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Berghoef, Neal and Ann Oral History Interview: Dutch Immigrants who Emigrated to the United States after WW II

Donna M. Rottier

Interview with
Ann and Neal Berghoef

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by Donna M. Rottier

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Subject: Post WWII Dutch Immigrants to Holland, Michigan

DR: Could you both state your full names?

AB: Certainly, my name is Anna Maria VanAlten.

NB: I'm Neal Berghoef.

DR: Could you also state your current address, please.

NB: 81 East Thirty-second Street, Holland, Michigan, 49423.

DR: Thank-you. And your date of birth?

NB: [date removed], 1922.

AB: [date removed], 1923.

DR: What date did you emigrate from the Netherlands?

AB: August 4, 1956.

NB: And we arrived on August 14, in New York, in 1956.

AB: It was ten days by ship.

DR: What ship did you come over on?

AB: It was an older ship. It was used for the soldiers in the war. It was called the Zuiderkruis.

NB: Southern-Cross. It was a "liberty ship." Those were the ships that were produced in mass during the war for war purposes, and they were converted first for troop transport and then for emigration uses. There were three of them: the Grotebeer and the Zuiderkruis and there was another one. They went to the United Sates or to South Africa or to Australia. Those were very important days in emigration--the early years of the fifties.

DR: What part of the Netherlands did you come from?

AB: The Northern part. We lived there for eight years, in the province of Friesland.

NB: The city was Franeker.

DR: What kind of a city is that?

NB: It's a pretty old city, let's say 750 years. We lived there for eight years, and the city celebrated the 750th anniversary. It was an older city that used to have a university, and it was quite important. It was one of the eleven cities. They had their skating tour, when there was enough ice, an eleven city tour, and that's one of the eleven cities. So, it was a very important city. I was working for a furniture factory as a plant manager.

DR: In the Netherlands?

NB: Yes, in the Netherlands.

DR: I see. So when you came here you already had experience working with furniture.

NB: I was thirty-four years old, and I had been through all the stages of supervision and I was a plant manager at that point.

DR: What prompted you to decide to leave the Netherlands and come to the United States?

AB: It's a more than one-answer question really. We had four children at the time and the Netherlands is a small country with a lot of people. We decided we would go and try the United States.

NB: My perspective is that I was kind of leveled off. I had reached my vocational platform. I had two brothers that went to the United States. There were some political reasons, too. For me, at least the united Europe seemed at that time a long ways off, and it still is. So I couldn't see, if we wouldn't unite as a Europe, that it was a good future to be in. Those were our reasons.

DR: How difficult was it to uproot your family and to move? You said

you had four children?

AB: Yes, and as I mentioned before, we lived in Franeker for eight years, but we had already moved away from our families quite a distance in the Netherlands. We moved from the city of Gouda to Franeker after our marriage. I think it was harder on my parents and my family than it was on us.

NB: The history of our families really is that my wife was born in the province of Zeeland, the Netherlands.

AB: That's close to Belgium.

NB: My parents came from close to Amsterdam, and both of our families moved to a little city, by the city of Gouda, and we met there.

AB: Dated later.

NB: We met there, and then my first job was in the city of Gouda, and we lived there for one and a half years. We had our first child there. Then we moved to Friesland, which was quite a move. Our parents thought it was a tremendous move. It was a three-hour train trip. The Netherlands is not a very large country; it's maybe one-fourth of the state of Michigan. So traveling is always three or four hours and you are where you want to be. But our parents already thought that it was quite a distance to move away three hours. You could go in a day back and forth, but they still thought it was very far. Moving away was not so much a shock for my father because he had already two children who had left the Netherlands to go to the United States. But it was a shock, and maybe you can pick up there, for your mom.

AB: Yes, for my mom. I was the youngest of six children, and my parents

had lost two children already through death, and she thought, "there goes another daughter," and the youngest. It was especially hard on her.

NB: At that time, it was just the cut-off time to go by boat and start flying. We were at that division line, and we said, well, considering the money we have, we'll go by boat. But other people were already going by plane. Of course, after the sixties, air travel just exploded. It is rather easy to go from one continent to another; it's an eight-hour trip. So Grandma thought, "We're never going to see them back." As it turned out, she visited us once for a half-year.

AB: Yes, they came together. They came by boat, and it was five years later, five years after we had emigrated. They loved it here. She thought we had in mind of becoming rich and not much work anymore, but then she experienced here. In the meantime we had another daughter, and she said, "Well, I see you are living good here, and you have to work hard." She liked it. My father, too, liked it. They stayed for about four months. They liked everything here except the language, which they couldn't understand.

NB: And after that, she must have been here at least twice by plane. She thought this was a permanent farewell. As it turned out, it enriched her life, too, by being here, and see some of the American life and how we worked and how we lived, the culture.

DR: What were some of your first impressions when you first came to the United States.

AB: Our destination was Grand Rapids. We lived there for a year--1956-

57. We rented a house in the old neighborhood, 617 Liberty Southwest, and I wasn't used to that. I missed a lot, of flowers, and open windows, and flowers in front of the window, and the language. We didn't really know a whole lot of the language, so we had to learn it.

DR: Did you learn it simply by having to go out and actually talk to people?

AB: Right. I must say, our children were nine, seven, five, and three. So the three went to school right away, and in about a month they could speak English. They corrected us when we said something wrong--grammar and sentence structure--and we said, you kids may correct us, in your own polite way. They did, so we learned together.

