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The Story of My Life

By Siewert Bus (1854-1938)

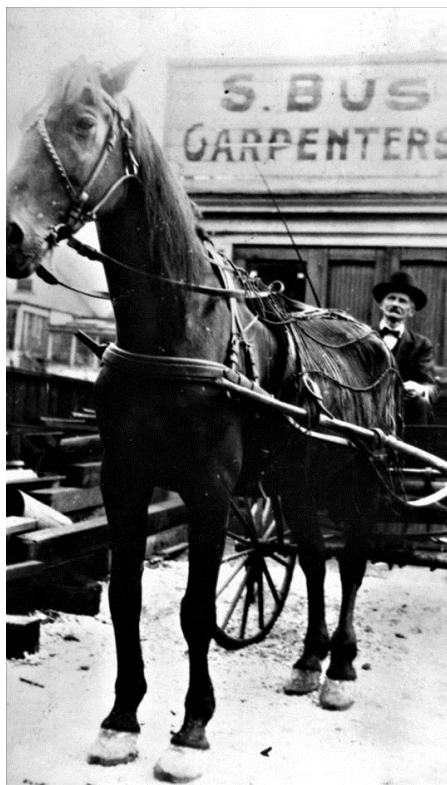
Note: My great-grandfather Siewert Bus did not title this autobiographical manuscript, which he wrote in about 1933 when he was 78 years old. If the original manuscript was hand-written, that version has been lost. At some point, the manuscript was typed and copied on a mimeograph machine. The mimeographed manuscript has been re-typed. Minor changes were made to correct errors in the manuscript. Annotations to the text are mine and are found in the endnotes.

Ken Bus
Peoria, Arizona
May 2018

Our dear children asked me sometime ago to give them an outline of my life's story and I am glad to accommodate them.

Your father was born in Middelstum, Groningen Province, Netherlands in the year of 1855.¹ I was the first born and I can remember as far back as a boy of 4 years, 6 months, when I was baptized in the Christian Reformed Church by Rev. Schuuringa, Mrs. B. DeBey's father, in the absence of Rev. B. DeBey² that Sunday. I remember so well my mother and grandmother told me not to talk in church, and right after baptism I said to mother, "I am baptized." I suppose there was some reason for it because mother wanted me to be christened in the State Church, and father, after he was converted, wanted me to belong to the Christian Reformed Church. I also remember coming home, the boys [in the neighborhood] said to me, you are a "coxeyon."³ Mother was not in good humor and said, "I told you so."

Then, I remember the First Christian Reformed School was built. I was standing on the southeast corner and looked down in the foundation (where I stood 65 years after that time). I never forgot that my grandmother gave me cookies after doing something for her, drawing water out of a deep well, rolling by a chain and bucket. As a growing boy I had to sit on the carpenter bench to give my father light by an oil lamp and he told me how to pray: "Heere bekeer mie om Jesus wil, Amen."⁴



As a boy of twelve I was handling carpenter's tools of my father and he told me how to use them. I shall never forget, he gave me material to make a tub and it was some job.

Before I was finished it was no larger than a pail. I had wasted all that lumber, but it came [to be] very useful to draw up water out of the well. After I was fourteen, Dad thought I might do better to work awhile with some other contractor and so I did. Simon Klei of Middelstum and the next boss Wollendorp [from] Onderdendam and Klas Tilbuscher of Rottum. I was very proud to be a carpenter, showing my rule sticking out from the rule pocket of my overalls. The tailor made the pocket a little too deep so it had to be made shorter to show the rule. In the year of 1870 I was working nearly all the summer on the Christian Reformed Church in my hometown, Middelstum, *genasnedn foegen*, (tuckpointing) the brick walls. I started to work, did about three feet square and

(continued on page 2)

From the Director



In this issue we learn about the story of a late 19th century immigrant family to the Chicago area, and their struggle to make good in America. When Ken Bus sent me the transcript of his great-grandfather's memoir, it reminded me that the Joint Archives of Holland's collections are much more broad than just the Holland, Michigan, area and have always been. We look forward to collecting more stories like this from donors and sharing with you and researchers around the world.

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

"The Story of My Life" (continued from page 1)

it was not satisfactory to the architect, so I was told the pick up my tools and leave the job. You may know how I felt as a boy of sixteen—like two cents. But what happened? The next day I was called back by the boss in the place of the architect, receiving orders to finish the job. Say boy, I had a feather in my cap. My pay for the work was 100 gulden. I must not forget when this Christian School was dedicated I was there and a lady put her hands upon my head saying, "De Heer zegene je" (the Lord bless you). In this school and church I received my [religious] instruction.

