

LOUISE CORNELIE VERMEY LEONARD

July 16, 1919-January 25, 1987

The female line leading to Louise Cornelie (Nell) Vermey was composed of exceptional women, strong in character, believers in equality, and supporters of the poor and disadvantaged, including orphans. Our record comes from a chart that was given to Nell and me in 1960 when we visited a distant relative who lived in the province of Drente in the Netherlands and was interested in genealogy.



Nell's grandmother, Elisabeth Van Polanen Patel



Nell's grandfather, Jan Dinger

Elizabeth van Polanen Patel, Nell's grandmother, married Jan Dinger in 1876. He was in trading, banking, and investing and was in the direct line of the Dinger family who had founded banking in the Dutch East Indies. They had nine children, of whom #4 was Nell's namesake, Louise Cornelie Dinger. She never married, but she adopted a son, the only white

MORE THAN A MEMOIR

baby in an orphanage that she visited, and she raised him in East Java. She was her father's right-hand woman in administration and investments. During the Second World War, she died in a Japanese concentration camp. Carolien (Lien), who was #7 in the Dinger family, was trained as an x-ray assistant and was a formidable lady. Interned in West Java during the War, she stood up to the Japanese, guarded the medicines, and looked after the supplies for the children. Lien survived the ordeal of the concentration camp, came to the Netherlands after the War, and eventually came to live with Nell's mother, Annie. I saw Tante Lien first in 1953 and every time we came to Holland after that. She was most generous to her surviving nieces and nephews, and she helped us purchase one of our Michigan houses.



Nell's Father, Henri Jacques Vermey



Nell's mother, Anna Theodora Caesirina Dinger,
ca. 1937

Anna Theodora Julie Cesarine (Annie) was born in Batavia (now Jakarta) on October 1, 1883, where she went to School and Teachers' College. She was good at horseback riding and tennis. Sent to Europe to recover from malaria, she spent a year in Brussels at a finishing school. After Annie returned to Indonesia in 1912, she met Henri Jacques Vermey (Hein), presumably playing tennis. His father, Jan Albertus Wouter Vermey, was a physician who, in 1888, had married Henriette Cecelia de Waal and they had six children, one of whom died in infancy. I had the pleasure of meeting

Jan and Henriette and visiting in their home when I first went to Holland in 1938, as related in the chapter on The Oxford Years. Jan and Henriette's oldest child and only daughter was Albertine (Tine or Tien). She married, but the marriage was not successful, perhaps in part because of the Bohemian life that they led. Tien was a talented interior decorator, who worked closely before the War with the Dutch architect Fritz Eschauzier and after the War, in partnership with Jacqueline Vermey, Henri's second wife, as interior decorators. Tien was the special friend of a famous Dutch mathematician and logician. She was a great listener and inexhaustibly kind. Tien was my advocate during the long years when Nell and I were separated, and Nell would visit Tien to talk about that American fiancé who was thousands of miles away and doing "who knows what" during the war years.

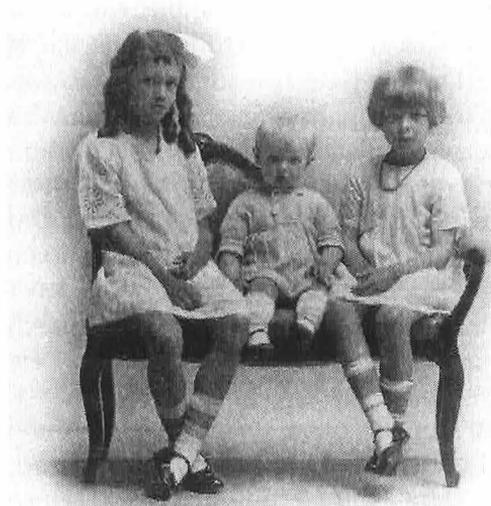
Rudolph (Bob) Vermey, who was #4 in the family, attended agricultural school, learned about sugar production, and went to Cuba to put his knowledge to practical use. There he met and married Grace Korth, a secretary from New York/New Jersey, who was a friend of my mother and was the eventual link for my meeting of Nell. Bob and Grace had four daughters, the first born in Cuba and the others born in Holland, to which the family returned. Bob's work did not go very well during the depression years, and the decision, a fortunate one, was made for the whole family to emigrate to the United States in advance of the war. His brother, Hein, with Annie, made the move possible.

