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De Pree, Randy Oral History Interview: Business and Industry in Holland

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Interview with Randy DePree

Interviewed by Anna Holt

1999

RD: When I started in 1953, I started in the vinegar department. That was way down in the old building, down by the river. You look out and look over the lake. The building is no longer there. They used to have the Cooper shop on one side, the vinegar line on the other. They made the relish and they ground up the mustard and stuff on the third floor in that old building. They cleaned the garlic and stuff all by hand in them days. The vinegar line ran eighteen gallons of vinegar a minute. Now today they run seventy gallons a minute. If we got over eighteen, when I started, we got a bonus for running that good. They don't do that no more. Now it's more production. Cooper shop, they get them big fifty-five whiskey barrels in. Then the guys clean them all up. Then they fill them up with pickles, roll them around in the back, in the field, until they were cured. They did that for a good fifteen, twenty years while I was here. Then they went to the big tanks above the ground. They eliminate the whiskey barrels. They don't do that. That's too much work. Now they went to the big wooden tanks. You see a bunch of them outside. About seven years ago, maybe eight, they went to fiberglass tanks in the ground. This is big, but they're buried in the ground. Don't take as much salt to keep the pickles for the whole season. They've got them in the ground.

AH: Let's back up for just a minute and get the technicalities. This is Wednesday, July

28. I'm Anna Holt and this is an interview with Randy DePree. First of all, can you get give me a little personal history? Where were you born?

RD: I was born in Holland, Michigan, right across the street from Hart and Cooley. The house is no longer, there's a little car lot there now. The gas company blew the house up and they wouldn't let us rebuild there. They rezoned it commercial, so they had to sell it. Now it's a car lot. I moved down the street and I've been there, on that same street my whole life. Never got off of Walnut Avenue. [laughter]

AH: And you started here in '58?

RD: '53.

AH: How old were you then?

RD: ...I'm seventy-one now. [long pause, then figures it out on paper] I was twenty-five.

AH: What did you do before then?

RD: I worked at Fillmore Creamery.

AH: OK. So then you started here when you were twenty-five. What was your first job here?

RD: Maintenance on the vinegar line.

AH: What did that entail?

RD: Get up in the morning. Come in there, oil and grease all their machines to get them ready. Put the labels in, put the glue in the machines. Make sure every machine is ready to run when the women got on the lines. They pushed the buttons, they better be running. [laughter]

AH: How long did you do that?

RD: I stayed on the vinegar lines all the years I worked here. I never got off the vinegar line.

AH: Have you worked full-time all these years, all forty-six?

RD: No, I'm just part-time now. I took the early retirement. I think it was 1987. I took the early retirement and got out. Then I come back and work a couple three months in the summer.

AH: That's a pretty good deal.

RD: I've been back every year since.

AH: Tell me a little bit what it was like when you first started working here, the processes and what you were making.

RD: They used to have, the corn would come in and they had a great big distillery. Building nineteen sits there now. The tanks sitting out front, where you first walked in, that's where they would grind up the corn and make the liquor. They tore that building down about twenty years ago. They can buy it cheaper already processed. They don't have to...grinding. Everything comes in tank trucks now. They bring it in. Must be cheaper. They'd grind up the corn and one other kind of grain that they'd bring in. The corn makes the white vinegar. The apples, they still do that down the hill. They press the juice out. They let the apple juice ferment. It turns into alcohol. That building is still working. That was just beyond where the old vinegar line used to be. That building's still run full force. Cider vinegar, they leave it in there, then take the water out. The tanks will be two hundred grain alcohol. You don't want to stick your nose above it. [laughter] It's strong. White vinegar is

the same way. They bring it down, that's hundred grain. They bring it up, dilute it down with a little water to get it so we got five percent in a bottle. Then we get it ready to go in the jars. That is a big job.

AH: So you make vinegars here, pickles and what else?

RD: Relish, vinegar, pickles, mustard. They're talking about a couple new jobs. Put up some different kinds of stuff. We don't know yet. They got a soy sauce that they're experimenting to see what the cost will be to bottle that here and make it. It looks real good.

AH: Is this really the largest pickle factory in the world?

RD: This is the only one Heinz has got left in operation right now, so they tell me. They used to have one in Canada. That's shut down. They bring the work down here now. We do it here. Pittsburgh, they did some pickles, not any more. Everything is done here, all pickles.

