

Transplanting Family, Farm Life, and Church

William Katerberg



RMS Aquitania.

My grandfather and his family emigrated from the Netherlands in late March 1949 and arrived in Canada on the RMS *Aquitania* in early April. Franke Visscher had been a well-off farmer in the Netherlands, but he was concerned for his children's future. There was little land to rent or buy where they lived in the province of Drenthe. He and his family would find the land they wanted about seven miles south of Drayton, Ontario, a small town southwest of Toronto.

The family had talked about emigrating for several years. They had considered South Africa, where there was a large Dutch community. By 1949 they had chosen Canada. Just before they left, a local reporter asked my grandfather why he was not afraid to go. Thinking back to World War II and the German occupation, and

to trials endured by his family going back to his childhood, he appealed to faith: "The same God that led us here and helped us through a lot of things will be in Canada too."

The reporter's question might seem odd. Opportunity beckoned in Canada, after all, while Europe was still in ruins, rebuilding, and dealing with millions of refugees. The winter of 1948–1949 was dreary. Prosperity was years away. A "Cold War" between communist and capitalist powers was dividing Europe. Leaving family, friends, and familiar places behind was daunting, nonetheless, no matter how uncertain the future seemed in the Netherlands. Starting over in a new land and learning a new language weren't for the timid.

At the same time, if the Visscher family sought opportunity in Canada—farmland—they wanted to take their religious life with them. "When we can't go to Canada and join a church that is suitable for us," my grandfather explained in an oral history taken in 1978, "we can't go."¹

The story of my grandfather and his family fits the general history of Dutch immigration to Canada. Before the war, some 25,000 Dutch immigrants arrived in Canada. Those who were Reformed started a few churches in Ontario and Alberta. Tens of thousands came year after year after the war. The first wave, from 1946 to the mid-1950s, mostly sought farmland; a second wave, into the late 1960s, was a mix of rural and urban immigrants. From 1946 to 1968 over 167,000 came, and more followed in the years after that. Dutch Reformed

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The Visscher family in the Netherlands in 1949. All Visscher family photos are courtesy of Thereasa DeHaan.

immigrants assimilated readily, learning English quickly, and did not show strong interest in maintaining ethnic traditions. They worked hard, however, to transplant their religious life, organizing churches, building Christian schools, and founding other religious institutions, reflecting a belief that faithfulness to God should extend to all areas of life.²

In the Netherlands

My grandfather described his life in the Netherlands in his 1978 interview for the oral history project. That life was shaped by farm work, religious experience, sacrifice for family, and participation in community.

Born in 1901 in Smilde, a town in Drenthe, a young Franke Visscher took over the family farm by his early twenties. He began by helping his father, Albert, run the ninety-acre farm during World War I. The Netherlands was neutral, but his three older brothers had joined the army. Franke may not have regretted taking on this responsibility, but he did not put up with his brothers' high view of them-

selves after they returned from the military. When one of them told him that "we" in the army "made everything alright for you," he responded, "Well alright. I was on the farm, and you were just playing. So, I did the work for you." The Netherlands was



Franke Visscher in the 1920s.

not in the war, he explained to his interviewer. "But I had to do the work with my father on the big farm we had."

At night during his teens, Franke went to agricultural school, learning about dairy and pig farming. There was no Christian school in the area, so he went to a "neutral" school. The family was part of the *Hervormde Kerk*, the national church, not the *Gereformeerde Kerk*, the more conservative body that was a product of secessions from the national church. In Canada his family would join the Christian Reformed Church, which was close to the *Gereformeerde Kerk*.

Life in the Netherlands was not all work, of course. Visscher was a winning speedskater in his village and the surrounding area as a young man. He remembered seeing champion racers, describing their gear as *onderbroek* (i.e., long underwear), referring to "the Poepjes" from Friesland, perhaps meaning Lijkle Poepjes, a well-known skater. He bragged that it was "no work to keep up with him." Visscher also enjoyed basketball. The family enjoyed music. His boyhood home had an organ. My grandfather played it, as well as the flute and mouth organ. And the family sang together.

