

# LETTERS FROM WHITINSVILLE FROM AN OLD "GROUSTER"

Introduction: The following articles were written by my grandfather, Jacob Kooistra. I believe he wrote them and sent them to a newspaper, *Frysk en Fry*, in Friesland. Most of these were written in the 1950s, probably after he retired from the Whitin Machine Works. He called himself a Grouster because he was born in town of Grouw in the Netherlands.

The first letter is a clipping from a Frisian newspaper, *Frysk en Fry*. It was found among many other newspaper clippings saved by Mr. George (Geert) Burgess of Whitinsville. It was found by his son-in-law, Bernie Van Spyker, when he was cleaning up George's belongings. It was translated by Mrs. Hilda VanderBrug Dykstra. I believe that is the first letter Jacob Kooistra wrote to Friesland and the other letters followed.

*Notes:* He means Friesian when he says Dutch, the Christian Reformed Church when he says church and World War II when he says First World War. Despite what he thought, the Whitinsville Christian Reformed Church was never 100% Friesian.

## Contents

<a href="#">A LETTER FROM AN OLD GROUSTER IN WHITINSVILLE</a> .....	2
<a href="#">THE FIRST FRISIANS ARRIVED WITH A SMALL HERD OF COWS</a> .....	3
<a href="#">THE FIRST FRISANS</a> .....	4
<a href="#">THE GREAT MOVE</a> .....	5
<a href="#">FRISIAN BUSINESSMEN</a> .....	6
<a href="#">THE TRADESMEN</a> .....	6
<a href="#">THE FARMERS</a> .....	7
<a href="#">HOW THE AMERICAN "FRISIANS" HELPED ARNOLD BAKER</a> .....	8
<a href="#">AS ONE FAMILY</a> .....	9
<a href="#">FRISIAN SOCIAL LIFE</a> .....	10

## A LETTER FROM AN OLD GROUSTER IN WHITINSVILLE

Dear Friends,

As a faithful reader, of your paper "Frysk en Fry" for almost two years, I will write you about Whitinsville, Massachusetts. I received a subscription to your paper from one of my nephews, namely Japik R. Jaarsma of Idaard. We sincerely thank him for it. We also received a beautiful book by P. DeJong, thanks to Piet and Grietje Hemminga of Haskerdijken. It was nice to receive it in return for a package I sent to my relatives in the old country.

But first I will introduce myself. I was born in 1873 in a house named "Tutzeplaats" on the canal from Grouw to Warga, the 8th and last child of Hendrik and Grietje Kooistra.

In 1879 we moved to Great Biensma-State, close to the Grouster railroad. I spent my childhood days in Grouw and attended school there. My teacher was Master G. Wielsma, who in those days wrote poetry for a Friesian newspaper.

"Och, hwat kin 't Lammert helpe,  
Al rint it lok him nei  
As reint it brij as wetter,  
Dan is syn leppel wei." (the rhyme is not translated.)

One of my classmates was Simke Molenaar who later became a famous Dutch orator. He was quite a character already then. He had one brown and one blue eye. Mr. Wielsma, the teacher, had his good and bad points. He would never keep us after school, but if we were naughty, we would have to sit next to the homeliest girl in school. He would say, "Come here little boy. You need a baby-sitter." This often happened to Simke and me.

In 1896, the 23rd of April, I left for America and have never been sorry. Four years later, I went back to visit my parents who then were living in Jirnsum. Believe it or not, what I could not find in Friesland, I found in America. I met a girl two years younger than I, namely Fokje Bakker from Koudum, who came to Whitinsville while I was still messing around in the old country. We became serious and a year later we were married by Rev. F. Drost, who was the first minister of the newly organized church in Whitinsville, with thirteen families. We raised two daughters and two sons, three of whom married, and mates of Dutch descent. At home we speak Dutch. Our church, the Christian Reformed Church, is 100% Friesian. Rev. N. Veltman is our seventh pastor. He has a cousin living in Koudum. Our church now has over 300 families. Ninety one of our young men served our country in the first World War. One, namely, Edward Haringa, whose family came from Heeg was shot down by the Germans and died. He is buried in Margraten near Maastricht. Our church is the only Dutch church in New England. We are sixteen miles from Worcester and 250 miles from New York and Paterson, New Jersey.

