

## Chapter 6. Life on the Family Farm

Within a week of our arrival on the farm, Dad had contacted provincial government advisors in Edmonton, one of whom, Alex Charnetski, visited the farm soon thereafter. Dad's diary records also that for further study for 'Willem' this man recommended the Provincial Schools of Agriculture at Olds and Vermilion. Already, therefore, Dad was looking ahead for possibilities for further schooling for me.

Dad arranged to buy a milk cow and two Yorkshire sows, and he also found a neighbour who could grind grain for us. A week or so later, he drove the truck to Rochester, near Athabasca, where he bought three purebred Yorkshire gilts, to be the start of a herd of pigs. One of the three, unfortunately, developed bullnose, an infectious disease that came to haunt Dad's pig production enterprise during the following years and eventually forced him to shut it down and go into chickens and beef cattle instead.

A month after our arrival, I was assigned the job of driving the tractor to Barrhead—about 50 kilometers—to deliver 500 'imported' cigars to Mr. J. Van Hemert who had agreed to buy them. Dad had met him when he attended a church service there on June 5, our second Sunday on the farm. The trip became almost an all-day affair for me, close to 3 hours each way, but I came home with a cheque for \$60. For several hours thereafter I could not stop feeling shaky from the rough and bumpy ride. A week later, when we were in church again in Barrhead, Mr. Van Hemert told Dad that he would like another 200 cigars! Perhaps he had found a lucrative market for them. Dad promised him 100.

Then came the unfortunate contract Dad made at the end of June with Mike Borys, a bachelor west of Busby, to move his small house out of the way and then to dig a hole—24 by 28 by 4.5 feet—for a basement for a new house to be built there. The digging contract was for 70 dollars, plus 15 dollars to move the old house out of the way. It was a terrible job that took four of us (Dad, George, Bill Van Doesburg, and me) about ten days to complete, digging mostly by hand with pick and shovel. We tried to use a scraper behind the tractor for a while but it did not work at all in the gumbo clay that we discovered below the 6-inch layer of easy digging near the surface. Not at all like the digging in sandy soil in the garden behind our house in Achterberg, but a deal was a deal and the job got done.

Money was very scarce, and farm supplies such as seed and feed had to be purchased if we were going to make a go of it and become somewhat self-sufficient. During the first six months, some payments came in from other immigrants to whom Dad had loaned money, to the tune of about \$800, and in the next 12 months, another \$560 came. Those amounts look small now, but they were important at the time. Other income came in small amounts here and there as payment for work done by us for neighbouring farmers. One fairly big job consisted of burning and cleaning up brush piles on Sylvester's land where a bulldozer had cut and piled the trees the year before. According to Bertha, Dad also borrowed some more money from Mr. Kannegieter a few times, when cash had run out. *Oom* Hendrik was a little skeptical of Dad's European notions about fertilizer use and of Dad's interest in expanding the pig operation so quickly, and at least once he refused to lend any more money.

In the meantime, Dad also had gone to Edmonton to visit university specialists to get advice on soils, fertilizers, grain varieties, and livestock production. A young soils professor (John Toogood) actually came out to the farm and set out a small fertilizer experiment on our land. Years later, after I had become a faculty member at the university myself, John Toogood told me that he had good memories of that visit. Dad also went to meet Peter Elzinga who owned a feed mill and from whom Dad would buy feed concentrate.

Fortunately, Dad knew his English well enough that communication with all these different people was not a serious problem for him. Mother's English-speaking ability, on the other hand, was nonexistent when we arrived in Busby, and most of us kids were not much better, despite the fact that both George and I had been exposed to several years of English in high school and Bertha had had some private lessons.

I don't know just when my spoken English became halfway fluent but it did take a while. It probably took me longer than it did for John J, John, and Jack, who were thrown right into it in school and had no choice. A couple of incidents stick in my mind. I went to the Busby post office to pick up the mail once and Mr. Elliott, the gruff postmaster, informed me that I was not learning English very fast. I was sufficiently unimpressed by that comment that I still remember it. Another time I was riding on the tractor with James Edwards, coming back from their 'Howieson place', and I said something to James to which he did not respond at all. It suddenly dawned on me then that I had spoken to him in Dutch! Gradually the speaking came together, of course. Writing in English was a different story again and on the farm there was little or no occasion to practice that. I had to do some exam and assignment writing during my first year at university but I did not really learn how to write properly until I took my one required course in English literature during my second year.

