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Oldemulders, Fred Oral History Interview: General Holland History

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Oral History Interview
Interviewee: Fred Oldemulders
Interviewer: Don van Reken
January 26, 1980

Abstract: Wooden shoe makers Oetman, De Witt, Klinger, Gary Ten Brink and Gerrit Vredeveld.

DVR: Today is January 26, 1980. I'm at the home of Fred Oldemulders on 48th Street in Graafschap, a suburb of Holland. Mr. Oldemulders is going to tell us a little bit about his life here in Holland, Michigan, and his business with making wooden shoes throughout all these decades in Holland, Michigan. How old are you, Mr. Oldemulders?

FO: I am 81 years old.

DVR: You were born in the Netherlands?

FO: I was born in Germany; about a mile from the border is my birthplace, by the place that's called _____. I was born on May 11, 1898.

DVR: How did you ever get involved in the shoemaking business when you were there?

FO: In the old country, we were a family of five—father and four sons. The family was really seven; I also had three sisters. My dad was a wooden shoemaker, and because we were on the farm, wooden shoemaking was not possible for us to follow in the summer. In the winter, however, there was lots of time of making wooden shoes.

My dad was the community wooden shoemaker. In the fall, the neighbors and others would bring their logs to us, and my dad would make the wooden shoes for that family. That made it so that the children all had to learn to make wooden shoes, and all four of our brothers were able to make wooden shoes. I started already at an early age of making wooden shoes at the age of 15, and I completed mine, because there was a lot of

time in-between that it was impossible for me to work, this I mean, First World War, but I completed that at about the age of 18. Then I could make a pair of wooden shoes.

DVR: Were you involved at all in World War I?

FO: Yes, I sure was involved in World War I. That is, our family was involved. At the first day of the war in 1914, three of my brothers had to leave for the army. Of the three, two of them had to lose their lives, one in Russia and one in France. I, myself, was at the age of 18 inducted into the army, and I served for two-and-a-half years. I came in in October, and I came back in the latter part of February, two-and-a-half years later. I was wounded once when I was in Belgium, although the wound was not so severe. I got over that well.

One important thing I'd like to mention right here: my brother and I were in the very same regiment, although he was not with the young; I was 17 years younger than my brother. As I was wounded, I had to stop by my brother, and the first thing that I told him was, "Heinrich, I'm wounded." But then together, we kneeled to praise the Lord for the keeping care that the wound was not a deadly wound.

After that, I came out of the service, back working on the farm. My two brothers were not there no more, so the work on the farm demanded that I had to stay home, and I stayed home until the day that I left for America.

DVR: When did you leave for America? When was that?

FO: May 2, 1923, we left from Rotterdam in the boat called Volendam.

DVR: You said, "We left." You were married?

FO: We were married on March 20, the same day that my father and mother were married, although many years before that. My father was 83 years-old when we left for this country. We married, and after we married, we left for this country.

DVR: Where did you land in the United States?

FO: We landed in New York on May 12. I had my birthday on the ocean the day before we landed in New York. From New York, we were placed on the train by good help of the agents of the Holland-American Line, and so we traveled to Detroit. From Detroit, we had to change trains and went for Grand Rapids.

DVR: How did you know which train to take?

FO: We were quite well-supplied with all the guidance that we need, not knowing the language. So we really were placed on the train, which was the right train to go. We found right away in America that the friendship here was of genuine nature.

DVR: And then you went to Grand Rapids?

FO: To Grand Rapids. And in Grand Rapids, we should have gone through Holland, but a good friend of an acquaintance here in Holland, which happened to be the relative we were going to, told us, "You must not go with the train. The train will leave two hours later as when you can go with the interurban." So we took the interurban to Holland, which we should not have done because in Holland, we were left off on 17th Street and the family that we were going to was living on Maple Avenue. Now, we could not find Maple Avenue on 17th Street, nor could we find the number 414. So, we traveled on that street, not knowing which way to go, west or east, so we called my family. This happened to be midnight, but there was light in the house. So we knocked on the door and we met Mr. Klender, who was a decorator. We asked him in Dutch, of course, "Do you know Mr. _____?" "Oh, yes, I do know him. I have to go to there paper hanging." "We come from the old country and we don't know how to find him." "That's all right," he said. "Just stay here. I'll take my car and I'll bring you down there." So he

took his old Model T Ford and we crawled in the backseat of that Model T Ford, and in a couple seconds, we were by Mr. and Mrs. _____'s house, which was only three blocks from where he lived.

