

KNICKERBOCKER HISTORY

(Some Thoughts on the Origins of the Name)

"This was the only answer we could ever get from him; and as my wife, by some of those odd ways in which women find out everything, learned that he was of very great connections, being related to the Knickerbockers of Schaghticoke, and cousin-german to the congressman of that name, she did not like to treat him uncivilly."

These words penned by Washington Irving in his famous novel-parody *Knickerbocker's History of New York* of 1809 launched the Knickerbocker name. A name, until that time, of an obscure clan of Dutchmen in central New York State became the famous Knickerbocker moniker adopted by old gentlemen on beer bottles and major league basketball teams. A name now most famous throughout New York and the United States. The name, spelled with the "O", has become synonymous with everything 17th century New York Dutch.

How bewildering it was growing up always fielding the question "Are you related to the beer company?" and if so, it would seem that we all must be quite rich. I finally decided after all these years to investigate the origins of our seemingly famous family. Cousin Harry "Babe" Pinney and his foray into the Pinney family tree, pushed me into taking a basic genealogy class at The Connecticut Society of Genealogists on Maple Street in East Hartford, CT. My spare time has not been the same since. I've collected several thousand Knickerbockers and I'm trying to make as much sense as possible of these family connections over the last three hundred odd years. The magic of our shared name is that we are related to every other Knickerbocker in the land. Our immigrant ancestor Harmen Jansen invented the name upon arriving on our shores. A few hundred years of "Anglicizing" from the Dutch beginnings gave us the Knickerbocker name known to Washington Irving in the early 1800's.

Katherine Knickerbocker Viele presents the history of our family name and the connections to Irving in her book entitled *Sketches of Allied Families Knickerbocker-Viele* published in 1916. She presents a far more cognizant explanation than I could ever hope to prepare and I therefore repeat her story here.

The Origins of the Name of Knickerbocker

The name of Knickerbocker is unique. It seems safe to assert that there has never been but one family of that name. It is evident from the testimony that it is constructed out of a combination of a family name and an individual peculiarity. There has never before been offered a rational solution of its meaning.

For several years four others besides myself - all of whom have had experience in the unraveling of the origins of Dutch names have given to this matter a good deal of thought and one theory after another has been run down without arriving at any satisfactory decision. It has been adventured that the name represented part of an old Holland family name, but all the combinations seemed far-fetched; that the ancestor's signature bore traces of lacking a syllable as

would be the case perhaps in the writing of an illiterate man; but the syllable omitted could not be determined. It has been thought that the name denoted the occupation of the possessor and the Dutch dictionary has been searched for words whose combination would indicate what that was. There seems absolutely nothing to make knickkel-marbles and backer-baker - a baker of marbles, the etymology of the name. The name was never authoritatively written with "el" for the second syllable.

This suggestion is given in the third volume of Munsell's Annals, p. 59; but a note to the preface of the seventh volume says that Knickerbacker "was not the original name." This statement of Munsell as to probable meaning has been widely copied.

It is probable that the name is to be read just as the ancestor wrote it at the foot of the legal document of 1682. The Dutch always signed their family names to legal documents. The late Walter Kenneth Griffin, an excellent genealogist, has well said, "Dutch names may be puzzling but they are logical and consistent."

Hermen Jansen Knickerbacker, as he came to be called, was at first most frequently spoken of as "Hermen Jansen van Bommel." This was the name of the place in Holland that he hailed from. But to his contract with Anthony van Schaick in 1682 he signs himself "Hermen Jansen van Wyekycback(e). Why not take this just as he has written it and give it at least a logical interpretation?

Hermen Jansen came from Bommel, in North Brabant, near which there was then and had been for several centuries a branch of the ancient family of Van Wye in which the names of Hermen and Johannes were very common. As far back as the fourteenth century there was a Hermen Van Wye who was Governor of the Neder-Betuwe, where the fortified town of Bommel was situated.

