of Michigan in 1938, and have been the subject of extensive study on the part of Miss Effa Zwier, of Grand Rapids, in the preparation of a biography of Paulus Den Bleyker. The translations presented above were made by Dr. Harry De Vries, who has had considerable experience in research work in Dutch sources, and who hopes shortly to prepare a study based on materials in the Den Bleyker papers.

L. G. Vander Velde

