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# Pictures of the Dead

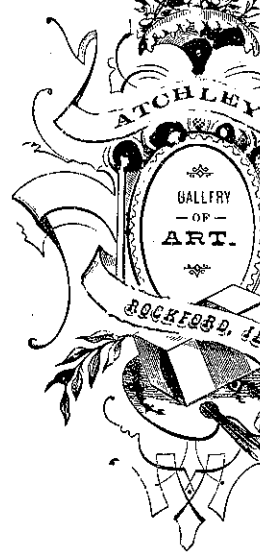
by Rob Kroes

In almost all historical libraries and archives, researchers encounter many photo portraits of unidentified persons. The older pictures, usually studio photos, are lettered ornately with the studio's name, and the subjects, dressed formally for the occasion, are pictured against backgrounds that suggest opulence — a brief identification with the trappings of the wealthy. Who, one wonders, did these immigrants intend to impress — relatives in homelands such as the Netherlands, or successive generations who would examine these likenesses to discover faces and features like their own? We will never know.

What we do know is that the early immigrant photographs belong to an era and a genre of studio portraiture in which photography was made to create illusions. The new medium of mechanical reproduction made it possible for the not-so-rich to be pictured in an aura of ease, refinement, and culture that only the wealthy could afford in the heyday of painting. Costumes, props, and backdrops were all provided by the studio. Willingly the sitters subjected

themselves to stage directions that had arranged family paintings ever since the seventeenth century. The mold of self-presentation was definitely patriarchal, though it came in two varieties. When husband and wife had their photograph taken, the husband was usually seated with his wife standing beside him. An extreme version of this arrangement is a photograph of an old woman standing beside an empty chair. She is a widow. But in a sense the dead husband is still there, defining her role and position. Occasionally, though, a woman was seated, with the husband standing by her side, the good provider and protector. In studio portraits of parents and their children, the

*Jakie Snyder 6 yrs old*  
*Eda Snyder 4 yrs old*



307 & 309 West State Str



Snyder children, Rockford, IL

parents were usually seated with the children standing around them.

If these photographs show a mixture of reality and fiction, it was not necessarily one consciously fabricated to mislead friends and

*This article by Rob Kroes is based on a longer contribution to a volume of essays, American Photographs in Europe (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1994). Dr. Rob Kroes heads the Netherlands American Studies Association in Amsterdam. This shorter version was prepared by H. Brinks, editor of Origins.*



*Husband standing, unidentified, Gillett Studio, 122 Monroe Street, Grand Rapids, MI.*

relatives back in the mother country. The code underlying this particular genre of studio photography was widely known: this was what people in Europe and America expected portraits to look like. The fact that people could have their pictures taken at all was proof not only that they could afford this relative luxury but also that even in their pioneer existence they could enjoy the amenities of a modern technical civilization. Studio photography was never far behind the frontier. Many photographs were taken in small towns all across the United States. Though a visit to a photographer may have taken the immigrants a day trip to the nearest small town, the message was clear: civilization was never far away. There was not a life in a bleak wilderness.

In general, whether or not the

intended message was an overstatement, photographs were accompanied by words, either scribbled on the backs of the pictures or in accompanying letters. Written messages served to add to the photographic information, contextualizing it by giving names, ages, color of eyes or hair, and by referring to the occasion for the photo, such as a baptism or a wedding anniversary. These details provided the recipients with — literally — a closer look at their distant relatives and friends. Words were meant to add focus to the photographic image, yet they could only function within the wider unspoken context of kinship or friendship.

Outsiders, strangers to such intimate relationships, could never hope to get the full

message. And later observers, such as students of immigration history, are at even greater disadvantage: the passing of time and of generations has filtered if not erased family recollections, has caused the loss of letters and photographs, has severed the links that connected them meaningfully to one another. There has been a massive loss of vital context. We are left with the mere fragments of what once was a meaningful and ongoing communication across the Atlantic.