I will try to get new subscribers to your paper, but the old Dutchmen here are thinning out. Now I will leave it to you to find a place in your paper for my story. Some of my old friends may enjoy reading this.

## THE FIRST FRISIANS ARRIVED WITH A SMALL HERD OF COWS

Dear Friends:

I would like to relate to you how the Frisians in Whitinsville, Massachusetts happened to locate here. We have here, the Whitin Machine Works, where some seven thousand men and women are employed, and where all sorts of machines are made for the manufacture of textiles. These machines are shipped to all parts of the world to wool and cotton wear manufacturers.

The Whitin family, the founders, settled here as pioneers, when the Indians still enjoyed undisputed housekeeping "rights" in an unrestricted territory. And ... it has been said that the "Whitins" (from which the name Whitinsville is derived) acquired all the thousands of acres of land (including forests and waters) from the Indians for a trifle, that the deal was closed for two kegs of firewater (whiskey).

I am of course in no position to prove the truth of the tale, however, one thing is certain, they did have and have now enormous holdings in this territory, over 500 dwellings for the employees, small businesses, such as an ice plant, coal exchanges, a large garage, and the like. Factories in the states of Maine, North Carolina, and Georgia, also manufacturing textile machinery.

In 1848 the large factory here started operating, and was called the Whitin Machine Works, The Whitin brothers were the founders, assisted by their brother-in-law, Laselle. The original factory was a small one, and was driven by waterpower. When later on, the Cotton factories became more numerous, the factory also grew hi size and productivity. John C. Whitin, one of the supervisors, had also undertaken Farming, in the meantime, and established the Castle Hill Farm. Stocking it with Jersey cattle. Land and forests were cleared, as acreage was needed.

In 1882, John C. Whitin died, and his widow continued the operation of the farm, without change of plans. The herd however contracted T.B., and the complete herd had to be destroyed. Following the example of other American herdsmen, she sent two agents to Friesland, to purchase a herd of Holstein-Friesian cows, which they succeeded in doing. Two Frisian farmhands were hired to accompany the herd to America, and to see to their care enroute.

They were the first "Seagoing Cowboys" on record here.

## THE FIRST FRISANS

Thus it came to pass, that in the same year, 1886, the first Frisians arrived here, Jan Bosma from Hijlan and Hendrik DeBoer from the Gaastmeer. Jan found much here to his liking, and requested permission to remain. But Hendrik was filled with a longing to return to the homeland. Rumor had it that he had come to an "Understanding" with a certain "Young Lady" in Friesland, and was not of a mind to remain. He therefore returned to the homeland, the "Old Country".

One year later, Jan Bosma enabled his sister and her husband Wytse Feddema, from Tzummarum, to emigrate to Whitinsville. This Wytse, being our "Barber and Hair Stylist" for many years. In 1888, Wytse in turn, enabled his brother Peter also from Tzummarum, to reach here; and five months later, his wife also, Klaaske Feddema-nee Hogendijk and their five children. This Klaaske passed away on July 4, 1948, the last of the early Frisian Settlers.

Very soon therefore, a brother of Jan Bosma, Rintje Bosma arrived accompanied by his wife and six children. Also Oepke Plantinga and the Mrs. and six children, and a brother of Rintje's wife, Albert Rienstra and his wife and five children. These last two families came from Abbega. Then the Haringas from Heeg; Sjoerd Bakker from Sandfirden, with his wife and eight children. Sjoerd was of short stature, and more often than not was called "Little Sjoerd". What he lacked in size, he made up in industriousness however, for he was one of the first to successfully undertake farming.

