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## Janssens, John Oral History Interview: Class Projects

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Oral History Interview  
Interviewee: John Janssens  
Interviewer: Mike Miner  
October 8, 1999

MM: What is your name?

JJ: John Janssens

MM: Where were you born?

JJ: I was born in the Netherlands.

MM: What city?

JJ: 1933, city of Groningen

MM: How long did you live there before coming to the United States?

JJ: I was 21 when I left, so I was 21 when I came here.

MM: Tell me a little about your family back in the Netherlands.

JJ: Ok, my dad was a preacher and he was married. And my mom and dad had nine kids, and I was the middle one of nine. Four were older, four were younger.

MM: Can you tell me a little bit about your lifestyle. Were you guys a wealthy family, or..

JJ: No, I came from a very poor family. There was not enough to eat when I grew up. And besides that when I was a young kid, we went to the war, Second World War, which made everything docturory and my dad was away from home for a long time, oldest brother was away for a long time. And it was a very, very tough time. No food, no heat, no clothes, no light, no nothing.

MM: Do you think that made you a harder working person- to succeed in life?

JJ: Yeah, plus what I knew, were my dad was through with the deep depression, and then what we had in the war had to do with almost nothing. That made me very conscious of having to work hard to get anything and once you have anything at all you make due with what you got.

MM: What was it like in your home town in the Netherlands?

JJ: I lived in a little village.

MM: How many people?

JJ: Probably 120 to 200, no more. And most everybody went to the church my dad was a preacher at, and we knew everybody by name and everybody knew us by name. There was a church and a Christian school and there were the main buildings in town. It was quite a peaceful living until the Germans came.

MM: What happened when the Germans came? Did they wreck the whole town?

JJ: They took our church building and made it into a horse stable. They had, of all things, a lot of horses in their army. They took the school building and made it into barracks. So there was no more school and there was no more church that we had.

MM: You went to grade school in that city?

JJ: Yep, I went to grade school in a little village, Scouwers Isle, and then I went to high school in the city of Groningen. And then I went to college in the city of Groningen.

MM: What was high school and college like in Groningen?

JJ: Very different than here. I went there to be educated and there was no sports connected with it at all, it just wasn't done. We had class from 8 in the morning 'till 4 in the afternoon five days a week and Saturday mornings from 8 to 12. And we had *loads* of

homework that you could not get done unless you worked on it hard 'till midnight.

Everyday.

MM: So there was no extracurricular activities?

JJ: Nope, we didn't do that, nope, we went to school to get educated. Sports was something else that you could participate in and was organized by the village.

MM: After graduating from college, where did you first work?

JJ: I worked for an engineering consulting office in the city of Groningen for a little while. I graduated in June, and the next year, early February we left and went to the states.

MM: So you were working the same job until you left?

JJ: I worked the same job until we left and went to the states.

MM: What did you do for fun in the Netherlands?

JJ: I always was very good at mechanical things, and so I had my mechanical things at home that my mother and dad bought- mechanical set, and I worked on farms. They were huge, big farms where I grew up. And on the farms you had lots of equipment, and it was fun for me to run the equipment even as a little boy. In fact as a little boy I was hauled out of school from time to time to see if I could fix whatever it was to be fixed on that farm equipment. And I am still a farmer at heart. I love farm equipment.

MM: Did you participate in any sports?

JJ: Nope

MM: Did you watch any sports on the television and did you even have a television?

JJ: Nope, we had no television, we had the radio, but I never got involved in sports. Neither out there or here. No. The sports section of the paper I never open up.

MM: Your family was active, obviously, in the church. How active were you? How much did you go every week?

JJ: My dad was a preacher and we all went to church on sundays twice, and during the week I went to Catechism class- an hour, and I went to meetings of young boys, which was an hour somewhere in the week, and of course being raised and going to a Christian school, there was a lot of Bible lesson in school too. Character building Bible lessons. It was all part of being raised.

MM: Did most children in the Netherlands go to church there? Many children these days do not attend church. Did all the children go to church there?

