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# Walters, Mrs. Roy Oral History Interview: General Holland History

Don van Reken

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Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Mrs. Roy Walters [MW]

Interviewer: Don van Reken

July 12, 1976

Abstract: Getz Farm/Lakewood Farm.

DVR: Today is July 12, 1976. I'm at the home of Mrs. Roy Walters, on the corner of Lincoln Avenue and 16th Street. Mrs. Walters, how old are you?

MW: I'm 73 years old.

DVR: How long have you lived in this house?

MW: I have lived in this house 38 years.

DVR: 38 years in this house.

MW: Yes. I had been married 55 years and my husband has passed away now, so I am living here. I expect to stay here as long as I can, and I hope that will be a long time.

DVR: What was your family name? What was your maiden name?

MW: My maiden name was Bomers. My father's name was John Bomers, and he was a builder in Holland. He was in business called Bomers and Smeenge, and they operated together for years. They finally dissolved partnership.

DVR: After the company broke up and your father was alone as a builder, when was that? Do you remember?

MW: No, I don't quite remember when that would be exactly. He built the old Trinity Church on 20th Street, and in later years, he remodeled People's Bank. He did carpenter work all his life. He didn't have much schooling, but he took a correspondence course. In that way, he got in the building business and could figure out jobs and things for himself.

DVR: Good. What is the earliest memory you have of your mother?

MW: My mother, she was a very hard-working woman. She did church work; that was important to her.

DVR: What church was she connected with?

MW: Well, first they went to Central Avenue Christian Reformed Church on Graves Place there, and that's where we all went to church. But that was a Dutch church, and us kids didn't understand any of the sermons or the catechism or anything, but that was where they went to church. Then later, they transferred to 14th Street Church, and there's where she did a lot of quilt making and Ladies Aid, you know. She liked church work.

DVR: Was your dad ever a fireman?

MW: Oh, yes, my dad was a city fireman for years and years in the days when they had horses and wagons to go to the fire. He'd have to get out in all kinds of weather. They'd come down past the house, and he'd jump on the wagon and away they'd go to the fire. They would have some quite big fires in Holland, I know on the old De Pree Chemical on River Avenue there. He had pictures of where he'd be way up on the ladder in the smoke, you know. But then he had to, after many years, every week they had a firemen's meeting, and then my mother and some of the other ladies would get together that night—that particular night they had the firemen's meeting—and us kids would have lots of fun playing together, you know, the games and stuff in the house. We looked forward to firemen's meeting every week.

DVR: Was it in your house then or in the firehouse?

MW: They would go to the firehouse, but the ladies would congregate in somebody's house, and us kids. Finally, my dad, after many years as a fireman, had to give it up because he had ulcers of the stomach, and he felt that he should give up going to fires.

DVR: Now, you said he jumped on the truck when it came past your house. Where was your house then?

MW: We lived on East 17th then, right off from College Avenue. But then the fire truck would maybe go right straight down College, and he'd have to go to the corner and jump on.

DVR: I see. What school did you attend?

MW: I attended Longfellow School when I started in kindergarten and, later on, I was transferred. See, then we moved from 17th Street to 16th Street, so they transferred us to what they called Central School and East Junior High over there, you know, on Graves Place. But most of my younger days were spent at Longfellow School. It was called Maple Grove in those days, but now it's called Longfellow. We really had bad weather to go to school in the winter. There were no snow plows, and you had to wade through deep snow up to your hip sometimes, through snow banks, to get to school.

DVR: That school was out of town, practically?

MW: East 24th Street and we lived on 16th Street.

DVR: So that was quite far.

MW: Yes, quite far. We had to walk; there were no cars then. Just the rich people had cars.

DVR: How did the teachers get to school? Did they walk?

MW: I wonder how they got there. They must have walked, too, because not many people had cars. And besides, they had cutters and horses in those days, and you wouldn't have been able to drive a car in the street because there were no plows of any kind. You just went through.

DVR: Anything special happen in school? Any special games or parties that you remember?

MW: Well, yes. We would have games in the basement. Especially in bad weather, we would take our lunch, and we'd all have games together. It was really nice, and we looked forward to those bad days. If you did something in school that wasn't just right, you would be punished by having to stand in the hall for hours at a time, and she wouldn't call you back until school was out. You just stood there and stood there all that time. Boy, that was punishment. If you chewed gum or something like that in school, boy, that was the punishment. (laughs)

DVR: Did you participate in any plays or sports or anything in school?