## THE GREAT MOVE

In 1885 the great "move" occurred. Arrivals were more numerous than ever. The Plantingas greeted thirty immigrants, standing at their door at once, on one occasion, old and young, grown and small. Gjalt Kuiken and his wife arrived from Het Bildt. Their arrival having a tragic note however, for two of their children died while the crossing was being made, and were buried at sea. One of his grandchildren, James Kuiken, is a recent member of the Doctors Profession. But more Frisians were appearing over the horizon. Werkman from Gaastmeer, the Velzens, the Zijlstras from Tzummarum, Frieswijk from Minnertsga, Bakkers and van den Akkers from Koudom,, the Vissers from Ferwoude. Glashouwer from Hindeloopen, the Ebbelings from Bolsward; some arrivals from Sneek, IJlst and Workum. Otto Feenstra from Rauwerd, some unattached males from Jirnsum, Rein Postma and Tjitte Koopmans, the Kooistras and Jaarsmas from Grouw. Meindert Krul from Molkwerum came with his wife and eight children. Douwe DeJong and the Wassenaars from Tzummarum, the arrivals were too numerous for individual mention.

## **FRISIAN BUSINESSMEN**

Whitinsville now has some 16,000 inhabitants, and many Frisian businessmen, motivated by a determined spirit to succeed, are earning their livelihood here. The five VanderBaan brothers, whose father originally came from Tirns, have a large grocery establishment, coupled with the selling of meats and bacon. Part or all of a hog can be purchased there, or a hind-quarter of beef can be purchased at current prices. Herman Baker - a son of "Little Sjoerd", has four stores, selling "dry goods" and household articles for those young people who are contemplating the "Double Harness Act". Then there is Arnold Banning, born In Makkum, owning five greenhouses, whose florist business keeps him well occupied. Beinema is the grocer, and Schotanus sells refrigerators and washing machines.. Also the spacious garage of VandenAkker; and that of Jasper DeJong, whose father was born in Tzummarum, and the garage of Jan DeHaan, from Kostens; and also the garage of Robert Nydam, whose father came from Nijland.

## **THE TRADESMEN**

And now, the principle Frisian tradesmen of Whitinsville. Peter Koopman, owner of the largest carpentry business with two stores, one having ironwork and all sorts of carpentry material for sale, the other with farm implements, such as tractors, plows etc. offered for sale. His father emigrated here from Jirnsum. Koopman is continually building houses, and needless to say, is a busy man. Berghuis and Wynja are close companions of the paintbrush, and do papering and all else that is connected with a thriving painting business, Marten Vierstra, who hails from Sneek, gains his livelihood as tinsmith and dealer of furnaces.

## THE FARMERS

Previous to this was information concerning the Whitinsville tradesmen; now the narrative will continue and tell of the "farmers."

When the first Frisians has established themselves somewhat, not a few of them bought themselves farms that were often in a rather run-down condition, and with a small herd attempted "Farming" ON THEIR OWN. The initial efforts showed very little gain, for land had to be tilled, new land had to be cleared of brush and trees, land newly purchased, to add to the meaner holdings, had to be fertilized, so that the determination to succeed was the moving factor. These are now large productive farms, utilizing the latest in farm machinery, such as manure-spreaders, hay-rakes and hay-tedders, hay-balers that bale the new mown hay into compact oblong bales weighing about 80 pounds each, that reach the topmost parts of the barn via an elevator, altogether, as handy and accessible as possible. Horses are almost extinct as farm animals. I myself won't live to see it, but I'm sure the day is coming when the farmer needs only to whistle shrilly a few times, press a few buttons, and the farm produce will "whisk" into the barn. Green grass and corn, is also "cut-up" and blown into the silo, and so used as winter fodder.