DVR: And then you found a good home there?

FO: We found a home there for one month, because our desire was to have a permanent residence, our home for ourselves. Then we rented a home, and we landed on Central Avenue by the family Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Bremer. And at that place, we stayed for four years, from 1923 to 1926. Pardon me, three years. Then we bought our own home on 21st Street. This was quite an instance for me, not knowing really what to do, but a fellow by the name of _____ was interested to go to the farm. He had his home on 21st Street, and he came over because he came from the same place where we came from in the old country and said, "Fred, you ought to buy my house." I said, "I cannot. I haven't got enough money." "That doesn't make any difference. I'm willing to sell my house to you and leave the money over the farm that you can pay off to Mr. Meppelink." At this, I didn't know what to do. I took counsel with a man who I trusted very much. His name was Mr. John Vogelzang, and he said this: "Fred, you do not learn to save until you have to save." So that made it so that we said to _____, "The house is sold." On April 26, 1926, we moved into the house on 372 West 21st Street. In that home, we lived until we moved to 8 West 32nd Street, where we had built our new house.

DVR: Let's go back a little bit now. When you first came to this country, where did you start working? What kind of employment did you find?

FO: We were, of course, both interested to get a little money. By the way, I have to tell you that the trip across the ocean and down here cost us nine and a quarter million marks; it

was in the time of inflation. And we had the money sent to us by my cousin, Mr. Heneveld. Then I had to start to work, and this I did within three or four days. I had a job for the city under the direction of the boss, so-called, Mr. Schuitema, which I loved until the day he passed away. He was a very gentle man. Here I worked for the city laying the curbing for the streets on 22nd Street, on College Avenue, on Central Avenue, and on 14th Street. It was on 14th Street on the corner of Columbia Avenue that the news came that our President Coolidge had died.

DVR: Did most of the crew that worked with you speak Dutch?

FO: Yes. There were two men on the crew which also came from the old country, had been here for many years, but they could talk Dutch. And I have, from the very beginning on, put all the effort forth to master the English language. Once we were about ten of them that came from the old country, and every week, one night, we were to the public school to be instructed in the language. This helped us quite a bit, and we enjoyed it very much.

DVR: What kind of a school program was that? Who operated it?

FO: It was operated through the school, but it was upon the _____ of the city that this school was held. It was publicized, and we enrolled in that school.

DVR: Was there a fee connected with it?

FO: Yes, there was a small fee connected with it, a very small fee connected.

DVR: Did your wife attend also?

FO: Oh, yes. We were there, myself, my wife, my brother _____, and his wife who came later. I cannot tell you the names of the others; I have forgotten those other names, but we were quite a group, I would say we were a group of ten or twelve.

DVR: What was your next employment after you worked for the city? Let's go back to one more thing. How did they get cement in those days?

FO: The city had one great cement mixer, where they made the cement in at the place where they poured it. The cement mixer had a capacity of two bags of cement plus the gravel that's supposed to be in there. Now, gravel and cement had to be put into the hopper by hand, and then it was poured out into the curbing where it formed the curbing. Mr. Lash, he was the one at that time who did all the finishing of the cement on the curbing. I rejoiced today in that _____; got to streets that I had set the curbing, they are still in good shape.

DVR: What was your next employment?

FO: When the fall came of 1923, we got more rain and I had more days that I could not work, which I didn't like. So, I went to, at that time called Piano Factory, Bush and Lane Piano Factory, which was located at the corner of 24th and Columbia Avenue. There I found a job, and I worked there from October until the 1st of December in the factory. Then it was very slack to the piano, and they had to lay off many, and I was one that also was laid off at that time. Still, I kept on working until the day before Christmas. Today, you'll find that fence, which goes around the Baker Furniture Factory right now, that fence built by myself and another partner with me in 1923 in the month of December.