JJ: When I grew up, more than 50 percent of the people in the Netherlands were Catholic. Catholic was the predominant religion. However where I grew up, Northern and Protestant people were by far now the majority. And there were only a very few people who did not attend church. Going to church and belonging to church, and doing your part, was normal everyday life and was understood to be done.

MM: Did you enjoy going to church?

JJ: Yeah, there was nothing wrong with that. No, I did. And I prided myself, in fact I still do, that I know few sections of the Bible by heart as well as just about 100 percent of the Dutch Psalmbook too.

MM: What led to your decision to leave from the Netherlands?

JJ: That was more as on my wives side than my side. She had relatives here and I got to know her, and the people she knew here are the Meijers people- the big store Meijers. I met Mr. Meijers in the Netherlands when he visited my in-laws. And he talked my

brothers-in-law to come and work for him in Grand Rapids, and then my in-laws went also to retire here, and then we left and went there too. Although I've never been involved with Meijers. As an engineer here, there were no jobs for me of course. But I simply followed the in-laws here to the States.

MM: Did you have any concerns before leaving?

JJ: No, you know I was foolish, and young, and married, and I had a lot of guts so I simply said that I am going to America. They will offer more opportunity than here, and I said "bye-bye" to my mom and dad who were very, very sad. They already had two sons left. One went to Canada, one went to Africa. And I was the third one leaving. I hardly gave it a second thought and I was on my way already to America.

MM: Did you have any second guesses on your way over?

JJ: Nope, nope I did not look back- I said to myself "I'm gonna make the best of it once I'm there, and I will work as hard as I can, and I will make myself a good future there".

MM: Why did you come to Holland instead of any other American city?

JJ: I didn't come to Holland, I came to Grand Rapids, Michigan. Because that's where the Meijers headquarters were and that's where my in-laws were. And that's where they wanted to live, so I simply followed and I landed in Grand Rapids, Michigan, got a job immediately. And stayed there from 1955 when I arrived 'till 1992 when I moved to Holland, Michigan.

MM: What did people say back in the Netherlands about living in America? Did they have in opinions towards Americans?

JJ: They went from lucky boy, you can go to America, because you have to have a quota number. Not everybody could get here. I got a quota number through my in-laws to get here. It went from lucky boy to 'you fool, you had a big education and now you leave, you could have made a big living and good living in Holland just as well. And anywhere in between'.

MM: Was there any stereotypes of Americans? Any differences when you came over?

JJ: No, I came here with a open mind. And I thought 'we'll find out when we get there', and I tell you America has changed a lot since 1955 when we arrived here 'till now.

MM: Did you have any trouble with your Visa?

JJ: No, I had that all figured out real well before we ever left, and the paper work was slick. We did not have any problem at all, the paper work was inspected, over and over and over before we left and once you were in Hoboken, New York, and there was no flaw in it at all.

MM: How did you come over?

JJ: By boat.

MM: How long was the ride?

JJ: 11 days, and it was kind of a pleasant trip. Early spring in February. We played a lot of cards, we read a lot books, we talked to a lot of people, and we talked to a lot of Germans all the time. There were a lot of German people on the boat- they Germans came to the States too.

MM: Was it luxurious?

JJ: Yes, in my book it was a luxurious trip. We had a nice cabin, my wife and I.

MM: What was your first impression of the United States when you came over?

JJ: We got a note from the captain of the boat. All you people that want now to leave the boat and we'll go to Central Station, watch out! Taxi drivers will take you for a ride, they will claim it's an hour and a half ride, but its not. Its a half hour ride. And you should not pay more than so much to a taxi driver. If he tells you more than that, then you got the wrong one. So we were warned about the Americans before we even got off the boat. We had a nice taxi driver. I said to the taxi driver, "it's only half an hour ride, but take a little longer, show us a little bit of New York. He said 'how much more do you want too see?'. I said '15 more minutes'. And he did, he was a very polite man and he showed us quite a few things of Manhattan while we road from the boat to the central station. He was a nice man.

MM: Where the building quite different from the Netherlands?

