

The Spronk Family
Dutch Immigrants
Washington
May of 1951



Editor's Note: Excerpt from
Immigration to Canada:

From Hei-en Boecop to Beverly 1951, memoirs of the Spronk's donated
to Pier 21 and held in the Scotiabank Research Centre

Dedicated to Opa and Oma

Chapter 4

What Drove Opa to Canada?

Have you ever wondered what would drive a man, with the responsibility of a wife and six kids, to give up a successful business and move to a new land, without knowing the language, without a certain job to go to, without much money and without an option to return? Leaving family and friends, never expecting to see them again. They did see some family again, but it was years later.

Oma first returned to Holland for a visit in 1964 when her mother Oma Visser was very ill and then again when she passed away. (Oma Visser came for a visit and stayed for several months in 1955.) Opa didn't return for a visit until 1974 - the first time he saw his mother and his three younger brothers, Jan, Engelbert and Floris. It had been 23 years since they had been together.

Opa recalls that during the first few years after his arrival in Canada he would have nightmares about the thought of returning to Holland. How could a man hate a place so much that he was willing to risk everything and move to an unknown place without any long-term employment prospects?

World War II had ended and the Germans ended their occupation of the small country of the Netherlands. Business had picked up, but economically things were still extremely difficult. Because some people had made large sums of money on the black market during the war, the government froze the banks, allowing only 200 guilders per person, making it very difficult to transact business. Although the foreign powers had been removed, government organizations and the 'red tape' remained

in place. Known German collaborators were given work rather than being punished!

In efforts to rebuild the nation in the aftermath of the war, the civil government intruded excessively into the lives and business affairs of its citizens by enforcing all their legislation and extracting all the taxes they could. A new burden was laid on Holland's industrious citizens, in particular, the small business owners.

Running a business in Holland seemed to be more about fending off the numerous government inspectors and tax collectors than about serving your customers. There were not only building inspectors, but there were also inspectors to inspect the quality of wood used to even how it was stored. Civil servants were continually seeking to catch someone doing something wrong and placing taxes on everything - including sales tax on one's own paintings that were hanging on the walls in one's own home!

Needless to say, it became oppressive and one young entrepreneur, Nico Spronk of Hei-en Boeicop, said "enough". He went looking for something better for his wife and growing family - beyond the borders of the land of his birth.

Many years later, Oom Jan described Opa to me as a bit of a radical when he was younger - very determined, stubborn, with very strong Christian beliefs. I had trouble picturing him like that because I always saw him as fairly laid back - it wasn't until some years later that I understood how much he hated civil servants.

John.

I finally really understood what drove Opa to move to Canada many years later when I was in high school, and helping Opa install a roof on a house renovation somewhere near the University area for a doctor. It was a nice Saturday afternoon, so the doctor came out onto the roof and helped nail the plywood down, and talked to Opa like an equal. To this day, the look of satisfaction on Opa's face stays with me - what a country (said his face), we are all equal here, and there is no class distinction here.

Morris.

Opa was in the building and carpentry business in Hei- en Boeicop, a small town about 20 kilometers south of Utrecht. The Spronks were well known in the area, having lived in that community for over 100 years. In fact, when Opa and Oma left, there was a great deal of sadness, Opa's

contribution to the community extended beyond advice for carpentry and building. Opa was often sought for advice on other matters, even medical advice since the nearest doctor was in Utrecht, still a fair distance to cycle, this being the normal mode of transportation.

I remember one incident quite clearly. One day a neighbour came by and asked if he would look at his son's hand. The son, who I remember as being around ten years old, had two large festering boils on his fingers causing him a lot of pain. My father asked for a needle, sterilized it using a candle, lanced both boils and appeared to have solved the problem.

John.

Opa looked with envy on his younger brother, Engelbert, who also was interested in immigrating. Being single, Engelbert had no cares or responsibilities but himself. But then he met his future wife, Teunie, an only child, and never did take the step to move out of Holland. Opa, however, became a member of the Christian Emigration Centrale (CEC).

Information of countries accepting immigration was perused with great interest. It was, after all, no small decision to relocate your family. South Africa was a possibility. Opa would have to go first without his family. This did not appeal to him. His wife, Anna, was now pregnant with their fifth child, wanted to wait.

Australia, Brazil, and Argentina were other options presented to them, but none of these appealed to the young father, who was attracted to Canada but Canada was calling for farmers, not carpenters. Then in 1951, the CEC sent a notice that Canada would accept carpenters, but they would need to have a 'country mentality'. This sounded like it was written with Opa in mind! Thus, with Canada now beckoning him, he set to work.

The six of us Dutch Spronks: Neil, Adrian, John, Morris, Margaret and Sya, playing behind the house in Hei- en Boeicop not long before we immigrated. Oma, whose head is obscured, is holding baby Sya.