Hein, #2 in the Vermey family, was born March 10, 1892, on the small island of Ambon, which was part of the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia). He had proceeded directly from high school to working as a bank clerk in Kassel, Germany, in order to gain foreign experience. While he was there, he started a tennis club, for which action, incidentally, he was honored 75 years later in a special anniversary celebration. After his stint in Germany, Hein was sent by the trading company/bank for which he worked to Jakarta, where it was that he met Annie, as related above. After an engagement of three years, during half of which they were separated, they married in 1916. Annie and Hein lived in Hong Kong where Hein was an agent for his trading and banking company. Elizabeth Henriette Vermey (Els) was born August 17, 1917. At the end of the First World War, during which the neutrality of the Netherlands had been respected, the family returned to Holland, and Louise Cornelia Vermey (Nell) was born on July 16, 1919, in Bussum, N.H. Ten months later, the family returned to the Far East, where Hein was appointed director of his import/export bank's office in Shanghai. During the five

happy years in Shanghai, Nell's younger sister, Hilda Carola, was born on December 29, 1923. Frequent outbreaks of violent anti-foreigner sentiment caused the family to move back to Indonesia for a time. Hein became a sometime director of the Dinger Family's sugar plantations, operating part of the year from Jakarta and part of each year from the Netherlands. Many, many years later, on separate travels to Jakarta and Shanghai, I could seek out the large houses that the Dinger and Vermey families had occupied in those cities. Both houses had been converted to multiple family dwellings and were overflowing with children in the years that I saw them.

Nell told me that I should be aware of the smells in the (then) French sector of Shanghai, including a mixture of cooking and laundering. She remembered the freshly laundered and starched smell of her own ama, or nurse. She also remembered the different colors of the people around her, which she regarded as a gift (for humanity). She learned to speak English and attended an English nursery school/kindergarten, of which her main (fond) remembrance was of a little boy named James. Somewhere in her background, there developed Nell's association of letters, names, and words with colors. I used to test her to find out if the individual relationships between sounds and colors changed or were forgotten, but they never varied. I believe she was disappointed that I had no such faculty. Also well recalled were the episodes of seasickness that she experienced on the sea journeys between Europe and the Far East during her earliest years. An aversion to moths must have developed early because she always used the baby word "flipperdeflops" to describe the creatures, and she squealed with displeasure whenever they came near (all her life).

The family moved to Westerveld in 's Graveland, North Holland, in 1927, and Nell attended school in nearby Hilversum. The town, literally "the count's land," consisted essentially of one main road. There were small houses, shops, and laundries backing onto a canal along one side of the road and large estates and a park arrayed along the other side. Westerveld, the name of their house, was one of the estates, consisting of a large Georgian house, separate garage, separate office/house, gardener's house, flower garden, fruit and vegetable garden, tennis court and tennis house, a large pond, and formal paths with occasional benches. Very special was the collection of trees, including unusual "weeping" varieties and a large stand of bamboo. It was an ideal world that Els, Nell, and Hilda could call their own and could share with family friends.



Three sisters, Els, Hilda, and Nell Vermey

Nell went to school in Hilversum so as not to pick up the local village dialect. At the depth of the depression, Westerveld was closed in order to economize, and Hein and Annie moved to an apartment in Brussels, Belgium. Nell continued her schooling in Hilversum, finishing at the so-called H.B.S., a very thorough girls' school, where she became interested in history and literature but not in mathematics. She performed in school plays and forged strong friendships. One contribution that she made in her geography class was to suggest that the shapes of Africa and South America

looked as though the continents had been joined at some early geological time. The science teacher pooh-poohed the idea, which was ahead of its time. It was several decades later that the paleogeologists concluded that at the beginning of the formation of landmass on planet Earth, there had been one continent, Pangea, in which Africa and South America had been contiguous. During the Hilversum years, Nell lived with the "Tantes" Woutman. Madeline and Ana Woutman were not related but were known to the family by way of Hein's boss in Hong Kong years earlier. Nell was fond of the "Tantes" but was generally reserved with adults and sought friendship with those of her own age by preference. She responded vigorously and effectively when she detected unfairness or bullying and she was very protective of younger children. Somewhere along the way, Nell learned to play the piano, sew, and cook. She received coaching in tennis and golf, and she learned to ski in Bavaria when she was 14 years old.