Among the large farms, is one with a herd of over a hundred cows that owned by Louis Wiersma, who emigrated here from Dokkum. There is also Krol from Driesum, having a herd of sixty cows, Hylke Bakker from Koudum, with a herd of sixty cows; and Arnold Baker, a son of Little Sjoerd, with a herd of fifty cows.

Then there are farms having herds of from thirty to fifty cows, such as the farm of Jouke van den Akker, whose father came from Koudum; Louis Bangma from Schettens; Jan Vos from Tjalleberd; George Nydam, Harmen Haringa, Dirk Visser, whose people came from Ferwoude; Albert Koopman, whose father came from Jirnsum; Ruurd and Geert Bosma, Ruurd coming here from IJlst; Jacob Wassenaar and van der Zicht, from Tzummarum.

And then the largest farm Castle Hill Farm, the operation of which has been taken over by the Whitin Machine Works, since the death of Mrs. John C. Whitin, having a herd of one hundred and seventy-five cows, eighty of which produce the milk. But, no more is the herd a Holstein Frisian herd. The herd is now of Ayshire cows, milk from this herd having more butterfat. Twenty years ago, a new herdsman replaced all the Holstein cows.

Milking machines are used almost exclusively here, and the milk is pasteurized, according to the Health laws. In addition, there is also the piggery of Teake Oosterman, from the Knipe having some 500 screw-tails, both small and large. And also the goat farmer, Japik Wiersma, from Dokkum, whose herd numbers "forty". A well kept "shed" houses his goats, who stand in their stalls as do cows. He uses no milking machine, but milks, as one would cows, from the side. He maintains that goat farming is more profitable than dairy farming, as cows eat more in proportion, and goats-milk retails for ten cents per quart more than does cows milk. Children, and those who are afflicted with asthma, are his customers.

## HOW THE AMERICAN "FRISIANS" HELPED ARNOLD BAKER

The Americans here say of the Frisians - Those people are very industrious, and have a lot of spunk, and that they did have when fire destroyed the barn of Arnold Baker, October 27th, 1947. The fire was of undetermined origin, probably spontaneous combustion. The evenings milking had been about completed, when suddenly the upper sections were enveloped in flames. The cows were hurriedly "let out" and were saved. Many people were attracted to the fire, and the grain was carried out, as was the equipment from the milk room. Although it was done in helter-skelter manner, it did not fall prey to the flames.

Five fire engines responded to the call, however the barn was a roaring mass when they arrived. The large house, housing four families received most of the firemen's efforts, and remained untouched, an evidence of their effectiveness.

Sound advice now loomed as a priceless article, for the winter months were right around the corner, and the hay that had been gathered during the summer months, had gone up in smoke. As the man who held the black hog by the tail said "Things look rather dark ahead of me." So did Baker's immediate future seem ominous. And then, The Frisians banded together. "Baker," they said, "we are going to lend a hand. The factory is idle on Saturdays, and many a tradesman and carpenter works there. Peter Koopman, he of the large "carpenter business" was chosen to supervise. He had to provide all the necessary lumber and building materials. The first few days were days of labor with a capital "L". All of the half-burnt hay, which was still a smoldering mass, coupled with the removal of all the burnt farm machinery, - tractors -manure-spreaders = amid the noise of bulldozers.

Andrew De Vries, who owns a sand and gravel pit, whose business includes the digging of trenches and cellars, and the erecting of cement walls, an enormous business in itself, arrived with his largest steam shovel, and the Castle Hill farm sent trucks and tractors. The hay still smoldering, was dug out of the ruins and carried into a nearby field, where it again burst into flames, and again the fire engines had to be called. The Frisian "palefaces" soon looked like second cousins of the Negros. The black, half burnt hay threw a sooty cloud over them,, but perseverance was the order of the day, the cause for which, it was done, was a deserving one. In two days time, the ruins were gone and cleared away, the burned walls had been pulled down with a tractor. The time for building anew had come.

