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Boeve, William Oral History Interview: General Holland History

Don van Reken

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Oral History Interview

Interviewee: William Boeve

Interviewer: Don van Reken

Summer 1974

William E. Boeve was interviewed by Donald van Reken in the summer of 1974 and includes such subjects as his father Egbert Boeve and mother Johanna Elander Boeve; farming on their farm on 136th Avenue in Holland Township; the River Avenue bridge; taking grain to the Standard Grocery and mill; cooking on a wood cook stove; milking cows; his neighbors the Kinman family; smoking meats; attending Pine Creek School on 136th Avenue and having instruction from Hannah Roost (teacher), Phil Wade (teacher), John Brower (teacher), George Brower (teacher); interurban; train to Grand Rapids; Ottawa Furniture Company; Mr. Browning, owner of the first car in Holland; Pine Creek and sucker spearing; Central Avenue Christian Reformed Church and Dominie Van Hoeven and Dominie Roelhof Haan; harvesting grain; second wife Jenny Donze Boeve; and his third wife Teresa Knoll Boeve.

DVR: William Boeve, your name is William?

WB: Yes, my name is William E. Boeve.

DVR: William E. Boeve, and Mr. Boeve lives on 136th Avenue in Holland Township. What address is this, Mr. Boeve?

WB: 3895.

DVR: 3895.

WB: 136th Avenue

DVR: 136th Avenue. This is just north of West Ottawa High School. And Mr. Boeve, how long have you lived on this farm?

WB: Well, I've lived here for 83 years.

DVR: You've lived here 83 years. How old are you?

WB: I'm 83 now, I'll be 84 on November 1st if I may live that long.

DVR: Okay, 1974. You were born on this farm?

WB: On this same farm, yes.

DVR: And year was that that you were born?

WB: In 1890.

DVR: 1890. What was your father's name?

WB: Egbert Boeve

DVR: And what was his trade?

WB: Farming.

DVR: He was a farmer. Did he come here from the Netherlands?

WB: Yes. He came here in 1881.

DVR: Was he married or was...?

WB: Yes, he was married.

DVR: Did he have children when he came?

WB: One, one child, three years old.

DVR: And how many children did he have altogether?

WB: Well, I don't know. Quite a few, some of them died when they were real small. In those days, the medical care wasn't like it is now and something in that way that they died within a couple of weeks or something like that.

DVR: What was your mother's name?

WB: She was Johanna as you might say...Elander.

DVR: Elander, that's an unusual name.

WB: Well, there used to be quite a lot of them around here.

DVR: Is that right?

WB: Yes.

DVR: That was your brother, then, who was three years old when your parents came here?

WB: No, my sister.

DVR: That was your sister.

WB: I have no brothers.

DVR: Is she still alive?

WB: Oh, no. She died, I don't know just how long ago, but she was 82 when she died. She was 13 years older than I was, and she died quite a few years ago already.

DVR: What is your earliest memory of your home, of your father or your mother? What's the earliest thing you remember about your home with your mother and so forth?

WB: Well, I can't say too much about that; it doesn't really come into my mind so clear. I don't know what to say.

DVR: Do you recall anything about your father and your reaction to him when you were six or seven or eight?

WB: No, I really don't too much, no.

DVR: He didn't make you chop the wood or he didn't make you pick potatoes or anything?

WB: Yes, we had to pick potatoes and I had to pick pickles, which was not a nice job for a kid.

DVR: What did they do with the pickles?

WB: They went to Heinz.

DVR: They went to Heinz already, in the 1890s already.

WB: No, not in the 1890s, that's when I was born! I would say about 13 years later or 12 years later, then they went to Heinz.

DVR: Okay, yes. What about that home, that house that you lived in those first years? It's not this present house, but it was on this farm.

WB: Yes.

DVR: What was it like?

WB: Well, I don't know what to say. I know they had built a small piece to it, a room about 12 x 24 to the old house, which was here where they moved into. I took that down in 1917.