In the year of 1868 about eight families left for the United States of America from our hometown, including our Pastor, Rev. B. De Bey. At the farewell the Church was filled and ladders [were placed] outside [against the wall] to hear the pastor's farewell sermon in the house of worship. At this time Father was persuaded to go with them, but Mother said, "I am not going over that great ocean," and so [we] stayed until 1872. That's the time we said farewell to Middelstum and to all our relatives and warm friends.

There was a young lady I thought a great deal of at that time. I would rather have said to my parents, "I will stay in Holland," but I did not dare to make that statement, for I was the oldest son, there were four boys and two girls—Siewert, Jan, Grietje, Menne, Cornelius, and Aeltae. Our homestead was sold—it had an orchard of about one hundred fruit trees, small and large. We had the auction on March 19th and left on the 21st from Middelstum to Groningen, from Groningen to Harlingen, from Harlingen to Hull, from Hull to Liverpool, from Liverpool to New York, and from New York to Chicago, arriving in this great city about April 20th. The name of

our boat was "Wisconsin."⁵ The wind was mostly sideways so the boat was rocking constantly. Families on board from our hometown were Kloosters, Buinings, Dykheusens, Torens, Scholtens and our family.

We arrived at the Illinois Central Depot⁶ on Twelfth Street and had to walk to Randolph Street. We could see Lake Michigan under us—the boards not close together and we had to hold on to our wooden shoes⁷ so as not to lose them. This was ten months after the great fire, in 1871. All was ruined by fire from Michigan Avenue to Halsted Street and Racine Avenue was the City Limits, south Twenty Second Street and north Chicago Avenue. We arrived on an express at the corner of Harrison and May Streets at the front of the Dutch Reformed Church at 7:30 p.m. Father and myself greeted our pastor, Rev. B. De Bey and Henry General, a member of the Young's Men's Christian Association, guided [us] on the express to Racine Avenue and Fifteenth Street, now occupied by the Colossal Market [owned] by a Holland family, Okke van Dyke.

Rooms were so scarce after the fire that we had to live in a basement, but the people were very accommodating, [and were] members of the Rev. De Bey's Church. But what a change from our place in Holland! The next day father and myself bought some furniture, but we had to buy according to our means. We had 100 gulden left—that was \$40.00 American money—but we were all happy to be in the United States. The next day I was fortunate to get a job at Palmer, Fuller & Co.⁸ making sash doors and frames, on the corner of Twenty Second and Union Streets at 50¢ per day for ten hours' work.

Then my father took sick and passed away four days after. The first day I came home from the shop, he said, "My boy I am afraid I will have to pass from you," and the second day he was not able to talk to me, but held up his hand. It was for me, "My boy I have told you the way to go," but I said, "Father, what must we do?" and no reply.⁹ I shall never forget the instructions of my father.

What to do now, poor Mother with six children, the baby three months? I held to the First Reformed Church¹⁰ and felt the responsibility placed upon me. The Church provided \$100.00 for lumber to build a house 16 x 22 [feet] and I built the house, [with] a big roof and built a kitchen in the rear later between times. It was at Throop and 18th Streets on a lot rented for five years at \$55 a year. In the meantime you must know a carpenter boss by the name of Jacob Stoutmeyer promised me 75¢ per day and the next week he raised my wages [to] \$1 per day. How did mother live? My sister then twelve years¹¹ [old] said to me:

“You must give it all to Mother, brother Siewert, for I must have a little hat and brother Con [Cornelius] needs a pair of shoes.”

Oh, how happy we all were under the circumstances the Lord had provided and what a blessing it was to know how to handle my tools at this time as a boy of eighteen.

It is hard to come in a strange country as a Hollander, no English, all I knew was “yes,” “no,” “money,” and “six o’clock.” I shall never forget it. I was working for a man and he said, “Hand me a square,” and I brought him a chisel. He said he wanted a square and I brought him a hatchet. He said to never mind and at that time I was wondering what that could be. Then he showed me what work I had to do, putting siding on the house. He did not send me for tools any more after that. Well, we got along fine and I built up a fine trade of my own, mostly of Holland people. All had sympathy for Mother who went out washing twice a week and my brother John now making \$500 per year by [working for] Jacob Van Zanten of South Holland. I built a house for Thomas Nanninga at the corner of Wood St. and Eighteenth St. I built the pews in the first Christian Reformed Church in Lansing, Illinois, and a new school house at Miller, Indiana. Now being a master contractor at twenty-one years, this was all the credit of some good friends who recommended us.

