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Raffenaud, Mrs. Oral History Interview: General Holland History

Don van Reken

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Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Mrs. Raffenaud (MR)

Interviewer: Don van Reken (DVR)

Also includes an unidentified voice (UV)

June 20, 1979

Abstract: Daughter of Jack Peterson, the animal trainer at Getz Zoo/Lakewood Farm.

DVR: Good morning. Today is June 20, 1979. I'm at the home of Mrs. Raffenaud, in a mobile home. Mrs. Raffenaud is the daughter of Mr. Jack Peterson, who used to work for Getz Farm. Mrs. Raffenaud, when did you move to Getz Farm? Do you remember?

MR: See, Dad worked there before we were born, before he was married. Then for some reason he went to Chicago, but coming back to Lakewood, I was about 6 years old, something like that, when we moved.

DVR: Now this is dating you, sort of. When you say 6 years old, what year would that be just about?

MR: Well, let's see. That would be about 1923, something like that.

DVR: Where was your Dad born? When was he born?

MR: He was born October 20, 1890, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and moved to Chicago and was brought up by his grandparents because of the diphtheria epidemic; he lost all his brothers and sisters that way. He went to work as an animal man, hired by Charlie Jackson, the farm manager in 1915.

DVR: That was the farm manager of Getz Farm then.

MR: Right, and a friend of Dad's, and I think that's how he was hired.

DVR: Was he married then in 1915?

MR: No, he met mother at a party given by Mrs. Jackson, and they were married the 3rd of June, 1916. He became the father of six daughters, four of these went to the little brick one-room schoolhouse.

DVR: Where was that?

MR: That was at Lakewood. All the farm people went to this little school.

DVR: When he married, he was working at Getz Farm?

MR: He was working at the farm when he was married. He worked at the farm before he was married, and he met mother there, and then worked there for I don't know how many years.

DVR: What kind of work was he doing at first, would you have ideas? Later on, he was an animal trainer. What was he doing at first?

MR: He was always with the animals. That was his love. That was mine, too, as much as Dad's. He always worked with them. It was a very small place at first, and gradually became larger and larger.

DVR: Did Mr. Getz have wild animals there, these zoo kind of animals at first? Or did he just have peacocks and fowls and pigeons and things like that? Or did he run both at the same time?

MR: Both at the same time. As far as I can remember, they used to go on these African safaris, and we always had new animals coming in: cats, lions, tigers, monkey, and one elephant. But as far as I know, they never had a giraffe.

DVR: Was that an African elephant or an Indian elephant?

MR: That was an Indian elephant named Nancy, a very friendly elephant.

DVR: Do you have any stories about Nancy?

MR: Oh yeah, Nancy used to be taken out and we'd take rides on her. She'd kneel down so we could get up, and we'd go around the farm and also she gave rides to other visitors, the visitors of Mr. Getz. They would take the children and give them a ride.

DVR: Did you ride on bareback then?

MR: Oh, yeah. We rode right behind the ears on the neck. That's the way they rode them out in Africa. As far as I know, they never had a little thing that...I never saw it anyway.

DVR: You mentioned cats. They had how many different kinds of cats at the farm?

MR: Oh, they had the lions and the tigers. They had leopards—one snow leopard, and one leopard that was the favorite of my Dad's, named Kip. He used to come to the cage all the time to be scratched. You couldn't do that with the other ones. He was called Snowball.

DVR: Were there any baby cats ever? Young ones that you could baby or nurse?

MR: As far as I remember, there were never any cubs to my knowledge. If there was before, I never heard of it. There might have been, I don't know. Well, let's see, they had ocelots and linx. I think that's about all in the cat family.

DVR: What about snakes?

