

# Spindrift Two

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Celebrating Whidbey Island's Dutch Heritage



# Hollanders Worked Hard To Tame Island

Second and third generation Dutch who lived through the Great Depression of the 1930s endured the hard times of that period secure in the knowledge that if their fathers and mothers and grandparents, who came to Whidbey Island in the mid 1890s lived through the depression of that time, they could too.

The mid-1890s brought the first of the Hollanders to Whidbey Island from the midwest; from the Dakotas and Michigan and Iowa where they found the going rough. Drought and poor crops and a depressive economy found many of them without everything except their fare "out west" to an Island called Whidbey, where potatoes and other crops grew to huge proportions, and the weather was mild. Two thousand miles farther was immaterial compared to the migration already undertaken, from The Netherlands across the Atlantic, to America, home of immigrants.

It is difficult to imagine the circumstances that would take a people from

the land where they had been a nationality for hundreds of years, across an ocean in sailing ships to a new land that promised unimagined freedom. Freedom from overcrowding, from caste systems, and the inability to better themselves.

Coming to America, to the United States and Canada, they found themselves in the nationwide depression of the nineties when it was difficult to make a living from farmland. When an enterprising Tucker-Potter Co. endeavored to sell 18,000 acres of Northwest Washington land to settlers, the Great Northern Railway hired a Mr. Werkman to travel to various settlements in the midwest to secure settlers who were disenchanted with their lot.

Werkman brought his settlers from Michigan and North Dakota. The ones from Michigan were familiar with timber and those from the prairies had experienced drought and crop failure. Nevertheless, in 1894 the *Island County Times* headlined "The Hollanders Are Coming" and 18 colonists stepped ashore at San de Fuca from the steamer *Idaho*.

thrifty Dutch-speaking immigrants kept coming. The advance guard, arriving on the *Idaho* were fairly well-to-do; none had less than \$2,500 and some as much as \$8,000 to \$10,000. This was more than enough to buy land and get started farming. Jerome Ely, early historian, listed the names of H. Te Roller, H. W. Freiling, L. Jacobusse, T. Haan, O. Heller, J. Boldt, J. Oldhuis, E. Jonker, M. Lichtenbert, S. Schilhaas, and S. F. Huisman. Members of the Heller family still reside on North Whidbey.

While the Tucker Potter Co. had advertised Whidbey as potential "fruit" country, the variety and size of the vegetables grown here had more to do with the migration west. Potatoes grown on the new soil were of huge proportions, as were the squash and other vegetables. Feeding their families was of prime importance. Some went first to Skagit County but the threat of the Skagit River which flooded yearly sent them on to Whidbey where there was no threat from the rivers. Dikes had been an ever-present bane of the Dutch for hundreds of years.

In 1895, Werkman arrived with ten more settlers. Until 1912, the

John Bos was one of the first arrivals. He rented the Taftson Donation

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claim which today is the hill above the Seaplane Base, then bought a farm in the Swantown area, mostly marsh, above West Beach. Dairying was his business and he succeeded very well. A number of his descendants still live on North Whidbey.

Henry Hulst arrived in 1896 and bought 120 acres near Hastie Lake. Thys Boon worked for him to pay for ten acres of the Hulst land, then added to it by buying and renting school land. The DeWilde brothers had enough money to buy land in Clover Valley and to keep them while they cleared land for crops. They raised cows and clover. They bought 40 acres more from John Power, and their land yielded as high as 105 bushels of wheat per acre.

John Ronhaar came to Oak Harbor with a wife and three children and \$10. An illness took \$5 of that, so he began making a home with \$5 and his hands. He soon bought 20 acres and cleared it by hand and within a dozen years bought 29 acres more. His main crops were clover and root crops, and Ely said "He never proposed to let anyone raise bigger crops than he did."

Riekele Zylstra was one of the 1896 arrivals. After three successive crop failures in the Dakotas, he traveled overland by rail, then by boat to Oak Harbor to stay for four months to see for himself what grew here. He was impressed, according to interviews with his daughter Taapke Zylstra Nienhuis, the late Mrs. Barney Nienhuis.

Zylstra took back to South Dakota samples of wheat, corn, potatoes, carrots and rutabagas to show his neighbors, and he testified later that "the neighbors left for the West before we did."

Members of the Zylstra family are numerous on North Whidbey and through the years have taken an active part in politics, government and business. A son, James was county prosecuting attorney; a grandson,



*This 1916 Maxwell was purchased by the Streutker family of Swantown from Olson Motors for \$594. Seated on the hood are Ben Faber and Henry Streutker, with Nick Eerkes and John Holtgeerts on the bumper.*

Richard was mayor of Oak Harbor.