NB: We had taken some time in the Netherlands to learn some English, but otherwise, more the King's English than it was American English. But I had bought some records, and they had two different courses. One was the King's English, the way they speak it in England, and one was American English. That did help us quite a bit. When we came here, we made a decision, which was good in a way and bad in another way. We said, hey, we are here, so we are going to be here, and not stand with one foot in the old country and another foot in the United States, and try to keep up our Dutch. We switched to English and made a go of that--reading in English, and we said, if we want to make it here, we want to adapt ourselves

AB: And be happy here.

NB: And be happy here, we've got to be able to communicate. We were

quite successful in that, although you never lose your accent which is something which follows you all your life, but then, who is perfect? Whether you live in Boston, or in North Carolina, or in Alabama, it all makes little difference.

AB: And you say perfect, but I think it adds something to it if you keep your accent. It's an interesting thing, too, although, I have learned to be happy with that, even.

NB: For our children, it was too bad, because most of them lost the language skill. Some of them were already bilingual. They spoke Frisian, which is a separate language, and Dutch, and they lost that, except our older children, that had a sprinkling of it, but they had to go back to school, like Calvin, and take a Dutch course in order to learn. So, from that point of view, the decision was not as desirable as it could have been. Now, whether we could have done better, I am not sure, but nobody seems to worry about it.

AB: The disappointment for my parents was that they couldn't converse with their grandchildren anymore. That was disappointing. We didn't do everything right. We didn't keep up the Dutch enough really, but we worked so hard, and so there is no guilt feeling. Our children can pick it up themselves. We had a son who studied in Europe for a couple of years, and for the little vacations he had he went to Grandma in the Netherlands, and could converse with her.

DR: You said that the move from Grand Rapids to Holland came because you got a job with the Baker Furniture Company?

NB: Right. We immigrated under the Refugee Act. Under the normal law, it was very hard.

DR: What is the Refugee Act?

NB: There are normal immigration procedures. You are on a waiting list, and it took a long time, because there were many people at that time who wanted to immigrate to the United States. I think there was a five-year waiting list. But then Congress enacted the Refugee Act, that all those people who had suffered through the war could come to the United States. I had been in the Underground, and that qualified me to immigrate under the special law, and the waiting period wasn't that long for me. Under that law, I needed a place to live and a place to work. When I arrived in Grand Rapids, I had both. My brother gave me a place to live, and Bergs Brothers gave me a place to work. I worked at Bergs Brothers, which is a furniture factory, and they were very good to me. They showed me to different departments, because I had basically some good experience in furniture. I was getting kind of impatient, so I applied for a job in Holland, which turned out to be a product engineer at Baker Furniture. After a year of being in Grand Rapids, I got that job at Baker Furniture as a product engineer and we moved to Holland, Michigan.

DR: Were you happy with the move to Holland?

AB: Yes. It was a good move because in Grand Rapids we lived in the old neighborhood, and there were too many ladies I came in contact with who had also immigrated and they were not happy at all. They were complaining about the United States--I wish I was back in Amsterdam--and I wasn't happy listening to that at all. So we moved here to Holland, and it was just perfect; we were happy here.

DR: Did you come into a lot of contact with other immigrants who had come from the Netherlands?

AB: Some, in our first year. In Grand Rapids more than here.

NB: Here we were taken up in the normal life of the community. There the recent immigrants had a little separate community.

DR: What would you say was probably the most difficult adjustment for you to make?

AB: I think for me, I did not work outside the home right away. I was mother and wife and was busy at home. I think the language was the most difficult, for my own feeling. You want to belong, you want to speak like they do here. That's why we probably tried so hard.

DR: In staying home with your children, did you find that you were more isolated, and did you find it harder to become a part of the community?

AB: No, that was more a help than a hindrance because our children went to school and we came in contact with the parents of the children. No, I didn't feel isolated at all.

NB: We had right away some good friends, good acquaintances. They were very helpful.

AB: School, and church, and there were terrific couples who helped us along and we became friends.

NB: At that time it was already difficult to rent a house, but through some very nice people we were able to rent a house. That was very difficult with four children.

DR: What church did you attend?

AB: We went to the Christian Reformed Church on Sixteenth Street. We

lived on Thirteenth Street at the time; we rented a house. We could just walk with our four, later on five, children to that church.

DR: Is that the church you still attend?

AB: Yes, although we moved away from Sixteenth Street and it became Providence Christian Reformed Church on Ottawa Avenue, across from the high school.

NB: We switched churches recently,

AB: last year

NB: but basically we've stayed with our church, the Christian Reformed church.

DR: Were you Christian Reformed in the Netherlands? Is that your family's church?

NB: That's basically our roots. It's called a little different, but that's basically our roots--Christian Reformed, and Reformed, it's not all that different.

DR: What has motivated you to stay in Holland all these years?

NB: Fortunately, the move to Holland and the working for Baker Furniture was a very happy one. I had a good background in furniture. I was well-trained and educated and I was able to put it to good use so that I moved through the rank and file, from product engineer to assistant plant manager to plant manager and I retired as manager of operations in 1986. Baker Furniture, and the people at Baker Furniture--it was a good match for us. We were happy in Holland. our kids grew up and went to school. It was just a very happy combination. I don't know whether we could have accomplished more, but we were satisfied. There was a temptation for me, being the guy

who always wants to embrace new things, to move away from Holland for a number of reasons. One was that the furniture industry was really not growing in Holland. But the growth in the furniture industry took place in North Carolina. Baker Furniture was shrinking in Holland and expanding in North Carolina. A new challenge always attracts me, so I was ready to move to North Carolina, but that's where my wife called the shots and said, "I've been uprooted once, and I am happy here. I don't want to be uprooted again." That's why we stayed here. We are very happy here. We have grown with the community. We are basically always participating. We love to participate. At the company, we wanted to participate and grow at Baker Furniture, in the furniture industry. In the church, we always participate at leadership positions. And later, in the community, once we were on top of things, I became active in the community--a member of the human relations commission. Then somebody said, why don't you run for council. I got appointed to council in 1983. I was member of council for several years, and then I ran for mayor. That's the way it went. It was a very happy marriage. Our children did well. They all went to school and have their degrees, and they have responsible positions--nurses, teachers, and principal. I think we made a good choice.

