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## Den Uyl, Richard S Oral History Interview: Longtime Residents of Macatawa Park

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Interview With Richard S.

Den Uyl

Conducted July 10, 1991

by Joseph A. Kuiper

Hope College Oral History Project, 1991

Subject: Macatawa Park

Joe- Can I have your name and your current address please?

Dick- My name is Richard S. Den Uyl, 662 South Shore Drive,  
Holland.

Joe- What years do you recall being at Macatawa?

Dick- Well, I was born in 1929 and my parents tell me I was there  
that spring so I was there shortly after I was born.  
My memories go back, probably to the mid-thirties I  
would say, as a child.

Joe- At that time, were you at Macatawa as a summer resident?

Dick- We used to rent cottages. My parents are both from Holland  
originally and they lived most of their life in  
Detroit, but always came back in the summers to  
Macatawa. So each year we would rent a cottage,  
sometimes we'd get lucky and get one for three or four  
years in a row, and then there were summers that we had  
to switch into whatever was available.

Joe- Where was your permanent home at that time?

Dick- Well both my mother and father were born in Holland, they  
both lived on fifteenth street. And after World War  
One they moved to Detroit and they lived there their  
entire life, but, you know, still coming back to  
Macatawa every summer.

Joe- When you came to Macatawa in the summertime, by what means  
did you travel?

Dick- Well we usually packed up right after school was out and  
drove all the way over, back then it was about an eight

hour drive, and then of course we had the car here all summer. In later years my dad used to fly up with their company plane on weekends. But generally speaking for all those years we made one trip over in the spring and one trip back after Labor Day.

Joe- While at Macatawa, where did you reside?

Dick- We lived in a number of cottages, most all of them were right along the lakefront. The one that is farthest north, which would be the closest one to where Mr. Van Andel's cottage is, at that time it was called the Habbercorn Cottage. We lived there. We lived in the Foster Cottage, which was further south. And finally, I think it was in 1941 we bought a cottage. It was called the Green Gables, and it was on Lakeside, which is the road that goes along the Lake Michigan shoreline. My father changed the name to the Owls' Nest because our name in Dutch means "the owl." And we had that cottage until my mother died years later.

Joe- How would you describe Macatawa at the furthest point back in your memory?

Dick- Well, as a kid I remember the old hotel was kind of the focal point. They used to have something going on every night, amateur shows, movies, lots of bingo games. On Saturday night there used to be a dance, and even kids could come. I remember a lot about the old hotel. I've always played tennis since I was very

young. I started playing tennis on the tennis courts that are at Fern Park. In the early thirties there was just one court, now there are five. Water skiing was big, and I think in 1945 they had the first world championship tournament. But prior to that time there was quite a bit of water skiing going on for a few years. And the soda fountain was the other focal point. The soda fountain was right near the hotel and you looked right down on the t-dock, which was where Point West is now. But there was a huge t-dock down there where the ferries used to land; we used to water ski right off of there. And you could sit up there in the soda fountain and look right down the lake. Those were great times. We also had a softball team that goes back long before I was born, perhaps back to 1910 or so, where every summer we would play Castle Park, and there were years when we played Waukazoo, and in later years we even played some of the teams in the industrial league. But that's something that ended maybe ten years ago, but went on for, you know, perhaps fifty or sixty years. So those are kind of some of the old memories.

Joe- What are your memories of the water ski championships that were held at Macatawa?

Dick- Well there were two. They had them two years in a row, in 1945 and 1946, and then the lake got too small as the

sport grew. We had a midwest, or a regional championship, or tournament, rather, a few years later and that's the last time it ever came into Macatawa. I remember in 1945 they had the Dutch Olympic swimmers and divers come over, and there was a lot of other entertainment. The Grand Rapids Chamber, I think, was the one that pulled that together, along with people like Chuck Sligh from Holland who was a very active skier.

Joe- What sort of memories do you have of Macatawa as a child?