Otto Van Dyk had come to Oak Harbor in 1897 as a young man. He was an excellent carpenter and craftsman. Round-roofed barns was a new concept at the time, and many said it couldn't be done. But Van Dyk built the big round-roofed barn for James Neil and it still stands today in the middle of town, used as a roller rink. The barn was the biggest barn on the

West Coast when it was built, and was initiated in 1912 with a huge barn dance which brought people from Seattle, Everett and surrounding communities, along with a special Hawaiian orchestra imported from Everett. Descendants of Otto Van Dyk still live on Whidbey.

The Fakkema family arrived from Michigan where they had settled some  
(Please turn to page 13)



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# Hollanders Worked Hard

(Continued from page 11)

20 years before, coming in 1895 with little money but a great deal of faith and a willingness to work. His credit established, Fakkema found his seven sons to be a real help to pioneer parents in an uncleared area. They cleared and planted with the help of oxen and by hand.

Miender Fakkema came with just enough money to make one payment on his 20 acres but he was fortunate in having all good land. He raised as much as 95 bushels of wheat to the acre, according to Ely.

Charles Nienhuis, a millman; John Ronhaar, William and Fred DeWilde, Eerke and Rein Eerkes all settled in Clover Valley, along with the Abrahamse, Nicoli and Nieuwenhuizen, the Capaan and Nymyer families. Jake Capaan built a two-story frame house which still stands, owned and renovated by the Navy near the Navy golf course. Henry Riksen owned a farm, cleared by hand on the south slope of Clover Valley and the house has also been restored by the Navy. Riksen, using hand tools, cleared "deadfalls" of downed timber many feet high.

Ed Vanderzicht came as a creamery man and settled in Clover Valley along with other families by the name of Kammenga, Infeldt and Harsh. Vanderzicht sold out his farming interest and built a home in town where he became a poultryman. He was Oak Harbor's first Marshall, and also ran a creamery for a number of years. His descendants still live in Oak Harbor, and the community's public swimming pool is named as a memorial to John Vanderzicht, who was active in state and county government for many years.

In 1912 Jerome Ely wrote: "O. Heller bought 20 acres, all woods, and rented 40 acres of school land.



Charlie Nienhuis and son John in their Clover Valley spud field.

His 20 acres is now all in cultivation and he is fixed to take life easy. Nienhuis and Riksen have beautiful farms (in Clover Valley) added to their original 60 acres. They had some means to start with and were used to timber. They had hard clearing but the best of land afterward." Nienhuis started a saw mill at Clover Valley with two other men and sawed lumber for nearly all the homes built at that time.

The "hard times" improved somewhat for the Dutch when during the first year of planting they produced a good crop of potatoes and saw the price double, to \$10 a ton. Nienhuis dug potatoes at 6 cents a sack that first year, when 17 sacks was a good day's work. He said the potatoes were so big he could get only one into a coal oil can.

Herb Dykers came in 1895 with no money but a willingness to survive. He couldn't speak a word of English. He and three other bachelors built a cabin near Cranberry Lake and walked the 10 miles into the village of Oak Harbor daily in search of work. If they found work, they worked the full day then walked the 10 miles home.