DR: Have your children stayed in the Holland area or have they branched out?

AB: Yes and no. The interesting thing is that they moved away. A couple of them went to Washington D.C. to work there, teaching or in

other professions. They came back. Our daughter came back to Grand Rapids and is a teacher there. Our son moved from Washington D.C. to Columbus, Indiana. Our second daughter went to Utah with her husband for a year. We didn't know why but we didn't ask too many questions. They came back after a year. So most of them were far away and came back. And well, we like it.

NB: Our oldest son was in Wisconsin for five years, and he came back. He's principal at Rose Park Christian School.

DR: What do you think it is that brought them back to Holland?

AB: I think it's a part of their profession, of what they're doing that they've found it better here in Michigan. I believe our son, too, is happy to be back in Holland as principal in the Christian school, and our second son is happy to be closer, like Indiana. As I listen to them, they are glad to be back near the family.

DR: Did it help to have a big family in adjusting to life here? Did it bring you closer?

AB: Yes. We were talking about it just a couple of days ago. We are a close knit family, yet we can let go to do their own thing.

NB: We were pretty fortunate that when the kids moved away and wanted to explore things--study in Europe and do all kinds of things--we were able to say, hey, we did it, you do it. Jack was in the Peace Corps in Nepal. He put in his service there. Henry studied in Bologna, Italy. They all had good experiences and they came back. They like it here in West Michigan. It's not that we ever tried to convince them to come back. A person, at a certain type of age, has to make up his own mind. We as parents only provide a basis.

DR: It seems that increasingly Holland is becoming more and more culturally diverse.

NB: Absolutely

DR: When you see new immigrants, such as Asian immigrants or Hispanic immigrants, coming into Holland, how do respond to that? How does that make you feel?

AB: I feel for them when they come in. There is one city council member, Luciano Hernandez. And his wife Janie, knows the Spanish, and the English language. I've said to Janie, too, she was talking about how she wanted to become a counselor, in the school or something. I said that's an excellent idea but urge them to try to integrate, and not forget their background, but at least learn the language, and feel more at home. I think it's quite an adjustment. I would never deny it, that the first two or three years it's an adjustment to make. I would urge to move on and try become happy and not hang on too much to especially the language.

NB: I cannot divorce myself from being a mayor at this point, so I have to respond the way I think at this point. The diversity is a fact--something that we shouldn't deny and cannot deny. We are here as a Dutch community. It's about 150 years ago, it will be in 1997, we'll be 150 years. I think at one time I was told that there were thirty different nationalities and ethnic groups that were in community education. You can see, from a single culture, that we've gone to multi-culture. We have to accept that. We have ourselves sponsored Asian immigrants. The Hispanics are here. We have an increasing number of black people who have come to Holland. I think

diversity is a fact. So we shouldn't deny it and go around saying we are this happy Dutch community. The next thing I would like to say is that diversity can be very enriching. If I meet you, and you come from Fremont, and you have a perspective, and we start talking about these things, we are enriching one another. So, it can be very enriching and we should see it as enriching. But the third point is that it is a tremendous challenge to get away from our isolated point of view--we are Dutch, and if "you aren't Dutch, you aren't much"--to say, all those cultures, we ought to embrace those. We have to accept and feel enriched by multicultural community. That's going to be a challenge. Part of that is my job also, to try to bring these people together, to tell them, this is enriching, we must embrace one another.

AB: You are sure right when you say that, because we came here voluntarily, but there are many immigrants, from Cambodia and Vietnam, who were forced out of their country, and that's a whole different thing to come to the United States, so they have to be embraced especially.

NB: That's going to be a challenge. And we can do it. Having our spiritual foundations. Holland could be a model community to pull it off. But it's going to be tough.

DR: Do you see Holland meeting up to that challenge?

NB: I think we have done well so far. I think the Hispanics are more comfortable now than they were at one time. We are working on that. We have brought more Hispanics into the structure, into the committees and commissions. I think we are making progress.

However, what now descends on us all of a sudden are more black people coming. That has sort of a shock effect. But I think now we have touched the next challenge that we have to now adjust ourselves, that with black people in our community, which we are not used to, and that's going to be difficult. So we really have to work on that, as a religious community, and as an ethnic community. That's the way I look at it; we have a challenge. So far I think we have not done too bad. The next step might be a little bit more difficult.

DR: As an immigrant yourself, how do you see yourself relating to these newer immigrants?

