

## Chapter 5. From Achterberg to Busby: Emigration to Canada

### *Emigration plans*

During the winter of my ‘farm school’ experience, we began to hear about much bigger adventures in store for us, starting in early 1949. Perhaps typical for Dad, the plan to emigrate remained mostly a family secret as long as possible. He did not want his farmer-customers to find out about it before everything was set to go. Some of the information probably leaked out anyway, for example, after Bertha enrolled in English lessons in Veenendaal.

The motivation to emigrate was based to a large extent on Dad’s growing disillusionment with Holland, including both the poor short-term economic prospects after the devastation of World War II and the controlling and regulating policies of the government of the day for many things related to farming and to his closely connected feed business. In addition, future prospects for six sons, not to mention a daughter, did not seem bright at the time. Timing of the actual emigration also was important if the family was going to move as a unit. Bertha was 17, and romantic associations for her could be just around the corner. For me and my younger brothers, those possible links were still far into the future.

Early information about possibilities for emigration to Canada surfaced in 1947, when Hendrik and Mina Kannegieter visited Holland. Before that, apparently, there had been talk about Australia or South Africa also as possible destinations. The Kannegieters were related to the van Doesburgs in Rhenen, friends of my parents. They had farmed in Neerlandia for a number of years, had no children, and had retired and moved to Edmonton. They were said to have socialist leanings and may have been ostracized a bit in Neerlandia on that account. It is even possible that they considered moving back to Holland to live there but I know of no evidence to support that. Had that been so, it would have provided a perfect opportunity to trade family financial resources in the two countries, during a time of severe constraints on foreign exchange in Holland.

In any case, the plan to emigrate gradually took shape. First, Joe van Doesburg, a nephew to the Kannegieters and 18 at the time, decided to move to Canada. Joe’s uncle was not able to sponsor him because he was no longer a farmer himself, but he persuaded Edmonton-area farmer John Goutbeck to sign his name on the forms and to provide his legal land description. Joe now had a sponsor as required by the Canadian government, and he left in 1948.

My parents met the Kannegieters during their visit to Holland, and at some point *oom* Hendrik told them to “Come to Canada.” He promised that he would make it possible for my dad to purchase a farm there. Dad was quite determined that he would not work for someone else in that new country, and the Kannegieter promise provided a solution to his quest. For some time thereafter, however, nothing seemed to be happening on the Canadian side and Dad wrote to inquire. Sure enough, after a while the news came. Hendrik Kannegieter had bought a farm for us, for five thousand dollars. The farm consisted of two quarter sections near Busby, northwest of Edmonton and about halfway between Edmonton and Neerlandia. Joe van Doesburg had gone with his aunt and uncle and a real estate agent to look at farms

that were for sale, and they had settled on this one, purchased during the winter. No one seems to know just what criteria they used in making their choice but, in retrospect, a low price probably was very important. Soil and building quality seem to have been a distant second. In any case, the promise was kept, a farm was bought, and our emigration plans could proceed.



The last portrait of the van den Born family in Holland, in 1948

I accompanied Dad on a visit to the Dutch office of the Canadian Pacific Railway in Den Haag (The Hague), probably to inquire about travel arrangement possibilities. During that visit the CPR man pulled out a book and looked up the population of Busby: 150! That was a good deal less than the population of our small village in Holland, and I was singularly unimpressed. Dad probably did not feel very different.

In the meantime, Joe's younger brother Bill made it known that he also wanted to go to Canada. An alternative view, suggested by later information, is that his father thought it a good idea for him to leave home. In any case, he was only 15, a few months older than my brother George, and he could not emigrate on his own. My parents then agreed to have Bill go to Canada as a member of our family and they duly signed formal adoption papers for him to make it possible. I did not know about the adoption step until after my parents had died and I am quite certain that the connection was never officially 'undone'. Bill's name was not changed, however, and in our family nothing was ever said later about the adoption connection. He stayed and worked on the Busby farm with our family for about six months and then left to find his own way through life. He died in 2009.