Dick- Well as a little kid, since we lived right on the beach, you know say up until the time I was probably eight or ten years old, we spent a lot of time just playing on the beach. Right now the beach is very large and it was large back then, but of course we've had years in between where there wasn't a lot of beach, but we played capture the flag practically every night before it got dark, and it was not uncommon to go swimming three or four times. There was very little boat traffic back in those days, in fact in the forties and particularly in the fifties we could ski anywhere because there were no no-wake zones. We used to ski right out the channel, all the way down Lake Michigan to Saugatuck, ski all the way down through the Kalamazoo River and then jump off wherever we could down there. But of course you can't do that nowadays.

Joe- Do any particular people stand out in you mind when you think back on Macatawa?

Dick- We were very close with a lot of the people, particularly the ones that lived right on the lake front. There was a Mrs. Ellis, who was a good friend of my mother's. I think she had the second cottage away from the channel. The Bradfords had a cottage there for many years, in fact they still have a cottage, and that's part of the Bradford Paper Company which is still in existence here. In fact Jud Bradford was one of my good friends and his brother Bill. The Foster Cottage, they were good friends of the family. The Sorlings, the Martindales, the Warners, and it seemed like we played with everybody from the channel up towards what we call Interlake Walk, and then of course we had other friends that lived up in the hills. But as a small kid it was mostly all the beach activity on Lake Michigan.

Joe- I understand your family had a unique connection with the Macatawa Hotel.

Dick- Yes, the hotel was closed for quite a few years. In the thirties I think for a while and then it was reopened by Georgie Miller who had inherited Macatawa from her uncle Swan Miller. We, I think it was 1943 and 1944, we were not able to get a cottage so when my family came up we stayed in the hotel for a little while. And

in 1945 my father, the hotel had closed down, I think in the early forties or something, my father put a group of cottagers together and formed a Michigan partnership, and in 1945 they bought the Hotel Macatawa; my father retained controlling interest in it. And so they just threw out all the furniture, fixed everything up, put new furniture in, and the hotel was opened in the summer of 1945. And then he got a manager, a fellow named Joe Bachunas, a Lithuanian who had several resorts, mostly in Michigan, but he also had one in Tennessee. And Joe was the general manager and then he put a resident manager in the hotel; except the first year we were open, my father hired a manager, and then we lost him after the first summer, so starting in 1946 was when Joe Bachunas came in, we became one of the Joe Bachunas' resorts, and he had one in Grand Haven called Prospect Point, and he had another one down near St. Joe, and then he had Blaney Park in the upper peninsula, another one in Tennessee. He put a resident manager at Hotel Macatawa whose name was John Urban, and I started working there as a kid probably in '46-'47 when I was in between high school and college. Our family operated the hotel for ten years through the summer of '55, and that last summer I managed the hotel. John Urban, our manager had gone into business for himself in New York, so I



managed it for the last year. And we had a particularly good summer that year; the weather was good and then after we closed the State Fire Marshall came in, this would have been in the fall of '55, and we were just making plans for the next season, we were going to start carpeting some rooms and everything, and he condemned the building. Basically he told us that we'd have to spend what amounted to about seventy-five thousand dollars to redo the fire escapes and put in other fire prevention things. Well, back then seventy-five thousand dollars was like seven and a half million, so we really had no alternative but to tear everything down. And then of course after that, nothing was there for ten years.

Joe- What are your memories of the hotel?

Dick- Well the hotel was a beautiful building, it was old, it really was a firetrap - fortunately we never had a problem with that. Then there were other buildings, right across the walk there was a large dining room and kitchen. That dining room seated about three hundred people. The staff there was usually anywhere between seventy-five and a hundred persons; they all lived right on the grounds. There was a dormitory there where the boys were on the first floor, we called that the cooley-den because it was so unhealthy down there - it was cold and damp and everything, they were always

getting bad coughs. The girls lived up on the second floor. Then there was, next to that was another building that some years would be a bowling alley and other years it would be a grocery store. The Central Park Grocery I think operated it for a couple of years. Then there was another building called the soda fountain, and there was a string of stores - there was a beauty parlor, the post office was there, Martha had a gift shop, she also had one in Saugatuck, she was one of the cottagers there. So those were the buildings that were there at the time.