DVR: What kind of beds did they have in those days?

WB: Well, just plain beds with slats under, and in those days they had straw ticks instead of mattresses. Where they have mattresses now, they were just straw ticks at that time. You put straw in them and take it out maybe a few times a year and put new straw in.

DVR: How did they like the houses? What kind of lighting did you have?

WB: Kerosene lamp. Just a plain kerosene lamp and also kerosene lanterns when we had to go to the barn and do the work.

DVR: And then the lamp would be hanging from the ceiling?

WB: Well, some of them. The more up-to-date ones would hang from the ceiling, but the other ones were just standing on the table. There was always a little danger about it not to bump the table or try tip it over, that would catch fire. The barn had a kerosene lantern with a handle on it where you could hang it on a chain or a hook or something so that you wouldn't have too much heat touching anywhere near the wood or straw, so it wouldn't catch fire.

DVR: What kind of stock did you keep in the barn? What kind of animals?

WB: Cows, three horses to do our work with, and then we had other coops for chickens but this is the barn itself where we kept the cows, milk cows. We kept about 8-13 milk cows.

DVR: What happened to the milk? How did the milk get...

WB: Well, in those days, quite away back...see, that is not way up to well maybe 1900 you might say, at that time. At that time, my mother used to take care of the milk and they'd

go in pans and then they would let it set until the cream would come on on the milk and they would take the cream off and they would churn that into butter. Then the skim milk was fed to the hogs and to the calves.

DVR: What did your mother do with the butter? Did she sell it?

WB: She'd sell it. Go to town once a week with a wagon, and she'd have her regular customers where she'd bring the butter. And they'd order that, "we want so many pounds," and then she'd have them in stone and gallon crocks. So, they keep it washed and kept clean as we'd take our butter to town. And the eggs the same way. We had customers who would order the eggs, "we want so many dozen eggs next week," and that's the way they would take care of that.

DVR: While we're here talking, 136th Avenue seems to be quite busy. What kind of traffic was there then?

WB: Nothing, just a few farmers that lived just a little further north that would drive by. You would know everybody that would come by; you'd wave at them because they all knew who we were and we knew who they were—the few of them that come past here.

DVR: Was it a dirt road then?

WB: Sand road.

DVR: What kind of a bridge did they have across the river?

WB: Well, the steel bridge. Before my time, when I was just maybe a kid, then they had another kind of a bridge—they had two bridges at one time. The bridge that's here now, which was a steel bridge with a board floor, and a little further towards town, about where Pine Avenue turns off now, there was another bridge, also a wooden bridge. Then they had a kind of a flood _____ a lot of water, and that bridge washed out,

which would come right out front of Pine Avenue by the river would come right down in front of Pine Avenue. And then they had kind of a lawsuit about it, the county and the city, because the city said they weren't going to put that bridge back. Well, they put the other bridge in. So there was quite a trouble about it. If these two bridges couldn't carry the water, how is the one going to do it? Well, they must have maybe made the other one bigger, wider, and then the other one was closed up.

[recording stops then starts again with much softer sound]

DVR: Let's go back to the early home that you had. We talked about the lighting. What about cooking now? First of all, what kind of a stove did your mother have to cook with and what did she burn in the stove?

WB: Well, she had an ordinary cook stove, what they called a cook stove in those days. It had four holes with four covers on. The two front ones were direct over the fire, while the two back covers were from the heat that was circling around the oven at the time.

DVR: What did they burn?

WB: Wood.

DVR: Who chopped the wood?

WB: Well, my dad would make the wood in the winter of the green wood, the green trees, saw it up and split it up and pile it up in piles in the yard. Then in the summer his wood would dry up so that he could derive fuel for the winter. Then we'd put it inside of the shed, what you would call a "wood shed," where the wood was kept in where we'd haul it, take it from, into the house for burning. In the dining room, or the living room, we had a heating stove. We also burned wood in that. And then in the late evening before they'd

go to bed, they would put an extra big chunk of wood and that would kind of keep fire all night, somewhat, just to keep the worst cold out.