It soon became evident that a lot of measuring and fitting had to be done. The best carpenters were given charge over the less experienced. Our new minister, Reverend Veltman, who had arrived a few months previous, donned a pair of overalls and also offered his services, and it was soon evident that he and the hammer and saw were not strangers, and to the curious few who came to inquire as to his progress he replied, "Brothers, the time for conversing will come later, action is needed now, and soon the snow flakes will be flying, by that time there must be a new shelter for Baker's cows."

And, the work progressed by leaps and bounds with fifty men crawling over the roof and walls. The din of the hammers was deafening. The women too, helped as they only could. Coffee and cake, fried cakes and pastry, were brought to the scene of action. The Reverend's wife also did her share, baking cakes and pies. And every morning and afternoon a recess of fifteen minutes was held, to provide a breather. The large coffee urn from the church parlors did yeoman service. The buns and pastries were looked forward to, and provided tasty snacks.

One month later, the 28th of November, the barn had neared completion to the extent that it could house the cows. Length—one hundred and twenty-six feet— height, thirty-five feet.



## AS ONE FAMILY

The Frisians here are as one family, growing together as the years went by. Our youngest son has married the granddaughter of Little Sjoerd.

New arrivals are fewer now than in previous years. One young married couple who emigrated here last year were Dirk Stellingwerf from the Heidenschap, and his wife Hiske Schuurmans from Drylts. Dirk was in the employ of Baker, and a conversation of five minutes duration with Hiske revealed the fact that we were related. Her great grandfather and grandmother, were my uncle and aunt. They were Peter and Klaaske Schuurmans from Nylan. I inquired of Hiske as to how they were managing and if they had experienced any serious handicaps, to which she replied that everything was going very smoothly. And then I said, "To quote an old Holland saying" "When you two arrived here you landed with your posterior resting in a butter barrel." Things weren't so smooth and easy for the Frisian stranger as they are today. Nearly any store you enter here while shopping, can understand, or find an interpreter to accommodate the Frisian speaking shopper. I recall the story told of the Frisian lady who inquired of a local storekeeper, if he had glue, which she needed to seal an envelope, and asking for it in the Frisian language (the pronunciation being Luck - spelled Lak). She had the gentleman baffled, her "Lak" (Luck)— and his "Luck" being vastly different. Needless to relate, the venture was not a successful one.

## FRISIAN SOCIAL LIFE

In years gone by, the Frisians of Whitinsville boasted of an ice skating club, a bank, and an election and speaking club. The Sick Benefit Society, boasting of a membership of over two hundred members is still in existence, bearing the name of Unity Be Our Purpose. It will celebrate it's 60th anniversary in 1951, plans being underway now to commemorate this occasion with an old fashioned evening of fun. Every year at its annual business meeting, the affairs are conducted so that a most enjoyable evening is had by all. In years gone by many a Frisian recitation was rendered, which needless to relate were always appreciated. After one of these renditions a lady from the audience approached me and remarked, "Kooistra, that was very well done, a laugh is never out of place, even here in America.

The Frisians enjoy a remarkable reputation here. The supervisor of the Whitin Machine Works, E. Kent Swift, whose wife's maiden name was Whitin, recently presented our church with a check of \$1,000 and a plot of land, as a gift, when learning of their endeavor to erect a new Church building. The Christian Reformed Church now being used has been found to be inadequate because of the large attendance, and plans are underway to erect a second church and form a second congregation. Our congregation also boasts of a Christian School having five teachers.

That the Frisians have forged ahead can also be seen as one takes account of the number of Frisians who are employed at the Whitin Machine Works in a supervisory capacity and those who are employed as part of the office force, having as is said here "A White Collar Job".

That about winds up my account of the history of the Frisians here in Whitinsville, Massachusetts.

We have often remarked, if those two farmhands hadn't acted as Seagoing Cowboys to accompany that herd of cows to Whitinsville, there might never have been a Frisian that would have arrived otherwise, nor any walking the streets of Whitinsville today.