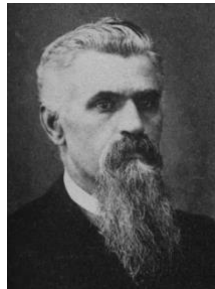


H D BAKER

By Frances Harrington

Maarten De Bakker and his wife, Sarra (Van Oeveren) De Bakker were living in Ouwerkerk, Zeeland, Netherlands in the early 1800s. Sarra gave birth to twelve children, only four made it to adulthood. Their seventh child named Hendrik, was born on 24 Mar 1832. They were not a wealthy family so Hendrik received only a basic education. He did, however, learn the value of honesty and hard work. As a young man, he learned the trade of milling (the craft of operating a wind mill or water mill). In 1853, at the age of 21, the thought of freedom of speech and economic opportunities that he didn't have in his homeland, made Hendrix decide to make the 36-day journey by boat from Liverpool, England to New York, U.S.A.

Shortly after his arrival, Hendrix De Bakker became known as Henry D. Baker. From New York, he made his way to Grand Haven for a brief time, and then to Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he was employed by lumberman C. C. Comstock.



In 1854, Henry married Gertrude Harriet Lewis. Gertrude was also a native of the Netherlands and had come to America with her family in 1846, at the age of 9. The Lewis family was the first Dutch family to settle in Grand Rapids, Michigan. During the early days of their marriage, Henry continued to work for Mr. Comstock but also, because he was so well thought of in the community, was appointed the first patrolman in Grand Rapids in 1856. The city directory listed him as a night watchman but history remembers him as the 1st policeman in Grand Rapids even though the official police department didn't start until 1871. He patrolled what is now the downtown area. In 1858, Henry decided to start his own grocery business. In 1860, Henry and Gertrude started their family with the birth of their first child, a girl, named Elizabeth.

The Civil War broke out in 1861. Henry loved his new country and felt it was his duty to defend it. He enlisted in 1862. Before leaving, he entrusted his grocery business to a man named Mr. Hinds. He received a promissory note for the value of the business and upon his return, would either get his business back or be paid for its value. Henry was part of Company K 1st Michigan Regiment of Engineers and Mechanics. At the battle of Stone River, Henry was wounded and almost bled to death. He was transferred to the hospital in Detroit, Michigan, where he remained for 7 months receiving medical care. At the end of the seven months, he was discharged from the Army because of his disability. After returning to Grand Rapids and finding

out that Mr. Hinds had sold his business and absconded with his money, Henry decided to leave Grand Rapids.

Henry moved his family to Muskegon, Michigan, in January of 1864. He started a small book and stationery store on Western Avenue near Pine St, what was then considered the very end of the business district. He shared half the space in Mr. Snyder's tobacco shop because there were no empty stores for him to rent at that time. For a counter, he used boards laid across sawhorses. He soon outgrew that place and built a store on Western between Pine and Terrace. In 1866, Gertrude gave birth to another daughter, Josie. Henry was doing so well that by 1867, he again had to move. Henry built the first 3-story brick building at 3 Western Avenue, on the southwest corner of Western Avenue and Terrace Street, on what would be known as the Baker Block. A large wooden 2-story building was located next to the book store. In April 1870, that building caught fire. The heat was so intense it caused the brick wall in Henry store to collapse resulting in so much damage that Henry's book store and all his inventory was lost. He had such a good reputation for being an honest man that everyone he'd done business with, offered to loan him the money to rebuild. The new building was the first to have a large plate glass window in which he would arrange attractive displays to entice shoppers and the first to have a store with gas lighting. Over the years, the H. D. Baker Book & Stationery Store carried popular books of the time, autograph books, text books, blank ledger books, and other office supplies. He sold magazines, periodicals, writing supplies, novelty gifts, tickets to the latest entertainment, tickets for the railroad, musical instruments, music rolls and sheet music. He carried curtains and the largest selections of wall papers in the city, selling tons of it every year.

In 1869, Henry is the first man initiated into the Muskegon Commandery No. 22, of the Knights Templar (a branch of the Freemasons to promote a concept of chivalry and Christianity within the Masonic framework). In 1871, his five-year-old daughter, Josie, died of water on the brain. In 1872, he was elected Treasurer of Muskegon's Knights Templar, a position he held with honor for over 25 years. Sadly, Henry and Gertrude also had a son who was stillborn in 1878. In 1879, their last child, another daughter, Gertrude was born. The Baker's made their home at 122 S. Terrace Street (the area located near the northeast corner where Peck Street and Terrace Street intersect).

The "Great Pine Street Fire of Muskegon" occurred in 1891. The fire wiped out 17 city blocks and destroyed 250 homes and businesses. A group of prominent businessmen including: C. H. Hackley, G. L. Erwin, F. H. Holbrook, and H. D. Baker, immediately got together to form the "Relief Committee of Fire Sufferers" to solicit donations, to assess the needs of the victims, and distribute funds to those in need. Henry became the Treasurer for the group and was on the investigating committee to make sure that no fraud was committed by those seeking assistance.

In 1892, Henry is appointed as County Agent for the State Board of Charities & Corrections. As the County Agent, he worked with the courts in dealing with neglected children and those who had gotten arrested for misdemeanor crimes. He saw to it that they were placed in good foster homes, or were adopted. He also transported young offenders to either the Industrial School

for Boys in Lansing, or the State Industrial Home for Girls in Adrian. Henry was responsible for investigating and reporting on the conditions of the facilities or homes and the progress of each child he placed. It was the equivalence of today's probation officers. He also had to make sure that the money that was being privately donated or allocated by the State for these children was being properly spent.

In the fall of 1893, Henry's wife, Gertrude, died of diabetes. He retired from the book & stationery business in 1906 after 42 years, to concentrate on his responsibilities as the County Agent. In 1910, Henry was the oldest County Agent in the State at age 78, and continued doing this job until shortly before his death in 1916.

Over the years, Henry had also served as the County Supervisor, was on the Board of Public Works, was the Street Commissioner, was on the Board of the Muskegon Furniture Factory, was the County Truant Officer, was a member of the Phil Kearney Post No. 7 of the Grand Army of the Republic, was the President of the Building & Loan Association and the Building and Home Association, and prominent in programs that promoted the general welfare of Muskegon.

The old lessons Henry learned in his youth of honesty and hard work served him well throughout his life. Henry was one month shy of his 84th birthday when he died of pneumonia. He and Gertrude are buried in Evergreen Cemetery in Muskegon. Their daughter Elizabeth, married Benjamin King M.D. in 1866. She died in 1947 and she and her husband are also buried in Evergreen. Their daughter Gertrude E. married James Orr in 1921 and died in 1941. She and her husband are buried in Lake Forest Cemetery in Grand Haven.

Sources: Hackley Public Library, Local History & Genealogy Dept.; Genealogybank.com, Muskegon Chronicle; Ancestry.com; Muskegon and It's Resources (Muskegon Board of Trade); Historic Michigan Vol. 3 Muskegon County; findagrave.com; freemasonrytoday.com; Romance of Muskegon by Alice Prescott Kyes; Lakeshore Museum Center; Familysearch.org