

(Impromptu talk given by Flora Fox at the 2006 Abel Tasman conference at Dunally)

THE NETHERLANDS, MARINERS AND TASMANIA, A FAMILY STORY OF CONTINUING CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

by Flora Fox- Meerding

My childhood memories include meeting and mixing with Dutch ships' officers from the 1950s onwards, when the Meerding family initiated and developed cultural interactions between Dutch migrants, mariners and Tasmania.

Henk & Mia Meerding migrated on the ship, the Johan Vanoldenbarneveld, from the Netherlands in 1952 with their 1 year old twin daughters, Flora and Els. In 1954 their first son Khen was born, followed by Mike in 1959.

Henk, a qualified motor mechanic, initially worked in Hobart repairing trucks and buses for Donald Gorringer and Pioneer Tours. In 1953 he established his own car repair business, working in Franklin, Blackmans Bay and Kingston, with Mia as his qualified secretary, bookkeeper and partner in the business. In 1960 they bought and managed the Shell Blackmans Bay Service Station and Garage, which is still owned by the family.

Life involved much letter writing and reading to and from family back in Holland. They felt isolated from their families and home country. Mia regularly listened to Radio Netherlands. Not being members of any church, they longed for the company of like-minded people from home. They had many Dutch and Australian friends, but were always eager to hear Dutch news and meet people fresh from the old country.

The family always spoke Dutch when at home or together without visitors. The children were all bi-lingual by the age of two and learnt to read and write Dutch at home at the same time as learning English at school. Later they studied formal Dutch courses at Hobart Matriculation College, courtesy of a Melbourne University.

In 1961 the family visited Holland together for six months, traveling by P & O cruise ships, the Orion there and the Oronsay on the return journey, via the Suez Canal both ways. The children met their relatives and all their cousins. Three of those cousins were to become officers in the Dutch Merchant Navy.

From their Blackmans Bay home, Henk and Mia scanned the horizon and the Mercury Shipping News for movements of Dutch ships. With their binoculars they quickly recognized the distinctive triangles within the emblem of the Dutch vessels on the funnel and the horizontal red, white and blue stripes of the Dutch flag at the stern. The "Straat" ships were common. They knew what it was like to be a long way from family in Holland. They wanted to connect with the Dutch mariners during their short visits and to show them Tasmania, their new home, which they loved very much.

Around 1962 Henk and Mia bought a Holden station wagon. They now had room to take extra passengers in the family car. A telephone call to the Zinc Works wharf as soon as a cargo ship had berthed resulted in eager acceptance of local Dutch hospitality by the captain and officers. The family offered a trip up Mount Wellington or a day trip in the family car, followed by a home cooked meal.

Usually Hobart was the ship's first port of call after South Africa. Cadbury's spilt cocoa beans crunched underfoot as the family skirted around the stacks of shiny zinc ingots awaiting loading near the gang-way.

Day trips included visiting Russell Falls, the Huon Valley and Hartz Mountains, or a picnic in the dunes at South Arm Peninsula. We children would pile into the back of the station wagon, leaving room for three officers as passengers. The ship's captain had first right of refusal, of course. Speaking Dutch with well-educated ships' captains, navigators and engineers improved the family's language skills while giving them the opportunity to show off Tasmania with pride.



South Arm Dunes Picnic, 1962.

(Left to Right) Henk Meerding, Els Meerding, Dutch Maritime Officer, Mr Bessen, Mia Meerding

The captain or officers sometimes reciprocated with drinks on board and a tour of the engine room when they were returned to the ship. Occasionally they invited the family to a ship's meal, depending on how long the ship was in port.

Repeat visits ensued, with officers booking ahead and sometimes the guest numbers were more than we could fit in the family car. This regularly led to roping in Dutch friends and organizing parties with Dutch food, hospitality and dancing, either on the ship or in our homes.

In 1970 a request from two visiting Dutch Navy ships for a large party, led to the formation of the Abel Tasman Dutch Australian Club. Henk and Mia were elected to the inaugural committee and they continued to be actively involved in fostering Dutch Australian cultural interactions until Mia died in 1988, followed by Henk in 1991.

Henk and Mia's children and grandchildren continue to maintain their Dutch language skills by keeping in contact with family and friends and regular exchange visits between Tasmania and the Netherlands.

Members of the family continue their involvement in activities, which include:

- participating in the Abel Tasman Dutch Australian Club;
- the sister-city relationship between Kingborough and the Netherlands municipality of Grootegast, (Abel Tasman's place of birth.); and
- Assisting the maintenance of cultural connections between Dutch visitors, migrants and the Tasmanian community.

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