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## Siouxland Miscellany

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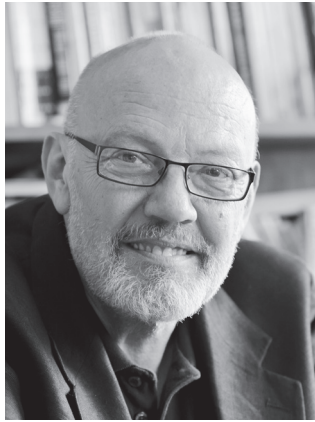
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# Siouxland Miscellany

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by James Calvin Schaap

*They're all around us. Some of them are almost forgotten, others forever lost. But stories, our stories, are as essential as breakfast or a good night's sleep. They are us and they become us. We are the very stuff from which they are made.*

*Many thousands of Dordt people have lived in Siouxland, some happily, some not so. Few, probably, know many of its stories. Here are just a few. If you've lived for any time at all, you're in them, no matter what you say.*

## The Winter of Righteousness

They were all wooden-shoe clad. I'm told *klompen* are wonderful insulators, and they had to be

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because that morning the temperature was -22, if you can believe the stories. Snow quilted everything, and there was no road, nothing really but experience to guide those sleighs, all from Orange City west to Calliope, 23 miles in insufferable temperatures. It was January 22, 1872. (You can do the math, but for your convenience, note this: it is, just now, the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this famous wooden-shoe insurrection.)

If all those Hollanders weren't carrying heat, you might call what they were up to "civil disobedience." But it was no peace march. Fifty-some Hollanders got together early that morning in an Orange City tavern—yes, there was one—run by the widow Mouw, who poured coffee from a wash-tub. They were intent on wresting the county seat from the gang at Calliope, just up the river from Hawarden. The Hollanders claimed they weren't getting justice from the gang of self-appointed commissioners. Such injustice happened often when territory opened for homesteading.

The morning was clear and cold. "The air was filled with snow crystals that sparkled like diamonds and a sun dog scintillated brilliantly on each side of the sun," says Charles Dyke, in his *History of Sioux County*.<sup>1</sup> But passions were hot. They were going after the fat, old, county safe and its attendant authority, then moving it all to the heart of their own Dutch colony, Orange City. With the kind of precision one expects from deeply righteous folk, another delegation of 25 sleighs—northern Sioux County Hollanders—met up at the prescribed time and place. When they showed up, a cold cheer rose valiantly from the congregation of Orange City sleighs.

Some Dutch powerbrokers had descended on Calliope, Sioux County's very first village, the day

before, to convince the crooks to give up governing authority. The blackguards laughed, fearing nothing from all the woodenheads, certainly not a bloody revolution. But that morning, the self-declared County Board of Supervisors happened to be in session when a hundred sleighs packed with huffy Hollanders descended from the hills east of town. Charles Dyke makes them sound like a company of angels: “The sun burst forth in all its glory.... Nature fittingly set the stage in snow, blue sky, and color.”<sup>2</sup> There was no Gandhi here. This was ice-cold, hot-headed Siouland frontier stuff. If the Dutch posse didn’t get the books and the county safe, they made very clear they would forcibly take it. That’s right: *they’d take it*.

“Over my dead body,” the swaggering Sheriff said, or something to that effect. The Dutchmen claimed the Sheriff’s body wouldn’t need burying since they’d drop it in the river after filling it with lead. Now the Hollanders knew the Scripture well enough to remember what Jesus said about peacemakers; but there were, among them, several Civil War vets who’d long ago determined that sometimes you had to take Scripture with a grain of salt or even a load of powder.

The sheriff saw those vets, and that was it. He went home. So those burly Dutchmen packed up sleighs with documents, including a massive safe that probably required most of Rock Valley to lift it out of the old log courthouse. That “over-my-dead-body” sheriff, a man who counted red noses and gray gun barrels, was voted back in when the next election came around. The Dutch appreciated how he’d used his head and not his handgun.

Today, county government operates out of Orange City, and Calliope is a well-meant attempt at a tourist attraction, just north of Hawarden. Check it out sometime when you drive up the Big Sioux. Among other attractions, the old village has a bank, a doctor’s office, a church, a school, and just down the road, the childhood home of its once-famous Iowa novelist, Ruth Suckow. There’s a log cabin replica of the old courthouse, just a little thing really, so small your family might have to take turns going in to see it. But when you do, note that there at the heart of the place stands—you guessed it—that huge safe a hundred incensed Hollanders once stole and took to Orange City.

Thar’ tis—right back in Calliope, 135 years later. Don’t miss it.