DVR: Now we've moved on to the subject of foods. What kind of foods did you eat in those days?

WB: Well, potatoes were our main meal at noon and also for the evening we'd have fried potatoes again. Then we'd get our flour, take wheat to the mill and get so many pounds of flour back out of the bag full of wheat, and then she'd make her bread out of that flour.

DVR: Where was the flour mill?

WB: In Holland. The Standard Grocery used to be on 7th Street at the railroad just off of River Avenue, that's where the flour mill was.

DVR: She would go there on Saturday then, along with her...?

WB: No, no, it may be anytime during the week when we took the groceries away we'd take a bag of wheat along and get flour.

DVR: What vegetables did you eat besides potatoes?

WB: Well, cabbage and carrots and something other than that, and apples and applesauce.

DVR: Turnips?

WB: Turnips, yes, I guess so. Not too much of it, we didn't have that.

DVR: What kind of meat did you eat?

WB: Well, they'd butcher a cow, and in those days, of course, there was no refrigeration of any kind. They would smoke it. And if they butcher a hog, they would fry out the pork and put it into stone jars, and they'd be poured down the sides or something like that. And then they'd pour fat over that pork to keep it covered that way, and then in the summer you'd have pork sometimes. They also used to make what they called metwurst,

and they still got the same name for it yet some places. They could keep them and smoke them and hang them in some kind of a big box or they'd hang them on sticks and some of them didn't have many _____.

DVR: Did you have a smokehouse then?

WB: Yes, we had a smokehouse.

DVR: What kind of wood was used for smoking?

WB: We generally used corn cobs. That was the best smoking stuff you could get.

DVR: Was any other food preserved? Any other kind of food that was preserved?

WB: Well, we would can food in quart cans or two-quart cans.

DVR: What did your dad raise on the farm?

WB: Well, we had grain: wheat, rye, oats, corn for the cattle; and then we'd have potatoes; we'd have maybe three, four, five acres of potatoes. In the fall of the year, we'd sell our potatoes. We had our regular customers through Holland who would buy their winter supplies. And then they'd take the sample and they could try our potatoes and then we'd go and find out how many bushels they wanted and then we'd deliver them.

DVR: What kind of clothing did you have in those days? Did you buy the clothing in the store or did your mother make it?

WB: No, we bought it mostly in the store.

DVR: What store would you buy at?

WB: Well, Lokker was quite the main clothing store in town. I think a lot of the dresses were made by my mother and the girls as they were growing up.

DVR: Did they have a sewing machine?

WB: Yes, they had a sewing machine quite early in those days. I don't know just when they got it, but they had a sewing machine. Now, first was also _____...

DVR: What about water in the house? You didn't have running water, did you?

WB: No, first we just had our outside pump on the back porch, and then you'd bring in a pail full for the evening, or two pails full, and that's the way they took care of the water supply.

DVR: Did you have a fence around your house at all, or was it all unfenced?

WB: No, all unfenced.

DVR: What other animals? Did you have dogs or cats?

WB: A few cats around, yes. We didn't have a dog, years back, later when I was a kid and growing up, yes then we had a dog.

DVR: Where was the school that you went to?

WB: Pine Creek.

DVR: How did you get there?

WB: Walk.

DVR: How many miles is that?

WB: Well, by the way of going around the road, it was just about two miles, but we'd generally cut across lots and that would save us quite a ways to walk instead of going around the road.

DVR: Was that taught in English or in Dutch?

WB: English. We had quite a few English neighbors around here at that time. This was more or less a little bit of an English neighborhood—some of them, some Dutch _____ in between. Had English neighbors right across the street with the name Kinman.

