

Frank H. Cooper built the world's largest department store, complete with lighthouse

PETER DE HAAN

On the northern outskirts of Akkrum there is a magnificent complex of senior apartments set in a large, well-cared-for garden. It is called Coopersburg and it is known far and wide. This is the story of the founder, Folkert Harmen Kuipers. Or rather Frank H. Cooper, as he preferred to be known in America, where he rose from salesclerk to owner of a unique complex of megastores. His fascinating life story is documented in *Alle minsken binn'myn Broerren! Folkert Kuipers en 100 jaar Coopersburg (Everyone is my brother! Folkert Kuipers and 100 years of Coopersburg, 2001)*. The following account is based on the book by Ernst Huisman, Atze Reidinga, and Willem Winters.

Youth

Folkert Kuipers was born on 23 October 1843, on the corner of Boarnswâl and Wide Stege in Akkrum, where his grandfather Harmen Folkerts Kuipers worked as a *kuiper* or barrel-maker. Harmen and his wife, Sieuke van der Veer, who came from a family of ferryboat captains, had 12 children, one of whom – Willem Harmens (1809-1903) – was Folkert's father. Willem married Ytje Rommerts de Vries, the daughter of a well-known ferryboat captain whose destinations were Amsterdam and London.

We know that Folkert's father Willem became a barrel-maker like his own father, but also that he was a well-read, even erudite man. He expressed his admiration for the tolerance and moderation propagated by Erasmus, and had learned from Spinoza that every man has a right to his own convictions. Father was an enterprising man who set up a steam-operated oil mill, together with his friend, Dr. W.H. Idzerda. The grain and seed came from as far away as St. Petersburg and Odesa, and in Holland there was a ready market for oil and cattle cakes. An eloquent speaker, Father was active in the Vermaning, the Baptist church in Akkrum where he led the singing. Frank grew up in a family that was in favor of non-violence and practical Christianity, and against doctrinal authority. Family friend Dr. Idzerda was a progressive conservative and even represented his party in the Lower House of the Dutch Parliament. It is characteristic of father Willem that he was among the first to make the 'long journey' to London and Paris.

Folker's mother Ytje came from a prominent family of shippers. She had a feeling for style and aesthetics which was reflected in her home and in her children's wardrobe.

When Folkert was born, Akkrum had a population of 1150, which was half Dutch Reformed and half Baptist. The village itself can best



be described as ‘free-thinking’. The paved road between Leeuwarden and Zwolle dated from over 10 years before, and the Boorne was the main waterway.

In view of the projects which Folkert was later to undertake, it is interesting to note that in the year of his birth Friesland had a total of 6000 stores, with a combined turnover of around 2300 guilders. The number of peddlers had declined markedly and a number of textile tradesmen from Germany (known as *lapkepoepen*) set up shop here. In 1826 Hermann and Joseph Sinkel opened a store in Leeuwarden, one of the first department stores in Holland. This period also saw the arrival of C & A in Holland, when Clemens and August Brenninkmeyer opened the first dry goods store with fixed prices.

Father Willem, when asked about Folkert’s special traits, replied that in a family with 11 children he was a boy just like all the other boys. In other words, he loved egg hunts, pole-vaulting, skating, etc. But his father also described him as ‘in learder, in stúdzjekop’ – the family spoke Frisian at home – i.e., he had an inquisitive mind and loved learning. So after elementary school, he was allowed to continue his education at the Latin School, where there happened to be more emphasis on French than on Latin. Folkert was the youngest in the class, but he got top grades and was even awarded a prize. He had a special gift for languages and that, combined with his adventurous nature, later led him to organize a trip to London together with his

Coopersburg in Akkrum

brother Rommert – at the age of 17! – and then to travel with a group to Paris, serving as both guide and interpreter.

Folkert's father wondered what line of work his son ought to follow after completing his studies. Dr. Idzerda said: 'Put him into dry goods – it's a branch where there's still a bit of adventure'. Through Idzerda's contacts, Folkert started work as a 15-year-old apprentice on Vismarkt in Groningen, but soon thereafter (7 March 1860) he began as a shop assistant with the merchant Antoon van Assen, located at Voorstreek 335 (later renumbered 37 and 39). On 13 March 1861, he registered at City Hall. The shop was at the same address as the house where Folkert would remain for six years. He was on good terms with his boss De Jonge, and took a particular interest in fabrics ('people will always need clothes').