Before we left Holland, there was a book about Canada in the house which we perused through with great excitement. The most spectacular scene in that book was a road grader ploughing snow off the road into the ditch. I remember seeing this picture years later and the snow in the ditch was not actually all that deep, less than 2 feet. There were bigger snowdrifts north of our home near St. Albert. But to a 6 year old in Holland this amount of snow was enormous, and I remember spending many nights in bed fanaticizing with Adrian about playing in this snow. This fantasy consisted mainly of digging a whole network of tunnels in

the snow, and crawling around through them. Needless to say, this fantasy never became reality.

Neil.

A few months ago, I toured South Africa. It reminded me of the books that were lying around the house that Opa studied to determine which country would be the best choice for immigration a full 50 years previously. As I recall, countries open for consideration were Australia, South Africa, Brazil, USA and Canada. I haven't been to Australia or Brazil (yet), but so far, I'm sure glad we ended up in Canada!

Morris.

Chapter 5

Emigration 50 Years Ago

Written by Oom Engelbert, translated by Opa, Joanne and Sya

That Annie and Nico wanted to emigrate was known for a long time. We often spoke about this at home with my mother. It was really something! This meant we would possibly never see each other again - something that is no longer imaginable today. Above all for my mother it was not a pleasant thought. In spite of that fact, I did not have the impression that she tried to discourage them from going.

She wished for her children to have a good future. The prospects were poor here. Because of continual governmental interference in business, Nico made the decision to leave. 'Civil servant' was to him an ugly word. He well understood that emigration was not everything, but saw a better future in doing so, especially for his children. For me it was also a traumatic time, because I foresaw that I would possibly have to take over the carpentry business in Heicop.

At first there was a probability that I too would emigrate. Our dialogue was already going in that direction: "Would you first check out South Africa; if it is suitable; we can also go there." But Engelbert got a girlfriend Teuny in Zijderveld, the only daughter of a carpenter and a sickly mother. For me emigration was no longer an option as I understood we could not do this to her family. In 1950, Teuny's father passed away. Emigration for me was now definitely out of the question.

Teuny always thought that I would have serious regrets because when we went to visit Canada the first time she was afraid that I would say "if only we had gone". Having seen and heard the hardships of the immigrants, I could truly say it was not for me.

Following the acquisition of my prospective father-in-law's carpentry business, I learned heavily on my brother Nico, who did my drafting and also stood beside me with advice and a helping hand. When they left for Canada, it was a double burden. It had become Canada, rather than South Africa, good thing!

Before it had progressed too far, I had a choice to make either to continue the business in Heicop or the business in Zijderveld. My decision was for the latter, because I had already made substantial progress there. This was advantageous to Nico because he could become financially solvent by proceeding to sell his business to Bart deGans.

Being preoccupied with business and other matters, I can relate very few anecdotes of Annie and Nico's family of that time. During the war, while they lived in Michie de Heer's farmhouse (in Heicop), I often visited them and Cor Visser, (Oma's brother, who was living with them in hiding from the Germans).

When they moved to the back portion of the old house (de Kurketrekker/Corkscrew) you could often find me there. That was much more gezellig (cozy, sociable) than in the front portion where my old grandmother lived with my mother, her daughter-in-law.

On Saturday evenings, Teuny would often join the gezelligheid and shared excellent fellowship with her future sister-in-law. Saturday is the evening all the children had to take a bath and she was allowed to help. I can still visualize her cutting Neil's toenails. Neil obligingly allowed her to do so while he 'read' the paper. Guess how old he was?

We enjoyed gezelligheid all evening till it was time for us to go home, "Kom," said Annie, "Now I'm going to work." Then she would work late into the night for her family. With such a wife, it will be easy to emigrate. Teuny was very honored that she was allowed to carry one of the babies into church for baptism.

I can still envision their boys walking barefoot outside. If they had an option, they would choose to walk on the grass, which was more pleasant than the gravel road.

I also remember a boat tour, with a scow, through the water filled ditches with Rientie (Morris) and Jan (John), who would chase the cat. The cat ran to the workplace attic, where the frightened cat promptly peed, and it leaked between the ceiling cracks onto Jan below.

As far as I know, they were not disobedient children, maybe with the exception of Jan (John), who would chase the cat. The cat ran to the workplace attic, where the frightened cat promptly peed, and it leaked between the ceiling cracks onto Jan below.

We took our farewells at the train station from where they traveled to France where they would board the boat enroute to Canada. It was a very emotional parting because we thought we would never see each other again. When I think back to that event, it looked like a scene from the movies - a smoking and screaming steam train disappearing from the station.

Chapter 9

Leaving

I remember clearly the day a bus arrived at the house in Hei- en Boeicop to take us to the train station. I would have been seven at that time. I do not remember Dad's state of mind, but Mother was crying when she said goodbye to the same of the relatives that were there. I just didn't understand why Mother cried at this point. This was quite the most exciting adventure I thought I might ever undertake. Children do see the world differently. It all seemed safe and exciting, and honestly, I do not remember having a concern at all.

Neil.