JJ: Yes, I was not used to big cities to begin with. And New York, of course, is one of the bigger cities, and I feasted my eyes on it, I thought 'man, did I get to see this'. I thought it was terrific, and I loved it. And then at night, the train left Central Station and there we went and it was cold, and it was much colder on land then on the ocean. Soon the windows froze over, couldn't see a thing outside and the train went from New York north to Albany, and then it went west to Buffalo, and then into Canada, over London, Canada and then we got out again in Detroit.

MM: How did people treat you on the ride?

JJ: Very nice, we felt very safe- very much at home.

MM: What was your first job in America?



JJ: I came over to Grand Rapids, and the next Monday I started a job at a company called Keela Brass, and I did piece work on the buffing wheel. Where no one has to talk about anything. The foreman showed me how to do it and I buffed hardware for the automotive industry. And I did that for about 4 weeks. And it was strictly piece work, strictly a job. And I didn't like it, but you had to get started some how. And then people moved me from there into the maintenance department- now I was back home to tools. Toolbox, maintaining machinery and I loved it. I could do that well. In fact, one of the big things I did at Keela, I overhauled a steam turbine. Took it all apart, rebuilt what had to be rebuilt, put it back together, and I liked it. Until my wife said some day, 'are you going to stay there forever doing machinery repair work? Aren't you gonna go back to engineering?' And I thought, 'yeah, I should get back into engineering'.

MM: So then you went to a new job?

JJ: Yep, then I looked through the papers and I got a new job. I started with a company and I stuck with them for 18 years. Then I left. The name was Oliver Machinery Company. After 18 years I quit and had a job with a company who had conveyor systems and I liked that better. It was a good company. But I traveled world-wide and I was away from home too much. I made trips six weeks out, two weeks home, six weeks out, and it was not good for my growing family. So I went back to Oliver's. I should not have done that, but I did go back to Olivers, and again I was chief engineer. I stayed in the engineering department for another nine years, and I had 27 years in. Then I got fired because I was no good. New management took over, the son took

over- it was a company that was family owned. and he fired me. Which was quite devastating. That's when I learned to deal with reality of American life. That was 1972.

MM: What did you do from there?

JJ: I started my own business in engineering. I started to design machinery as I had done all of my life. Particularly wood working machinery. I set myself up in business at home, solicited work, and it took off quite well, and I like it. It didn't take too long and I had a job offer from Herman Miller Company. Herman Miller Furniture. Who I considered being their manager of engineering. And I thought it was too good of job to pass up, so I took that job. And I folded down my own business at home and I went to work for Herman Miller. And I might say this became the best 15 years of my career. In many regards. The way I was treated, the way I could operate, the way I was paid. I thought the world of Herman Miller and the longer I was there, the more I thought of Herman Miller. Terrific company- terrific. After being there 15 years, I retired. Now I was 65, 64 and I retired. A nice retirement luncheon. Before the luncheon started, the man in charge said, "one more question now before we do this. Do you want to change your mind yet and stay with us or not?" "No, I want to retire". He said, "okay, then we'll go on with the retire luncheon, otherwise you'll change the name of it and you'll say it's a celebration of you staying with us". "Nope, I'm gonna get out". And that's now 2 and a half years ago that I have been retired.

MM: Are you enjoying it, your retirement?

JJ: Yep, there are all kinds of things that you can do when you are retired.

MM: When you came over to America, did people accept you, or were they mean and hard to get along with?

JJ: No, people have not been mean to me or hard to get along with. I always felt I got a very fair, probably better than fair, shake. We were church members here right away, and we had the privilege to serve in consistories of churches we've gone to many times. And my wife as well. I never was treated here like I was a second class citizen at all. No. My opinions were always valued and I was asked to give my opinions and I was always led to believe that my input was valued.

MM: What made you come to Holland?

JJ: Because I got kind of sick of driving in the morning and at night to Herman Miller, which was a good 30 miles. Herman Miller, at the time, said if you will drive, we will give you a van, and then you take other people along. So he gave us a van, 'see how many people you could sign up'. And I had a 15 passenger van, and I had it full, and I drove people to work in the morning and at night I took em back home. Which was kind of a neat thing to do at first, but later on it was a bit too much because you had to be exactly on time. I had 4 or 5 stops and when the clock said go, I went. Sometimes people would be left behind, would be mad. Well, I did it for ten years and then I said 'hey, that's enough of that, I wanna move to Holland- live close to work'. And we did, we built this house here.