Somewhere along the way, Dad had met Herbert Mirus, active member of a Brethren church not far away. The Mirus farm was 4 miles west of Busby, and 4.5 miles from our farm. The church was a couple of miles south of the Mirus farm, and we attended there a few times during that first summer, with the Mirus family. They did not have a car or truck and the parents and their two sons Horst and Eric went there with three of them standing in a (clean) manure scoop mounted on the back of their Ferguson tractor. There was a United Church in Busby but we never attended any services there.

One Sunday that summer, most or all of us travelled the 50 miles to Neerlandia in and on our big truck, probably in connection with the organization of a CRC congregation in Westlock. After church the whole family was invited for lunch to the farm home of Louis Nanninga, a visit I remember. Not long thereafter, on 25 September, we travelled the 15 miles to Westlock to attend the first CRC worship service there, with Rev. Peter Hoekstra as preacher.

For about two months in the fall of that first year, I worked for Mr. Mirus, for \$40 per month plus board and room. I got up early, as did Mr. Mirus and his sons, pumped water for their dairy cows, and helped with the feeding. I had learned to milk a cow in the course of the summer but I was pretty slow at it and I cannot be

sure that I helped with the Mirus milking. Mr. Mirus probably did not trust me to do a good job on his cows. At home, Mother initially was the only one who knew how to milk the cow we had acquired.

One of the more exciting events occurred one Saturday when I was riding one of Mirus' horses home for the weekend. I had not gone far before something spooked the horse, and it stopped very suddenly. I kept going, of course, and suddenly found myself in a snowbank beside the road, with the horse standing there looking at me. I was none the worse for the wear, fortunately, climbed back on, and reached home safely. My outside employment did not last very long and by mid-December I was home again, probably because Mr. Mirus and his sons could handle the work themselves.

Meanwhile, John J, John, and Jack had started their Canadian education at Trail's End School, about 2 miles northeast of our home. It was a traditional all-inclusive school with one teacher and with about 30 students in grades 1 to 7. John J remembers that he started in Grade 1 and ended up in Grade 7 during the first and only year he went to that school—the school closed, and all students went to school in Busby the following year. Sometimes they walked to school that first year, but more often all three rode Kitty, the horse we were able to borrow from Mr. Mirus that winter, or they rode on a sleigh behind her. For a while they even had a small stove on the sleigh and pretended to stay warm that way.

While I was away working on the Mirus farm, Dad had asked Peter Elzinga in Edmonton to find a job for Bertha, and he did so. She could work as a maid in the home of florist Amby Lenon, so she went to the big city to help earn some badly needed cash. It was not the easiest experience for her, young and with only the smattering of English she had learned. For us, she was simply gone. She herself has lots of memories, however:

I went there with my suitcase probably in October 1949 [Dad's diary says it was November]. Mrs. Lenon had her hair in rollers. Dad told her she had to take good care of me—I was 18. They were Catholic but they were not nice people. I was 'the maid'. I stayed there an entire year. They had three children, one a baby born about halfway through my stay with them. My English was minimal. I cleaned house, washed dishes, made breakfast. Did some cooking. Two children went to school. Sundays I went to church, with Peter Elzinga who lived not far away, near 81<sup>st</sup> ave and 104<sup>th</sup> street. On my afternoon off, I went to Elzinga's also.

I ate breakfast in the morning with Mrs. Lenon and the children. Mr. Lenon did not eat breakfast. They ate supper in the dining room while I ate in the kitchen. I spent my spare time in my bedroom. I was paid \$35 a month, and sent \$30 of it home. Kept some for 'collection' and bus tickets. I asked for a raise about halfway and got five dollars more. Mrs. Lenon had a lot of magazines that I had mostly all read by the time she laid her hands on them. Half of it I did not understand.

I did some ironing for a lady who had an ad in the paper, a Margaret Johnson. She was very nice, talked to me, and was interested in me as person. I did some sewing for this lady also because I could do that.