The day before departing from Holland, April 9, Opa had to pick up the passports. Cor, his brother-in-law, chauffeured Opa on his motorcycle. First stop was Dordrecht to a difficult customer, the steward of a baroness, who still owed him some money, money for which Opa had a great need. Then it was on to the government offices in Den Hague, only to be told that their passports were lost. It was lunchtime. The civil servant couldn't find it, but his secretary said to come back after lunch; she would see if she could find them. Thankfully, she did. But all was not in order - Sya was forgotten on the passport.

What to do? Was this a sign that Opa and Oma should leave their youngest child, a nine-month old daughter behind with Oma's sister, Tante Grete and Oom Cor, who had no children? No, they just could not do that. So it was back to the Canadian Embassy, convince them that there had been a mistake and that Sya had been approved of being in good health, even though she wasn't initially listed at the time the family took the medicals earlier in February.

Yet, one more item needed to be tended to, Opa had to get to Amsterdam prior to closing and obtain the certificate that indeed all of his taxes have been paid. What a hectic and tense day that had been! Is it no wonder that when Opa crossed the border into Belgium, he heaved a sigh of relief? "Boy, was I eve glad to be on that train," Opa thought to himself as he crossed over the border into Belgium. "Now, nobody can stop me." Why? He hated the civil servants so much, and it had become so that you had to be crooked just to get materials!

On April 10, 1951, in spite of the pouring rain, all the townspeople were there to give their adieus when the family boarded the chartered bus Opa Visser had hired. The families of both Opa and Oma came along to the train station in Rotterdam to bid their relatives 'good-bye' and wish them 'to go with God's blessing'. There, Opa Visser gave a moving farewell speech.

To Oma it felt like a funeral; and in a way it was, because it was the last time Oma would see her father, with whom she had a close relationship, alive on earth. Oma went back for the first time to visit in 1964, but it would be twenty-three years before Opa would return. This was when his mother was sick. Oma had challenged Opa's conscience by asking what it would be like if her sons left and never came to see her again. So he did returned in April/May 1974 in spite of a major fear: For years after emigrating from Holland he had nightmares about taking a trip to Holland and not being able to return to Canada!

I can't remember much about the departure. I do remember it being a sad time because we truly (at least I did) believed that we would never see the people in Holland again, ever. This was of course true for some - Opa Visser and Oma Spronk passed on before any of the children got back to Holland, which for me personally was some 40 years later in 1991.

Although I have been to Holland a number of times since 1991 there are some cousins that I have not met to this day - Oom Flor's children, one or two of Oom Engelbert's children, and although Oom Jan's daughters were born before we left Holland, I haven't met them on any occasion since. I also knew it was a sad time because it was one of the few times I ever saw Mom shed a tear. I am sure that she shed many more when the children were not present.

It was on the 1991 trip that our neighbour in Hei- en Boeicop told us the story of how bad she felt after we left. Her contribution to our trip was formula for Baby Sya and she forgot to put sugar into the formula to make it more palatable. I doubt that Sya remembers, but maybe Mom remembers that Sya didn't drink the formula very well.

The first part of the trip was by bus to the train station (I would think Rotterdam or Amsterdam, but can't remember which). We took the train to Paris where we stayed overnight in a hotel with an elevator that was a metal cage with the elevator shaft also being a metal cage.

Adrian.

All I remember was a yellow school bus and a lot of yelling and shouting when the bus drove off to take us to the train in Rotterdam.

John.

Chapter 10

Hei- en Boeicop to LeHavre

The train ride to Paris was exciting, but the real excitement started in Paris. The taxi driver was most impressive and he would screech the car to a halt in some intersection and shake his fist and yell at some other driver. This happened several times. Wow, what a way to drive. Never saw this before, or since, except in the movies. Maybe it still happens in Paris, but 1987 when we were there I did not see it. Maybe French drivers have become more civilized!

Neil.

We went from the hotel to LeHavre to catch the boat by taxi---maybe two taxis considering the family was already eight people and we had luggage that carried all our possessions that didn't go in the 'kist' (literal translation is 'box' which referred to the shipping container used by immigrants to ship most of their possessions).

I remember one incident from the taxi ride. The taxi was passing through a traffic circle, (I wouldn't be surprised if it was the one around the Arc de Triumphe) and the driver got very upset and had a shouting match with some other drivers or at the gendarme who was directing traffic. It is amazing what leaves a lasting impression.

Adrian.

When we arrived at the Hotel, mom told dad to go out and get some bread. A short while later he came back with bread sticks. Mom was furious. "Can't you even go out and find decent bread?" Dad insisted that is all there was. He was right. I have been back to France and bread

sticks is all there is to this day. It must have been difficult, but we did find a way to eat that stuff, and I do not remember it being all that bad.

"Now that I lived in England, and have been to France several times, I contrast England with France. There is a remarkable difference between the high streets in France and the high streets in England. In the daytime the streets in England are filled with people walking around, particularly elderly people. In France there is hardly anyone on the street ever, and when they are, they are invariably walking out of a bread shop with bread sticks in their hand. In no country do you see so many carrying bread—well those long sticks are hard to hide in a shopping bag, and they go stale quickly so that need to be purchased every day. To me it was a constant reminder of the bread stick event in the Paris hotel in 1951.

