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De Vries, John Oral History Interview: Class Projects

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Oral History Interview
Michigan History – Spring 2000
Interviewee: John DeVries
Interviewer: Kai C. Bouchard
12 March 2000

KB: Your name is John DeVries, and you were born [date removed], 1925.

JD: Correct.

KB: And where was the place of your birth?

JD: Friesland, that's a province, not a town, a province in the Netherlands.

KB: OK. What was the year of your emmigration?

JD: It was 1954, I think, but I don't remember.

KB: And your occupation in the Netherlands was...

JD: Clerk, salesman. (Wife- "you were a partner in you dad's business.") Ya, it was a fertilizer and coal business, and I was a partner with my brother.

KB: And when you came here, what was your occupation here?

JD: That was my occupation when I came here, and before that, I worked at the office of a prison, and in the head office of a railroad company. The railroad company in the Netherlands at that time was a semi-government business. But later on, in 1948, I believe it was, I went into business with my dad and my brother.

KB: The town you came from, can you describe it? Was it a town or a city?

JD: A village. A village along the canal. Just like a strip. That's about it. It had no streets, Main Street and that was it.

KB: Was most of the transportation done in the canal?

JD: At that time, a lot of it was, the heavy freight. But that changed after World War II.

KB: Can you tell me why you decided to come to the United States? Why did you decide to leave?

JD: That is pretty hard. It might take me all day to explain that. I have to be very brief or you'll never get out of here tonight. It was a combination of things. I was not too happy with what the government had promised. They were in England during WWII. My great uncle had lost his farm, because he was hiding the freedom fighters. They had a fight with the collaborators and they called in the reinforcements of the Germans. And they burned the farm, and he tried everything later on after the war, to get his farm replaced, like they had promised, but they didn't get any place. So some of these collaborators who knew too much about other government officials were released in a very short time. And that did not make me happy either. My two brothers were picked up by the S.S. and they wanted my dad, and later on we found out they were betrayed and I think that they should have punished the traitors. They didn't. Well they gave them a couple months, and that was it. It's a combination of things. Also there was a housing shortage, so when we wanted to get married, there was no housing available. We were on a waiting list. It could take years before it was your turn. People with children went first, then people who were on the list longer of course, and in different circumstances.

KB: So you were about 29 when you came over?

JD: Ya

KB: And were you married at that point?

JD: Ya, we were married.

KB: Have you had children?

JD: One, a son.

KB: Was he born in the Netherlands or in the United States?

JD: No, he was born in the Netherlands.

KB: How old was he at that time?

JD: One year old.

KB: You said that you came to the United States, because you had family that came before you.

JD: My grandparents came here in 1921, I believe. My dad was the oldest of the children and he was married. My mother was an only child, so her parents said "don't take our child away," so my dad stayed with mom in the Netherlands while the rest of his family went to the United States. Now grandpa was a widower at that time. When he came back for his first visit, it was in 1938, I believe. At that time he said it was good in the United States, and why don't you come. There was unemployment here of course, and it was the same in the Netherlands, so my dad started a business, and it started to go, and well, Germany started to do funny things. So he figured that it was not a good time. After the war in 1948, my parents went for a trip to the U.S., and they came back with big stories. So, that helped also to make me decide to go to the U.S.

KB: Did your parents stay?

JD: They stayed, but at that time my mother was not ready to go, because her mother was still living, my grandma, and when she past away then my mother was ready to and mom and dad came too, with my youngest sister.

KB: Did you move to Holland (Michigan) right away, or did you live elsewhere first?

JD: No, we came to Holland right away.

KB: What made you choose Holland?

JD: Because of family. I had two uncles here, and a sister. So that's what made us decide to come to Holland, and of course I had a picture created in my mind. Holland they say is a town created by the Dutch, which I do not believe of course, but I had an idea that the Dutch created Holland, Michigan when Van Ralte and his settlers came here. We thought we would fit in with the Dutchmen. That was a little different than what we had pictured, because these Dutchmen that lived here lived the same way as 1870, and they thought that everything was the same as the Netherlands, as when they left, and that's not so, they thought everybody was walking in wooden shoes, but that had changed too in the Netherlands.

KB: Why did your family come to Holland? Did they come for the same reasons?