MW: Oh, I was always an athlete. I guess I was plenty tomboy. I think I played all the games they played on the school ground because I liked sports, you know.

DVR: Where did you go to high school?

MW: I went to...on 15th and Pine, on the corner there, that was Holland High School then in those days when I went. I played basketball, you know, girls team, and we had gym and stuff. It was just like it is nowadays, except now they're on their own more than they were then.

DVR: Did you take any trips or outings with your folks while you were young?

MW: Yes, there was one trip that I remember distinctly; that was when I was quite young. My folks had a car then, an Oberlin car, and we were going to go to Grand Haven to visit the sheriff, Dykhouse; he was sheriff then. That was such a terrible day. It rained, and the roads weren't paved, and we got lost going just to Grand Haven. It was all mud, and we went through what they call the big marsh; the water was up to the running board. My folks were all day making that trip and getting home again at night. We just got lost, you know, the roads were so poor. I always remember that trip. My mother had a hat on that

stood out, and when she came home, it was drooping right around her face. We were really in some bad weather. Now you would go on that trip in about 25 minutes; then it took us all day to get up there and back. We finally did get to the courthouse, though, and back.

DVR: You don't remember what you saw in the courthouse? Did you get into the prison there?

MW: Yes, we went all through the prison and we visited those Dykhouses; they were friends of my folks. We thought that was quite something, you know, to go through the jail. I guess it was pretty crude in those days. Now, it would really be nice.

DVR: Then when you were 12 or 13, then your parents moved out to the lake, I hear.

W: Yes, then my dad—I think work was a little slack—and he had a chance to work for Mr. Getz doing carpenter work on the farm, on Getz' Farm. So, they decided to move out there, and we lived at one of Mr. Getz's homes called Hilltop Cottage, and it's still there. Then my father worked on the farm. My mother, she always liked to entertain people. See, we lived right near the lake, and that was really something to be able to go in bathing in those days. We had a car, and we used to drive to Holland and pick up a lot of friends and take them out there for the day, and she'd cook a great big meal. They had a great big screened-in back porch with a great big table, and we all ate out there—all our meals in the summer, you know. It was so nice out there; it overlooked a great big woods. Then at night, we would bring those people back to Holland again. They'd go swimming in the afternoon and have a great time. They all looked forward to coming to our place, because my mother cooked these nice meals and stuff for them.

DVR: Tell me more about the Getz. What was he, and what was the relationship to the farm?

MW: Mr. Getz, well, of course, he was a millionaire, and he made a lot of money in the coal business in Chicago. He had two sons, James and George, and he was there mostly in the summer. Sometimes he wouldn't be there continuously. He'd have to go back to Chicago on business and maybe be there a few days, and then he'd come back. They really had a beautiful farm, and the main house was very beautiful. There were some houses right on the farm, too, where the employees lived. But then he had about five other ones in the surrounding area. The dairy man lived in one house, and the man of the greenhouse lived in another house; and then the manager, Mr. Jackson, he lived right on the farm in a nice house. And then, of course, there was the boarding house, they called it. They had a dormitory where the men slept and lived, but then they took their meals at the boarding house. And that my folks operated for one year, and my mother did all the cooking. They employed about fifteen men that weren't married, and they're the ones that lived in the dormitory. But the married ones lived in the houses in the surrounding area. She really worked very hard, and all she could take it was one year.

DVR: She did all the meals and cooking for you as a family and fifteen men?

MW: For us as a family and also all of those men. My sister was there to help her with that work, but other than that, she did that alone. In those days, when we lived there, I always remember they had such a beautiful greenhouse, and they raised such nice things...cucumbers about fifteen inches long and big bunches of grapes—out of season, you know. Of course, they had a lot of beautiful cows and stuff, in the dairy. We got all our produce and our milk and cream and everything for practically nothing, because we lived on the farm. My dad would come home with a whole market basket full of nice goodies again, which was nice. They had a lot of animals, also, at Getz's Farm during

that time. See, the four years we lived there, then they didn't have all the animals. But when my folks lived on the farm for that one year, then he got all these animals and monkeys and an elephant and a python and all kinds of animals. He had a zoo.