Neil.

(Personally, I remember nothing from coming across, but I have heard) in LeHavre, dad bought long stick breads and jam to eat.

Margaret.

It was spring in the Netherlands when I stood at the train station in Rotterdam and kissed my fiancé good-bye and said farewell to my parents. My one huge suitcase was loaded up and the train took me to Paris, France for the first leg of my journey to Canada. Sitting with me on the train was a couple with six children! They were also immigrating to Canada and I offered to give them a hand by helping them on and off the train. I got to carry a basket which had their baby in it! After a night's stay in a hotel the train took us to LeHavre where we boarded The Washington.

Herman Groenewegen.

Heman Groenewegen, become our neighbour at the chicken coop and lifelong friend of Opa and Oma.

The first destination en route was an overnight stay in gay Paris. That was some experience. Strolling down the street with five children in tow and one in the baby carriage must have been a sight to behold. Sya was a fascination to the Parisians. It appeared they had never seen an infant in a carriage before. Having a small command of French was advantageous and necessary, for Opa not only had to buy some food for his family, but he also had to ward off 'the ladies of the street' that wanted to show him a good time!!! "Pour une fois?"

Chapter 11

Sailing from Le Havre to Halifax (aboard the SS Washington)

We boarded at night. The harbour was very well lit and I remember the ship looking white. It reminded me of the white ship that Sinterklaas (Santa Clause) would sail on when he came with Zwarte Piet from Spain at Christmas time. After we disembarked, the ship was black. This confused me for a long time. To this day I don't know if it was my overactive imagination or the effects of the bright lights in the harbour in Le Havre that made it look white." John.

The SS Washington

On April 11, 1951, the young couple and their progeny boarded the train for Le Havre. They were booked on the American ship, the SS Washington. It was a one-class tourist steam ship, the first boat on which Opa could secure passage for himself and his family. (One-class tourist ship meant that the passenger accommodations were individual cabins that a family shared, rather than segregation of the men and older boys from the women and children in cramped communal quarters of the average immigration ship.) Needless to say, this was an attractive feature. Thankfully, too, they had the benefit of some private space with the unforeseen immediate future still before them.

Ask Opa how he felt when he got on the boat. Unable to find the words to express it, his face will light up and he'll spread out his arms and exclaim with one word full of meaning FREEDOM! He felt truly liberated!

We got there just after dark and I have a vivid memory of walking with the family and the cart of baggage between this enormous ship on our left and the cargo shed at the right. This was the boat that would take us over the ocean. After walking up the gangplank, I remember being slightly disappointed to be traveling along some narrow steel corridors into some large rooms with rows of double bunk beds.

The men and women were separated into different rooms. It did feel rather strange to have mother sleeping in the different room than father. The glamour of the lights on the outside of the ship did not match the austerity on the inside. We were put to bed immediately, and were told we would be leaving the harbour in the morning. I resolved to go out in the morning to see the ship leave.

In the morning, I inquired as to when we were leaving. Being told that we were just pulling away from the dock, I hurried to the deck to see the dock a few hundred metres away, and stayed there watching LeHavre

getting smaller and smaller as the ship went out to sea. The early morning sunshine, blue water, green land and azure sky, made a vivid display of color.

Pulling out of the harbour seemed to take much longer that it probably took, and the LeHavre city skyline certainly made an impression on me. When I took the ferry into LeHavre in 1999, I went up on deck to relive this experience. The city towers, the landscape, and the cargo sheds had a strange feeling of familiarity. It is amazing how these things stand out in your mind.

Neil.

Accoring to the schedule, we would have embarked the evening of Wednesday, April 11, 1951. The ship also stopped to pick up passengers and freight in Southampton, England and in Cobh, Ireland. Exactly 39 years earlier, on April 12, 1912, the newly built Titanic called on the port of Cobh (formerly known as Queentown) after setting out from Southampton.

By noon the ship arrived in port again. This came as a complete surprise. I did not expect to see land in half a day. I was told that this was England, and we would only by stopping there for a short time. I spent the next two hours watching the loading of the ship. It was great fun to see the giant cranes drop palettes of cargo into the front hold of the ship. An automobile was even loaded up. This was much more interesting than wooden crates. Can you imagine why someone might wish to ship a car? Some passengers on deck were also watching. They had a set of binoculars, and let us look through them. This was great. Ships at this point seemed more exciting than I had hitherto imagined.

Neil.

By day two on the water, Adrian and I got a bit braver to do some more exploring. We found that some parts of the boat were much nicer that the part we were in. On the upper deck there were passengers playing with big checkers, and pushing them about with sticks. We watched this for a while and reported this to mom and dad, who told us that we should not really go there. Why not? We were not harming anything? The next day we wandered up to the first class section again: this time with a less confidence than the first time, since it felt not quite right. A crewmember spotted us and sent us back. Too bad.

Neil.

The ocean crossing was another adventure. The family was given a cabin near the center of the boat. This was soon changed. Margaret came down with the measles, a highly contagious disease. The captain had Oma and Margaret quickly relocated and put in quarantine in the infirmary behind locked doors in the nose of the ship below the waterline.

