

Chapter 7

Life on the Farm

Living with high humidity all the time made things of wood rot easily and similarly things of iron would rust easily. In order to prevent this as much as possible all things outside were regularly either painted or tarred. Everything else was kept inside as much as possible. This in turn meant we were always short of necessary room inside. And my Dad having no money to enlarge or build anything was always fitting and crowding more and more inside the little space he had available.

For a while we had the help of one of my cousins, Kees Kalisvaart, who at that time was 12 years old and had just left school. His Mother, my Dad's sister, had been a widow for a long time. Her husband was killed when a piece of stove wood he was splitting accidentally hit him on the nose. He bled to death as they were unable to stop the bleeding. Kees was a little hard to handle at home. And so it was agreed upon that he would be working on our farm. One Sunday afternoon he and I were home together while Mom and Dad were at the afternoon worship service. Kees encouraged me to get two cigars from the box Dad kept at a certain place to occasionally present one to some visitor. The only time I have seen him smoke was when a butter and cheese salesman almost forced him to take one. Anyhow, we soon were off together with two cigars to the bush where we had an old shack standing. My cousin knew how to get a cigar lit and also smoke the thing. I tried to do what he was doing but almost choked. But in order to not be out done by my one year older cousin, I kept it up as long as I could. Soon I found myself going home as white as a sheet and as nauseated as I could be. Soon thereafter my parents came home. Mother took one look at me and said, “Heb jij in het sigarenkistje geweest?” (“Have you been in the box of cigars?”) I had my lesson about smoking early in life. Kees was not a good influence. He did not stay long either. I am sad to say that he died rather young in an insane asylum.

Many things that are common today we take for granted. We have persuaded ourselves that life would be impossible without it. All of which during our childhood years were totally foreign; radio among them. But one day, an Uncle had brought a radio along for us to see and hear. It may have been our one and only Uncle who lived in a big city, The Hague. He was my Mother's oldest brother and he peddled dairy products. As a small boy I recall standing in front of this radio, looking it over and over, including the back of it and listening to the man talking. I felt that since I heard the man, I should also be able to see him! Nor could I believe how a big man with a strong voice could be inside a small box with two knobs on it! It just left me dumbfounded. But somehow I was convinced that I should be able to find him. I sat there for the longest time trying to figure out in my young mind what this was all about and I did not leave until my Mom turned it off. I presume I must have been about 5 years old. It took another 8 years or so before my Dad bought an old radio for ourselves.

Also in our younger years we had never seen or heard of people being drunk or being on drugs. In fact,

even by the time we left for Canada in 1948, at the ages respectively of 25 and 22, neither of us had heard of anyone being divorced! Now, even though this was our experience, I am not saying that everyone at that time had a wonderful life - long marriage relationship. But it is true that leaving one another for someone else just never took place. Such a thing was out of the question because marriage was for life, period. Marriage was as binding as death was at the end of everyone's life.

There also was very little moving around from one job or place to another. The only people who did move around quite a bit were hired men or farm hands but very seldom the farmer himself. In the olden days when a farming couple married, they settled on a certain farm and stayed there until death. And to illustrate both the permanency of marriage and the staying put for life at one place, in certain rural areas the front door of the farmhouse was opened only twice during their life. And this was on the day the bridegroom carried his bride over the threshold into the living room and the other time the front door was opened was when pallbearers carried the homemade coffin out of the husband or wife. Such most likely was part of the tradition of our ancestors whose names appear at the beginning of this our life story. Technology and science has enriched our lives in various areas but in other areas we have lost much of quality, value and virtue.

And coming back momentarily to drunkenness; The first time I ever saw someone drunk was, believe it or not, our one and only village policeman! I did not know what the matter with him was until shortly thereafter because the whole town was in an "uproar" about this event. He did not last much longer thereafter as the Town Council soon replaced him. The next time I saw a person drunk was when the circus came to town. There were also two bachelor farmers in our town that always worked hard the whole year around and were very kind and friendly people. Both were Roman Catholic. But I found out that during the festivities of the Queen's birthday they had trouble controlling themselves due to alcohol.