DVR: You did learn Dutch, though?

WB: Oh, yes, we learned Dutch in the home.

DVR: How many pupils do you think were in school around 1900 then, say, when you were ten years old?

WB: Well, 1900, I was ten years old, and I think we had around 90 to 100 pupils in a two-room school. Two teachers; the one teacher taught at the one end of the school and the other one at the other end. And then some years later, there was a petition put through the school so that they had the four higher grades in one room and the four lower ones in the other.

DVR: Do you remember the teachers' names?

WB: Yes, some of them. There was one lady from Holland—Miss Roost, Hannah Roost, was her name. And then we had a Mr. Wade, Phil Wade, was one of them. And then we had some Brower boys, two brothers, Browers, they were both teachers—John Brower and George Brower.

DVR: Was there a railroad in Holland when you were a boy?

WB: Yes. This railroad that's right here now was already in here when my folks came to America in 1881. This was a new railroad and the old railroad was about a mile or two over and that went by what they called _____, up north here quite a little ways. But the new one, that one went to Grand Haven.

DVR: That's the one that still goes to Grand Haven?

WB: Yes.

DVR: When did you first go to Grand Rapids? Do you remember your first trip to Grand Rapids?

WB: Well, hardly. My mother, she went to Grand Rapids quite early. She wasn't well; she had cancer, and she went to Grand Rapids to have it treated. Then they went to the train, there was no streetcar there at that time. Some years later, when I was a boy growing up a little, then they had a streetcar to Grand Rapids.

DVR: The interurban.

WB: Interurban, yes.

DVR: And you went there on the interurban then?

WB: Yes, but just when, I don't know. Growing up so soon as the way they are now, now they are thinking on their own to go almost anyplace, but in those days not.

DVR: How much traveling have you done in Michigan?

WB: Not too much of it. When we got a car and then went as far as the Straits, the Locks, what you call the Soo Locks.

DVR: Talk to me about cars. When did you see your first automobile? Do you remember that?

WB: Yes, a small automobile was standing at what was called the Ottawa Furniture Factory. It's all down now, but just a little piece of it left yet. The Ottawa Furniture Factory was taken down. There was a man by the name Browning. He had the first "horseless carriage," as they called them at that time. The first one.

DVR: What did you do for recreation when you were a boy? Did you have any games?

WB: Yes, the neighbor kids amongst each other and we'd play.

DVR: Play what?

WB: Oh, Run Sheep Run, we used to call it. I don't know, a few different games. I don't just recall too well.

DVR: Did you play baseball at all?

WB: Yes, but I wasn't a good hand at it. If choosing for a baseball team, I was the last one chosen. [laughter]

DVR: What about fishing?

WB: No, we didn't do much fishing. Right on the farm; oh, we did little fishing. In the spring we'd go spearing, pick little suckers in Pine Creek.

DVR: What church did you go to when you were a boy?

WB: Central Avenue.

DVR: Right in the city of Holland.

WB: Yes, Christian Reformed Church.

DVR: That means every Sunday you went to that church.

WB: Yes, by horse and buggy.

DVR: What was the pastor's name when you were a boy, do you remember?

WB: Well there was one Dominie Van Hoeven. I remember him. Then Dominie Haan, Roelhof Haan, when I was a boy, about twelve years old, something like that.

DVR: Did they have an organ in the church then? Was it a pump organ or a...?

WB: A pump organ.

DVR: What about parades in Holland? Do you remember ever seeing any parades in Holland?

For instance, at the time when WWI was over, was there a parade?

WB: Yes, there were parades in Holland.

DVR: Did you see any parades, political parades or circus parades?

WB: Yes, there were some that I think even had some cannons of some kind. Maybe pulled with tractors at the time or whatever it was. I don't remember too well.

DVR: When did you first vote? Do you remember voting at all?

WB: Yes, I voted as soon as I was allowed to vote. At that time, I guess you had to be 21.