When Mr. and Mrs. Lenon were gone sometimes, a sister-in-law came over. She was very nice and encouraged me to go to the library. She took me there—Strathcona branch on 104<sup>th</sup> street—and introduced me to the librarian. She got me a library card and gave me some books to read. I read *Anne of Green Gables*, *Little House on the Prairie*, *Hans Brinker*. The next week I would be back and she would give me more books that she thought I could handle. Marvelous that some people cross our path and are willing to help. I really appreciated that.

Bill (Wim) Van Doesburg stayed and worked with us until mid-November 1949, when Peter Elzinga came to pick him up and took him to a dairy farm near Edmonton where he had found a job for him. Bill had not had his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday yet and, adopted or not by our parents, he was on his own from then on. I was working at the Mirus farm at the time and did not witness his departure—he left and I was none the wiser.

Several years ago I found among papers left behind by my parents an official document from Rhenen's city hall that confirmed their formal adoption of Bill Van Doesburg. When I searched for the document more recently, however, I could not find it. I do have another document, dated 27 April 1949, that says that Gesienus Wilhelmus van Doesburg *op 6 Mei 1949 zal worden afgeschreven wegens vertrek naar Busby (Canada)* ( . . . will be deleted from the register on 6 May 1949 because of his departure for Busby [Canada]). He died on 24 March 2009, age 75, and eight members of our family attended his funeral.

The first fall I worked on Edwards' threshing crew I had a lot to learn, not the least of which was simply the hard work of walking the field and pitching bundles on to a 'rack' (a wagon with side racks to transport grain bundles or hay) all day long. On a Saturday night we were working late on the Reichert place, trying to finish up. The field pitching was done and I was waiting for the last load to go through the threshing machine—I was so tired that I could not stand up anymore and just had to sit down. The following year my muscles had developed enough that I could handle the work much better. I had also learned to harness and handle a team of horses, and was given a team and rack on my own. That meant an opportunity for a brief rest during the ride back to the thresher every time the rack was loaded. One time I was a bit careless taking the team along a side hill and, even though the rack was only half loaded, it tipped over and most of the bundles rolled off. No harm done, fortunately, except for getting the rack upright again and for some unnecessary extra work reloading the bundles.

In keeping with tradition, the wives of host farmers always prepared elaborate meals for the threshing crews and, of course, mid-morning and afternoon coffee with appropriate snacks. An exception to the good meals happened at the home of one neighbour where we had chicken that was so tough that no amount of chewing seemed to make it fit to swallow.

Dad and George and I worked quite bit for the Edwards family during haying and harvest time and also when they were building a new barn. Sometimes we were served lunch at their house; Dad then would ask for a time-out before we started eating and would offer a prayer. For work on our own farm, we did a lot of

borrowing from the Edwards'. When our tractor got stuck beyond help in a mud hole, we borrowed theirs to pull it out. When we needed horses to pull logs out of the bush for lumber or to pull trees down on land we were clearing, we used their horses. If we needed to haul hay or straw during the winter it was Baldy and Prince, their team, that we borrowed.

It did not always go well. Once, when George and I were loading straw in the field, George decided that he needed to go back home for something and he rode away on Baldy. That left Prince very unhappy. I held on to him for a while, until he suddenly reared up on his hind legs—then I promptly let him go and he galloped off to join his mate. Another time, during the winter, the team and the sleigh-borne hayrack were standing on our yard, facing downhill, and the horses decided to leave for home. In seconds they were galloping down the road, with us chasing behind. By the time we caught up with them 2 miles later they had gone off the road and were standing belly-deep in snow in the ditch, unable to move until we dug them out.

A much scarier experience with the horses happened to me the following year when I worked on the Edwards threshing crew, using their team and rack to haul bundles from the field to the threshing machine. When I returned the team to the Edwards place in the evening I made the mistake of stopping on a down-sloping spot. I was unhitching the horses, and suddenly the rack started to roll forward while I was standing in front. The horses were unable to hold it back and started going also; I stumbled and fell and both team and wagon went right over me until the fence 20 feet down stopped them. When I came to my senses I was standing behind the rack, wondering what happened, and grateful for being untouched by horses' feet or wagon wheels. I did not bother telling anyone about my adventure.

