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# Pro Rege

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Volume 32  
Number 2 *Fine Arts Issue 2003*

Article 3

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December 2003

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### Recommended Citation

Schaap, James C. (2003) "Van De Stroets of Settlers Township," *Pro Rege*:  
Vol. 32: No. 2, 8 - 9.  
Available at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol32/iss2/3](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol32/iss2/3)

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# The Van De Stroets of Settlers Township

James C. Schaap

When white settlers moved into northwest Iowa in the late 19th century, they squared the landscape with criss-crossing mud roads that even today, from a few hundred feet up, make the broad, flat land look like a grid. Of the 23 townships of Sioux County, 19 are perfectly square.

But the Big Sioux River doesn't give a hoot about straight lines, and the townships at the county's western edge are, as a result, jagged as sin. If that's true, the worst of sinners is Settlers Township, in the county's far northwest corner. On any county map you can find, four-square Sioux Township, Settlers's immediate neighbor to the east, makes Settlers look like something the dog dragged up: a jagged, upside-down, barnacled fish hook of a township, whose heart is seemingly carved out because long ago the Big Sioux decided to take a sharp left once it entered Sioux County, Iowa.

About a mile in, the river turns west, grabbing an extra half section or so of what would otherwise be good South Dakota land. Then it snakes southeast for a mile, bobs and weaves a little, then, remarkably, sets a course nearly straight east for almost four miles, before turning south once more, like a good river. What it creates thereby is something of a peninsula of Sioux County land, a thumb of rolling bluffs and river bottom unique to the county, a peninsula we might just call Van De Stroet Peninsula.

The 1908 Sioux County Atlas doesn't list John Van De Stroet among the property owners of Settlers Township. In fact, it doesn't list many Dutch names at all. Hundreds of Dutch names are printed in on the flat townships farther east, where the only hills are the ones that appear, mirage-like, a long way off — get up to them and they're gone. It makes sense that Dutch immigrants, perfectly accustomed to perfectly flat land, would have felt at home on a ripple-less landscape.

The original settlers of Settlers Township weren't Vander Brinks; they were Swansens and Jensens, Christiansens and Thormodsgaards, probably because the original settlers of Settlers took one look at the bluffs and the river valley and saw home—Norway, Sweden.

But today it's different. Take a hike up to that beautiful bluff that runs along the Big Sioux's left-hand turn; pick up a dandelion or a milkweed from pasture ground, and let the seeds fly hither and yon from that spot, a hundred feet above the river bottom. Even if those seeds catch a blustery updraft, most of them will likely come to earth on Van De Stroet land.

In the year 1920, when he was sixteen years old, John Van De Stroet, with a friend, left the Netherlands and came to America. Why? Because, as he told his son Henry, when he was 13, too often he ate the lunch out of his bucket as he walked to school in the morning, not simply because he was as hungry as any other 13-year-old boy, but because, for him and his family, hunger, back then, had become a way of life. Like hundreds, even thousands, of Sioux County settlers of all ethnic and racial backgrounds, John Van De Stroet thought America was a place there would be no more hunger.

Just ten years after arriving, he was farming two places in Settlers Township and he had a wife, Effie Van Grootheest, whom he'd found just across the section and had married in the Canton courthouse in 1922. Ask their descendants to see a picture of those handsome newlyweds. Put John in a tux, lower Effie's neckline a bit, toss in a little mousse, and even today the two of them would hold their own in *Brides* magazine.

Henry, their first child, was born in 1929, at just about the time when the cattle his father raised on the peninsula brought only six cents a pound. But John Van De Stroet knew poverty and he knew hard work. Mid-Depression, he bought himself a half section of land, a mile west and a bit north of Fairview, a place the Van De Stroets now call "the home place," at \$40 an acre. Of that half section, 140 acres was work ground, the rest all bluffs and pastures, a chunk of land that was likely a good deal cheaper, back then, than the flat land in the middle of the county. But even today, if you stand somewhere out on that land or just pass it on your way to Canton, you know that in Sioux County the Van De Stroet peninsula has no rival in sheer beauty.