In the year of 1874 a great panic came—no work to be had.¹² All mechanics got \$1.25 per day for ten hours’ work. We had saved a little money so that Mother was able to buy a milk cow for \$50.00 from Brother John. We did not nibble off the \$50.00 and not very long after we had two fine milk cows and we were getting along fine. But now we had to part with our little baby sister.¹³ It was hard to part with our sister, but the Lord knows best. Brother Charlie¹⁴ as a boy of eleven was caning chairs and I had to repair them. We hauled chairs from what is now the Loop and carried them back to their respective offices. We had a sign out: “Furniture Repairing and Chairs to be Re-caned.” It was at this time that Brother John took sick [from] a dreadful disease of diphtheria and scarlet fever. I called on him and he gave me the assurance that he was saved by Grace. Jacob Van Zanten¹⁵ had a great influence over him and my brother was the instrument in God’s hands, who pleaded with me and said, “Brother, you know Father is in Heaven. Mother is not saved¹⁶ and how is it with you all?”

Brother John passed away when he was seventeen¹⁷ and Sister Alice¹⁸ thirteen years, four days after. Their remains are resting at Graceland Cemetery.¹⁹ This was in the time of the great revival in our City and the time of

Mr. Moody,²⁰ who was the instrument in God’s hands to save many souls.

Now the epidemic of horses came and the failing of banks. Travelling all over the city and suburbs—no job to be found. So my friend, David Berkhoff and I went to work selling lamp wicks by the yard. Up to this time it was sold in short pieces, about 6 inches. We made a success in selling lamp wicks to the people from Chicago as far as Danforth, Illinois.²¹ Some bought enough for their grandchildren to come.

The country was well supplied because everybody was selling now. We tried a new scheme in selling all kinds of notions from shoe laces to men’s and ladies’ hats. First, we had a horse and buggy belonging to my partner’s father, George Berkhoff, and after we had to return the horse and buggy, we managed to buy four wheels from the blacksmith at the corner of Blue Island Avenue and Eighteenth Street and we were told there was a team of donkeys for sale at Lansing, Illinois, where we supplied lamp wicks. We bought the animals and double harness for \$55. We had to have a bond and Mr. Vinke gave us our bond for two months. By that time we were able to release our bond.

We surely had a picnic when we drove that team in Chicago through the crowds. It was not quite so busy on Madison and State Streets as it is nowadays. Well, we made several trips to and from Danforth, Illinois. You had to have patience going three miles an hour. This is where we got all of our patience, but my partner’s patience came to an end and he went to college and became a doctor and made good success.²² We took stock somewhere on the road and separated.

Now the people in Danforth suggested [that I] come to Danforth and sell butter and eggs and poultry and put up a small store. I suggested it to Mother and this is what she said to me:

“Son, are you still keeping steady company with your lady friend Anna?”

I said, “Yes.”

Mother said, “My boy, if you intend to get married, what will I do in Danforth?”

I said, “Mother, that has never come into my mind.”

So we moved to Danforth, but it was not very long [before] the Rev. Duiker,²³ our pastor, said to me, “Siewert, I see Elder Heersema is stopping in to drink coffee with Mother frequently.”

I told him that [it] was proper for an elder to visit the widows and orphans so the consequence [was] Mother

was talking the matter over with me and I said to her, “Mother, you don’t want me to get married and now you leave me alone as a bachelor and go to the farm?”

Our mother was married on Christmas, December 25, 1877,²⁴ and your mother and father were married January 16th, 1878.²⁵ But by the way, between time I had to go to Chicago to have a very important conversation with your mother-to-be. We never had been serious and when I approached her, her answer was this: “You must be sick.” I said, “Well, what about it?” and she said she would have to think it over.

Now, I did not wait a month, but went the next day and no doubt she had to talk it over with her father and mother and I got the final word—“I will marry you.”

You can just imagine the great sacrifice it was to marry a poor lad who provided for his mother and family and had no means. Well, we had a little furniture that Mother had left with us to start with. So we were married on January 16th, 1878. We had to pay \$2 to the minister and it was the custom to give the janitor \$1 under the pillow where we kneeled down. A great anxiety arose up now. This marriage proposition had to be published two weeks from the pulpit to the congregation and if there were any objections to call at the consistory.²⁶ When we entered the Church we were somewhat embarrassed. If someone brought up something that was going to stop the game, but nothing had happened. It was very important to me to hear my wife, your becoming Mother, say “Yes” to all of the important questions in the front of a full house in the First Reformed Church.