On a more positive note, my last experience with horses on a threshing crew job happened when I worked for George Heemeryck in the fall of 1951. He had a team of huge black horses that was mine to use. At lunch time on a day when we were threshing on his home place, I unhitched the team, climbed aboard, and headed for the house. The horses knew exactly where they were going and galloped across the field, jumping over stooks even, and I had the most exciting ride of my life.

An incident that was not so pleasant for George Heemeryck happened on his home place that same week. As usual, I had slept in the hayloft in the barn and got up early enough to feed and harness the horses and have breakfast. George was proud of his new W-9 McCormick-Deering tractor that was warmed up and ready to go. The first load of bundles to go into the thresher had stood out overnight and was a bit damp, and when the man on the rack started pitching bundles into the thresher, the tractor growled a bit. The pitcher kept right on going, though, until after a few minutes the machine got plugged up with the tough bundles and the tractor stalled. George was not happy, of course. His pride was hurt and he had to clean out the thresher before we could carry on. I simply watched it happen.

Eric Edwards was very ingenious when it came to tractors and different pieces of farm equipment. A good example of that was how he rigged up their John Deere tractor and ground-driven binder as a one-man operation. Both the hand clutch and the throttle on the tractor could be operated from the binder seat with a rope-and-pulley arrangement. For the steering system Eric rigged up a long shaft with a

couple of universal joints, and with a steering wheel mounted on the binder he then could easily keep the tractor on course.

During our second year on the farm we acquired a second-hand swather and a small combine so we could take care of our own harvesting. Running the combine was a bit dicey because even in the lowest gear our small tractor had barely enough power to run the combine. The swather was a converted horse-drawn binder and at full width it cut too wide a swath for our combine if the crop was at all heavy. Also, the tractor did not have a 'live' power-take-off (PTO), so for both starting up and stopping the driver had to be handy and quick with the clutch, the gearshift, and the PTO lever. But it was all manageable, provided there were not too many heavy or tough spots in the swaths. There was the occasional breakdown, and those occasions caused Dad endless frustration, especially if it looked like the good harvest weather might soon end.

Our house did not have enough bedroom space for all of us, so George and I slept in the old 'original' log house. That was fine during the summer but not so pleasant during the winter. There was no heat of any kind in the place—deemed much too dangerous—and it was very cold when we went to bed. We kept our socks and long underwear on and used all the blankets we could find; they were almost frozen to our faces by morning. We ran to the house as soon as Mother had fired up the kitchen stove and got the place warmed up a bit. That included thawing the ice on the water bucket and the frozen home-baked bread on the shelf behind the curtain.



The old log house in 1949

The kitchen stove generated enough heat to keep the kitchen warm but it did nothing for the rest of the house. For the living room Dad had bought a tin heater that could become red-hot when it was filled with dry wood but cooled off the minute the wood was done. During the night, therefore, the house temperature often dropped well below freezing. Not a surprise, of course, in a house without any insulation and without storm windows. A layer of straw packed around the lower part of the outside wall helped some but we could still easily be warm on the stove side of our bodies and cold on the other side.

For the first two years we cut all our firewood by hand with a bucksaw. After we used up the old and dry wood that had accumulated around the yard we sometimes had to depend on green stuff that did not burn worth a toot in our tin heater. Later we used a big table saw imported from Holland, with about a 24-inch blade, driven by the tractor. It had no protection of any kind but we never had any accidents with it, thankfully, and it beat the bucksaw hands down.

During the late fall and winter, Dad and George and I would work at clearing land every afternoon unless the weather was too miserable. We cut down all trees that were less than 8 to 10 inches in diameter and piled them up. The bigger ones we left until spring when we would chop off the roots and push the trees over or pull them down with a horse. We managed to clear about 8 acres this way. It was hard work, not least because we were not used to it but also because our imported Dutch axes were heavy-duty tools, with emphasis on the heavy, better for splitting firewood than for chopping down trees and not at all like the much lighter double-bitted Canadian-made axes. During very cold spells the blades were brittle and easily became nicked when we used them on trees that were frozen solid. Dad wanted to make sure to take those nicks out again so we spent a good deal of time sitting in the living room turning a small grindstone, with Dad holding the axe blades. The following summer we burned the brush piles and someone came in to plow the area with a breaking plow. We had some new land, won the hard way, and hopefully quite fertile for at least the first few years.