Up and down the county's western boundary, the Big Sioux's meandering long ago created hills and bluffs that suggest the buffalo commons of the Great Plains. That a farmer, even today, can make more money off the flat land east of the valley is almost a given. But the fluid lines of those bluffs and hills

are gracious and even feminine, like a woman lying on her side. The valley of the Big Sioux, the Van De Stroet peninsula, is like nothing else in the county. It's simply gorgeous.

John Van De Stroet, his son Henry says, used to tell him that there was a time when he made more money off those bluffs than he did on work land. In fact, those bluffs may have saved the farm. When, mid-Depression, the drought meant there was no feed to be grown or purchased, John let his sheep graze those bluffs, where they made it through the hard times by eating buck brush. When things got even worse, he shooed his hogs up there too, where they could munch acorns from the groves of burr oak that run like a unruly moustache through those hills. When other farmers were dumping livestock, those beautiful bluffs saved the Van De Stroet operation.

After the seventh grade, Henry put his pony and buggy away and quit school because there wasn't enough money to keep the hired man or the half-time help his father had employed when times weren't so bad. "Well, Henry," his father told him, "now you'll just have to work hard as two men," but he said it in the Dutch language, of course.

And Henry did. For most of his life, in fact, Henry's shoulder has carried a callous the size of an orange from lugging feed baskets in endless repetition from the corn crib to the cattle shed to feed the livestock. Today, the county social services might well call that "abuse"; back then, Henry would say, it was simply survival. Besides, then as now, Henry claims he always loved livestock. What's more, through those grueling days of lugging feed, his father wasn't cracking a whip or sitting in town drinking coffee; John Van De Stroet was at work right beside him.

To Henry, the hills hold the story of his own great love. In the late 40s, Antonia Bronkhorst, then just eighteen, immigrated to Siouxland with her family and ended up on a farm about a mile or so north of the Van De Stroet home place, up in the bluffs. He noticed her in church—Fairview (SD) Reformed Church—where she played the organ while his little brother Garrett, pumped air through the bellows. When things between Henry and Toni started heating up, he'd head up to her place, then return down the hill to his father's farm, the two of them aboard the horse he'd ridden up on. "Was I sore," Toni will tell you, giggling. But apparently she didn't mind all that much.

Before they were married, John Van De Stroet bought the farm place across the road for his eldest son and his new wife. The day of the wedding, January 2, 1952, the two of them went over to their new house and put some wood in the stove so when they'd return, on their honeymoon, so to speak, the new place would be comfy. And it was. Henry says his father used to say he didn't put his money in the stock market because he wanted to invest in something he could walk on.

Really, it's no wonder the Van De Stroet family hasn't left their own peninsula. Today, Henry's siblings are as plentiful as pheasants in the place where the Big Sioux takes a wild swing east. Tillie Van De Stroet Zylstra and her husband live a mile or so south and a bit west of the home place, up top the bluff on the South Dakota side. Cora Van De Stroet Van Beek was Henry and Toni's neighbor to the east, just a mile or so from Fairview, on the Iowa side. Albertha Van De Stroet Kampen lives just a bit south of Newton Hills (SD) State Park. Mace Van De Stroet and his family live right there on the bottomland on the corner where the river decided to bend east. Gilbert Jo Van De Stroet, the first of the family to be born in a hospital (the others were born at home), lives on the home place. Betty Van De Stroet Zomermaand lives just a mile north of Inspiration Hills. Garrett, who died several years ago, was the only sibling to leave the land.

Gilbert's son Jerome lives in the house they made sure would be warm when they returned from their wedding. In fact, all around the area, there is already a new generation of Van De Stroets putting down their own roots along the river.

And even though Henry and Toni, now retired, live in Rock Valley, they still get out there once in awhile. Every winter he's been in town, Henry has been putting out box traps to catch what he can of Rock Valley's rabbit population before they terrorize town gardens. He catches them live, of course, then totes them out to the bluffs, where he lets 'em go up on the bluffs. Midwinter, the coyotes probably need a little sport. Of course, as long as he's out there, he stops in Canton for a cup of coffee with his old buddies.

It's quite a story really, and quite a place—hands down, the most beautiful land in the county. It's no wonder so many Van De Stroets stayed there on that oddly shaped chunk of land someone, long ago, called Settlers Township.