

The Children of Outsiders: Insights into an Immigration

By Norman J. Kansfield



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South Holland, Illinois, established in 1847, had changed very little by 1940, when six-month-old Norman Kansfield and his parents moved there. This community of long-remembered Dutch customs and values provided the atmosphere for Norm's coming of age.

This atmosphere and education at Hope College (A.B., 1962), Western Theological Seminary (B.D., 1965), Union Theological Seminary, NYC (S.T.M., 1967) and the University of Chicago (A.M., 1970 and Ph.D., 1981) have made Norman a theologian who seeks to help persons understand that God is not angry with people, but truly, deeply loves us.

Norm began his ministry in Astoria (Borough of Queens, NYC) and continued in the Chicago suburbs of Berwyn and Riverdale. He served as seminary librarian and faculty member at Western Theological Seminary and at the Colgate Rochester Divinity School, and as President of the New Brunswick Theological Seminary. In retirement, he was Senior Scholar in Residence in the Theological School of Drew University. Norm's current ministry is as Resident Theologian for the Zion United Church of Christ in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania.

Norm is privileged to be the husband of Mary Klein Kansfield. They have two children and have been members of the Stroudsburg Area Torch Club since 2007.

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Some preachers just can't work without a text. For the telling of this tale, I choose Exodus 22:21: "God told the people of Israel: 'You shall not wrong a foreigner or oppress him/her in any way, because you were foreigners yourself in the land of Egypt.'"

God wanted God's people to remember what it felt like to be an "outsider", and to allow that awareness to form their attitude toward the "outsiders" present among them. God's word of insight to God's people continues to have relevance today. The story that I now tell makes clear how important it is to remember God's command not to oppress the stranger.

This story is about a small group of Dutch immigrants and the development of their settlement in America. In the decade between 1847 and 1856, a total of 44 individuals or families arrived from the Netherlands and settled along the banks of the Little Calumet River, twenty miles south of the center of Chicago (Cook 51). The community they established was at first called "Lage Prairie"—"Low Prairie"—but was later renamed "South Holland." These Hollanders were part of a huge wave of emigration from the Netherlands, occasioned mostly by a series of new laws affecting church life, taxation, and personal freedom. The international potato blight and the resulting downturn in economic prosperity also played an important role (Cook 35-39).

Most of the Netherlanders emigrating during this period intended to come to America. It was typical for these folks, while still in the

Netherlands, to form a group, headed by a clergyman, and to see their venture as having religious purpose. They intended to be a "Kolonie," sticking together and working together to establish a solid settlement in the United States. Their integration into the fabric of American life was not high among their goals. The establishment of the city of Holland, Michigan was the largest and most successful of these ventures (Lucas 87-150).

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The settlers of South Holland were notably different. While many of them traveled together from the Netherlands to the United States, they lacked any organization or sense of banding together. They came without a minister as their leader. For the most part, the bond between them was formed dur-

ing the forty- to fifty-day sea voyage. Most of them arrived as single-family units and joined themselves to the community by the purchase of land in the area.

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The first Dutch to immigrate to the Chicago area arrived in 1846 or 1847 (Swierenga 12). They settled in the city itself—then a thriving metropolis with a population of about 29,000 persons (“Chicago Growth”). In 1847, a small group ventured about twelve miles south of the city and established a settlement at first called “Hooge Prairie” (“High Prairie”), later “North Holland”, and finally “Roseland” (Swierenga 2). It was also in 1847 that the first of the South Hollanders worked their way eight miles further south, to the shores of the Little Calumet River, founding “Lage Prairie” (“Low Prairie”), which became “South Holland”, both names marking the relationship to the earlier settlement to the north (*100 Years* 15). The settle-

ment to the north very much looked down its nose at those who settled South Holland, referring to South Holland as “t Sloot”—“the Ditch”—because of the large number of drainage ditches the Dutch had to dig to drain their farmland. Whoever would want to live in a Ditch?

Among the South Holland settlers were persons who in the Netherlands had flourished as bakers, craftsmen, grocers, and other such lower-middle class entrepreneurs. But in their new environment, all persons began their American experience as farmers. Land was cheap, 75 cents to \$1.25 per acre (Cook 46). And farming was the quickest way to assure one’s family had food to eat.