So it was that in 1938, I met an 18-year-old of intelligence, travel experience, strong character, and athletic ability, as well as beauty, as related in the chapter on "The Oxford Years." During 1937-38, Nell was finishing her schooling in Hilversum, and during 1938-39, she was enrolled in a physical therapy program in the Mensendieck Institute in Amsterdam. There she lived in an apartment with three other trainees, Ientje, Mientje,

and Maas, and experienced an independent professional and a cooperative domestic life. The study following the Mensendieck system required two years; accordingly, it was necessary for Nell to spend 1939-1940 in Amsterdam to complete the study. This was the strong wish of her mother, who felt that it was important for a modern woman to have a profession. Thus, at the beginning of September, 1939, the decision was made that we could be engaged but that Nell would not accompany me to Oxford as the new World War began. We were both very young. Since my laboratory in Oxford shut down practically immediately, there would not have been an educational life in England-at-war, and—for two foreigners—not very useful lives. Nell was able to complete her physical therapy training despite the fact that the Nazis violated Holland's neutrality on May 10, 1940, with the bombing of Rotterdam. From that date, Holland was in the war. As each year went by, difficulties and dangers mounted, culminating in 1944-1945, the famine winter.

It is difficult to put oneself in Nell's place during the years 1940-1945. The best I can do is to retell what I remember hearing from Nell and from members of the family. After her sojourn in Amsterdam, Nell returned to 's Graveland. She found some clients for her physical therapy practice, and she journeyed to Geldermalsen to help take care of Els's daughter, Henriette, who was born to Els and Jaap Versteegh in June, 1941. At some stage, it became necessary to look after the small children of 's Graveland and to try to provide them with food as the supply of rationed food dwindled. Accordingly, Nell assisted in running the local kindergarten which took in as many young children as possible.

The enlarged fruit and vegetable garden of the Vermeys was an important source of food above the rationed level and for barter with other residents of the town. When the food supply dwindled, it was necessary to journey further afield by bicycle. When the rubber bicycle tires wore out, they were replaced by a series of wood strips attached to the rims. When a curfew prevented travel during the day, one had to move on bicycle paths by night. Hand-generator flash lights were used when electric batteries became unavailable. It was Nell who served as a courier for the underground and Nell who rode the bicycle by night all the



Louise Cornelia Vermey, I Holland, 1940
 "Wait for me."

way to the province of Groningen, approximately 80 miles, to exchange family jewelry for butter from a known farm family. Omnipresent was the chance of being shot by a German patrol or strafed by an Allied fighter pilot looking for targets upon returning from a mission. Confiscation of the material that Nell was transporting was an attendant danger. Even after Nell arrived back in 's Graveland, the booty of butter and farm products was not safe from thievery or manipulative distribution. Extra food was needed because the Vermeys had accepted and sheltered two women who had been displaced from the German border area of the Netherlands. Moreover, they were also hiding young men, who were in the underground, in a fake mezzanine area above the ground floor. These fellows naturally did not have ration cards, only falsified identification papers. In the event of a German search of the premises, they either had to maintain perfect silence in their hideaway or else, following delaying tactics, had to ascend to the roof for a temporary (cold) hideout until the inspection was over. Fortunately, no inspection ever extended to the garden sheds where there was an illegal short-wave radio for listening to Allied broadcasts and an illegal pig that was being fattened (somewhat) on garbage from too many unofficial residents.

