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de Blecourt, Jaap Oral History Interview: Dutch Immigrants who Emigrated to the United States after WW II

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Interview with
Jaap de Blecourt

Conducted June 9, 1992
by Donna M. Rottier

1992 Summer Oral History Project
Subject: Post WWII Dutch Immigrants to Holland, Michigan

DR: Could you please state your full name?

JD: My name is Jacob R. de Blecourt.

DR: Could you also state your current address?

JD: 566 Lawndale Court.

DR: And your date of birth?

JD: [date removed], 1930.

DR: On what date did you emigrate from the Netherlands?

JD: I came on the fourth of February, 1958.

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

JD: From the province of Groningen.

DR: What type of town did you come from?

JD: It was a small town about twelve kilometers north of the city of Groningen, called Garnwerd.

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

JD: Well, for a number of years we were in correspondence with an aunt of my mother's. My great aunt was the oldest sister of my grandfather, and she emigrated at the age of nineteen or twenty to Chicago. When my mother was born six months later, she was named after her father's older sister. Through the years, correspondence was kept up with the great uncle and aunt, and when my mother really became twelve or thirteen years old, she started her own correspondence with her aunt. I do remember her saying that even when she was out of a family of five girls, her aunt sent her a great big sleeping doll. It was such a big thing at that time. When my mother got engaged and later married and had children, the

correspondence were kept. So there was always a kind of a longing coming to America, anyway, from my part. I went on a very early age into horticulture. I started to work in my summer vacations already in greenhouses nearby, where I was born and raised. Later on I went to high school and to an elementary horticulture college, graduated and then did my entrance exam to go into college for floriculture. Graduated in 1952 from the college in Alsmeer, then did an entrance exam in the college in Boskoop for arboriculture. I graduated from there in 1953, also with a bachelor's degree in horticulture and landscaping designing. After graduation, we were told that when you are not ready to go into your father's business or start working for a park department, why don't you try to get as much practical experience as possible. Therefore, I worked for a year in England, then went to Versailles in France, worked there during the day and followed evening classes. Then I knew that I was going to emigrate, following a former neighbor. The former neighbor sponsored me. I knew that it would take another two years before the papers would be ready, so I decided to go and work in Switzerland at a big landscaping firm to get more experience. And that was also the country what paid the most per hour. So I worked there for two years, and then, when my papers came ready, I went home for a visit and left in a month's time, and came in February of 1958. Just before I left, a letter had come to the emigration office. They called me to look the letter over. It turned out to be that the owner of Grand Hotel was looking for someone to be in charge of his gardens and grounds on Mackinac Island. So I right away sent all

the copies of my certificates to the owner of Grand Hotel. He wrote me back to a distant cousin who was living in Connecticut who came to pick me up from the boat, and there was a letter waiting, saying, first, go see my manager in his office in Chicago and make arrangements with him. I was hired by Grand Hotel and worked for Grand Hotel from 1958 to 1964. I did get to know my wife in 1958, who was working as a student away from college in the summer. So in 1958 while I got to know her better, we got engaged in 1959 and married in 1960. In 1963, our oldest daughter was born, terribly allergic to horses. There was no other choice, we had to move. A maintenance man from Grand Hotel who came from Grand Rapids read about it in the paper that the city of Holland wanted to develop a seventeenth century Dutch rural landscape, with a focal point, a windmill from the Netherlands. So I applied to get into the park department here in Holland since we had to make the move for the child's, for Lily's sake. That was in May of 1964. I came in June for an interview, was hired in about a month's time, and then after the season ended at Grand Hotel, because I wanted to stay there for the summer, for Grand Hotel's sake. I started to work here on October 5, 1964, and have been here ever since.

DR: Was your wife also Dutch?

JD: No. My wife was born and raised in a small town by the name of Ashley twenty miles north of Lansing. She was from her grandparents' mother's side, Czechoslovakian and German, and from her father's side they were English, by the name of Webster. But they already came with the early immigrants a couple hundred years

ago or so.

DR: What were your first impressions of the United States?