MR: Well, they had plenty of those. They had a snake room with a variety of just plain snakes, everyday snakes that we'd find around here. There were rattlers; we had swamp rattlers. My dad used to go out in the pine grove and catch these little swamp rattlers. They also had a couple of python. One was quite a large one; I think he was about 31 feet, if I'm not mistaken. And that one, the first one, had to be force fed. They'd take him out and it'd take about—oh, I would say...I can almost count them—about seven or eight men to hold this snake out straight, and then they'd put a bar in the mouth with a

hole in it, and they'd run this hose down into the stomach of the snake and pump this food into him. He wouldn't eat by himself. They got another one, one time, a big fellow too. And he was in a glass—glassed in, in the indoors, a great big huge area there, and that one there fed himself.

DVR: What'd they feed him? Rats? Mice?

MR: Rabbits, chickens, anything live that they could put in there, he'd eat. They had the black snakes and the blue racers and the little...oh, we had hog-nose snakes or puff adder. We had one as a pet at home, too, we used to carry in our pocket, take wherever we went.

DVR: Take him to school?

MR: We didn't take him to school, but I took him to the place where I used to work in the drugstore and surprised a few people. But they're harmless. They look ugly, but they're harmless and they're big babies. And let's see. On the first of the week, the trucks used to bring in loads up from the bakeries: day-old bread and buns and that type of thing for the animals that ate that or had that in their diets. For the cats and the other animals that ate meat, I remember they used to buy —just disabled and blind, you know—old horses, and they'd be out in the field in the back of my house. I always wanted a horse of my own. Always. So, those were my pets. I'd go out and I'd pet them. We couldn't ride them; they were too weak, but they still liked to be petted and fed an apple or two. That was for the lions and tigers, all the animals that ate meat.

DVR: They were fed every day then?

MR: They were fed every day, at night. Their cages and everything were kept so nice and clean. It was very, very seldom that you had any dirty looks or smells there in the cat farm at all. And that goes with the whole farm; everything was clean and neat, and it was

washed down. All the cement, all the walks and everything were washed down every night.

DVR: How many men did Mr. Getz have on the farm then? He must have had a lot of help.

MR: Oh dear, I never really counted them, but they had a man for the gardens, and he had his helpers, at least two or three or more. Then they had the orchards, and they had two or three there—a head man there and two or three there helping. Dad had three men working under him. And the clean-up people, my gosh, I don't know. I would say about fifty people, something like that.

DVR: I heard they had a dormitory for single men.

MR: They had a dormitory for single men, and that's where my dad was before he met my mother. And that's where he did meet her, because they used to have square dances. One little lady that lived way down the line there, she used to be a caller, and they'd have her there. After my dad was married and had me, we'd come along. We used to go, too, and have the best time square dancing. It was lots of fun. After dad was married, of course, he had to leave the dormitory.

DVR: Did he move into one of Mr. Getz's houses?

MR: Not right away. We lived in two other houses first until there was one vacant, and then we moved to Hilltop. I was about, I would say, eight or nine years old when we moved to Hilltop, and that was one of Getz's cottages. He had a whole line of them along the lakefront, and those cottages in the summertime were occupied by Senator Vandenberg and Governor Green and all the special friends of Mr. Getz. Mr. Hickman. I remember on Saturdays, sometimes on Sunday, but not very often, he'd have movies for the farm people and their children and his guests. The guests would all be on one side and the

farm people on the other side, and we'd see a full-length movie and the cartoons and everything. That was a big night for us.

DVR: You mentioned gardens.

MR: Oh, the gardens were beautiful. They were all, more or less, scientifically raised.

Everything was perfected. It was just perfection in itself. The vegetables that we got from the gardens, we'd store in the basement for the winter, but we had no furnace or anything. The basements were cool and dry, and that's where we kept all our cabbages and carrots and onions and apples, potatoes, and the whole works, we kept down in bins down in the basement. And that's what we had all winter long. But their greenhouses, where they specialized in different things like their grapes and melons, and even their tomatoes. The grapes were about the size of a plum; they were so big and so heavy. The bunches were, I would say, about, oh, I think that's about twelve inches long, with these just huge grapes on, purple grapes, Concord grapes. And they'd put them in little snoots, little nets, to hold them up so they wouldn't break off of the vines. The same went for melons, too, their muskmelons. And boy, they were just delicious. Tomatoes the same way—one tomato would be just huge, just like these great big beefsteak tomatoes that were just, oh, luscious. People were allowed to go through those greenhouses, too, to see them. They couldn't touch.