To this ménage was added an infant, Daniel (Daantje) Hookstra, whose parents were being sent to concentration camps. Nell and her mother heard through a friend that the parents were desperate to save the boy and responded immediately by adopting Daniel. This was a dangerous undertaking because anyone who hid a Jew from the authorities was considered Jewish and risked meeting the same fate. Daniel was a blond, rosy-cheeked child. The cover story was that both his parents had been killed in a bombing. No one ever challenged the adoption, so Daantje was brought up in 's Graveland by Nell as his mother during about three and a half years. The child brought pleasure and hope to the household despite the deprivations. He also survived physical danger when he was nearly asphyxiated because of a malfunctioning kerosene heater and the medical emergencies of the usual childhood illnesses. The story of the parents, their incarceration, and their separate fortunate escapes from death, along with their return to reclaim their son from his war mother, has now appeared in a book written by Eline Hookstra-Dresden, his biological mother. Moreover, Eline has caused Nell's name and the names of her parents to be placed on the List of the Righteous, *Yad Vashem*, an Israeli production of well-documented cases in which non-Jews have saved the lives of Jews during the War and Holocaust. Marcia and her daughter, Julianna, traveled to Utrecht to accept the honor from the Israeli Consul. Els and Hilda were also present, and Daniel Hookstra himself gave a very moving talk.

He had come from Oregon, his present home, with his wife. Marcia and Daniel had made contact several times before the occasion (1999).

During the war, Hilda became engaged to one of the young men in the underground. He was picked up by the Gestapo and jailed. Who in the family was willing to find out where he was and what was going to happen, or had already happened, to him? It was Nell, on Hilda's behalf, who learned his location and his fate, which was the usual sad one for such captives. At the end of the war, when I appeared on the scene, as described in another chapter, Nell was helping out friends who were trying to reassemble their families or were having children under the difficult end-of-the-war conditions. She could also be of help to Els, who was living in the area below the big rivers that had been liberated earlier than the Hilversum region.

Since our lives converged in 1947, chapters from that year describe the events in which we both participated, our life together. However, there are some events that belong to Nell alone or that are especially indicative of her character and of her development during her years in the United States. I shall try to include exemplary situations, but I know beforehand that the listing and description will not be complete. Possibly the children will be able to augment the picture of this remarkable woman.

Her initial focus was on having children of her own to care for: Kenneth, Marcia, James, and David. There was nothing that made her happier than sharing love with these four, although she convinced them that I came first in her consideration. In a parallel arrangement of priorities, she was convinced that chemistry came first in my consideration. In actuality, there was great interdependence, and true happiness came from a combination of a successful profession, the loving partners, and the loving children. There are many examples of Nell's reaching out in concern and kindness to others. The first was to neighbors who had a small child with an incurable disease. Nell made herself available to the mother for shopping, babysitting, and general helping. The second was a Dutch immigrant family in which the father was trying to become a barber in Illinois. The Illinois license for barbering requires considerable medical information, probably as an historic carry-over of that profession. Nell translated the crucial material from English to Dutch and coached and quizzed the Dutch barber until he found it possible to pass the exams that allowed him to become an Illinois barber and to support his young family. The third was an immigrant from Yugoslavia who was widowed before her husband, a research assistant at the University of Illinois, had seen enough service to receive an adequate pension. She was a skilled seamstress, which made it possible for Nell to help her to obtain, first, private jobs and then a steady position with benefits.

Nell was one of the most naturally hospitable people I have known. Visiting lecturers were welcome to stay with us and were made to feel at home, even when we had very little space to offer. Leslie Sutton and Neville Sidgwick, my Oxford professor, were early visitors, as was Keith Murray, who had become Rector of Lincoln College, Oxford. When hotel accommodations in Urbana-Champaign improved, we at least had the visitors to dinner. When Rolf and Trudl Huisgen came to our house, there was an especially touching moment when the two wives met. Trudl was the first German woman Nell was meeting after the war, and Nell was the first Dutch woman Trudl was meeting. Both had been nervous in anticipation, but they embraced warmly when Trudl started apologizing for the German invasion and occupation of Holland, and they became long-term friends. Klaus Jann, my postdoctorates, and Barbara Jann, a postdoctorate in Biochemistry, also from Germany, were immediately welcome. My Japanese postdoctorates Michinori Oki, Takeo Sato, and Tozo Fujii, and their wives, became practically family. Barbara Rodbell, the Dutch wife of a postdoctorate in Biochemistry, was made to feel at home, as were Binne and Henny Zwanenburg, also from the Netherlands. When Bozenna Golankiewicz came from Poland to work with me as a postdoctorate, as her husband had done some years earlier, Nell told her that she would help her find a place to live for the contract year. However, they never did search for a place so stay. After having a cup of coffee together at home, Nell said, "This is silly and not very hospitable. You will stay with us, naturally; you can have your own room and bath, eat as many meals with us as you like, and still be independent." The same thing happened when Dr. Jorge Barrio returned from Argentina for a second stint in my laboratory. It was important that he live inexpensively in the U.S. for six months so that he could save money to bring his family (five in all) from Argentina to join him. Nell made it possible. I believe she would have been willing to board all of my single foreign postdoctorates if she had had time for it.