NB: You can't help but looking in the perspective of the United States of America. What we did in the beginning was a tragedy, how we dealt with our Native Americans. So we cannot say, this is our country, without including everybody who is saying it's our country. As an immigrant, I feel I have no more rights, probably less rights than the American Indian, the American Native, probably less rights than the black people who were brought here against their wishes, probably less rights than the Hispanic who was annexed to the United States. You're a history major so you know what happened in the Southwest when we chopped it all up saying you'll be ours. So I think you have to look at it from that perspective. Whether every immigrant looks at it that way I am not sure because not everybody has taken the trouble to study the history of the United States like they probably should. I don't know whether I'm an exception or not, but at least I have come back to school and learned a little bit

about it, and we have to use that perspective, of where everybody comes from and how we became one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. But this is going to be a challenge.

AB: Yes, that's the word for it. It will always be. In a way, you just as well say, leave well alone, keep the peace,

NB: don't bother us anymore

AB: but we come in contact with each other and we have to live with each other, and even more than that, we have to approach each other in kindness and doing things for each other, and serving each other.

NB: I think our basic religious beliefs should help us there, which is a message of love. Now we have to live up to that love.

DR: Do you see this as a positive thing or as negative?

NB: I would it is a positive thing.

AB: Positive, yes. Work at it every time. As our minister said Sunday, his topic of his sermon was "Go for it." It came out in the end to stretch yourself a little bit; what you haven't done before, take that step, and go for it.

NB: Be enriched. But that's going to be, for many people that I've talked to, this is going to be very difficult. When I was a kid, my friend and I discovered a little island in a little pond. We found a little boat. After school we would go to the little island, and we had it all by ourselves. we had a great time; we went fishing there, and would make a little fire, and we would fry the fish. But somebody came and took the boat away, and said we couldn't go there any more. So our world collapsed. We had this wonderful little island all by ourselves. We all look for that little island, where

we want to be undisturbed and nobody bother us, but that doesn't happen in the world, we have to share and share alike.

DR: What is your attitude toward such festivals as Tulip Time? How do you feel about that in regards to how the Dutch heritage is being preserved and do you see them being expanded to encompass what Holland is becoming?

AB: Concerning Tulip Time, we make more of Tulip Time here, in the city of Holland, than they do in the Netherlands. But I think it's good for preserving our heritage to have this kind of a festival. It's enjoyable. It's great.

NB: In the beginning when we came here, we were kind of offended.

DR: In what ways?

NB: In the way that the Netherlands is not like that.

AB: Although there are parts like that.

NB: But, we have all those Dutch costumes together, from Friesland, from Spakenburg, from Staphorst, from Zeeland, from Scheveningen. They are all different places in the Netherlands. You see them all together. You never see them all together in the Netherlands, because in order to see the Zeeland costume, you have to go to Zeeland, in order to see the Frisian costume, you have to drive four hours and see it in Friesland. So you have something that doesn't exist in the Netherlands that we have here. But I think we have reconciled ourselves a little bit saying this is the folklore of the Netherlands celebrated in the city of Holland, Michigan. Whether that's only one part of the Dutch culture, that's the costumes and the fun that we have, so I think it's great. How much it preserves

the Dutch culture, I couldn't tell you. What is culture? It involves more than just costumes and wooden shoes, right? How much it really contributes to the Dutch culture, I'm not sure, but it is fun, and I think we ought to preserve it and integrate it with other things that happen. If there is an Hispanic fiesta, they're entitled to their fiesta. If there's a black festival. . . What I really like to see, that we should have a group of people from different cultures that tries to bring all those various cultures to the community. You see, Laos, Cambodia have their own culture, and we would be enriched if that was shared with us somehow. We know very little about it, but I think it would be nice for to know how they celebrate what they do. In my dreams I see a group of people from different cultural backgrounds that brings something about, that we can get really acquainted with what they do there and how they live, and what their religious background is, and really what a culture is, rather than a costume. That's my dream, that we can do that. And what a wonderful community we would have.

AB: I think we are working on it. With the Spanish fiesta, and. . .

NB: Liberty Fest is a good example. I don't know if you know what Liberty Fest is.

DR: No, what is Liberty Fest?

NB: Liberty Fest is that we have people there from all different cultures--black groups, Hispanic groups--jazz, all kinds of music, and theatre, and that brings all people together, in a couple days of festival, in Centennial Park.

DR: When does that take place?

NB: In June, I believe. I've forgot now the date, June 18 or something. But it is around the Fourth of July. That's a good start.

DR: How long has that been going on?

NB: This is the third time, maybe, or the fourth.

DR: You mentioned when you first came, that you were somewhat offended by Tulip Time. How long did it take you to start to become involved with it?

AB: Maybe the following year.

NB: You see, our children were in school.

AB: I remember my neighbor lady saying on Thirteenth Street, "Oh, Ann, you have to put your children in Dutch costume," and I said, I've never done that before. In the past with our school trips, when I was a child, we went to, say, Vollendam, and other places, Urk, to see how they live there, and their costumes. But I caught on, and in the second year, our children were excited, and so were we.

NB: We're very adaptable, so we adapted quite quickly.

AB: I also think, and this is an honest opinion, that we wanted to forget a little bit of what was behind, but fortunately we caught on, and said hey, this is great, to not ever forget our heritage. That's why it was more fun for us in the following years, but we had to overcome that.

DR: This is still along the lines of Holland as a typical "Dutch" community as how it's viewed. How do you respond to that? Do you see it as a typical Dutch community? Do you see it changing?

AB: It used to be more of a Dutch community, but I think it's changing, fast, which is, my opinion, good.

NB: The perception is that we are a Dutch community. In actuality, we are quite a diversity. I think at this point, we still have decided that we project ourselves as a Dutch community. If there are going to be changes in the future, I don't know. Everybody seems to be happy with it, a lot of people benefit from it. It has an economic side as well as a cultural side that's intertwined, and I'm not sure how to separate them.

