

## *They Chose Canada*

Engbert and Johanna Kolkman's Immigration Story

They came from the back yard of the Netherlands, the Achterhoek, where farmlands and woodlands hug the eastern border with Germany. If you were to walk these woods today, you'd hear the sweet sounds of birds trilling. You could easily forget that these very woods rang with the harsh sound of gunfire and death over sixty years ago. The dairy farms were overrun by tanks and soldiers. The farmers and their young sons were pressed into service, digging trenches and doing menial labour for the occupying army. Some of the last battles of the Second World War were fought in the Achterhoek. Now, only the quiet cemeteries, sheltered by trees and blessed by birdsong, mark the resting places of the many Canadians who died liberating the Netherlands.

On the far side of the world, another struggle for liberation was underway. When Japan surrendered to the Allies in August 1945, Indonesians declared independence from Dutch rule. In one last colonial gasp, the Dutch government packed their war-weary youth onto ships bound for Indonesia. In November 1949, the United Nations, formed at the end of World War II, pressured the Netherlands to recognize the independence of Indonesia. Many Dutch soldiers returned to the Netherlands restless, for having tasted the salt spray and touched new lands, they found they could not be easily bound to Dutch soil again.

Engbert Kolkman was one of these young men who felt the pull to uproot and emigrate, even though his father needed him to work the family farm. In fact, his father had written to the Dutch government asking that they release his son six months early from military duty. Engbert was sent home early, and the first action the young soldier took was to visit the families of fallen comrades. Then he returned to his father and took up the work on the family farm. Albert, a year younger than Engbert, was also sent to Indonesia, where he served in the Royal Dutch Navy. He was skilled with numbers and assisted with the administration of the Dutch forces.

His 13 year old brother, Jan Harmen, peppered him with questions about the Indonesian war, sure to hear about glorious battles. Instead, Engbert spoke only of the lush tropical plants and the delicious food, like nasi goreng. He wanted to put the harsh memories behind him. Only once did Jan Harmen see how frightening it must have been for the nineteen year old soldier. One day he and Engbert were working the fields and a neighbour was hunting hares close by. At the sound of gunshot, Engbert dropped to the ground to protect himself.

Many years later, sitting around the campfire during Engbert and Johanna's fiftieth wedding anniversary celebration, their children, grandchildren and visiting Dutch family members heard the traumatic story. Engbert's troop of young Dutchmen was attacked while on patrol. Several of his comrades were killed and Engbert's leg was injured. He had to drag himself back to his camp to get help, hiding in ditches and slipping through the dark night to avoid detection. Family members also heard Engbert's youngest son, Eric, tell of how Engbert volunteered to take his father's place when Nazi soldiers came to the farm to take able-bodied men away to work during the Second World War. Several times the 16 year old boy slipped away through the night to return to his family farm at risk of death from Nazi patrols. He was lucky that there was always a different commanding officer coming to the farm to demand labourers and he was never caught.

Before leaving for Indonesia, Engbert had fallen in love with Johanna Heideman. Dreaming of Johanna's brown eyes and shy smile kept him going through the crude terrors of the Indonesian war zone. Before and after the Indonesian war, Engbert and Johanna looked forward to Sundays, because that is when they would meet at church. Their families walked or went by horse drawn coach several kilometers down treed lanes to the Gereformeerde Kerk in Geesteren, a village between the village of Gelselaar and the little city of Borculo. The Kolkmans traveled from the north, the Heidemans from the south.

They continued their courtship upon his return from Indonesia and were anxious to marry, but housing for young couples was in short supply in those years after the war. They also would have to wait several years for their own farmland, and this seemed too long for them. The Netherlands struggled to rebuild itself as a nation whose infrastructure, farmland and social systems had been shattered and there simply wasn't enough land or jobs to support everyone. The government encouraged farming citizens to leave, but wanted citizens with engineering, planning, construction, financial and other skills to stay and rebuild the country. Canada needed agricultural workers so this was a perfect match for young people eager to forge their own path.