DVR: Mr. Getz lived there full-time? Or did he just come there weekends?

MR: He had a year-round house and, if I can recall, I think it was his sister that lived there with him. I don't know much about Mr. Getz's wife. It was always his sister, more or less, that kept the house. He was there most of the time, except when he'd go to Chicago or he'd go on these safaris. As the boys—his two sons, Jim and George—got older, at

least George used to go once in a while; George Jr. used to go on these safaris. Jim, the youngest one, we used to get such a big kick out of it. The gates would be closed at a certain time to the farm, and he'd come with his car—he had a green convertible. I don't know, I imagine it was like a Lincoln years ago. It had a great big long chrome snake on the fender and the running board that was the horn. It was the funniest sounding thing. That is stuck in my mind, that darn snake.

DVR: Were the boys around there very much?

MR: Not too much. In the summertime sometimes, it seems like they were away, probably at school. We never really paid too much attention. When they were there, they were there, you noticed them, you know. When they were little boys, they went there, but I don't think they ever went to that little schoolhouse that we used to go to. I think they were more or less in Chicago, going to school there. I'm not sure, but it seems like that's the way. Chicago was their second home.

DVR: Coming back to the garden, they had flowers as well? Flower beds?

MR: Well, they had beautiful flowers, yes, all over. The beds were all kept nice and neat, and all different kinds of flowers. I don't know too much about flowers, but I know it was beautiful. I couldn't tell you all the flowers that they had—some of them I'd never seen before, the exotic flowers. It was a pretty place alright. Everything was kept so clean, even the cows and the cow barn.

DVR: How big a herd of cattle did he have? Did he have sheep and goats as well, or just cattle?

MR: No, they had the cattle for the milk and butter for the farm—milk and cream, butter for the farm. And also raised pigs. I can still smell the great big pots that they used to cook the food in there for the pigs. In the wintertime, or in the fall, I guess it was, when they

used to butcher the pigs, the farms—some of them get a half, some of them get a whole, some of them get a quarter of a pig—and they'd salt these down for the winter. We got all our food—and chickens. They raised chickens, lots of chickens. They had a chicken man and his helper. We had chicken every Sunday.

DVR: So, you got most of your food then right from the farm.

MR: Right, right from the farm. With Grandma, my mother's mother, baking bread, we didn't have to go to the store very often like we do now. Every day you go to the store, just about.

DVR: Now, the farm was open for tourists. Was it open year round, like 364 days, or was it just open in the summer?

MR: It was open more or less in the summer. I can't ever recall visitors in the wintertime. It would be open, I imagine, as soon as the snow was gone and the flowers start coming. I would say about May or June and probably closed after Labor Day, because that's when the flowers start going and everything. It isn't as pretty.

DVR: Did he have a big area for parking? Did they park in the lanes?

MR: Yes, they used to park on the road. See, we were up on the hill, and then down the hill was the farm. So all the way up on both sides they had parking areas, way up by our house, and that was at least three quarters of a mile. They'd park and then on the...let's see, that would be north and south, they parked on the side. Of course there weren't that many cars there then, either, like there is now. But they did have state police that came down, or it could be deputy. No, it could be state police. They had two of them there all summer long that stayed right there and directed traffic when they needed it or if there

were accidents or anything, they were there. We became great friends with them when we were kids.

DVR: How did you go to town? Your shopping was done in Holland, of course.

MR: Yes.

DVR: And you were about seven or eight miles away from Holland. How did you go to town, then, when you went to town?