Folkert was also friendly with Johan Winkler (1840-1916), a physician who was born in Leeuwarden and became a doctor in 1865. He would later be remembered for his linguistic, archeological and folkloristic studies in Haarlem. The two shared a love of the Frisian language. Frank would later take pleasure in recounting to his children the joys of those walks to and from Leeuwarden.

Even then, he read everything he could get his hands on about the United States. There was no shortage of books and magazines devoted to the experiences of immigrant families. Folkert was convinced that it was possible to make your fortune in America, if you were willing to work hard and had the gift of perseverance. His uncle Boetje, a preacher, dismissed Folkert's stories about the miraculous new country as so many 'pipe dreams'. When Van Assen sold the business to his second-in-command, Folkert knew that the time had come to take the plunge and set off for America. He was then 22 years old and officially still a minor. But his parents had sufficient confidence in their son's capabilities and linguistic gifts to give their consent. Nevertheless, his father gave him enough money to cover the trip back as well as the trip over, just to be on the safe side. From then on, it was Idzerda who would serve as his counselor.

Off to America

On Saturday 28 April 1866, the great day had come: he took leave of his family, friends, acquaintances and employer. On the train trip from Leeuwarden to Harlingen – Akkrum did not yet have a rail connection – he was accompanied by his oldest brother Harmen and his friend and colleague from Leeuwarden De Jonge. He later said that it was harder for the two friends who saw him off in Harlingen than it was for him. With tear-stained faces, Harmen and De Jong watched him go on board the steamship *Minister Thorbecke* (actually a freighter with passenger accommodation), headed for Hull. There he boarded the *City of Paris* for the two-week voyage to New York. He disembarked near Castle Garden. Neither Ellis Island Immigration Station nor the Statue of Liberty had yet been realized.

Folkert was immediately impressed by the city: the masses of carriages and the horse-drawn buses and trams which raced past him in all directions. He had been given several addresses, mainly acquaintances of family or school friends. They included the Catholic office clerk Conrad Kampschmidt from Leeuwarden. He – and others – warned him that it might not be as easy to find work as he originally thought. But the Civil War had ended the previous year, which could mean an improvement in the economic prospects. And otherwise, immigrants would have to travel further westwards.

The first two weeks Folkert's search for suitable work, preferably in the textile trade, was unsuccessful. He left for Lancaster, 400 kilometers north of New York City, where the 70-year-old Worp van Peyma lived. His much younger wife, Yttje Jacobs van der Meer, was a friend of his mother's. Van Peyma had been a gentleman farmer in Ternaart, and was the author of countless publications on hydraulic engineering. Folkert enjoyed the couple's hospitality for several weeks ('In that family I found my second parents.'). On his later visits to Friesland, he always looked up relatives of the Van Peymas in Irnsum. Seventeen years earlier Worp van Peyma had left his homeland, together with his family, several other farmers and their personnel, out of dissatisfaction with the social situation and the hope of finding more freedom and prosperity elsewhere.

The Van Peymas advised him to try his luck in the nearby city of Buffalo. It was at this point that he 'Americanized' his name to 'Frank Harmon Cooper', which we will use from now on.



Folkert Kuipers (later Frank Cooper) around 1866

First job, first marriage

Frank's first job paid five dollars a week, which was spent on rent (four dollars) and cigarettes. This soon made him decide to look around. He saw a job at the nearby 'Freush and Winkler', where they were paying ten dollars a week. He made this known to his employer, and when he refused to consider a raise, Frank felt free to try his luck elsewhere. Several months later, Frank waited on a lady who originally came from Middelburg. When she got home, Mina de Graff told her step-daughter Netty that she had met a Dutch clerk who was perhaps lonely and would enjoy meeting some young people. Wouldn't it be a nice idea to invite him over for dinner some time? Netty went to see for herself, and reported that she was prepared to 'take off her hat' for the likeable young man. Frank himself was immediately taken by this attractive lady, three years his senior. There were those who called Frank impulsive, others said he 'didn't waste time'. In any case, they married at Christmastime 1866, only six weeks after their first meeting. In his later life, too, Frank always headed straight for his goal. Initially, they would be living with Netty's parents.