What anxious moments, the mother had! Her husband didn't know this had transpired, the other children were somewhere on the big boat, hopefully near their father (and under his watchful eye), and little Sya was left in the crib in their cabin. How would she get a message to him? At first Opa didn't know where Oma and Margaret went. She simply seemed to have vanished, quite an easy thing to do on a big ship with 1,200 passengers and 500 crewmembers. They must have paged him, because soon he and the rest of the children, who were now in his sole charge, were also moved to the front of the ship but on a higher level, to cabin A2, an officer's cabin.

On the third day, the baby in the family was getting really sick, and mom and dad took Sya to the ship's doctor. They seemed to be gone for quite a long time, and dad came back alone with the news that mom was kept in quarantine. The next morning mother was allowed to come and see us for half an hour, and I have never, before or since, seen mother so distressed. She had spent the whole night in the bottom of the ship, with no provisions, and it felt like she had not even eaten.

She seemed to have felt completely abandoned. When mother went back to the hospital section to be with the baby, the rest of the family was moved to a cabin, which was much like a hotel room, with a bathroom and a porthole for a window. This was great, but we were no longer allowed to go on deck except in the evening for half an hour, and accompanied by dad. This put a bit of a damper on the boat ride.

Neil.

We were on board the SS Washington and none of the crew spoke Dutch. I, Margaret, got the measles and put into quarantine with Mom. We were put behind locked doors and mom didn't quite understand what was going on. As we know, she is not a lover of water, and all she could see was water through a small porthole. Once or twice a day, dad was able to come down and speak to her and meanwhile he too was quarantined in one of the captain's quarters where he looked after the other 5 children. Sya was only 9 months old!

Margaret.

The only memorable scene I have of the view from the window is one late afternoon or early evening, the water was as smooth as glass.

Neil.

Just in case you thought all immigrants traveled in steerage, take a look at this pencil sketch that Opa did (not one of his better ones - must have been a rough sea) of our Cabin No. 2A. Looks like luxury, doesn't it? That's 9-month-old Sya in the bed in the bottom left hand corner.

There were other anxious moments Oma experienced during the ordeal of sailing on all the water. She had a phobia about big bodies of water. Although, Oma had grown up beside lots of water, because her childhood home was built on a dyke, she never did learn to swim. (Her father was the machinist, who worked and maintained the *stoomgemaal* - one of the steam engines that replaced the windmills in controlling the water level from flooding the low lands of Holland).

Getting out into the ocean meant roaming the decks and watching the churning wake and imagining what it would be like to swim in it.

Neil.

A storm was rising. Poor Margaret was so sick and listless. Then these Negro stewards came into the cabin and checked the portholes to see that they were securely fastened and storm-worthy. Oma just had to see what was going on. She climbed on a chair to look out. And OH, all she saw was wild water! All she could think to do was crawl into bed and cover herself, head and all; she was so frightened and convinced this was the end.

One morning I was told that there had been a storm the previous night. I felt I had missed something as I slept through the excitement. Then I did not feel so good and decided that I needed to throw up. Quick! To the side of boat. But I did not make it. As soon as I stepped over the ledge into the outside air, I could not contain it and let go. There were crews cleaning and mopping the deck, as others had experienced a similar fate. A crew member quickly cleaned up my mess. I guess that what it means to be a deck hand.

Neil.

Maybe it was just as well that Oma was confined to these quarters, she would probably have experienced heart-failure if she would have seen her terrified sons kicking and screaming for all their worth when they were

being held over the railing by Herman Groenewegen, a Dutch bachelor, who was also immigrating to Edmonton.

The SS Washington was a very large ocean liner. One of our fellow passengers was Herman Groenewegen, who we had met earlier on the train. He was a young man full of spunk and mischief. Herman took great delight in grabbing and holding us by the wrists while swinging us over the other side of the rail over top of the water. We did not enjoy this experience as we kicked like crazy (probably the wrong thing to do) trying to wring ourselves free of his grip. Herman found a lot of humour in this. Morris and I, 3 and 4 years old at the time, were scarred for life!

John.

I have only one memory of the immigration trip - Oom Herman, when you held us young guys out over the edge of the SS Washington, you created a lasting memory. I recall that he held me out over the back of the ship, with the turbulence from the props making it all the more scary.

Morris.

I don't remember this but I might have done it - I'm sure I had a very good hold.

Herman Groenewegen.

Opa and Oma sent a few cards from the ship but didn't say much.

This one, sent to Oma's brother in law, is simply signed, Ann, Nick & family on the Atlantic Ocean. Grete, Oma's sister and Cor van Zee were one of the few relatives to visit Edmonton. They came during the late 1960's.

Insert graphic

This following card was sent to Oma's mom and dad from us kids. Only Sya's name stayed intact after we immigrated as the rest of us Canadianized our names.