The older Visscher boys married and left home in the years after the war. In 1923, Franke's father died, and the farm became his responsibility. Decades later, he remembered the religious dreams that these burdens seem to have inspired. In one, he asked Jesus why he had taken his father. In another, Christ returned. Franke was in a room with his family and the head elder in the church. They were looking to see if Jesus was there. And then he realized he was alone. "I stood alone. And so it is when we go to meet Christ. Then we are alone, and we stand alone."

It is no surprise that faith was important to my grandfather all his life.



Wezuperbrug School in the Netherlands, 1937. My uncle Johannes Visscher is second from the left in the front.

“I found my Lord when I was really young,” he explained in 1978, “or he found me.” The grief of his father’s death had been overwhelming, but it also shaped a deep, lifelong piety in him.

During the 1920s and 1930s my grandfather’s life filled out. He married Jantien Boer in 1927, and they rented a farm in the nearby village of Wezuperbrug in the township of Zweeloo. They eventually had eleven children. One died in her teens during the war, from diphtheria. Another died in infancy, the year before the family emigrated. The other nine (ages 2–20) would go to Canada with him and Jantien.

Visscher was active in politics and community life. He was a leader in his young people’s group. Interested in politics from a young age, he was the president of the local branch of the Christian Historical Party. He voted “more for the man than the party,” however, giving his vote to the Anti-Revolutionary Party in 1937, because he viewed Hendrik Colijn as a stronger person than the Christian Historical Party leader. He helped start a new Christian newspaper after the war, *De*

Nieuwe Drentsche. He was part of the Orange Society and the neighborhood association, and he helped start a local Christian agricultural school. He also taught hand-milking techniques at the local “milk factory,” passing on “some tricks” to the boys and girls in his classes.

“I had plenty to do” with all these organizations, my grandfather remembered decades later, “and I was glad

when we left the Netherlands”—adding wryly, “but soon it was the same thing” in Canada.

Journey to Canada

The move was no small affair. The family had been comfortably well-off, but the Dutch government limited the amount of cash that emigrants could take with them. So, the Visschers sold their household goods, using the money to buy new furniture and a car to take with them. Then they paid to have everything shipped to Canada. When he left, my grandfather promised that—“Lord willing”—he and Jantien would return for a visit in three years. He doubtless had a lot of family and friends in mind, but especially Jantien’s father, the only one of their parents still alive.

Visscher kept a journal during the weeklong journey from their farm in Drenthe to the new farm near Drayton. The family took a boat to England, and another to Canada, and then went by train from Halifax, Nova Scotia, to Kitchener. Their sponsor, a farmer, picked them up and drove them to their new home near Drayton. In his journal, my grandfa-



Franke and Jantien Visscher with the car they brought to Canada.

ther described the cities, buildings, and countryside in England. But, as with so many immigrants, it was the landscape and size of Canada that impressed him. “What we saw in England was nice,” he explained, “but this is different. It is so much more on a grand scale.”

“There is no end to what I could tell you about the landscape we see from the train here in Canada,” my grandfather wrote in his journal, describing the journey through Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec, and Ontario. “You read about it in the Netherlands, and you see pictures and films and think they are exaggerating about the beauty of the landscape. Well, I have to tell you that the way it really is exceeds this all.” He commented on rock walls, where the tracks cut through the Canadian Shield. He noticed hills, massive forests, logging areas, springs and rivers, meadows, and valleys. The farms he saw struck him because the barns for livestock were not attached to the house, as in the Netherlands. “Anyone who enjoys nature and has the money for it should travel through the length and breadth of this country,” he recommended.

Getting Started on the Farm

A Christian immigration society in The Hague, in the Netherlands, had connected my grandfather with Charles Spoelhof, a home missionary from the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). Spoelhof had helped the Visscher family find a sponsor as they planned their move to Canada. The Visschers settled into their new house and started working a farm owned by their sponsor, Amos Brubacher, a farmer and a Mennonite minister. A year later Brubacher sold the farm to my grandfather, trusting him to pay for the farm and the equipment that came with it as he was able. “God brought you to Canada,” Brubacher

told my grandfather; “because now you bought my farm and I see his hand in it.”

