

If you ask the right question, sometimes a door opens

My search for a Zeeuwse farmer's knife and how I met a world champion



JOHN'S CABINET OF CURIOSITIES

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I arrived back home from the Netherlands last week. Although these visits are ostensibly to visit family I always make room for my own micro-adventures, following where my curiosity will take me. As usual I have returned with a mass of notes, photographs and even some failed attempts at field recordings. I am still processing the experiences and trying to decide what, dear readers, to share with you. Here is my first curiosity from my recent visit to Zeeland:

On the trail of a knife, I went to Streekmuseum De Meestoof in the village of Sint-Annaland, Zeeland.

This was not just any old knife but one I had heard rumours about during past visits. I had heard about the 'old Zeeuwse farmer's knife', the *paeremes* or *scheemes*. It was once carried by farmers and farm workers throughout the province of Zeeland and is unique to Zeeland and Zeeuwse heritage.

Once I had paid my entrance fee I wandered over to an old barn that held the museum's agricultural artefacts. I wandered amongst the displays of anvils, hoes, ploughs, drills and other old farming tools. Interesting, yes, but no knife.

Dissappointed I turned back and went to the reception desk to enquire, trying to explain what I was looking for.

My questions were met with some bafflement at first but luckily a museum volunteer appeared who thought that there might be some examples of these special knives in the museum store. Soon there was some searching going on behind the scenes and to my delight several knives appeared.

They were magnificent, more beautiful than I had imagined.





The blade was a serious working tool. Long, heavy and practical. By the mid-nineteenth century a Zeeuwse farm boy might, at the age of fifteen, be allowed one of his own but only once he could handle a team of three horses. The knife sat in a leather sheath inside a narrow pocket sewn into the the side of his trousers.

It was used for pruning and topping beet or in an emergency cutting animals free. They were used for spreading butter on bread and even cleaning muck out from below their finger nails.

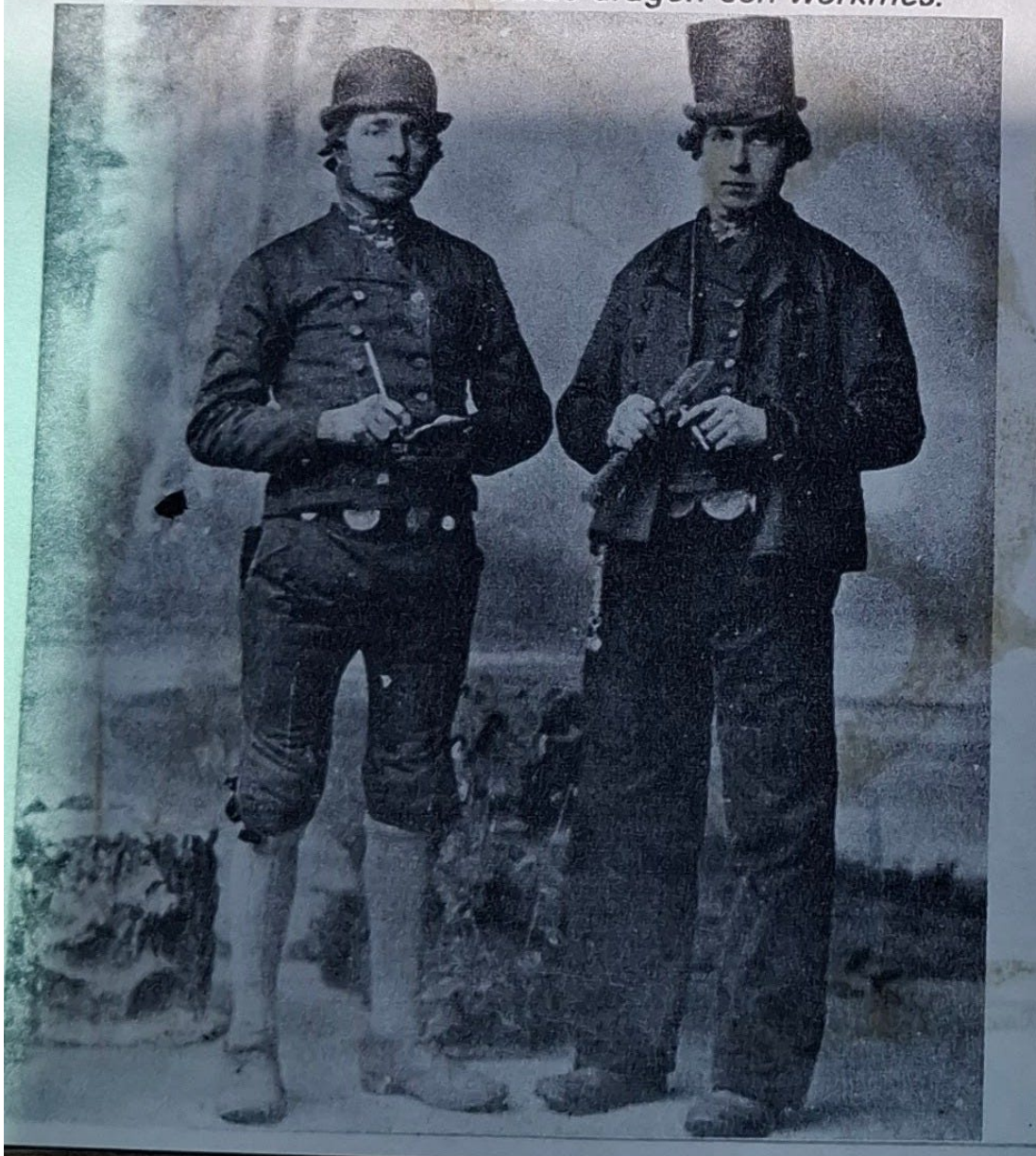
The handles were something else!





