

1847: a year of Dutch pride

April 6, 1987 S.R. Press

Rev. Albertus Van Raalte leads migration to Holland

by Larry Massie

Ottawa News Service

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But even as he rested, Van Raalte scooped through the snow to examine the quality of the underlying soil.

The Dutch pastor liked what he found.

The thick growth of virgin hardwood that blanketed the region indicated a fertile soil. The timber would be ideal for fine furniture manufacturing. The tempering influence of nearby Lake Michigan would permit fruit growing. The unsettled land around the mouth of the Black River could be purchased cheaply.

Perhaps most importantly, the river lay approximately half way between the more developed Kalamazoo and Grand rivers where, upstream, Kalamazoo and Grand rapids offered markets. Yet the Black River site was isolated enough to allow a theocratic Dutch colony to mature without the interference of the ungodly.

On New Year's Day 1847, as local Ottawas marked the holiday by musket fire, Van Raalte selected the site for the city that would be known as Holland.

Conditions in the Netherlands were ripe for a mass migration to America. Like the Pilgrim fathers three centuries before, seceders from the state sanctioned Reformed church were persecuted. Deteriorating economic conditions brought about by Dutch manufacturers' failure to compete with English producers were coupled with onerous taxes on food. Unemployment was widespread. In 1845-6, the potato blight that had such a severe effect on Ireland also eliminated this staple foodstuff in Holland.

Van Raalte, a 36-year-old pastor from the province of Overijssel, led 100 followers to immigrate to the land of opportunity on Sept. 24, 1846. They sailed on the "Southwinder" from Rotterdam and seven weeks later arrived in New York City. Initially, Van Raalte planned



to plant his colony in Wisconsin. The immigrants journeyed to Detroit via Albany and Buffalo and prepared to take a steamer up Lake Huron and through the Mackinac Straits to eastern Wisconsin, but the Straits had already frozen over, ending the shipping season.

Van Raalte found temporary employment in Detroit for his countrymen and took the Michigan Central west to the end of the line, Kalamazoo. There he met M.I. Coit and the Rev. Ova P. Hoyt, a Presbyterian minister. They and others, eager to secure for Michigan a better share of the settlers that had been bypassing the state for western lands, promoted local advantages. They convinced Van Raalte that western Michigan with its established population, "better educated, more religious and more enterprising people" than in Wisconsin, would be an ideal location for his colony.

They introduced Van Raalte to Judge John R. Kellogg of Allegan, who was knowledgeable about available lands in western Michigan. He suggested sites near Ada in Kent County, farther east in Ionia County and north of the Rabbit River in Allegan County. Kellogg guided Van Raalte along narrow Indian trails on an inspection tour from Allegan to the Old Wing Mission located in northern Allegan County's Fillmore Township. Smith, a Congregational clergyman, had established this mission in 1838. He resided in a wooden frame structure and, with his wife and Isaac Fairbanks, led Van Raalte northwest into Ottawa County along an Indian trail to Black Lake where he determined to found his colony.

Van Raalte continued his reconnaissance of the wilderness until Jan. 11, and then conducted legal research at Grand Haven, the Ottawa county seat. Returning to Detroit, then the state capital, he be-

gan purchasing land. He used some \$10,000 of his own money realized from the sale of his brick and tile factory in Overijssel and borrowed funds from Americans proud of their Dutch heritage. Van Raalte bought some land at government prices of \$1.25 an acre and other plots as low as 600 acres at \$11.60 for back taxes. He also purchased 3,000 acres for \$7,000 from New York City owners.

In early February, Van Raalte sent out a vanguard of six families to prepare the site for later arrivals. The women and children stayed in Allegan as the men made their way to headquarters at Old Wing Mission. By Feb. 23, the colonists, with help from the Indians, had chopped out a road and constructed their first log house. Their families joined them from Allegan and brought news that additional parties of Hollanders were en route. Shelter and food to survive the tough winter became a serious problem. Unused to American ways of building and ill-equipped with tools and supplies, construction of dwellings proceeded slowly. The Dutch pioneers also had an unfortunate habit of felling trees on top of already completed cabins until they learned lumberjack skills.

They also got in trouble with the Indians on several occasions. They appropriated dressed venison they found hanging from trees. Indian owners demanded restitution from Van Raalte, and he paid out of his own pocket.

The worst offense occurred later

in the year. During the spring, Indians planted corn and beans in fields and then left for their traditional hunting grounds in Berrien County. Assuming that the Indians had deserted for good, the Hollanders assigned the Indian fields to newly arrived immigrants. When the tribe returned in the fall for harvesting, they found their crop lands overrun with Dutch settlers. Van Raalte attempted to solve the problem, but failed to completely satisfy the Indians. In 1849, the last of the local Indians moved with Smith to a new mission site near Northport in Leelanau County.

Most colonists survived the winter of 1847, but the summer brought worse problems. Weakened by poor foods and insufficient shelter, many fell victim to malaria spread by the hordes of mosquitoes that infested the undrained swamps. Others died of dysentery or of the smallpox epidemic introduced by new arrivals. Medical facilities were almost non-existent and so many parents died that Van Raalte erected an orphanage.

Fortunately, the winter of 1848 proved mild and by the spring of 1848 what the first colonists numbered as the "bitter days" passed. More settlers continued to arrive from the old country and by 1860, Holland's population numbered 1,991. A fire that destroyed half the city in 1871 served only to cement a more tightly knit community. Unlike so many other American utopian experiments that failed, Holland was there to stay.

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