DVR: He had a regular zoo there.

MW: He had a regular zoo—buildings, and cages, and everything all built for that zoo. All that was open to the public, and boy, there would be people there already at eight-thirty, nine o'clock in the morning strolling through those grounds. It was really quite a lot of entertainment for people to come to Getz's' Farm. In my folks' backyard were all the monkeys. They had mirrors; people would stand there and laugh and laugh and laugh. They were real wide and short, you know, or they were real tall and thin. They really got quite a kick out of all those mirrors. But this python I was telling you about, that was oh, I think it would be about sixteen feet long, and being in captivity, it didn't care to eat. So they had to have about twelve men holding that thing and they'd put a board in its mouth, to hold its mouth open, with a hole in it. And in that hole, they would dump all the food and the python would just have to swallow it. And that was the way they kept it alive. Being in captivity, it didn't want to eat otherwise.

DVR: Did they have a bunch of men for keepers too, then, to take care of the animals?

MW: Well, there was one man that took care of the animals, Mr...I can't think of his name now. Jack, his first name was. But he took care of all the animals; he kept the cages and everything clean. I believe they had bears and stuff, too. But he could go right in there with the animals.

DVR: Did they charge admission to Getz Farm?



MW: No, they didn't charge any admission; it was all free. That's why they had loads of people there all the time, walking and strolling over the grounds and just enjoying it. Where his big house was—Mr. Getz's house—that was more private. They couldn't walk all around there. They could see it from a distance. They had some kind of fire equipment there, too, in one of those buildings, I guess for protection against smaller fires. But they had some fire equipment, I remember, in a building. That just came to me now, otherwise I almost forgot about that.

DVR: When you were at Getz Farm, that's when you were attending Holland High School. Is that right?

MW: Yes, when I was fourteen, then I...before I moved away, then I was 18. Then I went to Holland High.

DVR: How did you go? Did you go every morning on a school bus?

MW: No, every morning my sister and I had to drive to Holland. My father, he taught us to drive. In those days, you didn't have to have a license to learn to drive or anything—no training, you just drove and you didn't have to have a driver's license or anything. But I know that we might not use the car during the day. We had to bring it to a garage in Holland, at the Overland garage, and leave it there all day. But when we were out of school—my sister worked then, downtown, and I went to high school. After she was through working, we had to meet at the garage and then we might drive it home. But we were not allowed to drive it during the day at all.

DVR: What was the road like?

MW: The roads were not paved at all. In the winter it would be pretty rough, especially the last hill toward Lakewood Farm. Snow would really drift in there and oftentimes we'd get

stuck and my dad would have to walk over there and shovel us out because we couldn't make it. Then afterwards, they paved the road, just narrow for one car. Then when you met a car, you had to get off the road in the sand to pass. But then later on, they added the sides.

DVR: It was mostly sand there?

MW: At first it was all sand roads, until they put that one strip of pavement in, wide enough for one car. But then after the years, they added strips on the side.

DVR: I suppose they cut that hill down, too, a little bit, didn't they?

MW: Oh, they cut the hill down a lot, yes. They had a school on the corner that was called Lakewood School, I believe. We didn't go to that school though; that was for grade school. We used to go to \_\_\_\_\_ in that school once in a while, you know just to visit. But we didn't attend that school at all.

DVR: All these people that worked at Getz Farm, how did they do their shopping in Holland?

MW: Well, their shopping was done, for instance, like I say, on a certain night of the week; I think it was on Tuesday night. We would have to be at a certain place for the truck, and they were going to take us to town to shop. That was at a certain time; we had to leave at about six-thirty. They would let us off at the Model Drugstore, and then we would do our shopping. We had to be back there at like nine o'clock, and then they'd take us back home. But that was just for the convenience of the people that worked there that couldn't get to town.

DVR: Did they have any entertainment for employees there? It was sort of isolated.

MW: Yes, every once in a while, we would be invited to the big house—Mr Getz’s house. On the front porch, he would show movies. That was for everybody who worked on the farm, but not for the public, of course. We used to go to that, too.