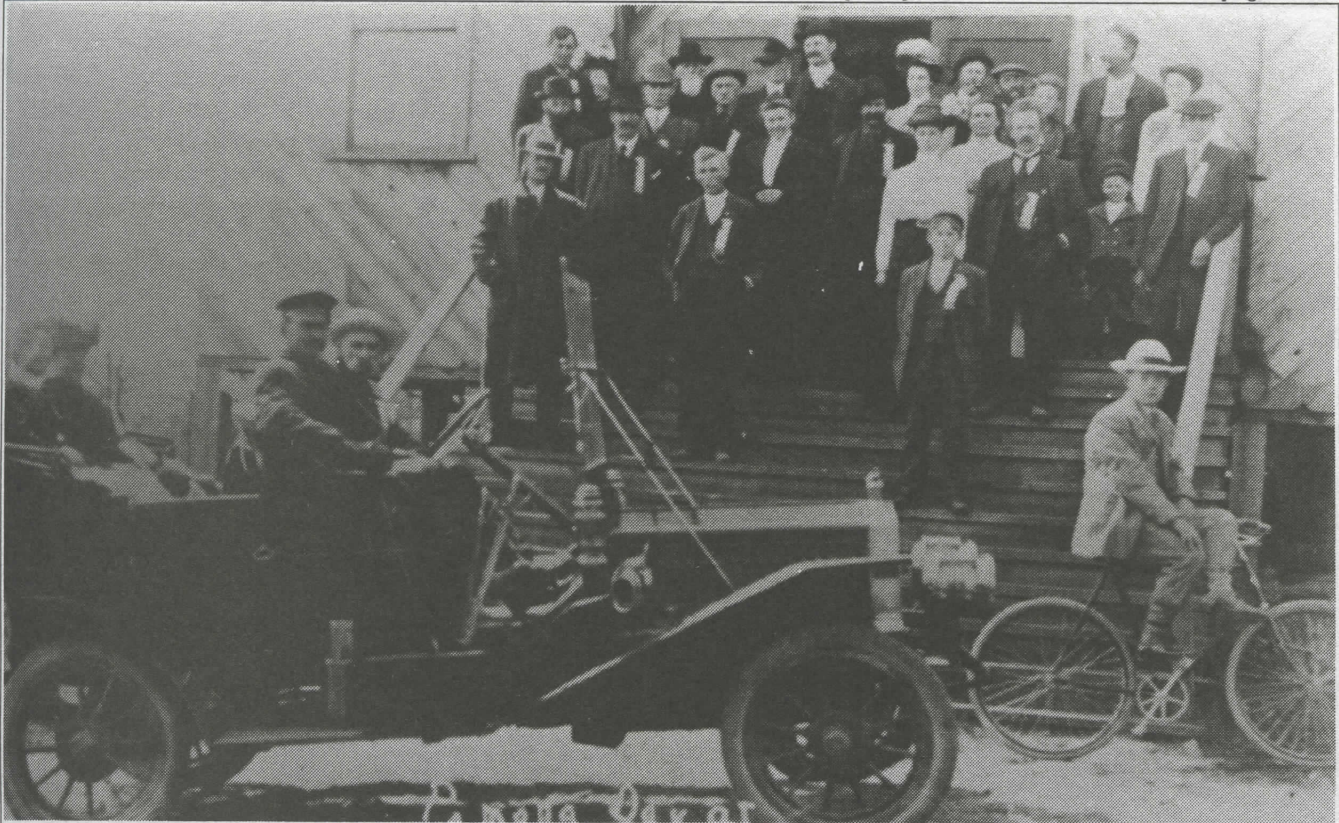
Dykers heard of a place in Renton

where he could milk cows, and worked there for a number of years, returning to Whidbey to buy a home. He lived first in the Miller house in Crescent Harbor, then bought the Buzby farm (Buzby was an 1850s pioneer) married and improved and built up a fine farm. Indians brought lumber across the straits from Utsalady to build onto the Dykers home, rafting the lumber and guiding it with canoes.

Gertrude Dykers Balster told how her father walked the beach from Crescent Harbor to Oak Harbor and noted the Big Spring at the bottom of the hill where the bodies of Indian dead hung in canoes in the trees just to the north.

These are only some of the "Hollanders" who came to Whidbey and stayed and worked to make it their home. In the 1920s a number of families came from drought-stricken Alberta to add to the population, among them the Rientjes, Tyhuis and Baan families. Following World War II another group came from the Netherlands, encouraged by local settlers and aided by subsidies from the Dutch government. All were hard working and innovative, and as businessmen and farmers they quickly became an integral part of the community.





In this Pomona Grange Day at Oak Harbor photo, taken just before or during the early years of WWI, no one is identified except Mayor Jerome Ely. He's standing just above the car's hood, hatless and wearing a badge.

## Not So Many To Be Counted in 1880

The census of 1880, one hundred and ten years ago, for Island County listed three major logging camps operating in South Whidbey at Glendale, Useless Bay and Holmes Harbor. In 1891 the Holmes Harbor operation sent nearly one million board feet of timber to the mills. By 1896 there were 115 men working in South Whidbey woods.

Population figures shown on the county assessment rolls lists on Dec. 6, 1858, 126 males, 52 females, 34 boys under 21 and 16 girls under 18.

There were 70 horses, 130 cattle, 1 mule and 162 hogs. A year later the total white population had increased to 185 men, 72 women, 47 boys and 33 girls. In 1891 the official census showed 1,417 white residents from Oak Harbor to Clinton.

Twenty years before, in 1860, the population of Whidbey Island was recorded in the census as having 292 population with only 80 women. King County at that time had 301 population, with the same number of women.