DR: When you first came did you find it easier to adjust because it was more of a Dutch community?

AB: Yes. That's why I say now after thirty-five years, it's good, it's not all Dutch anymore. Yes, it was a comfort at that time. It helped us to adjust. I think Neal, and for myself too, we wanted to move away because we soon had friends who were not Dutch at all, I mean Dutch names, yes, but who didn't speak the Dutch language or whatever. I think it was a good experience. When we go back to the Netherlands now, if you go for two weeks, you don't speak English for two weeks. So, I mean to say, it enriches a person. I feel I could live now wherever in America, where there is no Dutch community. But it's always a thrill to go back and be with Dutch people again, be with our families in the Netherlands?

DR: How many times have you gone back to the Netherlands to visit?

AB: The first time it took us ten years. It was only in 1966 that we went back. We came in 1956. But after that you have been there twice, maybe, since, twice or three times.

NB: Me? Maybe five. And you maybe ten or fifteen times.

AB: Yes. Because my mother and sister and brothers and your brothers

live there. They're still living, not my mother and father. So we have gone back on regular times.

DR: What sort of feelings do you get when you go back to the Netherlands to visit?

NB: That's quite a mixture. Let's try to separate them. In the first place, they have a very densely populated country, which we are not that used to anymore here in Holland, Michigan. We are used to space. We are used to our conveniences which are still considerable, like heating the whole house when it's winter, taking a shower whenever you want. I'm not saying you can't do it, but there are some restrictions as to heating the house and so forth. But economically, they're strong, their education system is a good system. It's totally different from ours, but it is a good system. It makes people choose a direction earlier in life. Let's say you can go to college, and still don't know what you want to do. There, earlier in life, they make their choices, whether they go industrial, or whether administrative, or whether they go for a profession, or a minister, or a law education. They make it much earlier in life. So they've got a strong technical, the people that are going in industry are well-prepared. They are economically strong. I think for us, now that's very personal I suppose, the spiritual aspects are very important. I think in the United States we have preserved more our traditional view of God and him being a loving God. In the Netherlands they have lost some of that. The young people, say the age of our children, very few still feel that there are eternal values. If they are, it's very unorganized. They

came out of the war by saying a God that allows six million Jews to be killed, what kind of a God is that? They took it from there and they went kind of their own way, and forgot to look inside and say some of the source is the humanity itself, they cannot blame God. They have thrown away some of other traditions. How many of our. . .

AB: nieces and nephews attend a church, it's very few, and we have quite a few nieces and nephews.

NB: Very few are married; they just live together and have children. We feel that it's kind of a loss. So when we are there, while we like our relatives, we like the country, we don't like where they're at at this point, spiritually and morally. So, in a sense, our children, I don't think we have it forced onto them, our children have adopted more the traditional religious values, which I think is good, and they have more acceptable traditional moral values--married and being responsible for each other. So from that point of view, when we visit Europe, we are kind of sad when we see what happened. We are happy when we come here to see that there are considerable traditional values.

DR: Do you think the traditional values center mainly around Holland or do you think it's the United States in general?

NB: I would think in general. I would say you find more--and I'm not a deeply rooted fundamentalist, I'm more evangelical--I think there's a stronger sense in the United States than there is in Europe.

DR: Why do you think that is?

AB: Does the Second World War have something to do with it? I believe as I am saying this now, that's one of the good motives we left the

Netherlands. I just feel it deeply that it was good to move away when we did, and when our children were growing up, let them make their choices. Advised by us, but give them that certain freedom. I think that has helped them.

NB: The difference between Europe and the United States is considerable as far as religious background is concerned. It's too deep for me to define that, why that's happened. Here you have a concentration of English religious tradition, German religious tradition, Roman-Catholic tradition.

AB: I think that the whole Europe comes under that. There isn't a whole lot of moral values and spiritual values.

NB: Germany is a different religious tradition--Lutheranism--and France is basically a Roman-Catholic country which isn't all that close to Rome anymore. England has produced Methodism and so forth and that has proliferated here in the United States.

DR: Do you think that the fact that there is so much religious diversity in the United States has something to do with all this?

NB: That could easily be.

AB: Yes. You have the Baptists from the South, and yes, I think together with all the diversity that we have learned from each other.

NB: I think what has happened, the Baptist faith has really expanded here in the United States. You have the basic fundamentalistic Baptists, the Southern Baptists. You don't find that that much on mainland Europe--the Baptist faith. I think that has kept in balance whatever else happens. That comes from England basically, I

think. But anyway, the Baptist faith, you don't find it in Europe that often.

DR: You are both Christian Reformed. Have your children gone on in the Christian Reformed tradition?

AB: At this point, they have been searching, like we did ourselves, in the last two or three years. Two of them are not with the Christian Reformed Church anymore. When they announced that, no, we aren't shocked, because we have learned, too, that the Christian Reformed Church is not the perfect church. They have chosen to go to another church and are very happy there.

DR: What churches have they chosen to go to?

AB: There's the Central Wesleyan. And our son Henry goes to the Presbyterian church. As long as we notice, too, that they keep the same principles, then we can be happy.

NB: There is still a great amount of spirituality, right, love for God?

AB: Yes. We see certain things when we visit them that puzzle us, but they are not the same as we then, but we don't say anything, but we notice.

NB: Everybody has to live his own life.

DR: If I could bring us back to when you first came over here. Do you have any vivid memories of your first years here--some specific events or experiences you had which changed you in any way?