In preparation for our family's move, I remember reading some books about Canada. It was an interesting exercise that provided ideas and images of what things might be like in that far-away and unknown country. It was interesting only at the time, though, because none of the reality I encountered in Canada matched the ideas I received from those books.

Movers came to our house with a huge *kist* (crate) on the back of a truck, about 8 feet high, wide, and deep. The truck was the three-ton 1946 Dodge with a flat metal deck that was also to be shipped to Canada (from where it had been imported to Holland three years earlier), for our use on the farm. The men who packed our belongings into the crate were able to do it so well that there literally was no empty space anywhere in it. As far as I can remember, nothing in it was broken during the trip. I have no idea how and where we managed to sleep and eat during the last few days or nights; perhaps we had all gone to Terschuur to stay with our relatives there.

Foreign exchange restrictions by the Dutch government were very strict when we emigrated, and we were allowed to take with us only one hundred dollars per person in Canadian currency. One of the things in the crate, therefore, was a substantial number of cigars that Dad hoped to turn into Canadian dollars once we arrived in Canada. He also had loaned sums of money to five or six other Dutch emigrant families to pay for their trip expenses, on the premise that they would pay him back later in Canadian dollars. Some of that repayment did indeed happen but a good part of the money owing was never recovered. On a trip I made to Vancouver Island with our family in the sixties, Dad had asked me to visit one such family that had settled there to try to collect some money from them. I did make the visit but I don't think I came away with any money. At best a promise that they would send some.

George and I stocked up on peppermints and *dropjes* (salted licorice) before the trip began. We were not very smart about it, though, because after we left we ate the stuff fast enough to result in a serious bellyache for a while. I don't recall ever receiving an allowance from my parents, so Mother must have given us money to make those purchases. Whatever cash mother had was kept in a little metal money box that could be locked, and that box stayed in her bedroom closet. I still have the box in our house, polished up nicely.

In addition to the candies, George and I each bought ourselves a jackknife. Since it was fashionable for boys to carry a jackknife in their pockets and to have it attached to their belt by a short chain, that is what I did. It worked fine for cutting up an apple or for carving up sticks of wood but it was disastrous when the knife-on-a-chain was open and the hand holding it was used to throw something. I have a scar on my right index finger to prove it.

Dad had organized an elaborate farewell evening for his business customers and assorted friends and acquaintances about a week before we were scheduled to leave. I have a typewritten copy of the farewell speech presented by Dad but I remember very little of the speech itself or of other details of the program, other than the showing of a film about Canada. My grandparents were not living anymore so there was no semifinal parting for them and I also do not recall any tearful farewells on the part of my parents or my siblings. Things just happened.

### *The emigration journey*

I decided to quote here, in its entirety, a translated version of the diary entries I wrote about our family's departure from Achterberg and the trip by train and boat as far as Quebec City. Two diary entries written by my father, for 16 and 24 May, are included also. For some reason, neither he nor I wrote anything substantial in the diary about the four-day train trip from Quebec to Edmonton or about our brief stay in Edmonton.

#### *Friday 6 May 1949*

With great interest from others we left Achterberg at 6:30 am, in two cars, a delivery van, and a jeep with ten suitcases. We arrived in Rotterdam at 8:30 am. At 9:52 am we took the D-Train from Rotterdam via Roosendaal (customs) and Brussels (13:45) to Paris where we arrived at 18:15. Many passport checks en route. In Paris we overnighted in the Hotel Terminus North, close to Gare du Nord where we had arrived. We had supper at Chantilly, close to the hotel, at a cost of about 2000 francs. We had brought 9000 francs, 5 pound sterling, and 910 Canadian dollars from Holland. The hotel cost 2560 francs.

#### *Saturday 7 May*

We were up at 6:30 am and left at 8:15 by bus to the train station St. Lazarre where we purchased 17 kilos of bananas at 180 francs per kilo. The bus trip cost 1400 francs. We left Paris at 9:45 am for Le Havre where we arrived at 1 pm. From the train station we walked with our hand luggage to the pier where our ship 'Scythia' was ready for us. We left around 3 pm. We have not been seasick yet. We played heavy-duty ping-pong and went to bed by 11 pm. We enjoyed good meals at 2 pm as well as at 7 pm.

