



“We never felt poor,” she said.

Both of my parents were brought up on farms near two small towns in Wisconsin populated by Hollanders. Unexpectedly, my mother’s mother married a German. They soon had five daughters and a son. One day my grandfather received a letter from The Kaiser in Germany. My grandfather was instructed to return to Germany to join the army and fight in WW-1. He did not wish to leave his family to go to war in Europe so he went to the county courthouse to ask if he would be required to do so. “No need,” he was told. Good fortune! Tragically, a worse evil soon struck him. The Spanish flu pandemic of 1918, the deadliest in history, infected an estimated 500 million people worldwide — about one-third of the planet’s population. It killed an estimated 20 million to 50 million victims, including some 675,000 Americans. My grandfather contracted this flu. He did not die, but forever after he could not work on his farm, nor did he speak. Because he did not die, his family was not entitled to county welfare support. His son, then 13, got a lifelong dent in his head from trying to saddle a horse. Would they lose the farm? My mother was 7. When I was 7 she would often say to me, “If you don’t work, you don’t eat.”

After many years the family all passed away except for my mother’s youngest sister, she the last one of her generation. Only then did she reveal to me the rest of the story. In those days one did not go to a bank to get a mortgage. The Ackermans had gotten their loan from another family in their church, the Grotenhuises. Needing to feed eight mouths without a working husband, my grandmother could not make the contracted mortgage payments. My dear old auntie wanted me to understand that in our church there were many other families who would have pushed us off of the farm. But not the Grotenhuis family. --Jon Claerbout

