

## IN QUEST OF VOORHEES, HOLLAND

### The Quest of 1937

In the late Summer of 1937 I left Amsterdam by automobile to find the village of Hees. I had gotten, in Amsterdam, a good road map that showed Hees to be near Ruinen. My companion was another architect. Together we were confident that we could read the map and find Hees. We drove north from Amsterdam, across the great dyke (Afsluitdijk) which separates the Zuider Zee (now IJsselmeer) from the North Sea, down through Friesland to Meppel in the province of Drenthe, and thence eastward on a country road to Ruinen where we arrived late in the afternoon. Here our map failed us. It was getting dark, the day had been rainy and cold and we were chilled to the bone, so we decided to give up the quest and head for Zwolle where we had arranged to spend the night.

As Dirk, our chauffeur, swung the car around, our headlights picked up the name of a cafe "S. Hees, Proprietor." This stopped us. We went in to get from Proprietor Hees the location of Hees. While Dirk was doing his best to get the directions, Russell and I had some jenever (Dutch gin). It was most gratifying - warmed us from within. But it was not joyful. I learned later that the taste must be acquired.

Dirk was having a tough time communicating with the proprietor since he spoke Dutch according to the usage of Gouda, his home, and the proprietor spoke according to the usage of Ruinen. However, we got enough information to indicate the route, so off we went in the gloom and downpour, taking first a road to the right, then a left turn, and then across "two bridges." We had arrived on a country road surrounded with soggy fields - no houses. Now we were frustrated and so decided to go back to Ruinen and on to Zwolle. When we came to the next crossroad, we found a sign pointing to our left saying "HEES, 2 K.M." We made these two kilometers in no time flat and came upon a cluster of three or four houses.

We sent Dirk to find if this was the village of Hees. He came back with a teenager who spoke excellent English and told us this was Hees, and moreover he knew where Voorhees was. So we went down the road a way and came to a house back in a wide field which we crossed, with mud up to our shoe tops in places. Here we found a family of father and mother and two children in a small brick outhouse used for cooking. When they learned our mission, they invited us in to the main house which, as usual, was one end of the barn. As they went in they kicked off their klompen (sabot) and walked with stocking feet - heavy woolen ones. We felt we ought to take off our shoes also. The floor was wood and as highly polished as a table top. But we did not have the right kind of socks, so at the insistence of the family and stepping very lightly, we edged into the living room. The mother assured us that this was Voorhees and to prove it looked for her insurance policy, but unsuccessfully. So, after a little visit, we left for Zwolle.

My impression of Voorhees was very low. All I had seen was soggy flat lands and a few rather small house-barns. It was obviously not as rich country as Friesland where there were large barns and fine cattle. The land was poor and much of the province was moor land and peat bogs. It seemed quite obvious why our ancestor left for the bright prospects in America but I wondered where he got the money to make the purchases of land and other farm property when he arrived at Gravesend in Long Island.

We spent a comfortable night in a Zwolle hotel after a delicious dinner. The next morning was bright and clear, blue sky filled with white puff clouds. The contrast was so great from the previous day that it made me think even less of Hees. We motored back to Amsterdam through Deventer, Zutphen, Apeldoorn and Hilversum - all beautiful towns surrounded by lovely country.

#### The Quest of 1960

When we arranged - my sister, Margaretta, and I - for our cruise through the canals of northeastern Holland in the Summer of 1960, we decided to make another and longer visit to Hees to see if it was really as dreary as I remembered it. We tied up our yacht, the "Alicante", at Kampen, hired a car and motored to Ruinen and Hees through Zwolle and Meppel, a distance of thirty miles. It was a glorious day - blue skies, puff clouds and a gentle breeze, and that iridescent atmosphere so characteristic of Holland.

When we arrived in Ruinen we found the "Hees Cafe" still going, so we went in for directions which were given by the proprietor in English this time. So we took off to find Hees. With me this time, in addition to my sister Margaretta, was Mrs. Frances Black, the widow of a Dutchman and quite at home in the Dutch language. We found the same cluster of three or four houses that I saw in 1937; also the signpost pointing to "Hees, 2 K. M." Everything was bright and cheery, the farmers were getting in their hay, and the whole aspect was so different from my memory of it that I was really thrilled.

I was taking a picture of a group of farm buildings when a woman standing by one of them beckoned me to come in. I did so. She took me in to the barn to show me a dozen little pigs, apparently here great pride. Well, I remembered enough of my farm experience to appreciate what a nice litter it was. Then we asked if she would take us into her living room which she was glad to do, together with her mother and the rest of the family.

The living room was most interesting. The walls were finished in a blueish white tile from floor to ceiling, with decorated tile around the windows and doors. The floor was wood, highly polished. One end of the room was paneled in wood, some of the panels being doors which, when opened, revealed berths - good sleeping in cold and drafty rooms. I had seen the same thing in the cold parts of Norway.

Also in the room was a beautiful wooden wardrobe. The old mother opened it to show us her wedding garments including a gold casque. I had read that the women of Friesland wore these casques but I never expected to see one outside of a museum. The casque is made of two sections of gold sheet fitting the head tightly, over which a lace cap is worn. The rest of her wardrobe was equally interesting. We left with very happy memories of a very nice family, most cordial: and, furthermore, that the home was in Voorhees.

We had a good lunch on a terrace in front of a cafe in Ruinen - not the Hees Cafe - and were waited on by a young man who spoke excellent English which he had learned at school.

We then went over to the church in Ruinen where I think our ancestors must have worshipped. It is very early architecture, not too large but very spacious and dignified. Unfortunately the Dominie was away but his assistant and a neighbor showed us around. In the late afternoon we motored back to Kampen and the "Alicante."

From this trip I have a very pleasant memory of Hees. In the twenty odd years that had elapsed, much had been done to improve the economics of the province. Means had been found to make the land more fertile after the removal of the peat; housing additions had been built to the barns, and it looked good.

A few days later on our cruise we arrived at Assen, the capital of Drenthe. Here, through an introduction from Mr. Sinclair of the Van Voorhees Association, I called on Dr. Schaap, who is doing some research work in Voorhees to find out about the ancestors previous to their migration to America. He spoke excellent English and told me some of the results of his investigation. The most important to me was that the name of Hees is the name of a district and not of a village. He said that Voorhees should properly be translated as "near Hees", having reference to Ruinen. He said there were other areas such as Middel Hees.

All of this was in accord with my own observations. I am convinced that we came from the region of Hees - not a village - being that portion of the region that is nearest Ruinen. Also that it probably was a pleasant place, even if not too fertile. Our ancestors were wise - very wise - in coming to America in 1660, with its greater opportunities which their descendents have so well exploited.

*J. F. Van Hees*