The first time I was ever requested to be a pallbearer was at the age of 12 or 13. At that time I was in the executive of our "knapen vereniging". It was like a junior young peoples club, except it was only for boys. The one who had passed away was a 5 year old son of one of our very respected and long time Elders. It was a farming family and they had 17 children. The mother had died shortly after the birth of their last child and he was the one who now had passed away. At that time it was still the tradition to bury people from their homes where they had lived, holding the Service there also. It was a huge living room and it was crowded with family members and a few others. I was deeply touched by their tears, the words the Minister spoke, the solemnity, the brevity of the boy's life, and the Pastor's prayer. As a long time Elder, the Minister and Father were very close. After carrying the little coffin out of the house everyone crowded into horse drawn buggies provided for by neighbors and then drove out to the graveyard for burial. It was not until after World War II that funeral services were held in our big old church building.

I loved going to the junior young peoples group. We only met during fall, winter and spring time. The

summer months were too busy for all farm boys. We had very fine, dedicated and committed leaders. With gratefulness I look back on these years. The first part of the evening was filled with a Bible topic. And whoever's turn it was, the individual had to come prepared with a written out introduction and explanation of the passage. We also took pains in trying to make an application of what it was supposed to say to us as individuals. Thereafter we had a discussion on the Bible passage and what this member had written about it himself. After the intermission, during which time the Treasurer collected the fee, someone else read or recited a poem, and/or whatever else was worth reading to those present. By the time one of the members turned 16 he became a member of "De Jongelings Vereniging", i.e., the senior young peoples group. The two leaders who were there during the 4 years I was a member both became related to our family. The one was Andrew's wife's brother and the other married Corrie's oldest sister. Later on, I was elected to become one of the leaders.

Youth group picture

Another area of faith building and spiritual growth took place at the weekly catechism session. Memorization was part of it but the Minister's expounding of these doctrines made things much clearer. Here too a "collection" was taken up. Catechism started immediately following "graduation" from Sunday School which was at the age of 12. There were three different catechism classes, 12-16 years old, and 17 to the time a person was ready to join the members attending the communion class. The traditional age for this was 21. When this age bracket came around parents would suggest that it was time to make Confession of Faith. The money for the catechism collection as well as the fees for the other activities ordinarily came from that which our parents gave for these purposes. For none of us ever received any money for the work we did on the farm.

During my early teens, my Dad had found me a job with someone who went around our area to various farmers to collect milk samples. It was to determine the levels of milk production and butterfat. I was the junior helper and went out two evenings. It was a way to get rid of cows with low milk production and butter fat. All the traveling from one farm to another was by bike. When I had to ride more than 45 minutes to reach the farm, I would stay overnight at that place. Having always lived a very sheltered life, sleeping there with several hired men in the same room and sometimes in the same bed was quite often torture for me. In the summer months quite a few farmers began their milking in the morning at 3:45 a.m. I later found out that my parents did this because they wanted me to do something else besides farming. It is very understandable, seeing they were just crawling out of the Great Depression but to the best of my knowledge nothing was ever explained to me.

The same was true when my mother pushed me, more or less, to enroll after school to take English lessons. This was with our long time school teacher/principal, Albert Klarenberg. We were with four or five boys from our town and I did this for about two years. It was hard finding sufficient time to go over my lessons at home when there was always work that needed to be done as well. Looking back it has

helped me prepare for the future day.

During my teenage years, I struggled for two to three years with a serious hernia problem. It not only inconvenienced me, it outright bothered me with my work. When doing heavy lifting I often had to lay down to push the protruding intestine back in its place. Yet, I always waited until I could do so when no one was looking. In order to stop the protruding intestine from popping out, I had invented a home made kind of truss. It was a belt around the lower part of my body and a large handkerchief at the place of my problem. For the better part of two years it was quite successful. But the heavy lifting during the plowing one fall made the situation become serious. It simply did not work any more. Repeatedly I had to lay down and work for a considerable time to get the intestine back in its place. I now simply had to face up to it.