#### *Sunday 8 May*

I got up at 7:30 am feeling nauseous. I ate no breakfast and tried to throw up. Felt better in the afternoon, and just before going to bed at 10:30 pm I puked a lot.

We sleep in a room with 24 bunk beds. Han and Jan were very sick in the morning. Wim van Doesburg is fine, not bothered by anything, and eats for three. Gerrit is even sicker than Han. In the evening I chatted with a French-speaking Pole and showed him some pictures.

#### *Monday 9 May*

I woke up a bit dizzy. I ate well but it didn't help. I did some reading, played chess with Wim van Doesburg, and wrote in my diary. Nothing special the rest of the day other than seeing a German film that was boring. Clocks set back one hour.

#### *Tuesday 10 May*

No special activities. Saw another film, 'Symbol des Glücks'. We get coffee in bed at 7, eat breakfast at 9, and at 1 o'clock we eat again. At 3:30, we get tea and raisin bread and at 7 pm we eat again. We eat in two shifts an hour apart. We are part of the second shift.

#### *Wednesday 11 May*

There is more wind today. Until now the ocean has been very quiet but today it is coming to life. We also have been in a fog bank already. The ping pong that we played at so hard the first few days is finished. Two balls are broken and

the third one is lost. Towards evening it became very windy with big waves throwing some water on deck. We have had a practice with life jackets once already. There are 35 lifeboats which we hope will not be needed. Dad, Wim van Doesburg, Gerrit, Han, Jan, and I sleep in room B35, the others in room B30. The ship has six decks: boat deck and decks A, B, C, D, and E. We can walk outside on the boat deck, and on decks A and B. Clocks set back 1 hour.

*Thursday 12 May*

Every day all passengers have to leave their rooms between 8:30 and 11 am. Then the Room Officer cleans the rooms and the captain comes to inspect. The passengers go to the library, the smoking room, or the lounges. In the morning a ship from the Norwegian McCormack Line passes us a short distance away. Clock goes back a half hour. This will become a total of 5 hours.

*Friday 13 May*

This morning I played chess with Gerrit. Last night we saw another film, 'Abenteuer in Brasilien'. We cruised the whole day in heavy fog that cleared up during the evening. Every minute we heard the fog horn. There are 2108 persons on board which includes 1678 passengers and 430 crew members. In the evening we see a lighthouse far away. The ship is 19,761 tons in size.

*Saturday 14 May*

It is very foggy in the morning. By 10.30 it clears up. We have travelled the following distances based on noon to noon:

May 7	297 miles
May 8	371 miles
May 9	376 miles
May 10	372 miles
May 11	347 miles
May 12	355 miles
Total	2118 miles

In the evening we enter the mouth of the St. Lawrence. At 8:30 a number of Dutchmen, including us, sing traditional Dutch songs. Clocks set back a half hour.

*Sunday 15 May*

We get up at 5 am to see the coast nearby. Beyond the shore we see mountains covered with snow. Villages along the shore. Later on no more hills, and lots of farm land. We cruise close to the right shore of the St Lawrence. At 11:10 am we are at the pier in Quebec, towed in by two tugboats.

*Monday 16 May (Dad's diary entries start here)*

In the afternoon about 4 pm we left the ship, boarded the train, and departed at 7 pm. The trip through Quebec and Ontario begins.

Not a good first impression of Canada. Lots of rocks and bush. The train stops at every small station. In Winnipeg we transfer to a train to Edmonton where we arrive Friday morning May 20. We are met by Mr. Kannegieter and Jo van Doesburg who take us by truck to the Kannegieter home, and later in the evening to the Immigration House. We eat our meals there, and also some at the Kannegieters. We decided to go to the farm as soon as possible, even though our furniture and other belongings have not yet arrived. On Sunday we go to church.

