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TenBrink, Henry Oral History Interview: Class Projects

Tom Hillegonds

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Interviewer: Tom Hillegonds (TH)
Interviewee: Henry Ten Brink (HT)

TH: Could you state your full name?

HT: Hindrick Ten Brink was the name I was given at my baptism. But I changed my first name when I came to America. I thought Henry would be better here. So my legal name now is Henry Ten Brink.

TH: What is your current address?

HT: My current address is 16596 Quincy, Holland, Michigan.

TH: What is your date of birth?

HT: My birthdate is [date removed], 1924.

TH: And you were born in Germany?

HT: Yes, I was born in Germany?

TH: In what city?

HT: Not really in a city. It was in a farming area called Heesterkante. That is: H-E-E-S-T-E-R-K-A-N-T-E. It is in the county of Bentheim.

TH: How long did you live there?

HT: I lived there for the first 30 years of my life.

TH: And when did you immigrate to America?

HT: I immigrated in 1955. My wife and I left our homestead in the later part of May, 1955, and we set foot in New York City on June 1, 1955.

TH: What was your life like in that farming community?

HT: I'll start with my life there during World War II. In 1942, I entered the German military. I fought on the Russian front. I was wounded twice during combat. During the last months of that war, I deserted the German army. I went into hiding for two or three weeks. I made my way home and my parents hid me there so the German officials wouldn't find me and put me in prison. In the Fall of 1945, the English occupation forces in the area eased up a bit so I came out of hiding and re-registered as a German citizen. After that I was a free person again.

TH: How did you decide to come to America and not some other country?

HT: I learned a lot about America from people I knew that were already living here. Two of my grandmother's sisters and brothers came to the United States years ago and settled near Cadillac, Michigan. So already as a boy I learned a lot from letters these relatives wrote. Also, two sisters from my wife's mother had immigrated here and settled in Holland, Michigan. They also wrote much about life here. So it was from people like these that my wife and I decided that, if we immigrate, we'll go to Holland, Michigan. Also, there were churches here in Holland that we

could identify with, and that helped influence us. So these two factors, especially, helped us decide where to go.

TH: What was the journey to America like?

HT: The journey itself wasn't too pleasant. But leaving wasn't easy, either. First, my wife and I had to say all our goodbyes, and that was hard. Then we sang a sentimental song, and that was difficult. But we had to go on. There was no turning back now. So we boarded the boat, crossed the North Sea, and then the Atlantic Ocean. We spent a good ten days on the water. Then we had to wait over half a day in the New York City harbor before we docked. The weather was quite stormy during our trip. I became very sick. Everybody did. They were throwing up all over the place. So the trip itself left no positive impression on me. Had it been a smooth trip, it would probably be more memorable. And ten days on the ocean is a long time. You don't have much to do. You sit. You eat. You play shuffle board. You look around, but all you see is water. Once in a while we'd see dolphins. They were interesting to watch. The people on board with us were very nice. We met a lot of them, and could converse with those who spoke either German or Dutch. Otherwise, the trip to America wasn't that pleasant.

TH: Who else came with you on the boat? Any family?

HT: My wife, of course, and a cousin and his wife traveled with us. They were newly married, just like my wife and I. They were from Germany too. Their nationality was Dutch, but they lived in Germany.

TH: What were your first impressions of America?

HT: Well, they weren't very good. The first people we met were those that worked on the pier. They didn't seem to care, and offered little help. They would only offer assistance if we were ready to pay them. Things around the pier were sloppy too. It seemed like things never got cleaned. Both of these things didn't help in making a good first impression. Then another thing. We had eleven hundred pounds of luggage in a huge box. We had to open that and show everything to the inspectors. Then we had to repack it all. The officials offered no help. It was so disappointing. But we got through this and finally boarded a train for Michigan. We enjoyed the train ride through New York State even though it was night time. When daylight came, it seemed as if we were going through a wilderness. But we finally arrived in Kalamazoo where we were met by relatives and our sponsors. Then we began to feel better. And when we arrived here in Holland, it was also night time. It seemed to me we were in South Africa. The houses and other buildings were set back from the street, just like I had seen in pictures from South Africa. I even asked myself, "Are we in America or in South Africa?" Later this style of setting out homes and other buildings was something I became used to. But we were happy to be in Holland. Our journey was over.

TH: Were there any myths about the United States, and did you find that any of them were true?

HT: That I would find out later, so I couldn't say either way at first. What my wife and I had been told we hadn't experienced yet. One thing that did impress me immediately was how big the United States is. We had traveled from New York City to Michigan and really didn't cover much of it. Only later did we experience just how big this land is.

TH: How much of the English language did you know when you first came here?

HT: I knew one expression. It was "How do you do?" and, yes, I think I knew the words, "Thank you." In Germany, I worked all the time. I had no opportunity to go to school, high school, that is. And I didn't go to classes here to learn English. I went right to work after I came here.