I worked for Walter Fedorowich for a few weeks one summer, picking roots, haying, and stooking. Picking roots on newly broken land definitely was the worst job. Haying was not bad because he had me up on the rack most of time, even though Walter was very strong and one of his pitchfork loads was almost enough to swamp me completely. Stooking was hard work also but I could manage short rests once in a while when he was on the other side of the field and could not see me.

For several weeks during that same winter two or three of us would walk to the north quarter every afternoon to cut birch and poplar trees down for logs that later were sawn into rough lumber on a portable sawmill. According to Dad's diary we cut a total of 308 logs in the 18 days for which numbers were recorded (it just struck me that one of the things I inherited from my dad was the inclination to record a lot of different things). As I recall it Dad was able to sell the birch logs and we used the rough lumber from the poplar logs to build three farm buildings—a granary, a pig brooder house, and a garage. More about that later.

Starting our tractor during the winter was difficult. There was no garage and both truck and tractor stood outside all the time. We did not realize that it was important to change the oil in both engine and transmission to a lighter-weight oil for the winter to prevent everything from becoming very stiff. Often the only way we could get the tractor started was to have one of us turn the crank while the other pushed the starter button. We may even have built a small fire under the oil pan once, but that would be a risky undertaking. The truck battery froze and did not survive the first winter because we did not know enough to take it out and bring it inside during the months that the truck stood idle. Dad did not buy a new battery for it for at least a year (not considered a priority for the little money we had), and for

some time during the following summer we would pull the truck with the tractor when we were picking rocks off the field.

One of the two Edwards tractors was a John Deere BR with the traditional putt-putt engine. I wanted to find out what our tractor would sound like without the muffler, so I took it off. It became very noisy, of course, even with a straight pipe mounted on it, and listening to that for hours at a time was, in the end, not that great, so the muffler went back on and stayed on. Dad never commented on what I had done.

One experience with our tractor was quite scary, at least in retrospect. The school bus that picked up my brothers at the farm gate had slipped into the ditch full of snow and I was going to try to pull it out with our tractor. To get extra traction I hooked the chain to the plow lift arm just above the rear axle of the tractor, not realizing that a big risk in doing that was that a sudden pull could easily tip the tractor over backwards, with me underneath it. Fortunately, all that happened was that the tractor wheels spun on the snow and nothing else moved. It took more than that to get the bus going again.

A different pulling incident did not involve me other than as a spectator. Willie Oldenburg had picked up a load of grain on our north quarter and partway back on the road through a muskeg area the truck's back wheels had broken through a small and rotten wooden culvert and almost disappeared from sight. We knew that nothing we had would move the truck. Fortunately, someone with a big Caterpillar tractor was clearing bush a few miles away and was willing to bring his rattling and lumbering machine down the road to help out. When he hooked up a steel cable to the front bumper of the truck and started to pull, I stood well back because I thought he would pull the truck frame apart. The frame probably flexed a bit but the truck started to move and soon was on solid ground again.

On Sunday 2 July 1950, Rev. John Hanenburg was installed as Home Missionary for northern Alberta and we travelled to Neerlandia for the occasion. He lived in Edmonton but would be in charge of worship services and catechism classes in Westlock. We already had begun to attend church services in Westlock on most Sundays, transported the 15 miles by various means that included Bill Elliot's school bus from Busby, a taxi from Westlock (paid for by the church perhaps?), and even by tractor once or twice when the roads were bad. A few times we were picked up by church members from Westlock who owned a car. John Van Zalen, for example, drove us several times. Most of the time we would take a lunch along and eat it at someone's house there, often at George and Anna De Boer's place, and sometimes at Van Zalen's or at the Sierinks. After a leisurely lunch we then would go back to church for the second service at 2 o'clock.