The family tradition says that Hermen Jansen was in the Dutch navy, and although this has not been proven there is nothing to prevent its having been true. He is said to have been with De Ruyter's fleet in the Battle of Solebay, fought June 7, 1672, and to have been there wounded. I doubt if an unwritten tradition would have done more than have handed down the facts of his fighting and of his wound. Therefore when I found that in the next year (1673) there had been a still more fierce and sanguinary battle fought by the same fleet under the same commanders off the Dutch dunes at a place called Kijk, I could not but note its similarity to the "Kyc" in the ancestor's name, especially when "back" (cheek) gave such an easy reading as--Hermen Jansen van Wye-Kijk- back--Kijk cheek--or cheek marked at Kijk!

In the effort to read the name, the "Wye," which might easily be mistaken for "Nye" (it has been read in both ways by different clerks), was so interpreted and the name became Niekicbacker-Niekerbacker, from which the transition was easy to the final form of Knickerbacker.

The clerk in the first document, that of 1682, writes the name kinne ker backer. Kinneback is jawbone--kinnekycbacker--man with the Kijk-jawbone, falls into line as a suggestion, but as to form it is more far-fetched.

There is no such name as Knickerbacker in Holland and since we have the signature of the ancestor to go by we must bear in mind that he does not call himself Knickerbacker, but "van Wyekyback (e) .

It is from this signature that the origin of the name and of the man must be traced.

Various renderings of the name of Hermen Jansen Knickerbacker:

1680 (April 6) Harme Janse van Bommell (Proceedings of the Comm, 1676, 80 p.500).

1682 (Dec.11) Hermen Jansen van Wyekyback(e); Harme Jansz Kinnekerbacker. (Albany Deeds book III, p. 170.)

1683 Harmen Jansz Knickelbacker (List of Dutch church members).

1684 (May 6) Harmen Jansen Kinnekerbacker (Court Minutes 1680-1685 Debt).

1684 (June 3) Harmen Janssen van Bommel (Court Min-utes; jury trial).

1686 (Jan'y 1) Harme Jansz van Bommel (Dutch Church Register) .

1688 (Sept. 8) Harmen Jansz (Dutch Church Register).

1689 (Sept.) Harme Jansen van Bommel (Munsell's Annals of Albany, VoL II, p. 112, 113).

1692 (Jan'Y 6) Harmen Jansz and Lysbet Jansz (Dutch Church Register).

1695 (July 21) Harmen Knickelbacker, Lysbet Bogert (Dutch Church Register).

1696-7 (Feb. 26) Harmen Jansen Knickerbacker Van Wyye (Albany Indexes, Book IV, p. 94).

1698 (March 9) Harme van Bommell, Lysbet Bogert (Albany Dutch Church Register).

1699 (Sept. 3) Hermen Janse, Lysbet Bogert (Albany Dutch Church Register).

1702 (April 19) Harme Knickelbacker, Lysbet Bogert (Albany Dutch Church Register).

1704 (May 1) Harmen Jansen Kinckerbacker (Albany Indexes, Book VI, p. 14).

1706-7 (March 15) Harmen Janssen Nyckbacker (Albany Co. Deeds, VoL VI, p. 39).

1707 (Feb. 26) Heermen Jansen Kynckbacker (Wills, Vol. I., pp. 175, 178, Albany County clerk's office).

(Kathlyne goes on to give an explanation of the connection between Washington Irving and the prominence he provided to the Knickerbocker name.)

Washington Irving's "Knickerbocker Legend" and its Relation to the Knickerbocker Family

Knickerbocker's History of New York was the work of Washington Irving's youth. He appears to have begun it in 1808 and completed it in 1809.

