

A Tale of Two Cemeteries: Dispatch, Smith and Jewell Counties, Kansas

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## The Tale of Two Cemeteries: Dispatch, Smith and Jewell Counties, Kansas

“Kansas is goed voor alle menschen, zijn niet good voor Kansas.<sup>1</sup>” Roughly translated, this comes out to, Kansas is good for everyone, but not everyone is good for Kansas. In the case of the Dutch settlers at Dispatch, this was debatable, depending on which church you belonged to. Located on the border of two counties, Smith and Jewell, and two townships, Lincoln and Irving, Dispatch was a town founded on strong Dutch principles, in a place that many considered uninhabitable. The first Dutchmen arrived in 1869, and many began to follow their example, arriving during the 1870s. At one time, the town was coined “The largest Dutch settlement in Kansas.”<sup>2</sup> With citizens coming from established Dutch colonies around the United States, Dispatch had a chance to flourish, and instead sadly foundered. Standing at the only crossroads in the town site on a clear day in April, looking in all directions I saw nothing but farmland and blue skies. To the west, one can see Higgins’ Bluff, a place where many Dispatch residents would hunt for deer and other game. The bluff can be seen in the distance in Figure 1, below.



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<sup>1</sup> Department of English, Emporia State Teachers College, *Heritage of Kansas, Hollanders in Kansas* (Emporia: Emporia State Teachers College, September 1963), 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

*Fig. 1: Higgins' Bluff, west of Dispatch, KS (Photo by author, April 11, 2010).*

At its most successful, the town had two churches, a parsonage, a grocery store, a creamery, a post office, and a hardware store/gas station, where local families could have their cars worked on in later years.<sup>3</sup> The town also had two separate cemeteries, located nearly a mile apart. As a child, this always puzzled me. My family's roots are in Dispatch, all the way back to my Great-Great-Great-Great Grandmother, Krina Tanis. My Tanis relatives are all buried in the East cemetery in Jewell County, along with the Folgers, the people of my maternal Great-Grandmother. One mile west, in Smith County, lay the other half of my Dutch family tree, the Schreuders and the VanDonges. To me, Dispatch is the base of my roots, and has always played a fundamental part in my life. My family visited both cemeteries every May, and the stories of my ancestors became as real to me as they were to them.

To explain the reason for the split, my grandfather, Lloyd Schreuder, always said it was accounted to a break up in the churches of the community. Today, there is only one church, the Christian Reformed Church, which holds services every Sunday, and has a congregation consisting of people of mostly Dutch descent, and whose names still ring clear from the tombstones in both cemeteries. Koops, Tanis, and Verhage are just a few surnames of congregation members, found on headstones dating back to the founding of Dispatch. I attended church here at Dispatch CRC in April of 2010 and visited with members of the congregation, primarily to see if any members of the church had any knowledge about the two different groups. The wonderful people of this community did not let me down. During the fellowship time after the service, I was overwhelmed by their stories and the information they had to share with me. They each gave me a different reason for the split in ideology, and presented me with various

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<sup>3</sup> Mrs. Harold E. Senti. *Lincoln Township, Smith County, Kansas*, n.p., n.d.

ideas of why there are two cemeteries in this ghost town. I discovered that each of them was probably right in some capacity, and that there was no one definite answer to explain the schism between the Dutch Reformed Church and the Christian Reformed Church.

When the Dutch settlers came to Dispatch, the first thing decided was that there would be a church. The Dutch Reformed Church was founded one mile east of Dispatch in 1871. This is the approximate location of the east cemetery. In 1872, a second group of Dutchmen split from this faction, and began their own church, calling themselves the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). The CRC is the only building still standing in Dispatch.<sup>4</sup> Originally, this group held services in the homes of Teunis Kuiken and Hilvert Schreuder, my Great-Great grandfather. By 1887, the group had built a large church and parsonage. This church served as home to the congregation until the dedication of the current church building in 1917<sup>5</sup>. This church stands tall and proud, like many churches do on the western plains, and as is shown in the photo below.



*Fig.2* Dispatch Christian Reformed Church, Dispatch, KS (Photo by author, April 11, 2010).

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<sup>4</sup> Dispatch Christian Reformed Church. *1880-1890 "A Century of Faith,"* 1980.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

The records of the Dutch Reformed Church, which came before the CRC, burned in a house fire, and thus, little is known about the workings of the church.<sup>6</sup> The Dutch church was organized in 1871 and operated until 1945, when most remaining members migrated to the CRC, or to other churches in the area. The cemetery of the Dutch Reformed Church is just east of the current CRC church, and the oldest gravestone there is that of Krina Tanis. She died in 1878, having come to America in 1848 with her son Maarten. This cemetery is the only evidence of the Dutch church in the Dispatch area, and its significance is marked with a stone at the entrance to the cemetery, as in Figure 3 below.



