

**ZONDERVAN®**

*The House of Zondervan*

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*A place of great importance.*  
ISAAC MCCOY, 1825

## *Prologue*

Before the Dutch came to Western Michigan, there were French traders. And before the French traders, there were Catholic missionaries. And before the Catholic missionaries, there were Ottawa Indians. It is said that Pontiac, the great chief of the Ottawa who conspired against the English in the French and Indian War, held council on the high land overlooking the rapids of a river that wound through Western Michigan toward its mouth at Lake Michigan. Major Indian trails crisscrossed near the rapids. The Ottawa called the place *Owashtanong*, “the Faraway Waters.” But the white people who came later gave it the name Grand Rapids.

The Reverend Isaac McCoy was among the first white settlers who came to the area of the rapids—in about 1820. Overlooking the rapids of the Grand River one day in 1825, he wrote that it was “a place of great importance.” Why he called it such is uncertain—except that it was beautiful, fertile, inviting, and full of promise. The first permanent settlement began when Louis Campau established a trading post there in 1826. Grand Rapids was incorporated as a village in 1838 and as a city twelve years after that. And by that time the Dutch had arrived.

Immigrants from the Netherlands made their first landing on the Lake Michigan shore in 1847. The group, led by Dr. Albertus Van Raalte, called the place Holland. From Holland it was only a short distance to Grand Rapids, and some of the Dutch settlers soon ventured the journey and made their home there. Later came Poles, Scandinavians, Latvians, Lithuanians, blacks, Greeks, and Syrians, among others. But it was the Dutch who exerted the most lasting influence on Grand Rapids' culture, lifestyle, and reputation.

The city's location, well off the main commercial routes and rail lines running between Detroit and Chicago, might have undermined the Reverend Mr. McCoy's prediction, but it did not. Grand Rapids' population eventually grew to 200,000 and became the biggest and most important commercial city in all of Western Michigan. It came to enjoy a varied industry—farming, metal-working, printing and graphic arts, and the manufacture of automobile parts. It was once “the gypsum capital of the world” because of the mining operations that still continue on a small scale. And it is forever nicknamed the Furniture City, even though, as historians point out, “that fame came to rest more on quality than on quantity.”<sup>1</sup>

Grand Rapids can also rightfully be called “the religious-book capital of the United States.” Five of evangelical Christianity's most respected book publishers are located here, listing as many as four hundred new titles a year. They all have their roots in the Dutch heritage that set the tone for many communities in Western Michigan—Calvinistic, pious, conservative. Grand Rapids became a city of churches—more than five hundred of them at last count. It became the headquarters of the Christian Reformed Church and the home of its two leading educational institutions, Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary. And it nurtured three other Protestant colleges, two Protestant seminaries, and a Catholic college.

The Dutch immigrants brought with them traditions of strict observance of the Lord's Day and opposition to such “worldly” practices as dancing, playing cards, and attending movies. More important, they brought an earnest love for the Scriptures and a fondness for theological debate and Bible study. The ministers preached their catechism from the pulpit on Sunday, and the communicants discussed them in the fields or over a pipe of tobacco and a cup of coffee during the week. Thus there was a demand for theological commentaries and reference works. Early on, books were imported from the Netherlands and translated into English—or left in Dutch for the many who

preferred to use their native tongue. It seems inevitable that a vigorous religious publishing industry would arise in Grand Rapids.

Louis Kregel began it all when he started selling used books from his home on West Leonard Street in 1909. Under the leadership of his son Robert, the business grew into one of the country's largest dealerships in secondhand religious books. Eventually it began publishing older theological works under the name Kregel Publications. And in time it spawned a competitor: Louis Kregel's nephew, Herman Baker, decided to quit working for his uncle in 1939 and founded the Baker Book House. But that gets ahead of the story. Two other firms were to appear before Baker.

William B. Eerdmans had emigrated from the Netherlands in 1902, intent on entering the ministry. He graduated from Calvin College and completed one year of study at the seminary before going into business selling books with B. Sevensma. The company was called Eerdmans-Sevensma. Sevensma died shortly thereafter, and Eerdmans went into business for himself in 1911; he moved his firm to 208 Pearl Street and named it the William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. Unlike Kregel, Eerdmans soon built his list as much on new titles as on reprints. Later on, as he expanded his printing facilities, he moved his business to its present location at 255 Jefferson Avenue SE. Both Kregel and Eerdmans prospered as World War I came and went, the Roaring Twenties had their fling, and the country sank into the Great Depression in 1929.