For the first several years, as prairie grass “as tall as a person” was broken up to provide rich farmland, almost all effort was focused merely on supporting one’s own family. Once that was secured, and as the new settlement had need, individuals began to return to the practice of what had been their trade or business in the Netherlands. Two general stores, a blacksmith shop, and a bakery soon joined the church building on the community’s main street, “the Chicago Road,” now called “South Park Avenue” (Cook 53, 56).

Even though life was harsh, and most years saw very little added to the net worth of the settlers, these immigrants appear to have been profoundly grateful to the American nation for the opportunities it offered to them. After only two years in America, Marie Broeks Arendse (Mrs. Cornelis Arendse) returned to the Netherlands expressly in order to acquaint family and friends personally with the opportunities of life in America (*100 Years* 64). Most of the men in the settlement quickly went through the two-step, five-year process to become naturalized citizens. As early as 1856, settlers were voting in elections. They began by voting as Democrats, but by 1860,

swayed mostly by their concern for abolition, they began to vote Republican.¹

Two residents of the immigrant community, Jan Ton and his wife Aagje, were so moved by the plight of slaves that they established their home, on the north side of the settlement, as a station on the Underground Railway (Lucas 546). In so small a settlement, this meant that everyone was complicit in their act. Two sons of the community served as soldiers in the army of the North during the Civil War (*100 Years* 29). Both returned safely home after combat. In 1868, the first church offering for “Negro education” was taken (*100 Years* 125).

In just such ways, South Holland’s immigrant citizens generally sought to demonstrate their gratitude for the rights and privileges of the citizenship they enjoyed and to assure that those same rights and privileges were shared by all. As years went by, of course, the community did not always live up to this ideal. Occasionally these same citizens or their children pulled up a curtain around their community and ignored issues that demanded public attention. Take, for example, the three great railroad strikes that threatened to paralyze the nation. By 1880, four railroads ran through the village.² South Hollanders made very little use of them, choosing instead to haul the produce of their farms by farm wagons to the South Water Street Market in Chicago, a four-hour trip in each direction. So, during the great railroad strikes of 1877, 1922, and 1946, South Holland showed almost no concern.

Sometimes, anxiety regarding the profitability of their farms appears to have been all-consuming. In the 1920s, Edna Ferber lived in the community while she did research for her 1924 novel *So Big*.³ In that Pulitzer Prize winning work, she carefully documented life on a South Holland farm, depicting a small-minded society that

did not at all value the arts, and that demeaned, humiliated, and disgraced those who did.

On the other hand, the Great Depression hit South Holland as hard as it hit other communities, but there was in South Holland so strong a commitment to community that it rose above most of the disasters that befell other farming towns. The South Holland Trust and Savings Bank, for example, never closed during the Bank Panic. This allowed the bank for years to advertize itself as “the oldest bank in Cook County” (Cook 81).

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In the era just before World War II, the nature of agriculture began to change. It was no longer possible for the farmers with twenty to forty acres to make a living by taking their produce to the market in Chicago. When Libby, McNeill, and Libby built a tomato processing plant in Blue Island,

South Hollanders began to truck tomatoes the seven miles to the plant. Similarly, the raising of sugar beets became a profitable cash crop, the beets being transported to sugar processing plants by rail. And, in 1892, the raising of onion sets was begun. (Onion sets are the small, first-year onion plants from which large onions are grown in a second year.) By 1950, South Holland could justifiably call itself the “Onion Set Capital of the World.”⁴ These three cash crops—tomatoes, sugar beets, and onion sets—transformed agriculture in South Holland.

These crops required, among other things, the use of migrant farm labor. This marks a point at which the ancient word about how one was to treat an outsider should have had special relevance. Migrant Mexicans flooded South Holland each summer. The Dutch recognized that these folks needed adequate housing. Some farmers remembered their own origins as migrants and provided good housing. Others did not recall their roots and provided only shacks and hovels. In 1943, the First Reformed Church established a Spanish-language Sunday School for the children of the Mexican migrants (*100 Years* 133). This occurred at a time when worship in the First Reformed Church was still conducted almost entirely in Dutch!⁵ The Hollanders recognized the high family values held by the Mexicans and encouraged many of them to stay on as year-round residents.