*Fig.3 Cemetery Marker, Dutch Reformed Church Cemetery, Dispatch, KS (Photo by author, April 11, 2010).*

It is noted in both local and church histories that the two churches enjoyed many “programs and services” together over the years after they split<sup>7</sup>. Some members of the CRC that I spoke with told me that they did not know of any split in Dispatch, but that the division had

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<sup>6</sup> Congregation, Dispatch Christian Reformed Church, interview by Jillian Hocking, field notes, April 11, 2010, Dispatch, KS.

<sup>7</sup> Ileen Koops Tanis, letter to author, April 4, 2010.

taken place before the move to Kansas ever happened. Dutch immigrants frequently moved in groups, with most of the immigrants in the Dispatch area coming from their first American settlement at Holland, Michigan. Census records show a second group coming to the area from Pella, Iowa, and initially I felt that this could be a reason for the split, as groups that moved together often had different ideas about piety, however after speaking with the congregation at CRC, I found that while not wholly true, the differences in beliefs about piety may have played a role in tearing the Dutch church from its Christian counterpart<sup>8</sup>. Tradition in the church may have divided the settlers and caused the development of two churches in their small town.

The traditional Dutch Reformed Church Service consisted of Psalms being sung, always in Dutch. Speaking English was frowned upon, as the congregation members and clergy of the church felt that it was unholy to speak the English language in church. It was their belief that English prayers would not be heard by God, and instead that the devil would enter their house of prayer<sup>9</sup>. One theory for the division, as told by a congregation member was that the founding members of CRC did not want to sing the psalms or receive sermons in the traditional Dutch form, and thus started their own church, where sermons were given in English<sup>10</sup>. Traditions were very important to the immigrants, as they were in a place completely new to them, and the culture they brought with them from their homeland was often what they believed would

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<sup>8</sup> Bureau of the Census, *Eleventh Census of the United States: 1890, Population* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1893).

<sup>9</sup> Congregation, Dispatch Christian Reformed Church, interview by Jillian Hocking, field notes, April 11, 2010, Dispatch, KS.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

ultimately keep them together. According to Ileen Tanis, a member of the CRC and local Dispatch resident, this split may have happened before the settlers even came to America<sup>11</sup>.

Other possible reasons for the split run along social boundaries. Some members had been told that the reason for the division was that the members of the Dutch church wanted the freedom to join secret societies, such as the freemasons.<sup>12</sup> According to The Church in History, the Christian Reformed Church was officially organized at a meeting of Classis Holland in 1857. In the 1870s, members of the CRC left the Dutch Reformed churches when the Dutch church failed to take a “positive stand against Free Masonry.”<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the men of Dispatch did want to join the freemasons, and formed their own church so that they would be able to do so. I do not know if this theory holds any truth, as records of the freemasons are hard to access, but the timeline does match with that of the churches in Dispatch. Another theory was that the members of the Dutch church felt that drinking and dancing were unholy acts.<sup>14</sup> These beliefs were finite, and not up for debate. Like the theory about the secret societies, those who disagreed founded the CRC. This theory made more sense to me, as I know that my Great-Great grandparents, Hilvert and Anna Schreuder, had a home brewery in their cellar. Hilvert was a founding member and elder in the Christian Reformed Church.

The most common reason I was given for the schism was that “Well, that church was over there, and our church was over here, so they had two cemeteries.”<sup>15</sup> While comical, I found

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<sup>11</sup> Ileen Koops Tanis, letter to author, April 4, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Congregation, Dispatch Christian Reformed Church, interview by Jillian Hocking, field notes, April 11, 2010, Dispatch, KS.

<sup>13</sup> B.K. Kuiper, *The Church in History* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 364.

<sup>14</sup> Congregation, Dispatch Christian Reformed Church, interview by Jillian Hocking, field notes, April 11, 2010, Dispatch, KS.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

it hard to believe that such a small town would need two churches that were essentially the same in theological beliefs, and only a mile apart. What I found in my research, speaking to church members, my grandmother, and many people in the community, was that the reason the churches divided isn't important anymore. When the Dutch Reformed Church was forced to close its doors because of dwindling members, the Christian Reformed Church welcomed its members with open arms and warm hearts. Today, the Christian Church is all that is left of Dispatch.

The general store, opened in 1891 by the Dolfin brothers, closed in 1956.<sup>16</sup> The only evidence of the store is an indentation in the ground where it used to be located, directly across from the church. The town itself, with its few shops and residents, is completely destroyed. The only establishments left are the church and parsonage, a modern home, and the two cemeteries, a mile apart. However, as the gracious members of the Christian Reformed Church welcomed me, I came to realize that the differences of the past really don't matter to the people who call Dispatch home. The church, and their faith, keeps the community together, much as the original settlers believed was necessary. And while the town of Dispatch may be gone, the church is still strong and a great uniting factor in the lives of the proud Dutch descendents in the area.

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<sup>16</sup> Mrs. Harold E. Senti. *Lincoln Township, Smith County, Kansas*, n.p., n.d.

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