Joe- What was it like inside the hotel?

Dick- The hotel of course it was all wood. On the first floor there was a very attractive lobby with a fire place, circular front desk and then there was a huge, large ballroom right off the lobby which probably could seat maybe a couple hundred people theater style. There were just a few rooms on the first floor, and then there were three other floors. It looked like, the building was actually six stories high, but there were only four floors. And it was strictly seasonal, I mean once it got to be the middle of September we had to shut down, and we generally opened the first part of May, just before Tulip Time. So it was about a four month operation. And I remember we used to take in about a hundred thousand dollars a year, total revenue,

which amounted to about ten thousand dollars a week. Our fire insurance was ten thousand dollars, so that tells you something that, you know, one tenth of the money we took in had to go to fire insurance. And our rates were extremely low. There were some rooms that had no bathrooms, you had to go down the hall to the bathroom. The rate on a room like that during the first few years was under nine dollars per person including three meals - they got three meals a day which were very, very good, plus at midnight the guests got to raid the walk-in refrigerators in the kitchen and get ice cream. They could also make their own sandwiches. So they really got four meals, plus all the activities. The highest room, I remember, I think even in the later years, was fourteen dollars per person, so that would be twenty-eight dollars for two people in the room - that would be with a private bath and again including all the meals and activities.

Joe- Did the Macatawa Hotel play an important role in the social atmosphere of Macatawa Park?

Dick- It really did! I think much more so than Point West in later years, because it was more focused toward the cottagers - they felt always very welcome to come into the hotel and many of their friends stayed there. Back then there were virtually no hotels to put people up in. There were, you know, some small resorts. So the

cottagers had more tendency to use the Hotel Macatawa and Castle Park and the old Waukazoo Inn for that sort of thing. They were well integrated with the hotel guests.

Joe- Do you recall any prominent people ever staying at the hotel?

Dick- Not really. I actually worked at the front desk for four or five years and then I did some accounting, and the last year I managed it. I can't think of anybody that I know. We had some dignitaries from the Netherlands that came in a couple times, I just can't remember who they are. A lot of people would come and go and we wouldn't even know if they were dignitaries because they like the privacy anyway.

Joe- What was the relationship between the hotel and the cottagers?

Dick- Overall, I would say it was very good. There has always been a little strain between whomever owns the hotel (even through the Point West days) and the cottagers, because the cottagers are concerned about protecting their rights for the roads, the walks, the parking, and the beach. Those things are very dear to them and they obviously bought their property based on the idea that they would always have those things, and whenever something starts

turning the other way - and also the tennis courts - they get pretty well fired up. I don't want to say it was an adversarial relationship because I think, generally speaking, through the years, until recently, it has been a very pleasant relationship.

Joe- What do you remember most about the hotel?

Dick- I think the appearance of the hotel from the outside.

Since it was built in 1896, it was very similar to many other hotels around the country of that era. I don't want to say it looks like the Grand Hotel on Mackinaw Island, but it kind of had that feel on a smaller basis. A very majestic look. There were porches that went entirely around the first and the second floor. You know, they just don't build buildings, or even homes, like that anymore. There were rocking chairs that spanned both of those porches all the way around, and people would just sit there and rock away. And we had shuffle-board courts out in the back, which were always busy, and the horseshoes. Just seeing all of the people sitting around on those porches, I think, from that exterior view was really phenomenal.

Joe- Did you spend much time around the cottages in later years?

Dick- We had a cottage which we sold around 1970, and then my family had a cottage there for a few years. In later years, my brother has continued to have a cottage, in

fact he has two cottages there, until this day. But even since I moved to town I have spent a lot of time out there. I was one of the owners of Point West, so I was there for over twenty years. We sold Point West in 1981, but I stayed on five more years, so I've been pretty steadily there through 1986, and then I still get out there quite a bit. In fact eventually I'd like go back in and get another cottage.

Joe- What do you recall about the social atmosphere of the cottages?