AH: Didn't you celebrate your hundredth anniversary of this factory a few years ago?

RD: Yes. Two years ago. About two years ago they had their hundred anniversary. The old building used to be where the Bay View Furniture factory was, this side of Kollen Park. They tore that down. Heinz has got all tanks in there now too. That little shoe factory building, that's sort of got the agriculture department in there. They got that going. Got a bunch of stuff stored over there.

AH: So now that you're part-time, are you still working on the vinegar lines?

RD: I did last year. I worked one day on vinegar and then the other day put up fans and whatever they got to do. This year, I've been keeping busy just working on fans.

Boy, it's hot up there now.

AH: I bet.

RD: The fans, we took them down two years ago. I told them to order me some different ones to put back up. They never did come in yet. We got a few, but they're not as big as the ones I had before. I've been trying to find a book where I can get the big ones back. They blow more air. So far, I can't find them. I went through four catalogs, trying to find fans. Can't find the great big one.

AH: I bet it gets so hot in there.

RD: When you've got all them big vats cooking them pickles, it gets awful hot up there.

AH: Summer is your busiest season then, isn't it?

RD: Yes. They'll work about ten weeks of green pickles. One line runs around the clock. They don't shut it down. They got to get all the pickles they can done when they're fresh. They go in the spears, twenty-four once. They've got five machines that fill the jars. Then what didn't get filled, the ladies stand and fill them by hand the rest of the way up. You really got to work. Now they got the new sandwich slice. Those are good. That line runs around the clock too. Got to get as many of those jars up as they can. That's all done by hand. The vinegar lines, every year, the amount goes up. They're running more hours on vinegar now. They're getting more jobs out of the other companies. We can put it out faster I guess, so we're getting vinegar increases.

AH: Just growing and growing over here.

RD: That's what we need. If they don't produce, after a while, nobody's going to have a

job. They got to get the work out.

AH: How would you describe the relationship between the management and employees here?

RD: Real good. Since I retired, couldn't find them any better. The management we got now, they're real good people. Pam and them... I was on the union bargaining committee. She would be there too. She would take notes for management. We always got along real good, never had no arguments to speak of.

AH: Do you think they're very receptive to the needs of the employees?

RD: Oh yes. They listen. Most of the time, they see it that you're in the right. They'll go along with you. Once in a great while you get a case that you're not going to get across.

AH: That happens everywhere.

RD: I'm sure you go anywhere, you're going to find the same thing.

AH: Do you find that there's a connection between this factory and the other Heinz factories or is it kind of separated?

RD: The other factories, they make other products. We're the only pickle one. That's why you don't see many of the other factory people come in here. Once in awhile one of the big shots out of Pittsburgh will come down, but that's about it. You don't see none of the other people in the pickle business come. They're never here. The big shots out of Pittsburgh, they say, "You run this one." You hardly ever see them. I guess one or two of them came in one day last week. They say, "We got big shots coming in. Make sure everything is up to snuff." Everybody's cleaned up. Looked

real good.

AH: So the main office is in Pittsburgh? The company is headed there?

RD: Yes. All your retiree benefits, employees, insurance, and everything, all goes through Pittsburgh.

AH: Heinz has a lot of different...don't you also have baby food and...?

RD: Yes.

AH: What else?

RD: They got the baby food. They got dog food, cat food - Nine Lives. They have the Ore-Ida potatoes. Then they had some pizza joints. Made little pizzas about that big [gestures to the size of a small pizza] for a few years. Haven't seen them around no more. Croutons. They make the Heinz 57 sauce, cocktail sauce. They make horseradish, mustard. They got chicken broth, all kinds of soups. Spaghetti sauce. If you go in the company store, on your way out. You just go in there and take a look at all the different things that they make. They got three different size baby food. They got number one, number two and number three. Then they got the dry stuff. We don't get the dry stuff as much as we'd like to see it. Most of the time all you can find is the glass jars. They had some, come in a round tin can, dry. That was really good. The kids, they'd mix that up, goes real fast. [laughter] But they don't get that in too often. My kids are all grown-up. My grandkids, when they were growing up, I'd go down, bring it home.

AH: Which of those is the biggest seller? The pickles?