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### A Winter’s Tale

If the tale is true, the immigrant Menning family had some significant bucks when they left the Netherlands for America. Most pioneers didn’t, of course. But some did. What money didn’t buy them, however, was plush accommodations on the steamer they took across the ocean, a trip that was, for them, no piece of cake. In the North Sea, their ship collided with another. Both sunk, sadly enough, and down into the cold went a healthy chunk of the Menning’s worldly possessions.

They were saved, blessedly, when a freighter picked them up and carried them to Grigsby, England, the port from which they left for America, arriving eventually sometime later in Quebec. Their next stop was Wisconsin, where some relatives lived; but their purposeful destination, right from the moment of embarking, was Iowa, the northwest corner just then being settled. In the 1870s, there was cheap, good, productive land out here, and the word was that lots of it was still available. The Mennings took a place two miles east and one mile north of Orange City, all of their neighbors comfortably Dutch.

Their first abode, like everyone else’s, was literally dug out of that same rich ground. The histories don’t say what Vrouw Menning thought of mud roofs, but the literature of the era offers little nostalgia when it comes to the relative pleasures of a sod house. Even though they’d lost a great deal in the North Sea, it didn’t take long for the Mennings to get a frame house up off the ground. But the new place was no palace, just 14 by 14. Welcome to America.

Soon enough they had good friends—the Schuts—from just down the road. One winter’s day the neighbors dropped by for some fellowship. Two big families, kids and all—just imagine—packed joyfully into 14 by 14. Right neighborly, it was. Right neighborly it had to be. But there’s more.

Neither family had weather.com on their iPads, so when a blizzard blew up out of nowhere that late afternoon, they were, so to speak, left out in the cold. There

was no going home—that kind of blizzard.

Now the Mennings' old lean-to was big enough only for their team of horses and two precious milk cows. The Schuts had taken their wagon over, so they had their team as well and were more than a little wary of leaving those good horses outside in the storm. Alas, there was no room in the lean-to.

They had no choice but to make do, so Mr. Menning took control by putting the Schut's horses into their lean-to. Then he grabbed more than a

## Million Dollar Corner

There's no sign up anywhere, near or far, but every last soul in the region knows that the intersection of *the* two major two-lane-ers in the county—highways 75 and 10—is, was, and has been for as long as anyone can remember, the “Million Dollar Corner.” It lies out there on a low plain all by itself; the closest burg is Maurice, three miles south. It's an ordinary but busy northwest Iowa in-

What history doesn't say is whether the milk cows knew Dutch or the psalms, so whether or not they sang, no one will ever know.

few armfuls of straw and littered the house floor before leading their two precious milk cows into what was the only other shelter available, that new 14 by 14 frame house. The story goes that before those beefy bovines got in, Vrouw Menning made sure whatever foodstuffs happened to be around were stowed on the other side of what amounted to their Great Room, which was nothing close to a dance floor.

So there they were—two wooden-shoe families, kids and all, and two milk cows, all warm and snuggly in a crackerbox that was, that winter's night, the only port in the storm. Once Mrs. Menning milked those two sweet beasts and pulled out an ounce or two of chocolate, the whole gathering had a great time during a long evening together in a blessedly warm house, drinking chocolate milk and singing their favorite psalms—an image right off the canvas of any one of the great Dutch masters.

What history doesn't say is whether the milk cows knew Dutch or the psalms, so whether or not they sang, no one will ever know. But it was, by report, one of those kind of nights when something magically memorable could happen. What is clear—what is for sure—is that those early immigrant folks, dirt poor, somehow found a way to make do. You've got to love it.

And remember, the Mennings were the rich ones.

tersection. Once upon a time, a gas station tried to make a go of it on the southeast corner, but successive floods likely dampened enthusiasm for people trying to turn a buck there, even though Million Dollar Corner handles as much traffic as any other corner in the county.

The nickname, if you listen closely, has a sneer to it, as if some locals despised government spending and assessed the whole corner to be a lousy “boondoggle,” even though that long quarter-mile bridge, north and south, was paid for by the Great Northern, not Washington big spenders.

Years ago, a man named Harold Aardema, of the *Doon Press*, told me the corner was called that because a tragedy, death by drowning, took place there and would never be forgotten. A father and son were swept away in a flood where there shouldn't have been one, right there at the corner, where the only source of water is a creek that barely whispers most of the year, the West Branch of the Floyd River, of Sargent Floyd fame.

On Saturday, September 27, 1926, Deputy Auditor M. J. Van Wyk reported the official rainfall at Hull, Iowa, to be 14 inches. Boyden's Supervisor Kamminga claimed a barrel, empty before the storm, had two feet of water in it when the rains finally quit.