It is said that his initial intention was to write simply a burlesque on a pretentious guide book lately gotten up by a Dr. Samuel Mitchel. He and his brother Peter commenced this burlesque together and wrote in conjunction that part of it which relates to the history of the world prior to Dutch rule in New York. Then Peter having been called to Europe on business, Washington rearranged his ideas somewhat, cut down the first part to five chapters-he afterward said it would have been better to have cut it down to one-continued the history-producing it as it at present stands. This was in the early summer of 1809. In April Mr. Irving was much prostrated by the death of his fiancée, Miss Hoffman, and spent the two months succeeding her decease in the retirement of the country at the home of his friend Judge Van Ness at Kinderhook. Here he diverted himself from his grief by re- visiting and completing his History of New York and it would appear likely that during this period he visited the Knickerbackers at Schaghticoke and catching the old-time character of the place and people conceived the fancy of sending forth one of the Knickerbocker name to lead the procession of quaint Dutchmen already passing along the avenue of his imagination. The impression of myself and others has been that Mr. Irving's acquaintance with the Knickerbackers was the result of his friendship for "my cousin the Congressman" whom he met in Washington and who was Herman Knickerbocker sent down there in 1809 to represent his district in the 11th Congress. But in a letter to his friend, Henry Brevoort, dated Washington, Jan 13, 1811, he says:-"The other evening at the City Assembly I was suddenly introduced to my cousin the Congressman from Schaghticoke and we forthwith became two most loving friends." This was a good year after the publication of his Knickerbocker's History of New York and proves he found his way to a knowledge of the Knickerbackers of Schaghticoke by some other less obvious route. In his article "The Historian" in Bracebridge Hall he says:- "Diedrich Knickerbocker was a native of New York, a descendant from one of the ancient Dutch families which had originally settled that province and remained there after it had been taken possession of by the English in 1664. The descendants of these Dutch families still remain in villages and neighborhoods in various parts of the country, retaining with singular obstinacy the dress, manners and even language of their ancestors, and forming a very distinct and curious feature in the motley population of the state."

The principal Knickerbocker of Schaghticoke at that time was John Knickerbocker, father of the Congressman, a man of strong personality and stronger prejudices, still in his prime and living on his many acres surrounded by his many children. Whether it was as his guest that Washington Irving became familiar with the Knickerbocker environment or if his knowledge of the family came through the rather boastful communications of some family connection whom he met in Kinderhook or Albany and who rang the changes on the family importance and the fame of "my cousin the Congressman" cannot be ascertained, but the impression this long established Dutch family made on him is plain as the many illusions to it show. Even the name of Diedrich was offered suggestively to Mr. Irving in the person of Derrick Knickerbocker, a young lad, son of Herman's brother William, named for his mother's father-Derrick Van Veghten.

Under Mr Irving's magic hand Derrick became Diedrich and the family name of Knickerbacker received a twist to Knickerbocker, from which it has never recovered. Mr. Irving humorously mentions that "Diedrich Knickerbocker was of very great connections, being related to the Knickerbockers of Schaghticoke and cousin germane to the Congressman of that name." Another twist and "nephew" had become "cousin"!

Having thus transformed the real into the imaginary with the wand of his fancy, Mr. Irving proceeds to identify himself with the Diedrich Knickerbocker of his creation:-for it is of himself he speaks when he writes "After a residence of sometime at Schaghticoke he began to feel a strong desire to return to New York which he ever regarded with the fondest affection not merely because it was his native city but because he regarded it as the very best city in the world, etc." In the same disguise he continues: "Such are my feelings when I revisit the family mansion of the Knickerbockers and spend a lonely hour in the chamber where hang the portraits of my forefathers shrouded in dust like the forms they represent. . . . With pious reverence do I gaze on the countenances of these revered burghers who have preceded me in the steady march of existence, whose sober and temperate blood now meanders through my veins flowing slower and slower in its feeble conduits until its currents shall soon be stopped forever. As I pace the darkened chamber and lose myself in melancholy musings the shadowy images around me almost seem to steal once more into existence, their countenances to assume the animation of life, their eyes to pursue me with every movement." Although Mr. Irving doubtless had in his mind various such portrait-hung chambers, as a matter of fact the portraits of departed Knickerbackers did look down upon him from the walls of their former dwelling place.