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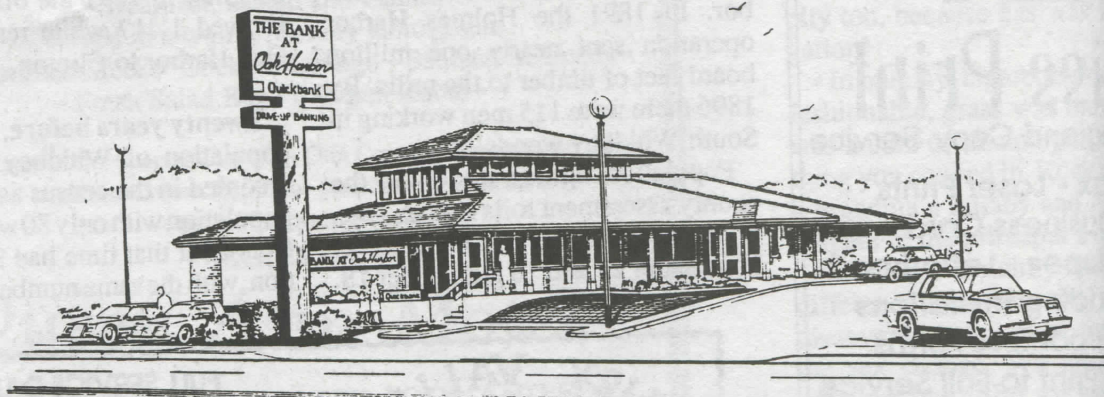






Done Ely stands in front of the house on 200 Ave. West that his father built in the 1880s.

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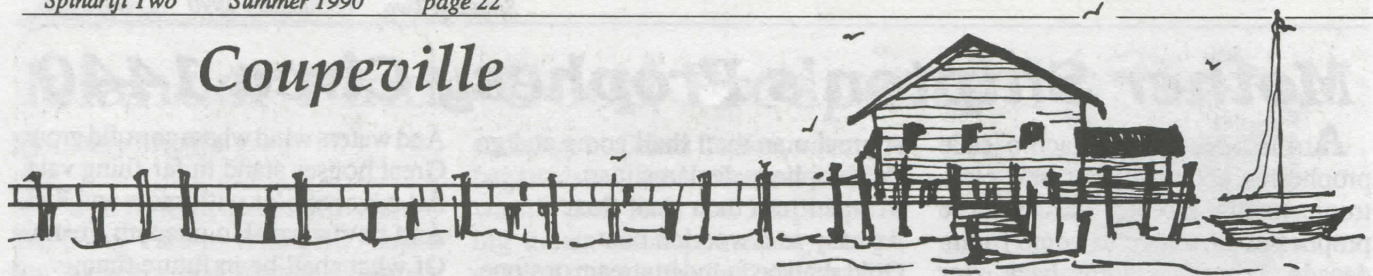
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# Coupeville



## What Happened to Young Harry Evans?

*This story of an 1893 tragedy on Whidbey Island is condensed from a version written by a person who was "on the scene" at the time, Mrs. Mary Keating Thornton, the former Mary Putnam of Coupeville. She was author of "The Story of Harry Evans," printed in the Feb. 11, 1960 Whidbey News-Times. The news story had been printed in the Island County Sun on Nov. 9, 1893.*

Harry Evans was the son of Captain Joseph Edward Evans, lighthouse keeper at Admiralty Head where Fort Casey is now located. Evans lived there with his wife Bessie and only child, Harry, aged 16 years. Harry was an intelligent, capable boy who assisted his father with the care of the lighthouse, carrying the 10-gallon cans of kerosene up the long flight of stairs to the light, trimming the huge wicks, wiping the lens and pulling curtains around them when the light was out during the day.

In October 1893, Evans and his wife planned to go to Port Townsend to do some shopping and to see a dentist. For the first time, Evans decided to leave the care of the lighthouse with Harry, against Mrs. Evans' wishes. It was an overnight trip, but Evans felt the boy would be able to handle the light for 24 hours. For the boy, it was an adventure. He received permission of his mother before she left to get her recipe book and make some candy, a rare privilege in those days when stores were far between and sweets were very dear. As the couple left to go to the boat landing where the small steamer called, Harry said, "Goodbye, Mama, have a good time." This was the last time the mother was to hear the voice of her

child.

That same afternoon about 4 o'clock, my father, Norman Putnam, who had a field of potatoes near the lighthouse, drove his team over to load it for a trip to Coupeville the next morning. Harry Evans came over and jumped up on the side of the wagon, chatting with my father and asking him to send two money orders for him on his next day's trip to "town."