DVR: Was he on first name basis with all the employees? What was the relationship?

MW: Mr. Getz? Well, he used to call my father John, I remember. I think he was, more or less. Yes, I think he was. He was a nice man, you know, a broad-minded person. He wasn’t proud or anything because he had money, you know. He just was more or less a common fellow.

DVR: What did you do about Sunday worship when you lived out there?

MW: That’s what I’m trying to figure out. My folks always went to Central Avenue Church. We must have gone with the car to church, to Holland. But then there was another church called Harderwyk Church, and I think sometimes we went to that, too. And then, in those days, I remember there was a tiny little schoolhouse right next to our house, down below the hill, and that was really a country school. We didn’t attend that one either. See, I was more or less in junior high then.

DVR: Did you ever work at Ottawa Beach Hotel, or have anything to do with the Ottawa Beach Hotel?

MW: No, I never did work, but we have been to Ottawa Beach quite often, just for a ride. I was there the day the hotel burnt down. It was really a big fire, I’m telling you. It burnt right to the ground, you know. We used to like to go to Ottawa Beach and stroll around there and see the sights. A lot of Jews stayed in that hotel.

DVR: That’s what I’m told, yes. Then you met Mr. Walters. How and where did you meet Mr. Walters?

MW: Oh yes, that's another thing. He came from East Saugatuck, and he worked at...well, first he worked at the garage, at VanHekken's Garage, garage work, but he was always interested, from a kid on, in railroading. He lived in East Saugatuck, and he used to hang around the depot as a kid, at East Saugatuck, with the trains. He knew the operator there, and when the trains would come in. He sometimes would stay in the depot all night with that operator, Mr. Dekker. Then he was really interested in railroading all his young life too. His brother, Bob, worked on the railroad, and it was during the war and he was drafted. My husband was seventeen years old and he was working at this garage, and he said, "How would you like to get a job on the railroad?" So he took him up to Grand Rapids, up to the office, and he got a job at seventeen, working on the switch engine, and his brother had to go to the service. He was on the railroad for 47 years, working all over. He got to be an engineer. First he fired the coal, lots and lots of coal. It was steam locomotives. But he finally got to be an engineer. He only worked on the diesels about three or four years before he retired. He never cared for them; he liked steam. He was a great steam man. Yes, he liked steam.

DVR: Now, you didn't tell me how you met him. Maybe you want to start with going to...you went to business school, I understand.

MW: Business college, up on 8th Street.

DVR: Where on 8th Street?

MW: Right above where Woolworth is now, upstairs there. They taught bookkeeping, shorthand, typing, and the usual thing. Mr. Hoeksma, he was at the head of it, he was our instructor—a pretty stern man. I really think he trained you good. But in those days, you know, when you're younger, you think you're pretty stern, but I think it was for your own

good. Then I met my husband. He used to ride around town in a little car called a Cornelian; it almost touched the ground. Well, that looked kind of good to me, so I got him to take me for a ride one time in it, and then that was the beginning of our courtship. I just went with him three months, and then I got married. So, then he was working on the railroad, and we had it pretty rough first—I mean, not much money. Then my folks had moved to town, see, and then we lived upstairs in their house, right here down on East 16th.

DVR: So, that means all during the Depression in the '30s that your husband was working regularly?

MW: Oh, no, we had it real rough. Then we had one child, and we really had it rough. He was what they call furloughed, and he worked maybe one day in the week, or maybe two days, and we lived on that. It wasn't easy. I used to say, "Well, I don't think you will ever get back on the railroad, Roy." "Oh, yes," he said, "I will." And he did, in later years. Then he got a regular job. When the Depression was over, then it was all right again.

DVR: World War II came along, and then it was busy, busy, busy.

MW: Busy, busy, yes. But he never had to go to the service because in those days, they didn't draft the railroad men, so that's why he never went.

DVR: Your name is Bomers. When did the Bomers first come to Holland? Do you know anything about your ancestors?

MW: My father was born in Grand Rapids, but they must have moved to Graafschap. That's where my mother was born and lived, and that's where they met each other, in Graafschap.

DVR: What was her maiden name?

