

Chapter 9. Settling in Edmonton

We moved into our rented townhouse with minimal furniture. We bought a relatively expensive new bedroom suite at Sprague's (the store is no longer around at the time of writing but the bedroom suite is, with a new mattress that we bought almost fifty years later). That was an important piece, of course. For the eating area we found a new table and chair set; for the living room I bought a couch and chair at an estate auction sale. It turned out to be quite a low-end set (what did I know about furniture quality?) and the fabric edges showed serious wear before long. But then, it was something to sit on.

New tenants moved in next door, and we got acquainted with John and Marie Boras and their children, staunch Roman Catholics. John was changing careers, from selling farm equipment to a career in law. He and I car-pooled in our travels to and from the university campus all winter. We stayed in contact with them for some time afterwards and in later years we visited them once in Lethbridge.



Wierenga family and add-ons in 1962

We settled into church life again also, in Edmonton's First Christian Reformed Church, and we became reacquainted with our Vanden Born and Wierenga relatives. We usually would go to Mom's for coffee on Sunday mornings after church; Andrew and Carolyn would be there as well—they had been in Edmonton since the summer of 1960. Andrew was going to law school and Carolyn was teaching at the East Christian School. She taught full-time 1960-62 and part-time in 62-63, with Mom taking care of their son Mark Andrew. In 1961 she taught until the day before Mark was born! Andrew was admitted to the Alberta bar in the late spring of 1963. Gladys was studying at Calvin College, after taking her first two years (1958-60) at the University of Alberta, and she graduated in 1962. We got to

know her quite well during her first and only year of teaching in Edmonton after that. She and I had fun exchanging the same birthday card a few times.

I started working at the University of Alberta in January 1961; I was paid as a postdoctoral fellow even though I was still pre-doctoral (who was I to question that?). My official appointment as Assistant Professor of Crop Ecology would not take effect until September, and I was assigned no particular responsibilities. The academic work I did for the next four months consisted of preparing and typing a final draft of my Ph.D. thesis, on Mom Wierenga's heavy-duty old Remington typewriter. When I finished it I turned the whole thing over to Janice [Greidanus] Baker who had agreed to type the official 181-page thesis, all six copies of it, as required. Photographs had to be printed and glued on the appropriate pages, and when it was all done I sent the completed bound copies off to the University of Toronto. There was to be no re-doing of computer-generated sections as was often done in later years. The typing cost \$48, the not-so-fancy binding \$15.

In early June a noisy prop-jet Viscount took me to Toronto—my first ever plane ride. I had to be there for at least two weeks, to present myself for two oral thesis defense examinations that, for reasons unknown to me, had to be two weeks apart. The first was a departmental exam (the most substantive of the two); the second one was conducted by the Faculty of Graduate Studies. As I recall it, the chairman of the second examining committee was a professor from the music department who did not ask me any pertinent questions. Actually, I do not remember any of the questions that the examiners asked me. What I do remember is that, after I had been told that the thesis as well as my defense of it was considered acceptable, I walked out with a big sense of relief. No more exams!! The relief, unfortunately, lasted only a day or two, until other concerns began to take the place of worrying about exams. Dr. Forward took me out for dinner at the university's Faculty Club and afterwards drove me all the way back to the Van Beilen home in Weston where I was staying.

My two-week stay in Toronto was made more bearable because I could stay with Dan and Leida the whole time. Leida's younger brother gave me a ride to the bus or subway in the morning, and I think he gave me a ride back again also. I don't remember what I did with myself during that whole period, however, other than trying to make sure I would have all the answers for my examiners. From some slides in my collection it seems that I travelled to Ottawa and Montreal (where I visited John and Sophie) and that I also visited John and Tineke in Drayton. It was the longest period of long-distance separation from Dixie since our wedding three years earlier and at the end of it I was quite ready to go home again. My flight back was my first on a jet, a Trans Canada Airlines DC-8 with take-off power that I had not experienced before.

My nine years of formal university education were finished. It sounds like a long time, just thinking about it now, but at the time it did not seem long at all. The three degrees I earned came at the ends of three quite distinct and unique periods of study, at two different universities, and none of them had been planned very far in advance. Besides, courtship, marriage, and the birth of our first daughter, all served as important balancing influences to academic work and study during the last six of the nine years.

I don't know if I was entitled to vacation already but, at my parents' request, our threesome spent three weeks in August 1961 looking after the chicken farm operation in Busby while my parents went on a road trip to Ontario in their blue '58 Chev. Wilco—who had just turned 14—went with them and apparently did a fair bit of the driving. George and Jack were both home to do much of the work. I did not really know much about the farm routines anyway because I had been away from there for six years and a lot of things had changed. It worked, though, and the chickens were none the worse for the wear after we went home again, as far as I could tell.