MR: Well, we used to go, especially in the wintertime. In the summertime, we took our own car out and about once a week we'd go shopping, my dad and mother. And when we got older, they'd take the two older ones along with them and buy their staples for the week. In the wintertime, we used to go... the roads weren't plowed like they are now, so they'd have the great big farm trucks and they would convert those for passengers. They put long benches in them, facing each other, and they'd stop at every corner, there were people that wanted to go. And we'd go, oh, I would say about seven o'clock, we'd go. At about ten o'clock, they'd be on the corner by the old Hans Drugstore, that was where Peck's were and where Readers World is now. That's where we'd meet—ten o'clock, and then back we'd go again. That used to be a lot of fun, too; we'd sing songs. The old Pine Creek bridge there, which they've fixed all up now, was just a little wooden bridge and it was bumpy. There was a man named Norris who worked at the farm. I think he was with the gardeners, too. And every time we went over that bridge, everybody would yell, "Norristown." That was his little bridge. I don't know what the story was all about there, but we used to always yell that. We'd get a big kick out of that.

DVR: What kind of entertainment did you have besides the Saturday night movies and so on?

MR: Well, we used to have Christmas parties with all the family. All the families would gather, and we'd all get a little present—all the kids would get a present. And I guess the adults, or the employees, would get a little bonus of some sort. Of course, we had the beach; we used to have beach parties. The farm was right on the lake, so we'd just go right down there. They had their own great big pier there. We used to have great big huge beach parties with bon fires and roasted the wieners and the hot dogs and the marshmallows.

DVR: You could do that all spring and summer then, being right there.

MR: Oh, gosh, yes. We lived on the beach all the time. We were there morning, noon, and night when it was summer.

DVR: Now, he had a deer herd there, too, didn't he?

MR: Yes, on the top of the hill before you go to the lake, they had a large area there, a wooded area, where they had these deer. We'd always feel so bad when they'd lose their antlers; they looked so naked. But they were beautiful and very friendly. We used to go in there and pet them, feed them. Then one time a news reel man came and wanted some pictures of the farm children in the area feeding the deer. I never did see it, but it was on the news reel, I guess, in different areas. Different people have said they had seen it, but we didn't go to shows that often. Yes, they were beautiful things.

DVR: Well, the way they're resurrecting old news reels from time to time, we might even see it again one of these days.

MR: Yes, we might. That was, I think, when I was about twelve years old, something like that—eleven, twelve years old when they did that.

DVR: In about 1929 then.

MR: Yes, just before I...

DVR: What happened with the Depression and the farm? Do you have any recollections of the Depression and what it did to the farm and everything else?

MR: Well, I think gradually they started selling or getting rid of the animals. But most of them were going to the Brookfield Zoo. I know for a long, long time, the farm just sat there and they just used it...the people would come to the cottages in the summertime. There was nothing doing there. All the cages were empty and everything; it seems a shame.

DVR: Was that because Mr. Getz died?

MR: No, that was before he died. He died later, down in Florida. He died of bronchial pneumonia.

DVR: But he was just unloading gradually?

MR: Yes, right. I don't know if it was getting to be too much for him, or whether the boys weren't interested or what. I don't know. When you're kids, you don't pay too much attention to that, you know, just all of a sudden they were gone. It was just a shame. It was just like a great big empty spot. I still think that's something that they should have here again.

DVR: That would cost quite a sum of money though.

MR: Well, there was a plan at one time, but that fell through. That would cost too much money. That was before they built the Civic Center. They were going to have a little park there with just a few animals and stuff. These people that were concerned about it, that were involved in it, my dad included. But I don't know what happened to that, all of a sudden just dissolved. But that's a great thing for kids, it really is.

DVR: What did your dad do after the Getz Farm closed up?

MR: Well, that was during the Depression, and he got a job. Well, I imagine that's what they called it, a job, but he would write articles in the Sentinel. I don't know whether he got paid for it or not; I really don't. Every week there'd be an article on some animal, some experience or something that he's had on the farm, or some of the animals from Africa. That went on for quite a while, and then in between times, he'd give talks to children on animals because children just are crazy about animal stories. They just love it. And that's about the extent of it, and then he got sick.

DVR: Do you know anything about how or why he left the Getz Farm? Was it just because of lack of animals and then he was laid off, so to speak? Or did he stay living there?