AB: It came so gradually, those first years. In a way, you felt displaced and had to get over that feeling. As I said before, the children helped a lot. There were so many activities in school and church and community, as well in Grand Rapids that first year in

Holland. As to any particular event, someone gave us a great big tent the first year we were here and we went camping together. That was terrific, which we never did before. That really was fun, going up to Northern Michigan with a family of seven and sleeping next to each other in this great big tent.

NB: Nature is great here. It's there, too, but it's more restricted. For me, at that point, my wife was home with the kids, we had four and later on five children, which nowadays is a large family, to provide was pretty important. We had some tough times. We did take quite a bit along, from our belongings. We had set up how we were going to furnish our house. I made some stuff in Europe that I had knocked down that they could build here. The first years were kind of marked by how do we survive and how do we get a new start. Those were tough years. Starting from scratch is not all that easy, in every way--language, customs, housing, furniture, refrigerators--but we were busy at it. I worked lots of hours, because I needed the extra money. I worked sometimes fifty-five hours, and that was a blessing, because there were fifteen hours time-and-a half involved. That helped getting financially started, and I wanted to be sure that my wife was comfortable, that she was okay with this change, and that I myself was comfortable, that the kids were comfortable. It is a considerable change; you should not minimize that. Once, a guy told me, he said, "why didn't you go to Australia, we don't need you here, we have plenty of labor." Those are emotionally tough things to go through. That was the only guy that ever said it to me. Emotionally, you have to survive all that. That's a

considerable struggle. You shouldn't minimize that.

DR: Even though that was the only person that ever said that kind of comment to you, did you ever feel those sort of feelings from other people, not verbal?

AB: I don't remember.

NB: I have to say that the American people are just fantastic when it comes to receiving other people and other traditions and taking them in and be friendly and kind, and give everybody an opportunity to be himself or herself, and not be judgmental. We come from a European setting which at that time was very judgmental. There was communism and socialism, and they were very judgmental. The religious people were very judgmental. There was not the generosity of spirit that leads everybody to his own decision and his own opinions. The United States is much more forgiving than that, than at that time Europe was. I don't know how it is now. I think we have learned to be more generous, to be more tolerant. There's a tolerance, and I think I really enjoy the tolerance. Having deep differences of opinion, and still be friends. I think we have learned that here.

AB: I think that some of that opinion of not leaving one another alone to an opinion is coming back. We have to fight that. It's coming back in our religious groups. We can have differences, but it depends how we deal with them.

NB: What I also like is the possibility of having a secondary education here. That was quite difficult for us at that time. I did not know how I possibly could get a college education. Here it's pretty well open for everybody. There are always ways that you can finance your

education. After I came, I used them pretty well, without getting ever a degree, but picking up courses at Hope and at State and at U of M.

DR: What kind of education did you have in the Netherlands?

AB: I had the elementary school, which was up to seventh grade. That was it. Then I was thirteen years old. Just a few years ago, I was hungry for more, so I went to community education here and took more classes, where I got my G.E.D. They said you can go to most colleges with that, which I didn't do, but it's just a good feeling of having accomplished that, especially the American history I was very interested in, and social studies. It is a good feeling, and you gain a lot of confidence in doing it.

DR: Do you think you may eventually go on and take some classes at different colleges?

AB: Maybe. But as of now, it's sort of on the back burner. I've looked into other things, of joining groups in town here, like the women's literary club and certain things in church. But I noticed when we went to Providence Christian Reformed Church, that I liked to do some writing for the monthly paper about the Bible study group we had. I enjoyed it. Then I thought I might like to do some more writing, and that's why I went to the community education and they said, "Wouldn't you like to get your high school diploma?" Well, that would've taken a couple more years, so I stopped after two years. But it's just a good feeling and maybe I will do more.

DR: Was it difficult at first to make yourself do this, or did it come naturally?

AB: No, wasn't too difficult. I was then sixty years old, and I felt myself as an older woman sitting with a lot of younger, but there were some older ones. There were some of the younger ones who had to get a high school diploma in order to find a job. They would complain, "I'm not coming back tomorrow." I would say, "Don't you dare stay away." We had fun too. I enjoyed most of the subjects. My math was the last test I took and it came a little harder. I still kept a lot of papers and I may just go through those once more, and keep it fresh. I may do more writing, yes, when I get older. Neal is in the meantime mayor, and we do a lot of things together, a lot of events that we attend together. So the challenge was there, which I think was preparing me for going out and doing things on my own.

NB: I had a trade school education. After grade school, at that time, we had to take either the administrative direction or more industrial, so I went in there for cabinet-making. That was my background and I have built on that trade school education. I built my career on that, although I never was so enchanted with furniture. I just made a go, and eventually the redeeming thing was that I ended up in supervision, and that was something which I really enjoyed--taking all the resources and make all those resources work together. To build on that education, I did a lot of study in the Netherlands in the evenings. And I did take a lot of courses. I went wherever I needed to go, either Grand Valley or Hope or whatever courses were available that I needed to advance my management background education.

AB: And you had your high school diploma.

NB: Yes, I went back and got my high school diploma, too, in addition to what I had in the Netherlands. It was fun--a lot of excitement in our lives. We have done a lot of good things, and I am admiring my wife. When you are married, you have to adapt yourselves to one another, and I always felt that I probably was a hard guy to adapt to, and my wife really did a yeoman's job in keeping the family together and keeping the balance in the house. Something that she didn't one-hundred percent plan was to immigrate. I don't think she ever had that as a goal in her life; however, we together work these things out and that we can thank the Lord for the wonderful things He has done in our lives, because it has been great so far. It has been exciting, and it still is exciting, and we do it all together.