Next day we went on our honeymoon from Chicago to Danforth. The house we occupied was not up to the latest improvements. Our sleeping room was upstairs and the roof had not been taken care of for some time. My young wife said, “What is that in the roof?” I told her the moon shining through and the stars, and in the morning we did not need an alarm clock because the sheets were icy and snowy and we were awake at once. My mother was a great comfort to my wife. She came and visited her now and then. If it had not been for the *Chicago Inter-Ocean*²⁷ morning paper, I think she would have gone back to Chicago.

Well, we all have our experiences in life. Just think of mother being married to her first husband six months. The second husband, our father, nineteen years and married to her third husband forty years and passed away in peace at eighty-eight years.

On the 28th day of December we were blessed with our first baby, Grace, and we thought no baby in all the

world was like her.²⁸ The little donkeys came in very handy that day to get Mother and the Doctor. We used the donkeys with the ice sled and it would go about three miles an hour. The noise the donkeys made was enough to let everyone know that something had happened. Your mother and the baby were in the store and your father peddling by the farmers—trading in poultry, eggs and butter and there was no money to be had. In February of the next year we were back in Chicago and opened a store at Harrison and Miller streets in company with my good friend Herman P. Kelder, him boarding in the flat in the rear of the store.²⁹ Our business was prosperous. Herman worked in the store and your father [was] getting the outside customers. We had about 150 outside customers—North Side, West Side and as far [south] as Englewood. Your mother helped in the store three evenings a week, making up orders [with] the babies on the counter.

Now my partner smiled at a fine young lady and she smiled at him, just coming from Holland and they were married so we were two families in small quarters.³⁰ To support two families out of a small business meant something in that time. So we had to dissolve partnership. We did not have much cash so there was no chance for us to stay and to part with all the hard work we put in and having a mortgage on the stock, but the landlord, Mr. Mohr, came and said, “Do you intend to go out [of business], Bus?” I told him frankly there was no other way for us and this is what happened.³¹

He said, “Get a friend for a bond and I will turn everything over to you and your wife.”

I called on my good friend, Tom Nanninga, whose house I had built four years previous[ly] and he [put up] our bond. All went in the best harmony. We were in the grocery and meat business about twenty-five years and [were] successful—prosperity and adversity through different circumstances. Then we went back to our tools and carpenter business up to this date. It has [also] been successful. In the meantime we were blessed with 5 sons and 3 daughters—Grace, John, Belle, Charles, Cornelius, Alice, Siewert, and Marinus. In 1928 we celebrated our Fiftieth Anniversary and now we have been married 55 years. Now your Dad and Mother are seventy-seven years and as young and happy as the time when we gave our hand and our hearts to one another, ‘til we part.

What shall we render unto the Lord for all his blessings bestowed upon us?³²

Bless the Lord!

Endnotes

- ¹Siewert Bus was actually born on 4 Nov 1854 in Middelstum.
- ²The Rev. Bernardus De Beij (1815–1894), mentioned several times in this account, came from the same village in the Netherlands as the Bus family. He convinced many “seceder” families in Groningen to follow him to Chicago.
- ³This epithet was apparently used to disparage the followers of Hendrick de Cock, a religious reformer in the Netherlands at the time. Perhaps it would have been more accurate to spell it “Cocksian.”
- ⁴Translation: “Lord, guide (or literally “convert”) me to Jesus’ will. Amen.”
- ⁵This information is confirmed by ship’s log records that list the Bus family as passengers on the *Wisconsin* when it sailed from Liverpool, England on April 9, 1872.
- ⁶The journey from New York to Chicago was by train. The Bus family completed the immigration formalities in Castle Garden at the tip of Manhattan.
- ⁷The wooden shoes Siewert Bus was wearing are still in the possession of the Bus family.
- ⁸This company, a major producer of wooden building materials during the late nineteenth century, was founded in Chicago in 1866 by A. R. Palmer and W. A. Fuller. In 1869, the partners built a large lumber mill at 22nd and Union Streets. By 1873 that facility employed about 400 men and produced about \$800,000 a year worth of sashes, doors, and other goods. [<http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/2804.html>]
- ⁹Jan Jans Bus died on April 23, 1872, according to the records of the Cook County Office of Vital Statistics. He had been in Chicago just three days when he died of pneumonia. He was 45 years old.
- ¹⁰The First Reformed Church, on the corner of May and Harrison Streets in Chicago, was founded by Rev. Bernardus De Beij and served the Dutch immigrant community.
- ¹¹This sister must have been Aaltje or “Alice” Bus, born on 11 July 1865 in Toornwerd, near Middelstum.
- ¹²The Panic of 1873 was a financial crisis that triggered a depression in Europe and North America that lasted until 1879.
- ¹³Louwke Bus died in 1875 at the age of 4. The family called her “Grace.”
- ¹⁴“Charlie” was apparently the family’s nickname for Menne Bus, born in 1864.
- ¹⁵Jacob Van Zanten was John Bus’ employer. He had a large farm in South Holland, Illinois.
- ¹⁶Why John Bus thought that his mother was not “saved” is unclear. There are some indications that she did not accept the teachings of the Reformed Church. Perhaps she followed the teachings of the State Church of the Netherlands.
- ¹⁷Jan Bus died on November 24, 1876 in Chicago at the age of 16. He was called “John” by his family.
- ¹⁸Aaltje Bus died on December 5, 1876 in Chicago at the age of 11. She was called “Alice” by her family.
- ¹⁹Graceland Cemetery, one of Chicago’s most historic final resting places, is on the corner of Clark Street and Irving Park Road in Chicago.
- ²⁰Evangelist Dwight Lyman Moody was the founder of the Moody Bible Institute on Chicago’s North Side.
- ²¹Danforth is a small town about 80 miles south of Chicago in Iroquois County, Illinois.