But while they were still in the honeymoon period, Frank's employer went bankrupt. Netty was a seamstress, making vests which

sold for a dollar apiece. A son, William Harmon, was born in April 1868, and this proved to be a turning point in Frank's work situation. He got a job with a large firm called 'A, M & A's', where before long he was promoted to head of the department. Meanwhile a second son, Edward, was born. Due in part to Netty's sewing work, their financial position improved, and they were even able to lay aside the odd small sum, which they hoped would help them to realize their dream: a business of their own.

Their own business

But they would need more than the 1300 dollars Frank had saved to set up a business, and he contacted his colleague Trempanier to discuss a possible collaboration. They decided that each of them would invest another 2500 dollars, and set up a joint venture. Frank persuaded his father to donate the required sum. They then decided to try their luck westwards, heeding the then popular motto 'Go West, young man, go West!' In 1873 they ended up in Toledo, in the state of Ohio. Located at the mouth of the Maumee River, at the western end of Lake Erie, the town was a hive of activity. They managed to stay ahead of the competition by launching spectacular stunts like half-price offers, and opted for a formula which combined affordable merchandise with good service.

By this time, two more sons had been born to Frank and Netty: Charles and Garret. Five years after setting up the company, the entire family visited Akkrum. Netty met her parents-in-law for the first time, as well as the rest of the family. The visit was a great success. Frank's mother presented him with the 'long pipe', which he would smoke on subsequent visits, and which has now found a place in Coopersburg. Frank's 19-year-old sister, Fokje Johanna, decided to accompany them on the return voyage to America.

After returning to Toledo, Frank decided to terminate the collaboration with Trempanier. His wife spent money like water, and that had a bad effect on Frank's partner. He bought them out, paying his partner \$11,500.

Within a year he returned to Friesland in connection with family affairs.

Adversity

Frank had no sooner arrived in Akkrum when he had to hurry back (and this was before the advent of air travel). His wife Netty was seriously ill, and the attending physician said that she had only a chance of one in a thousand of surviving an operation. His sister Fokje, known as Flora, had to promise Netty that she would care for the family which, with the advent of baby Eda, now included five children. She agreed. The mother of the young family died on New Year's Eve 1878. Frank sent a telegram to Akkrum which read 'Netty dead, God help me!'



Netty, Frank Cooper's first wife, around 1866

As young as she was, Flora took over the care of the family, while Frank criss-crossed various states in search of a suitable city in which to set up a business. His eye fell on Peoria, some 500 kilometers west of Toledo. It was in the state of Illinois, in the emerging Mid-West. It was in Peoria that Abraham Lincoln, later President Lincoln, first openly condemned slavery in 1854. It had been abolished shortly before Frank arrived in America. Frank had seen that the position of the city on the Illinois River was quite favorable, and offered distinct possibilities for development. That, together with suitable premises and Frank's entrepreneurial skills, proved to be an excellent combination. Frank was able to double the amount invested within the year, and to expand the business a year later. Flora accompanied them to Peoria, but wanted to return to her parents in Akkrum. Frank understood, and it was agreed that Flora would take the baby Eda with her. Eda was to remain in Akkrum for four years, until the day Frank came to get her, together with his new wife, Winefred. She was a beautiful widow with a daughter of her own, who was given whatever she asked for, in sharp contrast to stepdaughter Eda. In fact, according to Frank's descendants, Winefred was an egoistic, greedy, and vain woman. Frank realized his mistake and took steps to divorce her. Three of Frank's children were sent to a Methodist training institute. They jokingly referred to their father as 'the Governor' or 'the old man'.

Collaboration with Henry Siegel

It was due above all to the ingenious never-before-seen advertising campaigns and gimmicks – 'come to the store at such and such a time and take home a gift' – that the Peoria store was successful. So successful, in fact, that in view of the population of the city and the region, his business had reached its maximum size. He wanted to start a larger store in a larger city. He discussed these plans with Henry Siegel, a manufacturer with a Jewish-German background, with whom he placed large orders for coats. Siegel had the same idea as Frank Cooper, and had also singled out Chicago as a promising location. The two had become friends, they knew one another well, and each had confidence in the other's capacities. Frank postponed the signing of the final collaborative agreement until they had found the definitive location. He sold the store in Peoria to three businessmen from New York for \$15,000 more than the stock was worth at the time of transfer, as the store-wide sales continued apace.