MM: Are you enjoying living here in Holland?

JJ: Yeah.

MM: Better than in Grand Rapids?

JJ: I like it better because we live out in nature here. And I like wild life around the house. We have a lot of wildlife here. We feed em all, and it's kind fun to live here. This is a good place to live.

MM: It is very diverse here in Holland. Do you like that idea?

JJ: Yes. I like that too. When you go to any one store, you see people with all kinds of nationalities, backgrounds and I like that. That's great I think. You see a lot of Mexican people of course. Spanish people. You here a lot of different languages. And I always think this, hey this is just great. This is just neat.

MM: Have you ever had any problems with anyone?

JJ: No, not at all. In fact, I like it. In fact, I like it a lot. We have a lot of migrant workers, these people are called, right in this neighborhood. Which will disappear again, pretty soon, some of them have left already. And they all show up again in spring. And it gives just this whole thing an extra boost, and I like it.

MM: How have you kept in touch with your family and friends back in the Netherlands?

JJ: By letter, by phone, and I have made many, many trips. In fact, there was one year that I went once a month back to Europe. On the average, I have gone at least twice a year. And now through email. I send emails very often with my siblings back in Europe. Which I think is just a neat thing to do. You can send it in the morning and at night you have an answer. It's fun.

MM: Do you miss them a lot?

JJ: No, I cannot say that I miss them. I stay close enough in contact with them to know how things are. There's a picture up there, when I went to my dad's birthday- he

turned 90. And a whole lot of his descendants showed up for his birthday party- about 50, and it was fun to meet a lot of them. I have gone to many birthday parties back there, many of my sisters, brothers. And that's kind of fun to do. We went to a family reunion, was in September last year- full day. Met all my brothers and their spouses and sisters and their spouses.

MM: So you really enjoy going back?

JJ: The travel is a bother, but being there is nice.

MM: How long by flight?

JJ: 8 hours.

MM: Where do you think the best place to raise a kid is, here in the United States, or back in the Netherlands?

JJ: I have traveled a lot worldwide, and I always thought to myself, 'if you want to raise kids, then West Michigan is a pretty good place'. West Michigan is a pretty good place because you have a lot of back up from churches and from schools here, which I think have done a lot of good for this little family and my boys and girl. And I said that many times to my wife. I think there's hardly a better place to raise kids than in West Michigan. Also, better than in the Netherlands. What I see, what goes on out there and of course, the Netherlands is very, very liberal now. Far more than it was when we grew up. I think it's good for us not to have raised kids out there. I could give you many examples of that. Drugs are legal out there, and euthanasia is practiced out there on older people or are not fully with their mind anymore, and there are all kind of things that I frown on and I think 'boy I wish they hadn't done it, and I hope it never

gets that way in West Michigan'.

MM: Do you have any children?

JJ: My wife and I have 4, plus the in-law kids and 7 grand kids.

MM: Where are your children living now?

JJ: Grand Rapids, Zeeland, Holland, and North Carolina.

MM: Where did they go to college?

JJ: All four have gone through Calvin College. Came out of there with good grades.

MM: Did they enjoy their child life here in America?

JJ: Yeah, we would take em on vacations, and I know they all look back on nice episodes in there life when they grew up. And they will tell you about that.

MM: In what ways has your life changed the most by coming to America?

JJ: I visualize that quite soon, everything here is faster paced than back there. Much faster. We've got to hurry up here. We got things to do. We have no time to smell the roses. We got no time to relax, and even now that we are retired, we have a problem slowing down. We think we have to cram everyday full with activities, and we almost do everyday. Which I think is too bad, but that's how we are. Even now when we are retired I have a very active calendar, and my wife has too. On Sunday nights we sit down together and say 'now when do we meet each other in this house'. Because she has those things to do and I have my things to do. Except now I pick out things that I like to do. That's the fun part of being retired. I got trained as a Steven Minister in church, and I visit old people or handicap people. I do Meals-on-Wheels, I just did that this morning. I council people who are tied up and got their finances all

puzzled away and don't know how to get out of debt. I sit down with them and council them and work it out for them. These kind of things for which we had no time before, I now do. But soon you get yourself tied up in that 100 percent and then there is no time for anything else anyway.

