

The Admiral's family

I don't mean to impress anyone even though namedropping is a tempting hobby if the intent is to discover evidence of pedigree, peerage, or royalty. A veritable who's who in the chronicles of a family's history. Some notorious, some gallant. Some worth forgetting, some to remember. No Kings in my family tree, except for rumours. However, unless William of Orange, per chance on a visit to Ghent, Belgium, sometime in the 1700's, and while traveling north after the Nine-Years War, had an affair with a scullery maid whose last name was Verstraete, and who begat a baby boy and kept her maiden name.

William III, also known as William of Orange, was by birth the sovereign Prince of Orange, *Stadtholder* or Chief Magistrate of Holland as well as additional provinces of the Dutch Republic including: Zeeland, Utrecht, Gelders, and Overijssel, from the 1670's. He was also King of England, Ireland, and Scotland, from 1689 until his death in 1702. His wife was Mary II of England. My vivid imagination perhaps? A guilty plea to the charge of fabricating royal descent? Who knows? But Caroline Verstraete would have known, except that she was born in Ghent in 1787. Or was it her mother Angelica or grandmother Franciska Bobelyn-Verstraete. Were they *all* paid to keep silent or is it just intrigue and fiction?

How's that for namedropping?

Needless to say, nor did my family build cathedrals, but they were stonemasons. They did not publish Gutenberg Bibles or State-authorized Scriptures, but they were bookbinders and merchants. Nor did they build full-rigged galleons for the Dutch Navy, but they were shipwrights nevertheless. They built wooden fishing boats. Over two hundred years later, descendants of the shipbuilders still ply their trade, only now they handcraft custom interiors for yachts and pleasure boats, but still in the same town of Hasselt, where it all began in the 1800's. On my mother's side, stone masons were the Van Dam family; but it is from my grandmother's side that the name *Admiraal* (Eng. *Admiral*) gained notoriety. The name was passed down to the Verstraete's family. My father named his company Admiral Bookbinding & Publishing. My father's name was Christiaan (Eng. *Christian*) a first name that over the years and with the birth of each firstborn male child, alternated between Bernardus (Beert) and Christiaan (Christian) Verstraete. But the first Verstraete from an unknown date in the 1700's was Livinius Verstraete. But, that's another story.

It is to the *Admiraal* family I turn, because it's a tale worth telling and a coat-of-arms worth preserving. And most definitely I *am* related.

The *Admiraal* family were my grandmother's side of the family, a side that came complete with an illustrious past, a past that began somewhere in a little place called Hasselt. I do remember, although vaguely, occasional visits to Hasselt, a small rural town just west of Zwolle and downstream along the IJssel River. It had been and continues to be home to a number of family members of my grandmother, Aleida *Admiraal*. Hasselt is a picturesque little medieval town with tiny brick rowhouses placed in an orderly fashion along its many waterways including the big river. It was an urban planning tradition common to the Dutch watery way of life. Hasselt was home to a number of family businesses, especially those of shipyard and shipwright reputation. The town graced the banks of IJssel river that eventually flowed into the North Sea. The *Admiraal* family was into shipbuilding. They built many ships to ply the coastal waters of the Netherlands and to cross the channel to England.

But, I must share this brief story of the *Admiraal* family because of its unique history and special place of honour in the "Verstraete Venture." In fact, I am rather proud of the events that

led to the Admiraal legacy. Let me take you back a century or so, during the early nineteen hundreds. Beert Verstraete had married Aleida Admiraal. Beert and Aleida were my grandparents who were both born just two years apart, in 1893 and 1891, respectively. Their lineage continued via a son Christiaan, my father. Two other sons, Lambert and Herman, although married, but never had any children.

The 1890's were times when the great powers of Europe were on the verge of war, again. Europe was in turmoil. A number of alliances were hastily formed to stem the growing tide of revolution and war. Germany had signed a reassurance treaty with Russia in 1887. The French and Russians had declared an alliance in 1893. The Boer War between Great Britain and Transvaal began in 1899, and lasted until 1902. The English signed with the Japanese in 1902, and the English and French concluded an *entente* in 1904. The Russian-Japanese War broke out in 1904, and lasted until 1905. Austria annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908. The first Moroccan crisis of 1905, spilled over into a second crisis in 1911. Two wars erupted in the Balkans in 1912, and 1913. On June 28, 1914, Austrian Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his wife were assassinated by Serbians in a political plot at Sarajevo, Bosnia.

The European continent erupted into the first of two World Wars.

During those turbulent times, the ship-building Admiraal family, married into the Verstraete family. Everyone tried to maintain life and order. The Verstraete family became heirs of the Admiraal legacy. However, the Admiraal story dates back much further than the 1890's, World War I, and the early nineteen hundreds. In fact, records of the Admiraal family date back further than Verstraete's and the Van Dam's on my mother's side. Whereas the Verstraete and Van Dam family trees can be traced back to about the year 1744, the Admiraal legacy begins in 1573, two hundred years earlier and as of today, nearly half a millennium ago.

I must confess to a vivid imagination as I recall the events of 1573. My mind conjures up images of swashbuckling buccaneers, tall ships, barrels of pork-in-brine, and adventures to the East Indies. However, I shall attempt to remain true to the details of the story. I hope you will not become too frustrated by all those Dutch names, but the Dutch language is still a special part of my life. My children have often expressed a desire to learn the language, therefore, go ahead and try pronouncing the words.

