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Gerrit Spaanbroek

One of the fascinating people Paul and I became acquainted with in Chapel Hill was Gerrit Spaanbroek, father of Henny Caldwell who lived across Purefoy Road from us. Henny came to North Carolina from The Netherlands at the age of eight when her father had been sent to Asheville for the opening and operation of the American Enka rayon plant as an upper management official. The Spaanbroeks frequently came to see Henny and her family. We found them delightful and often went with the Caldwells when they went to Asheville to see Henny's parents.

Mr. Spaanbroek was a charming, effervescent person who came as close to being a Renaissance man as anyone I've ever known. His physical appearance was for me the picture of how a "Dutchman" should look. He was very short, probably no more than five and a half feet tall, a bit rotund, and very dapper. He had small, elegantly shod feet which seemed to twinkle as he walked, ever hurrying from one task to another. Always beautifully groomed, he looked neat even when he was working on any of his varied projects in his basement or when he returned from a week's fishing trip to Florida, where he went whenever he could, as relief from the demanding nature of his job. His hair was white and thinning, but always immaculately groomed. His face was jolly; indeed, he seemed to share a private joke with every person he had contact with.



His playful nature was evident one time when he had been confined so long recovering from an illness that he answered a knock at the door. The Catholic priest standing there asked him about his religious affiliation. Mr. Spaanbroek replied, "I used to be a Catholic."

"Oh, no", the young priest assured him. "Once a Catholic, always a Catholic."

"I married a Jew - and I'm a thirty-second degree Mason."

"Yes, you once were a Catholic," the young priest answered sadly, turning to leave.

He did indeed marry a Jew and was terribly concerned about the fate of Mrs. Spaanbroek's relatives in Holland, going with her several times in vain efforts to locate any of her family or friends who survived the Nazi occupation of Holland.

He was a wonderful example of a European paterfamilias. His word and desires determined the activities of the household. His children truly loved him, his wife was successful in anticipating almost his every wish, and his grandchildren were sure that he was perfect. The entire household revolved about him and his wishes. He adored his grandchildren (two more had followed Chuck during the time we knew the families) and was a great companion of them. Once, he incurred the displeasure of his daughter Henny when he taught three-year-old Chuck how to swear in Dutch, but he was unrepentant, declaring that so few people understand Dutch that the reputations of the child and parents were safe.

He was an accomplished artist. The Florida room of the Spaanbroeks' spacious Asheville home was devoted entirely to his painting equipment: his easel occupied the center of the floor with its work-in-progress ready for the next brush stroke. Near the easel could be found his supplies of watercolors, oils, and brushes. Stretched canvasses and mounted water colors were stacked against the walls awaiting proper display. They were interesting, well-executed pictures, mainly landscapes.

He was a superb photographer, using his Linhof view camera and his Leica to take prize-winning photographs of people he knew and places he visited and explored. His favorite Great Smoky Mountains were well and beautifully represented in his portfolio. His photographs were regularly published in the American Enka house magazine, for which he was listed as the official staff photographer.

He was a tropical fish expert. The walls of the dining room were lined with many large professional fish tanks containing rare specimens. Several times Paul and I were able to deliver to him special shipments of exotic fish from one of his suppliers in Durham. He was also a source of young fish for the tanks of his friends in Asheville. His tanks displayed the considerable variety of exotic specimens he collected and lovingly tended.

He was a knowledgeable music lover. His audio equipment was state of the art. He was an early pioneer in home hi-fidelity equipment. The living room held his many speakers and turntables, anticipating stereo sound by several years. Because he didn't want to run amplifier and speaker wires across the floor or under the carpet, he drilled holes in the floor and threaded the wires across the ceiling of the basement. He frequently rearranged the audio components for better sound, thus necessitating more holes for the newly located wires. His children teased him that some day the living room floor would collapse into the basement, if he kept drilling holes. The sound was wonderful, and the variety of 78 rpm classical music records we heard in his living room was magnificent. Shelves on several walls were filled floor to ceiling with record albums. Listening to his eclectic collection proved a wonderful music education for Paul and me.

He was an explorer of the Smoky Mountains which surround Asheville, climbing all the peaks and hiking most of the trails. He was a great guide for visitors, deciding which of his guests was capable of negotiating which trail on which mountain. He was usually right, too. When a number of us were planning a hiking expedition to the top of Mount Leconte, he told me that I should drop off at Bat Cave, halfway up the mountain. Although I was determined to prove him wrong, I found myself gratefully stopping at the designated resting place. While the rest of our group continued their climb, I thoroughly enjoyed a long conversation with Henny, who could have made it to the top but graciously kept me company. Not only was Mr. Spaanbroek a guide for his visitors but he also made friends with many of the hikers he met along the trails. Henny recently told me that, when one of them saw the notice of his death, he drove across Tennessee to come to the funeral in Asheville.

He was a boat builder. He constructed a large seaworthy boat in his basement for deep sea fishing. It was not a mistake when he had to knock a hole in one wall of the basement in order to take the boat out. Removing the wall and replacing it was no problem for him, and was, in fact a contingency he had planned for.

He was a dedicated fisherman. He frequently relaxed by going to Florida where he would take out the boat he had built and fish off the coast, managing the boat and the fishing rod by himself. It was his deep-sea fishing that furnished his family and us with one of our favorite stories. Henny, George, Paul, and I were in Asheville for the wedding of our friend, John Carpenter. When we returned home from the rehearsal, we were greeted by one of the worst odors I've ever experienced. When Henny complained to her father, who had just returned from a fishing trip, he said, "Oh, my dear, does that bother you? I will fix it." And he poured a bottle of Air Wick into the steaming pot in which he was cooking off the flesh from a barracuda he had caught. He wanted to mount the jaw as a show-piece trophy. He had just thrown the head into the trunk of his car when he caught it several days before he returned home, not being bothered that it had decayed. He did everything with zest, infecting those about him with his joy of living.

He was a playful, loving husband. He and his wife had a longstanding discussion about the hats she loved to buy and wear. He felt that hats were outrageously expensive. She seldom appeared outside her home without an attractive one on her head, but because she didn't want to provide fuel for his belief about the unreal cost of hats, she had an arrangement with the hat shops she frequented: she charged part of the cost of each hat and paid cash saved from her generous household allowance for the remainder. Several years after Mr. Spaanbroek's death, Mrs. Spaanbroek visited us in Dallas. When we met her at the airport, I was amazed to see her without a hat. When I asked her why, she gave me a simple, logical answer: after Mr. Spaanbroek died, the game of buying a hat was no longer any fun. She simply stopped wearing hats.

Gerrit Spaanbroek was a great man, a real friend to us and many others. We were very fortunate to have had the privilege of knowing him.

Note: his grand-son (maybe – this seems to be a common name) posted some of his pictures at www.steves-gallery.com/gerrit-spaanbroek