

## CHAPTER THIRTY

## THE DOORHOUSE

**The Wieman Family<sup>1</sup>**

Piet Wieman (42), a joiner and also owner of an ironmonger's store in Schalkwijk, a town located in the province of Utrecht, together with his wife Aagje Wieman nee Vosmeer (37) and their twelve children, were among many Roman Catholics to take the plunge and to migrate to Australia in the early 1950s, even though they were among the minority of more affluent Dutch families in the Netherlands at that time. In contrast to the majority of the population, they already owned a home of their own. Be that as it may, after a great deal of deliberation, Piet and Aagje had come to believe that their many children stood a greater chance at economic success post-war in Australia. Unemployment, underemployment, severe housing shortages and rationed fuel, food and clothing typified the economic and social climate of the Netherlands after WWII. Consequently the mood of the populace was extremely gloomy as they were unable to see a future for themselves. Furthermore the Monarchy and Government were also urging people to emigrate, to find a future in other lands.

Prospective emigrants were enticed with placards, fliers and brochures showing Australia's booming industries, boundless self-employment opportunities and full employment economy with good working conditions. This was a place where an immigrant could own their own motor vehicle and a home filled with electrical goods. This level of materialism was not on the radar of possibilities after the war in the Netherlands. Furthermore, it could be reached with 'passage assistance', to which the Australian and Netherlands governments contributed. Passage assistance was not, however, relevant to the self-funded Wiemans. They had decided to pay the family's passage from the proceeds of the sale of their Schalkwijk family home and business. Passage assistance being heavily means tested by the Dutch Government, this may well have been the more economical way out for the family.

Originally their intention was to migrate to New Zealand, but after having purchased a house in Auckland, the New Zealand government rejected their application to enter New Zealand due to the large size of the family and Perth in Western Australia was their next choice.

In preparation for their migration the Wiemans sold their home and business, then 'farmed out' the younger children to kin and friends, while they packed the furniture and other domestic goods into large shipping containers for transport to Australia by freighter. Most of their personal items went into suitcases so that they would be available on the *SS Waterman*, the passenger liner that was to take them to Australia.

The day before departure, all the children were collected from relatives. The following morning, 7 August 1954, after a hasty breakfast and nervous

goodbyes to neighbours and friends, the family travelled to Lloyd Kade (Lloyd Quay), Rotterdam harbour to board the *SS Waterman*. A troop ship, it had only recently been converted to a migrant ship. Once on board, being such a large family, they were allocated four cabins.

Piet Wieman was seasick the entire voyage. Aagje was therefore kept extremely busy attending to the welfare of all their children. Despite having to help with the younger children, the Wieman's two teenage daughters thoroughly enjoyed the attention they attracted from the younger male crew.

The voyage took a lengthy six weeks and one day – via Surinam, Panama Canal, Tahiti, Wellington (New Zealand), Melbourne and finally ended in Fremantle WA. The food was simple and the four allocated cabins were basic and crowded with such a large family.

The *SS Waterman* berthed at Fremantle Harbour on 19 September 1954. Disembarkation needed some strategic moves to organise twelve children, whose ages ranged from 16 years down to five months: Alie (16) and Leni (15), Hans (13), Karel (12), Ineke (11), Tom (9), Dini (8), Theo (6), Bert (5), André (4), Maria-Anna (2) and Peter (5 months).

On the Quay they had still to clear customs, before the family could board the buses to Holden Camp, the Commonwealth Department of Immigration Accommodation Centre in Northam, which functioned as a 'holding' and reception centre for new arrivals.

A Wheatbelt town situated 98 kilometres from Perth – it was the first accommodation in Western Australia for the majority of non-English speaking migrants and Displaced Persons (DPs) who came to WA from 1949-1966. The Displaced Persons (DPs) who were first to arrive from Europe, were housed in very austere barracks at the Military Camp on Great Eastern Highway. In contrast, the voluntary migrants were placed in barracks in Hutt Street, to the north of the town in the former military hospital. Although only minimally furnished, these unlined barracks were nevertheless in better condition than the structures at the army camp.