George stayed on the farm from the fall of 1960 until 1963. I don't remember what he did for the next three years, but in 1966 he worked in BC for a time and then he studied at NAIT for a short period. My parents had several different people work for them on the farm during the mid-sixties. They included John De Kam for a couple of years, Bert De Kam for nearly a year, and even Bert's father-in-law, Mr. Zijlmans. The work was gradually becoming more difficult for my Dad, and all his sons were leaving home. John J and John had left in the mid-fifties and Jack left in the early sixties. Wilco graduated from high school in 1965 and went off to university but came back to work on the farm during the summers of 1966 and 1967. In 1968, Dad began to suffer from phlebitis and spent some time in the Westlock hospital. At one point he also had a blood clot in his lung and came close to death as a result of it. In 1969, George came home again and helped solve the farm labour shortage.

Our family's social life during the sixties was not particularly extensive or exciting. Our young children kept us busy and my involvement in school and church things took up much of my non-work time. We were in a couple of different Bible study groups for a while, first with Horace and Janice Baker and the Shannons, and later with Herm and Carol Konynenbelt, Fred and Linda Boersma, and Art and Ruth Bailey—the latter group around 1967-69. When Dick Shannon and his family came to Edmonton in 1965—he as principal of the West Christian School—they had stayed in our house for a month while we were away on vacation.

When my academic appointment took effect in September 1961, I had to become more serious about my new work responsibilities. I had desk space in a small office area next to Bill Corns' office, directly across from Ray Schraa who had become Corns' technician some time before my return to Edmonton. About the only thing I was told about my work assignment was that I was to teach the 'weeds' course, starting in January 1962. Bill Corns was turning all his work with weeds and their control over to me and planned to change the focus of his own work to range management, especially mechanical and chemical brush control on range land. Later in the year he was slated to take over as department head from John Unrau who had accepted a position at McMaster University in Hamilton. In March 1961, however, John Unrau suddenly and tragically died as a result of a brain hemorrhage, at the age of 45, and Bill Corns moved to the main office on the third floor much sooner than he had expected. I inherited his office on the ground floor and soon I also inherited Ray Schraa as technician, which was a whole lot more than I had expected right at the start of my professorial career.



Ann in early 1962

On 1 November 1961, our second daughter was born, Ann Elizabeth, and the number of children in our small family suddenly doubled. Surprisingly, the relatively long hair she had at birth was nearly black, quite out of character for our family. But the black did not last very long and she eventually became the blondest of our daughters. Strange things happen. When Ann was born, I recall that my first reaction on hearing it was 'a girl' was a mild sense of relief that the new baby was of the same gender as we already had in Karen. The reason for feeling that way has forever been a mystery, but that is how I experienced it.

In January 1962 we bought a newer car, a 1959 Chev station wagon, from Plant Science professor Ted Smith for \$1,500, and we were able to sell our 1954 Chev for \$250. We borrowed money for much of the purchase and made monthly payments for six months, after which we were able to pay off the balance.

Some time later, I developed a strange bump at the base of my spine. Dr. Cliff Hergott, our family physician, called it a sebaceous cyst that should be removed. He did the surgery in the General Hospital, where I experienced my first and only hospital stay. All went well, and a week later I was home again. Sitting was uncomfortable for a while but I was able to cope with that. Bill and Mary Corns came for a hospital visit, as did Don Forsberg, who worked for the Velsicol Corporation and who came to promote research with their new herbicide, dicamba. It became an important component of my field and lab research program during the sixties.

Baby Ann grew and soon was not a baby anymore; there was even some evidence that another family member would make his/her appearance before long. It was time, therefore, to start looking for accommodation with a bit more space for a growing family. Agricultural Engineering professor Fenton MacHardy and his wife Phyllis were going away on a year's leave, and their house on the south side, not far from the university, was available for rent for a year, so we moved there. The house was a pretty basic three-bedroom house, with most of the basement space taken up by their belongings. We did not have a lot of stuff so that was not a big problem. Dixie's cousin Sharen Tuininga (now Degner) stayed with us there for a while. She was studying, and worked for her room and board at our house. According to Dixie, Hendrene Wierenga did that for a while also.