The older Visscher children worked the farm or got jobs to support the family. The younger ones went to school. The teacher in the nearby one-room school set immi-



Peel Public School, spring 1949. My mother, Jean Visscher, an aunt and an uncle are in the picture, new immigrants.

grant children like my mother and her siblings back several grades, to give them time to learn English. Only the youngest two girls finished grade school and high school. The others left school in their early teens and started working.

As with the countryside he saw from the train, Visscher was impressed with the land he now farmed. “The ground here is good, and anything can grow here,” his journal records. “Here it is mostly oats, barley, and wheat and the rest is grass.” He welcomed the technology that even modest farms had. “Most houses, also ours, have electric lights and running water. You open the faucet and have water. Also, the appliances, washing machine, and stove are electric,” he wrote. “The barn also has electricity for milking and a machine to separate

the cream from the milk. The milk is then fed to the pigs. Like most farmers we have pigs and cows. Also, on this farm we have a lot of chickens, about 1000.”

In the first weeks on the farm, as winter turned to spring, Visscher fed the animals and gathered eggs from

the chickens. He also spent a week trimming the trees in the orchard. Then he and the family turned to working the land. “Yesterday, April 15, we started sowing the oats and barley.” He described the process. “We were busy with three tractors. First was a tractor with a disk harrow, behind that one with a regular harrow—about 3 meters wide—and after that the seeder—about 3 meters wide. In the seeder there is fertilizer in one container and oats and/or barley in another. Sometimes these are seeded together. The fertilizer and seed are sowed together in this way.”

My grandfather wrote his account of life in Canada with people in the Netherlands in mind. He kept the journal, according to family memory, because a Dutch newspaper, *Trouw*, had approached him to write articles



The Visscher farm in 1952.

about his family's experience. He made it clear that he was impressed with his new home—with the landscape, technology, and opportunities Dutch folk would find in Canada if they visited or immigrated. "They can work quickly here," he emphasized. "The tractors go so fast that if you had to walk alongside you would have to walk fast."

Soon my grandfather bought a second farm. It eventually went to one of his sons, but in the meantime two other Dutch immigrant families started out in Canada on it. Soon Visscher was recruiting immigrants from the Netherlands and helping settle them. This work as a "field man" led to



Two Visscher sisters squabbling, one reading *Calvinist Contact*, the newspaper of Dutch Reformed immigrants. It offered Reformed perspectives on the news and helped immigrants and their communities connect with each other.

his oral history interview in 1978, a project sponsored by the Multi-cultural History Society of Ontario. Over Christmas and the New Year in 1952–1953 he and Jantien made their promised return visit to Drenthe.

Life in Canada was good, but not without its normal sorrows. Jantien fell sick and died in 1959, and their oldest son, Albert, died in a work accident in 1966. My grandfather remarried in 1961, to Frieda Reinders. I remember visiting him, Aunt Frieda, and the Visscher clan regularly in the 1970s.

Building a Church

In addition to getting settled into the house, beginning to farm, and finding jobs, the Visschers helped found a church. My grandfather had been busy with community life in the Netherlands, and when the family got settled in Canada, he did what came naturally. He started

organizing, working with other recent Dutch Reformed immigrants—such as the Van Elswyk and Van Veen families. Once again, Reverend Spoelhof played a key role.

Born and raised in Paterson, New Jersey, Spoelhof worked out of Kitchener, 45 minutes south of Drayton. From the late 1940s into the 1960s, he helped settled immigrants and start Christian Reformed congregations in southern Ontario—in places like Kitchener, Woodstock, Drayton, Stratford, Listowel, and Clinton. Later he did the same in British Columbia, eastern Ontario, and Quebec.

With Spoelhof's support, the immigrants began worshipping in a house



Reverend Charles Spoelhof. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

in mid-April 1949. My grandfather read a sermon when Spoelhof could not be there. They soon needed more space, with new families arriving regularly. In June they started using Knox Presbyterian Church in

Drayton for worship services, paying rent of \$2.00 a week. The CRC recognized the group as an "organized" congregation, First CRC in Drayton, in June 1950. My grandfather was one of the first two elders, along with Gerit Vander Heide.

The new congregation had more than a dozen families and almost one hundred members. It worshiped on Sunday afternoons and held Sunday School and catechism classes afterward. It started a young people's group and women's and men's societies. The congregation celebrated the Lord's Supper when Reverend Spoelhof could come, with a communion set borrowed from the Kitchener



Building the first "basement" facility of Drayton Christian Reformed Church. Courtesy of Heritage Hall.