*Tuesday 24 May*

Jacob van de Brink and Mr. Kannegieter bring us to the farm where we arrive around 7 am. Jo van Doesburg drove the new Case tractor that we had bought on Saturday. Signed a promissory note to Mr. Kannegieter for \$1500, payable May 23, 1950, at 5% interest. This was the balance owing on the purchase of the tractor and plow and a disk. I had paid \$449 myself, in traveller's cheques and cash.

When we left the *Scythia* in Quebec City, some of us walked to a store and used our feeble French to buy a few things to eat on the next leg of the trip, the four-day train ride to Edmonton. I don't know how our parents managed to keep us in food and out of trouble during those four days, but it all worked. We slept on the fold-down benches and probably bought food on the train or at station stops along the way.

An unusual sight from the first day on the train that has stuck in my memory was a farmer somewhere in Quebec pulling a set of harrows with what looked like a 1930s model car. Unheard of where I came from, of course, and never seen again. Apart from that we saw a lot of rocks and trees before we got back to farm land again.

We were met and well received when we arrived in Edmonton, and also well taken care of during the next few days. Dad wrote in his diary that we went to church, presumably the First Christian Reformed Church, but I don't remember it. It would be interesting, in retrospect, to know how much of that first English church service I actually understood.



The van den Born immigrant family, with Joe and Bill van Doesburg (on the left) and Mr. and Mrs. Kannegieter (on the right, next to my dad). George and Wilco are missing from the picture.

For the next four days, we slept in the Immigration Hall and ate most of our meals there. We also had some meals with the Kannegieters and had some pictures taken

on the back step of their house—Joe Van Doesburg took them and gave me copies of the prints many years later. The Kannegieter home was at 10222 – 107 Street, now the site of Norquest College.

I went along with Dad and Mr. Kannegieter to purchase a tractor as well as a plow and disk, but I have no memories of what we did the rest of the time we spent in Edmonton. I have a vague memory of hearing Mr. Kannegieter tell us that he and his wife had been in Canada for 60 years, but it probably was less than that. In any case, the number of years he quoted sounded like a very long time.

### ***Historical and other notes on Busby and surroundings***

The farm near Busby that Hendrik Kannegieter purchased for our family consisted of two quarter sections, in adjacent ‘sections’. The home quarter was NE4-58-27-W4 (the northeast quarter of Section 4 in Township 58, Range 27, west of the 4<sup>th</sup> meridian), and the north quarter was SE9-58-27-W4. The farm is in Alberta’s grey-wooded soil zone, a transition zone between the much more fertile black or shallow-black soils to the east and south and the forest soils further west. Not the greatest soil for good crop production, therefore. About 180 acres of the total of 320 acres was cleared and ‘under cultivation’.

According to historical records, Charles Hersey had homesteaded the farm and was the first to receive title to it in 1912. Charles’ son Harry Hersey was a neighbour who worked for Dad from time to time in the late fifties and sixties. In 1919, the farm was sold to John Henry (Harry) Badman, with the title apparently held by the Soldier Settlement Board until 1947, which was also the year he and his family moved off the farm. The title was transferred to Hendrik Jan Kannegieter in February 1949 when he bought the farm for our family. My parents received the title in 1955, after they paid the balance owing on the farm to the Kannegieters.

In 2009, Jack spoke to several members of the Edwards family who recalled (via their parents and grandparents) that “Harry Badman was not much of a farmer—a pig here, a cow there, a few chickens.” That description certainly would account for the sorry state of affairs on the farm when our family arrived. He was said to be “a pretty good gardener”, though, something he learned in England around the same time our neighbour Grandpa Edwards, as a young man, had learned his horticulture while working on an estate in England. Harry Badman died in 1949, the year our family settled on the farm.

At the time of our arrival on the farm and for about 15 years thereafter there was regular passenger and freight train service from Edmonton to Busby, and Bertha and I went home from Edmonton on the train a number of times during our early years in Edmonton. I do not know how pick-up times were coordinated before there was telephone service on the farm, but somehow it all worked. Passenger service to Busby stopped in the mid 1960s, and the station was closed.