Shortly before we moved, Dixie and I had travelled to the Seattle World's Fair, via Logan Pass in Glacier National Park that had just opened and that still had lots of snow. We stayed with Bill Groot's sister Marge and her husband Bill. Dixie

remembers that, along the way, we slept in the back of our station wagon, not the greatest accommodation but very cheap. We also took the ferry to Vancouver Island where we visited Butchart Gardens and stayed one or two nights with Walter and Rita Smith on their farm near Chemainus. Mom probably looked after Karen and Ann. In August we went camping in Banff, with Mom and Jean and Herman along. We had borrowed a wall-type canvas tent from John Vandervelde for the occasion but somehow came away without the ridgepole. It did not help any that it was dark by the time we were setting up the tent but, fortunately, there were helpful fellow campers and, with some rope and nearby trees, we could get the tent up well enough to accommodate us.

Some time during that same year I had a phone call from John Woudstra, asking if I would be willing to serve on the Christian School board. I said that I would be willing, and that brief conversation led to a long association with Christian education in Edmonton at all levels, including what became The King's University College. In the meantime I also had been named a member of the first board of the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee, as a representative of Classis Alberta North of the Christian Reformed Church.



Joan arrives in 1963

Joan Eleanor made her appearance on 15 February 1963, a bit earlier than expected. I was returning from my first CRWRC board meeting in Grand Rapids that day, and Jack had been staying at our house, just in case. Certain signs prompted Dixie to call her mother early in the morning, and Mom promptly came over to take her to the hospital. Peter also came along to stay at the house and help out—Jack had been out late the night before, perhaps indulging his love of bridge. When I arrived at the airport in the evening I was paged for a message from Mom that perhaps I should make a trip to the hospital to visit Dixie and Joan. All was well.

The time had come to find a more permanent place to live, and we started looking around for a suitable house. Our two choices were for a place not far from

the university or a place that was convenient for our children to get to the Christian school. We started looking, and real estate agent Neis Greidanus showed us three or four houses, of which I remember only the one we chose. It happened to be the largest and most expensive of the ones we saw, at \$19,000. We borrowed \$1,000 from the bank to add to the \$1,500 we had ourselves to make the down payment. The house was in Crestwood, at 9520 – 145th Street, and we lived there happily for 26 years. The house even took on a bit of shrine status for some of our children after we moved out in 1989. At the time we bought the house, an advantage for the

location was that there was a direct bus connection to the Christian school in McQueen. That changed within a few years, unfortunately, even before Karen started school.

We had rented the MacHardy house on the south side for a year but moved out two months early to take possession of our very own house. It meant paying two months' rent while we did not live there but it seemed the right thing to do. John De Weerd and a helper took just two hours in early July to move all our belongings, and we could begin to settle in. I bought a used reel mower, probably at a garage sale, which we later gave to John and Eileen Sneep. I then bought an Sunbeam electric mower from Arcade Hardware—in the building that now houses The Hardware Grill—that was noisy but served us well for many years. Earlier we had already bought some other used items such as a small desk for \$30, a vacuum cleaner and polisher for \$110, and a chest of drawers for \$15. A few more financial details, for the record. At Wedgewood Homes the rent for the two-bedroom townhouse was \$90 per month. For the MacHardy house we paid \$110 per month. Two years later we had carpet installed over the then not so fashionable hardwood floor. Still later, in 1968, we actually bought some new living room furniture—for the first time—with the advice of an interior decorator, and we decided what colours the walls, inside and out, should be painted.

When my official academic appointment took effect on 1 September 1961, my monthly income increased a little to take account of that. During the post-doc months my salary had been \$7,000 per year (net take-home \$458 per month), and as an actual professor it increased to \$9,000 (net \$583 per month). That does not sound like much as I write it now, but with our monthly rent for the first year and a half at \$90, we got along just fine. Our expectations were not high and we never felt poor or particularly stressed financially. A few years later I sat in the office of someone who was a 'full' professor and saw his pay stub on the desk, with the number \$1,005 on it! That looked very impressive at the time.

The previous year, when we were still living in Toronto, I had seen a job advertised, probably with Agriculture Canada, at a salary of \$8,100 per year, more than double what we were living on at the time. Dixie and I looked at it and, naïve as we were, could hardly imagine what we might do with all the money if I was offered that job. I did not apply for it, though. I did apply for a research position with Agriculture Canada at Harrow, Ontario, and got as far as having an interview there. The appointment went to someone else with more experience and I don't remember feeling terribly disappointed about it. In later years we have occasionally reflected on how different our lives might have been if I actually had been hired for that position.

