

## Ancient Memories

My story would simply not be complete if I did not share one of my greatest adventures. Having validated the Admiral's family as integral to the history of the Verstraete's, I must move on to the next great chapter of my life, that one-of-a-kind adventure called "Immigration" to Canada. Before I do, however, there are a few memories worth telling. Their contribution will give all who read this story a greater insight into my collective history and an appreciation that as a Verstraete my greatest legacy has been and always will be the aggregate of a rich variety of people. They are the aunts and uncles, cousins, nephews and nieces, grandfathers and grandmothers, fathers, mothers, children and grandchildren, who gave birth to each one of us, their stories too many to count.

Even though many childhood memories remain alive in my consciousness, some memories are no doubt the typical trials and temptations of any child, yet others stand out as special. Perhaps there will always remain a deeper longing in me to return to that time of innocence, a time of swimming in canals and skating on them in winter months, playing soccer on streets paved with bricks, and the legends and traditions that surround my ancient home. I will never forget traditions such as *Sinterklaas*, a Dutch tradition celebrated every December 5th, and not quite the same as Santa Claus and Christmas celebrations elsewhere. Every year Saint Nick arrived in Zwolle on the bow of a large tugboat where he stood tall robed in red. His white horse was at his side as was his faithful *Zwarte Piet*, who was Black Peter, his trusted servant. Legend had it Saint Nik rode his horse over rooftops dropping presents down chimneys. While the generous saint busied himself with presents, Black Peter made his way to the front door of every home. He knocked hard and did not wait for the occupants to open the door. He opened it himself and stuck his gloved hand around the corner. In a split second a cascade of *pepernoten*, small ginger cookies, tumbled to the floor sending the children scrambling to get a fair share. No sooner had he come, when Black Peter left again. Somehow in the commotion, a large bundle of presents appeared. The only one I can still remember is a wooden windup train that ran on a small circular track about two feet in diameter. *Sinterklaas* celebrations also heralded the start of winter, a time of year complete with its own fond memories.

My mind swirls with picturesque images of frozen canals, stubby, knotty willows silhouetted eerily against a pale winter sky. Who can forget ancient stone walls of medieval cities, their secret passages, and the torture chambers and grand halls in old castles? As a child I dreamt of knights with swords and shields. Out of cardboard and scrap wood I constructed their symbols of chivalry and daring. In my mind I sailed endless rivers and canals, traveling past old stone churches and stately brick *pakhuizen*, those very Dutch gabled warehouses that lined canals beside cobbled streets.

Every Sunday morning our family went to the *Oosterkerk*, a large church located in the *Oost* or east neighbourhood of Zwolle. In the afternoon it was time to visit *Oma* and *Opa*, known as grandma and grandpa. She cooked succulent meatballs made of lean horsemeat with gravy that left my mouth watering for days. I do not recall any of the religious teachings of my youth, other than an overwhelming fear combined with guilt and a shame and unworthiness so typical of orthodox Calvinism. There was an old mariners' song I used to sing as a child. It was a song about sailors from the Dutch coastal island of Urk in the North Sea. The sailors were on shore leave and obligated to attend church. On one particular Sunday, so says the song, they were grateful for the sea's intervention, as yet another Calvinist sermon droned on and on about guilt

and shame. It seemed the pastor of the church in a small coastal fishing village of Urk had suddenly forgotten his sermon because the sea thundered very loud outside the door of his country church - no doubt to the entire congregation's delight. I lived too far inland to expect any *bulderen of de zee*, "thundering of the sea," to drown out the droning and condemning voices of my childhood religion. Nevertheless, today, the sea and people of the Netherlands have a more sober relationship and less religious, a relationship that dates back centuries to ancient struggles between the might of oceans and the resourcefulness of people who lived along its shores. Often the relationship was one of pleasure and sandy beaches crowded with vacationers. Sometimes the relationship was a disaster.

Such was the year 1953, when calamity struck.

Even though I lived quite a ways inland and far away from angry seas and windy shores, I could not escape the weight of the tragedy that struck the Netherlands during January of 1953. I was seven years old, just three months away from my eighth birthday. A massive Atlantic hurricane smashed the coasts of England and the low lands, including the Netherlands. The hurricane thundered up the channel that divided mainland Europe and Great Britain, smashing shores and reaping havoc. Early one fateful morning, church bells began tolling a mournful dirge across the countryside to announce the looming disaster lurking outside Holland's many dikes along her Atlantic shores. I can still feel a chill down my spine as I think of those church bells ringing ominously throughout the darkness of night. Many of Holland's dikes failed and the sea came rushing over farms and through houses. With only a radio to stay abreast of the news, I listened to a national disaster unfold. Over two thousand people, including men, women, and children, died in a single tragic weekend, with over 1500 deaths recorded in the Netherlands alone. The church bells sent shivers up my young spine. I saw water levels rise to alarming heights in rivers and canals. I feared the dike just across the street from our home would burst as water rose precariously towards the top. Everyone in the neighbourhood stood nervously on standby ready to spring into action with shovels, pails, and sandbags. Parts of Zwolle's downtown businesses and residential areas experienced some flooding but nothing that could not be stopped by sandbags. We were safe on higher eastern grounds, away from the low lands that lay below sea level along Holland's western shores. The brave people of my homeland, however, rebounded from the tragedy with an even greater resolve never to let the sea win again. Thus began plans for the greatest marine engineering project ever, the *Delta Plan*, a plan that would eventually control all water flowing in and out of the country's most vulnerable areas that lay below sea level. I was a plan so bold and daring that even the mighty Atlantic Ocean and Rhine River would have to yield to the Delta Plan's power to stop or control both.

