

Chapter 5

Later Childhood Memories

Holland, being known historically as "The Low Lands" with many rivers, canals, creeks and ditches is also "rich" in frogs. I recall that for several years, catching frogs was one of my favorite hobbies. We had no toys or games or radio or television, so this was our "toy" and "game": to go out in the grass and along the ditches to catch frogs. We were strictly forbidden to go very close to the water. It was tempting though, for right there in the water were the biggest bullfrogs - the big, beautiful, shiny, clear, light green ones with the dark round spots - prized possessions for any little boy.

When we were very small, I too believed the threat that some of these bullfrogs were so big they could actually grab small children and pull them right into the water. At times I would go out hunting all by myself, but at other times my younger sister and brother came along. One day, we came up with the plan to see how many frogs we could catch in one day. We had asked our parents for something big to store them in. They allowed us to use an old wooden barrel no longer used for making cheese. These barrels were three feet high and four feet wide. We had put it up in the orchards and I still know exactly where it stood between two apple trees. When the day was over, we had 145 frogs! It was quite a sight. The next day we dumped the barrel and let them all go. Frogs were jumping in every direction - small ones, big ones.

But sometimes the bigger frogs did not get off so lucky. I do not know where we learned these evil practices but I think it was when we were together with some of our older cousins. We would take a straw and blow the poor frog up to almost double its size. I thank the Lord that when my parents found out they told us to never do so again.

Holland is also known for its clean streets, white fences and swept houses. However, when we grew up as little children, our medical know-how was far from what it is today and with it, the overall lack of hygiene. This was due to a variety of circumstances including poverty, lack of running water, drainage, crowded homes and conditions, old fashioned toilet facilities, and so on. Because of the above, some families were at times plagued with bedbugs and lice. There were a few children in our school (two rooms with 3-4 grades in each room, one teacher) who quite often spread lice around among the others. Usually, it was a poor family with many children. I recall that my mother each Saturday morning got us - one at a time - to come into the front room during the winter to comb lice out of our hair. Some of them were a good size, too.

My mother always cut our hair when we were small (and even when we were not so small). She also functioned as our "dentist". My dad on one of his trips to Canada brought along the old tooth puller and gave it to me as a keepsake. It sure brought back childhood memories of frightening moments! I must also admit that fixing cavities during our later teen years were no better since dentists during the war years had nothing to freeze our gums. Looking back, I must also say that teeth home care was far from what it should have been. And again poverty had much to do with it. Visits to the dentist were only when we could no longer stand the pain any longer.

We did have electricity on our farm as far back as I can remember. This was not so at "Huis Ten Dorp" where Mom was born. Their farm was one kilometer from the road while I was born and raised just outside of our small town. Our farm was the first farm outside our village. However, running water did not come to our farm until the early 1950's, well after we had immigrated to Canada. All our drinking and washing water came from one of our three "regenputten" as they were called. These were large cement cisterns, about 12 or 15 feet in the ground and having a diameter of six feet. These too were dangerous places for little children. In the early years of our childhood they were covered, having a big stone on top. All the water for these water storage places came from the roofs of our house and barns. The water was hauled up by pail. On Monday - which everywhere was washing day - there was a lot of water to be hauled up. During rainy times, we also used this water for washing our butter and cheese making containers. And when the pits were full, they were *full* - which meant they just ran over until it quit raining.

One of the rain pits provided water for making pig slop. During the dryer seasons we had to preserve water as much as possible, for if we ran out altogether we would have to resort to drinking water from the creek. I recall that even the drinking water from these pits at times swarmed with larva that became pesky mosquitoes. However, we did what we could to keep the water as drinkable as possible, especially cleaning the gutters just before the winter set in. When a dry season came and the pit was just about empty, it had to be emptied altogether and the mud at the bottom hauled up in pails. The sides were washed with water to be brought in by pails that were lowered down. Dry seasons were few and far between so we ordinarily took all of our water for a week or so out of just one "regenput" so as to bring the level down to the very bottom. Cleaning took place about every three years. Each year we did one.

