

JUST DAD

STORIES OF HERMAN HOEKSEMA  
**JUST DAD**

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*In memory of my beloved husband, Chuck,  
who went to glory in March, 2014*

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## PREFACE

It was never my intention to write the story of my father's life. My sister-in-law, Gertrude Hoeksema, had already done that as the author of *Therefore Have I Spoken*. She came to me shortly after Dad died in September of 1965 and said, "Someone ought to write a biography of Dad, and I think I should be the one to do it." I simply said, "Go ahead if you want to." And she did.

Not long ago that book went out of print. The Reformed Free Publishing Association approached me regarding possible changes, since they did not want to reprint the book as it was. I did not simply want to add to it or revise it, if that were even ethical. Yet I had always been aware that Trude was in her twenties before she married my brother Homer, and that she could not have experienced life with our family in the parsonage.

So I decided to tell Dad's story myself, and this is the finished product: a book of tales for the telling and for remembering Dad with love.

## *Chapter 1*



# GRONINGEN

**H**erman Hoeksema was many things: preacher, teacher, student, scholar, blacksmith, carpenter, artist; but to me, he was just Dad.

I did not hear about his early life as a continuous story simply related to me like a novel. It was not like that at all. Rather, the family often gravitated to the living room for a while after the dishes were done, unless Dad had a meeting to lead or a catechism class to teach. If he was spending the evening at home, we might ask him to tell us a story.

We liked his stories; some of them went back to his childhood, some to his youth and adolescence, but all told of a life of which we knew nothing, a life of the streets. It makes you wonder at the ways of God. Why would God choose this waif, toughened and schooled in the ways of the street, to be his faithful servant for so many years? It reminds me of a favorite theme of Dad's, one he often voiced in his sermons: God sometimes chooses the most unlikely persons to be his servants, so that he may receive the

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glory. This book is an attempt to make a continuous story out of the bits and pieces he told us about his life.

My earliest memory of him is of the day his beloved mother died. I was around three years old. My mother set me on that old mohair davenport in the living room and said, “You must be very quiet today around Papa because his mother died, and he will be very sad.”

I have only a faint memory of his mother. We called her “Chicago Grandma” because she lived in Chicago and our other grandma, my mother’s mother, lived in Grand Rapids. We had a picture of Chicago Grandma that showed a rather slim woman, dressed in black, sitting in a straight chair with an open Bible in her lap.

I was my father’s youngest daughter. The parsonage at 1139 Franklin Street in Grand Rapids, Michigan, is the only home I remember until I was married. It was a big house: upstairs were

four bedrooms, a hall that ran the length of the house from front to back, one and a half baths, and a door that opened onto a tin deck, used at various times for sunning, for airing clothes, or for housing pigeons. At the front of the hall was my father’s study. There was another door next to it that led to the attic; we might not play there because there was no railing around the stairwell.

Downstairs was a living room, dining room, sun room, office (and reception room for callers),



*Dad's mother, Johanna Bakkema  
(Chicago Grandma)*



breakfast room, kitchen, pantry, hallway, half bath, and play-room-sewing room. Between the kitchen and breakfast room was a swinging door. Behind that door was a button. The button was connected to a buzzer that rang in Dad's study. My mother used that buzzer to summon my father if he had a caller, that is, if he had a caller whom Mom deemed worthy to invite in. She did not lightly invite a caller to come in. If she had, Dad would have gotten little of his work done. If the buzzer in the study rang, Dad would come downstairs. Mom did not often make a mistake.

We called the room to the left of the front doorway and hall the office. Dad received most of his callers there. It also housed our piano, and sometimes we studied in that room or learned our assigned scripture verses on Sunday afternoons, a ritual reserved only for my brother Homer and me. (When my sisters were little, they learned the Heidelberg Catechism; I do not know what my brother Herm learned. Today I thank my dad for it.) That was the house where I grew up.