TH: Was your first job here in Holland, Michigan anything like the work you did in Germany?

HT: No, not really. In Germany I was trained and certified as a carpenter. I did have some experience in masonry, cement work, and plastering. I was 15 years old when I began this training. My uncle had a large business in the building trade, and I trained under him for three years. I even lived with him in his home, and would go home on weekends. So I learned my trade under the leadership of my uncle, and I was a journeyman at the time I entered the German army in 1942.

TH: Was Holland, Michigan the first place you came to?

HT: Yes, it was the first place, and the only place.

TH: What was Holland like back then when you first came?

HT: Oh, it was a clean city. I had no complaints about it back then. And the Dutch people living here were very much like the people I grew up with. I lived close to the Dutch border so I had many contacts with Dutch people before I came here. Oh, there was some animosity toward German people by the Dutch back then. That animosity went back to World War II when the Germans occupied the Netherlands. I could sense that back then. But now, today, that's gone.

TH: Where did you first live when you came to Holland?

HT: We first lived on 14th Street with my sister and her husband. They took us in. But the house was quite small. I still remember one incident that happened there. My wife and I slept in the living room. My sister awoke one Saturday morning. It was about 9 A.M. We slept in that morning, it being Saturday. My sister walked into the living room, realized my wife and I were there sleeping, and said, "Excuse me!" I didn't understand what she said. I asked my wife, "Is she asking for kisses?" Well, we all had a good laugh over that, and still do whenever we recall the incident.

Later we found a home on East 17th Street. There my wife and I lived with two other couples. So it was three families in one house. And we were all related to each other. But we had enough room in that house. But then, we didn't need too much room because we didn't have much.

TH: So you went to work as soon as you got here?

HT: Yes. Four days after I arrived I went to work. That was quite an experience!

TH: So, it was pretty easy finding a job?

HT: Yes, it was pretty easy. My first job was working for Harold Langejans. He was a builder. But one of my feet gave me trouble right after I started working. You see, around Christmas, 1954, I was in an accident with a motor bike. I broke that

foot in that accident, and I was in the hospital for a couple of months. I never really worked again in Germany before I left for America. That foot really bothered me on that first job. Then there was the hot weather of that first summer. Oh, man! I thought I wasn't going to make it. But I'm not the kind of person who gives up easily. I didn't either, but it was hard going. But I made it through that first work experience. And now, looking back, everything worked out for the best.

TH: Who were your friends when you first came to America?

HT: We had relatives here, and our two sponsors. That was a plus for us. They gave us some good advice, and that helped a lot. That was a plus for us too. So we had some connections when we arrived.

TH: You mentioned your sponsors a few times. What did your sponsors do?

HT: Sponsors are people who are willing to take responsibility for us the first five years. If we became sick or got into any kind of trouble, they were there to help. They signed papers with the State of Michigan in which they agreed to take responsibility for us. In that way nothing would fall on the state. This was a big thing for them. We had no money when we first came, so they helped in paying the bills. If I had not gotten work, or my wife or I became sick, they were there to help. It worked out nicely. They were very helpful people. And we would reimburse them when we were able, so it worked out nicely.

TH: What were the most difficult adjustments for you to make coming to Holland?

HT: Finding new friends, I guess. I lost all my friends when I left Germany. I also lost my homeland. I loved my country, and it was hard to leave it. I'm a sentimental person, and losing family, friends, and country made me ask more than once, "Why did I do this?" But it was a leading, God's leading, that brought my wife and I here. I believe that, and God had a reason for bringing us here, even though I may not know as yet just what His reason is. Some day I'll know. For now, it is God's will that I live here, and raise my family here, not in Germany. But feelings are strong, and for years it was hard to accept this big change. Also, it's hard to talk to people here about life in Germany, or about my life in the German army. It seems many people don't want to listen to my story. So, for years, I couldn't share my experiences with many people. For years it seemed that I had nothing in common with many people around here. I can't really blame them, though. Their lives and experiences were so different from mine. So all of that was hard on me too.

TH: What do you think of Tulip Time?

HT: Oh, Tulip Time is impressive. It's always a nice time, and I love all the flowers. And it's always done nicely. It's clean. No bad things. It has my one hundred per cent approval.

TH: Have you been back to Germany?

HT: Yes, several times.

TH: You went back to visit family?

HT: Yes, and I also took my family there. Once we stayed for a whole year. And then there was this: family and friends would try to talk us into staying there. Then

I'd be all mixed up again. I can recall one time while we were there that my wife had arthritis really bad when we arrived. Then, after a few months of being there, she began to feel much better. And people there would say, "Jenny, why go back to America? You feel so much better now that you're here. And there's lots of work for your husband. He can go back and join his uncle in the business." My wife's response was, "I know. I know." But after about three months, the arthritis began to bother my wife again. It's the damp weather there. It really works against anyone having arthritis. So we decided to come back here.