Insert graphic

We got on the boat, the SS Washington, in the late afternoon or evening, traveled across the English Channel to Southampton, England during the night. We weren't there long, and in the morning left to cross the Atlantic. The crossing was uneventful - no storms and took approximately 4.5 days. The boys and Dada were in a different room

than Mom and the girls. Soon Mom had to move to an isolation room because Sya had chicken pox, considered a contagious disease. I think everyone got seasick, including me. I think I threw up once, but I don't recall being terribly sick. It did seem like it took a long time to moor the ship once we were in the Halifax harbour.

Adrian.

Our five day voyage on the sea began. Somehow on the boat I learned that the family Spronk had been quarantined due to some illness the children had but that they were happy to have a nice cabin.

Herman Groenewegen.

Websites:

<http://www.maritimematters.com/washington-33.html>

<http://www.maritimematters.com/united-states-lines.html>

Chapter 13

Pier 21: Canada's Ellis Island

Millions of Canadian can trace their family history back through Pier 21 in Halifax. It is Canada's Ellis Island, the point of entry for the great immigrations of the 20th century; the immigration which took place from 1928 to 1971, in this case. Between those years, one million immigrants first set foot on Canadian soil at Pier 21. As well, half a million Canadian troops bound for Europe passed through Pier 21.

Pier 21 is located on Marginal Road, on the harbour front behind the Halifax train station. Click here <http://www.pier21.ns.ca/> to visit the Pier 21 official website. The museum at Pier 21 contains a great deal of information on the people and ships who arrived here, and a Wall of Honour, which celebrates the families who arrived in Canada at Pier 21.

We arrived near Halifax very early in the morning. It was a clear sky, and the early sun shone brightly on the shore and the water. We watched the pilot boat come up and then the tugs. The ship was slowly taken into the harbour and docked opposite an island, which made the harbour so distinctive.

Neil.

I recall it was a gray day in Halifax and it was very busy with sailors from all over the world doing their jobs.

Herman Groenewegen.

The ship left the French harbour at midnight Thursday, April 12th, and arrived in Halifax about a week later. Oma recalls arrival as Friday afternoon, April 20th. By this time, some of the other children had contracted the measles. So one by one they were placed in the hospital in Halifax.

We were marshaled into the immigration hall, and the next day learned that our journey could not continue with the baby sick with measles. Soon Margaret also become sick. In the end we stayed on Halifax for about four weeks. As one person get better, another got sick.

Being confined to stay in the hall, as there was a guard at the entrance, we found things rather boring. The only excitement consisted of watching ships come in and go out. As the hall was on the second story, there was a good view of the harbour and the island from an observation deck.

One afternoon we found some rolls of toilet paper in the bathroom, and tossed some from the observation deck when there was no one on the dock so we would not be found out. I somehow expected later to be reprimanded for this, but nothing came of it.

I became aware that this hall was a sort of no man's land, and that the guard at the entrance was actually an immigration officer. Different people moved into and out of the hall over the time we were there, and little dramas ensued when people were not allowed entry into Canada, and were to be deported back to where they came from.

Neil.

The immigration hall was a bit like a prison, surrounded by a chain link fence, you had to obtain passes to leave. Once we received our 'landed immigrant' status we could get passes. This opened new doors for Kees (Neil) and Adrie (Adrian). They were adventurous and independent young fellows; they soon discovered they could travel on the city's transit system for free because they were six and under and might as well do some sight-seeing in this new and strange coastal city. It sure beat staying in the living quarters of the immigration hall. Oma says, "Kees could do everything." They didn't worry about them because this was a good country.

We made friends with a slightly older boy that seemed to be there for some time, and for reasons I don not understand we were allowed to go out with him past the guard and walk about the city. Several times we went with him to the park, and we played on the rocks by the water,

watching the tide go in and out. I have fond memories of that park, particularly because it had some natural springs that fed small streams. I was interested in following all the streams to see where the water came from.

Next to the immigration hall there was a railway station with the most magnificent steam powered iron monsters. Approaching these engines was always accompanied with a slight feeling of fear, as they sometimes vented steam with a great noise that was rather scary. I so looked forward to taking one of these trains to our new home in Edmonton. Another memorable outing was to follow the railway from the station for a mile or two, and watch the trains travel along them wondering where they were going. The tracks passed under a number of road bridges, which are still there. Standing on a bridge above a moving train was great fun.

Neil.

Although I didn't know it then, we stayed in the dorms or holding rooms of Pier 21 for three weeks, while Margaret and Morris also got the chicken pox in successive weeks. Finally when all were recovered we were able to continue our journey.

There was another boy there who for some reason also had to stay at Pier 21 for an extended period. He was Neil's age I think or maybe older than Neil. Regardless, he was 'streetwise' re Halifax. He knew how to get around on the city buses, and because we were young, we were able to ride for free. "Wasn't Canada a great country, or what?"

Maybe the streets weren't paved with gold but free bus rides sure helped us out. So we rode around on the busses, went to a big department store, Sears if I am not mistaken, and went to a seaside park to explore and just spend time away from Pier 21. I'll probably will never know if we were able to ride for 'free' maybe the bus driver thought we were with an adult, maybe he knew we were immigrant kids, and trying to communicate he knew would be hopeless.