Like every other American city, Grand Rapids faced severe unemployment and economic problems as the Depression deepened. The city had maintained a reputation for clean government and clean streets, despite some noteworthy scandals, but seeking solutions to the Depression's ills brought its share of controversy.

The city manager appointed for Grand Rapids just before the Depression hit was George W. Welsh, a future mayor whose stormy political career would span more than a half-century. His major contribution to the city while he was mayor was probably bringing water from Lake Michigan to Grand Rapids through a costly but successful program in the late thirties. It was a somewhat similar plan put forth by City Attorney Lant K. Salsbury in the early 1900s that had precipitated the biggest scandal in Grand Rapids' history. Salsbury's scheme was to issue far more bonds than were needed for financing the water

project and to use the excess to fill some pockets. Before the scandal ran its course, it touched the mayor; fourteen aldermen; the city clerk; a state senator; a former prosecutor; leaders in society, church, and business; the three city newspapers; and a few people in New York, Chicago, Milwaukee, Indianapolis, and Omaha.

But that was all in the past and forgotten with the onset of the Depression. Manager Welsh's job in 1929 and the years following was to see that people had something to eat, put business back on its feet, and restore order out of fiscal chaos. Refusing a \$12,000 salary and accepting only a dollar a year for the job, Welsh effected economies that turned a city deficit into a surplus of \$174,000 in less than a year. A national magazine, *The American City*, praised Grand Rapids a short time later as "a city where everyone has a job." Welsh was invited to various cities, including New York, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh, to tell the Grand Rapids story.

Nevertheless, not everyone back home was pleased with what was happening. It seems that, amid considerable opposition, Welsh got many people fed by multiplying public works projects—a policy encouraged by President Herbert Hoover. Welsh had as many as sixty projects going at the same time. In addition, there was continual haggling in city hall over the "always poor" and the "Depression poor" and who was getting what. Some of the city's policies offended the sensitivities of the Dutch with their Puritan work ethic.



Two young men who didn't have to turn to public works, however, were P. J. Zondervan, better known as "Pat," and his younger brother Bernard, whom everyone called "Bernie." Pat had left the family farm in nearby Grandville in 1924 to work for his Uncle Bill Eerdmans—the founder and owner of the William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. Bernie quit school two years later, having finished eighth grade, and joined Pat at the firm. It seemed to be a satisfactory arrangement. And it was—until one fateful day in the summer of 1931.

Although many people were not enjoying that long, hot summer, a few were. Babe Ruth was hitting homeruns long and often for the New York Yankees and had a little earlier asked for and received a fabulous \$80,000 salary. When someone asked him how it felt to be getting a higher salary than President Hoover, Ruth replied, "I had a better year than he did!" Frankie

Frisch of the St. Louis Cardinals and Lefty Grove of the Philadelphia Athletics were leading their teams toward baseball's World Series and were on their way to receiving the Major Leagues' first Most Valuable Player awards. Also that summer an act of Congress made "The Star Spangled Banner"—a common companion to sports events—the country's national anthem.

On the other hand, the University of Michigan, which hadn't sent a football team to the Rose Bowl since 1902, was facing the prospect of another grim season without a championship. One of their new freshman players that fall would be Gerald R. Ford, a talented center from South High School in Grand Rapids.

Grand Rapids was pleased with its new South High School auditorium that summer, but it was even more excited about the new DeVaux automobiles. On January 13, DeVaux-Hall Motor Corporation had wheeled the first of its stylish six-cylinder autos off the assembly line in Grand Rapids, with orders totaling 12,500. The cars sported a price tag of \$685 and boasted a top speed of seventy to eighty miles per hour. They were to be used most notably as police cruisers. By summer, however, the firm's plans had begun to sour in the deepening Depression. The company filed for bankruptcy in April 1932 after fourteen months and 5,554 cars.

The book business wasn't good in the summer of 1931 either. Whether it was just the difficulty of trying to turn a profit or whether there were other factors, William B. Eerdmans wasn't happy. His aggressive nephew, Pat Zondervan, was learning the trade well and was pressing Eerdmans to give him a share of the business. Uncle Bill wanted none of that. One day, when his irritation became too great, he told his twenty-two-year-old nephew, "You're fired!" Pat, astonished, immediately left the office, drove over to get his belongings from the Eerdmans home, where he had been living, and went back to the farm.