One more suggestive quotation from Mr. Irving's History of New York, when the sober mood has given way to the whimsical, and he tells of the gathering of the outlying Dutch clans when they assembled on the Bowling Green at New Amsterdam ready to help Governor Stuyvesant win a victory over the Swedes at Fort Casimer "Lastly came the Knickerbockers of the great town of Schaghticoke where the folks lay stones upon the houses in windy weather lest they should be blown away. These derive their name as some say from KNICKER to shake and BECKER a goblet, indicating that they were sturdy tosspots of yore, but in truth it was derived from KNICKER to nod and BOEKEN books; plainly meaning that they were great nodders over books."

Referring to his friend, Hermen Knickerbacker, the Congressman, Washington Irving writes on March 5, 1811, to his friend Henry Brevoort in New York, "About the time you will receive this I am expecting 'my cousin' Knickerbocker will arrive in New York; I wish you would call at the City Hotel and look for him; he is a right honest, sound-hearted, pleasant fellow." (Life of Irving. Vol. 1, p 208.)

On July 31, 1833, Washington Irving lately returned from a protracted stay in Europe, "went up from Tarrytown to Saratoga Springs to take the waters and after a fortnight there he made an excursion to Schaghticoke and visited Hermen Knickerbocker whom he had known twenty years before when he was a Congressman." Of this visit he wrote to his brother, Peter: "I found him (Knickerbacker) with a houseful of children, living hospitably and filling various stations-a judge, a farmer, a miller, a manufacturer, a politician, etc.; he received me with open arms and I

only escaped from his hospitality by promising to come another time to spend a day or two with him " (Ditto, Vol. II, p 261.)

So thoroughly does Irving in his account of Diedrich Knickerbocker mix up the real with the fanciful that for some time after the publication of his "history" it was generally thought that the odd name of "Knickerbocker" was the off-spring of his imagination. As late as 1853 when the present writer, then an infant, was brought to his nephew, the Rev. Pierre P. Irving-then Rector of Christ Church, New Brighton, Staten Island, to be baptized, the future biographer of his uncle demurred at accepting "Kathlyne Knickerbacker" as a baptismal name, saying it was a pity to give a child a fancy name!

On a recent visit to the Knickerbacker homestead at Schaghticoke I and my companions were shown an old sleigh with goose-heads on long slender necks curving down in front, set with brilliant glass eyes and with very moth-eaten cushions, and told that Washington Irving had driven in it.

Some time ago I came across a tale in a little book, called the *Bradshaw Memorial* (p 45) of a Mrs. J. B. Lee, once of Schaghticoke, who remembered as a little child coming into the parlor at the Knickerbacker homestead and being very much frightened by the ticking of the tall clock in the corner She could recall Mr. Irving, who was there, taking her up on his lap, explaining the sound to her and then teaching her how to tell time. These homely incidents indicate the woof on which Washington Irving wove the delightful creation-Diedrich Knickerbocker.

In January, 1833, the Knickerbacker Magazine was started and its first number contained this paragraph, taken from a supposed conversation with Diedrich Knickerbocker: He readily forgave the liberty taken with his name in consideration of our having restored it to its ancient spelling especially when we informed him that it was in consequence of a request officially preferred by the Burgomaster of the ancient City of Albany"

But in July the next copy comes out with the title changed to Knickerbocker and that number opens with a conversation as before with Diedrich Knickerbocker in which he says "I wish thee to restore my name to its original spelling as it stands in my celebrated History; so as fortune has given immortal glory to what some would consider a discreditable mistake I will even take it as it came and add the 'O' to the end of time"

Charles Dudley Warner says of Diedrich Knickerbocker: "This little man in knee breeches and cocked hat was the germ of the whole Knickerbocker legend-a fantastic creation which in a manner took the place of history and stamped upon the metropolis of the New World the indelible Knickerbocker name and character; and even now in the city it is an undefined patent of distinction to have descent from 'an old Knickerbocker family.'"

Howard Knickerbocker
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