The elaborate handles were a nineteenth-century development. Early examples had rudimentary carvings but by the 1860s the imagery increasingly turned towards the life of the Zeeuwse farmer. Eventually a pair of workhorses crowned the handle leading to the knife itself becoming known as the *paeremes* from the Zeeuwse dialect word *paere* - horse and the dutch *mes* - knife.

Jonge Walcherse boeren. Beide dragen een werkmes.



'Two young Wlacheren farmers from the late 19th Century.
Both carrying a work knife - photo credit Streeks Museum
de Meestooft, Sint -Annaland

After I had finished admiring the knives, the volunteer, Tineke smiled.

"Follow me" she said. "I have my own display to show you".

She led me up a narrow, twisting staircase to another part of the museum. At the top was a cabinet filled with cycling jerseys, photographs, medals and other pieces of racing memorabilia.

Some of it, she told me, was hers.

Then came the surprise.

Tineke Fopma had been the Women's Road Cycling World Champion in 1975.

I looked at her. Then at the cabinet. Then back at her.

A few minutes earlier she had been helping me examine old Zeeuwse farmers' knives. Now I was standing beside her, a woman who had once worn the rainbow jersey as the best female road cyclist in the world.

I asked her if she had ever ridden at the Olympic Games.

She shook her head. Women's road cycling was not yet an Olympic event and was not introduced until 1984. In Tineke's racing years it was possible to become world champion and still have no Olympic road race in which to compete.

Among the objects was a pair of cycling gloves patterned with the distinctive red water lily leaves of the Frisian flag.

"Are you from Friesland ?" I asked.

She was and so I inevitably I asked,

"Spreekt u Fries?" - "Do you speak Frisian?"

"Yes."

That small detail delighted me. Here was a Frisian woman who had travelled South to pursue her love of cycle racing, eventually making a

life in Zeeland. Someone who raced at the highest level in the world and now spent time volunteering in a small regional museum, preserving the stories of another place.

Our paths had crossed because I had happened to ask if the museum had an old knife. Remarkable.





Tineke Fotma, Women's Road Cycling World Champion 1975. Tineke's 'rainbow' jersey stands at the back - the jersey of the world champion.

As I was leaving another women pressed a small scribbled note into my hand:

Frans Dingemanse, 1944 - 2026. Zeeuwse paardenmessen.

After a little research I discovered that Frans Dingemanse had spent decades studying, drawing and learning how to carve these extraordinary knife handles, preserving a folk tradition that might otherwise have been lost.

I had arrived looking for a knife and left having met a world champion. A reminder once again of what my mother taught me - "if you ask the right question, sometimes a door opens".

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Tineke Fopma, the staff and volunteers at Streekmuseum de Meestooft for their help in finding what I was looking for plus a delightful bonus find !

Further reading

<http://www.fransdingemanse.nl>