Then, I was laid off and between Christmas and New Year's, I did not go anywhere. In 1924, I went to the Limbert Furniture Factory, and I got in there and I met the superintendent, Mr. Fiebeck. Now, Mr. Fiebeck, he immediately noticed that I was of German descent, and he talked German to me, which was very pleasant. But that was not the main thing that I enjoyed. I enjoyed when he said, "Yes, you can start to work right

away.” So there’s where I started, and I was in the trimming room, what they called, doing the last touches to the furniture. This was mostly, almost entirely, dining room furniture. I worked there, but at the same time, I had my second job, which was making wooden shoes. On East 17th Street lived a man by the name of De Witt. He had made, for quite some time already, souvenir shoes. He was not making big shoes, but he made souvenir shoes. All the shoes had one side about four inches in length. He sold these shoes to Mr. De Weerd who, once again, was selling them to other firms. He could not take care of all the others that he had, and I knew that he was doing that work and I went over there and asked him if he could have help. “Yes,” he said, “I can, very much so.” So then in between time, I was working. Especially on Saturday when the shop was not working in the afternoon, I was busy making wooden shoes. There I worked until 1926 in the spring, and then he became sick and had a surgery by a doctor by the name of Mr. Brouwer. But Mr. De Witt died shortly after the service, and all the wooden shoemaking business laid on my shoulder. The sons of Mr. De Witt wanted me to continue at the place on 17th Street, which I did in order to accommodate the others that were there and filled the others. But I didn’t have any interest really in staying there. Then we had a meeting together, and the boys by the name of _____, he said, “You better take over and teach the boys,” his two boys were there, “also to make wooden shoes.” I said, “Yes, I will not do that unless I can buy the business.” They were not interested to sell the business, so I said, “Okay, then I’ll pack up my tools and start at my own home.” This is what I did in the summer of 1926. I had at my place on 27th Street a garage, and in that garage, I started to make souvenir shoes.

This souvenir business got bigger and bigger because Mr. De Weerd sold his business to Mr. Chet Van Tongeren. Chet Van Tongeren got in contact and connection with the ten-cent stores and Kresge and with Woolworth. These three stores took more shoes than I could make, so I was very busy. At the same time, I also helped out in the furniture factory, although the furniture factory at that time was not too busy, and I told the foreman there, "Whenever you have a chance of telling me to stay home, please do so." That's what I did then, let the others work in the factory, and I worked on souvenir shoes.

It may be of interest for all to know a little bit about the wooden shoe history as far as I know here from the city of Holland. In 1890, a man by the name of Klinger came in this country. His birthplace was about five miles from my birthplace in the old country, although he was born in the Netherlands. He followed, as a sideline, making wooden shoes for those that were interested in having a pair of wooden shoes. The tools that he had are now on display in the Wooden Shoe Factory on 16th Street and the bypass. I bought those tools this year and put them in a frame. Those tools all have their names on and what they are used for. Anybody can see them. Mr. Klinger still worked when the first Tulip Festival was on here in Holland. He worked in Nies Hardware Store. I, myself, have followed him up, also working in the Nies Hardware Store on Tulip Time, so I have known that man.

Then, another interesting part of the wooden shoe history is this: Mr. Gerrit Vredeveld, who came also before the turn of the century, here in the vicinity of Holland, was a wooden shoemaker, and he had learned the trade by my father in the old country. Even his tools that he had were then from my father, which he gave to him as he left for

the old country. The handle on one tool was even from an apple tree that grew on the place where I was born, which is today yet in my possession. This is, as far as I know, the wooden shoes. There were, at that time, even more wooden shoemakers. There was one wooden shoemaker, which came even before that time, by the name of Oetman; he also was a wooden shoemaker. This, as far as I know, is about the history as I can recollect here from the Holland vicinity.

DVR: Very good. Now, you were making your own wooden shoes in your own garage?

FO: Yes. I said that we had a garage on our property, which I used, although that garage proved to be much too small. Then I built a 24x24 garage, which I could have some machinery which speeded up my production on wooden shoes, which Mr. De Witt did not have. I immediately knew that I could speed up the production by putting some machinery into that garage, and that's what I did. This would be that I could make a gross pair—we sold at that time the wooden shoes by gross pair—means 144 pair. And the price was set on one gross; also at the ten cents store, it was all sold by the gross.