"My father was somewhat surprised that the Evans' would leave Harry with the light overnight. My brother Roy and I were all for going over to spend the night with Harry, but my father decided against it. He possibly felt Harry would do a better job alone than he would with two others to assist him.

At 1:30 the next day the steamer rounded the point with Mr. and Mrs. Evans aboard and suddenly Evans pointed up to the lighthouse where the light was still burning. A premonition that something was terribly wrong spurred his feet up the hill when the boat docked. He flung open the door to call "Harry! Harry!" Bureau drawers were in disorder, and Harry's clothes were gone. The wick in the light had burned all night, and Evans extinguished it and covered the lens, and then went below to comfort the hysterical Mrs. Evans.

By late afternoon the grounds were full of men from Coupeville, San de Fuca and Oak Harbor, who came by horseback and in rigs. The Sheriff came, and it was discovered that the lighthouse boat was missing with several hundred dollars worth of government supplies; kerosene, paint, flour, sugar, potatoes and other things. Also missing were two buffalo robes, sup-

## An 1893 Island Tragedy

plied by the government to lighthouse keepers. A high-powered rifle and shotgun were also gone, and it began to look as though the 16-year-old Harry had been kidnapped or killed. Fear gripped everyone.

Dr. W. L. White of Coupeville came to minister to Mrs. Evans who had fainted and was in a state of severe shock. He stayed the entire night with his patient, assisted by my mother, Mrs. Putnam and Mrs. Kaehler and her two daughters, Delia and Louise.

That night, Oct. 10, 1893, will never be forgotten by the writer, who was a young girl. A terrific gale came up, the west wind blowing relentlessly through the Straits for four days. In the living room at Admiralty Head a brass lamp suspended on a long chain from the high ceiling swung all night long through the force of the storm. With the horror of kidnappers or murderers in everyone's thoughts, it was a weird night.

The storm abated after four days, and the lighthouse tender was sighted coming from Port Townsend, towing two white lighthouse boats. Mrs. Evans was highly excited and prayed "Oh God, please bring home my boy." But he wasn't with the people who disembarked. Thomas Delaney, Chief of the U.S. Customs and a slim girl, Millie Dennison, whose older brother Frank was keeper of the Smith Island light, had a story to tell.

Four days earlier Harry Evans had come to Smith's Island. The Evans



and Dennison families were old friends, and Harry spent the day visiting with Mrs. Dennison, Millie, Elinor and two boys, Joe and Char-



ley. Frank was on the mainland at the time. As night came on, the storm hit, and the young people were playing cards. Harry seemed worried, Millie said, and at last threw his cards down and said he would have to go to his boat to get his coat. Looking at Joe Dennison he asked, "Are you coming with me?"

Millie said her brother's face was ashen as he answered, "No, not in this wind. Let your coat go until morning," but Harry left. The little group waited for him to return for an hour, and then Millie told them to get their coats and a lantern. They were going to look for the boy. The boat was gone, and the youngsters called and walked all the way around the little island, calling, but the howling gale and roar of breakers drowned their voices. They returned home and Millie said her brothers were so shaken that Mrs. Dennison questioned them closely.


Harry, they said, was running away from home and was headed for Alaska to "hunt bear." He had wanted Joe to go with him, but Joe's better judgment kept him at home on this stormy night. Joe Dennison never said he had visited with his friend on Whidbey Island the night before he appeared at Smith Island, but there was evidence that young Harry Evans had had company the night his parents left for Port Townsend. There were two places set on the supper table, with the re-

mains of uneaten food. The plate of candy Harry had made had two knives stuck in it to pry loose the sticky mass. Men who took part in

the investigation said the boy alone could not have carried all the supplies down the hill, loaded the boat and launched it.

Without Millie's bravery and courage, the story would never have been known. The empty lighthouse boat was found floating bottom side up near San Juan Island, and a letter from Thomas Delaney to the Evans family officially closed the case. Hope had been abandoned by everyone but Mrs. Evans, who collapsed again. Upon her recovery, the couple was sent to a lighthouse post on the Oregon coast, where later Evans died. After a few years of living in her girlhood hometown in the east, Mrs. Evans returned to Whidbey Island and ended her days living alone in a cottage at Prairie Center, where she said she felt closer to both her son and husband.

**Postscript:** *"In this day with our large population, our crimes and tragedies, this story would receive little attention, but in the old days trouble or illness in any household brought all the neighbors together to do whatever could be done by love and kindness for one another. Getting this story on paper has brought back many poignant memories, and for them I am grateful. This is not a happy story, but a true one. Our pioneers were good people, may God rest their souls and may we never forget them."*

... Mary Keating Thornton. 



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