Compared to other migrant groups, Dutch migration was overwhelmingly family oriented. Although many womenfolk found it difficult to leave their families behind, they did so because it was considered a woman's duty to accompany the menfolk – to go wherever their husbands chose to earn a living. Dutch Calvinist and Catholics were two religions that promoted emigration.<sup>2</sup> Their clergy also charged Dutch wives – to ensure their family's successful migration by safeguarding their family's spiritual welfare and by creating a *gezellige* (convivial) home in Australia. This was to be wherever the





**Figure 1**  
The 'Doorhouse'. Courtesy: Wieman Family.



**Figure 2**  
Doors become walls.  
Courtesy: Wieman Family.



**Figure 3**  
Weiman family and church.  
Courtesy: Wieman Family.

family had to live – be it reception centres, tents, garages, caravans, tram or train carriages, verandahs or houses.<sup>3</sup>

Most Dutch women remained stay-at-home mums. This is reasonable given the large families under their care. However, the fact that these women also perceived their confinement to the domestic sphere as advantageous, rather than oppressive or subservient or as an outcome of male dominance, adds an interesting element to Dutch resettlement. The women in fact saw it as giving them status. Aagje's experience in fact adds another element to the employment mix, for as well as looking after her large family, she helped with the family business.

The Wiemans found the adjustment from shipboard life to the primitive accommodation in unseasonably hot Northam, very difficult. Two weeks later, they moved into a 'small house' in East Cannington, a suburb of Perth. Not long afterwards they purchased a half-acre (0.4 hectare) vacant block of land at 54 Railway Street, (later called Treasure Road) and now Mallard Way, Queens Park (now also in Cannington).

In the meantime, Piet Wieman commenced work at the joinery business of Peter van Gerrevink and Peter Bakker. Peter van Gerrevink, the son of an acquaintance of the Wiemans, had sponsored them to Australia. Van Gerrevink had also warned them about the shortage of building supplies in Western Australia at that time. His advice prompted Piet to purchase numerous doors from ex-army officer van Winkel. These doors were packed into large crates (2m x 1m x 1m), together with kitchen utensils, a stove, a copper, clothes and many other personal effects and articles considered useful for their resettlement and were all shipped by freighters to Western Australia.

The arrival of the 188 doors from the Netherlands, put paid to any weekend leisure time for Piet for some time to come and in the future. Instead he would spend this time constructing the family home. He began by setting the doors into 'T' bars to form walls and then covering them outside with asbestos cement sheeting. On completion, on the inside the walls were duly covered with wallpaper, on the outside they were painted. Apart from the asbestos cement sheeting and the concrete stumps, Australian materials were only used in the construction of the roof and ceilings. The 'Doorhouse' had four bedrooms, one bathroom and toilet, a laundry and a combined kitchen-living room. Piet also dismantled the crates and used these for flooring and to build cupboards and chairs. The family moved into the partly completed 'Doorhouse' on 19 July 1955, less than a year after their arrival in Australia. This was unusual, as it took most families years of living in partly constructed dwellings before they could afford to finish building their residence. Although at this stage, Aagje and the girls still had to wash the dishes in the concrete trough outside. They did this until the kitchen, laundry and bathroom were finished some weeks later.

Not long after moving into the 'Doorhouse', the opportunity arose for Piet to go into a business partnership with another Dutch migrant Jan Coppens and



**Figure 4**  
Wieman family. Courtesy: Wieman Family.

so the business of door manufacturing was started in a shed at the back of the house, using the name 'Hercules Joinery Works'. The partners made doors and nearly everyone in the family had to pitch in to help to get the business off the ground. Piet's two oldest boys, Hans and Carl, and Aagje, his wife, spent most days on old and homemade machinery, gluing doors together and finishing them off ready for sale. In the meantime the oldest daughter had started work in a Cannington delicatessen, and their next daughter had left school to help her mother look after the large family.

In 1964 the Wieman's purchased a block of land in Mandurah near the beach, and they relocated an old timber framed house from Kwinana onto this property to be used as a holiday home. (This was demolished in 2003 and replaced with 2 new brick dwellings, one used as the new 'beach house' and the other was to become a new home for Maria Anna [Marian] and her husband Ken.)