But then in 1927, the Holland Furnace, being quite a factory here in Holland, had an idea of giving Christmas presents to the distributors all over the country. That happened to be the number twenty-four hundred distributors or agents that they had. They wanted pairs of wooden shoes that did not have to fit the foot, but the shape had to be there and it had to be hollowed out. Van Tongeren came and said, "I have an order of twenty-four hundred pair of large wooden shoes. Can you make them?" I said, "No, I can't, not in the time before Christmas." This was the 1st of October. Then there was another man in Graafschap who could do everything that you asked him to do except that he never finished anything that he promised to do. He wanted to make wooden shoes and

Chet Van Tongeren had told him, “You go over there and _____ the shoes, but do not buy anything until you see them.” And that’s what he did. When he saw the shoes, he said, “No, I cannot send them away.” So I hired two men that had to do all the rough work in the wooden shoes. One man was Mr. Bower and the other man was Mr. Abers. They helped me—and I could pay them good, too, at that time—in making the shoes. Instead of getting the twenty-four hundred from October until the middle of December, I reached fourteen hundred pair of wooden shoes. I made them, and I know the price at that time was 90 cents a pair. So there was good money in those.

That was the beginning of making the large wooden shoes for me. Then in 1932, Mr. Van Tongeren’s business grew that he had to have a larger place.

DVR: What business did he have, really? Mr. Van Tongeren?

FO: Mr. Van Tongeren sold, at that time, a lot of wooden candles, decorated candles that were all alike, through the ten cent stores. He had a few other items that he had, but the main thing was still the wooden shoes. He had besides that just a little other work, but the orders became so large that there had to be more room and it was necessary to advance, to make progress and to do some more. In that time, Van Tongeren came and said, “What about if we both would go down 8th Street? There is a building for rent,” which was later on called the Jobber’s Outlet. It was on the corner of 6th and River Avenue. We rented that, and we went in there in 1932. Then in 1933, the World’s Fair came in Chicago, which gave us quite a boost. This was right in the middle of the Depression at that time, and, instead of being out of work, I had to hire more help. So when we were there, not very long after that, we worked with the nine of us in the Jobber’s Outlet, and I had to buy more machines.

Then we also had a window in the front where we put a wooden shoemaker. At that time, we had a family coming here from the Netherlands, which was a wooden shoemaker, and he started to work with wooden shoes for me almost immediately as they came. I had him on big wooden shoes, making wooden shoes for me. His name was Mr. Gary Ten Brink. He worked until the day he died for me. He was making the wooden shoes by hand. This was in 1934-35. Then he was working, making wooden shoes by hand in the window. This, again, drew a lot of the tourists that came through here, so the wooden shoe industry did increase from year to year. It was that we could not make enough shoes, almost from the beginning.

In '29, the first wooden shoe dancers came and they needed shoes, but we could not supply them. A lot of the shoes at that time could be bought at Sears & Roebuck; they had regular stock in the catalog of wooden shoes.

DVR: Where did they get them?

FO: They had a source in Wisconsin where the shoes were made. I'll have to give you a detailed story of that a little later yet. There were shoes bought, and so there were shoes imported from the Netherlands, too, that the wooden shoe dancers would have wooden shoes. This went on with a capacity that was not sufficient every year a little more until 1939 when I was desperate in getting shoes made, and desperate in getting enough shoes. We knew that there was a place that sold the shoes to Sears & Roebuck in Wisconsin. I said to my wife, "We're going to take a little vacation and go to Wisconsin and find where that wooden shoe machine is." We found it in _____, Wisconsin, which is about 35 miles northwest of Sheboygan. There I came and found a wooden shoe machine, all complete, all set up, and I talked to the owner, which was a lady. Her

