

1-24-1977

Van Der Ven, Charles Oral History Interview: Class Projects

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Recommended Citation

Repository citation: Timmerman, Steve and Peters, Jay, "Van Der Ven, Charles Oral History Interview: Class Projects" (1977). *Class Projects*. Paper 51.

http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/class_projects/51

Published in: *English 113 Oral History Interviews (1977) (H90-1096)*, January 24, 1977. Copyright © 1977 Hope College, Holland, MI.

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January 27, 1977

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Digest of Topics

Charles Van Der Ven

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An Interveiw with Chuck The Barber
(Chuck Van Dur Ven)

Charles Van Der Ven has lived in Holland since 1923. He was the sole propriator of "Chuck's Barber Shop." He has played the violin since early youth. He resides at 307 College Ave.

S: How do you veiw the present modern "Barbering" in comparison to the past?

C: Personally I would not want to start out being a Barber today. Never!

S: How's that ?

C: Not because of the trade itself, but because of the people. The style of the population has changed. We have gone into Afro styles. We have tried to make ourselves some thing that we are not. I may be set in my own personal ways, it's because of the days when I started out. There was a time in Holland when a man would not go to Church because he had not had a haircut.

S: Why, I bet you and the Preacher were good friends ?

C: Saturday was the biggest barbering day in Holland.

J: Would you say that the average person got a haircut every two weeks ?

C: Sure! They came in and even had their necks shaved.

S: Was their any compitition in the barbering bussiness when you first started ?

C: I came to Holland in 1923. There were over 28 barbers in Holland when I first arrived. There were other services provided by barbers besides haircuts. Shoe shines and "hat-blocking". Today they don't even know about "hat-blocking."

S: What was "hat-blocking".?

C: Well, you had a felt hat and if somebody sat on it, or if you got caught in the rain the stiffness would come out of the felt, they would put the hat on a wooden block that was the shape of that hat, and they would rebuild that hat you might say. They put starch in it or something. Hat-blocking and Shoe-shineing were an important part of the barbering bussiness.

J: What kind of prices did you charge back then ?

C: 25¢ for children and 35¢ for adults. The day before I came into Holland prices were cut to 25¢ for adults, and 15¢ for children. What was I coming into Holland for ? We weren't making a living. Even my Father was against me opening a barber bussiness in Holland. I said "I am going to cut hair."

In 1937 I built a little house out on West 15th Street. I rode a bicycle to work. But, I remembered one thing. When I put a dollar in that cash register I remembered one thing. That it was not mine, because I had obligations. So, it isn't what you earn, it's how you use what you earn.

When I retired two years ago we had one barber in Holland.

To have a barber shop today you must have the "Modern Thought". We willgo so far as to say "the chair". The barbering chair was not designed by a barber. In my book, if a barber had

any sense in his head he would want a simple chair that you could raise or lower so he could keep the head at eye level. So he doesn't have to stand in an awkward position to cut hair. If I were going to design a chair it would be made of tubular steel. The new barbering chairs are too difficult to work with.

I feel you must stand when barbering. A strong pair of legs and feet are essential to be a barber.

Carpetting has no place in a barber shop.

Men today are falling for feminine hairstyles. Buy a toupee if you find you must have one. But, I can't run around the house with a cap on my head. I'm letting my hair grow long, sure I don't care. But keep it clean.

I was the type of barber who thought this. You must go into a barbershop not looking like you need a haircut. And you must walk out not looking like you had one.

Since 1944 I was the first barber in the State of Michigan to start appointments. I learned that in the Navy. It was very successful. I was at that barbershop every morning at seven o'clock.

When I reached the age of 65, and all the other barbers were losing their trade, I had a little guilt complex. When I was about to retire I still had a good business. How many do we have today? I would hate to count. They have gone out of the business right and left.

I enjoyed barbering. I really did. But, I had a bad reputation. I never gave the customer what he wanted, because I had something to sell.

I can spot dyed hair, and I can spot wigs. There's nothing to it. After 45 years of cutting hair I ought to see something.

J: Do you still cut hair today?

C: Sure!

J: Who ? Old friends ?

C: O ld customers that would'nt leave me alone.