

Closing the Circle

By Betty Wiese

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"If they need young men, they need young women," recalled Johanna Kattenbelt Kray Vermeire with a chuckle as she told her story of coming to America in October 1907 as a 21-year old Rotterdam, Netherlands city girl. She had seen an advertisement - news from the United States as Montana was opening for homesteading. Johanna's parents would not allow her to go to America alone, so she continued to work for the Maat family in their tea room/dairy business in Rotterdam.



When her employers Joris J. and Barbara Maat decided to emigrate with their 6 sons and a seventh child on the way, Johanna came with them to help, with her special charge the baby boy, Anton, age 8 months. He was so ill on the journey and after they arrived, they all worried he would not live.

The Maats and Johanna arrived at Ellis Island in the fall of 1907 and made their way to Red Lodge, Montana. Johanna eventually married Henry Kray and moved with him to their own homestead outside of Hardin, Montana. Their daughter, also named Johanna, was my mother.

Anton Maat grew up to be a Catholic priest. He was ordained as a Benedictine in Washington State. My grandmother spoke with pride about the baby she cared for who grew up to be a priest and visited her more than once when they both lived in Seattle, Washington area. Johanna passed away in Seattle in 1983.

Fast forward to December 2001 when my brother David, Johanna's grandson, passed away. Our family had already planned to spend the holidays together on the Oregon coast, so it seemed an opportune time to have a family memorial gathering for David. As the family organizer, I planned the memorial. While my mother said it need not be at a Catholic church, I found a lovely small church at Rockaway Beach, Oregon. When I

noted the parish priest was William Maat, of course I inquired if he was from Montana (thinking there might be a connection to the Maat family that my grandmother immigrated with). I was told no; Father Maat was from Michigan.

So, imagine our surprise and wonder when we met a very elderly priest at the lovely church on the Oregon coast who remembered Johanna Kattenbelt. Yes, that baby who arrived in America in 1907 in Johanna Kattenbelt's arms, officiated at the memorial service for Johanna's grandson in 2001.