Often after dinner the family would gather for a while in the living room. Usually it was one of my brothers who would beg Dad for a story. If Dad had to leave in a few minutes to go next door to church for a meeting, or to teach a catechism class, he would have to refuse. But sometimes he would begin, "There was a farmer who had a little pig, and that pig had a curly tail, and oh! That farmer was mad." We would say, "Not that one; that isn't a story. Tell us a real one. Tell us about the time the farmer held you under his pump." We knew most of his stories, but we enjoyed hearing them again.

My father and his cronies had been urchins on the streets of Groningen in the Netherlands. How did this happen?

Dad's mother, Johanna Bakema, had married Tiele Hoeksema, a handsome cobbler. How this had come to be, I do not

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*Tiele Hoeksema, Dad's father*

know. Whether Johanna's parents disapproved, I do not know. Dad never spoke of any relatives or grandparents except for his Uncle Lulof, his mother's brother. I wish we had asked him.

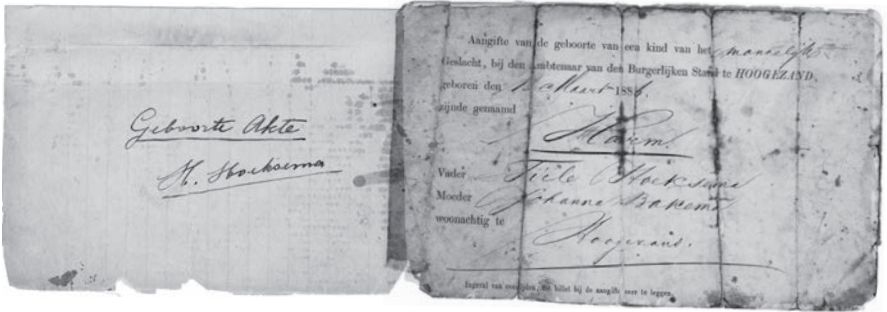
Johanna and Tiele moved out of Groningen to a suburb called Hoogezaand. There Everdiene, their only daughter, was born. Three sons followed: Harm (my father), Albert, and John. Even before Harm was born, Tiele had taken to drinking and philandering. When my father was born on March 12, 1886, Tiele

was too drunk to register the birth, and it was March 13 before he went to the clerk's office. Thereafter Dad celebrated his birthday on March 13, but he often said, a little ruefully, that it should have been celebrated on March 12. Finally Tiele abandoned his family altogether and joined the military service of the Netherlands. It would be many years before they heard from him.

Johanna was in desperate straits, but she was strong and resourceful. She moved her family back to the more densely populated city of Groningen, found lodging that opened on the street, and let it be known that she was a good seamstress. Soon she found as many customers as she could satisfy. It was a meager income and out of it she first set aside money for the church they attended and for the Christian school, thereby setting an example for all of her children and grandchildren.

Their home was one room. They had a bed in the wall, and the whole family slept in it. In order to fit they had to lie in opposite directions, so that one's feet were in the other's face—"his

## GRONINGEN



*Dad's birth certificate*



*Dad's boyhood home*

dirty feet,” as Dad once said from the pulpit, to the chagrin of my mother.

Because she worked as a seamstress in the homes of wealthy clients, Johanna had to be away from her children all day, with only the neighbors trying to keep an eye on them. Everdiene, the oldest, was only a child herself. Who can even begin to imagine that situation? There were no toys or books, nothing but a bare room. Their chairs and table were cardboard boxes.

In those days there was much class distinction. The poor were

despised, even in the church, to its shame. The church did not help them at all but looked down on them.

Periodically the bread wagon would come around. Harm and his siblings hated to go there and did so only when they were famished. They had to stand and wait for the piece of dark bread that was thrown to them and then submit to a humiliating search of their pockets to make sure they took no bread home with them. That was how the government helped its poor.

At home in that bare room Harm tried to amuse his younger brothers. He would take a crumb, tie it to a piece of string, and lure one of the many mice out of its hole in the wall. Then he would pull the string around the room just out of the animal's reach, while his brothers looked on in delight.