AB: Here, too, there were challenges. My mother would have liked to keep me close to her. She had her reasons I guess, and I was the youngest. But that was not very good for me. I always wanted to pull away. That's why it wasn't so hard for me, to go with my husband, even as far as he wanted to go. Neal challenged me, and sometimes it didn't come easy, because, a good mother I had, but one that didn't really encourage me to do the thing that I wanted to do and let me chose. It was always, "Well I don't know, could you do that? I don't think you can do that." Even when we left, she said, "I think you'll want to come back. Maybe you'll want to come back on you knees," she said one day. No, Neal challenged me to come along and try this. It wasn't always easy on me, but looking back, yes. We're talking about writing more, and our children have asked

us to write our memoirs. We both have started doing that.

NB: Nobody wants to read them.

AB: Our children want to.

NB: My summary is, in retrospect, looking over those thirty-five years, they have been, in all our struggles, and with the education of our children, and with careers, and with all the public interest, and our spiritual life, I think that they've been very rich, and I thank God for that. When I look and compare to some of my brothers and brother-in-laws and sister-in-laws in the Netherlands, I must say that their struggles, even though they didn't emigrate, have been greater, because the controversy that a change in lifestyle in Europe brought about have put them under considerable stress. I think more stress than this whole emigration process was on us, and that was considerable, too. I see how they're divided in their families and the grief they have about their children. The second thing is, whether they should have it, I'm not a judge of that, but they do have the grief. So, in our life, it is a struggle, and I really think, I am very grateful that we came this far in our emigration. I have to say, that I have watched lots of immigrants, because I was a supervisor and then manager, and not everybody has a happy experience. Not everybody is as grateful. Some people have very difficult times; they should have never changed.

AB: There was a lack of accepting the difference, accepting this country. I think we really plunged into it. We didn't really know what we were in for; the future wasn't at all sure when we came here, but I think, looking back, we did the right thing.

DR: What do you think is probably the single most important ingredient to your success here?

AB: To me, for certain, it is giving of yourself. It happened already in the church we joined, that a couple coming from the Netherlands said, we are going to change churches because here they hardly talk to you, and she wasn't happy at all. Well, later on I talked to her again in the church that they had joined then, and she was again not happy at all. I could see that their whole family just had not accepted at all and given of themselves, and that's the main ingredient.

NB: I think you are right. Giving yourself unconditional, and that doesn't mean that you shouldn't have your own agenda. I always have an agenda. It's terrible, but I do. But that doesn't mean that you have to have that total agenda always completed. There are other people that have agendas, too, and we have to work together on our agendas. She has an agenda, I have one, you have one, and we have to work on that. Your happiness doesn't depend on take all, but on marrying all these various people's goals and agendas. That's in politics, too. You say, I want to achieve this, but you're there with nine people, so we've got to be there together and work on each other's agendas, that we have a good agenda for the community of Holland. If it is take all, you lose. Our faith, our trust in God, and God's grace to us. Life is a gift. He has given it to us. If you see that life is a gift, that I can't say, I'm entitled to a three-hundred and fifty-thousand twelve-room house. Life is a gift. If it is going to be a small house, that's a gift. If it is a big

house, life is a gift. Talents are a gift. We have received it for nothing. I think if that's the basis upon which you operate, your desire to take is less. One of the problems in the world is that everybody is on the take, and the quality of our life is not on the take, it's on the give. Am I preaching?

AB: Sounds like a good sermon to me.

NB: Well, you're talking about your basic life's philosophy, and if you ask that, I will give it to you.

AB: Now, as immigrants, if you adopt your chosen country and not criticize all the time, and that's what I heard that first year in Grand Rapids. That was not our philosophy, and so that's why I was unhappy there. I had never heard of Holland, Michigan, until we came to live in Holland, Michigan.

NB: I think we probably could have made it wherever we went.

AB: I'm sure we could have--Canada, or New Zeeland--but this is it and we are happy. Our children are happy. I think a lot of immigrants lack the giving, and a lot of them just like to sit in a cluster and be with their own people. We still like to be friends with Dutch people, but we honestly don't come in contact with them too much.

NB: We had a friend over a couple days ago and we hadn't seen each other for twenty years, and we reviewed our whole history. That was great. He works at Dow Chemical, he's a chemical engineer, he's just a great guy, a wonderful person, and his wife, too, what a wonderful family they have here. He really made his contributions to Dow Chemical. That's great to make contributions, and that's what make him great, too. You never hear him moan about anything.

He's just always giving and on the go.

DR: What sort of contributions would you say that you've made to the Holland community?

AB: I hope they will say that we have made some difference.

NB: I would like to have other people be the judge of that.

AB: We would like to make the difference for the good.

NB: We have tried to give what we have. What we have received, we have tried to give. What that is, the extent of that, let other people judge that.

DR: What kind of things have you attempted to give to the Holland community?

AB: I also hope that in our children they will see in this community what the parents have contributed. That's our hope and prayer, that they will go and serve this community. And it looks like they have started.