²²David Berkhoff, M.D. graduated from Rush Medical College, Chicago in 1891. He was a member of the Illinois State and Cook County medical societies and a prominent member of the Holland Society. He died at his home in Chicago February 9, 1908 at the age of 51 [*The Illinois Medical Journal*, Volume 13].

²³Reverend A. Duiker became *dominie* (pastor) of the Danforth Reformed Church in 1872. The congregation there consisted of about 40 families from the Netherlands. [*Netherlanders in America*, by Jacob Van Hinte, 2003, p. 551.]

²⁴Grietje Sieverts Arkema was married three times. Her first marriage was to Albert Jan Elsberg Fokkens on June 3, 1852 in the city of ‘t Zandt in Groningen Province, Netherlands. But four months later she was a widow. Then she married again, this time to Jan Jans BUS. After his death in Chicago in 1872, she married Heere T. Heersema in 1877. They had no children together, but were married for 37 years until Mr. Heersema’s death in 1914.

²⁵Siewert Bus married Anje Veenkamp, whose family had immigrated to Chicago in 1868. Anje or “Annie” as she was called, was an eye witness to the Great Chicago Fire in 1871. Throughout this memoir Siewert never mentions her name. The marriage was performed by Rev. Bernardus De Beij.

²⁶The reference here is to the “banns of marriage,” a tradition in many churches at the time. The “consistory” in the Reformed Church was like a church council composed of the clergy and the church elders.

²⁷The Chicago Inter-Ocean was a newspaper published in Chicago from 1865 until 1914. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chicago_Inter_Ocean]

²⁸Grace Bus was born in Chicago on 29 December 1878. She died in 1902 at the age of 23.

²⁹These statements are corroborated by the United States Census of 1880. “Simon” Bus, his wife Annie, and their infant daughter, Gracie, were living at 346 Harrison Street in Chicago.

³⁰Herman Kelder married Siena Punter on January 1, 1880. Herman’s brother Klaas Kelder later married Martje Veenkamp, the sister of Anje (Annie) Veenkamp Bus.

³¹According to the 1880 census record, Nicholas Mohr, a German immigrant, was the owner of the building where Siewert Bus had his grocery store. The Buses also lived in the building, probably above the store.

³²Psalms 116:12; King James Version.



Ken Bus is a native of Illinois. He received his BA and MA from the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. At the University of Illinois he started his career in international education, teaching English as a second language (ESL) in Tehran, Iran, and then had a similar position with the University of Southern California in Tehran.

His wife, Mary Jane, later joined him in teaching ESL and writing curriculum with the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO) in Saudi Arabia. Bus also worked at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth for seven years in international program administration. He finished his career as the new director for an international education program at Glendale Community College in Phoenix, Arizona.

The Joint Archives of Holland



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Family of Siewert Bus and his wife Anje "Annie" Veenkamp Bus taken in about 1920. Standing left to right: Charles, Marinus, Cornelius, Sievert, and John; sitting left to right: Annie Veenkamp Bus, Belle, and Siewert.