JD: When I arrived by boat, it was terrible foggy. It was a great big hall full of people who were all going criss-cross about one another. I do recall having a physical while my cousin and her husband and their two children were waiting and waiting. After that, I went to stay with them for a week. That was very nice, in Hartford, Connecticut, where they were living. They were pretty well off. They introduced me to many of their friends. Some parties were planned. The friends I visited at that time were also people who sent us clothes, right after the Second World War. My mother had kept up correspondence with these people. He had a good position with Vanadium Steel Company. My impression, of course, of America was very good. I did not have too many difficulties, since I was not married and no family to support, so it was all very easy for me in comparing when people come over with five or six children, and do not speak the language.

DR: Did you already speak English when you came over?

JD: I had learned part of that in high school, and later on in college, where we had to read an awful lot of trade papers. Of course I'd worked for a year in England. I stayed in Wisbech (Cambs), near Oxford. In Wisbech they speak kind of the high English, not the dialect English. Quite different.

DR: Do you think that the move and adjustment was easier for you because you didn't have a family?

JD: Very much so. I have talked with many people who came over with two

or three children. I remember some friends from Hudsonville who, coming off the boat, their two year-old boy said, "Dad, I have to go to the bathroom!" in Dutch. And Dad said, "I don't know where there is a bathroom, so you better hold it!" You see, I did not have this. I mean to say these problems some of these people had, to make it to the train, and get to Grand Rapids. I had some friends who had a sponsor in Grand Rapids, and the night they arrived, is when the sponsor died of old age. So there was no one at the train to meet them.

DR: Was the move from Mackinac Island to Holland an easy one or a difficult one?

JD: No. My wife already was working during the summer on Mackinac Island a couple of years before. She came in 1956. On Mackinac Island, it is so, you know every house, you know every road, you know every tree on the road, you know every bend in the road. Actually, after a while, you become an islander, you feel quite secure on the island. Then, of course, to move away from the island into the full atmosphere of the fully American world. Yes, it was quite a change. I did not learn to drive until I was thirty-four years old, because in Europe people do not drive, as such, as what we do down here. I remember coming to Holland driving our car we had just bought, and it was getting kind of dark. My wife said they're flickering the lights from their cars. You must not have your lights on. But I said I see the reflection on the signs on the road. So I imagine I hardly knew how to drive. I didn't even know where the light switches were.

DR: Was it easier for you to adjust to life in America because you had an American wife?

JD: Yes. When we moved to Holland, we had our second child that spring. My wife was expecting again. We came in October, and in November we bought a house in Holland Heights, and in December my wife had a miscarriage. Knowing no one, it seemed to be getting very difficult. The kids, both of them had many allergies which they were trying to outgrow. There were times that we, after the bills were paid, no more than \$10.00 a week left for groceries. Oh yes, the beginning was very difficult. Then in the spring we sold our home on Mackinac Island, and that eased it up considerable.

DR: Did you know anybody when you came to Holland?

JD: What was very nice, the first week that I worked here for the city, they asked me to fly out to Detroit to pick up the miller, who would rebuild the windmill, to pick up him and his wife. And the week thereafter, the city council had an openhouse for the two couples, the miller and his wife, and my wife and myself. Many Dutch people came to the openhouse at the Warm Friend Hotel. Many of them who were good friends, or had known my parents very well. Many of these people who came at that time, we are still very good friends with. We got to know, through that, right away a great number of people. It was very nice that the council did this. We were helped in many ways possible. I remember that one of the windmill committee members was in charge of the First National Bank, and he said in case you need a loan or whatever come down and see me. Yes, they were all very helpful, very understanding. Well, it was in its

beginning stage. All that was here of the island was a little bit of water and a lot of cattails and swamp grass, and around the edges dead elm trees which had to be all cut down.

DR: What was your job like here in the beginning?