Engbert proposed to Johanna that they marry and emigrate to Canada and she agreed. At the time, she worked away from her family farm, minding the children of a city family in Borculo. She biked in each day, earning 5 guilders a week. She began to save for furniture and household goods to take to Canada. She earned wages while Engbert

earned his room and board on the family farm. Her wages and a small inheritance after the death of her father gave her enough money to buy a beautifully carved buffet, a table, 4 chairs, a bed, night tables, linen closet and 2 chairs for their bedroom along with dishes, pots and pans. The young couple traveled into Borculo each week to study English and plan for their adventure. They were both twenty-three and their youthful dreams and passions propelled them forward. They saw leaving as the only chance for a farm of their own, so they set their minds to it and never looked back

The other Kolkman children began to follow their own paths in life. Some moved away from farming and from Gelselaar, while others stayed in the area. Bert, the oldest son, worked for a co-operative in the Achterhoek, before leaving for Noord Holland, where he established a printing business in Den Helder. Reintje and her husband Henk farmed on the polder near Nagele and already had small children. Albert trained and worked as an accountant in Borculo, and later moved to Deventer where he met and married Ina. Jan Harmen, then 17, was finishing higher level high school in Zutphen. On weekends and summers he worked on the farm before taking a job at the Philips factory in Eindhoven. From there he went to Groningen and made the north his home, becoming a mathematics and physics lecturer, a college director and an international tour guide. Jan married Clary in 1967.

Three of the Kolkman children were still on the farm when Engbert left, Aleid who was 21, and Derk, who was 19. Aleid helped her mother with eight year-old Bennie, who was physically and mentally disabled. When Bennie moved to a long-term care facility in Apeldoorn, the family was required to send a helper for 4 years and Aleid made the commitment to go. Later, she decided to become a professional nurse and moved to Groningen for training. There she met her future husband, Emmo. Derk worked alongside his father and inherited the Kolkman farm in 1962 when illness forced his father to stop working. He married Jans in 1962 and they worked the farm for many years before selling it in 1973 and buying another farm in the general area.

Engbert's father hid his disappointment when Engbert told him he would leave the farm and set up his own farm in Alberta. His father would not hold his son to the land through family obligation and he covered the costs of the marriage in April 1952 and paid for their passage and train travel in June. The day before leaving for Rotterdam, father and son shook hands in the field. The senior Kolkman returned to his plowing, while the younger Kolkman set his eyes on new horizons. There was no big send-off from the Kolkman family because they had all been together in Groningen for the marriage of Henk and Annie two weeks earlier. Henk was a water engineer and worked in the Groningen province before settling later in Assen.

Johanna and Engbert lived with her family after their wedding. Johanna's family gathered in her parents' home Friday evening before their departure on Saturday morning. Johanna's oldest brother, Jan, sent them off with 100 guilders payment for some work Engbert had done on the Heideman farm, rented from a widow near Borculo. Her brother, Arend, came by motorbike from the farm he worked on near Wijhe. He later bought this farm, married Gerry and raised his family there. The oldest sister, Janna, had been married for 13 years and lived on a farm on one side of Gelselaar, while her sister Dina married in 1948 and lived on the other side of Gelselaar. Aaltje married in 1946 and lived on a farm near Ruurlo.

The stoic Dutch upbringing, the hard work on the farm and the war years of survival had toughened them and they were not a hugging or kissing people. Johanna's mother simply shook her daughter's hand and sent her on her way. The only care she allowed herself was to instruct her new son-in-law "Engbert, you have to promise me that you will take good care of Hannie, because she is such a slender little woman!" She had already bid farewell to two daughters, Gerda and Tonia, who sailed for Ontario, Canada a few months earlier. Two years later, she would send off her youngest daughter, Gerry, after her marriage to Bill Hulsman. Gerry and Bill were the only family members to fly across the Atlantic. They landed in Toronto and traveled to visit Gerda and Tonia and Bill's family in rural Ontario before boarding a train to Edmonton.

Upon seeing her younger sister, Janna broke tradition and gave way to emotion. She wept as she tried to grasp how far away Canada was, fearing that she would never see her little sister again. Yet she was the one who came to Canada four times to visit and traveled to California and many other places after her children had grown and her husband had died. Grada, at 22, worked off the farm, and was able to get some rare time off to come home to say good-bye. In those days, workers got every other Sunday off after milking.