My teaching career had its formal beginning in January 1962, when I taught the weeds course for the first time. It was an intimidating experience. Bill Corns had given me all his lecture notes and I tried to use most of that material, almost certainly a big mistake. I discovered that teaching from someone else's notes really did not work well. It tended to become a mechanical type of transfer of information from paper to the students' minds and notes, without a well-defined context in the mind of the lecturer, meaning me. Preparing and presenting lectures was hard work

for me for the first several years, until such a context for the stuff I was teaching had taken shape in my mind. As a consequence, I did not begin to enjoy the teaching until several years later. It did not help, of course, that my program of courses and research at the University of Toronto had nothing to do with weeds and weed control—the term ‘weed science’ was still waiting to be coined and accepted. In addition, during the three years I had been away from working with weeds, chemical weed control had begun to go through a major change. A couple of selective herbicides for wild oat control in grain crops had come on the scene, and the 2,4-D family of herbicides for the control of broadleaved weeds was about to be supplemented with a whole range of new products. In a real sense I entered the field of chemical weed control just when the range of useful products was about to explode and to provide all kinds of fascinating research questions that needed to be answered.

Soon after I started work at the university I decided that it would be interesting, as well as professorial and ‘cool’, to start smoking a pipe. So I bought a pipe and some tobacco and every morning the first thing I would do in my office was to smoke a pipe. Since I had never smoked before, other than a couple of cigarettes when I was younger, all I got out of it was a bad taste in my mouth, not much of a reward for the hard work of keeping the thing lit. But I persisted for a while, thinking that at some point I might actually enjoy it. Until one day, after my morning smoke, I felt sick to my stomach. Not enough to throw up but enough to tell myself that what I was doing was really dumb, and to put pipe and tobacco away permanently. [I recently spoke with Rudy De Groot in Calgary who told me that he and some fellow students went through a similar experience when they were at Dordt College.]

And then there was that other question. How was I going to give expression to my belief in Jesus Christ and my convictions based thereon, in my teaching and research career? No one offered or provided me with any guidance in shaping my academic career, and no one seemed available to answer the question I just raised about my Christian convictions. I had only begun to think about that question during my study period in Toronto when I met with people such as Peter Schouls, Bert Witvoet, Leo Jonker, Gerald Van Belle, some of whom had been student followers of Dr. Evan Runner at Calvin College. A talk by Dr. Paul Schrotenboer on *The authority of Scripture* and a couple of lectures by Dutch professor Dr. Hendrik Van Riessen, on a Christian understanding of science (*The pretended autonomy of philosophical thought*), were very enlightening. I had never taken any philosophy courses and no one had ever pointed out to me that there was such a thing as looking at things scientific from a Christian perspective. All my elementary and high school education had been at schools that bore the name Christian but, in retrospect, the Christianity in those schools seemed more an add-on to the curriculum than a foundation for it. It is also possible, of course, that my immature mind was simply blind to it at the time.

Back in March 1958, I had attended a meeting of about a dozen Christian Reformed U of A students with four local CRC pastors—the student number had grown in the six years since I started—probably organized by John Piersma, pastor of Second CRC, or Bastiaan Nederlof, pastor of Third CRC. That meeting had a mostly social focus, at least in my memory of it. John Piers, one of the students present, told me

recently that a number of them met regularly during the next couple of years, under the mentorship of pastor Nederlof, to discuss what it meant to be a Christian university student, and how important that had been for him. For me it was not until my contact and experience with fellow Christian students in Toronto that my eyes and mind had begun to open to the idea that there really was a Christian way of looking at things scientific.



Christian Reformed students at U of A
plus four CRC pastors in 1958

In the fall of 1961 a number of students, friends, and some relatives in Edmonton were sufficiently interested in the same questions that we were able to organize the *Calvin Club* whose members would meet to discuss them on a regular basis. The constitutionally stated lofty purpose of the club was “to study the application of the principle of God’s sovereignty to the fulfillment of the cultural mandate.” Membership in the club was “open to persons of university level interested in pursuing the aim of this organization”. The ‘university level’ gate to membership was not a very secure gate, however, and it was never used to keep someone out. Andrew Wierenga or I functioned as president, I served as unofficial faculty sponsor, and we were able to persuade Rev. Bastiaan Nederlof to serve the club as philosophy mentor. He had studied astronomy for some time before becoming a minister and was well versed in philosophical questions. The agreement we made was that he would not participate in the main discussion period but would serve as respondent-commentator-summarizer at the end of the discussion. That system worked very well and he served the club in that capacity for several years. Jim Visser, Fred Cupido, and Bill Sinnema were active non-student participants. The group always met in Room 450 in the Agriculture Building and remained active for several years.

