

A look back at our Dutch Association "Concordia" founded in 1957.

Late: Pierre Hanssen – Edited: Joop de Wit

In the early years of emigration, many Dutch emigrants settled near Newcastle. The reason for this was probably the employment provided by the then B.H.P. steel & blast furnace factory, it gave many Dutch emigrants a fairly secure and average-paid job. Soon these Dutchmen came together and some of them built up a kind of Dutch-Australian association. Names such as Aart Schelling and also the Australian Don Thompson were the leaders in those days who made it a bit more pleasant for the "Dutch People" to get through the most difficult time. They paid 2 Shilling (A\$1.65) and then became a member for life, which I personally found a bit naive/incorrect and if you look at it now, I was indeed right. In a room in Wallsend South where party evenings were regularly organised and with a zinc tub full of ice and beer, a record player that played Dutch music, the worries and the sometimes-acute homesickness were forgotten for a while. Transport difficulties were solved by having people sometimes collecting the visitors even on motorbikes etc. In 1956 Mr Paul Mansfield got it into his head to start a drama club and after the first play "SHED ON BOARD" the enthusiasm was so great that more would follow. After a major disagreement with the then board, the theatre club separated from the main group and when the Australian-Dutch club ceased to exist in 1957, the current NEDERLANDSE VERENIGING CONCORDIA was born from the theatre club. I remember very clearly the trip I made in July 1957 to Sydney to the office of the Chief Secretary's Department, a state office responsible for foreign associations. This was to present our bylaws and thereby obtain an application for approval as a registered association. Thus, we were officially registered as a "Charitable organisation". Concordia was officially given the right to call itself "THE DUTCH SOCIETY CONCORDIA" as it still does so today.

The activities of the association mainly consisted of theatre evenings, followed by about 2 hours of dancing after the performance. In 1965 the theatre club was unfortunately closed as the supply of young players stopped because the emigration from the Netherlands fell to almost zero. It was already said then that the "Dutch club" would not exist for long, now many years later the club is still as alive as when we started in 1957. Of course, there are also many perilous moments in the existence of the club and there were times that I personally have felt at times to put it down, but the trust I have always had in my fellow committee members and in the Dutch people in general have become the reason that we are still here today. The lean years were mainly after the disbanding of the drama club. At that time, the club only consisted of dance evenings. The much-needed finances of our association had to come from the still very young emigrant families. Most of these families were therefore also stuck with young children, so that it was not always possible to visit a pleasant dance evening. The income from these dance evenings was not always enough to cover the expenses for such an evening. We then organized weekly "Bingo" evenings in order to get a little money in the till. At that time, the Grootjans family and also the van den Heuvel family always made their homes available, and the association sometimes made the "beautiful" profit of 11 to 12 dollars on such an evening. I was also happy that the calling out of the bingo numbers was over for me.

During the late sixties the K.L.M. started group travel and charter flights to the Netherlands, it became a bit of "The Golden Age" for Concordia. The people who wanted to fly had to pay half the cost when booking, this had to be paid to Concordia and we paid the rest 14 days before the flight. Concordia needed however, sending the money only 14 days before the flight date always had a large amount in the bank, which in turn deposited a nice sum of interest in the association cash account. We also received a small commission for every flight sold from the K.L.M. Yes, that was a very good and profitable time.

There have been several subdivisions in the club over the years such as the Theatre group which has existed for about 8 years under Concordia and has given 32 plays. We had a Football club that had to close after 3 years because of the very high costs. There has been a Dutch dance

group that has existed for about **5** years, which I found to be one of the main groups that brought out our **Dutch** culture. Unfortunately, due to not having too many members participating it had ceased to exist. We also had a card club that lasted much longer, I'm sorry I can't say exactly how long. We have known **3 Instuif groups** in the past, all of them no longer active today, the last one was the **"Marmong Instuif."** This group was under the leadership of the **Rev. Foppe** and **Aaltje Brouwer**, both are now deceased. This leadership was taken over by **Lucia Reynders** with assistance of others. However, the property where the Instuif was being held had to remain in church hands, due to declining numbers of churchgoers it was passed over to a bigger church group. Also, the declining numbers attending the weekly Instuif and the capacity to manage after Covid, it was the deciding factor to have the Marmong Instuif disbanded.

We also had a carnival group which existed for **12** years which had a very successful life. This cosy group was not able to supplement its continuation due to a shortage of members, this also had to cease to exist. Then there is also the Dutch singing choir **"The Twilight Singers"** Founded in **1986** and is sadly no longer active after **2010**. For all those years, it has propagated the **Dutch** culture to the outside world and has therefore become the longest-standing subsection of our **Dutch** association since its inception. Personally, I was their conductor for all that time and our **Tony Kirchner** took my place in my absence to visit my very ill daughter in the Netherlands for 12 months. I officially started as the **President of Concordia in 1957**, I am proud to say that I have held a leadership role in our beloved club for **50** years. That is why I resigned from the board when I turned **75** years old. For **24** years I was active as the conductor of our choir **"The Twilight Singers"**, due to a large reduction of singers and health reasons of several members, we had to give up in **2010**. This was unfortunately the end of our singing history. The pleasant gatherings that were faithfully provided for a large and different audience and with great listening pleasure also came to a sad ending.