Somewhere near Lebanon, a harried one-room schoolteacher kept the kids inside while around the building water rose into a roiling horror. All night she held out, while the kids' folks kept ev-

everything lit at a nearby farm where the whole lot of them waited prayerfully for their children's deliverance. One young man, a boy with the last name of DeVries, gallant as anything, was lost, his wagon swept away when he tried to get out to the school. Like the teacher, "little Miss Mouw," DeVries was 18 years old.

But the story old Aardema told was of a father and son, a man named Terpstra, from Hospers, on his way to Sioux Center. Any local will tell you that his routing decision makes no sense, then or now. Hospers is a pure, straight-edge east from Sioux Center, but Terpstra and his son had to angle far out of the way to avoid the flood waters that eventually took both the dad and his boy.

Terpstra was the jeweler in Hospers, well-known, a businessman, on his way to pick up his wife from an all-day, Sioux Center church doing, a missions gala. He'd turned north just a bit from Million Dollar Corner, when his tires went down into an invisible washout created by rushing water. He and his son, just seven years old, climbed out of the car, even got to the roof, which made the tragedy public. People on the banks of the raging West Branch saw it happen. The bodies weren't found until they showed up a couple of days later, mud-laden, downstream.

But newspaper accounts back then located the sadness right there at "Million Dollar Corner," which means that the intersection had its widely held nickname already then, in 1926, almost a century ago.

Why am I retelling that whole sad story? Why not just let those tears evaporate into the miasma of a foggy ancient past? Maybe because I'd like to think that a million dollars' worth of bridge-building and some heavy-duty dirt work all around the intersection was no boondoggle, wasn't wasted taxes at all, wasn't wasted anything.

Today, there's a gigantic crane over the north end of that long railroad bridge. You can't miss it. Some kind of repair is going on, if for no other reason than to keep the BNSF freights that pass the intersection from some messy derailment. Besides, I shouldn't have to tell the descendants of all those Dutch folks that cleanliness is next to Godliness, that order is better than chaos, that being ready for some torrential downpour is better than simply let-

ting it happen again.

I like old Aardema's suggestion—that the place is named after construction that went on *after* that deadly flood, even though historically it's not true. I like the idea of remembering because Mark Twain got it right long ago: "The past does not repeat itself, but it rhymes." Every time I come over the hill just east of Million Dollar Corner, I honestly don't mind being reminded that once upon a time... well, you know.

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*To be sure, not all of those who say "Lord, Lord" turn out to be honoring their maker. A few louts among the throng have been determined to live here, far off the beaten path. Besides, it's the bad stories that make the headlines. But here are a couple of joys, a couple of stories of people trying their Sunday best to be good, good people.*

### A Father's Tears

It's a simple human story, repeated countless times in countless settings. It begins with the absolute necessity of very hard work and the will power to get it done, an ethic that white rural folks have celebrated proudly for 150 years—"that kid really knows how to work."

At 98, barely able to walk, my father-in-law still apologizes for having done nothing all day in the Home. His laziness grieves him. He dreams of working all afternoon—doesn't really matter doing what, as long as he sweats.

Now put a man or woman like that through the Depression, and if that powerful will doesn't die, it skyrockets. A big-shouldered farmer named Carl remembered meals composed of nothing more than lard on bread. Cupboards were bare. When, at school, he'd pull a lard sandwich out of his honey-bucket lunch pail, he remembered being afraid some other kid would smell it and know how dirt poor his family really was. No matter. He had to work.

Throw in a penchant for an austere religion practiced fiercely, a faith fit to condemn more swiftly than to love, a religion so heavy-laden that a man spent his prayers snarling, then bring on a horror, a tragedy, the worst life can afford a parent,

the death of a child, and you have grief unending. Those ingredients comprise a simple story heard countless times in dozens of variations.

This farmer, Carl, now deceased, remembered growing up with a father like the old man I just tried to describe. Carl was himself the namesake of a boy he never knew, a child who died at three months, another Carl.

Carl says there came a time when he and his siblings—there were eleven kids—got together to

the four of them stood by the grave, so Carl writes in his memoir, he never forgot what he saw when he looked up into the old man's face. Hard as it was for him to believe, the tough old man was crying tears.

That's the human story remembered in a thousand rural settings out here on the edge of the Plains, told in maybe a dozen languages, maybe not told but remembered, always remembered—the day the old man cried.

That's the human story remembered in a thousand  
rural settings out here on the edge of the Plains,  
told in maybe a dozen languages....

ask themselves whether it might not be better for their father *not* to know the truth about something he couldn't bring himself to identify in a memoir he wrote sixty years after all that happened. The kids were serious, he says, because they knew how much anger they'd trigger if Dad, tough as an old harness, discovered whatever kind of sin they'd somehow committed. Together, they decided that the moral high ground was to lie. True story.