For many years Busby was a water stop for steam locomotives on the main line to Dawson Creek; there was a reservoir near the station that doubled as a swimming hole for hardy Busby inhabitants. In 1949, Busby still had two grain elevators, built

in the 1920s. They were closed in 1971 and demolished in 1974. Freight train service via Busby to Grande Prairie and Dawson Creek still continues.

The Edmonton, Dunvegan, and British Columbia Railway had started building a rail line north from Edmonton to Dawson Creek in 1912, reaching there in 1930. During that same period, many settlers arrived in the Pembina Valley area—including settlers in Neerlandia. According to some railway history on the internet, “a well organized group of settlers presented its case for railway service into their area to the provincial government in 1924, and two years later the Pembina Valley Railway was organized to push a short line from Busby to a new town site to be named Barrhead.” The 27-mile line was completed a year later—the track lay within a mile southwest of our family farm—and the first scheduled train arrived in Barrhead on 18 October 1927. In later years, the Pembina Valley Railway company was amalgamated with the Northern Alberta Railway which, in turn, was absorbed into Canadian National in 1981. Some time after that, all train service to Barrhead was discontinued, and the tracks were taken out.

### *Arrival at our new home*

On the Monday after our arrival in Edmonton, Joe Van Doesburg drove the tractor the 45 miles to the Busby farm that was to become our home, about a four-hour trip at 10 mph top speed. The rest of us were driven to the farm the following day by Joe’s friend Jake Vanden Brink, who had a pickup truck. Mother rode in the cab, as did Jack and Wilco, and the rest of us rode in the back, along with our luggage. When I think about that now, it must have been an interesting sight. Unfortunately, no pictures were taken, and only vague memories survive, mostly of sliding around on the muddy roads, even into the ditch once or twice after we left the paved highway at the Legal corner.

The muddy roads, especially the 4.5 miles from Busby on, were a surprise, but the farm itself was not. I don’t really know what I had expected to see—it was simply all part of the emigration adventure. That adventure continued when we began to explore the house and the old and decrepit other buildings on the farm. No one had lived there the previous two or more years, and it showed. The small house was the best-looking building on the place but that was not saying much. It had a kitchen, a living room (after we took out a wall), two small bedrooms, and not much else. No such things as electricity and running water, of course. A small cellar with dirt walls and floor was accessible through a hatch in the living room floor. There were two shallow wells on the place, but we could not use the water until they were cleaned out completely. We emptied out all the water and cleaned the wells out as well as we could, but even after all that we still occasionally found a drowned mouse in the bucket of water we drew up. As I recall it, we would simply dump that bucket and carry on as though it had not happened.

I don’t think my parents’ minds were filled with happy thoughts about their new home, but they did not tell us what they were thinking. They must have talked about their disappointments with what they found on the place that was to become their new home, but we children did not hear about them. I believe that they only wanted to look ahead, trust in God, and make the best of whatever came their way. Some of



Dad's feelings did find expression in the first two letters he wrote to customers and friends in Holland, but we did not get to see those until many years later.

We had arrived with just the luggage we could carry and, therefore, we had no furniture of any kind until the crate with our other belongings would come. But we did have compassionate and helpful neighbours! The same day we arrived, our nearest neighbour James Edwards came along with a tractor-pulled stoneboat loaded with basic necessities for our use. A few years ago we discovered that the kitchen table and chairs they loaned to us had left them without a table in their own kitchen!



The van den Born farmhouse in 1949



Jack at the better of the two wells in 1949

From an old straw pile on the farm we brought enough straw into the house for us to sleep on, under blankets that I suppose we had brought along. Mother and Dad must have bought enough food to get us through those first days, and I don't remember going hungry. We got water from the neighbours' well, and they likely also provided us with milk. Fortunately, my mother was someone who rarely

complained and who was able to make the best of a tough situation. It helped also that she had grown up on a farm herself and knew how to milk cows, make butter and cheese, and bake bread.

Bertha has said, “I take my hat off to my mother. I think she was ready to move. Probably fed up with raising six boys all by herself. So she was looking forward to a better situation that way. She had a lot of pluses—baking bread, making cheese, milking a cow. Many other women would not have fared as well.” Someone else has quoted Mother as saying: “The hardest thing was to be poor for such a long time.” That was so for at least our first five years in Canada, until 1954.