There was one traumatic experience while we were at the park one day. One of the things we liked to do was jump from rock to rock. This was really not that difficult because the rocks were close together, with little water separating them. But all of a sudden it become much more difficult to clear the water - the rocks were getting farther and farther apart. As I recall the adrenaline rush kicked in and we were able to get back to shore without getting wet feet.

Adrian.

While the Oma and Opa went to visit their sick child(ren) in the hospital, Sya was left in care of an old white Russian who was being deported back to Russia for something to do with his political past, Opa thought; because everyone was carefully checked for their past political involvement in those days before one was allowed entry into Canada. The Russian did have a connection to Stalin; they lived in the same place. But this Russian had a real grudge against Stalin for stealing a loaf of bread from his mother.

Oma had no concern about their daughter being left in the care of this stranger. He loved their baby girl. She was such a good baby, seldom crying, and contentedly playing with her teething ring (throwing it onto her foot again and again) and besides; Oma did her best to see that she changed diapers when they were wet and/or dirty. (This was not so with many of the others staying in the hall; Oma found it quite disgusting that some young children would be diapered with a number of layers to be changed only at the end of the day! PU! This was before Pampers, folks!) Also the Russian couldn't go anywhere anyway because he was under arrest within the confines of the hall till his deportation.

I recently asked Mom and Dad how old this 'old white Russian' was. They said he was probably in his early fifties! And here I had always pictured someone nearing his eighties! He also had a wife with him.

Sya.

Although I enjoyed Halifax, it was good to get the train and carry on..

Neil.

Chapter 14

The Train Ride - Halifax to Edmonton

I have asked mom how she managed with two babies on a train. Those were the days without pampers! Mom had to do the diaper laundry in the train washrooms. Needless to say we were not the cleanest children by the end of the trip.

Margaret.

With all of the children recovered from their illnesses, we were finally able to move on to our destination. Opa had to start working to provide for his family. Sya had now developed the measles, but that was no problem. Oma covered her with a blanket (so no one could see she was

sick) and we moved on. Oma recalls that we finally left Halifax on the train on Monday afternoon, 4:00pm, May 28, 1951. We had lived in the Immigration Hall at Pier 21 since our arrival almost six weeks earlier.

The first train was a steam train, and the coal smoke billowed along the cars. The ride was so rough and jerky, Oma wondered if they would get to Edmonton in one piece. Well, what a time Oma had keeping the family clean! Changing diapers required a bit of work. The diapers were immediately washed in the small train sinks, and then hung to dry around the coach. Needless to say, they were quite yellow by the end of the trip.

Oma tried to keep everyone clean, but the coal dust made everyone look like they had an excessive amount of kolengruis (eye shadow) around their eyes. Traveling as far as Winnipeg was no problem as it was a trainload of immigrants and all had the same soot-stained skin and clothing.

The train ride was constant anticipation of what the next station would look like, and the next bridge, and sightings of other trains. Following rivers, and lakes, were wondrous events. I clearly remember crossing the St. Lawrence over a large bridge in the late evening, towards the lights of Montreal. We switched trains in Montreal, and several other places along the line. Each time there were different (newer or older) railway cars to explore and try out the bathrooms. Mother got really concerned about the coal dust in our hair. I must say that it did not bother me one bit, and never quite understood why it bothered her.

It was best when the cars were not too full and there was a double seat all to yourself to sleep on. I don't think I slept very much, because I remember watching the lights go by quite late into the night and waken up before sunrise almost every day. Some seats were more comfortable to sleep on than others. The landscape of rocks, lakes, and trees of northern Ontario went on forever, and made a deep impression on me. I never drive through that area without reminiscing the train journey of 1951.

Neil.

The trip from Halifax to Edmonton seemed to take forever. The first part of the trip was in an old red (the boxcar colour) train with hard seats. The passenger car we had was close behind the engine. It was a coal burning steam engine that pulled the train. The train car was filled with soot and it was hard for Mom to keep six kids clean.

Adrian.

In Winnipeg, however, we became the lone immigrant family to move onwards and the ground-in dirt made us very obvious to the business and tourist clientele. We were now traveling on a diesel train and no longer subject to the coal dust. Oma said she didn't care how they looked because she didn't know them anyway, and besides she had cute kids.

Here Neil and Ade had their first entrepreneurial experience - entertaining their fellow passengers with Dutch songs. They would be rewarded with nickels and dimes for their musical performances. Once they discovered that it was a paying proposition, they sang all the way to Edmonton.

Their singing careers came to an early end on the completion of the train ride. Neil resumed his singing career with the University of Alberta Mixed Chorus, where he met his future wife, Barb.

Somewhere west of Ottawa, we were in a very new modern railway car that had a smoking section which was separated from the non smoking by a glass wall with a glass door. I was sent to wash my hands for supper, which probably consisted of sandwiches. I don't remember much about the food on the trip nothing to exciting, except that when dad went off the train to find some food, there was always a slight fear he might not make it back on time.