I vividly recall that one time my dad asked me to help him clean one of these pits which meant that I had to go down the ladder that was placed inside and fill the buckets with whatever was left inside (i.e. water and mud). Whenever the pail was full, he lifted it out. I had come to the very last part where it was mopping up so to speak. It took quite a while before the last pail was full again. He let down three pails which would hold whatever was left. Thereupon he told me he was going to eat for he was in a rush to do something else immediately following his lunch. When he did not come back in time, I began to panic and imagine the worst situation that could take place - a thunderstorm was coming up and a pouring rain, filling up the pit and in no time drowning me before he would come back!

I did not know how to swim, for this was something strictly forbidden (for fear of drowning). My mother especially was very scared of us getting into a canal to learn swimming. And I am sure it was dangerous, for the only sandy beaches that we had were on the shores of the North Sea. If we were lucky, we got there once a year during a school outing. Anyhow, my mother's unwritten and unspoken philosophy was , "You will not get into the water until you know how to swim".

In my utter desperation and panic, I began to scream and scream as loud as I could. I can still hear the walls echoing with my fears. I am sure there was never a more relieved and happy boy in all the world when my dad returned calming me down and assuring me that there was no thunderstorm anywhere on the horizon.

Obviously, with no running water on the farm, our toilet facilities inside were far from what our children here in Canada have become familiar with, (or should I say, just plainly taken for granted?) I used this inside facility very sparingly. It did not compare with the freshness of bush or the slopes of the ditches! These were my "places" for the largest part of the year. And in the winter when it was too cold outside, there was always the warm barn where the cows were! I vaguely recall that we had an old outhouse standing at the edge of our orchards near the place where we had about a one hectare bush. But this must have been removed when it was decided to make our inside toilet. Several of our uncles and aunts had outside toilets much longer than we did. At our place, the change from the outside to the inside was made when dad and mom got electricity on the farm. It was then that the old horse stable became a place for the inside toilet facility and washing clothes.

On the other side of the farm, a new building was erected that included a place for horses, pigs, buggy and wagon. The old horse stable also functioned as a place to take our "bath" when we were old enough to do this ourselves. But in the wintertime, it was far from a pleasant place for undressing and washing. Besides this, we could not be too generous with hot water. When we were teens, we often resorted to the warmth of the cow stable. The secret was to find a few cows that were not easily aroused and were laying down, for as soon as they got scared in the slightest they would rise and the first things they would do was lift their tail and began splashing in the gutter below. This meant we had to run if we didn't want to have ourselves splashed under with what was in the gutter below.

During the wintertime our family lived in what we called a "winterhuis" and in the spring we moved into what was known as a "zomerhuis". The latter was a smaller living quarters. This was because no stove was needed there to keep warm. Moving back and forth from the one living quarters to the other was always an exciting time for us when we were small. We liked helping carry things from the one place to the other each spring and fall. No cooking was ever done in either of these living quarters - this was all done at the large area called "boenhoek". It was the place where we had a pump, a furnace, and where we made the butter and cheese. This was also the place where we could hang some of our clothes. My dad and mom always slept in our winter living quarters. It was a place called "bedstede", i.e., cupboard-bed, with two doors that opened and closed like a large clothes closet.

In the wintertime with its high humidity, it was good to be around the stove. We ordinarily burned coal. As long as I can remember my oldest brother, Andrew cleaned the chimney each spring. A brick was tied at the end of a rope, followed by small bundles of straw firmly tied and lowered down, pulling it up over and over again.

Whereas the winter living quarters was the only area that was heated throughout the whole house, it meant that all of us (with the exception of mom and dad) slept in rooms without any heat during the winter months. My sisters slept in a room above our winter living quarters. They had a little warmth from below and also the chimney was located there. Our sleeping quarters were above the "boenhoek". At times it could be pretty cold there. We kept ourselves warm with many blankets and at times whatever old winter coats we could find. I recall that sometimes it was so cold that my brother and I decided we should try sleeping between the hard straw mattress and the soft feathery mattress. Nothing upstairs was insulated. Often the wood above us was white from the frost. Andrew's sleeping quarters were above the cows, the place where the hired man used to sleep. In the late fall and winter time the whole area where

my youngest brother and I slept was covered with winter apples and pears. They were covered with many layers of paper to keep them from freezing. My, what apples we have eaten there!