In recent years, the activities of our association have become much less. Less than was organised in those earlier years. It is also very understandable because our core of regular members has grown older and many have lost their partners, which means that the visits to our dance evenings have become less frequently attended. Unfortunately, this aging group no longer wanted to go out on the road in the evening and certainly because the dreaded **"Booze bus" (alcohol control)** came into effect, some of the members didn't dare to take the chance. In addition, the rent for the hall has also increased enormously. **Public liability insurance** costs were also pushed up and the cost of putting an orchestra on stage had become prohibitive. It was our secretary **Joop de Wit** who took over the dance nights with pre-recorded music from records, cassettes, and later CDs.

The afternoons that were being organized in the **Cardiff Workers Club** and the **Cardiff R.S.L.** were very well attended and seem to be very popular with our members, friends, and acquaintances. Since 1999 we only attend to our functions in the Cardiff RSL. A word of thanks to the current committee is certainly in order and especially to our secretary and editor **Joop de Wit**, who always comes up with a nice and pleasant program. **Joop** has also been taking care of the **Concordia** bi-monthly newsletter since 1984. **Concordia** is now the only **Dutch** club in Australia that is a growing concern, which was unique in the history of the many **Dutch** clubs abroad. **Joop** was also the provider of the **Dutch-language** radio program on our local radio station of the **University of Newcastle** commonly known as **2NURFM 103.7**. At the end of **1983** **Joop** started to participate to replace **Ankie Dupree** who was not always able to attend due to her heavy workload. The bi-weekly **Dutch** program management was in the hands of **Henk de Jong** with the assistance of **Ankie Dupree** and **Rinus Lagerwaard**. Since 1985, **Joop** has taken over the **Dutch-language** program after **Henk de Jong** decided to only concentrate on his **jazz** program from the same station. It's so much fun to listen to all those nice familiar **Dutch** melodies from the Newcastle University Radio Station. My wish and hope to be able to enjoy them, thanks **Joop**! Unfortunately, **Joop** had to stop the **Dutch** program after **30** years at the helm. It was the radio station that moved the **Dutch** broadcast from the **Tuesday** night to the **Saturday** night, this was a financial and new programming decision from the

radio station. On any given Saturday **Joop** had to be in the studio by **7pm**, did his program at **8pm**, had to wait till **11pm** to switch the next broadcast direct from the **BBC** in London, after the connection was made, **Joop** could leave to go home. The studio had to be attended at all times by a qualified volunteer presenter for emergency situations, none of the paid presenters were at the station during the weekends. The **Dutch** program was an issue that could not be resolved. If the program was kept on the Tuesday nights, **Joop** was happy to continue, however management was not moveable and **Joop** decided to let the program go after having 30 long years of presenting the great melodies, news from the Netherlands and all the **Concordia** happenings. It was so enjoyable to listen to the **Dutch** music from the past which we all remember with great fondness.

Thinking back over the past since the start in **1957**, I must think of the many people who have had a leading position in our association. Many are no longer with us but have accomplished a very important task in the club. My opinion is that if we forget them now, we are making an unforgivable mistake that cannot be corrected as they all had a relationship in serving our members. They all had the privilege of contributing to the well-being of our association in the past and tomorrow.

There have also been many highlights, too many to remember them all, but most of all I think of the great **St Nicholas** parties which I think we started to organise around **1963** and which the first one was held at '**Tyrell House**' in Newcastle. The **St Nicholas** party is one of the most beautiful events that we were holding every year till **Covid** arrived. After **Covid** we could not muster enough volunteers and some other personal issues that was too difficult to handle, sadly this situation was the cause to discontinue our annual **St. Nicolas** in the park assisted by his many helpers. Our current **St. Nicholas** has been making a quick presence at our adult **Christmas** function in December but now only with one **Piet**. This has been a great success for the past few years. Looking back, every **Dutch** child, member or not, has some beautiful memories. Every year around **300 to 350** people were in attendance, all were enjoying a great day in the park. The highest number of booked children ever was **191**. We thank all the **Sinterklazen** who were always ready to surprise the children whatever the weather event. The current **Concordia** committee is working as hard as possible to drive our **Concordia** forward, it's nice to realise that some of our committee members today were still "**teenagers**" when **Concordia** was born. This is something that gives us the most joy and gives the greatest confidence for the future. At the time of writing, I was almost **90** years old and would still like to see us enjoy our club. Then I can say with joy.... "**It has been worth it**". I still look forward to many pleasant afternoons by wishing you all plenty of fun for the future.

Pierre Hanssen

PS: Unfortunately, **Pierre** passed away on Thursday 3rd December 2015, at the blessed age of **92** years. He died the day after the funeral of his wife **Lenie** who died on Friday 27 November 2015.

FOOTNOTE: The above story has been totally edited and updated by the current secretary **Joop de Wit** since the passing of **Pierre**. I have also translated the **Dutch version** into the **English language**.

There are currently 2,171 Dutch citizens in our **Newcastle** region which officially placed us as the number **10** in our local Ancestry of citizens, latest Census was held in **2021**. **Next census 2026**

Numbers of Dutch citizens: 2,171

Percentage of all citizens: 1.3%

Regional percentage of citizens: 1.4%

Change since the last census in 2016: 381 new Dutch additions in our region as per the **2021** census.

Joop de Wit

Hon. Secretary / Editor / PR officer

Dutch Society Concordia - Newcastle and Hunter region