Why had I waited this long? Why did I keep it a secret so long? I am sure that the answer has to be short and simple: fear. It meant I had to talk about it, knowing that it would eventually lead to surgery. The latter in our family had become a “no-no”, a “last resort” thing. Surgery had inherited a negative connotation. It was because of the awful time my mother had experienced with the epidemic of the Spanish Flu. My parents hardly ever mentioned it but from the little bit I had picked up, the conclusion was firm: stay out of any hospital in whatever way you can. Illnesses at home were treated homeopathically, period.

Thus, at last I could no longer bear it, due to the fact that the tear in the membrane lining of the intestine had grown too large. One afternoon when I was alone with my Mother, I literally “sweated-out” the words, “Ik heb een breuk”. Right away I noticed that my way of dumping the news on her was not anything of a shock to her. She had known it already for quite some time simply by observing me in the way I walked and worked. Whether it was special Mother instinct or what, I do not know. But what I should have known is that my Mother was very sharp in seeing through things in a moment of time. This is just how she was. Maybe she had a special sense of (women's) intuition. I should have considered it here in this situation as well. Also, it was her who had been “treating” me for a half a year for a hernia when I was very small. Vaguely I did remember. She had hoped the peritoneum would grow together. When she wrapped these linen rolls around my groin and tummy I was, at best, 3-4 years old. This made it only 6-7 years ago that she had her hospital experience. Most likely they were still trying to pay off this bill. And so, in 1925-26 saddling themselves with another bill, besides the cost of my deaf sister's speaking lessons and education, was out of the question. Such then was the perspective on my situation at that time. All of this had a bearing on what I was to experience a decade later and finally face at the age of 17.

Soon thereafter I made arrangements to visit our Doctor who told me that wearing a truss would no longer help me. I now needed surgery without any further argument or postponement. The Hospital to which I was admitted was called Bethel and was known to be a good Christian hospital. Each of the nurses I

came into contact with were deeply dedicated individuals. It was 1939 and the year before the war broke out. We had just come through, more or less, the long and severe Depression. There was little or no money anywhere and lots of unemployment. Also, the medical know-how was still struggling to develop into the more modern state of art. The practice was to put people out by way of breathing in ether. A cap was placed over the patient's nose and he/she was to inhale this stinking stuff. All I can say is that it felt like suffocating. I fought with all my strength to push the hands away that held this cap over my mouth and nose. It was a frightening experience for it felt as if they were trying to kill me. Corrie had the same experience with an appendectomy. It has taken us years to erase the experience from our mind. In my case there also was the unfortunate experience of having a middle-aged man right across from my bed, suddenly die of a stomach bleeding.

Also, the medical practice was that following such surgery for a hernia the patient was to lie flat on his/her back for two full weeks. There was no sitting up or any going to the washroom! Once we were made ready for the night, the nurse would read a passage from Scripture and pray with us for a good night of rest and speedy recovery. After a week or so I was longing so much to get off the bed and start walking again. I felt excellent. And the longer I was laying there the more often I would tell the nurse how eager I was to get out and begin running in the hall. She had warned me to not get off the bed at the end of the fourteen days all by myself. I was told that I would not be able to do so and walk alone. Somehow I found this hard to believe. I kind of laughed about it saying I was not an old man. When the 14 days were over, two nurses came in to help me get up, sit on the bed for several minutes and then try to walk in between them. Well, they were right and I was wrong for after laying there for two full weeks flat on my back, my blood circulation needed time to adjust. And if it had not been for these two nurses to hang on to, I would have fallen on the floor before I had left the room.