There would be innumerable ways to indicate Nell's friendliness to others—to neighbors, to all residents of Urbana and Champaign whom she met socially, on committees, in church groups, and even casually. I shall illustrate with just one instance what occurred in Snowmass Village, Colorado. When a couple moved into the house next to us in Melton Ranch I, Nell said, "I believe I'll go over to see if I can do anything for them." Ann Watson, the new resident, described it this way: "When I went to my back door upon hearing knocking, I greeted this beautiful blonde who asked to be put to work if there were anything she could do for us. She really meant it, so I had to let her do some unpacking and cleaning." Now, Ann and

MORE THAN A MEMOIR

Jim Watson are not people who normally need help. They can pay for it very well. This was the beginning of an abiding friendship, continued through the present.

As I have said elsewhere, Nell took very seriously the process of becoming a U.S. citizen, and she turned to the League of Woman Voters for guidance and, subsequently, affiliation when she became a citizen. She became involved with the League's housing study because it seemed to her that there was inequality in the opportunity for black people in Urbana-Champaign to acquire the housing they desired and could afford. She was also involved in the League's project to set minimum standards for rental housing. Recognized for her energy and leadership, Nell served twice as president of the Campaign County League of Women Voters. Nell's church work in the First Congregational Church of Champaign, Illinois, began as a Sunday School teacher and then as an active member of the congregation, leading up to being the moderator of the congregation for two years. Crucial amalgamation of three churches and ministerial changes occurred during that period. Nell had the diplomacy, strength, and poise to be moderator among members who occasionally became very emotional. A plaque on the wall of the church commemorates her service.

Nell joined Church Women United because she liked the idea of Christian women of different color and religious persuasion working together. She made the local membership aware of unfair practices in real estate transactions, with the result that CWU was the first organization to publicly endorse open housing. As soon as this principle was made law in Illinois, Nell was appointed a member of the Fair Housing Board in Urbana, on which she served three years. She also became involved in the urban renewal plan for Champaign, and she and other members of the League of Women Voters (in this case) convinced the planning committee to drop the original proposal for mass



Nell, League of Women Voters, 1963

evacuation in favor of a proposal according to which no house would be demolished until acceptable living quarters could be found for the

occupants. Other issues that claimed her time and effort were child welfare, beautification of the environment, juvenile justice, criminal justice, and alternatives to incarceration. Church Women United undertook to raise money to build a chapel at the women's prison in Dwight, Illinois. Nell became a member of the state committee for the Dwight prison project, and in that capacity gave fund-raising slide presentations throughout central Illinois. Shortly after Nell's death in 1987, the chapel was built and we were able to contribute to the purchase of a small organ. Nell served many years on the state board of CWU and eleven years on the national board, two of these as national vice president. Remarkable for her ability to examine issues objectively, Nell gained a deeper understanding of human nature because of her ability to understand problems within the interracial and interdenominational membership of CWU.



Nell, Dunewood, 1985

On January 17, 1987, the Champaign, Illinois, Chapter of the National Council of Negro Women saluted Louise C. Leonard as "Civic Worker, Facilitator of Interracial Harmony, Dedicated Christian" at their second awards banquet. Son David attended the ceremony on behalf of the family and accepted the award plaque in Nell's honor. Another bronze plaque adorns the wall of the cottage in Dunewood, announcing that the Bronze Circle of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences bestows on Louise V.

Leonard Life Membership "in grateful recognition for distinguished loyalty and support of the pursuit of excellence in education, scholarship, and service, 1986." It was her initiation of the fund that set up the Nelson J. Leonard Distinguished Lectureship at the University of Illinois upon retirement in the Spring of 1986. Nell's last participation in a CWU event was in the Central Area Institute on October 21, 1986, when she was greeted as a "tower of strength."