Jan Coppens left the business partnership in the mid 1960s, but Piet carried on by himself after renaming the business 'Doorhouse Joinery Works'. However, around that time the Canning Shire insisted that he could no longer continue to run the business in Railway Road, as it was gazetted

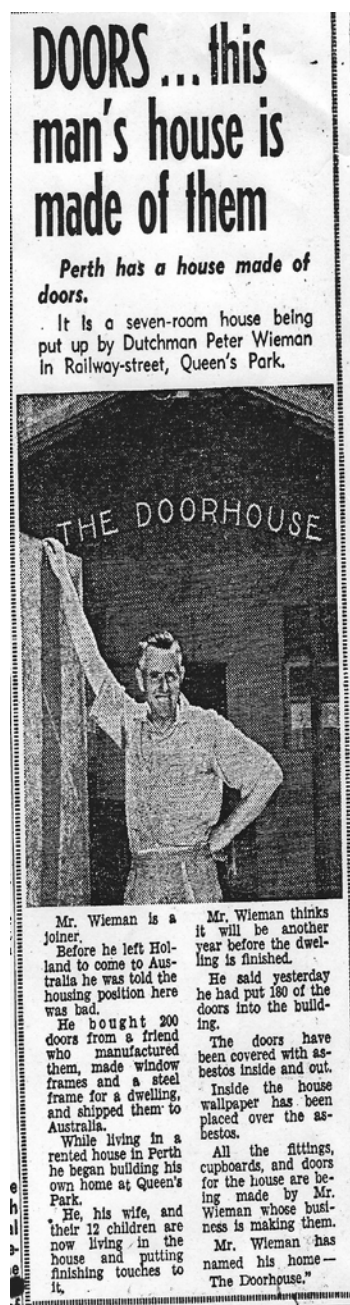


Figure 5  
West Australian Newspapers c 1956.

as residential. This resulted in both the 'Doorhouse Joinery Works' and the family moving to a four hectare industrial property, which had an old 1930s style two-bedroom dwelling upon it. This home was two kilometres away at 232 Welshpool Road, Queens Park. They remodelled the house to accommodate the large family by enclosing the verandahs. However, the children still had to sleep four to a single bedroom. The 'house of doors' in Railway Street was rented out later to other Dutch families. The Wieman family had by then increased in size, with the addition of Frank born in 1959 and Rick in 1961. Seven of the family members were married between the years of 1958 and 1969.

In 1975 Piet and Aagje finally built a new house at 26 Derisleigh Street, Queens Park, which is currently owned by their son Frank. The 'house of doors', commonly known as the 'Doorhouse', was sold in 1985, when it was demolished and replaced with residential units by the new owner.

The 'Doorhouse Joinery' business on Welshpool Road flourished and expanded with the production of jarrah joinery and by importing plywoods and timber from overseas. However, this came to an end when Piet Wieman suffered a serious stroke in 1975. The business finally stopped production in 1979 and the property was sold in 1980.

The siblings are unanimous in praise for their parents – Carl speaks for them all when he states: "We are all very proud of our parents and most grateful for what they have achieved and done for us".

### Post Script

Tragedy struck in 1972, when Piet and Aagje's daughter Alie and 3 of her children, John, Peter and Carla were killed in a traffic accident in Invercargill, New Zealand. Her husband John and eldest child Patti survived. Piet Wieman passed away on 6 April 1986 and Aagje on 21 November 1992. Ineke passed away on 2 March 2015.

Their descendants in April 2015 comprised;

Children 14 (2 deceased)

Grandchildren 44 (4 deceased)

Great-grandchildren 58

Great-great-grandchildren 20





## ENDNOTES

- 1 The Wieman family wish to thank Michael Beerkens, without whose great input this vignette would not have happened.
2. Walker-Birckhead, W., 'A Dutch Home in Australia: Dutch Women's Migration Stories' in *The Dutch Down Under 1606-2006*, N. Peters, Coordinating Author, UWA Press 2006.
- 3 *ibid.*

**Figure 6**  
House of doors. Courtesy: Wieman Family.