His mother was surprised to see him. "Why are you home? What does this mean?"

"Ma!" Pat announced. "I just got fired!"

The date was July 31. What happened next led to the founding of a company that would soon begin to make a profound and lasting impact, not only on religious publishing but on the evangelical Christian world as a whole.

This is the story of that enterprise, which Pat and Bernie Zondervan called the Zondervan Publishing House.

*I want to be a publisher,  
because all they do is laugh and talk all day.*  
CHRISTOPHER CERF, PUBLISHER'S SON, AGE EIGHT

1

## *Dawn at the Farm*

It is both ironic and appropriate that the publishing house known as Zondervan should begin on a family farm in Grandville—ironic because neither Pat nor Bernie Zondervan ever felt cut out for farming, and appropriate because the farm held so much of their roots and heritage.

Peter John was born April 2, 1909, in Paterson, New Jersey, a suburb of New York City that still harbors a substantial Dutch community. His brother, Bernard Dick, was born on October 8, 1910, in Harrison, South Dakota, after the family moved to the upper Midwest to take up farming. After that the boys' only sister, Mary Ann, better known as "Bonnie," arrived.

Eventually the children ended up on a farm in Grandville, Michigan, southwest of Grand Rapids, in a then completely rural area. By that time, however, their mother, Petranella, had gone through a divorce and then married a man named Louis Zondervan, who adopted the children so that they would share his surname.

Petranella, an immigrant from the Netherlands, was pleased to be living only a few miles from her brother, William B. Eerdmans. Pat, Bernie, and Bonnie were joined by five more brothers, George, William, Harold, Louis Jr., and Ted.

Somehow Peter came to be known as “Pat,” and that’s the only name most people ever knew him by. People were as likely to guess that his real name was Patrick. One puzzled bookstore clerk who obviously had never been paid a visit by the brothers wrote to the publishing house in 1945:

*Dear Pat and Bernie,*

*I am not familiar enough with you to know if Pat and Bernie are brothers or if Pat stands for Patricia and you are Mr. and Mrs. I am very interested to find out.*

*Myra Bemis  
The Book Shop  
Fullerton, California*

For Bernie there was never any confusion. He was named after his mother’s father. Dutch names can be fascinating! “Zondervan” is a Dutch expression that means literally “without a from.” This name probably dated from the days of the Spanish occupation of the Netherlands when the indigenous Dutch were required to register according to where they lived. The Zondervans evidently identified themselves as “from nowhere.” Peter and Bernard not only wore their “out of nowhere” name proudly, but also made it immortal—or at least a household word in many a minister’s library and religious institutions around the world.



Given the large family and the traditional Dutch love of hearth and hospitality, there was a virtual “open door” policy at the Zondervan farm. Everyone referred to Nellie Zondervan as “Ma.” The fellows and girls from the neighborhood and church would often be found at the farm, playing ball in summer and making themselves at home indoors in winter. Ma always had a supply of freshly baked bread, cookies, or other Dutch treats on hand. As her children grew up, the extended family enriched Ma’s life. Pat and Bernie’s younger brother Bill recalls, “She was a true mother, and she was a true woman of the house. Nothing thrilled her or excited her more than to have all her family—grandchildren and great-grandchildren—come home on holidays.”

The home was typically Dutch also in its religious practice. The Bible was read after every meal, and the whole family went to church twice on Sunday. It is no wonder that Pat and Bernie later saw their book enterprise not only as a business but also as a ministry to present and spread the gospel.

It was at the farm as well that the brothers learned to work hard. They got their first taste of selling in driving their dad's horse and wagon into southwest Grand Rapids and peddling farm produce door-to-door. Pat recalled that muskmelons were a special favorite of their customers.

If they didn't care for farming when they grew older, neither did they disparage the Puritan work ethic that had been instilled in them. In later years Louis Zondervan remarked Calvinistically on the way things turned out for his boys Pat and Bernie: "You never know what God will do. He makes one rich, and the other one he keeps poor. That's the way he does it. And these boys succeeded pretty well. I must put it this way: It's God's work and all in his hands. Every way it turned out, God has used them, it's true, but all the same. He was the one who blessed the work, so that's why they got what they got!"