JD: Well, I was actually hired to develop the gardens. They had hired Jerry Fairbanks, who had a winter resort in Gaylord, Michigan. He had been hired about a month before I did, on a year's lease, on a year's contract. He came that following spring, in April, and set up office in the Civic Center, until the office in the Post House was ready for him. He worked five days a week, April until Labor Day, and then he came for the second six months, one weekend a month. Then it came down to the point that when his contract was up, what were we going to do? The city council did not renew his contract and I was hired full time to be in charge of the project. To this point, twenty-seven years later, I have been able to keep it self-supporting. No tax money ever has gone into Windmill Island. I mean to say, the city borrowed \$450,000 to start Windmill Island with the promise for Windmill Island to pay that off over a span of twenty years, and was done. Besides paying that off we have blacktopped the entrance road, and blacktopped the parking lot. We put a building around the merry-go-round. \$250,000 was spent on building the Royal Orphanage building, an exact replica of the Royal Orphanage in the Netherlands. The ground sprinkling was put in, tile floors placed into the Post House. Everything was very minimal but all has been improved. The concession building we are sitting behind was built in eight years later, and later on a brick wall

built around it. Well, it has been a long haul. I have to admit that. Many difficulties we had to overcome, but we did it, and the council has been very helpful, so is the windmill committee, very active after many years again. The new windmill committee has been very helpful, too.

DR: What has kept you here at Windmill Island for so many years?

JD: The challenge. Very much the challenge, to build up something from nothing. My brother-in-law who worked at the Oldsmobile factory in Lansing says, at least when you are done or when you retire, there is something left of your work behind that you can see. He says, when I work on a car and the car rolls off the line it is gone, and that's true. But for instance, what we had in the beginning, we needed of course our summer flowers for the park, after the tulips are bloomed out in the spring. We put it out for bid to about two or three different companies. Normally the nurseries have the plants ready by May 1, the summer flowers, but we do not need them until about June 15th. Invariably we always got annuals which were too tall and had to be clipped back, so the young, spring, the vigorous growth would be gone. So I said there's no other choice, we have to build our own greenhouses. I looked around and I found, at an estate in the north end of town, a greenhouse which was built round about 1916. Mrs. Thorsheski had just died so we got in contact with her daughter, and she said she had just given the estate to Hope College, therefore get in contact with Hope College. So we took up contact with Hope College so they donated one of the greenhouses because everything was going to be torn down. Hope

donated one of the greenhouses so with our own man power, at that time we had what we called the Ceta Program, a federal funded program. The crew went down and took one of the greenhouses apart piece by piece, and had only a carpenter come down to help us with the foundation. So we built our own greenhouse. Then the Blodgett Estate in Grand Rapids had an identical greenhouse but it was twenty-five feet longer. By talking to Mrs. Blodgett, she felt that maybe they should give that to the city and use it as a tax write-off. So we went over there and took that down piece by piece, and rebuilt it here at the island. One green house, the biggest one, is used for growing our summer flowers, and the smaller greenhouse is open to the public. In the first greenhouse, a boiler came with it for heating. So we took that apart piece by piece and put it back in again, then a flower shop in Zeeland gave us a boiler for our second greenhouse. This was mostly done with federal-funded help, so not so much Windmill Island money had to be spent. These greenhouses have a lovely steel construction, with lovely molded glass around the gutters. Now, we have very good quality flowers to plant, because we seed our flowers much later, so therefore they are just in a nice, bushy, short stage to be planted by the middle of June.

DR: What was the purpose of Windmill island in the very beginning?

JD: There were about six influential business people here in the city. One man by the name of Carter Brown who owned Castle Park, which is outside the city near the lake as a resort place, and Carter Brown had said to his friends, the city is in the position to do this.