A few years ago, Ken Piers (younger brother to John) wrote about the impact the Calvin Club sessions had had on his life, even though he did not realize it until

much later. He wrote, in reflections at the end of his teaching career at Calvin College,

Being untutored in philosophy, theology, and history, I sat, mainly inert, through the monthly meetings of this student club for nearly three years before their message began to make some sense to me. By the time I graduated in 1963, I was committed to the idea of Christian education and convinced of its importance.

He expressed his gratitude for Andrew Wierenga's persistence in telling him to be ready to be picked up to go to the meetings. I quote Ken's statement here not only because it emphasized and illustrated the importance of the club's activities but also because my own experience in many ways paralleled his, a few years earlier and in a different locale. I am not certain how long the club continued to function, but its existence probably ended in 1963 or after Rev. Nederlof left Edmonton in 1964.

In the fall of 1962, over the Labour Day weekend, I attended the first of a series of 'Banff conferences', aimed especially at university students, and sponsored by what was then called the Association for Reformed Scientific Studies (now the Institute for Christian Studies). Calvin Seerveld was one of the main speakers, on *A Christian critique of art*. I was much impressed by his presentations, both in form and in content. It was the first time that I actually was provided with some tools or handles that I could use to evaluate or discuss artistic works, with the main focus on paintings. I can still recite Seerveld's definition of art: "The symbolic objectification of some meaning aspect of reality". A few years later, in the fall of 1965, astronomer Harry Vanderlaan presented a series of three lectures on *A Christian appreciation of physical science* that helped me immensely in developing my own perspective on the scientific stuff I was engaged in, both in research and in teaching.

Many years later I was asked to write a brief article for *The Banner*, about my work as a Christian professor in a secular public university—it was published in the 6 September 1993 issue. I wrote the following, under the title *Christianity in a public university?* (the editor deleted the two sections between square brackets in the published version of the article):

Someone once asked me why, as a Christian, I do not have any problems teaching in a public university. My response, then and now, is that I [do not have a problem with it because I] have the freedom to teach in a way that is consistent with my Christian convictions.

My appreciation for the importance of a Christian perspective in all scholarly work developed late in graduate school. I had been naively ignorant that the possibility for a Christian perspective on all academic study even existed. But, gradually, the notion became part of my thinking. Until it did, I suspect my teaching was not much different from that of any of my colleagues.

During my early years in teaching, I never told my students anything about my convictions and how they shaped my thinking and my teaching. I hardly knew myself. I decided that I should express my Christian commitments more overtly and make clear how they influence my work as a scholar. I decided to spend some time near the beginning of each term on a short autobiography, including the fact that I am a Christian, what that means for my life in general, and especially what it means for my university work.

I tell the students that my views on the things I teach (weed problems, weed control, herbicides, environmental considerations) are shaped by my Christian faith commitment and my understanding of God's creation. I cannot force them to accept the perspectives from which I look at the course material, but they do get to know those perspectives.

Students' reactions to my approach have been positive or indifferent, but they have not been negative. Students who are Christians listen sympathetically and sometimes offer appreciative comments. Non-Christians usually listen quietly (what choice do they have?) and occasionally offer a comment.

I have not had any criticism from my superiors. The University of Alberta has no written rules about such things, and no one has ever suggested that what I do might be inappropriate. Around the university, in fact, people have the unexpressed expectation that professors ought to teach from a diversity of perspectives.

Christian faculty members from a variety of church backgrounds support each other well—through prayer groups, for example. Yet, these groups have tended to focus on prayer for the institution and its students and teachers rather than on Christian approaches to our various disciplines.

In my work, I do lack many like-minded colleagues with whom I can develop my ideas. I also cannot assume that my classroom is filled with students who eagerly anticipate learning what a biblical perspective on weed science is all about or why weed control might even be called a redemptive occupation.

I do receive strong support through the Christian Reformed Church's campus ministry. And I also benefit from the presence of The King's College here in Edmonton. I support its educational philosophy and mission statement, and its faculty shares my commitment to Christian scholarship.

I was asked once to apply for a teaching position at a Christian college, and I agonized over the question. Had I taken the job, I would have traded a combination of teaching and research, with graduate students, for a program of teaching only. More important, I would have surrendered the opportunity and challenge I now have to serve as a witness to the importance of Christianly oriented scholarship, [particularly in teaching, in an environment that is predominately secular but does not dictate what views I should present in the classroom].