Fifty years before, Chicago – 200 kilometers northeast of Peoria – did not amount to a great deal. But after the opening of the Erie Canal and the Illinois-Michigan Canal, Chicago became a hub for both waterways and railways, and soon it was a city with a population of over a million. Having survived the Great Chicago Fire, it emerged from that disaster with an even more modern aura than before, now that it could boast the world's first skyscraper. Cooper and Siegel invested \$125,000 in a centrally located site, and the store opened on 28 May 1887. A year



later the decision was taken to acquire the adjacent buildings, creating a front width of 160 feet. The two partners formed a corporation: 'Siegel, Cooper & Co.'. Business was still booming, but four years later a fire destroyed the entire building. A temporary building was quickly found, so as not to lose their customers during the construction of the new premises. They decided to opt for an even more favorable location, not far from the entrance to the coming World Exhibition and the planned 'elevated railroad'. The new building which took shape at the corner of State Street and Van Buren Street was described as 'one of the most remarkable buildings in the world'. There were 2000 employees in all, 10 percent of whom were of Dutch extraction. This 'over-representation' was the work of Cooper's manager John Broekema, a key figure within the Holland Society. The building provided commercial space for 65 different, independently operated businesses (not only furniture and clothes, but also a large department where carriages were sold, and even an international reading room and a bank). In the central hall, made entirely of marble, stood a large illuminated spouting fountain filled with hundreds of goldfish. There was a 'Vienna Café' for ladies, with a view of the great hall. In addition to the luxurious furnishings, escalators had made their entrance into Chicago. The large building even had its own power plant consisting of steam engines. Another innovation was a mail-order department which included 65 gold-painted carriages and 150 horses. In 1893, the year of the World Exhibition, the owners recorded a turnover in excess of ten million dollars. A separate apartment building was provided for the female personnel, while the company also had a Mutual Benevolent Association, essentially its own

The gigantic Cooper & Siegel department store in New York City

Health Service (which also paid out cost-of-living expenses during sickness), which at the time was highly unusual.

By this time, all Frank's children had left home. He himself now lived on Michigan Avenue – with a clear view over the lake – under one roof with his daughter Eda, who was married to Wallace Wolff. Years later, at the opening of Coopersburg, their daughter Antoinette would personally present the new occupants with their house keys. As for Frank's third wife, we know only that once, when friends asked if they could stay for a few days, he wrote back that she was American and 'They're a bit different from us Frisians'. This would seem to indicate not only that Frank still considered himself Frisian in heart and soul, but also that his wife was not eager to have strangers in her house. In any case, he promised that he would find a solution, if necessary elsewhere. Frank remained there until 1902, the year he sold his share in the Chicago company to his fellow partners for \$750,000. He then went to live with the family of his oldest son William, in New Rochelle, just north of New York City.

New York

Siegel & Cooper had built a new department store here in 1896, a building for which even superlatives fell short. When Frank informed his father that he was planning to build a 'Big Store' in New York, he advised against the scheme. Why would he want to take on even more responsibility and pressure? But it was Frank's dream to realize this plan in the American metropolis, which was 700 miles closer to Akkrum and – more importantly – had a worldwide charisma. The Manhattan peninsula was where it all happened. Within its confines, the so-called 'Ladies' Mile' was a magnet for retailers: this was not only the home of the wealthier residents, but a new branch of the elevated railroad train was under construction on Sixth Avenue. They found a building site on the east side of Sixth Avenue which covered almost an entire block (between 18th and 19th Street). This became the site of a building of monumental architectural allure, designed by the architects De Lemos and Cordes at a cost of almost nine million dollars. Until the construction of the later Macy's, this was acknowledged as the largest department store in the world, a true 'world bazaar'. To give readers an idea of what this meant: there were 150 departments where, according to *New York Times*, you could find 'everything under the sun', from 'a ten-cent nail to a diamond bracelet'. There were also restaurants and a day-care center, alongside stocksellers, a pet shop that sold wild animals, a photo studio, an aviary, and even a bicycle department with its own training track. Nothing was too crazy to try. There were also plainclothes policemen throughout the store, then a new phenomenon.