MR: We stayed living at Hilltop until we found another place in town. We lived at Montello Park, and that's when he was writing these articles and giving these talks. All the different buildings were sold, the cages were ripped down, and now the place is all built up with houses and stuff. They're all private homes in there.

DVR: I saw a map of it just before...a diagram of it, and he had 640 acres, which is a square mile, and that's a sizeable bit of land. So, it's probably well broken up by this time.

MR: It is. It's well broken up, and all along the lakefront there, on top of the hill—it's on top of the hill and then it goes down like that—they're all new homes built out there, from Tunnel Park. Tunnel Park was Getz's property, too. And all the way down, they're all homes now, permanent homes, and the orchards are all being broken up into sections for homes, too.

DVR: I'm told that there are some lots there that will never be used, that they're dedicated to the elephants that are buried there. Do you know anything about that?

MR: I really don't.

DVR: It's just hearsay.

MR: I never heard of that before. I really didn't. The only elephant that I ever knew of was Nancy, and Nancy didn't die there. She died in Brookfield Zoo.

DVR: What can you tell me about the monkeys at Getz Farm? I understand you had a lot of monkeys and some of them were more interesting, or very interesting, than others.

MR: Well, we had one that was a very interesting monkey. He had a little trick when there were a lot of people around his cage. In the first place, he was a mandrill monkey—large, more on the ape side. But my father would come up there and say, “Chief, show what you have,” and he would turn around and show his bottom, which was just beautiful. It had beautiful colors, sort of iridescent reds and purples and lime-colored. He would just turn around and just grin at the people, as if to say, “See, I really got something to show you.” Also, they had the large baboons. We always called them the lion monkeys—great big huge fellows with very big fangs. We didn't have too much to do with them. They were quite vicious.

DVR: Were they vicious to your father, too?

MR: Well, he never took them out like he did some of the monkeys, like the chimpanzees. Now, those were his favorites, I think, because old Sally, one of the chimps, he could teach just about anything. She did just about anything, and she was quite an attraction to the people. Dad would have Sally behind the lions and show them all the different tricks that she could do. She went to Brookfield, too, and lived to a ripe old age, and had at least two little ones that I know of. And one, I think, is still there, still living.

UV: _____ and she was 42 years old.

MR: Old Sally, I think she lived to a ripe old age, and she's the same age as my one sister.

UV: You took your grandson there to see Sally.

MR: Yes, we took our grandson there, and we saw Sally the first time we went there.

DVR: At Brookfield?

MR: Yeah, at Brookfield we saw Sally. That's when I took my daughter and my niece. Then the next time we went there, we took our grandson, and she was still there.

DVR: Did Sally respond to you?

MR: No, there was such a difference in time, such a long period of time that she hadn't seen any of us at all. She was a great big huge chimp, and when she left, she was only about, oh, I would say, about two and a half or three feet tall. When I saw this Sally, oh man, she must have been about four or five feet tall.

DVR: What did your dad have to do about care of the animals, in the sense of sickness or injury?

MR: Dad took care of most of that. Any real serious problems, they'd call the vet in. But he did all the stitching up scalp wounds and injuries, just minor sickness. He could take care of all of that. There were times when he took monkeys home that had to be healed. Instead of keeping them in a cage by themselves, he took them home for the kids. We had a lot of fun with them, and I think the monkey enjoyed it too. A little reese monkey, that we called Brownie, was a pet of ours, too, until he got better.

DVR: Would he be in a cage at your home then?

MR: Oh, no. No, we had him in the house, and we'd take him wherever we went. He'd stay on my shoulder. He had a leash on him, and we'd take him up town, any place we went we'd take him along. He was just like a member of the family.

DVR: One man in town, Mr. Raven, told me about a little horse that his dad gave to Mr. Getz and brought to the Getz Farm. Can you tell me about that little horse?