husband had built one machine and had rebuilt another machine, had built his own boring machine—complete thing made by him. He was a genius. But, that man landed in the insane asylum in Milwaukee, where he died. I asked the lady, “Are you willing to sell the wooden shoe machines?” She didn’t know what to say to me. She said, “I’ve had that for sale for two years now, and you are the first one that asked, ‘Are you willing to sell the wooden shoe machines?’” So I said, “Yeah. You give me the price and I’ll tell you if I want them or not.” “I have to see my lawyer. Will you come back this afternoon?” “Yes, I will.” We go back to their house in the afternoon and she said, “Yeah, I talked it over with the lawyer.” Then she said, “It is for sale for \$1,000.” I said, “Okay, it is sold. I’ll give you a down payment now, and I’ll give you the complete payment when I come back.” “Everything that is here, including the shoes that are half-made, full-made, all that is here, for \$1,000.” So, that was that, and we went back home again, but I was not home only one night and took my pickup and went back and got the shoes that were made there. I had some 600 pair of wooden shoes on my pickup, which pretty near paid three quarters of the price of the whole business. So I had a good deal there. In 1939, we started to make the shoes on the machines.

DVR: Okay, let’s go back, first of all. This man that invented all this machinery, was he a German or a Dutchman?

FO: He was a German.

DVR: Let’s go back a little bit further. You mentioned the World’s Fair. That was in 1932 or 1933 in Chicago.

FO: ‘33.

DVR: You were involved in that? Tell me.

FO: Yes, I was in Chicago, a demonstration for the World's Fair.

DVR: For who? For the state of Michigan? For the city of Holland?

FO: No, it was through the Dutch representing the Netherlands that I was demonstrating the wooden shoes in Chicago.

DVR: Okay. And how long were you in Chicago with that?

FO: Two or three days that I was there, only.

DVR: Oh, I see.

FO: After 1939, I made the wooden shoes on West 22nd Street, the corner of Ottawa Avenue and West 22nd Street. I had a lumber shed there, built in '36, and I enlarged it to _____ the wooden shoe factory alongside it. So then my interests, because I was then a manufacturer of wooden souvenirs on River Avenue, I was not really too happy employing a big group of people. I didn't like that, so I told Van Tongeren, "I'm ready to sell. You better buy what I have here. I'll go out to the 27th Street and follow-up, only making wooden shoes." We agreed on that, and that happened to be in '43. In 1943, I sold all that I had, the machinery that I had there, to Van Tongeren, and I followed up the wooden shoes. From then, I made wooden shoes with the help of two men only, working for me. It's true, between '39 and when I was 65, I had completed 300,000 pair of wooden shoes that I made, outside of the souvenirs. But, I had the machines set up and I did invent myself on the machine quite a few things, which helped me in making the souvenir shoes. I made the 4-inch souvenir shoes on that same machine and turned them out in rapid order. So, the wooden shoe industry has been my joy, it has been my hobby, it has been my livelihood. I am 81 years-old today, and I still do enjoy just as much as I did the first day, although the strength is not as much anymore

as then. I sometimes do not like to go anymore to the shop because I'm getting a little bit tired, but I still enjoy it. Today, I am just about the main man there in the wooden shoe factory. In fact, if I would not make the patterns, which I used to make the wooden shoes of in the wooden shoe factory on the machines that they have now, they could not run. It takes a wooden shoemaker—what I mean by wooden shoemaker, it takes one that can make a wooden shoe by hand, all complete, in order to run a wooden shoe factory. The sad thing is there is none here now that I know of that could take my place. It happens again and again. It is not the outside of the shoe that interests me at all. It is the inside of the shoe which I want to have exactly, because I do not want to have complaints of the feet. The feet never lie.

DVR: So, you now work at 16th Street and the bypass. Do you own that at all, or are you just an employee?

FO: No. When I retired, I sold all my machines. Let me say this: when I thought I retired, but it turned out to be just a little different because they could not continue without me, so I had to be there and I have been there ever since making shoes. The main thing is to keep up the wooden shoe pattern. It's made out of wood, and if the ball runs on the inside of that hollowed-out shoe, or a guide running over the outside to shape the shoe, it's wearing that wood. It only lasts so long and then the pattern is not useable anymore, so it has to be replaced by a new pattern. Now that is just the thing that the new pattern is made as it's supposed to be.

DVR: Now, you mentioned all the machinery. Is that machinery that is used for making wooden shoes now, is that a common form of machinery, or is that special for wooden shoes?

[Recording ends; end of interview]