MM: Tell me a little bit more about Meals-on-Wheels, do you enjoy doing that?

JJ: Yeah, I did it this morning. And I delivered this morning 18 meals. And that's typical too. They're almost all to women, because there are no old men, there are oodles of old women. And they're housebound, and often times, I help them get to the table. Set the food in front of them. Find fork, spoon and knife. Open the food. 'Are you all set mam, can you handle it from here?' 'Yep'. I've also sat down with them and feed em. 'Open your mouth please, a little more', till the food is gone. And then I think about myself. Gee, three years ago, I wouldn't think about doing this. I was way too busy-to make a buck, to make money. Now, at least, I have time for this. And then some of these women, they sit there and I'm the only person all day long they see. No one else comes. No one. So you spread a little friendly word. Almost all ask ya, 'How's the weather today?', because they don't get outside. They have no contact with no one. Yeah, I like to do that.

MM: Do you ever think what life would have been if you would have stayed in the Netherlands?

JJ: I can almost accurately predict how life would have been. One of my cousins had exactly the same education that I had. I have visited with one of my brothers who has about the same amount of education, although in a different field. So I can compare

very, very easily. The one brother who has also raised four kids as we did. He has a education in teaching, became a principle of a very large high school. And I thought if I had followed his line of education, I could have done that too. And he financially did very well. In our time in America, we three times build a new house. He also built three times a new house. He goes on long, big vacations further and farther than we do, and all and all my kids look from him to me and me to him and they say, 'man does he look like you'. Yes he does. Had I been there, the only thing-everything is much smaller, much smaller. And it's cramped, and it's nice to be there for awhile- 2 weeks, 3 weeks and then to go back to America where the open spaces are, and I like it here.

MM: So you do not have any regrets of coming over?

JJ: No

MM: You would do it again?

JJ: I would.

MM: What sort of hobbies do you do around here?

JJ: I have more life around the house that I seem to attract more and more. I have built a lot of bird houses and the bird houses were quite full this year. In fact, as I like to say, we raised 20 new birds this year. Ten blue birds and ten rents. We feed wild turkeys in the back yard. Now I have bought a lot of corn again and we'll feed deer pretty soon. I have quite a few bird feeders up all year round, and I love to see what kind of birds come. I like to play with my computers, here's one, I've got a few more in here. And that's kind of fun. And now that we are retired, I like to visit people, and I do that quite a bit. And I'm active here at the Port Sheldon township hall, where we



supervise the design and building of a new firebarn- firestation, which was fun. Cost 750,000 dollars and I thought the whole project turned out just super nice.

MM: Do you have any strange stories when coming over?

JJ: Not so much weird, but I made kind of a bet with my wife that I wouldn't get sea sick and she said she wouldn't get seasick. And we left the harbor of Rotterdam, which is connected to the North Sea with a long canal. And at the end of the canal, that's about 20 miles long, there was a boat still stuck on the dunes, on the beach, and it had been there for a couple of weeks. We read about it in the paper, it was called "The Faust", I remember that. We looked at it, you know what, we were actually within land yet- I got seasick already. We were not even one mile out into the ocean- I got seasick. And not a little bit and I thought 'oh man, I wish I was not on this boat'. For being seasick is a miserable experience. You get green in the face and you can not eat and you throw up and there's no where you can go. And so I lost that bet right away. Later on there was some medication that I took and I survived, but when the ocean was nice and flat, it was fun. But when the boat start to get wobbly, then I was sick again. Later on here I bought a sailboat and now I have a power boat as well, and I still have to watch that. If I do funny things with my boat I can still get sea sick. If i lay down in my boat because it's a nap or whatever, no I cannot do that- I still get seasick.