And then there was that time two of the girls damaged the soft top of the old man's car accidentally and didn't tell him—never did, in fact, until, years later, the old man was on his death bed. Even then, lying there helpless, Pa got steamed, says Carl.

That's the man in the story. He was someone like Calvin Coolidge, who was once described as being so sour it just seemed he was weaned on a pickle—that kind of man, that kind of father. And now, the story.

Decades later, Carl, his wife, and his parents took a ride back to Lebanon and the country church they'd attended when the kids were little, a country church surrounded by a handful of houses and a school that long ago had closed its doors. Carl says he and his wife walked out back together with his parents, into the cemetery. There, they saw a little stone slightly raised from the grass standing along the fence, the grave where his namesake had been buried way back in 1926. They found it easily. You still can today. I found it myself just last week, all by itself in that country churchyard. As

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### Count Your Blessings

Some psychologists want to drop the last initial in PTSD. They claim that to call PTSD a “disorder” makes the condition appear unusual. It isn't. They claim that if you've been to war, you have post-traumatic stress because war is trauma.

I can't help thinking such distinctions wouldn't have mattered to the woman in the casket yesterday. Her husband took Nazi fire at the Battle of the Bulge and came home with a purple heart from wounds that were visible—and some that were not. “He just wasn't the same when he came back from the war,” one of his relatives said.

Her husband died 32 years ago, but he could have met his end twice before that, once in a snowy woods in Europe, then again by a truck accident that did everything but kill him. His wife suffered through that also. Cancer took him finally. He was always a heavy smoker.

She died not long ago, her 96 years composing their own issue of a *Life* magazine. She'd seen more than most of us ever will, if you count the tears.

She'd just given birth to a baby boy in 1945, when she got word that her husband had been wounded in Belgium. I don't know if she ever talked much about getting the news—where she was or how it came. What her family knows is that she received that telegram with a little boy in her arms.

That was also the year a tornado blew their place away one night. She and the little guy took refuge in the church parsonage. Her husband, a victim of war, was still away.

Her obituary says she was born in Estelline, South Dakota, in 1920; she went to a country school through eight grades; then “worked out,” which is to say moved into farm houses where the women needed help after having babies. Thirteen, she may have been, maybe fourteen, doing the work that farm wives did back then, every last thing.

The good folks of Estelline in the 1920s were not an affluent bunch. Most had moved west to homestead cheap land, hoping to make a life on a landscape that didn’t tame easily. She was a child when the stock market crashed, and she probably remembered when dark skies filled with Kansas dust drifted into every corner of a farmhouse.

She got married eight months before Pearl Harbor and never anticipated that part of the war. When the man she loved returned from war, he was not exactly the man she’d married. But then she probably wasn’t the only woman who nursed all kinds of wounds. Back then, people just didn’t talk much about it. She and her husband had another five boys, six in all—six boys trying to make a go of it on a hardscrabble farm.

In 1965, the oldest son was killed, a passenger in an accident the newspaper described as taking place in early-morning fog, a couple of trucks on highway 18. She was at home on their farm when she and her husband got the news.

Fifty years later, she buried another son after he’d been killed instantly in a construction zone on a Wisconsin interstate. He and his wife had been on their way to Minnesota to visit their kids and grandchildren. Tillie was a resident in the Rock

Valley old folks home, and in a wheelchair herself. That time, her remaining four sons came over together to deliver the bad news.

By a country mile, her allotment of sadness exceeded what most of us will ever know. But at her funeral, when the pastor and her family reminisced, the sweet face that appeared right there in church was smiling because she always did. One after another, her grandkids claimed that her giggle was infectious. While they were speaking, it echoed through the sanctuary.

One of her sons told the audience that with six rough-and-tumble boys growing up on a small farm where there was no end to work, there were weeks and months, even years, when there was no end to trouble. Once, he said, when he was in it, when he was right there in the heart of her concern, his mom looked at him, offered that smile, and said just three words: “Count your blessings.” That testimony echoes through a sanctuary all its own.

Once upon a time, in a moment that doesn’t need to be detailed, she looked at her boy, one of six, and this woman who’d suffered so much sadness, so much trauma, gave him a line to live by, a line that to me, up until yesterday, when her son repeated it, seemed little more than cliché.

“Count your blessings,” she told him, smiling. Never in my life have those three words carried so much love.

### Endnotes

1. Charles Dyke, *History of Sioux County* (the Greater Sioux County Genealogical Society, 1942).
2. Ibid.