Johanna, Engbert and his sister, Aleid were up very early on Saturday morning, waiting for the emigrant bus from Groenlo to take them to the port city of Rotterdam. The bus bumped along the eastern town roads, collecting them and other young people and families along the route. In the big harbour of Rotterdam, the Rijndam lay waiting to ferry them away to their new land. They treated themselves to lunch before boarding in the afternoon. Aleid, with a

lump in her throat, watched Engbert slip his last Dutch herring down his throat, savouring each salty bite, as he prepared to leave his homeland forever.

The Rijndam sailed from Rotterdam on Saturday, June 13, 1952. On board, Johanna was flabbergasted by the fancy dining room and silverware. She had only traveled in the eastern provinces of the Netherlands, and once to the northern city of Groningen, and had seen little other than the simple, hard-working life of farmers. Engbert, being more seasoned, made friends easily with others on board. He even scoffed a few drinks from fellow travellers, trading stories with some who had been in Indonesia. They had a bit more money than he and gladly paid for his drinks in the spirit of young adventurers. Johanna kept mostly to their cabin, struggling with seasickness and nausea from the early stages of pregnancy.

The ship approached Halifax harbour Saturday evening, June 21<sup>st</sup>, the longest day of the year. The city lights sparkled a welcome to the excited travellers. The passengers were not allowed to disembark at Pier 21 until Sunday morning. Packed and ready to go early that morning, Engbert and Johanna stood eagerly, yet patiently in line and were swept along with the crowd as it flowed into the building. They all wore tags on their coats with their destinations clearly marked. They spoke little English and remember no one greeting them in Dutch. They were steered through the building and outside towards the train station and the train that would take them westward. The Pier 21 process was all very organized and functional, impressing the practical young couple.

And then they saw a sight they hadn't expected. They were greeted with a wall of fear. There were men walking up and down outside the building carrying signs. Engbert worked to piece together the words, chatting with other Dutch immigrants and figuring out that the signs read "No more DPs". (No more Displaced persons and immigrants) Then, he understood. They were afraid the continuing waves of immigrants would take their jobs! These men were labour unionists fighting for jobs for their own people. Engbert thought he could understand their fears and feelings. After all, hadn't Canada done enough already? He had left his own country due to lack of work and opportunity and he also remembered how Indonesians had fought to regain control of their country. Young Canadian men and women had laid down their lives to help liberate the Netherlands. Canada had taken in thousands of refugees and immigrants in the first years after the war. Dutch immigration reached its peak in 1952, with a total of 20,653 immigrants making their way across Canada. The country was just coming out of a recession in 1951 and times were hard for many.

They quietly made their way past the picketers to the train station. The train was a converted troop carrier and the benches were hard. During the war years, young Canadians rode the rails to Halifax to catch the boats to the battlefields of Europe. Now, these same troop cars and rails carried European immigrants across Canada to new beginnings. They swayed back and forth on the benches, the conductor calling out the names of the towns they past. These were new sounds for Dutch ears, a mix of Mi'kmaq, and English: Truro, Amherst, Shubenacadie, Sackville, Moncton, Edmunston. Wait, was that Edmonton they heard the conductor call out? Could they be there already? But, no, Edmonton was still 4 days away.

They rumbled through the Maritimes, and then along the south shore of la belle province de Quebec. They saw only, trees, lakes and small towns and villages and the great St. Lawrence river. They wondered, "where's the farm land we've heard so much about?" They saw the great Chateau Frontenac perched on the Quebec bluffs above the river, not knowing about the decisive battle fought on the Plains of Abraham that decided the future of the country they were embracing. The train carried them onwards to Montreal, where they switched to a more comfortable coach for the long journey to Edmonton. They rolled westward across the Great Canadian Shield to prairie cities with Cree names like Winnipeg and Saskatoon.

They journeyed across this great land, enjoying the long days of late June. They were a young couple in love, she carrying their first child, a new and uncertain life before them. Sometimes they were silent, each lost in their own thoughts. What would it be like when they reached Edmonton, Alberta? What if they couldn't get the promised jobs on the farm? Would they ever see their families again? Their spirits began to lift as they crossed the prairies and traveled, the rail line cutting through fields of oats, barley and wheat. At last, this was the Canada for which they had left their homeland.