MM: Was there a lot of Dutch immigrants in Grand Rapids when you went over there?

JJ: Yeah, in Grand Rapids when we arrived, we were welcomed by lots of Dutch immigrants, and they lived all in Grand Rapids, and they all wanted us to come over and say "hi". You could speak Dutch all day long if you wanted to. In fact I can also

speak a couple dialects from the Netherlands. I found quite a few people that could speak the same dialect I spoke. Makes you feel quite at home.

MM: Is it the same thing here in Holland?

JJ: Yes, less because no new immigrants are coming anymore. The new immigrants that are coming here are coming from Asia or from Mexico. But Dutch new immigrants are not coming, because the economy out there is set that people just assume stay there.

MM: Now the Netherlands is half way under the water without dams?

JJ: They have a super nice way of keeping the polars dry. The people that are in charge are to be trusted for 150 percent, and they are- called babaarschaap. Years ago they pumped the waters up with the big windmills, and the windmills are still standing there, and they're still turning around when the American tourists are coming. But they're not pumping water. That's all done electrically, all these big diesel engines. And I went to see quite a few of them. And to keep Holland from drowning, those pumps are moving water all of the time, all the time. That's a very important thing, if they don't Holland will drown.

MM: Did you live in an area where one of those was broken?

JJ: It happened to be high ground where I was raised born and stayed. But in 1953, when we were still there, a large section of the province of Zeeland was flooded, and many people drowned and it was a catastrophe. That was simply due to a very bad storm combined with high water in the first place, and people were surprised by water in their bedrooms and drowned. Could not get out nowhere.

MM: Do people live in fear? Do they live everyday just to live the day, instead of worried

about what happens if the water comes through?

JJ: No, I'm surprised because they have many new pieces of land made out of the bottom of the sea, and they would first build big dikes and then start pumping and you would find ship wrecks and all kinds of things. And after a couple of years, the bottom is not sandy and not salty anymore- you can raise crops. And people start moving in and of course those people are living below the water level. And no one pays attention that it might be dangerous because the systems are virtually fool proof. And if you ever fly into the Skippo airport, the big airport of the Netherlands, which is considerable- that's a big, big airport. That is something like 4, 5 meters under the sea level. The whole airport it. But no one pays attention. That's fine, everybody knows the fellows in charge are taking their job very seriously and have proper equipment.

MM: How did people discover the land could be pushed back by water or whatever?

JJ: You can do it anywhere. You know, whatever lake you look at, there must be a bottom of the lake. So that, at first, Holland start to pump empty the inland lakes. Some of them are considerable big. And they simply pumped the water out of these lakes, till the inland lakes became dry land. And when that was all reclaimed and became farming ground, then they said 'now, we need still more ground', so they started to simply build a dike out into the ocean and turned around that dike, till it finally hit the earth again 20, 30 miles upstream. And now they start pumping water out it over the dike. I follow that quite closely with some of them. The building of the dike, first. And then they would underwater make ditches, every so many miles across way. And

then on the main ditch, they would build the pump- big diesel insulation, and start pumping. And all the water would collect in these ditches and it all would go to the big diesel pump. And slowly you would see dry land appear. And what I always was amazed at, dry land is now there and wildlife moves in. Where the wildlife would come from, I often have wondered. But birds, even deer would find it very attractive to go in there and live there.

MM: What is the wildlife like compared to the United States?

JJ: Smaller, the Netherlands is much smaller, because the country is much smaller and many more people. There is not a whole lot of space for wild life. But the wildlife they have, they take care of. Much better than we do here. When a highway goes in, through a certain section, then always it's first determined 'is there is wildlife here?' And if there's wildlife, what kind of wildlife is it. And then the highway is supposed to be built in such a way so the wildlife can cross the highway, underneath as through tunnels or over head. But the wildlife is taken care, so the wildlife does not have to be crossing on the road or on the pavement and get killed. People prevent that. There's not such a carnage of wildlife as we see here.

MM: Is there anything else you wanted to add to this interview? Any last thoughts?

JJ: Generally speaking, America has been good to us. It has been a good place for us and I like it here.

MM: Thanks a lot