On Sundays when we did not go to church Dad would read a sermon at home, out of a Dutch book of sermons. What I remember from those occasions is that I/we put up with it but did not always understand much of the readings. One series of sermons that I can remember dealt with the meaning of the different coloured horses described in one section of Revelation; I probably was not all that interested in understanding.



In July 1951 Dad sold the big truck to someone in Iron Springs, and a month later he bought a used 1946 Dodge pickup truck from Stan's Service in Busby. That truck became our main mode of transportation for the next three years, until he bought a new 1954 Mercury, complete with V8 engine and automatic transmission. Dad and I traveled to Lethbridge in the Dodge during the summer of 1952 to visit *Oom* Cees and *Tante* Aal, and also Frits Schuld, Dad's bosom pal during his teenage years. I shared a bed with Dad while we were there and have bad memories of his persistent snoring. If it woke me up—and it did—it was almost impossible to get back to sleep again. One morning during our stay we helped *Oom* Cees hoe sugar beets—he and his family were under contract to do that. The long rows and the large field made it seem like an endless job that I was happy to leave behind again.



Four brothers and 'new' truck in 1951

I did quite a bit of the driving to and from Lethbridge, on what then was all two-lane highway. On the way back we had a flat tire on the back a short distance south of Innisfail. We took the wheel off and put the spare on and by the time that was done we discovered that the other back tire also was flat. Not a good situation. I was elected to hitchhike to Innisfail with one flat tire. The tire was fixed, I hitchhiked back with it, and we were on our way again. Soon thereafter the engine began to knock. Also not a good situation. We stopped to check the oil level, found it fine, and drove home the rest of the way at 25 miles per hour, hoping that damage to the engine would be minimal. The upshot of it all was, however, that the truck needed a new engine. It had become a costly trip.

The truck was difficult to start in the winter—it did not like cold weather. The transmission and rear end also would be terribly stiff. But it got us around, albeit with other 'interesting' experiences. One Sunday on the way to church I was driving and the left rear wheel fell off, rolling ahead of us and ending up in the ditch. We stopped, of course, retrieved the wheel and were able to get it reattached with enough bolts to hold it on—the rest were stripped. Other times we might race through a mud hole on the road to make sure we got through, and water would splash up to the distributor cap, killing the engine in mid-hole. Take the cap off, dry it, put it back on, start the engine, and hope to drive out again. We did.

The two shallow wells on the farm provided us with enough water for use in the house but often not enough to keep our pigs and our cow happy. James and Annie Edwards' well was said to provide an endless supply of water so we began to use the sprayer as a water tank to haul water home from there. A few times we also pumped water from a slough north of the farm but that was not the greatest water. The pump on the sprayer was driven by the tractor power-take-off that, of course, never had a safety shield on it. A few years later, after I had left home, Dad nearly

died when his pants caught on it and he got knocked around a bit before John J, who was nearby, was able to turn off the tractor.

The cellar under our house was small, and we needed a place to store our potatoes, turnips, and carrots where they would not freeze. In September 1950, I was given the task to dig a root cellar or rootpit, its walls lined with rough lumber, and with beams across the top that supported a layer of soil and manure to keep the frost out. A triple hatch in the top provided awkward access and getting stuff in and out was a major chore. But nothing froze in the rootpit.

The first winter on the farm was very cold and also brought a lot of snow. When Willie Oldenburg drove out with a load of fertilizer that Dad had ordered, for example, he could not make it past the half-mile corner and dumped all the bags right there. It meant that we had to struggle through the snowdrifts with our tractor and stoneboat to bring it the rest of the way. It took a while but it got there.

In late 1951 Dad was able to use some of his money in Holland to purchase additional equipment and have it shipped to Canada. Early the next summer it arrived: a used Ferguson tractor with mounted plow, a hammermill, a European-style side-delivery hay rake, and a saw table with a huge blade that was useful mainly for cutting firewood. The hammermill turned out to be the least useful piece because it ground very slowly and very fine and took all the power our small tractor could muster. But we managed to get it installed in the barn and we used it for quite a while.

A scary incident occurred during that same time. Wilco and I were up in the barn loft, probably doing something with the new hammermill, when suddenly Wilco, no more than 4 years old, fell out through the open door to the ground 7 feet below. I was so shocked that I jumped right out after him. Neither of us was hurt, thankfully.