MR: Oh, I sure can. That was one of my favorites. That little horse was the most perfect little animal that I ever did see. At that time, he was considered...his title was “the smallest horse in the world.” And at the time, he was, I think nineteen years old, when I knew him, and he was just as frisky and lively as a little two year old. But he was black, and he had such tiny, tiny little feet, little hooves, and a long tail that just dragged on the ground and a long mane. He used to get out—I don’t know how he ever got out, but he did. He managed to get out sometimes, and I’d be the one to find him. I’d go looking all over for him. Then I’d keep him for a day or two because that was my horse then. Finally, I had to give him up. Dad would be looking high and low for him.

DVR: Where would you keep an animal like that? You couldn’t keep a regular horse barn. You couldn’t keep regular fencing.

MR: In the farm, where the elephant was, that used to be the horse barn. There were big box stalls they had for the boys’ riding horses. When they did away with those—they haven’t had those for years—then they converted that into the elephant barn, and upstairs they had the big snakes in the glassed-in area. But there were a few stalls left, and one was for Tiny Might, that was the little horse, and the other one was for a Shetland pony, Lala. Those are the only two horses that they had on the farm, other than the work horses.

DVR: Whatever happened to Tiny Might?

MR: I really don’t know...whether he went to the zoo...I really never knew what happened to him. I think maybe some private person took him. It could be even the boys might have

taken him, I don't know. But I never heard how long he lived or anything; I never heard another word about him.

DVR: He was fed just like any other horse, with carrots and apples and oats and hay?

MR: Oh, yes. They all had their special diets, each one.

UV: (unable to hear)

MR: All the animals were very healthy animals. It was very seldom that you had a sick cat or anything like that. I think it's because...well, all his life, he's loved animals.

DVR: Where was the hall of mirrors in the Getz Farm? Was that where people first came in?

MR: No, it was sort of towards the last. There was sort of a path that they had to follow, and they'd follow this path. They'd cover the whole farm, and just at the last, just before they're ready to leave, there would sit these mirrors. I think there were four of them, if I'm not mistaken. And, boy, it was hard to get people away from them. We got such a kick out of it ourselves as kids. That really was funny.

DVR: That's one of the things people remember at Getz Farm, the mirrors.

MR: Oh, yes. I do, too. They'd sit and laugh and laugh and laugh. It was really comical...turn sideways. Some of the mirrors there would give half—half would be real tall. Your head would be a long peak and on the bottom there you'd have little tiny feet. The other ones, you'd be real long, the whole thing. Next time, you'd be real short and fat. Each one was different. It was fun just standing there watching the people. That's where I'd spend a good many hours, watching the people and following them.

DVR: Did you work on the farm at all? You were there with your dad, of course. Did you work actively?

MR: No, I never did. We used to go and help Dad once in a while, just to have something to do; he'd let us do it. But no, we never did.

DVR: Now, later on, you were a teenager and you went to high school. You went to Holland High School. How did you go there every day?

MR: I learned to drive when I was twelve and thirteen years old. At that time, you didn't have to have instructors and lessons and so on and so forth. My dad taught us how to drive. We had to in order to get in. And then we picked up other kids that were just starting, too. So we had a car full when we'd go to high school and come back.

DVR: And you went every day then?

MR: Every day.

DVR: Was the road surfaced all the way or was there some sand there?

MR: Yes, it was a one track, really. It seems to me, like at one time, if I can recall way back, that it was a dirt road, gravel. Then they put in this concrete or some sort of stuff, just for one car. But the shoulders were gravel. Then later on, then they added the cement to that gravel part, too, because it was a little dangerous getting off when another car wanted to come. You'd have to pull off.

DVR: Yes, that's tricky. You learned how to handle sand and gravel at an early age, then.

MR: Oh, yes. I learned to drive on what we call the snake roads, and the old road from Tunnel Park to Ottawa Beach used to be a little curve, just one track going through. That's where I learned to drive, on the old Ottawa Beach Road and that road.

DVR: Well, thank you very much, Mrs. Raffenaud, for this interesting story of your dad and your life there at that time.