JD: My grandpa came here because he was a farmer, and the farming at that time was not too good. His brother, Uncle Tom, he went here in the 18-something, and he said "hey why don't you come here. It is better here than in the Netherlands." That's what made him decide to leave I believe. There are more opportunities, and it's a bigger country. When we left the Netherlands it was crowded, and it's more crowded today, of course. We didn't think there was an opportunity. And the Depression came later on of course, but the Depression was here too.

KB- What were your first impressions of Holland?

JD- Wooden homes. I remember the train ride, when we landed in Hoboken, in New York,

by boat and the train arrived and we looked out the window and we thought, "what have we done?" It looked barren. The wilderness of the land was not plowed. The train goes through the most desolate places you can think of and you see these little shacks and say, "whoa, am I going to live in those?" There were barns with no paint on them, and we were not used to that. Everything was nicely painted in the Netherlands. You look at it first and you think what country is this, but then later on when you come into Holland there, it is neat, a neat town with wooden homes.

KB: What were the homes made of in the Netherlands?

JD: Brick. It's all brick.

KB: What were some of the problems that you faced when you were trying to adjust to the different cultures, the new culture?

JD: There is an old saying- "do in Rome, as the Romans do." Our idea was we had to adjust to the way of living here if we wanted to be accepted in the community. I still think that today I feel sorry for the people who cannot or who do not and they want to do their own thing, and I don't think that that's right. That is a problem that you face. You have to adjust. Secondly, learn the language as soon as you can. There again what I see today is dual languages in, for example, in the hospital, and I think its not helping the Spanish speaking people. That's degrading them. Don't they want these people to learn English, to get along? We had to go through the same thing, and I'm glad that every thing was not in Dutch, so we had to learn it, and to me that's the only way. If I go and immigrate to Germany I'm not going to tell the Germans to start speaking English or Dutch, but I have to learn the German language. So that was another problem, because I

thought that I could go on the road and sell fertilizer or what ever. And I applied to a company, and they said, "Well you learn your English better and you may come back, and we talk." So you have to start on the bottom, and that's good. Often you see that people want to start on the top, even if they have no skill. That's not good. If you study to become a teacher, you can not ask the salary of the principal right away.

KB: Other than the language, what were some of the differences between Holland, Michigan and your home in the Netherlands?

Wife: Oh, I have no idea, it's so long ago. Everything, really, was different. We had to adjust to the food.

KB: What kinds of food were...?

Wife: We were used to maybe the same types of foods, and yet the tastes were different. There were things that we absolutely didn't like, and we thought, "Oh boy that stuff tasted better in the Netherlands." Until ten years later we realized we had built it up in our mind because it wasn't as good as we thought. A whole lot of those things. The food, and the transportation of course. Over there we did most everything by bike and public transportation was plentiful. Here you had to have a car.

JD: If you wanted to go to the city, every hour or hour and a half there was a bus, if you live by the village. Here you can stand by the road, but the only way is maybe to hitchhike. So that is a big difference. There are a lot of things, but it's hard to think of them right now, looking back and saying, "That's how it was." Of course, you have to listen to the Dutchmen jokes.

Wife: We missed our friends and family, though.

JD: The big difference is, we were talking about this today in GR, homeliness, the friendliness, the social gatherings. Neighbor helping neighbors. It's more like the Amish, because we lived in the village. And here everybody seems to be for themselves. You have to get used to that. I was talking to a fellow, about 40 years ago, it was in the '60s I think when I met Dell. Dell had been to the Netherlands and he said "John I was in Amsterdam in a pub, Oh boy did I like that." I said "Dell, what's the difference between a pub and a bar, here?" He said "You step to the counter and the fellow next to you say 'Hey how you doing?'" Start talking to you says, "Hey you talk with an accent. You from England, Canada." "No I'm from the U.S.," "Oh boy," he said. And they are friendly. Here he said you go to a bar for a beer. Everybody is here for themselves. They don't talk, but later on there is TV, and you watch a ball game, but over there everybody talks, I love it. So he went to the Netherlands once a year and always came back with big stories about how nice the people were. And that's true, and I don't know what makes that. Is it because we have a variety of people here like Dutch, German, French, Irish you name it, I don't know.

KB: Was it difficult meeting people when you first came over?