We had one so called guest room. The way to get there was through our winter living quarters, four steps up to a higher level. That room was strictly off limits for all of us. It was the place where dad and mom kept the things we should never get our hands on. The bed there was also a cupboard type, with two doors. The only time any of us were ever to sleep there was when we were good and sick and mom wanted us close by to keep an eye on us.

Living with high humidity all the time made wooden things rot iron things rust. In order to prevent this (as much as possible) wood was regularly painted or tarred. Things of iron were kept inside as much as possible. During our younger years when we were still small our parents did not have any machinery, but that changed when we had become teenagers. Such machinery would quickly deteriorate had it been kept outside like it is so often here in Canada. All the painting was done by professional painters, this even though our parents could hardly afford it. Why we did not do these things ourselves I can only guess, and my guess is that no farmer did it himself. Only the tarring of fences and poles was done by ourselves. I have been told that all this quickly changed soon after we had emigrated. Of course, this also was the time when farmers began to use more and more machinery which in turn meant that it would pay to have your own tools. But before this any repairs, whether to buildings, holes in a milk pail, patching the reed layers of the "hooiberg", it was always done by trades people.

I should mention here that reed grew in plenty in Holland. The riversides were famous for the growth of sturdy and tall reeds. Even when we were small, many farm roofs consisted of a very thick layer of this reed, anywhere from 6 to 8 inches. This had to be fixed or renewed ever 15 years or so. The father of one of my school friends plied this trade. (He also was also our Sunday School superintendent for the longest time. If my memory serves me well, I believe that he did it for approximately 25 years. He had also been one of the main town councillors for years and he was very active in a Christian political party.)

Sometimes as a little boy I was allowed to go along with my dad. I was just amazed at it all. The first thing that stood out was the huge church steeple of "De Nieuwe Kerk" (The New Church), as this huge structure was called. A little further away was "De Oude Kerk" (The Old Church). Well, as far as I could tell they were both old and they were both huge. I am quite sure this "Nieuwe Kerk" was already three centuries old. Also, the traffic impressed me, especially the throngs and throngs of people milling around at the cattle market places in Delft only 5 blocks apart.

There are three incidents I vividly recall. Once I became separated from my dad. I still can feel what it means for a little boy to be lost in a crowd of people. I do not know how long it took before I was found or who found me. All I remember is the fear and panic of a little boy be lost in a strange, big, and crowded place. Another incident was when my dad tried to cross a railway track while the beams for stopping all traffic were already starting to move. He was late for market and the things came down pretty slow. Sometimes they would just hold it until the wagon, truck or car passed. But this time none of this happened. They just lowered the thing right to the ground and we had to stop with the horse and wagon, being stuck right on the railway track while the bells were ringing. After a few seconds of this fright they

lifted the beam and we could proceed. I do not remember whether my dad received a ticket or not, but I do know that every time we met a policeman that morning I thought they were looking for my dad. The third experience I will never forget was when my dad walked over to one of the cheese buyers to pick up his money and somehow they entered into an argument resulting in a heated tongue lashing of my father by this salesman. I was really scared. I had never heard anything like this. And I could not see how my dad just sat there and did not say anything in response.

Sometimes when my dad came back from the butter and cheese market, he would bring some peanuts with him. This was a real treat for all of us. He ordinarily came home just when we were finishing our noon meal. At such a time we would all sit around the table and eat peanuts until the whole bag was empty. I still remember the big pile of empty shells Andrew had in front of him.

For several years we were known as "Jodenkaas makers". It had something to do with "kosher". My dad did it together with our neighbor for a Jewish man had to be actually "directing" the whole procedure of making the cheese. One month the man stayed over at our place and the following month he would be at our neighbor's. Then for a few months he would be away at some other farmers and only return for an occasional inspection. On Saturdays one of us would have to come over to his place to turn on the light and return when the light needed to be turned off. He always drank raw eggs. And of course certain foods he would never eat. My mother then would prepare something he could eat. He was often reading during the day his Bible and spent much time in prayer. My parents would get one or two cents per pound more for this cheese made under the direction of such men. It all came down to this - everything had to be cleaned in a certain special way.