During the month of October in 1573, Cornelis Dirkszoon (meaning: Cornelis, *zoon* or son of Dirk) suddenly became a national hero, while serving as burgomaster (mayor) in the community of Monnikendam, a small town located a few miles north of Amsterdam on the *Zuiderzee* (Southern Sea). The events of the day swirled around the Naval Battle of the *Zuiderzee*, precipitated by a revolt of Dutch citizens against Spanish rule. The *Zuiderzee* was an inland sea connected to the North Atlantic through the *Noordzee* or Northern Sea, allowing strong Atlantic currents to buffet the low coastal stretches of fertile Dutch land. Cornelis Dirkszoon must have been a rebel with a cause, namely Dutch freedom, and he must have had a certain affinity for both the sea and sailing because he soon found himself captain of a Dutch warship. His warship was part of a small naval force hastily mustered by the Dutch rebels. In the battle that erupted, Cornelis Dirkszoon's ship captured *The Spanish Inquisition*, which of all ships, happened to be the flagship of the Spanish fleet. He took as his prisoner Captain De Bossu, enemy commander of the Spanish flagship. It was no small victory. A short while later, the entire Spanish fleet was defeated and destroyed. Following Cornelis' spectacular naval victory, the sea battle served as a moral and symbolic victory for the Dutch rebels. For his bold feat of courage and leadership, Cornelis Dirkszoon was honoured with the rank of *Admiraal*, that is *Admiral of the Fleet*. His descendants adopted the military rank of Admiraal as a family name complete with

a special family coat of arms to commemorate the events of 1573. I could, if I wanted to, sport the name Gerrit Vincent Leonard Admiraal-Verstraete on a letterhead alongside coats of arms of both families. Call me what you will, but I am still proud that my journey includes sea battle *victors* of the 1570's as well as the *liberators* of 1945, even though they are 375 years apart.

As the nineteenth century progressed, however, the trade of shipbuilding declined for the Admiraal family. The primary reason for the decline was the result of cutting the Zuiderzee's watery link between inland rivers and the North Sea. The town of Hasselt, where most of the Admiraal family lived just west of Zwolle, in effect had become land-locked.

I am here

In the mid-nineteenth century a great Dutch engineering feat made that "cutting of watery links" between north and south seas possible. It was known as the *Afsluitdijk*, a long stretch of dike literally known as "the dike that cuts off," and it ended the Zuiderzee's dominance and turbulent contributions to Dutch coastal life. Instead, this body of saltwater once known as a sea, the Zuiderzee, became a lake to be called *IJsselmeer*, or "IJssel Lake," named after the IJssel River, a tributary of the Rhine. Zwolle, my city of birth, is located on the banks of the IJssel River. When the *Afsluitdijk* was completed, plans were implemented to begin draining IJsselmeer, an ambitious project to reclaim fertile land that lay below the surface of the newly-formed lake. The result was the creation of a number of *polders*, which are tracts of marshy land, below sea level. In turn these polders were drained and the land reclaimed for cultivation. Dutch engineers built an elaborate network of dikes and pumping stations to keep water at acceptable levels. Typical images of the Netherlands are picturesque windmills, a national symbol of Dutch invention. Windmills served as pumps to manage water levels and as mills to cut wood and grind all sorts of grains. After many years the slowly drying polders eventually turned a watery landscape into some of the most productive and fertile farmland of these low-lands. I have bicycled and toured by car through polders where fields stretched endlessly flat and rolling, boasting of an abundance of wheat and farm produce, while basking under blue and generous Dutch skies, skies made famous by seventeenth century Dutch Masters.

And so ends my story of the Admiraal family amidst the colourful surroundings of a Dutch landscape and its equally colourful history.

However, as I share this tale, I am prodded once again to dig deep into my memory and find some more stories to tell. In fact, I am somewhat reluctant to leave my past, as I savour the moments I remember once again, even wishing to turn the clock back to simpler days. Those were the days of endless hours of playing safely in the streets of Zwolle and in the alleys and backyards of our neighbourhood. Television had as yet not dulled my imagination and my only venture into modern technology was distribution radio, an early form of state-controlled cable radio. Holland was (and still is) a free and democratic country and the sparse airways of cable radio were filled with concerts and radio drama. As a family we gathered around a single speaker and turned the dial on the wall to either channel 1 or channel 2. Some of the more affluent folks on the street owned AM/FM radios complete with banks of glowing glass radio tubes, enabling eager listeners to peruse a variety of radio stations, especially the powerful signals from Germany and France. However, I spent more time with my children's story books and a dusty copy of the official book of Provincial legends and folk lore. Those were the days when I could soar in my imagination to the highest heights and the greatest adventures. Regrettably, today's youth cannot even get off the sofa as television and video games have chained them to their seats. "Back then," however, as evening fell and the Enkstraat was still lit by gas lamps to be replaced much later with electric lights when we moved to the Abel Tasman Straat, I retreated

into my world of dreams. It helped that my older brother Beert was a master storyteller. Bundled in our blankets, because we had no central heat in those days, Beert invented story after story until we finally drifted off into welcome sleep.

Perhaps some claim to fame after all.