Early on, Pat wanted to be a preacher. Walking behind a plow on the farm didn't suit him; yet it gave him a chance to try out and develop a preaching style. "I wanted to get into the Lord's work," Pat remembered, "and then the only church employment I knew was either as a minister or a missionary. I just wanted to preach."

Perhaps as much for her sake as for Pat's—for who can abide a restless son?—Nellie Zondervan arranged for Pat to live with the Eerdmans family and work for Uncle Bill. This was in 1924, when Pat was fifteen. He had gone as far as the tenth grade in Grand Rapids Christian High School and then tried the Davenport McLaughlin Business Institute briefly. That was the extent of his formal education. But he learned much from his uncle that he could never have learned in school. He also got some advice: William Eerdmans had attended Calvin Seminary for a year, so with some authority he told Pat, "You can have a much wider ministry in selling Christian books than in being the pastor of one church." Pat took the counsel, and his uncle put him to work at once. Even so, Pat did become a gifted lay preacher for the Gideons International by the time he was thirty.

Pat remembered, "I was handyman around the publishing business and around my uncle's house." In the home he helped out as babysitter, auto mechanic, and groundskeeper. At the publishing house, he said, "I began by sweeping floors, then working in the warehouse and shipping. Then I worked in the offices and finally became Eerdmans' first salesman." He was a good salesman. Some of his early selling efforts consisted of pedaling his bicycle around to homes in Grand Rapids to peddle Eerdmans' latest publications.

Then Pat began to sell out of town and gained a passion for travel that he kept for the rest of his life. He dealt with publishers and bookstores, sold books to seminarians, and scouted ministers' libraries for good used books to buy. In this way he gained an appreciation for theological and academic books that figured prominently in his own business later on.

Another invaluable experience for Pat was a trip he took to Europe with his uncle in 1930. Among the publishers and booksellers Pat met in London was Frederick Marshall of the prestigious publishing firm of Marshall, Morgan & Scott. This meeting paved the way to an opportunity for Pat and Bernie to begin dealing in foreign rights some four years later, and foreign rights became another crucial aspect of Zondervan publishing.



With all this experience in the publishing world, it didn't take Pat long to decide what to do after he was fired by Bill Eerdmans that day in July 1931. Pat set off the next month for the East Coast by car to see if he could acquire some Christian books that New York publishers couldn't sell because of the Depression doldrums. Among the books he purchased in New York were some "remainders" from Harper Brothers, especially a number of copies of J. Gresham Machen's book *The Virgin Birth*. Harper's price was \$5.00 a copy, but Pat bought them for \$1.00. Some other titles he bought at ten cents on the dollar.

By the time Pat arrived home, Bernie, who had gone to work for Eerdmans two years after Pat, was ready to join him in the enterprise. Twenty-year-old Bernie and Uncle Bill agreed that they didn't need any family competition. So Bernie left.

Then, later, when Eerdmans heard about Pat's buying the Machen books, he sent a wire to Harper, saying that "these boys don't have the money to pay for the merchandise!"

Too late! The books had already been shipped. Pat and Bernie sold them to seminary students for \$1.95 each, and the Harper bill was paid on time.

It was a long time before Uncle Bill forgave Pat for going into competition with him. After all, Pat had learned the publishing business from him! But sometime in the early sixties, when William Eerdmans was in his eighties, he called Pat and said, "Let's have lunch." The two went to the Schnitzelbank, a

German restaurant across from the Eerdmans company, and there they were reconciled.

“Pat,” said Uncle Bill, “I want you to know that I don’t hold anything against you and I wish you every success in your business.” The wish was a little ironic considering that Zondervan Publishing House had been prospering for more than thirty years and had surpassed Eerdmans in annual sales by that time. But the reconciliation was a delight to Pat.

“Believe me, Uncle Bill,” Pat replied, “I don’t hold anything against you either. If it hadn’t been for you, I’d never have gotten started in this business. Thank you for calling this lunch and having this chat.”

They parted as equals. Both firms have fared well since uncle and nephews parted ways back in 1931.



It must have become apparent to William Eerdmans, and to everyone else who knew them, that Pat and Bernie had learned the book business well by the time they set out on their own. Pat brought sales experience and the ability to promote products creatively; Bernie had gained a solid knowledge of the financial and production aspects of publishing. They complemented each other perfectly in the partnership they maintained for thirty-five years until Bernie’s death in 1966.