RD: Ketchup is the biggest...and the vinegar. Ketchup and vinegar are the two biggest I'd

say. And the soups, you'd find they're all different kinds of labels. It's not made just for Heinz, it's made for all these different chain companies, like Aldi's, Save-A-Lot. They got special labels on them. The pickles are done here. Soup's the same way (made in Pittsburgh). You get Kroger and Spartan, all the different names on them.

AH: Don't know what you're getting.

RD: Never know. If it says cream of mushroom, it's going to be cream of mushroom. That's all you know for sure. [laughter] They have all kinds.

AH: What's happened at Heinz since you've been here that you think was the biggest hardship or the biggest challenge?

RD: When they first talking about closing it down. But that never came through. Now we're the only one left in the pickles.

AH: When did that happen?

RD: That was quite a few years ago they talked about. But that was just talk I guess.

AH: What was the reasoning behind it?

RD: Everything's done in Pittsburgh. They don't come and tell you straight facts on all that. You just get rumors that this might be done. We make more vinegar here than they do at any of the factories.

AH: Where are most of the factories now?

RD: One or two in Ohio, Pittsburgh. Got one in Canada. The one in Canada, they used to make pickles, but now they don't. They're all done over here now. I don't know what they make over there. I've never been there. They had a couple factories in North Carolina, they shut them both down. I went down and looked at the one. The

lady that runs the company store, she was from the North Carolina, one of them. Her and her husband, he worked in the office. She works in the company store two days a week. I went down to North Carolina just to see what the factory looked like. It's small. They did all the private label stuff, mostly over there. Now they do all the same private labels right here. They did pickles there too in that North Carolina, but they shut it down, moved them all here.

AH: Can you tell me a little bit about the growth that you've experienced here? Is it mostly because other factories were shut down or is the market-share growing?

RD: Well, when I started we had around three hundred and sixty full-time employees. They downsized and now we're down to about two hundred and sixty full-time, year round. That's when I took the early retirement. That's when they started cutting down. It was down two-sixty. They're up to maybe two-eighty, in that area right now, full-time. In the summertime, they'll get up to over a thousand employees. They're lined up on both sides of the machines, all the way, hand-stacking pickles.

AH: So when there was the downsizing, was it mostly because Heinz wasn't getting as much business?

RD: No, they were still getting the business. The new machinery produces faster, but you got to get the jars filled, that's why it takes that much more people in the summer. Then they don't need them the rest of the time. They finally said, "Well, we can eliminate a few jobs, save money." That's why we're down to two hundred and eighty. That's the only thing. All the other Heinz factories did that same. Kelloggs, they're going to cut down too over there.

AH: Who do you think are your biggest competitors?

RD: Vlastic. Then you've got a couple in Wisconsin, Aunt Jane, I think. Vlastic is the biggest. Around here, you go to any of the supermarkets in Holland, Heinz don't have very much shelf space. They've got Vlastic all the way top to bottom. You want to find genuine dill, there's only one store in town here, that's Montello Park. They got them. They're some of the better pickles, I think.

AH: That's strange that being in Holland, you think they'd have more Heinz.

RD: You go to D&W, you go to Family Fare, you go to Meijers, you got _____.

AH: When I started this project and called Heinz I was at Meijer and I was buying pickles and I looked and I couldn't find any. There's tons of Vlastic...

RD: You may find one row of sweet pickles, a couple jars of dills and that be it. The vinegar and ketchup you find a great big isle. The pickles, for some reason, they just don't get them on the shelf in Holland.

[stop]

AH: Can you tell me about Jerry Shoup and changes in management?

RD: When I started Mr. Cobb was the plant manager. He died. Then Ed Schierbeek. Then we had Dave Willard as manager. He's over at Perigo's (?) now. Then we had...some fellow. He wasn't here very long. He came in, but he didn't last very long. Then they had one from North Carolina. He came in. After he left, then we got Jerry Shoup. Jerry's been here ever since. Jerry's been in there now... I've been out since '87. When I was on bargaining Jerry was in management area. He's been here, I'd say at least twenty years.

AH: That must be nice. Especially how you said, there were people who were not there for very long.