MW: Her name was Volkers, Hattie Volkers. I think they got married quite young, and they must have moved to Holland on West 17th Street, because that's where I was born. I was the third child, but I think my sisters were born there, too. They must have moved to Holland quite soon, because that's where we lived as children. And, of course, then he sold that house and built a nice house on 16th here, between College and Columbia, and we lived there. Then he sold that house to the Fairbanks; and then he built a house right straight back on 17th between College and Columbia.

DVR: Do you remember anything about downtown Holland, and where you went shopping when you were a youngster?

MW: Yes, there were many grocery stores downtown in those days, that you could buy groceries. Also, there was a ten cents store, and Mr. Abraham Peters, he owned the ten cents store. That's where we spent most of our time. They had quite a big family in those days, but he was quite a prosperous businessman on 8th Street. And then they had the banks and the post office, and then there was an Interurban station, also. You see, an Interurban ran through Holland, and it would take you to Grand Rapids and also to Jenison Park and Macatawa. I don't know if you'd like to have me talk about Jenison Park.

DVR: Sure.

MW: Once a year, they had a farmers' picnic—ox roast—and everybody went to farmers' picnic. That was an amusement park, Jenison Park, and they had the merry-go-round, and we called it the figure eight, and the airplane that swung out over the water. Oh, that was just a great day. We all looked forward to farmers' picnic, and then ox roast. They

even had a little pavilion at Jenison Park, and I still have some dishes. They had a shooting gallery, and if you could shoot, then you would get one of these cute little Japanese plates. I got them in my book nook now. They're antiques. Also, across the street from the amusement park was a beer tavern, and that was called Murphy's. They had a dance floor there and tables around. We were just kids then, but I still remember it. I didn't attend or anything, but I still remember a lot of people did.

DVR: Did you go out there on the Interurban?

MW: Always on the Interurban. We would go in the morning and come home at night. We had relatives that had nine girls. They were cousins, my folks, and they would always go together. They had so many kids. Then at night, when they came home on that Interurban, it was so crowded, those kids had to sit all over. They got off on 13th and River, and there they counted noses and one was missing. What happened is that one girl stayed on, and they had to pull into the East End Drugstore here. She was sleeping; she was sitting with another lady and they left her on the Interurban, but they took her off over there on 8th Street and then they held her until they got her back. But that was when I was a kid.

DVR: Did you ever ride the Interurban all the way to Macatawa?

MW: Oh, sure. They made the turn there when you went back.

DVR: Did you ride it down to Saugatuck?

MW: Well, the Interurban didn't go to Saugatuck. It went to Grand Rapids and to Macatawa Park. That's as far as they went. But that was our means of transportation then, I guess. I was quite young. See, we didn't get to go so often in those days, because there was no means of transportation. I remember, though, somebody on our block had a nice car and

that was Dr. Scott. He was a dentist in town, and everybody envied him with that automobile. It was different, believe me. It has a part in the back made like a basket with seats around it, and that's where you rode, and then the driver's seat. But there weren't many cars then yet.

DVR: Did your dad have a horse?

MW: No, I don't think he had a horse. No, not that I've ever known. We didn't have a stable or anything like that.

DVR: How did he get back and forth to his work?

MW: Well, I suppose that in the early days when we lived on 17th, he had that Oberlin car. I remember in later years, he had a big truck that he took his men to work in; on the back of the truck they would ride. He also built Belvedere; you know, that's on the way to Saugatuck. That's a nursing home now.

DVR: What was it then?

MW: It was a private home in those days. They had beautiful gardens and stuff, you know. One time, I remember they were working there, and they had a car of lumber that was being sent in by rail, and the car got on a runaway. It just started to go back down a hill and, boy, that was really something. I don't know how they ever got it under control again, but it was a runaway car, a boxcar. But that took quite a while to build that big of home at Belvedere.

DVR: Did you ever have any great picnics that you remember, besides going to Jenison Park? Were there other great picnic places?

MW: Oh, yes; we had a carpenters' picnic once a year. That was all the city carpenters and builders and their families, and it was a big basket picnic. Everybody took their own



basket, and I think we even must have sat on the ground to have it, because I don't remember the tables being there. It was right on Lake Michigan, and oh, how we looked forward to going and swimming every year. That was about the only time we ever got to go to the lake. Then we would spend the whole day there. We would go out to the picnic—it was about six miles from Holland—and we would go by hayride. Everybody rode on the hayride, with the horses pulling. Then we would have all kinds of sports and prizes and nail driving contests and all kinds of guessing games. Oh, it was really great for all ages, young and old. We really had a good time at those picnics. It was a public entrance to the lake, which afterwards, Mr. Getz owned.