The building now enjoys monument status (Landmark Preservation), which is unusual for New York. And today anyone gazing up at the building on Sixth Avenue (which foreigners often refer to as the Avenue



Painting of the Cooper & Siegel department store, with its working lighthouse



of the Americas) cannot help but be enchanted by the magnificent Renaissance architecture. It consists of seven floors (counting the cellar) and the façade features countless decorative details which evoke the ‘grandeur that was Rome’: Corinthian and Doric pillars and pilasters, round windows, and lions’ heads. The circular marble hall once featured an enormous fountain, with a huge marble statue of a female figure in the center. This became a famous meeting place, and any New Yorker would have been familiar with the expression: ‘Meet me at the fountain’.

Equally exceptional was the richly ornamented tower which graced the Sixth Avenue façade. It not only embellished the building, but also served as an attention-getter. At night it circulated a light bundle in the form of a searchlight which covered the entire city of New York. Visible from 30 miles away, it functioned as a kind of lighthouse: a unique initiative in the world of advertising. The effect is captured in a painting which Frank commissioned for his father. It is a mirror image painted on a sheet of glass (see photo), and now hangs in the trustees’ room of Coopersburg in Akkrum. Unfortunately, the tower and its searchlight were not included in the restoration which took place during the nineties, and today only the base is visible.

Frank Cooper had a sixth sense for public relations before the term had even been coined. And there was no better place to make use of that talent than New York. In addition to the lighthouse and the world’s

The foundations of the tower are just visible

first trading stamps, his publicity stunts included banners featuring special offers, which were attached to balloons that hovered high above the building. Prior to the official opening there was an 'open day' on Saturday 12 September 1896: visitors were free to look around, but were not able to purchase anything. Even then, dozens of people were trampled underfoot. At the actual opening, which drew some 150,000 visitors, it was a total madhouse. At five o'clock in the morning there was already incredible jostling and pushing, and some sixteen people were said to have been 'seriously injured'. The ambulance services were kept very busy. According to the *New York Times*, in 1902 the staff waited on *an average* of 180,000 customers per day. Here, too, the terms of employment were highly attractive. For example, Siegel and Cooper had a complex of summer homes in Long Branch, at the New Jersey shore, which employees could rent for a modest sum.

All his life Frank had a soft spot in his heart for Friesland and the village where he was born. He made no fewer than 12 trips to the house he grew up in. Invariably he also paid a visit to the widow of his former partner De Jonge in Leeuwarden. He once asked his father what his annual turnover was as a barrel-maker, and he answered 'around 2,500 guilders'. Frank replied that when business was good he turned over that amount every five minutes or so. His father replied with the winged words: 'Well, my boy, I don't doubt that you do, but just remember that you and your brothers never went to bed hungry'.

The above anecdote may mistakenly suggest that Frank was a boaster, which was not the case. He once mentioned to Jacob Hepkema in 1901 that he had no love for the class society as he had observed it in New York and other cities. If his employees (throughout the year 3000 strong, but at Christmastime 7000 plus 1000 drivers) failed to greet him in passing, it didn't bother him: 'We're all of us human beings, and no one stands an inch above the others.' The *Chicago Tribune* wrote of him in 1901 that he was not only 'modern and up-to-date' within the commercial world but also a model of generosity and magnanimity. 'If you ask Mr. Cooper himself, he will reply that he is simply a businessman. But it's his friends who highlight the other side of his character. His work for charitable institutions and the public cause is much appreciated. He approaches his personnel in cheerful fashion and the appeal of his personality is apparent wherever he goes. He does not play golf and is only a member of the Chicago Athletic Club.'

No doubt the same held true during his time in New York. Moreover, he did not devote himself exclusively to the running of the Big Store. Together with his sons, he was involved in patent medicines, and he also owned rich silver mines in California.

Coopersburg

During his many trips back to Friesland, plans began to take shape which would help to alleviate the poverty which he saw there, in par-

ticular among older people. In 1899, before a notary, he set up the Coopersburg Foundation. The goal of the foundation was to house and care for elderly people in need, regardless of their religion or sex. They had to have lived in the municipality of Utingeradeel for at least 30 years, preferably in Akkrum.