For no particular reason, I remember tearing down the aisle at full speed when WHAM. Looking right through the glass door, I did not notice it. I ran smack up against the heavy glass. The pain made me quite miserable for some time. A lady passenger attempted to sooth me, but it did not help at all.

Neil.

At some point, a couple of days or so into the journey, we switched trains and this one was much more luxurious with padded, more modern adjustable reclining seats. At the ends of the car there was a vestibule and it had a glass door. I don't know who was all chasing who, but being kids we were running up and down the aisle. Poor Neil didn't see the door, and ran into it full speed and got a big bump on his head. The drinking fountain water was from a block of melting ice above the spigot. Some people got some ice from there and put it on his head to reduce the swelling.

The only other event on the train is singing for money. For some reason or other the Canadians on the train enjoyed us immigrants singing

Dutch songs and would give us money when we would sing. It probably helped Mom and Dad buy a loaf or two of bread.” Adrian.

Except for the flat, boring landscape of Saskatchewan (Opa’s description), which Opa could hardly stand, the rest of the train trip was an enjoyable experience. Our train arrived in Edmonton four days later on Friday, June 1, 1951.

The prairies were not as interesting as the lakes and rocks in northern Ontario.

Neil.

A few weeks later we bumped into Herman Groenewegen again, completely by coincidence.

The last leg of my journey was a five day trip by train across the country to Edmonton. I left Halifax a month before and didn’t expect to see your mom and dad again. More than a month went by before I re-connected with the Spronk family.

I was sitting in church (Second CRC was worshipping in the I.O.F. Hall) one Sunday morning waiting for the service to begin when to my great surprise and excitement I saw Neil (the oldest child) walking down the aisle sporting a huge bump on his forehead! The story goes that he had walked into a glass door!

Herman Groenewegen.

Chapter 15

The Immigration Hall - Edmonton

After five days on the train, we arrived in Edmonton on Friday, June 1, 1951. The first night spent at the immigration hall was in a private room on the second floor. However, because another family (the Nautas) had a baby due, we were moved to the third floor to a large communal room. That was okay; we had the place to ourselves - for one day.

Our euphoria was short lived. The next afternoon, a trainload of new immigrants arrived and filled up the hall. It was like an invasion. We found this quite entertaining; especially when the young German couple took all their clothes off when they went to bed and in the same sleeping bag. And then there was the man (Henry Woudstra’s father-in-law) whose feet always a struggle to get access to the end of his bed.

Quite a few families stayed in the immigration hall while trying to find permanent accommodation. It was always a struggle to get access to the kitchen and the washing machine.

New neighbours wouldn't be so sad if they were all from Holland and spoke Dutch, but they weren't - there were German, Italians, Poles, all living together in close quarters and limited ability to communicate.

Oma didn't only have to cope with the loss of privacy, but the inconsideration of her fellow immigrants in the use of the kitchen. Being busy with a large and young family, Oma couldn't always get in the kitchen before others to prepare supper. She would have to wait until the others were done, only to have to wash their dirty dishes before she could proceed with her meal preparation and feeding her family.

We only had one set of clothes so all the wash had to be done while the kids were in bed. Eventually we got two sets-- one we wore while the other was in the wash. Oma was always up quite late doing laundry.

But God is good. He sent Oma encouragement by way of the maintenance man. It was near midnight when he, the maintenance man, met Oma about to do her laundry. It was the only time that worked out for her to do so. The man took pity on her and took all her laundry, which she would have to do by hand; while he had a washer and dryer in his apartment. This was a leap of faith, expecting a stranger to do the laundry, but he must have been an angel. The following morning, he brought Oma all her clothing washed, dried, and nicely folded. Bless his heart, among the difficulties and trials of the communal living of the immigration hall, he lifted a burden and encouraged this one young mother with a kind deed that will always be fondly remembered.

Meanwhile, Opa had employment with Dick Sherwin, the contractor who sponsored our family to come to Canada. Since it was so late in the school year, they hadn't bother suggesting to Neil and Ade to enroll in school. (Neil and Ade were quite capable to look after this sort of thing on their own.)

No doubt living in such crowded quarters with all kinds of people was an education next to none; seeing their mother's enduring patience with those who were inconsiderate and contrasted with the maintenance man must have helped define the difference of the selfish and the selfless individuals.

In Edmonton we stayed in the immigration hall. The memorable things there were watching the trains at the CN station next door, particularly the shiny new black engines with 4 white drive wheels. One day we

followed the airplanes that flew overhead and found the Edmonton Municipal Airport. At the Eaton's department store we discovered escalators.

Neil.

When we came to Edmonton, immigrants stayed at the Immigration Hall which was just east of the CNR station (now the CN Tower). We stayed there a number of weeks until Dad found the family a place to live. Being near the train station was fun. We got to see lots of trains up real close. There was no security like there is now - we were able to walk on the platforms at will. There was also tennis club nearby and we would go and watch the 'rich' people play tennis was considered a sport of the well-to-do in 1951.

Adrian.

End of excerpt...