When that got tiresome, he took to the streets. At five years old he was an urchin on the streets of Groningen. It was not long before Harm found friends who were also looking for fun—and sometimes food. That was how it came to be that Harm and his cronies were stealing apples from a farmer on their way home from school. Usually they posted a lookout, but the lookout was slow to give warning, and the farmer discovered them. All of the boys got away except Harm, who was short and stocky, and slow of foot. The farmer caught him and doused him under the water pump. Harm went home soaking wet and without any apples. This was one of our favorite stories.

On Sundays Johanna took the children to church and also taught them catechism, scripture, psalms, and whatever was good for them. She was strict about Sabbath observance, almost legalistic. One Saturday night, after she had been working all day, she remembered that she had not sewn the white collar on her only black dress. She quickly wielded her needle and her task was finished. Then she glanced at the clock and realized that it was past

midnight and already Sunday. Just as quickly she took out the stitches, and on Sunday she wore the dress without the white collar. Dad himself never was quite so legalistic about the Lord's day, but he respected his mother for her piety, for he himself told us this story about her.

Harm and his buddies did much of their mischief when they were on their way home from school. Sometimes the boys would stop at the back of the syrup factory, where there were barrels of syrup stored. While a lookout was posted, they would pry off the cover of a barrel of syrup, dip a fist into the sticky stuff, and run, licking off the syrup as they ran.

All of the boys smoked clay pipes. For tobacco they used cigar butts picked off the streets. Sometimes they would fill their clay pipes with water, and then one of them would approach a gentleman who was smoking a cigar and ask, "A light, *Mijnheer*?" When the gentleman obliged, he would douse the man's cigar, and the boys would run away laughing.

Sometimes Harm would offer to entertain some of those same gentlemen with some poem or a section from scripture. The gentleman understood, of course, that he would have to reward the lad. Then Harm would take his coins and buy a little candy or tobacco.

Many of his exploits involved food; the reason for that is not hard to see. He was hungry, always hungry. Sometimes the boys could not resist the smell of the fresh-baked bread on the back of the bakery wagon, and they would steal a loaf or two and run, eating as they ran. This was one of the stories my mother did not like him to tell us. She might say as we were gathered in the living room, "Not that one, Harm." (She still sometimes called him Harm, his Dutch name, which he changed to Herman when he emigrated to the United States.) My mother probably thought we

might get the idea that stealing was sometimes permissible, but that was not the case.

The story did, however, evoke sympathy for those who were so hungry that they would even steal to satisfy their hunger. As for Dad, his feelings showed in his preaching. He sometimes admonished the employers in the congregation to pay their employees a just wage, even when he had to warn the workers against membership in the ungodly labor unions. This was especially true during the Great Depression.

As Harm and his buddies became older, around eleven or so, their exploits became bolder. We enjoyed hearing about those adventures too. We might say, “Tell us about the time you got caught swimming in the canal.”

Harm and his pals had been swimming in one of the canals, an activity that was forbidden by law. A policeman saw him swimming, holding his clothing above his head, and called to him to come back to shore. Instead, Harm swam to the other side, donned his clothes, thumbed his nose at the policeman, and ran. My mother did not like that story. It is easy to see why. It was probably one of our favorites, perhaps because Dad was such a firm disciplinarian, and we took some comfort in the fact that he once could have used a firm hand himself.

It was about this time in his life that his father suddenly appeared on the scene. One day as Harm was on his way home from school, he felt a firm hand on his collar and looked up to see the face of his father. He must have sensed it was his father because Harm could scarcely have recognized him after he had not seen him for so many years. His father intended to take him to the place where he was living. Harm struggled with him in an effort to get away, but to no avail.

Then he tried a ruse. He told his father that he had to use

the street urinal, and when his father relinquished his grasp, he ran. As usual, he was slow, and his father quickly recaptured him and took him to his lodgings. Harm began screaming and yelling, and he made such a commotion that his dad was glad to release him and send him on his way. Thereafter his Uncle Lulof, his mother's brother, helped Johanna get separate maintenance (what we would call a restraining order or a personal protection order—something very unusual in those days), so that never again was Harm bothered by his dad.