Dick- There was a lot of, you know, real friendships that were created, because it's kind of like when you're a kid going to camp - you don't go anywhere, you stay there for two months, or in this case more like three months. Those people became very, very close to one another, so as a consequence people were visiting back and forth. I can recall eating at home very seldom. We were usually eating over at somebody else's house, or somebody else was eating at our house. So a lot of back and forth. The hotel served as somewhat of a mixing area where people would meet. But there were other activities. We had tennis tournaments; they used to have ping pong tournaments in the hotel ballroom; shuffle board tournaments; softball was big, even though there weren't that many people playing there were always maybe, sometimes fifty, sometimes seventy

people, attending those games. So it was a fairly tight knit community. I think people went to Holland occasionally, but they spent most of their time just out at Macatawa.

Joe- You mentioned the beach a little earlier. As far as the resort atmosphere of Macatawa is concerned, what sort of role did the beach play?

Dick- Well I think the beach was, in many ways, the focal point, because, like my father used to say, he'd traveled all over the world and that is absolutely the finest sandy beach anywhere and of course that would apply to the state park as well. I guess as a general statement he was saying that about the west-Michigan beaches, there isn't anything better than them, as long as they don't get too small. There were times when the water level was high. In 1929 when I was born, my parents rented a cottage right near, it's the cottage that Ray Herrick had when he passed away. And the water was actually slashing at the sidewalk there, that's one extreme. Now here in 1991 we have probably the largest beach that has ever been there, so there are extremes. Under that sand now are old sea-walls and all kinds of rubble that was put down to hold it back. When the beach got real small, it made the cottagers even closer; I mean they had to get together and raise money and figure out how to keep the high waters from knocking the cottages down.

Joe- Has such beach erosion been a consistent problem throughout the years?

Dick- Yes, but, of course over the last eight or ten years with the Corps of Engineers feeding the beach, and I think we've had less rainfall and there've been other factors that have made it less of a problem. Unfortunately, years ago it took its toll on the dunes that came right down into the water, and we will never get those back. But I don't think it will ever be a problem in the future, because through engineering they've come out with a lot of unique ideas, not just sandbags, but all kinds of ways to keep the water back.

Joe- Speaking of the beach, I understand there were quite a few cottages along the lakefront, and you mentioned that most of the cottages you stayed in were along the lakefront. What was it like along the lakefront as you recall?

Dick- Well for one thing it was very private, because you had a nice view of the beach and you could walk out to the beach easily, and the cottages were generally nestled against a dune so there wasn't anybody behind you. But when you go up the walks, like Bluebell Court which comes up from Lakeside along the beach, then the cottages are pretty close to one another, and away from the lake, when you go down the walks like Grove Walk, Interlake Walk, Michigan Walk, the cottages are very



tight there. Some people like that, other people prefer to be up in the hills; they've got a couple of, well actually really three or four areas up there in the Macatawa Hills. Some people prefer that, even though it's difficult to get up and down. Myself, I think the prime location, and it's evidenced by the valuations, is to be right on the beach, or be up on a hill with a nice view of the beach - and particularly now since the beach is quite large, you have a little more privacy.

Joe- Do you recall any big events, annual celebrations such as the Fourth of July or others?

Dick- There were always fireworks and everything - I think the yacht club did a lot of that on the Fourth of July. Fourth of July has always been a big day. When we built Point West back in 1964, my wife Patti put together a Fourth of July celebration - we did this for about three or four years, and it was huge - we had boat races, all kinds of games, it was kind of a carnival atmosphere. The thing got so big that people were coming from all over western Michigan and we had to discontinue it because it just got out of hand. Everybody had a great time, but then we ended up cleaning up the mess, you know, the next two days after that. The other thing that's real big in that area is the sailing out of the yacht club. Many of us that

lived in Macatawa, would race every Saturday and Sunday, and that was a really big thing, and we spent a lot of time, water skiing as well. And the yacht club was, many, many people from Macatawa and of course Castle Park belonged to the yacht club. That was a nice mixer because we got to meet kids from Castle Park, and even a lot of people from town, through the sailing and yacht club connection.