The brothers shared many personality traits, even though many who knew them tended to think first of their differences. Perhaps the greatest difference was that Bernie was generally quieter and more reserved. If they were walking down the street and chanced to see one of their employees, Bernie would acknowledge that person with a beaming smile; Pat would as likely wave and call out a greeting. Otherwise, the brothers held in common a strong Calvinistic acceptance of life, a friendly mien, a keen business sense, and a love for work. And true to their religious heritage, they grew up in the Christian Reformed Church, learned and practiced a vital faith, and determined to serve God both in the work of the church and in their vocation.

Their vocation clearly was publishing. “In view of the fact that Bernie and I didn’t like farming,” Pat once recalled, “and since the only other occupation that either of us knew was book publishing and selling, and since we couldn’t get a position with any other Christian publisher, we decided to start our own business. We had both just read a book that told about the beginning

of Foyle's Bookshop in London, and that gave us courage to go out on our own, even though we had only \$1,500 and were in the heart of the Great Depression." Their friends also gave them encouragement, since they had a lot of faith in the boys. They were young, they were aggressive, and they had nothing to lose.

They received permission from Ma Zondervan to use a spare upstairs bedroom to set up their business. Then they had to settle on a name. They rejected the word *company* as too cold; they wanted the name to have a warm and friendly sound. And since they would be operating out of the farmhouse, they thought *house* would be appropriate. They decided their business should be called "Zondervan Publishing House."

It is interesting that in book publishing, perhaps more than in most other businesses, there is a tradition of naming a firm after its founders. Consider how many prominent publishing firms bear the names of the originators: Scribners; Macmillan; Doubleday; Simon & Schuster; Farrar, Straus & Giroux—the list goes on and on. Perhaps this arises from a regard for books as something more personal than a typical assembly-line item.

Pat and Bernie used the term *publishing* because they resolved to produce their own books as soon as the opportunity arose. But first they had to get established and become known to the book trade.



The brothers' plan was to produce catalogs under their own name, listing remaindered stock and whatever other books they could acquire. Then they would call on booksellers and students in the East, South, and Midwest. (Neither ventured across the Rockies to the West Coast until Pat and Mary made the trip in 1937.) Names from denominational yearbooks and business contacts from previous trips were compiled to form Pat and Bernie's first mailing list of 2,000, and this was used for their publishing premiere—a four-page catalog. Much of their business was conducted by direct mail, using one old typewriter and a battered desk and chair.

Business grew and prospered. During the first few months Pat and Bernie each drew \$10.00 a week in salary and paid their mother \$7.00 of that, leaving them \$3.00 apiece for gas, dating, and other personal expenses. Their total sales that December were \$1,800.00.

Brother Bill, who, like Bernie, was named for his grandfather, was only a grade-school student at the time, yet he did as much as he could to help the business. After school he would help pack books into one of the closets that was supposed to hold clothes. Bill recalls getting paid \$1.50 for eight hours of work.

There was also some outside help. Wilma Plas, one of six daughters of a truck farmer in nearby Wyoming, Michigan, attended the same church as Pat and Bernie—Wyoming Park Christian Reformed. While Bernie was still working for William Eerdmans, Wilma was studying at the Davenport Business School and later was a secretary for the Grand Rapids Credit Men, neither place being very far from the publishing company. They often rode together on the “interurban,” the electric train line that ran between Holland and Grand Rapids and connected a number of other towns and cities in West Michigan. They started dating while they were in their teens.

During the earliest days of the business at the farm, Wilma often came to help by stuffing envelopes and licking stamps. “I can still see that crowded bedroom and the stairway filled with books so that we could hardly move in the house,” she recalled. “No one used the front entrance, as that was filled with books, and on the farm everybody came through the back door anyway. Finally every available bit of space was crowded with books, boxes, and shipping material.” The chicken coop and other space in the farm buildings had long since become stuffed with merchandise.

Until finally Ma Zondervan had to call a halt.

“When the living room began to fill up and there was no room for the rest of the children to play,” Wilma continued, “Ma Zondervan said, ‘This is enough! It’s time to go out and have a sale and get rid of all these books!’”

And that’s just what Pat and Bernie did.