CRC. They began having services in English, once a month, in 1951.

Drayton CRC quickly outgrew the Knox Presbyterian facility. In 1952, the congregation built a "basement church," purchasing land suggested by my grandfather. It was centrally located for the immigrant families in the area. The congregation also called its first minister in 1952. Reverend Andrew Folkema was a Dutch immigrant himself and had served CRC congregations in South Dakota, Iowa, and Illinois. By 1959 there were 75 families. In 1963, led by its third minister, Lambert Doezema, the congregation decided to demolish the basement church and build a facility that could hold 600 people.

In 1954, the Dutch Reformed community in the Drayton area began talking about a Christian school. It soon founded a Society for Christian Education, with a membership fee of \$1.50 a month. And in 1956 the school opened its doors as Calvin Christian School (today, Community Christian School).

The school's website emphasizes that its founders were inspired by the Dutch Reformed ideal of education

shaped by Christian worldview, even while most were immigrants with little money to spare. My grandfather remembered that they didn't "feel the sacrifices" during that time. "We were all one and we all were happy, and we were busy in our church life and in our life to form Christian Schools and all that, you know, and the different societies."

The school's early documents are in Dutch, of course, and doubtless the shared immigrant experience helped the children learn English and adapt to life in Canada. Its mission was not to be an ethnic sanctuary, however, but to transplant the vision and the institutions of Christian education in Canada.

Dutch Re-

formed immigrants did not just build churches and Christian schools. By the 1980s they had started the Institute for Christian Studies, a graduate school, and Redeemer College, an undergraduate institution. They also founded a wide variety of other kinds of Christian organizations, among them a Christian Farmer's Federation.

Conclusion

The Drayton congregation and its immigrant families soon turned from needing the CRC's help to supporting the denomination and serving in it. The first immigrant student from Drayton to go to Calvin College and Seminary and become a minister in the CRC was Arnold (Arend) Rumph, a Drenthe boy. He graduated from the seminary in 1957 and served churches in Ontario and then as a missionary in South and Central America.

Others soon followed. My uncle John Zantingh and my father, Henry Katerberg, graduated from the seminary in the 1960s. Both had emigrated to Canada from Drenthe with their families and had met and married



The house I remember, where Frank and Freda Visscher lived in retirement, in 1968.

Visscher girls (Alida and Jean) in Drayton.

My grandfather may have left behind his busy life of community organizing in the Netherlands. But he and immigrants like him took the habits and vision of Christian faith that shaped all areas of life with them and transplanted it in Canada. When he retired in the mid-1960s, one of his sons took over the farm and he and Frieda moved into the house next door to Drayton CRC. I remember reading books in their library and shooting pool with him on a table in the basement. ❧

Endnotes

1. All material quoted from my grandfather is from a collection of family history material compiled by my Aunt Thereasa (Visscher) DeHaan. She transcribed material and translated it. I have a digital copy of the diaries, oral history, photographs, official documents, and genealogical material she collected. The oral history was conducted and recorded on cassette by Elizabeth Hietkamp. The interview was part of an oral history project of some 6075 interviews sponsored by the Multicultural History Society of Ontario. You can find Frank Visscher's name in the oral history inventory, <http://mhso.ca/wp/oral-testimony-collection/> and http://www.mhso.ca/docs/MHSO_Oral_History_Inventory.pdf (accessed 10 February 2022).

2. For background in this history, see essays by me, Phil Teeuwssen, and Adrian Guldemond in *Origins: Historical Magazine of the Heritage Hall Archives*, XXXIX:1 (Spring 2021). I describe growing up in immigrant communities in Ontario; Teeuwssen focuses on Christian schools; and Guldemond examines Dutch Reformed immigrants building Christian institutions to fulfill the mission of bringing Christian faith to all areas of life. Finally, more generally, note Herman Ganzevoort, *A Bittersweet Land: The Dutch Experience in Canada, 1890–1980* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988); and Tymen Hofman, *The Canadian Story of the CRC: Its First Century* (Belleville, ON: Guardian Books, 2004).