Joe- Were you at Macatawa Park during the depression?

Dick- Well of course I was, you know, only three or four years then. I've been at Macatawa every summer of my life at least for some time, except for one year when I was in the army, that was during the Korean War, otherwise I've been there every summer.

Joe- You mentioned that at one point the Macatawa Hotel was closed. Do you recall any periods of decline at Macatawa Park?

Dick- Well the hotel I think was closed, I'm not sure of the exact years, I want to say that in the later thirties or early forties. I don't think that had anything to do with the war, I think it was just an economic factor. The owner who was Georgie Miller at the time had inherited it from her uncle. His name was Swan Miller, who probably just didn't have the money to get it into the kind of shape that where people could come in and be comfortable.

Joe- The Macatawa Hotel was torn down in 1956, and I understand you were the manager of the hotel at that time. What lead to the decision to raze the hotel?

Dick- Well I think the State Fire Marshall's office was under instructions obviously to really tighten up, because there were a lot of buildings out there that were fire traps. The Waukazoo Inn was another example.

Everybody thinks the Hotel Macatawa burned down, but it really didn't burn down. We had it torn down. And I'm not sure what happened to the Waukazoo Inn, but a few years later, I was living in Arizona at the time, that went down, I assume that it was just torn down also.

Along with many other buildings around the state and I'm sure around the country. They just could no longer meet the code. We were given an opportunity to continue by making structural alterations, putting in new sprinklers and that sort of thing, but the problem is that when you're a seasonal operation you're open for basically ten weeks, of which eight are really good. There's just no way to make it, you know, given the fire insurance and all the other problems - the staffing. And so the only ones that have really made it are ones that have been totally restored, like the Grand Hotel, and some of the New England resorts. But it's certainly a dying breed, there's no question about it.

Joe- What were your feelings on the hotel's destruction?

Dick- I felt very badly. After it went down, I stuck around while it was taken down, and I got a job at a resort in Arizona, but before I left we made an attempt to get the township board to allow us to build a new hotel. We had plans to build a hundred room hotel, but in order to do that we needed to be open year round, and we needed to develop group business, and it was really a necessity that we have a liquor license to do that. So we went in with some plans and tried to get a liquor license and were turned down so nothing really happened. And as I said earlier, the property just sat there for ten years, and finally we came back and built Point West.

Joe- What was the process by which Point West came into existence?

Dick- Well I continued to be in the hotel business, I was managing a property out in Scottsdale, Arizona called Camelback Inn, but I would come back every summer. In 1963 I was back for most of the summer, and I went and talked to a couple of the gentlemen that were on the township board and they said that they felt that the time was right that if I wanted to come in and make an application for a building permit and even a liquor license. They thought it had a pretty good chance of going through. It took us a while to put some plans

together and everything, and we did go in, and there was no problem, we got the approval. And so we actually started building in '64 and opened the motel in December of '64, and then the restaurant opened in February of '65. There was just kind of a different feeling. I think they realized that if they wanted to get some really first class facilities in the area, that they were going to have to go along with the liquor issue.

Joe- Would you say that Point West adequately filled the void that was left by the Macatawa Hotel?

Dick- I think so. When we first built, we only had thirty guest rooms, then we added thirty-three more later on. They were really the only first-class rooms in the city, until the Holiday Inn was built which is now the Best Western. I think Holland desperately needed some nice hotel rooms because the city was way behind all the other competition.

Joe- Have you been down to Macatawa Park in recent years?

Dick- I get down there quite often. I play tennis down there, and I'm probably down there three or four times a week.

Joe- Does being at Macatawa bring back any special memories?

Dick- Oh yeah, you know looking back now our family wishes that we hadn't sold Point West, and I did try to get it back a few years ago but we couldn't get together on the price. But I can accept that, I would have a conflict

of interest now because I'm involved in two other hotels. There's a lot of memories back there and, like I say, I'd like to go back and have a cottage there someday.