Why do we not create a Dutch rural landscape which could be found in the Netherlands during the seventeenth century. He says, I know a nice place just behind what is now Freedom Village. It is a little island called Hyma Island. So he took a pontoon boat and went over there with a tractor and mowed it on a regular basis. Why don't we place a windmill there. So to begin with, he asked the head of the Dutch Windmill Society to come over from the Netherlands. They already had bought the land from the Hyma sisters, so it was called Hyma Island. And he, the director of the Dutch Windmill Society, said, oh no, this is too close to the city, it takes the windsweep away from the windmill. You have to go much further into the swamp. They took a little boat ride, going all around, and finally settled on the land where the windmill stands now. But for that they had to buy additional land which they first leased it with an option to buy, from John Kempker. The whole area what you see outside of the windmill is owned by the city. The whole idea was to create a Dutch rural landscape with tulip fields in the spring. Also, the Nelis Tulip Farm and The Nextdoor Neighbor Tulip Farm called Van Braught were becoming smaller and smaller. There was Tulip Time with less tulips to be shown to our visitors. That also activated it to begin this plan, which up to this point, has materialized very well. What did he do to make it an island. Since the Black River, called Black River in 1965, is now called Macatawa River, has the water flow all the way around the island into Lake Macatawa. To make it an island, he [Carter Brown] cut a canal through it, and so it became an island, which the service bridge on one end and the visitor's bridge

on the other end to cross the canal to get to the windmill.

DR: Did the creation and the building of Windmill Island increase the number of people who came to Holland for Tulip Time?

JD: I don't know, because twenty-seven years ago there were not as many festivals going on than what we have now. At that time, Tulip Festival in Holland was the second largest festival. Now we call it the third largest one. Of course, everywhere now, Zeeland has the Petunia Festival, and there's an Asparagus Festival, or a potato festival, or. . . Let me say this, when it has not brought extra people, it has still kept up its level of what it was before, yes.

DR: Do think that things like Windmill Island and different festivals like Tulip Time contribute to the Dutch heritage in the Holland community?

JD: Yes, I would say so, because so many people do come here and they'll say, oh, well, we learned a little bit more about the Netherlands through the guided tour of the windmill or through the documentary film you showed, so we have learned a little bit more. We also have many people of Dutch descent come down to visit. Time after time in my suggestion box there will be a little note saying, my grandparents immigrated to the United States. We always wanted to come to Holland, Michigan. We finally had a chance to come, and how lovely it is. Of course, the entrance to Windmill Island is very nice, too, with our railroad station which has been brought back into its old charm. Then they love to drive up and down Eighth Street and see all the Dutch names, Vogelzang, Steketee, and so forth, on all of the buildings. Then, of course, during Tulip Time,

they love to see the Klompen Dance, go to the Dutch Market, and of course, above all, go to the Netherlands Museum, which is very much a drawing point. So to me the Netherlands Museum is very important, and any time when people have heard maybe about Windmill Island, but not about Netherlands Museum, we always recommend it very highly.

DR: Do you think these things are true to what life is like in the Netherlands?

JD: Life in the Netherlands is very modern now, and very up to date. In fact, the economy in the Netherlands is extremely good. I would say the Netherlands, or the Netherlands and Germany, almost have one of the best economies in Western Europe. The Netherlands, when you drive through the countryside, you still can learn some of the old charm down there. There's still a lot of culture left. The museums are a very strong part, showing off to the tourists what the fifteenth, sixteenth, seventeenth century was: art, and theatre, and so forth. The government supports it very heavily. For instance, many people, when you want to learn more about the Dutch background and how it was years ago, go to the open air museum in Arnhem in the Netherlands. There you have an area what shows off what stood in the provinces of Groningen, Drenthe, Overijssel, etc. Some of the very old factories, windmills, farms, etc. are torn down and rebuilt there again. Of course, this is all very heavily financed by the Dutch government, which is general when it comes down to museums and culture in the Netherlands. It is very heavily subsidized.

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

JD: Well, a number of times. I used to go back in the beginning quite a bit. But now, my folks are gone. As of lately I was back last October, that's October 1991. My brother has two sons and the oldest one was getting married so I went back for the wedding. I had a chance to visit one of my aunts and a couple of cousins from my mother and a couple of cousins from my father and then my own four cousins, too, who came all to the wedding.

DR: Were there any other members of your family that immigrated to the United States after you did?