TH: Do you still consider Holland, Michigan to be a Dutch community?

HT: Yes, in some ways it still is. But I think we're going to lose that. We've had such an influx of other cultures. And it seems that many of these newcomers want something different than a distinct Dutch community. But I'd like to see this city stay the way it was. The character of this city has been good. It has been a healthy character. I'd like to see it stay that way. And I say this even though I'm German by birth.

TH: Do you have any children?

HT: Yes, my wife and I have six children, three daughters and three sons. And they're all healthy.

TH: How would your children's lives have been different had they grown up in Europe?

HT: That's hard to say. My wife and I just returned from a visit to Germany, so we had a firsthand look at how our relatives and friends are living. Based on that, I'd say their lives would be much the same as they are here. There's very little difference in lifestyles. There was once, but not anymore. As a matter of fact, the government there stands ready to help young people get an education, so higher education is readily available to all. My brother's son, for example, is an engineer. Other relatives have children who are teachers, all this because of government assistance. Fifty years ago, even thirty years ago, this wasn't possible.

TH: How do you think your German heritage has influenced how you raised your children?

HT: Say that again.

TH: How do you think your German heritage has influenced the way you raised your kids?

HT: Well, I don't know if one has much influence, one way or the other. We came here having been strongly influenced there on how to live, on what is right and what is wrong. So my wife and I didn't have to learn that coming here. The community in which my wife and I grew up was pretty strict, at least by today's standards. That community was, as I mentioned earlier, Heesterkante, in the county of Bentheim. We had close connections with communities in the Netherlands, especially in our religious life. Our churches belonged to the Reformed Church of the Netherlands. So we came here with strong religious ties to the churches of the Reformed faith. And we were always thankful that we could find good, solid, Bible-based preaching here, and also people who were God-fearing. And it is in this setting that we raised our children.

TH: Have you ever thought about going back?

HT: Going back? Yes, many times. And my wife and I would talk about it. But that's as far as it ever got. And life in Germany is so different in many ways from when we left. We'd have to make so many adjustments if we moved back. And besides that, so many of the people there who were so close to us are now gone. So, no. I'm glad we stayed here in America.

TH: Do you miss anything about Germany?

HT: Yes, I miss all the beautiful things from my younger days, things I experienced that I'll never forget. I loved all my neighbors, and they loved me. I had a lot of connections there. I was the kind of person who liked to talk with people about almost anything. I made a lot of connections that way. And when I'd go back there to visit, people would call where I was staying and say, "Henry, you must come to visit. We want to talk with you before you leave." So I established many good relationships. And these, going way back to my youth, I'll never forget.

TH: I think you'd like my grandpa. He likes to talk to people too.

HT: (Laughing)

TH: What do you think of the new immigrants coming to Holland?

HT: I'm not sure. It depends on who they are. I like the good, solid families that come here. But it's those people who seem to come to engage in wrong behavior that bothers me.

TH: So you are not worried about different nationalities that come, just the people in general.

HT: When the people are good, whether they be German, Dutch, or Mexican, I welcome them. But I get bad feelings about those that come here and don't seem to care how their children behave. The gangs, the robberies, things like that- they bother me. I would rather that those kind stay where they are. And the government should check all those wishing to immigrate, just like they did my wife and I. Check them out before they're allowed in. That, I think, is a must.

TH: Did you plan on staying here as long as you did, when you first came?

HT: Yes. We established a foundation here, and I earned my living here. And that has gone very well. Why then should I think about going somewhere else? No, I don't think so.

TH: In what way has your life changed by your decision to come to America? What's the biggest change?

HT: I guess the biggest change is how I've grown through my experiences here. Every person who wants to live right gains in experience as he gets older. And I gained a lot of experience living here, but not from a formal education. Formal education is not always necessary for everybody. Some, who are able, gain much from a formal education. For those who are not capable of gaining from a formal education, I'd say, "Find a good job and earn some money." On the other hand, if my brother had

come here, he would have made great strides with a formal education. But for me, my goal was to gain as much practical experience as I could, and then put that to work. It was my goal to do everything in my power to have every job I did help me gain experience, and in that way bring good to myself, my family, and others.

TH: Would you make the same decision to come to Holland?

HT: Oh, yes. If I had to do it over again, I'd come here. Nowhere else.

TH: So, no regrets at all?

HT: no. No, none at all. I'm glad I found out about this place from relatives that were already here. They told me so much ahead of time. So I knew my wife and I would fit well into this community. Now that I know more about the United States, I know that there are many communities where I wouldn't fit in well at all. And I wouldn't even take the chance to check out other places, or say to myself, "Snoop around a bit and see if it wouldn't be better somewhere else." No, I wouldn't do that.