Only the aged with persisting memories can bring the sitters back to life. I was reminded of this, when reading a story by

James Schaap, a Dutch-American author.<sup>1</sup>

The story tells us of a young man who had come to see his grandmother on her deathbed. He remembers, "Nameless faces lined the walls, and an old Dutch couple peered at me from an ornate oval frame hung above the headboard. I always loved that room, for there was excitement here, the fascination of experiences long past. I loved to sneak in as a boy, to sit alone on the bed and look around." Now, for the first time, he is not alone in this room. In her final days, his grandmother tells him about the past, before it is too late, about "the nameless faces" on the wall, her father and mother. "What was your mother like, Grandma? Like you?" Slowly, in answer to his queries, she brings the past back to life, telling a



*Wife standing, unidentified, Van Koevering Studio, Zeeland, MI.*

story that she had kept to herself all along, a story about a disastrous fire on board an immigrant ship crossing Lake Michigan en route to Sheboygan.\* Her father had died fighting the fire; her mother had died looking for one of her daughters. The portrait of his grandmother's parents comes to life: "I glanced at the portrait. I had seen it often before. It had come from Grandma's uncle in Holland. He was seated on a chair as big as a throne, his wife's hand rested on his shoulder as she stood soberly at his side." As his grandmother unfolds the drama of her parents' death, the grandson-narrator keeps looking up at the picture. "I tried to imagine [them] as Grandma spoke," he says. They are for him no longer nameless faces. The words of his grandmother have given them life and meaning.

When I was reading the story, there was a strange sense of *deja vu*, of something half-forgotten pushing to resurface. Suddenly, there it was. In a book by a Dutch amateur historian who pieces together the emigration histories of his forebears, reference is made to the same tragic event on Lake Michigan. I had heard the story before and had gone through the same emotions the young man in Schaap's story went through as he listened to his grandma. I had also been looking at photographs of the author's relatives and friends who had been in the fire, which are reproduced in the book. In his act of filial piety, he manages to draw outsiders like me into a circle where "nameless faces"

\*For a recent account of this "Phoenix Disaster" see *Origins*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 16-23.



Wife and husband, both standing, unidentified, Reuvers Studio, Pella, IA.

are being restored to their place in history through stories told by their distant offspring.<sup>2</sup>

In the exchanges between immigrants and their relatives and friends in the home country, photographs acquired their full meaning and sense only in a context of written words, but with the passage of time the connection between photographs and commentary on them is often severed. Either we find photographs that time has cut loose from their accompanying annotations, or we find only the annotation, cryptic references in letters to pictures that originally must have been enclosed. Currently many people have begun to collect and order what is left of the communications of their relatives across the Atlantic. They have sorted out letters; they have made copies available to

official immigration archives in their home countries or in the United States. But more often than not these are the mere fragments of exchanges that went on for years if not decades.

One of the tasks that immigration research has set itself is archival — bringing together as many of these fragments as possible. And the results have been impressive.

Hundreds of immigrant letters have been collected, ordered, and made available for immigration research. Large selections have been published in the United States and in the main countries of emigration in Europe.<sup>3</sup> Larger collections are available in immigration archives in all those countries. Yet many of the archives are still as chaotic as before. Successful search still depends too much on

serendipity; yet researchers in the field keep stumbling upon previously unmined treasures. No single researcher can claim to have seen it all, or even to have gone over a representative sample. But there is always the temptation to come up with some tentative generalizations. So, with all due disclaimers, let me give some general impressions before I go into greater detail.

My own work in immigration history has been mostly concerned with Dutch immigrants in the United States and Canada.<sup>4</sup> In the course of my research I have come upon hundreds, if not thousands, of letters, and there are new finds all the time. On that basis, and also on the basis of such collections of letters as have been published in other countries, it seems safe to say that photographic

information was not commonly passed between families. Entire exchanges between family members, even if they went on for decades, have no reference at all to photographs. A selection of quotations from Dutch-immigrant letters published by Herbert J. Brinks,<sup>5</sup> contains no mention of photographs.\* And only few of the many photographic illustrations in the book are clear cases of pictures sent home to the mother country. There is one example of those stilted studio photographs that were described above as a genre. In it we see husband and wife, the man sitting, the woman standing by his side, both looking as if they have just swallowed a broomstick. The caption, in quotation



*Unidentified family portrait.*

marks, reads, "In this letter I send you my portrait and that of my husband. I can also send you the children, but then it may be a little too heavy." Another picture, from about 1906, is taken outdoors, on an unpaved street, with a group of people posing alongside a hearse. According to the legend, the photograph was taken on the occasion of the burial of a young immigrant in Grand Rapids and was intended for his mother in the Netherlands. The photograph serves as documentary reportage, capturing one of life's irreversible moments.