JD: No, not at all. Actually, I was born in 1930, so do remember the Depression years quite well, such as 1936, 1937, 1938, up to 1940, and of course after that the Second World War broke out, which was tough. The Germans needed an awful lot of food, so they tried to get it from the occupied countries. So the farmers had to deliver so many pounds of meat, in terms of cows or sheep, so much wool, so much this, and so much that. So there was very little left for people in the Netherlands themselves. Many people went hungry or starved, especially people in the big cities who could not get out. Everything was doled out with coupons, and after a while there was a lot of inflated money, but not enough coupons any more. The food was not there any more, like sugar and butter and meat. Maybe eating a lot of vegetables kept us healthier, I don't know. Many people broke out in rashes and so forth by not being able to have enough fat in their diets. Then, until about 1960, when mother died, I still found some food coupons, forty years after the Second World War. In 1949, four years after the Second World War, they

were still giving out coupons, after that food became plentiful again. And of course the government had to try to get the import and export back in balance, in 1945. When I left, the economy was lifting a little bit. Everyone was earning a little bit more. They were able to repair their homes again or buy new furniture which they hadn't bought in the last fifteen years or so. By 1960 the economy lifted, I would say, from 1960 to 1970, the seventies were the "golden years." Now they have so many governmental programs that the government can hardly support it any more. It is still very good in the Netherlands. Now, many of my friends who emigrated after the Second World War have gone back to the Netherlands.

DR: Why is that?

JD: Well, first of all, since they had worked a few years in the Netherlands, they are able to draw a pension from there. Also their social security from here as well as their factory pension. And when they came back to the Netherlands, they found their health insurance was paid for, too. It's the same as people from Spain who come to work in the Netherlands, or people from Czechoslovakia, Poland, or whatsoever. The Netherlands is a haven for people like that, maybe still eight or ten thousand people a day come to the Netherlands. They are trying to cut it down as much as possible, because there's hardly enough space. The Netherlands has like 660 people per square mile. America only has sixteen per square mile.

DR: Have you yourself ever considered moving back to the Netherlands?

JD: Many people always have said to me, what made you come to America, and I always laughingly say, adventure, because just before I left

the Netherlands, they needed a park superintendent at three different cities. I applied at one and went for an interview and he said we would like to hire you but our county is almost too small and with your background we know that you will be here a couple of years and then you will for a better place or a bigger city. Then there were two other cities very much almost in favor of hiring me. One of them came down, he had 150 applicants, and he chose finally nine, and I was one of the nine. But it was just to put out some feelers to see what I could do over in here. But then everything was set. I emigrated anyway. I came in 1958. In 1960, 1960/61, my wife and I went (in December) back to the Netherlands on our honeymoon and were gone for four months. We took an U-rail pass and traveled through Europe first class for two months. We saw an awful lot. And my wife, who had hardly ever been out of her home town-- the furthest she had been away was Mackinac Island, then to go to the French Riviera, or go to Vienna, or be in Salzburg, and so forth, because for two months on that pass you could travel anywhere you wanted, too. That was a very nice trip. I had said to friends, what should we do? Should we spend our money for a down payment on a house, or should we make a long honeymoon trip. They said, the house you will get anyway, in the long run, but this long trip, you might never be in that position again. Take that trip. So that was very nice.

DR: In what other ways, besides Windmill Island, have you been involved in the Holland Community?

JD: I have been very active with the Chamber of Commerce, in the tourist

division, and the Ottawa tours council. Of course I have been very active in the tourist department, from the West Michigan Tourist Association. Circle Michigan, which has about 130 members, tries to draw touring companies to come to Michigan. Windmill Island is also a member of the Grand Rapids Convention and Visitor's Bureau, the Pennsylvania Bus Association, but that is very much all tourist related. To make ends meet, the first twelve years I worked seven days a week, with pleasure, even when I only got paid for five days a week, just to make Windmill Island ends meet. Then finally the project became too big, so they gave me an assistant. I have had this man now then for the last thirteen or fourteen years. He is in charge of the maintenance, Humphrey De Vries, we work very close together. I spend more time into the advertising part of it, so I travel extensively. Windmill Island's a member of the American Bus Association, and the National Tour Association, and they have their conventions in November and December, and these conventions could be anywhere in the United States. I always have a minimum of fifty appointments with the touring group with tour directors, or people who are representing their touring company. I have not been involved too much in the community, due to the fact that they cannot depend on me because I have to go, let me say, to Pennsylvania and visit all these touring companies and might be gone for three weeks at a time. After this interview I might remember certain things what I did or have been very active with in the community, but it does not come to mind right now.