Finally, in the afternoon of the fourth day, they reached their destination. They stepped off the CN train on the north side of the North Saskatchewan River in Edmonton on June 26<sup>th</sup>. They had landed in Canada with \$54 Canadian dollars and Johanna's frugal spending made that money stretch all the way across this wide country, buying food along the way whenever the train stopped and making their own meals. They had enough left to buy food in Edmonton for their first few weeks.

A pastor representing the Dutch Immigration Society greeted the young couple. They were supposed to travel further northwest to work for a farmer near Westlock. Instead, the pastor directed them to a farm southeast of Edmonton. He thought there were more opportunities for a young couple in the Edmonton area than in Westlock. Five days later, they marked Dominion Day, July 1<sup>st</sup>, by picking rocks. To the farmer, it was just another day and he put the new immigrants to work right away. They felt they earned their citizenship building up farmlands, even though it would be ten years before they were finally full-fledged Canadians.

At the end of a back-breaking day, they heard from other young Dutch labourers that the farmer only wanted them for the rocks. There would be no work for them in the winter, and by then, all the farm placements would be gone. They packed up after nine days and left. They found work on the Harrington farm where they were paid \$4.00 per day, with housing included. It was a dairy farm and since they both were raised on dairy farms, this was something they knew and there would be year-round work.

Six weeks into their new land, they received news that their furniture had arrived in Westlock. Tom Harrington made the long trek to pick it up for them. Their only link to their homeland for a long time was the furniture Johanna brought and they moved it from farm to farm. The buffet and 2 bedroom chairs are with them yet today, while the linen closet and bedside tables are with the two youngest children, Eric and Annette, the twins.

During the fifties, Alberta farm labourers stooked the hay and grain by hand, forking it onto horse-drawn hay wagons. Johanna and Engbert experienced their first prairie harvest. All the farmers and their labourers worked together, going as a group from farm to farm, making sure that all the farms got their crop in from the fields. Johanna cleaned the milk machine on a daily basis.

There are many stories to be told of their first years in Canada as they struggled to make a living, learn English, and raise the three boys who were born in their first three years in Canada. When it came time for the birth of their first son in January, Engbert was in the barn. He asked Farmer Harrington to take them into the Royal Alexandra Hospital in central Edmonton, but had to return with the farmer, leaving Johanna alone. With only six months in her new country, Johanna spoke little English. She lay for 3 days in the hospital with no family or friends to share in the joy of her first-born son while Engbert wondered what was happening with his young wife. The farmer had no phone, so, the hospital staff called the little store nearest to the farm with news of the birth, but the message got mixed up along the way, and Engbert didn't know he had a son. Finally, he was able to catch a ride into Edmonton and speak to Johanna and their son, Gerritt, in the language of their people, now so far away.

They had to scrape together \$300 to pay for Gerritt's birth, because they had not been in Canada for a year and were not eligible for medical support. They had earned over \$800 in their first six months in Canada, and paid out a third of their savings for the doctor and hospital. They didn't have much money, but they didn't need much money because they knew how to live simply. They ate garden vegetables and bought hamburger for 25 cents a pound. Engbert rolled his cigarettes from a big can of tobacco. By the fall, they had saved \$600 for an old truck so they could get into Edmonton for Church and shopping. The church was their social life, connecting them with other immigrants and Dutch speakers. When they were able to get a few days off after their first year of work, they took a trip in that old truck to visit the Weeninks in Lacombe. This visit was a link to the Netherlands, because Weeninks in the Netherlands had married sisters of Engbert's mother, Berendina.

Life on prairie farms was more challenging than in the Netherlands, and they endured outhouses in the cold winters and pumped water by hand. They stored their food in root cellars and kept meat frozen in the winter in a box on the north side of the house. The young couple worked on four farms before they could save enough money to buy their own farm, farther east of Edmonton, in May 1956. They did not want to start farming in debt and were able to pay \$3000 down and another \$250 a year later. Electricity lines were strung in 1957, followed by phone lines ten years later in 1967. Their first Dutch visitor was Johanna's mother in 1957 and she was surprised that her daughter lived so sparsely in Canada, compared with the comforts in the Netherlands. One day, the cellar door was left open by mistake and she fell into it, escaping with only a minor scrape. She had many stories to tell upon her return to the Netherlands!