The rough lumber from the logs we had cut on our own farm was used to construct several new buildings on the farm. I was to do the building because George was working for a neighbouring farmer and, except for Wilco, my younger brothers were all going to school. Also, Dad was not a particularly handy man and was not interested in becoming one. I checked out some construction manuals, looked at other buildings, and pressed on. My first project was not the most successful one, undoubtedly because I did not solicit enough advice on just how to do it. I built a granary on the north quarter and all seemed fine until the first time it was filled with barley. The floor promptly collapsed under the load because I had put the supporting joists in flat instead of on edge. Fortunately, the barley suffered no damage.

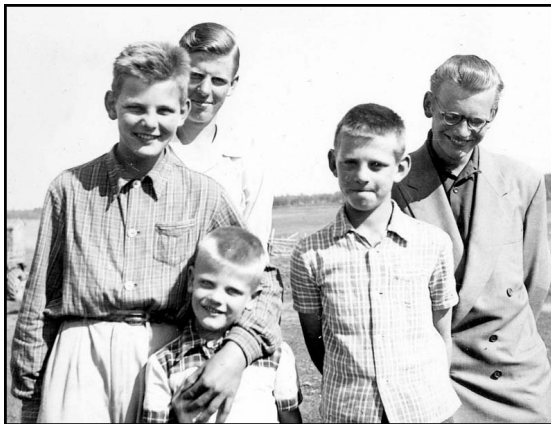
My next construction project was much more ambitious and complicated but also much more successful. Dad had found a detailed plan for a hexagonal pig brooder house that had six pens for pregnant sows and a stove in the center where newly born piglets could stay warm and be out of the way of their mothers. It took quite a while to get it done, with me working at it alone most of the time during the winter, but it became a very useful building for as long as Dad continued to raise pigs. The only 'finished' lumber in the building was the siding around the outside. When the pig brooder house was occupied by sows and their piglet families, Dad or one of us always had to be there and stay with a sow that was about to give birth, to make

sure that she would not accidentally lie on one of her babies and that the little pigs could make their way to the warm stove in the centre.



The van den Born family in 1951

During the few years I worked at home, the relationship between Dad and George never seemed very good and it gradually got worse. Dad considered George lazy and argumentative and he became quite frustrated with him, unwilling to accept the possibility that perhaps George had some serious mental and emotional problems—they were not diagnosed until much later. I don't believe that George was lazy, and he and I got along fine when he was working at home. George worked 'out' for several different farmers and also spent some time in Edmonton. Once he came



Five brothers 1952

home with some records he had bought; somehow he had the idea that he would become an entertainer. Dad became very angry about the whole thing and insisted that he take the records back to where he had bought them. I don't know if George actually did that—perhaps he could not—but it was an unpleasant scene. Mother was much more accepting of George's situation, possibly because she had a younger brother who suffered from a similar condition. Bertha has said that in later years when my nieces Laura and Jacquelyn stayed on the farm for a while, they were scared of George.

Not for sexual reasons, but “he was weird, just lay on his bed, watched television, and smoked a lot.”

We had a dog on the farm most of the time. One of them was Prince, a mid-size dog with a bit of a mean streak. He would sneak around behind visitors to the farm and try to nip their ankles. He might even do that to our cow. One time he actually bit me, though not seriously so. I was doing something with a load of logs on a sleigh and Prince managed to get his foot caught between two logs. I was standing right next to him and he probably thought that I was responsible for his pain. He yelped and bit my hand, enough that I could feel his teeth through leather and wool mitts. Fortunately not through the skin. I think he died a few years later under the wheels of a truck that came on the yard and that he decided to attack.

A surprising item my parents brought with them from the Netherlands was a second-hand brass microscope and a number of prepared slides with insect and plant tissues. I have no idea where Dad (presumably) had bought it and why he had done so.

Certainly not for his own enjoyment—that was not his thing, and I don’t recall him ever looking through it. In any case, after the microscope surfaced I spent a lot of time looking through it and being totally fascinated by what I was able to see. My high school biology courses had been few and did not have any labs with them so I had never seen anything like that before. There is little doubt that my experience with that microscope had an influence on my future academic endeavours, even if it was completely subconsciously. I understand that my nephew Doug Vandeborn has the microscope now.