DVR: So, it's right at the same place that you lived later on.

MW: Yes, it was on the main road; it ran right to the lake.

DVR: Did you ever take trips to Grand Rapids for visiting or for adventure?

MW: Yes, I did. I would go to Reeds Lake; about once a year we got to go there. We'd save up our money, and it was an amusement park. They had a big roller coaster and I took my first ride on the roller coaster alone. I was alone in the car—I had a lot of nerve in those days, and I had to try that out, and boy, that first dip was enough to make it worthwhile, I guess. Anyhow, I really hung on for dear life, but I had to try that out, that derby racer, and that really had the dips, we thought, in those days. They had all kinds of things to ride on, an amusement park, you know. But we had to go by Interurban.

DVR: And you would leave early in the morning?

MW: Yes, and stay all day and come back in the evening. Of course, we mightn't stay out late or anything. We had to come home on time on a certain Interurban. They'd meet you, you know, when you got home.

DVR: What kind of newspaper did you get in your home? Do you remember newspapers at all?

MW: The only paper I can ever remember is the *City News* and the *Sentinel*. I don't know when if the *Sentinel* was published then. Do you know when that was published?

DVR: I think it started in the '20s.

MW: 1920. I was born in 1902. But I do remember *Holland City News*.

DVR: What about mail service? Do you know anything about the mail service? Did you have good mail service at Getz Farm?

MW: Oh, yes, they had mail service there. We used to have a mailman come and put it in our mailbox. He came with a truck, delivering the mail all around. I don't remember much more than that about the mail service, except that I know our mailbox was down below the hill, and we had to always go down there, to the road, to get it.

DVR: I hear that your husband had a boat; he is a boat enthusiast. What can you tell me about that?

MW: Well, he built a steamboat in 1961; he was still working on the railroad then. He came home and he said, "Well, today I bought an old lifeboat off the old *Alabama*." He said, "They're wrecking it, and I'm going to build a steamboat." I really thought he was flipped a little because to build a steamboat, but he had that in his mind for a long time. He bought just the hull, and he rebuilt the whole thing. When he'd come home from work—we had a garden spot back here—and he would go right out there and work on that boat. It took him 3 years to build it. He bought a boiler, and he installed that whole boiler and the whole inside. He even upholstered the seats. It held twenty-five people, and we used to take a lot of people for rides. He fixed up a table and everything on it, and we would go to Ottawa Beach and take our lunch along. We'd park by a dock and

some would sit on the boat and eat. It had seven whistles on it, and we used to take big groups for a ride. The kids would always be so crazy about blowing the whistles. People all over the city could hear those whistles, and they'd say, "There goes Roy again." We really had a lot of fun on that boat. It had different things that had to be improved on all the time, and we would sometimes be stalled out there in the lake, and then the Coast Guard would tow us into Holland, back to the dock. Then he would work on that again to get that bug out. Oh, he really put in a lot of work on that boat. It fired coal. Boy, he really was in his glory when he could be on that boat, taking a group of people out.

DVR: Where did he dock it on the lake?

MW: Well, see, first we docked it on the east side of the bridge on River Avenue, down by that house. Then to get under the bridge, the water was usually quite high, so we had the smokestack fixed so it would tip forward. Every time we went under the bridge, we would all have to lean one way, because that's the only way you could get under, with the smokestack down. Then when we'd get on the other side, then he'd go up there and put the smokestack back up and then we would all sit around again. But I know we all had to lean a certain way to get under that bridge. Then after a while, the water got so high that another year we couldn't park there anymore. See, when it was on the east side of the bridge, then we could go to Windmill Island; that was always such a nice trip, you know. But then, when the water got so high, then he parked it by Brewer's City Coal Dock, in there, by Harrington. Then we would start out from there; then we couldn't go under the bridge anymore. We would take a lot of people. There were a lot of parking places, and they could always park their cars there, and we'd go out on the boat.

[End of interview]