It was also during the 1940s that Chicago’s population growth, combined with a certain amount of “white flight,” inspired considerable real estate development in and around South Holland. In East Harvey (just at South Holland’s western border), two new streets of houses were developed and quickly sold. This brought new students to Public School District 151, of which South Holland was a part. The district had two elementary schools, Coolidge School in the village of

Phoenix and, in South Holland itself, Roosevelt School (named for the “good” Roosevelt—Theodore—of course). Phoenix had a population that included a large number of African Americans, as did Coolidge School. Roosevelt School, like South Holland, was all white. The students from the new area of development in East Harvey were all white. This resulted, for years, in the Harvey students being bused past the mixed-race Coolidge School in order to attend classes in the all-white Roosevelt School (Van Dam 33).

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During this era, South Holland’s village government worked strenuously to preserve its traditional view of the community. Village Board members were busy writing laws that would assure that no businesses would be open on Sundays, that alcoholic beverages would not be sold within the village, and that no rental properties would dilute its housing stock. Nevertheless, the Phoenix-South Holland border continued to present occasions of concern regarding African-Americans actually “moving into” South Holland. In 1960, a home at the distant geographic edge of South Holland was intentionally lit on fire with the purpose of destroying it rather than allow an African American family to move into it. One of the village’s high-ranking officials died as result of his involvement in this act of arson. If

my memory is correct, this event was never publically acknowledged in any way.⁶ Clearly, the Old Testament word about how to treat outsiders was sadly unheeded in this event.

In 1969, the situation in School District 151 was finally described legally and publically as segregation. This became the first federal desegregation case in the north. On July 7, 1968, Judge Julius Hoffman of the United States District Court, Northern District of Illinois, Eastern Division, ordered that the program of busing be instantly discontinued, and that the two schools within District 151 be fully and immediately integrated. This order aroused some protest and was appealed, but ultimately the issue of integration became the new reality within South Holland (Van Dam 33).

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The population of the village continued to grow. The 3,247 residents in the village in 1950 were almost all descendants of the original settlers. By 1960, the population had grown to 10,412,

with most of the additional residents coming to the community as a result of white-flight from the Englewood and Roseland areas of Chicago. The 2010 census indicated that 22,030 persons were resident within South Holland; that figure may be slightly higher now. The newest arrivals within the community are predominantly African American, and at the present time the community is 51% black.

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Most of those who have been longest resident in South Holland have continued to reside within the village, demonstrating amazing perseverance in the face of the massive changes the community has experienced. There is still a Tulip Festival each Spring, celebrating the village's Dutch origins, even though Miss South Holland is now most likely to be African American or Hispanic. The village's mayor is Don DeGraff, a fifth-generation descendent of Wouter DeGraaf, who settled in the community in 1856. But the Village Board and most of the village offices are held in equal number by members of old South Holland families and by African Americans.⁷

The number of persons within this study is far too small for scientific analysis, but the history of South Holland suggests not only that immigrants can contribute unique insights into living out the American dream of the melting pot, but also that, as in the Lord's word to the children of Israel so long ago, there is strength and wisdom in treating newcomers in a spirit that is consistent with the history of our own predecessors.

Notes

1 Cook, *South Holland*, 62-63; Lucas, *Netherlanders*, 346-347. By the Census of 1870, the first to report such data, exactly half of all male Dutch immigrants were naturalized citizens. By 1900 this figure had risen to 80%.

2 The Illinois Central in 1860; the Panhandle Railroad (Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Chicago, & St. Louis railroad) in 1866; the Chicago and Eastern Illinois in 1871 (with a freight depot and station in South Holland); and the Grand Trunk in 1879.

3 This best-selling novel was first published in 1924 by Doubleday, New York. South Hollanders were generally not very pleased by the characterization.

4 Cook, *South Holland*, 83. Cook reports top production at more than 1,500,000,000 pounds of onion sets per year.

5 See *100 Years*. Women first obtained the right to vote in congregational meetings in 1942. One has to wonder how much this may have given rise to the concern for the Mexican children.

6 As is easily understood, information about the fire and death was totally suppressed. However, my father was an officer in the volunteer fire department at the time, and sorrowfully detailed this sordid event to our family.

7 See the South Holland website, www.southholland.org.

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