In response to Dad’s encouragement I sent off a letter of application for admission to the University of Alberta’s Faculty of Agriculture. More accurately, probably, Dad drafted and typed the letter and I signed and sent it. A four-word entry in Dad’s diary for 9 January 1950 seems to refer to it but provides no details. Along with my letter I sent in my high school diploma and my report cards as well as copies of the final examinations I had written. All of these documents were in Dutch, of course. It took some time to get sorted out but apparently the university officials located someone who was familiar with my type of high school background and I was duly admitted. I have in my files a letter dated 27 December 1951 that said I was eligible to enter the first year of the Bachelor of Science program in the Faculty of Agriculture.

I did not have the slightest idea as to what a university was all about, even though I had visited an open house there—Varsity Guest Weekend—with the Busby Grain Club in early spring. George was along also on that trip because together we had won a few awards in the local Grain Club with meticulously selected samples of oat kernels that winter. We drove the tractor to Busby and a school bus took us to Edmonton. The only other time we had been there since our short stay in May 1949 was the time Dad took us to the Edmonton Rodeo in January 1952—so says Dad’s diary but I have no memory of it. Going to the big city was a major event, therefore.

Our visit to the university impressed me but as an institution the place was totally foreign to my experience. Nevertheless, the die was cast for my immediate future and I was on my way. Dad drove me to Edmonton near the end of September, presumably with a pen and paper, some clothes, and a bit of cash. He dropped me off somewhere near the campus and suddenly I was on my own. I bought a newspaper, found an ad

for a room near the campus, and rented the room for a week. Next day I put an ad in the newspaper myself—something about room and board for a Christian university student—and promptly received a visit from Mr. and Mrs. Thompson who lived nearby and with whom I boarded for the next five months.

It did not take long to get myself oriented in terms of directions, and the fact that Bertha was working near the campus was both helpful and reassuring. She worked as a cook in the Delta Upsilon frat house (now historic Rutherford House on Saskatchewan Drive). She even provided me with cash several times, presumably instead of giving it to Dad. In February or March her fellow cook left and I moved in with her for the rest of my first school year. I slept and studied in the second small bedroom in the basement. In return for my board and room I had to help Bertha with the dishes every night and help her change all the beds in the third floor dormitory every Saturday.

Curiously enough, other than the brief entry that seems to refer to my first letter of application for admission, Dad's diary makes no mention whatsoever of my departure for Edmonton where a new chapter in my life was about to begin. Nevertheless, I have been forever grateful for my parents' encouragement towards further education. Sometimes there has been the slightly nagging thought that Dad expected me to come back home to work during the summer months and, upon graduation, to put my newly acquired expertise to work on the family farm, but neither he nor Mother ever spoke about it to me and I never asked. Whether or not those expectations existed, none of them became a reality because my academic and career path led elsewhere.

In many ways, it was my mother who held the family together emotionally. I never once heard her complain about the many hardships she had to contend with, compared to her life in Holland. I recall seeing her cry just once, in the summer of 1952, when she received word that her younger brother Heimen had died, at 46, when he was hit by a train while riding his bike.

If there were disagreements between my parents, we never heard about them. Sometimes Dad would tease Mother a bit and she seemed able to take that, but I do not recall ever hearing a word of criticism from one to the other. Their respective responsibilities in the household and in farm or business were clearly delineated, it seemed, perhaps self-assigned or more likely based on tradition and neither of the two interfered or questioned the other, at least not in our presence.

One of Dad's brothers (*Oom* Jaap) came to visit once, several years after I had left home, perhaps just to see how his oldest brother had made out in that faraway place. I can only begin to imagine what stories he carried back to Holland, at a time when he and his brother Jan had great financial success in their feed business. Some other Dutch acquaintances came to visit over the years but most of that happened after I left home to go to university and I did not witness those visits.

There is no doubt that my three-year farm experience was important in helping to shape my thinking when my teaching and research career in weed science began. It was especially true for the teaching part of my work. I was grateful that I had had an opportunity to acquire at least some sense of the practicalities of weed control 'down on the farm.'

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