

Creative Creatures

The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.



9 / Claudia and Andrew Sadler, ships carpenters, Groningen, the Netherlands

One day in 1997 before we got active on the Internet, Ans and I found a letter in the mail from Andrew Sadler, an English graphic designer who at the time lived and worked in Rotterdam, the Netherlands; he formally asked our permission to marry his Dutch girlfriend Claudia van der Straaten, also a graphic designer. Not only this—he asked us to be their best man and best woman and, knowing we were not considering to fly to Holland for any occasion, informed us that, if we said yes, they would cross the ocean and exchange “Yes I do!” somewhere in the American West. We felt honored and blessed, and amazed, too, because essentially we had no say over Claudia at all.

We had first met Claudia when son Mizja introduced her as “my buddy.” He was seventeen, she was nineteen, and they were both studying graphic arts in Rotterdam. We liked her enough to take her along once or twice to Paris, where Mizja and she roller-skated all over town. Mizja eventually went his way, Claudia hers, but somehow she never left us--she remained our dear, dear friend. In fact, she became “our adopted daughter” and fully acted the part when she came to introduce her new boyfriend Andrew. On a dark, rainy Sunday afternoon it was. Andrew was cool; we liked him enough to invite him along on a next trip to Paris.

We had dinners together, went to art shows and attended ballet and theatre. Before Ans and I exchanged the Netherlands for the United States, we were told they too were beginning a new life: they'd bought a 1916 motor barge with a 35 horsepower single cylinder semi-diesel engine and planned to restore it to its old glory, then live on it, and sail it, of course. That was in 1994. Three years later came Andrew's letter. In November 1997, Andrew and Claudia were married on the church plaza in Abiquiu, New Mexico by a Hispanic justice of the peace donned in a black robe and a black Stetson and wearing slope-heeled cowboy boots. We had champagne and a grand Indian curry dinner followed by drinks at the fire pit. Later, we drove to Kansas and dropped them off at Kansas City Airport, but not before we had introduced them to the tallgrass prairie in Chase County, where Ans and I had already spent many good months before we moved to Abiquiu. Fact is: Andrew and Claudia spent the night in what is now our Matfield Green home, in the bedroom of which we took down the walls to create a large studio / study; their bed was where today my desk stands.

Claudia and Andrew returned ten years later accompanied by their then nine-year-old daughter Em. In the meantime, they had restored their early-example-Dutch steel-hulled river barge (a registered historic vessel) and were living in its bulkhead; they had moved it to the town of Groningen where they both decided to say goodbye to graphic design and to start a ships restoration business pinpointed at solid and traditional ships carpentry. "Our work is derived from a passion for design as well as functionality, and our belief in the inherent quality and beauty of natural materials. We aim at outfitting the ships as they were before, with shining copper and all the perfect wood for its furniture as well as the superstructure, masts, leeboards, rudders and tillers, and even the mooring bitts."

On Friday afternoons, after work, they steer their fleeting home to the Friesian lakes, or drop anchor just outside town at a quiet spot under the trees. They meet their ship-owning friends somewhere on the water, tie the vessels together, and party. Or they sail their little sloops: Em, now fourteen, is an award-winning sailor moving up from Optimist Class to higher National Class and beyond—a champion in the making, who (*I know it*) someday in the future will reach Olympic level.

Their carpentry and furniture making business (www.sadlerbootwerk.nl) is doing remarkably well. Not that I ever doubted its success. "We have chosen not to compromise at any stage," says Claudia. "Everything is produced from scratch; every single component is sawn, shaped, planed and sanded by hand, to ensure a perfect finish." The bespoke nature of their work means they are able "to design without constraints and to provide a delicate synthesis of function and aesthetics." A mutual awareness inspires them to produce ever more ambitious projects whilst minimizing environmental impact.

Both Claudia and Andrew are meticulous workers indeed, with the sharpest eye for detail and the patience that creates perfection. They live unhurried, too, with a deep appreciation of nature, peace of mind, clear thought, and good company, and a great respect for life with a capital L. And they love the waterways, the lakes, the sea—they love water, period. They love magnificent boats, big and small (and no, you won't ever catch them on jet skis). Their barge's proud name is the old, rather Dutch-Reformed sounding "Op Hoop van Zegen," which translates as Hoping for Blessings. So far they received many.

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