Engbert had dreamed of becoming a Canadian grain farmer, hoping his milking days were behind him when he left the Netherlands. However, it was livestock that would feed his growing family and pay the bills. He raised pigs and milked a dozen dairy cows for cream, feeding the skim milk to the pigs. The cream brought in the money, as did the pigs when slaughtered. Many piglets died and there just wasn't enough money in it for a growing family. Next he tried raising beef cattle for a couple of years. It was less work, but, there was less money in it as it could take two years of feed costs to raise a calf for sale at market rate.

He did what he had to do, including working nights at a packing plant and working days on the farm. In 1969, he decided to go into dairying full time and bought milk quota. He started shipping bulk milk on August 7th. Engbert was so thankful and hopeful that he hung the first shipping slip in the milk house, and there it hung for many years. Within one year, he was able to quit his job at Canada Packer's and go into dairying full time. After 14 years at the packing plant, he could finally get a good night's rest before rising at 5 am to milk. He started with 40 cows and built up to more than 70 cows.

Together, he and Johanna built barns and added onto the little old house on the land. They finally built their own new house in 1974, with the help of their children and friends. Johanna and Engbert raised six sons and two daughters on the family farm. Johanna was busy making diapers, washing diapers, making clothes, mending clothes, gardening, preserving, cooking, cleaning and helping with the farm work. Saturdays she made Dutch pancakes – pannenkoek – and bathed the children for their Sunday trips into Edmonton. She had her soup ready Saturday night for Sunday dinner so that the only labour they had to do on the Sunday was feeding and milking the cows. Sunday was the one day they could rest and keep holy the Sabbath. They were members of the Third Christian Reformed Church on 96 Street in central Edmonton. This street became known as "Church Street" thanks to the many immigrant communities who built their churches and kept their communities strong in the faith. Later, when another Christian Reformed Church was built in the Ottewell neighbourhood on Edmonton's east side, they transferred their membership.

Engbert and Johanna retired to Edmonton in 1992, not too far from the fourth farm they had worked as a young couple and just up the street from their Ottewell Church. That farm is now a shopping mall surrounded by streets lined with bungalows and apartment buildings. They passed their family homestead to the two youngest sons, who carry on dairying to this day.

Notes:

This family story was written thanks to the many memories collected and shared by Engbert and Johanna Kolkman, Jan Harmen Kolkman, Aleid Koetje, Erna van Koeven, Jan Heideman, Arend Heideman, Johan Grysen, Grada Oltvoort and John Kolkman. I enjoyed collecting the memories and stories and writing them and I am very thankful for this opportunity. It's the kind of story that keeps growing as those who read it remember more events. Any errors are mine and I apologize if I made a few mistakes. I welcome any additions, corrections and other memories you would like to share.

A special thanks to Jan Harmen Kolkman, who encouraged me each step of the way to keep improving the story and to add more depth and detail. Thanks to Jan Heideman, who translated an earlier draft of this story so that his parents, Arend and Gerrie, and his aunt, Tante Grada could read it. I understand that Oom Arend Heideman read the story to his sister Aaltje in the week before she died on Good Friday, April 14, 2006. I know that Johan Grysen read it to his mother, Janna. Thank you all for taking the time to translate and share this with other family members.

I enjoyed leafing through the book "To All Our Children: The Story of The Postwar Dutch Immigration To Canada" by Albert VanderMey (1983). I was to situate the family story within the larger story of Dutch immigration. It was interesting to see photos of the harbour in Rotterdam, the Rijndam, an emigrant bus, Pier 21 and the Halifax train station, among many others.

I will have the wonderful opportunity to tell a shortened version of this Kolkman-Heideman story at the Storytellers of Canada/Raconteurs du Canada national festival in Halifax on June 23<sup>rd</sup> at Pier 21, now a national historical site. The webpage is <http://www.sc-cc.com/english/annual.htm> I am working on my pronunciation of the Dutch words in the story, especially the "G"! Wish me good luck!!!!

Interesting Note: On April 30, 2006, a new monument at Halifax's historic Pier 21 pays tribute to the Canadians who risked their lives or died during the liberation of the Netherlands in 1945. The monument features a dedication in four languages: English, French, Dutch and Mi'kmaq. John and I will undoubtedly see this monument when we travel to Halifax in June.

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