I remember asking Dad if he thought his father really had a soft spot for him, and he just said, as he looked away, "I don't know." But I always thought that deep down he wished for a real dad.

In the winter the boys went skating on the canals. The winters were not as cold as ours in Michigan, and the ice was never very thick. Harm still tended to be rather clumsy and sometimes fell through; yet he always came back for more. Skating was always a favorite sport of his. Even later on if nearby Reeds Lake in Grand Rapids was frozen over, he would find time to do a little skating.

When Harm was finished with grade school, his mother faced the question of where he should go next. He had done well in school, but he was not the top scholar. Again they consulted with Uncle Lulof, Johanna's brother, who suggested that Harm should try for a scholarship at Ambacht School. There were two students equally worthy of a scholarship. Harm was one of them. Harm's mother was to choose the piece of paper with the name of the winner on it. She reached for the slip farthest from her, then changed her mind, and her good manners took over: "No, I was taught to take the closest," she said. That was the winner.

Harm was to go to Ambacht School. Harm's mother said quietly, "That was the hand of God."

Ambacht School was a school where one could learn a trade, but it was more. A student could also pursue an avocation, something that would enrich his life for years to come. Harm learned to paint with oils there, even though he pursued the trade of blacksmithing. Uncle Lulof was a blacksmith and that influenced Harm, no doubt. Those days at Ambacht School were happy ones for him, and he often talked about them. His life on the streets was over, but his propensity for mischief was not.

He liked and respected his teachers—except for one: the students called him “*De peukel*” (the pimple), for obvious reasons. He was dull and crabby and not likable. The boys were not charitable to him either.

One morning, after the boys had snowballed him after he came to school and he was in a foul mood, he decided to take it out on a student who had misbehaved. After calling the boy to the front of the room, he asked him, “*Sta je goed?*” (“Are you ready?”) And then in front of the whole class he gave the boy a kick that sent him flying across the room. He lay there for a few moments, while the class sat stunned and disbelieving. In the silence that followed, Harm said in a clear voice, “*Wat gemeen!*” (“How mean!”) For that the teacher promptly sent him to the principal’s office. Soon he returned and took his seat, saying nothing. When the teacher could no longer contain himself, he said to Harm, “Well, did you tell the principal?” Harm replied, “Yes.” Then the teacher said, “What did he say?” “He said, ‘Tell your teacher that I have no time for such trifles.’” When Dad told us this story, you could tell that he was reliving the story and enjoying it in the telling.

Those days at Ambacht School passed swiftly for Harm. At graduation he received a silver watch. He was fifteen and had learned many skills that would later prove useful and enriching, but for now he had to have a job.



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He was apprenticed to a country blacksmith for thirty dollars a year plus room and board. It was another experience that increased his sympathy for the laboring man. Each day he was awakened at four o'clock, and he could not go to bed until ten o'clock at night. He spent each day sharpening plowshares and shoeing horses. He had to make both the shoes and the nails. The work was exhausting and the hours were long, but he rather enjoyed it in spite of the scars he received from the work. (He could identify these scars for us when we asked him.)



*Dad (Harm) at sixteen*

What he did not enjoy was the niggardliness and hypocrisy of the country blacksmith. Again Harm was hungry. The portions of food were small, and if Harm asked for a little more, he was refused. Even worse than that, when the man was about to ask a blessing, he held his cap over his face and said, "Let's peek in the cap a moment," and proceeded to mumble a few meaningless words. Harm was repelled.

After his year of apprenticeship was finished, Harm left that job and went to work for a blacksmith in Groningen who made ornamental fences. Harm took pride in that work, and many years later when he returned for a visit, he could still identify some of the fences he had made. He could once more live with his family too, although he never told us where they were living and if their situation had improved. We never thought to ask him, perhaps because we were so young when he told us these stories. His own financial situation was better: he was earning more money as an iron worker and even saving some.