NB: I always think that it has to come from somewhere down deep. Let's say, at Baker Furniture, to have people participate in the process--whether he's a sweeper, or whether he's a top dog--have everybody participate according to his gifts. Contribute to what we are trying to do, which at Baker was making a beautiful piece of furniture. That's been always something that has driven me. Have people work together for what they're doing. And in the community, too, the more people we can get involved. I appointed two women to the planning commission, and somebody got riled up about that. I had never heard anybody vote against the recommendation of the mayor. That meeting was the first time that I heard somebody vote

against it. So have people that want to serve involved in service, regardless of sex, and of ethnic or racial background, but that have the gifts, and see that community operate. What drives me is build a community and involve everyone that wants to be involved. The theological basis, if you want one, is this--the prophet Micah has said, what does the Lord require of you, that you seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God, and that's kind of the bottom line, what I'd like to see as my contribution to the community.

DR: I don't have any more questions. Is there anything that you haven't said that you would want to say?

NB: Well, thanks for coming. I's been fun, reviewing our life without thinking about it a lot beforehand--unrehearsed.

AB: And be honest about it.

[Brief Conversation]

DR: Thank-you. This has been a really good first interview for me.

END OF FORMAL INTERVIEW

[Formal interview followed by brief conversation, excerpts of which follow]

NB: We've done it before [the interviewing process], so I think that helps a little bit, putting you at ease. It's not that big a deal, if you are comfortable with it. What bothers me for instance about the situation in Holland is this, that these black people are so uncomfortable about us. They are uncomfortable, and say, they're following me. I would like to see everybody's comfort level up there, that you can sit down and discuss things. And about the

interview, we have a comfortable situation, so that you can say what you think, and you don't mind asking the questions. I think that's the key of success, to be comfortable.

DR: And the more you're exposed to something, the more comfortable you get with it.

AB: And also, I think, when you feel uncomfortable and feel that people are after you, you tend to strike out, and that's where the problem comes from. They strike out in the hurt they feel, and that's a problem.

DR: Then that striking out is a lot of times seen as something different, as more aggression rather than. . .

AB: It is a pain on their side, and we don't understand that pain. That's difficult.

NB: To share is very important, to be able to share with one another--difficult things, good things--and to share your life with somebody. If you are happy with it, there's not a nicer thing that you can do.

AB: As an immigrant couple thirty-five years ago, yes, we are still in awe at this time, as to how we came this far. We have seen, of course, a terrific leading in our lives, but it's still an awesome thing to us to have gone that far, with Neal as mayor, and I do my part. The more we do, the more confident we become. [To Donna:] It will happen to you, too. After this one, maybe it's not so hard anymore.

NB: Really, basic to our life, is the fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom. That has been basic to our lives, the fear of the Lord, not in a fearful way, but we respect God as being the creator,

the maker of heaven and earth. He is really in command. He decides what happens to us. We are his creatures. I think a lot of times, people forget that they have not created themselves; they are dependent creatures. I think once we forget that, we are going to get all kinds of big ideas. Humility, what Micah said, live humbly with your God, I think that's very basic to life, basic to your happiness, too. This was not intended to be an evangelistic sermon [laughter]. It's the revelation of our own basic thinking.

[Conversation]

AB: It is so funny, just a little incident comes to me when we were living in Grand Rapids the first week. A couple ladies of our church asked after the service, "Do you want to come to our picnic?" I thought, I can't, I don't speak like they do, and converse. They said to me, "You come," and I was just so nervous. But I went there and those ladies were all just great. So, you feel very small, but step by step it becomes a great experience. The thing is never to sit back and say, I'm going crawl in my shell and let the other one do it. I've been tempted to do that in the past. It doesn't work that way.

NB: I worked there at Bergs Brothers, and they were very generous, because my brother said, this guy has background in the furniture industry, he can be helpful to you. They took me every month to a different department. That was great, and I learned a lot, how they make furniture in America. I knew how they did it in the Netherlands, in Germany, I'd been all around Europe. I started

there in August, and in July of the next year, I didn't get anywhere. I was kind of stuck, and I said, hey, I'm stuck here. So I said I'm going to apply for another job somewhere, and there was a blind ad in the Grand Rapids Press, Baker Furniture in Holland, good company, didn't pay a lot. I was the only applicant, because they did not train people in this country for those positions. Everybody would go to college and this humble product engineer in the furniture industry were not available at that point. So I rolled into that job. Then as aggressive as I was, well, not aggressive, I hope that I was, whether it was bad, I wanted to advance. Then they bought Grand Rapids Chair Company, and the assistant superintendent went to that place, and I was looking for the that assistant superintendent work, and I got that, so I moved along pretty nice. It was financially very helpful. We never got rich; our idea was not to get rich. At least to pay the bills. It all worked pretty well.

AB: You had one supervisor.

NB: Oh yes, Bill Merriam. He was a pretty good guy.

AB: Do you know what he said once, and I'll never forget it, he saw what you had in you and he was always working to get you hired, and he mentioned once, that, "I raised hell for you," he said once, and that was true.

NB: Anyway, Bill was a good guy, but Bill had emphysema, and I more and more took his place. So there's something to it, and I don't know how that worked, being at the right time at the right place? And I always seemed to have been at the right time at the right place.

With a combination of just saying, hey, I need it, use me, that make this thing click. We did do a lot of hard work, and my wife gets a lot of credit, because I worked late sometimes--six o'clock, six-thirty before I was home. She had to take care of those kids, feed them. And they had their sports, their basketball, we always followed them wherever they went.

AB: You're parents were here and they said, you're just like a taxi-driver--the game here, the blueberry patch there.

NB: And the disappointment, trying out for cheerleader and not getting it. You suffer with your kids.

AB: I was going to say that we love our children and grandchildren--we have eleven grandchildren now.