TH: Well, that's the end of my questions. Is there anything else that I haven't covered that you'd like to talk about?

HT: Yes, maybe I should mention again the importance of gaining experience. My wife and I have been here now for almost 44 years, and we've learned a lot. And the more we learned, the better we felt about living here in America. And it's a good feeling. We became involved in church and community activities, and these made us feel right at home. We haven't done a lot of these two things, but we did our best in those we did become involved in.

Perhaps you want to know about how I got to work here. As I mentioned earlier, I started by working for Harold Langejans. After seven weeks, Mr. Langejans asked me, "Have you ever laid brick?" "Oh, yes," I said, "I've done some masonry work." From that point on, I did all the masonry work for him. First, he gave me one helper, and later, another. From there on, one thing led to another. I had never built a fireplace before, but Mr. Langejans gave me the opportunity. I figured it couldn't be that hard. So, bit by bit, I started. I got the chimney through the roof. One morning I was on the roof working on the chimney. It was seven o'clock in the morning. Two men came up on the roof. Later I learned, one was Jack Lamar. The other was Lee Sandy. In half-Dutch one of them said, "Hello there! You do nice work." "Thank you," I said. "We'd like to talk to you sometime," one of them said. "O.K., O.K.," I answered. Then they left. Three or four days later these two men returned. They had talked to my boss, Mr. Langejans, and Mr. Langejans tried his best to have me understand that these two men wanted me work for them for a few days because they were so busy. But I really think they wanted me because they liked the work I did, not necessarily because they were so busy. When I finally understood what Mr. Langejans was trying to tell me, I said, "Yes, I'll do that. It doesn't make any difference who I work for." "Alright, then," Mr. Langejans said. "They'll pick you up at your home tomorrow morning." That was good because all I had then was a bicycle. They were at my home at six o'clock the next morning. I wasn't even dressed yet! So, my first job with Lamar and Sandy was putting brick on a home on 33rd Street. I also built an elaborate fireplace in that home. It was a stone fireplace, and I had really never worked with stone before. I think those two men, Lamar and Sandy, were testing me to see just how well I could do this job.

When the job was done, they complimented me on the good work I did. "Good work," they said. Mr. Langejans came by the last afternoon we were on that job. He asked Jack Lamar, "How is he doing?" "Oh, he's doing alright. And, by the way, he says he wants to stay with us." "What?" Langejans asked. "Yes, that's what he said. I understood enough of what was being discussed by these two men, and I knew I never said I wanted to stay with Lamar and Sandy. So Harold Langejans asked me, "Hank, do you want to work with these men or with me?" I said, "Well, maybe I should stay with these men." "Why? Don't you like me?" Mr. Langejans asked. "Yes, I do like you," I said. But I didn't really like him one hundred per cent. You see, he was a driver. Oh man, was he! One couldn't work fast enough to suit him. I was not a slow worker, but it seemed he demanded more and more all the time. "But," I went on, "when I lay brick, I don't have to talk much." You see, the language thing was still a problem for me. When I did masonry work, all I had to say was, "I need more mortar, or, I need more bricks." That was much easier than learning all the words associated with carpentry. And do you know, from then on, I was hooked on masonry. I worked that whole summer for Lamar and Sandy, and even into early winter. Then, on New Year's Eve of that first year, while we were working on a new home for Robert De Nooyer on State Street, it just got too cold to lay brick. There was still a lot to do on that home, but it was just too cold to continue. "We're going to have to lay you off, Henry," Mr. Lamar said. "Oh," I said, "that's not good for me. But I'll just have to find a job somewhere else, something inside. I can't just sit around." I was trained as a carpenter, so I thought that, perhaps, the Chris Craft Company could use me. I applied for a job there, and started the next day. When April of the ~~next~~ year came, 50 men were laid off. I wasn't among them. "Funny," I thought. "I wonder why?" Some of those who were laid off asked me, "What about you, Hank?" "The boss said nothing to me," I replied. I could tell they were not too happy that Chris Craft kept me and let them go. About a month later, another 50 were let go, and I was among them. But before I left, my foreman said to me, "Henry, go to Hart and Cooley and apply for a job there. That is all I can say, but I think you can get work there." I said, "Thank you." But I never put my application in at Hart and Cooley. Instead, I paced the floor at home for a week.

It is now Springtime, 1956, and I need to work. So I placed an ad in the local newspaper, asking for any kind of work people might have. I received many responses to that ad. People called saying they had work for me. "We have this job, we have that job," they said. From then on, I was busier than ever. It was then that I started my own business. But one thing was still difficult. I didn't know the English language very well. I should have gone to school to learn it better, but I didn't have time. And we had one child by then. But everything worked out well. I worked hard. I did the best I could for my family, and God has blessed me richly. I am very thankful.

TH: If you want to say more, that's O.K. I have the time.