JD: No, not really. We joined a church. And I think that that was a big help. You have contact, you know. We met people that had been here since 1948 I believe, and they told us the do's and don'ts and what to expect and that was very helpful. And of course if there was anything, we could go to our relatives and ask them for advice.

KB: What traditions did you bring with you that is still apart of your family today?

JD: One of the most important things is, we were brought up to read the Bible at dinner

time, and we still do that , and I think that's very important. That is a very good tradition I would say.

KB: Do you still speak Dutch to each other?

JD: No, but I must add, also, that we speak Vries, the Vriesian language because we were born in Vriesland and Vriesland has their own language. It's not a dialect, it's a language, and sometimes I catch myself speaking Vries to my wife. And then there are certain things that pop into my head when I am speaking Vries, and I say how do I translate it? There is no way to translate it. There is no word for it. I have heard ministers who spoke English and they studied some Dutch at college or seminary and when they were preaching they would say, "hey, in Dutch they say..." You can not translate it.

KB: Did your son learn Vries or Dutch?

Wife: We do have four children, three of them were born here. Not enough...

JD: The oldest one, when he went back for the first time, you better tell that.

Wife: He picked up some of the Dutch, but the problem is, like you have when you're in the other countries, his cousins just wanted to talk English because they wanted to practice that.

KB: But he picked up some words, and he was very much interested. The house where he was born, the town may be a little funny, the children were not born in the hospital back in those days. You were born in the house you lived in. He was very much interested to see that house. He was interested to see the church where he was baptized. But the language he never picked up. A couple of words, but that's about it.

Wife: That's mostly because of us being dual already, with the Vriesian and the Dutch language, so he never knew which was which. They tried to say something, it came out a little bit funny, we laughed about it and we never should have. So then they thought they were talking in Dutch and they were saying things in Vriesian and the other people couldn't understand them, and they said, "Forget about this."

JD: And in the beginning, he didn't stop talking. And they took him to a doctor.

Wife: We had a boy who was Dutch, and we had a lady living downstairs who was like a grandma to him, a little lady. She spoke English. So he was, he really came in contact with three languages. He understood every one of us. We decided we better try English. I wasn't so good at it and you were better. As well as we could, we started talking English to them and within two weeks the kid was talking.

JD: So again, it is important to teach them language from the youth on. Now we have a broke we never use, and we are proud of it. I talked to a fellow years ago, he was from Switzerland. He was selling togenburger wafers. It's the best wafer I've ever have, I believe. I said, "Boy, he speaks with a broke." "I have one, but that is really something." He said, "I'm proud of it, that's what sells my wafers. They're interested in hearing me talk." I think he had a good point there. That was a wafer that melted in your mouth. Remember them, those little square packages?

Wife: Talking about Dutch traditions, this old Dutch tablecloth, I've heard it said before already, that the Dutch have rugs on the table. We have certain things that we still do like we did in the Netherlands. They kind of integrated into all the other things.

JD: It all has a meaning.

KB: Why have you stayed in Holland? What about Holland jumped out at you and said, "This is the place we want to stay?"

JD: We stayed because I had relatives here. That's why we stayed in the beginning.

Wife: I'll tell you why we stayed. If we had ideas of moving, I said, "No way." Once to emigrate was enough. I didn't want to go to another strange part of the country. Now it wouldn't matter, but now the children have all grown up.

JD: In the beginning I would have loved to go into the country again. It's more freedom. Cleaner air to breathe, but she said no. Later on you find work here, and we started a business and the children grew up, and later on they got married. And they all live here and there is no desire no more to move. It is not easy to immigrate and start over in a new country. You have to go through it I guess to realize what it is like.

Wife: Leaving temporarily is one thing, but to really leave your homeland for good...

JD: I remember the first time your mom and dad came over to visit us. We took them to a Mrs. Tibbe, they had the address from your dad's brother. He was working on a family tree. That name appeared one way or another. We said, "Okay, we'll look it up." We found an old lady, really old, walked with a stick, and we told her who we were, and why we came there. "Okay," she said, "You may come in." So we sat around the table and talked. She said, "I remember when I was a little kid that my mom sat down behind her house under a cherry tree, and she was crying." And I said, "Why was your mom crying?" She said, "Mom likes to go to the Netherlands, Mom was homesick. That's why she was crying." And I can really understand that. We had such a nice visit. When she let us to the door, I said, "Mrs. Tibbe, you forgot your stick!" "Oh she said, I'm years

younger. I can walk without a stick.” But we didn’t trust her, she was kind of wobbly on her feet. So we got her stick for her. That really did something.