Very, very few times have I seen my dad mad. One such a time was the day before market. Cheese was cleaned and polished and laid out to dry behind the stove in our winter living quarters. It was during the afternoon milking that my dad stepped in the house to check up on the cheese whether they were dry enough to be taken away - then he discovered someone had taken a few bites out of his precious cheese! It turned out that my youngest brother Jaap had done so. He must have been 4-5 years old. It was during the depression and financially things were tighter than tight. A bite out of a couple cheeses meant fixing the damaged places by way of pouring a small stream of hot water over a knife held on the spot, gently pressing and smoothing it over. Though this worked well, it never got exactly as it was before. When my dad discovered the bites he just grabbed my little brother and began beating up on him. I had never ever seen my dad like this before. It was a good thing that my mother stepped in and stopped him. I could not believe what I saw – usually it was my mother who did the disciplining.

Sometimes mice would be a problem eating our cheese. During such a time there were traps and mice poison everywhere. Cats here were of no help for they liked to eat the cheese as much as the mice did. The mice problem only bothered us during the spring, summer and early fall. This was when the cheese were laid to dry in the cleaned cow stable rather than in the cellar during the winter time.

But it wasn't only my youngest brother who at times aroused anger. One time it was me who deserved my parents' discipline. It was on a winter evening just before bed time when I had hid myself just around the corner at the top of the stairs behind empty old boxes that were stored up there. I was waiting for my sister Pietje to come upstairs. When she did, I jumped out in front of her and said, "boo".

I was planning to scare her alright, but I had not anticipated her to be scared this much. For weeks thereafter she was afraid to go upstairs by herself. I well remember my mother's anger and the spanking I received (deservedly so). It was the topic of discussion for quite some time. And whenever it was brought up, I felt the shame and guilt being rubbed into me.

The barn cleaning every spring immediately after the last cows had been turned out into the pasture was always a very special event for us kids. Later on when we had to join in the actual hard work it was a different story. Everything was first of all pumped full with water. This itself was a major job for all the water had to be pumped by hand, coming by way of a culvert the length of our farmyard out of a creek. The troughs were in one piece out of which 15 cows drank. It was the same on the other side. Our cows stood with their faces toward one another with about eight feet of space between for the feeding of the hay. The gutters too were filled all the way with water running over from the troughs. Dirt was packed at the end so the water could not drain out into the manure pit outside. Then the soaking started. We had special wooden shovels that were always used for spreading liquid manure on the field. They were used for splashing everything wet with water - including us kids! (Once our parents allowed for such extravagance). The soaking procedure lasted for two days. Every two hours the walls were made wet from top to bottom. The manure had been splashing against the wall during the whole winter, thus there was quite a crust on the walls. It was always surprising how clean the walls were after the second and third brushing. Andrew always did the major share. His perseverance always amazed me as a young boy.

We celebrated holy communion four times per year. People would sit at long tables covered with white sheets each holding about 35 people. It took four exchanges of tables to have all communicant members partake. As a boy I found it embarrassing that all other people had already walked up to the table and seated themselves while my dad was still at his place in the bench. There were no deacons or ushers to arrange for such seating. And dad was always the last one to go. I firmly believe it was because of his humble attitude. I have come to see that if he did not feel himself like the apostle Paul, "the chief of sinners", he certainly must have looked upon himself as the least of all the saints.

At the age of seven I developed a very serious case of pneumonia. I got it while sitting at the corner of the house where a man was sheering sheep. I still remember that it was rather cold and the wind was blowing around the corner. Anyhow, I became very sick. The doctor and my parents feared for my life. I was kept in a bed in the living room. I was sweating profusely and delirious from fever. Our minister and the teacher of the Gereformeerde School, who taught my deaf sister, came to pray for me with my parents. I heard them whisper about when "the crisis" would be there. At night someone was at my bedside. While doing research on our family tree I was reminded of this experience and how many young children in those days passed away from similar kinds of illnesses. I thanked God that He brought me through. For nearly half a year I was out of school. My teacher let me pass on to the next grade but I was not able to catch up. I failed the next grade. When we had our medical examinations for our immigration, the doctor told me that I had a large scar on my left lung. When I told him about my pneumonia, he told me I was a lucky man.