Mother did not know a word of English when we emigrated, but she was determined that she was going to learn. The only neighbour she could communicate with was James Edwards’ wife Annie who could speak low-German, close enough to Dutch that the two could understand each other. At Annie’s funeral service in Westlock in the fall of 2009, we heard a few things about the happy relationship between Mother and Annie. Annie was lonely, in part because she was not appreciated by her mother-in-law, Granny Edwards, and she enjoyed Mother’s company. Mother, in turn, learned basic English from her, supplemented by having her younger children speak English to her, trying to read some English books, and later, when electricity arrived, listening to the radio.

Dad probably drove the tractor to Busby several times during the first ten days, since that was our only mode of transportation other than walking. Post office contact had to be made for our mail (no home delivery there), fuel and oil for the tractor had to be ordered, and groceries had to be bought. Willie Oldenburg in Busby was the faithful trucker and deliverer of goods to the farm, at least during the years I lived there..

As the oldest boy, I was charged with the responsibility of figuring out how to use the tractor and plow and looking after their maintenance. I was all of 16 years old and had no experience doing such things at all, but somehow it began to come together. We had very little in the way of tools initially and I had never changed oil or used a grease gun before, let alone one that you had to push like crazy to get grease to go into tight joints. Some of the learning came the hard way. For example, who would know that a truck or tractor battery would slowly discharge during the winter and then could freeze and crack, as one of ours did during the first winter, apparently the coldest on record for some decades?

Learning to run the tractor and the plow that was mounted on a hydraulic lift did not take too long. Mounting and dismounting the plow was an awkward and miserable chore, however, because the mechanism was not nearly as sophisticated and easy to work as the three-point hitch system on the Ferguson tractor we acquired 3 years later when Dad had it shipped from Holland. That became especially difficult when the tractor got stuck in a muddy part of the field. It would have been nice then to be able to quickly unhook the plow and drive the tractor out. With the Case system, unfortunately, that did not work.

One of the first pieces of land plowed was a garden area, and within two days we had planted potatoes (300 pounds, according to Dad’s diary) on a good chunk of it. Right away the first week also, Dad made an agreement with neighbour Erickson

who lived northwest of us, to put in our crop, because we did not have a seed drill and it was getting late in the season. Mr. Erickson took his time but he did get it done, by June 10. His speech was very colourful, with a restricted vocabulary that favoured words such as son-of-a-gun and son-of-a-bitch. These terms lose quite a bit in translation into Dutch, so at one point Dad asked Mr. Erickson for an explanation of some of his favourite expressions, to our acute embarrassment. The Edwards family members used no such language—perhaps the odd ‘damn’ or ‘son-of-a-gun’ but nothing more serious than that.

On June 1, eight days after our arrival on the farm, Jake Vanden Brink brought word that our truck and the crate with our belongings had arrived. Dad went to Busby to get the truck the next day—Jake may have driven him there—and we unloaded it immediately. At least one item on it was the old sprayer that we later used to haul water. The following day Dad drove the truck back to pick up the crate. We unloaded part of it right away, and Mother could actually begin to set up housekeeping in our new ‘mansion’. When the crate was emptied out, we moved it next to the house and used it as back porch—for the next 20 years. When Mother acquired a gasoline-engine-powered washing machine in 1952, it found a place in the *kist*.



The farm house, complete with ‘porch’, in 1954.  
The car is Bill Groot’s

Dad’s diary records that the same day our belongings had arrived we received a visit from Mr. Herman Wierenga, recently appointed as immigration fieldman by the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). Dad wrote nothing in his diary about the nature of the visit, and little did I know that 9 years later I would marry the oldest daughter of the Wierenga family. Mr. Wierenga visited a second time in late September, accompanied by Rev. Peter Hoekstra, home missionary for the CRC in western Canada. I witnessed part of that visit and understood that the visitors encouraged my parents to find a way to get established closer to an existing CRC congregation. As it was, such a move was not at all feasible for my parents at the time, and nothing was done about it.

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