Wife: Those people who left then and never had to go back really had a much harder time. We thought we were leaving without ever going back, but things went a lot easy

KB: In what ways have you been involved in the community?

JD: Not really, no

KB: How about the Church?

JD: In church, ya. We started a soccer team. International team. We had a couple guys in there from Germany. A couple Dutch guys. One was learning to become a preacher, at the Western Seminary. Hank. One guy came from Jordan. We had them from all over. It was beautiful. At that time I was elected president of the team, and it was tough going. I spent a lot of time on it, because people here didn't know soccer, and at that time the only way is that we bring it into the schools. If the kids play then the parents will get interested then. And look what happened, when the ladies, last year, became world champions, here. So that was really something. I still like to watch soccer. It is still my best sport. I like sports, but soccer is still #1.

KB: What was the church affiliation?

JD: Christian Reformed. And Why Christian Reformed? When we left the Netherlands we went to see the minister and asked can we take papers along to prove that we are members here. He said sure. What kind of church are we going to join there. Well he said the church closest to what we have here in the Netherlands is the Christian Reformed Church. So when we came here we found out that a church on Central Ave. had a Dutch

service on Sunday afternoons, and hay it happens to be a Christian Reformed church, so in the morning we had English and we did not understand all of it, and in the afternoons we had the Dutch.

KB: Holland seems to be becoming more culturally diverse, so when you see newer immigrants settle in how does that make you feel?

JD: It's a hard question. I think that they are welcome, I think that if they adjust to the way of life here, they don't make a nuisance of themselves, don't steal, don't shoot each other, don't knife each other, then I would say that they are welcome 100%. And you are my neighbor and my friend. But if they make a ruckus of things, then I would say, Why did you come to this Dutch town? What brought you here? I know why I came to a Dutch town because I found Dutch living like they used to. So I think they come here because Holland has a good name. There is work to be found, and there are good other nationalities, very good. I've met some very good people. One time I had a neighbor that was Spanish, and he was one of the best neighbors you can find. But there again, there are other people...It is not one nationality that is bad. These people have to be taught to behave in society and people will trust them. There was a black man once, he was a truck driver, and he wanted to move out of the inner city of Chicago, and I said what for? And he said black kids beat up his kids. I said aren't your kids black. He said, ja, but they are bad, and I can see his point. If that was the case then he should move out.

KB: Do you see that these are cultures are having the same problems that the Dutch faced when they first came to Holland?

JD: I don't know.

KB: How do you feel about the Dutch heritage that Holland has tried to preserve? For instance, how do you feel about Tulip Time?

JD: I think that it's good. Its good for the community and good for the preservation of the Dutch culture. After all, the town was founded by the Dutch. And I think that this is one way of preserving it.

KB: Is it the American view of the Dutch culture or is it the Dutch...?

JD: It is not the Dutch. The first time we saw the parade, we said "What!" Now, we enjoy it but the town crier is a laughing matter to us. It is ridiculous how they portray it but, hey if people are happy with it what am I to say. Let them believe it. Don't spoil a good festival.

KB: What do you think about the Cinco de Mayo festival?

JD: I don't know too much about it. I have never been there.

KB: Do you think that the Dutch community is well represented here in Holland, MI?

JD: If you look at another Dutch Community like Pella, you see more names of Dutch people, some towns in British Columbia where there are Dutch settlements they have a Dutch council and Dutch mayor. Holland does not have that. I don't know why. If people aren't interested in politics.

KB: Have you ever experienced any discrimination in Holland?

JD: No not really, I think that in the beginning, they told Dutchman jokes and they all end up as the stupid Dutchman. But the same jokes you hear in Polish communities. And I think that you should laugh it off, and don't think too much of it. I think that it gives you incentive to. You think I am going to show you that I am not that stupid. So you work

harder. But if you take the same joke and say it to American then they get mad at you.

But discrimination... No.