Picture

Our farm at the front. When dad had to sell the four acres in front during the Depression, it took much of the beauty away because of buildings going up, the piles of bricks, storage of all kinds of things and the workmen rushing around. The quiet scenery was gone much to everyone's regret.

At one time when I was looking for a nest in hollow willow trees at the creek's edge, I discovered something. I would walk along the creek and kick hard against each tree seeing whether any bird would fly off its nest. These trees were the "knotted willows" as they were called. We would stick a straight willow stick in the ground at the edge of the ditch (or creek) and once it was about 4 or 5 inches in diameter, we would cut it off 7-8 feet above the ground. After some time these trees often became hollow. When I had kicked one of these trees, I heard something moving inside. I knew immediately it wasn't a bird. When I kicked again good and hard all at once a polecat appeared at the top. This is a very bad smelling weasel-like carnivorous animal. They are brownish in color and a little smaller than a skunk. Right under the neck they are white-yellow. When I kicked some more he climbed in one of the branches right to the top. I stood there for a second or two in a kind of panic, fright, and excitement. Thereupon I ran home to tell my dad and my oldest brother and sister who were making cheese. Andrew had a .22 gun which he ran to get as fast as he could. When we got back, the polecat was still sitting there in the same place. Andrew shot it and it fell in the water. Our dog jumped on it and got it out. He was not interested in eating it and neither would I allow him even if he wanted it, for I "saw" money! I figured that a hide like that would bring me a lot of money! I brought it to the man who always peddled around with a box on his bike, buying whatever small animals he could. He told me he would let me know what he would be able to get for it. After a week or so he finally told me that he did not get much for it. I do not know whether he told me the truth, but I do know I was very disappointed.

Another time as I was out roaming around in the orchards at the edge of our bush with my youngest brother, I turned over a couple of half rotten boards that were laying there. To my amazement there was nest with five small hedgehogs under it. When I tried to touch them they all rolled up in little balls.

As a young boy I loved roaming around on the farm. During the early spring, I was looking for eggs of all kind of birds. At one time I had a collection of more than a dozen of birds. One of my favorite nests to find was that of wild ducks. Sparrows and starlings did not fare too well on our farm. They would always nest under the "dakpannen" of the roof on both the house and the cow barn. When we were small, my oldest brother would take the ladder and get all the nests out from under the tiles of the roof. We ordinarily ended up with quite a collection of both eggs as well as young birds. If these nests were not destroyed, it could be very noisy while we were still in bed both in the morning as well as the evening, for when the young birds were being fed everyone would hear it!

Whereas my dad had only pasture for about 25 years, during the winter it became necessary to purchase feed for our farm animals. Every two weeks the salesman came around to determine what was needed. For many years dad had a hard time paying for the feed. But what I best remember is that the feed salesman came around with a car way before others drove one. And one day my sister and I were allowed to sit in his car and have our picture taken.

My dad also had a chance every now and then to buy old bread from a man living in The Hague. He did not come often, but when he came and my father bought some it was feast for us kids. How we would go through all the old bread, looking for some old cakes, raison bread, and other such goodies! And bringing it into the house, we sometimes eat from it for days.

Cats were always needed on the farm to keep the mice and rat population at a reasonable level. We also tried to have a dog who was good at catching rats. We caught many of them with our dogs, sometimes right in the pig barn, or under piles of junk outside, or from their burrows itself. When the dog signaled that there were rats in the burrow, we would pour pails of water in until they finally had to come out and face the eagerly waiting dog. We also had a good rat trap. It was a big wired box. I loved catching rats at all times. But one thing I hated was when my dad drowned the little kittens that were born at regular intervals. Of course, we did not understand that had they kept them all we would soon have had more cats than mice! And trying to give some away to others didn't work either because practically everyone had more cats around than they needed.