DR: Do you have a church affiliation?

JD: Yes, we attend a church. It's called Church of God Worldwide. It's in Grand Rapids.

DR: What kind of a church is that?

JD: It is a non-denominational church.

DR: What has made you decide to go to that church?

JD: Well, first of all, it is a Sabbath church in so far that we celebrate our Sabbaths on Saturday, the same as what Christ did. Even when Christ died, even two or three hundred years after that, all the religious groups of that time still celebrated Sunday on Saturday. Well, the idea what was good enough for Christ was certainly good enough for us. It is just that the people have changed. It was not that Christ changed. We have been very active in the church. Most of our activities are with that church. We feel very much like a big family. We also celebrate what we call (it is not a Jewish church) the Holy Days, that is the feast of tabernacles in the fall, or just recently, Pentecost, that fell on last Sunday. So we are continuing to celebrate the same Holy days or feast days as what Christ did, because it says so clearly in Leviticus in the Old Testament to follow this for all years to come. It does not say, after Christ is born you do not have to do it anymore. It says it very clearly.

DR: What sort of church did you grow up in?

JD: I grew up in the Netherlands in the Reformed Church. My father was a deacon and my grandfather an elder. It was a very big church, as a building. The church was built around the year 900. Years ago, in the small towns, church life was everything. It was almost their

only get together once a week. Years ago it was known the church to be packed on Sunday mornings—250/300 people. Right now I think they don't even have fifteen members, which includes the deacons and elders. The Netherlands has become in so many ways very irreligious. It's a crying shame, I think. So, they sold the church in my village to the government for one guilder, and the government spent hundreds of thousands of guilders to bring it back in good repair. The walls are that thick [about two feet].

DR: What made you decide to switch from the Reformed Church that you grew up in to the non-denominational church that you go to now.

JD: Well, we read a lot of literature.

[At this point, the interview was interrupted by Mr. de Blecourt's secretary, reminding him that he had an appointment in ten minutes]

We followed the literature from the Worldwide Church of God. When we moved from Holland Heights, where we were members of Calvary Reformed Church, to Lawndale Court, which was in the city, we got kind of disenchanted with it (the Reformed Church), and started attending Worldwide Church of God, and have been very happy with that ever since, I would say thirteen or fourteen years. We waited almost six or seven years, even after we read the literature, before becoming members. Then we asked someone to come down to visit us and talk a little bit more about it, and learned there was a church in Grand Rapids. There's one in Muskegon, one in Lansing, one in Gaylord, a couple of them in Detroit, and in Ann Arbor, and Lansing.

Over the whole world it is a small denomination. Maybe it has a total of 120,000 people. But then, Christ always worked with small groups anyway, never with millions.

DR: I have one more quick question, and that is having to deal with the increasing multi-cultural diversity in Holland. How have you seen that change while you've lived here, and how do you feel about that?

JD: Yes, I have seen it change quite a bit since I came here twenty-seven years ago. To me, it is okay. I have worked maybe much closer with it than many other people have, due to the fact that we have employed so many people from Texas, let me say, I don't know what you want to call them, Spanish Americans is maybe not the right word. But even now for instance, we have one fellow working for us who is from Ethiopia, and one is from Cambodia. But these are all students in high school who help us and have their families living here in town. And I've gotten to know many of the Spanish families that way. Every one strives to better themselves, and when they thought they could be better themselves down here, then I cannot blame them to work towards that.

DR: You should probably get to your appointment. Is there any last thing that you'd like to say?

JD: No, no. When it comes down to Windmill Island, Windmill Island's doing very well up to this point. And as I've said, it has been kind of my life's work since I came to America. Even when I had very good contacts with Grand Hotel.

[At this point, side one of the tape ran out, and Mr. de Blecourt left for his appointment]