What exactly is the communicative value and function of the photographs we do find mentioned in letters? Let us consider a few examples. For the very early period in the history of photography I have one set of letters, exchanged between members of the Te Selle family and ranging in time

\* The most recent of Brinks's books, *Dutch American Voices: Letters from the United States, 1850-1930* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1995) contains dozens of references to portraits and photos.

from 1865 to 1911. The earliest mention of a photograph is in a letter from 1869, and it is scribbled in the margin almost as an afterthought: "Here is a protrait [sic] of our little Dela. She is now eleven months old. She sits on a chair, but it was difficult to keep her still for so long." Another note in the margin adds this: "I took the letter to the post office but then it was too heavy. I will send the portrait with G. Lammers." In a letter sent from Winterswijk in the Netherlands in 1873 to relatives who also lived in the Netherlands, there were two enclosures: a letter from an elderly uncle in America and his photograph. In the accompanying note we read, "So I send you this letter, and also the portrait, so you can see him on it, and also read in this letter how he is doing. Also you can perhaps send it to your other sister, who would also like to have it and see it." In June 1873 the same old uncle writes a long letter, again from Holland, Sheboygan Country, Wisconsin. Following a pious dissertation — "And Blessed are

we if we hear, do and maintain what God says in his word. But also we know that there is another, who is called Devil, Satan, Old Snake, the Seducer, Lord of Darkness, God of this, our century, . . ." — there are a few bits of news about a granddaughter marrying and about the weather. And then there is this line: "Also I feel the urge to send you the portrait of my Deceased Wife; we had only one portrait of my wife, and this very same one we had duplicated, which we now send you." Again his nephew in the Netherlands passes the letter and the portrait on to his uncle's sister and brother-in-law. "The portrait is yours to keep," he adds.

In 1883 there is a reference to a different kind of visual information, not a portrait of a family member, but a picture of a wind-driven water pump, with this commentary: "This autumn we had a water wind pump put on our well. Now we don't have to draw the water for the cattle ourselves anymore. It cost a hundred dollars. Here on this little print you



see its picture." Then, in a letter of October 1892, there is the anxious query for an acknowledgement of receipt: "On February 2 this year I have sent all the potrets [sic] of my children and of my son-in-law with the request to write back soon, but then later on we got a letter from you which made me conclude that you hadn't received it: Then I have done it again once more, but if they have gone lost again at sea, I don't know." Apparently the enclosure of photographs must have been an act of great significance, worthy of repeated reference and the cause of worried inquiry.

This one collection of thirty-five letters, spanning a total of forty-seven years, is fairly representative of other such correspondences. The references to photographs are few, and of those most relate to portraits. Apparently, the main informative function of photographic enclosures was to maintain a sense of visual familiarity

among family members in spite of geographic distance. This sense is vividly evoked in a letter sent from Santa Monica, California, to Leeuwarden in the Dutch province of Friesland: "Dear nephew, I have received in good order the photographs that were passed on to me from Yakima. After I had received your letter I looked forward eagerly to seeing them, and so, as you can understand, it made an unusual impression on me to see a likeness<sup>6</sup> of my next of kin. After such a long absence. Your mother I could not recognize as the sister which I had pictured in my memory. Her appearance, it seemed to me, had changed. Your father seemed to me more or less the same as I remembered him. A little older but the same jovial person. I value the possession of the photographs and thank you for the interest and 'attention to send them *tot mij*.'"<sup>7</sup>

Pictures of inanimate matter, be it the natural scene, machinery (like the

windmill referred to above), or the built-up environment, figure hardly at all in immigrant letters. They are more likely to show up in business-related correspondence or publications. For example, the *Noord-Amerikaansche Hypotheekbank* (North American Mortgage Bank), operating from Leeuwarden, the capital of Friesland, with representatives in Dutch immigration centers like North Yakima, Washington, and Bozeman, Montana, produced an advertisement folder with two photographs and the following two legends: "Picking apples in one of the valleys in Washington" and "Harvest and threshing combine at work in Eastern Washington." It also gave the names of its two representatives in the United States. People looked at such visual information with different eyes, with a view to business opportunity and migration possibilities. And, of course, there were many channels conveying precisely such information:



Schaapman farm, Ripon, CA, ca. 1915.

shipping lines, land-development corporations, migration societies. But that was not the information that people expected to be carried by the much more private lines of communication that connected friends and family members across the Atlantic.