Three years later I developed another hernia, this time on the opposite side. The war and the occupation of Holland by Hitler's military had made our land poorer than ever before. I prayed a lot whether to risk entering the Hospital once more or suffer it out for who knows how long. At last God gave me the assurance that I should go ahead with the new surgery. The Lord kept on reminding me how normal I had become following the first surgery and how relieved I had been when my intestine did not keep on coming out over and over again. Also, how much I needed to be normal in case things would become worse and I would have to flee or whatever. All of this led to overcoming the fear of being there in the hospital with this ether business again. Also an additional fear; namely that the occupation forces would enter and get the name of every fellow and draft them for work in German factories.

When I was at last again placed on the operating table, I needed not worry about ether anymore as they were completely out of it! Hitler's military needed it for their war victims. Every Hospital supply room and every place where ether was produced had been raided and cleaned right out. All Surgeons could do now was just freeze the local area on the outside where the cutting needed to take place and be a horse doctor for the remaining work on the inside. The only thing the Surgeon had told me was that they were

out of ether and they would just freeze me locally. I felt very good about that - but not for very long! The fixing that needed to be done on the inside, that is the repair of the torn membrane or peritoneum, was something I had not considered being left out of the freezing process. Of course the Surgeon and Nurses knew this all too well, but it was for me to find out. Well, I did, and the pain was extraordinary, just unbearable. I have never experienced such severe pain as during this half hour. A big lamp was right above the place they were working. I could see everything they were doing. When they were finally finished and wheeled me out, I happened to look back and saw water on the floor right below where my head had been on the stretcher. The spot on the stretcher, too, was soaking wet from the sweating I been doing during the ordeal.

In between these two surgeries I had an accident with my two fingers. It was the spring of 1941 when I was 19 year old. All afternoon I had been harrowing back in the field. I had been working hard and hoped to be able to finish it all. This was because it was the only afternoon our neighbor had his horse available. He had one horse, the same as us at this time. We would always share horses whenever two were needed. The horse of our neighbor was a very spirited one. The field had just been plowed and it had dried hard, making the clay very hard. And so I needed to pull the harrow sideways continually in order to break as many of the clay lumps as possible with the sharp harrow pins. The rope fastened to the harrow was always in my hand and the steady pulling was hard on the muscles. At last I was finished with the job. Hurray, I made it!

All I now needed to do was stop the little mill. There was little water left in the ditch that separated the two fields and this meant that the windmill wings would begin racing around faster and faster. For it is the weight of the available water to be lifted from the lower to the higher side that slows down the wings from going too fast. Sometimes when the wind suddenly increased in the middle of the night we would have to get up and go down there to stop it from going too fast. During a storm and without water it could easily fly apart this way. So I decided to get as close to it as possible without allowing the neighbor's horse to become too excited. I walked over and climbed the iron pole leading to the spot where the breaker was located to tighten the wing's rotation. There were five crossbars allowing a person to climb up there. Since I had done this many times and even at night when dark, I reached up without looking. The sun was just going down and I was blinded by it. Well, I reached right in the cog wheel. I am sure that my muscle's coordination was faulty due to the strenuous pulling all afternoon but thanks be to God the larger gear broke in six pieces. This we found out later. At this moment I only knew that I had lost part of two fingers and that "het molentje" was flying out of control. Neither the water nor the gears were able to slow it down.

Also, due to the unusual speed and noise our neighbor's spirited horse had forgotten how tired he was just a few minutes ago and was ready to take off alone with the harrow. Had he done so he most likely would have fallen sideways on the points and hurt himself severely, or even be killed. All this and much more flashed through my head that moment. So I just allowed myself literally to fall out of the thing and run over to the horses trying to control the one. I sought to get both horses loosened from the harrow but I

was unable to do so with my one hand. All at once I thought about one of my other neighbors who happened to be working in the garden spot he had rented from my Dad way back in the other field. I called as loud as I could that I was hurt and needed help. He came running as fast as he could and did the work for me. We then walked home together to the farm. It was funny but the first thing that then flashed through my mind was that this accident spelled the end of my occasional dream to become a policeman. I really wasn't tall enough to be accepted but somehow I kept hoping and praying that I would keep growing a little more.