DVR: You always voted here in Holland Township then?

WB: Yes. Our town hall used to be on East 8th Street, just passed where Russ' place is now, on the opposite side of the street. That is where we had to vote.

DVR: How did your dad harvest all his grain? You talked before about growing wheat and growing barley and other crops.

WB: When I was a little boy then they would cut it with what they call a scythe, and then they would trim that around, you know, they called that a cradle—it had fingers, sticks on, so the grain would stay in an upright position as they swung, and then you laid it in rows. Then it was raked up by hand and tied in bundles with the same straw—take a handful of straw and put that around it and twist it up. That was the way they made the bundles. Later we got our grain harvester, a grain binder, and then we'd cut and the bundles would come right out of that as we'd drive through the grain—cut it and had some kind of a reel on there which would throw it back onto the platform, which had a canvas running on it, and that would bring it up and it was upward canvases and then it would go down into what they called the “binding part,” where it packed up so tight that it would automatically kick over and make a bundle out of it, out of the twine.

DVR: That was all horse drawn?

WB: All horse drawn.

DVR: When did you get your first tractor?

WB: Oh, we got the first tractor that's only...we wasn't the first ones with a tractor at all...that's about, I can hardly guess at that. About maybe '40?

DVR: Oh, rather late then.

WB: Yes.

DVR: Now let's talk about your personal life a little bit maybe, Mr. Boeve.

[recording stop then restarts]

DVR: Mr. Boeve, what about your family now. You were born in 1890. When were you married?

WB: 1911.

DVR: What was your wife's maiden name? Do you remember?

WB: She was Jenny Donze, D-O-N-Z-E. She was from the Netherlands. She was a girl of 16 when she came to America, and that made me keep up my Dutch. That's why I can still talk Hollandser.

DVR: Good. Where did you live when you were first married?

WB: This same place.

DVR: With your folks.

WB: With my folks, yes.

DVR: And how long did you live with your folks then?

WB: About five, six years.

DVR: You helped your dad with the farming?

WB: Yes. We had an agreement what to get out of it while living and so on.

DVR: How many children did you have?

WB: We had eight children with my first wife. She died with pneumonia and left a baby of three months old. And then we kept our family together. The baby went to my sister and stayed there until he was just about two years, and then he came back home. And then we kept our family together for just about six years. Then my oldest boys got married,

two of them; and the girls, they would like to get rid of their housework and their house care and their home care. So then I got married. I married a lady with three children, and I had four of them home yet at the time from six to fourteen. Then we had a family of seven of them there. My second wife, she died from cancer. So our family stayed together, they all slowly on got married. And then I got married again; I got my third wife now.

DVR: You have a third wife. And her name was? What was her family name now?

WB: Her family name was Knoll, Ka-noll like you say in Dutch.

DVR: Teresa Knoll.

WB: Yes.

DVR: Where is she from?

WB: She was formally from Chicago, but she was from Holland when we got acquainted.

DVR: Oh, very interesting. Now, I would like to ask you a little bit about going to church. You say you belong to Central Avenue Church. You were baptized there?

WB: Yes.

DVR: What do you know about your baptism? Do have some facts that you remember or that you've been told?

WB: No, not that I know of. I do think that my mother said I bawled a lot when I was a little kid.

[laughter]

DVR: When you went to church, what happened to the horses? What did you do with your teams when you went to church in the summer or in the winter?

WB: Well, we had a stable at the rear end of the church—back of the church. A long stable with a door for every two horses—there's where we kept our horses. And then they wanted to change the church and they needed more room, so they took those stables all away and then they built a bigger stable farther back, back on the Dominie's lot, where the minister lot now is. That's where they built a bigger stable. And then finally the cars all came around and the stables were taken away.

DVR: Would you venture a guess as to when the stables were done away with? When were the stables eliminated?

WB: Oh...

DVR: 1920?