Clearly, in the early years both of the history of photography and of large-scale Dutch migration, economic considerations affected the selective nature of photographic information. Having portraits made and sending them across the ocean was relatively costly. A letter from Michigan City, Indiana, dated June 5, 1894, is quite explicit on this point: "Had we not had such a bad time, we would have had our pictures taken this summer, but now this will have to wait a while." Yet, economic means permitting, the first priority in the exchange of pictures was family portraits rather than any other topic of visual information. Our same correspondent, in a letter sent from Holland, Michigan, in the year 1900, is exultant: "Dear Brother and Sister, with joy and gratitude we received your letter with portrait. We were overjoyed, for now we could behold your family from afar: of Freerk we could not very well see that it werst thou. It is eight years hence since we saw each other."

Further evidence that this was the favorite subject of photographic information comes from the later period, when price was no longer a limiting factor. When immigrants were better off, following their years of hardship, and when photography itself had come within reach of the general public, family pictures were still by far the leading genre. Rather than economics it was now the technology of the early amateur cameras that set the constraints. Exposure time practically prevented indoor photography. But even outdoors the light was not always suffi-

cient: "Last Sunday we have taken pictures of the children. We would take a few more the next Sunday, but it was a dark day, so we have to wait until the following Sunday. As soon as they are ready, we will send them to you. Monica is quite a girl already, and Anna comes along nicely."

Photography had moved outside the confines of the studio and into the private realm of the family garden. If the focus was still on family members, explanatory notes now increasingly referred to details of the setting as well, such as "our house," "our front porch," "our garden patch." One legend reads, "This is our house; we built it." But still the eyes of the recipients of such pictures set most eagerly on the human image. Tiny details of physical appearance were added in writing or commented on in letters from the home front. Color of hair and eyes, signs of aging, and family resemblances were standard topics in the exchanges accompanying this photographic communication. Photographs went from hand to hand among family members at the receiving end. "Dear cousin . . . have you received the portrait already of the little sisters? We sent six to Aunt Klaasje; if you don't have them yet you can expect them every day now. Can you tell who they resemble? Not me. That much I can see myself." Or, in a letter from Chicago, written in the late 1920s by an American daughter-in-law married to a Dutch immi-



Wedding of Catherine Fiekema De Jong, 1931, Doon, IA.

grant: "You all look so good on the picture, older of course, but aren't we all getting older every day. Mother is much thinner, but Dad almost looks the same except for the gray hair."

In this later age of the amateur snapshot there is a greater informality in the way people have themselves represented. People in their everyday clothes doing little chores around the house are a common theme (for example, "Father feeding the chickens"). Yet there are clear echoes of earlier conventions of self-representation. Often people still dress up for the occasion and stiffly pose for the photograph. The stagings may be vaguely remembered and awkwardly

executed, yet in the family groupings on the front porch we recognize the prescriptions and styles of self-representation that dominated in the era of the studio photograph.

When we try to fathom the role played by family photographs, we should never forget the importance of context. The stories told by these highly private photographs, stored by immigrant families, and circulated along with their letters among friends and relatives in their mother countries were always personal testimony to the sobering realities of immigrant life. They offered as much a constructed, retouched, and manipulated view of life in America as the pictures that circulated in the public realm. Yet they served a totally different psychological purpose. They could shore up the hopes and spirits of immigrants at times when their great expectations threatened to collapse.