On 18 July 1900, with Frank looking on, his 91-year-old father laid the first stone for a unique complex. And in April of 1901, Frank and no fewer than 11 family members crossed the ocean to attend the opening of Coopersburg on 8 May 1901. The entire population of Akkrum turned out to welcome the family at the railroad station, and the brass band played the American national anthem. In his opening speech Frank said: 'It is the greatest pride of my life that I was able to realize this haven of refuge for the elderly, and that I was in a position to subsidize it for hundreds of years to come.' The residents paid no rent, and even received a weekly allowance. To ensure that even after his death the necessary funds would be available in the future, he had taken out a life insurance policy in the amount of \$100,000. The Coopersburg foundation would have a life interest in this capital, which was to be administered in America. The founder of Coopersburg could not have foreseen that quite soon after his death, this flow of funds would stagnate. Frank said at the ceremony, 'All the pleasures, travels, music, opera, and whatever else one does for oneself is, in my view, worth nothing.' It was 'being there for each other' that mattered.

In 1902, Frank was the first person to sign the Coopersburg guest-book (profession: 'merchant'). In the newspapers he was lavishly praised for the benevolent initiative that led to the founding of Coopersburg. He was undeniably an enthusiastic philanthropist, but also a man who, though he regularly returned to Akkrum, never stayed for long. After a few weeks, he was ready to take off for Paris or London, where he 'went out on the town' or attended to business matters. And yet, life in the country had not lost its appeal. He did not drink alcohol. In Akkrum he always ordered bottled water, as he was afraid of rainwater. On 28 May 1904 he attended the unveiling of a statue of the writer Eeltje Hiddes Halbersma in Grou. It would be his last visit.

On his return to America, he suffered a stroke. After a sickbed lasting six months, he died on New Year's Eve 1904 with his son William beside him. He was then 61 years old. The press devoted considerable attention to his passing, especially in Chicago, where he was known as 'the merchant prince'. There – more than in New York – he had also been in the limelight outside of the business world. Although he was retired, his name still appeared on the huge flags that flew high over the city's rooftops.

Due to the dynamics in the variation of spatial functions in Manhattan on the one hand, and the departure of Siegel and Cooper on the other hand, the 'Cathedral of Commerce' on Sixth Avenue declined after the First World War. It first served as a military hospital, and was later turned into a warehouse. Today it is a monument, and after a



Martin van Buren, from 1837 to 1841 the eighth president of the United States

OK

An expression in almost universal use, 'OK' also originated in Holland. At least, one of the most common theories is that it was first used by Martin van Buren, of Dutch extraction, who became the eighth president (1836 to 1840). Van Buren lived on an estate 15 miles south of Albany; it was called Lindewald, but was commonly referred to as 'Old Kinderhook'. Later he himself was known by this nickname, which was often shortened to OK. Others claim that Van Buren was in the habit of initialing his documents with the abbreviation OK. It is interesting that while most immigrants from Holland traditionally voted Republican, Van Buren was a Democrat.



Detail of the mausoleum

The Cooper family on the veranda of Coopersburg

renovation, it even houses a number of shops. But the heyday of the world's largest department store belongs to the past.

What also remains is the national monument Coopersburg in Akkrum. Built at a cost of over 90,000 guilders, with a main building flanked on either side by a wing housing ten dwellings, it is set in a magnificent park with several ponds. And last but not least, there is a genuine mausoleum, erected after Frank's death. It was commissioned by the children and executed by Johann Hinrich Schröder, who in his Leeuwarden period was responsible for sculpture groups on the gate of Nieuw Sint Anthony Gasthuis, and above the windows of the chemist's on the Tweebaksmarkt. The mausoleum is located behind this complex. An inscription implores God's blessing on the founder and his wife 'salang de wyn waeit, de hoanne kraeit, it gers groeit en de beam bloeit' (as long as the wind blows, the cock crows, the barley grows and the field blooms). In February 1907 the remains of Frank Cooper and his first wife, Netty, were brought by train from the harbor of Rotterdam to Akkrum. The funeral cortege, consisting of two funeral carriages and six additional carriages, set off from the Baptist Church, where Reverend Kossen held the eulogy, to the mausoleum. However, the coffins proved to be too large for the space reserved in the tombs and they had to remain above ground. A carpenter is thought to have shortened the coffins the following day... Anyone who would like to know more about how Coopersburg later fared can consult *Alle minsken binn'myn broeren!*