

A Case of Mistaken Identity

Who Did We Bury?

By Frances Harrington

Marinus Bras was born in Borssele, Zeeland, Netherlands, on 1 January 1854, to Gerardus and Jacomina (Bruijnooge) Bras. Maria Hoebeke was born in 's-Bravenpolder, Zeeland, Netherlands, 14 Nov 1851, to Anthonie and Rachel (Vermare) Hoebeck. They were married in Borssele on 9 May 1878. Maria had one daughter, Rachel P. born in 1877, and together, she and Marinus had two sons, Geerard born in 1879, and another son who was stillborn in 1882. Marinus' occupation was listed as "arbeider" (in a Netherlands census) which means worker or laborer" in Dutch.

In 1883, Marinus Bras, his wife, Maria, and their daughter, Rachel, and son, Geerard, boarded the screw steamer "P. Caland" in Rotterdam, Netherlands, headed for America. They traveled in the steerage, which meant that they were by no means, people of wealth. The steerage was actually the cargo compartment. The steerage decks were used to provide the cheapest and lowest class of travel. It would have taken about a week or more to get to New York. Like so many other Dutch who traveled to America, it was probably because of religious persecution or for better economic opportunities. By 1900, one-third of all the Dutch who were born in the U.S. lived in Michigan, and most of them, in West Michigan.

The Bras family settled in Muskegon where, for most of his life here, Marinus worked doing manual labor in the lumber mills and then in area iron and brass foundries. At some point, his surname was changed to Brace, and his given named to Martin. Maria was called Mary, and their son Geerard was changed to Gerrit and given the nick-name "Jerry". Mary gives birth to 5 more children: Anthony in 1884, Jacob in 1885, William in 1889, Minnie in 1892, and Anna in 1896.

Gerrit left home in 1898, at the age of 19. He seldom wrote to his family so they weren't sure, at any given time, where he was living. Then, on 3 August 1908, the "Miller Bros. Ranch 101, Wild West Show" came to Muskegon. A friend of the family, Klaas Kooi, went to one of the two performances that Monday. He noticed a familiar face working with the show and called out his name...it was Gerrit! The two men spoke for a minute and made plans to meet up later. Klaas left the show grounds and went to see the Brace family. He told them that he had seen Gerrit working with the show. They didn't believe him until they saw Gerrit for themselves. They had a short reunion because the show was leaving soon. It turns out that for the past 7 years, Gerrit had been a cowboy, and had traveled throughout the West. It was a while before they heard from him again and this time, he was working in Chicago for an electric company.

Anthony pretty much stayed in Muskegon, living in his parent's home and working for area foundries, like his father.

Jacob left Muskegon in 1909. He and a couple friends headed west looking for work. They ended up in a small town called Reynolds which was in Grand Forks, North Dakota, where Jacob found work on a harvesting crew, traveling throughout that region, working on a threshing machine. He wasn't much of one for keeping regular communications with his family, much like Gerrit. In July of 1914, he made a short visit back to Muskegon to visit family and friends. Then

on August 21st, his parents received a telegram from the coroner in Edgeley, North Dakota, telling them that their son had died on August 19th. The family was devastated. Mr. & Mrs. Brace contacted Tiede Clock (Clock Funeral Home) and he made arrangements to have the body brought back to Muskegon. The body arrived on August 24th where it was viewed by Jacob's family and about 75 of his friends, followed by a small funeral, and burial that day. After the funeral, Jacob's sister Minnie wrote to his landlady, Mrs. C. O. Gorder, requesting she send his belonging back to them in Muskegon. She told her how sad they all were, and what a nice funeral service they had for Jacob with so many people attending. Mrs. Gorder received that letter on Saturday morning, August 29th. Later that day, the Brace family receives a telegram stating: "News you got wrong. I am well. Will write. Jacob Brace". The family couldn't believe what they were reading. How could anyone play this kind of a practical joke, sending such a cruel message to their grieving family? After all, they had all viewed the body at the funeral. The next day, they received a visitor. It was Jacob Schaalma, one of the friends their son had gone to Dakota with, and he was in fact, Jacob's roommate at Mrs. Gorder's place. He had come to visit his family and was stopping to see Mr. & Mrs. Brace to let them know that their son was alive and that he had been with him just the day before. The family was overjoyed! Jacob was really alive! It wasn't a cruel joke after all! Then, it hit them – if Jacob is alive, then who did we bury?