RD: Jerry, he knows you. He comes up, he speaks to everybody. He's a real nice fellow. Cobb, he was a good man too. When my mother's house was on the corner, the car lot. The next house is where Cobb lived. When they shut down the Fillmore Creamery, Cobb said, "Why don't you come down and get a job at Heinz?" So I came down, put my application in. I went right down to start. He lived there on Eighth Street about four or five years. Then he moved down here on South Shore Drive. They lived in that house a few years until he died. Then his wife went a block or two down, then in, and built a brand new house. She's living in that home in Zeeland... You've got to be able to take care of yourself. It's beyond a rest home. You've got to be able to take care of yourself in that home. She's been in there for about three years now. She's got one boy living in town. He's a car salesman at Elhart. Then another boy in California. They had a daughter and she's in Hudsonville, between Hudsonville and Grandville some where. They had three children. Margaret, she's got to be in her late eighties right now.

AH: Do you think that makes for a better work environment? When everyone's from the same area?

RD: Yes. Like now, you've got a lot of Spanish people. There's not too many of the colored people. There's a few. Maybe all total, maybe twenty. Some of them, come, they work a little while and then they quit. Most of them got to drive from Muskegon. The ones I work with, I can't find nothing wrong with, get along fine.

AH: What do you think the biggest triumphs have been while you've been here?

RD: See if they can't get more production. That's one on the biggest things. They're always pushing for more and more. When we started, eighteen gallons, that was a big day. Every minute, you grabbed a gallon, put a label on it by hand. Now you run them and the machine puts the labels on and you run seventy gallons a minute. That's all you can get to fill up in a minute. The machine, they just put a brand new filler up there. It's a nice looking machine too. The old one was getting in pretty bad shape. Now it's all stainless steel. The other one was all cast iron. That vinegar, it hits that cast iron. That vinegar is strong stuff. It eats everything. It's amazing what that vinegar will do for you. It's good. Drink that cider vinegar, mix it in water and honey. That much vinegar in a jar, that much honey [gestures amounts with hands] fill it with water, stir it up. Drink a glass, that much in a glass every morning. It's suppose to take care of your arthritis and all this kind of stuff. I told one fellow. He was so bad he couldn't get up and down in his boat. I said, "Better try some vinegar and honey." He's been on it ever since. He said now he wants to go dancing, makes him feel that good.

AH: My grandma, I think she says for her heart. She mixes vinegar and grape juice I think. She says she's been so much better.

RD: Something about cider vinegar, has to be cider vinegar. Can't use the white. It's good for you. They've got big booklets out on what vinegar will cure. They got some articles hanging up on the wall up there about vinegar. You can order that big book. It's something else. I didn't know vinegar was that good of a medicine. I

shouldn't have no sickness [laughter] because everyday I usually get a vinegar bath.

Go home, get out of the shower, half hour later, all you smell in vinegar. Man, that vinegar really absorbs you good.

AH: What's your opinion about the business climate in Holland?

RD: Business is good here in town. I go down to tackle shop, now we got a new tackle shop that opened up down on Port Sheldon, just about to Port Sheldon. They don't have too much stuff in there. The one on Ottawa Beach Road, it's got everything in here. That new one, if you want something they'll order it for you. It's just a small building. Three fellas went in together. They're going to try to make a go of it out there. In the tackle business you've got to have a lot of stuff if you want to make any money. They've got their own well and to keep live bait they've got to run that water day and night to keep the minnows and stuff alive. They're going to end up paying great big electric bills. We tried it in the West Ottawa store. It was unreal what he had to pay for that, Consumers Power because that pump was going around the clock. Business around town here is really good.

AH: Much is said about the work ethic in Holland, do you think that's had a lot to do with the good business here and success of the factory?

RD: You've got, when General Electric was here, they're one of the higher paying ones. They closed down. They lost about nine hundred jobs when they moved out. They got other business came in. The town is growing leaps and bounds. You just go down, two o'clock until five. Don't get on 31. Bumper to bumper as far as you can see. Man, where are all these people coming from? But they're all coming from

work going home. It's got to be this. Their building new businesses all over. Every time I go down towards Grand Haven... it won't be long until it will be solid business, all the way. They're just buying the land up all the way down. It's got to be the people that work good here. Going towards Detroit, you don't see business going as good. They're all coming this way. It's got to be, they work better around here.

AH: What are you expecting for the future here at the factory?

RD: The way things are looking right now, I think they will grow a lot bigger yet. If they can get all these new products that they want to try and get to do. That means more jobs. That's good. I hope they get it. More they can get here, the better it looks for everyone that's up there.

AH: OK, well that's all I have. Thank you very much.

RD: You bet.