WB: No, later than that. I would say about in '30?

DVR: 1930. When did they build a road in front of your house? You earlier said that...

WB: The cement was put in here in '21, and they did the grading in '20 and in '21 they poured the concrete through here. This road, which at that time was called M-11, was a mile further west from this place. That was called the West Michigan Pike. That was the main road and that was a gravel road at that time. And then this road was called later, first it M-11 and then it was called 31. Then they put the new road over another mile further east from here. That's the US-31 now.

DVR: This used to be US-31 also?

WB: Yes.

DVR: You had a lot of traffic here then.

WB: Oh, yes, and only a narrow road, 18-foot wide. We thought we had something. We had a cement road right past our place, an 18-foot road. It was about five or six years ago that they widened it, three foot on each side.

DVR: Did they run a water line through here recently?

WB: Yes, that's about three years ago.

DVR: So that's about the end of the improvements that you'll see then?

WB: Yes. They are improving it now from Quincy, which is just a few lots north of here—they are adding to it now to widen that road. I think they are going to add six foot to that, the same as they did to this one, three foot on each side.

DVR: How big a farm did your father have when you were young—when you were farming together?

WB: He had eighty acres. When they came from the Netherlands in 1881, they bought the farm here with forty acres, which was all brush and woods-like. They bought it for \$400. And they bought the other forty where the building's on for \$800. That's all they put into it at that time.

DVR: How much land do you have left?

WB: I sold most of it a couple years ago, over a year ago. Now I have twenty acres left, that's all.

DVR: You sold some to West Ottawa Middle School?

WB: No.

DVR: You sold it to...

WB: To private people.

DVR: And you are left with twenty acres out of the original eighty.

WB: Yes.

[woman speaking]

DVR: Ten acres to your daughter, Mrs. Van Huis?

WB: Yes.

DVR: You've seen many neighbors come and go.

WB: Oh, yes. I'm the only one that's left out of this neighborhood of that age about, you might say. The rest of them no doubt have passed away.

DVR: Thank you very much, Mr. Boeve, for telling us this story of your family and your background. Could you give me the names of your children?

WB: My children, yes. The oldest, Ed, is in Portland, Oregon. He's spent some 62 years in _____; Ada, married to Doug Van Huis; Andy, he lives on Lakeshore Drive; Julia, she lives in Allendale; Betty, she lives in Grand Rapids; and Patty, my other daughter, she lives in Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin; and Cora, she lives in... _____, I got Betty... and Patty should have been in a different place, that's alright. Cora lives in Old Orchard Road, right here in Holland; and Tom lives on South Shore Drive, he's right here in Holland.

DVR: Eight children then, and they are all alive?

WB: Yes.

DVR: That's a wonderful thing.

WB: Yes.

DVR: Thank you again, Mr. Boeve.

[end of interview]

Oral History Interview

Re: 136th Avenue

Interviewee: William Boeve

Interviewer: Don van Reken

[date unknown]

Abstract: William Boeve, River Avenue bridges

DVR: While we're here talking, 136th Avenue seems to be quite busy. What kind of traffic was there then?

WB: Nothing, just a few farmers that lived a little further north that would drive by. You would know everybody that would come by, you'd wave at them because they all knew who we were and we knew who they were—the few of them that come past here.

DVR: Was it a dirt road then?

WB: Sand.

DVR: Sand.

WB: Sand road.

DVR: What kind of a bridge did they have across the river?

WB: Well, the steel bridge. Before my time, when I was just maybe a kid, then they had another kind of a bridge—they had two bridges at one time. The bridge that's here now, which was a steel bridge with a board floor—yes, a board floor—and a little further towards town, about where Pine Avenue turns off now, there was another bridge, also a wooden bridge. Then they had a kind of a flood _____, that is a lot of water, and then that bridge washed out, which would come out front of Pine Avenue by the river would come right down in front of Pine Avenue.

[End of interview]