At first, they thought that Jacob must have bought a ticket for the hospital, lost it, and someone (who must have looked just like Jacob) found it and went to the hospital and died with their only identification being that ticket. (Note: in those days, hospitals made money by selling tickets which entitled that person to so many visits at the hospital during that year. Also, this was a rural community with no large facilities so, the "hospital" might have been nothing more than a doctor's office with a couple of rooms where patients could stay for a short time to recover from whatever was wrong with them.) But that "ticket" explanation didn't make sense to them. Then they thought of William. He had left town but they were pretty sure he was in Idaho, and he had curly hair and the person that was buried had straight hair. That only left Gerrit, but Gerrit was in Chicago, wasn't he? Meanwhile, they receive Jacob's letter telling them to, "write to me with all the details of what has happened, so I can travel to Edgeley to investigate how I came to die there, without my knowledge".

Mr. & Mrs. Brace contacted Tiede Clock on the 30th, to let him know of what has developed. He immediately telegraphs the sheriff in Edgeley, and asks him to investigate. He also arranges for the body to be exhumated, and the exhumation is done the next day, August 31, ten days after it was buried. Before the casket is opened, Mr. Clock asks if Gerrit has any identifying marks, in case it *is* him. They told him that Gerrit had a large scar on his right knee from a cut he received falling from a telephone pole when he was a boy. After the body is examined by Mr. Clock and he finds such a scar on the right knee, Mr. & Mrs. Brace carefully look the body over and make a positive identification...it is their eldest son, Gerrit. The body is immediately re-buried back in Oakwood Cemetery. They had no idea what Gerrit was doing in North Dakota. They realize that Gerrit died all alone, just 75 miles from his brother, Jacob, and neither one knew the other was so close. Now they start to grieve all over again. Mr. Clock later receives a death certificate from Edgeley with the name "Jerry Brace". He was 36 years old.

I kept asking myself, how could Mr. and Mrs. Brace *not* recognize that the body in that casket they thought was Jacob's, was actually Gerrit's? What mother, wouldn't be able to recognize

their son if they'd just seen him a month before? Then, I looked over the news clippings again. I thought about the telegram, the one that came telling of the death. We don't know if it mentioned Jacob by name or just said "your son" and we don't know if it stated the reason for his death. Telegrams were usually very brief messages, just enough to get the main facts across. Don't forget, Jacob had a job that took him all over the region, and the fact that the death occurred in Edgeley, and not in Reynolds (where Jacob was actually renting a room) wouldn't raise any red flags to make them question that it wasn't Jacob. Since the only son they knew to be living in North Dakota was Jacob, they naturally would have assumed it was him. Also, even though they were 6 years apart, the two men were known to have looked a lot alike. By the time the body got here, he had already been dead for 5 days. I tried to get a death record from North Dakota but was told they don't have records going back that far (1914 really?) So, I went to the Hackley Library Local History & Genealogy Department. I remembered that they have books of Clock Funeral Home records going way back. I know that some of the old funeral home and/or cemetery records often list the cause of death for the person who was buried. Sure enough...the 1914 Clock Funeral Home book lists Jerry Brace, with his cause of death being pneumonia. If the person in the casket didn't look exactly like Jacob, they probably thought it was because of whatever may have caused his death. Remember, these people were grieving. I'm sure, when the body got there, they weren't thinking, "maybe if I look close enough, I'll find out they've made a mistake and this isn't my son". More likely, they were thinking how sick he must have been to have aged so much in such a short time. So now, looking at this more sensitively, and less judgmentally, I can see how this might have happened.

Martin Brace was 78 when he died in 1932. He was still working in the foundry when he was 76 according to the 1930 Census. Mary died in 1942 at age 91 while living with her daughter, Anna. I lost track of Mary's daughter Rachel who, up to 1900, was working as a domestic for the lumberman, Carleton Hamilton on Clay Avenue. After that, she seems to disappear. Anthony never married and died at the mental facility in Traverse City, in 1929 at age 45. Jacob, also, never married, and died in Beltrami, Minnesota, in 1940. His obituary said he died of old age at the "Old Folks Home". It also said he had no known relatives, so his mother, brother William, and sisters Anna and Minnie (who were still alive at the time) were never notified of his death and would never have known what became of him. He was 55. William married Mamie B. Hogan in 1922. They raised their family in Kennewick, Washington. He died in 1965 at 76 years of age. Minnie married Theodore Musgrave in 1917. They raised their family in Muskegon County. She died at 77 in 1969. Anna married Fred Otten in about 1929. They also lived in Muskegon County and raised their family here. She was 92 when she died in 1988.

Sources: Genealogybank.com, Muskegon Chronicle; Findagrave.com; Ancestry.com; Family Search.com; swierenga.com; Northland Times, Beltrami, MN; Newspapers.com; and Hackley Library Family History & Genealogy Dept.