The only other time I experienced such shivers happened when the Netherland's Civil Defense authorities periodically sounded all the air raid sirens throughout the city. This was done to ensure all systems were still working should yet another tyrant invade this fragile and small country I called home. After all, it had been less than ten years since one such tyrant, Adolf Hitler and his German Nazis, had been defeated and the drone of high-altitude bombers had finally stopped. To young and old alike those air raid sirens were screaming voices of pending doom and very painful memories. We strained our ears to listen for the throbbing drone of bombers and fighter escorts. None came. I plugged my ears whenever the sirens wailed and their cry tore through the city. It's a memory that still haunts me whenever I hear any siren, even today, whether a fire truck or emergency response vehicles or an ambulance howls like a wolf in the dark night on this otherwise quiet island called Gabriola.

Those sirens also drove one of my relatives mad.

I had a very strange aunt who insisted on even stranger birthday presents. When my uncle had worn through his pants, she would cut them off at the knees and stitch them into shorts. I hated those button-fly shorts with a passion. Only suspenders kept them from falling down over my legs. She was equally strange with other clothing items of my uncle. My parents made me wear those horrible *uglies*, not because they couldn't afford any better, but so as not to hurt my aunt's feelings. I wish they had. But, it was all blamed on "the war." My aunt became mad because of the war. Ever since those ancient memories, I have hated hand-me-downs, for both myself and my children. My children have never worn any aunt or uncle's clothes, or any hand-me-downs, unless they accepted the clothes after a full disclosure of the items in question, absolute free consent of the children or their *nay* even if the items were nearly new. I still detest buttons and button-flies. I have never visited a recycle depot or thrift store to look for clothing among the hand-me-downs of others, not for me or my children - brrrr.

Yet, despite painful memories of national disasters and air raid sirens, I also experienced my first love. Her name was Titi. Once during a brief moment of male bravado, when I was about ten years old, I prepared to show my undying love for a young girl in my class. Her name was Titi Meyer. The day dawned sunny and bright as I planned my move. My heart was pounding. Love rose within me. Seconds ticked away. Any moment we would all be seated in our traditional wooden school desks, each desk complete with a little inkwell nestled in a small glass bottle in a round hole at the top of the desk. With the sudden passion of a love-sick suitor, I bent over Titi's desk and blew hard into her inkwell. The ink splattered on her notepaper, on her pretty dress, and all over my face. I stood stunned. It was so unlike me to do such a thing. Despite youthful playfulness and exuberance, I was a normal somewhat quiet child with a big streak of shyness. Why on earth I would think that blowing in a girl's inkwell would demonstrate my love for her, I will never know. The teacher, who no doubt knew I was out of character with my sudden burst of passion, tried to control his laughter. He managed to keep a stern look on his face as the whole class erupted in cheers. Even Titi managed a big grin. Maybe love's arrow had struck home after all.

My punishment and the teacher's discipline were gentle. Instead of blackboard duty, endless lines, and penance in the corner of his classroom, he sent me home and told me to go to Titi's parents and apologize. I had no choice but to walk to her home. It was one of the longest and most agonizing journeys of my young life. She lived in what seemed like the other end of the city. One day, while twisting in agony, I stepped through the doors of the Meyer Grocery Store in downtown Zwolle. I found Titi's mother wearing an apron at the back of the store. I had rehearsed my confession over lengthy sidewalks and now the time of reckoning had come, like doomsday from a Calvinist preacher. I swallowed hard and about to erupt in tears I apologized profusely to Titi's mother. She was so moved by the innocent appeal of this young boy standing in her store, his head looking mournfully at his feet, that she promptly invited me to her daughter's birthday party that Saturday. I couldn't believe my ears. Earlier that week I had embarrassed both myself and the love of my life, and now I was invited to her birthday party. Not only was I invited, I was the only boy coming to her party. I learned early that true love can have great rewards despite awkward circumstances and stumbling beginnings.

But, my love was not reserved for just young girls. I also loved guns.

In 1956, at age eleven, I wrote a passionate letter to the Chief of Zwolle's Police Force, begging him to give me a used revolver, one the police did not need anymore. I had been magically transported into the otherworld of American comic books, especially those Westerns. I simply had to have a gun. In true Dutch fashion and with diplomatic courtesy, I received a very

personal letter from the Chief of Police, a letter in which he gently refused my request and diffused my passion for used revolvers. He said that all "used" firearms were destroyed.

I have never owned a revolver, a gun, or any other firearm - ever.

Some thought at one time that my destiny would be in performing arts. As a young boy I loved creating puppet shows. Armed with colour pencils and paper, I created elaborate backdrop sceneries for my productions. From scrap wood I constructed a small puppet show complete with a draw-curtain. Somewhere and I don't remember where or when, I found some puppets. My theatre was a small storage shed behind our house. It could seat about five to ten kids. Soon the little theatre was bristling with activity as children from the neighbourhood came to see the adventures of Punch & Judy. Years later, as an adult, I was often "persuaded" to do puppet shows for children during the annual bazaar of the John Knox School in Mississauga. My season of puppet shows ended when television with cartoons and other children's programming overwhelmed little children with antics and laughter. However, since those puppet days I have continued to evoke children's laughter through drawing games including storytelling, hang-man, and such special games as "scribbling," which is the art of drawing something recognizable from random scribbles on a page. Sometimes I'd get on the floor with a little one, as I have done so often with my own children and grandchildren to draw a spontaneous story as we each take turns at developing the story in cartoon form.

And so ends a cavalcade of memories, many of them yet untold.