Arriving at the farm I let my bachelor neighbor, Gerrit Van Dien, take care of the horses while I called from the yard to my parents in the house that I had an accident with my hands and needed to see the Doctor right away. I grabbed a bike from the wagon shed and rode through town with my bleeding hand held up. I saw a number of people staring at me in disbelief, probably thinking, "What is the matter with Jan Moerman"? The visiting hours were over but the family physician was home, praise God. I rang the bell and just barged into his house with my bleeding hand. It now had begun to hurt quite a bit. At first when it happened my whole arm and hand were just numb from the shock I guess. Dr. Reynders took one good look at my hand and fingers and said, "I will just bandage it up temporarily and have you go by taxi to Bethel."

The Hospital in Delft was only 5 kilometers away from Schipluiden. It was the second time in my life that I been in a taxi. Arriving at the Hospital I was told that the one and only Doctor who needed to take care of something like this was in surgery at the moment. The nurse told me to sit down and wait. "It will not be too long" she assured me. Soon I wondered what "not be too long" meant? Every 5 minutes or so she was back, checking up on me, asking "Are you doing o.k.?" Then she stayed away 19 minutes. And since I was still sitting there, she asked me a question about the condition of the gears. She told me that the wait was taking too long and I might develop an infection. I presume that she had been talking with the Surgeon, for right after that she said, "Come with me and I will help you temporarily. It will prevent infection." Following her to another room, she only told me to look the other way while she had taken my hand in hers. What she did was put my whole hand in a big pot of iodine. I gave a big sigh and groan, too. However, thinking about it later, this "treatment" no doubt was the best thing they could have done while I was waiting for the Surgeon to finish what he was doing. Even the grease from the gears probably had some beneficial effect.

Finally Dr. Verschyl Jr. came and began looking at my fingers and told the nurse to clean everything as thoroughly as she could. Then the procedure began to save as much of my two fingers as they could. I was not to look at what they were doing but "to look the other way where the window was". I tried doing this. Yet, when sometime thereafter the Doctor was whispering something to the Nurse, I turned to look at the thing they were discussing. He had whispered to the Nurse, "I may as well take this little stump off altogether", and to which she had replied, "But Doctor, isn't there a slight chance that it may be saved?" As I entered into their discussion, he warned me that he was quite sure I would be back within a week with severe infection needing more amputation than just "this little stump". I told him that if there was

ever so slight a chance to leave the part on, that all the blame would be mine if infection were the case. After more than two hours with a hand all bundled up and bloody I arrived home.

The whole evening and night the pain was severe. A few aspirins did not do all that much. I walked back and forth a lot through the house. A couple of neighbor boys, who were often at our place, knocked on the side window calling my name over and over again. When I went over there they showed me part of one of my fingers which they had found. They said, "What zullen wij er mee doen? Kuinen wij het aan de kat geven"? (What shall we do with it? Can we give it to the cat"?) I believe I told them it was o.k.

While in the Hospital I was informed to go back every day to our Doctor and have my broken off fingers cleaned and freshly bandaged. For the first days the part of my left index finger turned blacker by the day. Each day he stressed that this was not a good sign. On the fifth day the Doctor told me that unless there would be a change the following day, I was to return to the Hospital. This was the very thing the Surgeon had warned about. How my prayers intensified. Coming back the next day his face brightened and he said, "Congratulations! I see a very narrow strip of slight orange!" I have good reason to believe he had been praying as well, for he was a good Roman Catholic and a real man of prayer. How I thanked God for the good news that the "little stump" could stay on! For quite a while I was unable to do all regular farm work. However, slowly but surely I was able to do more and more. But as to milking, it took a year and a half before I became good at it again; though I must admit never as good anymore as before.