In "Sign of a Promise," the title story of the James C. Schaap collection,<sup>8</sup> there is a very moving vignette



*Anthony De Groot family, Chicago, Heights, IL.*

that beautifully illustrates this role and the place of private photographs in the life of immigrants. The author

takes us to the pioneer house of a Dutch-American family struggling to survive on the prairie frontier in Northwestern Iowa. They had recently moved there in the restless search for success that had earlier taken them to Wisconsin and Minnesota. They are alone, the first in their part of the world to break the prairie soil. It had been raining for days, and the result of days of back-breaking work had been washed away. The woman stands behind the window, looking out. "And the sky, spewing incessant rain, seemed to combine with the desert of grass to destroy whoever, whatever tried to exist there. The endless miles of prairie seem to her a Godless expanse, and all the prayers she had learned as a child, no matter how loudly she could cry them to the heavens, could not bring her any closer to the God she had known in the old country. This land was so wide, so vast, so everlasting, that she felt her best prayers rise in futility . . . to a God who had never



*Johannes Schaapman — feeding chickens.*



mind this region of creation." Forlorn and forsaken, forgotten by a God who is normally the last hope and refuge for people of her religious background, the woman is in utter despair. "She turned from the window and looked back to the family portrait that hung on the mud wall. It had been taken in Wisconsin. She had wanted it immediately after their arrival in America to send to her parents in Holland, for she knew their concern and felt that they would be reassured by the clean faces and the Sunday clothes of the children. They knew very little of America. Some of the stories they had heard were like those of the land of Canaan — a land most bountiful, full of opportunity. But others were fearful, accounts of drought, storms, savages, violence, strange and horrid stories of people who didn't know the Lord. The family picture had helped, she knew, for it showed them tidy and happy, wearing the smiles that reflected the hopes and jubilation of a life filled with new opportunities. She knew they (her

parents) would like it, for she liked it. This was the way she imagined things."

The last line is amazingly perceptive. It catches the meaning of photographs that immigrants had taken of themselves, presenting an ideal view of themselves to family members in the old country, but, more importantly, to themselves as well. Family photographs in that sense are not so much pictures of the present or records of the past; they are visions of the future. They document the hopes and anticipations of immigrants as they themselves harbored them.

For a variety of reasons, then, photographs have played their role as a source of private information, for the earlier immigrant families as much as for those who left the Netherlands by the tens of thousands in the postwar period. Immigration began to taper off in the later 1950s, at precisely the time when the Dutch national economy began to gather steam. With prosperity coming to the mother country, and technological

revolution changing international travel, a final twist occurred in the role of photography as a means of private communication: The amateur historians of family migration who enthusiastically collected family information from letters and photographs, who typed out the letters and arranged the photographs neatly in albums were able to rejoin family ties while vacationing in Europe or America. Tourists have traveled in both directions and when they succeeded they memorialized their achievements with photography. The same medium that had kept earlier generations in touch. Snapshots of family reunions join the old photos and in many cases, nameless faces photographed a century ago acquire names, dates and other vital statistics. §



*Corn binding, Reinder Van Til, ca. 1930, Highland, IN.*



Cross stitch of the Antvelink family tree.

Antvelink family, reunited in 1981 in Rekken, Gelderland. From the USA — Alan Watterson and Marybeth Watterson with 3rd and 4th cousins of the Antvelink family. Photographer: Elaine Watterson.

Endnotes

1. James C. Schaap, "The Heritage of These Many Years," in *Sign of a Promise and Other Stories*. Sioux Center, Iowa: Dordt College Press, 1979, pp. 248ff.
2. Willem Wilterdink, *Winterswijse pioniers in Amerika*. Winterswijk: Vereniging 'Het Museum,' 1990, pp. 32ff.
3. The largest recent collection of letters to be published is W. Helbich, W.D. Kamphoefner, U. Sommer, eds., *Briefe aus Amerika: Deutsche Auswanderer geschrieben aus der neuen Welt, 1830-1930*. Munchen: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1988.
4. See, e.g., my *The Persistence of Ethnicity: Dutch Calvinist Pioneers in Amsterdam, Montana*. Urbana/Champaign and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1992.
5. Herbert J. Brinks, *Schrijff spoedig*

terug: *Brieven van immigranten in Amerika, 1847-1920*. The Hague: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 1978; also available in an English translation: *Write Back Soon: Letters from Immigrants in America*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: CRC Publications, 1986.

6. The writer uses the Dutch word *lijkenis*, which is an unusual synonym for "portrait."

7. I have used inverted commas for those passages that were written in English. The continued use of Dutch, though, shows the impact of English upon the writer after so many years as an immigrant in the United States. The letter was written by one of two Tacoma sisters from Friesland.

8. Schaap, pp. 61-81.