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Van Alsburg, Janet Oral History Interview: General Holland History

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Oral History Interview
Interviewee: Janet Van Alsburg
Interviewer: Donald Van Reken
December 31, 1975

Abstract: Growing up poor in Holland; single-family household; John Van Lente family.

DVR: This is December 31, 1975. I'm at the home of Janet Van Alsburg on Howard Avenue.

It's a snowy day. There's snow out on the fields outside, and I'm looking out over the lake and there is snow on top of all the ice. But, in spite of all the snow, it's raining outside. Mrs. Van Alsburg is going to tell us a bit about her life and her early days here in the city of Holland. Janet, how about it?

JVA: Incidentally, this is the first day the lake has been frozen over. I'm tightening my tape.

(reading) "Grandma, what did you do in the olden days?" The olden days for _____.

One would think I had been born and raised in the American Revolutionary War period.

Grandmothers undoubtedly are asked this question many times. Apparently the children

of today cannot visualize a world without cars, buses, hot rods, motor bikes, color

television, and airplanes. Each time I would try to convince my grandsons that you do

not have to be rich to have fun. Still, when I was their age, I longed to have just a little

bit of money to spend foolishly. I never had an allowance. I wore made-over clothes,

cobbled shoes, and a few times in my life when I did have a new coat, it was purchased at

least two years too large for me, so by the time it fit me, it was worn out. But no matter

how poor we were, I always had one good Sunday dress which I could wear rarely for a

church entertainment or a party. I never questioned this because most of friends were in

the same boat. I thought I was abjectly poor.

In my teens, I sold for people for a dollar a day on Saturday, until I leaped to two dollars a day working at the Five and Dime.

DVR: Where was that? Where was that dime store?

JVA: Right on the corner of Central and 8th Street.

DVR: It's still there?

JVA: Yes, it's still there, but a different one. It was owned in that time by old man Piers.

Before I was twelve, I had sold a good many ten and fifteen dollar orders for the Larkin Company, sometimes for money, most time for premiums, going from house to house in the neighborhood and to all my mother's friends for orders. I still have one premium today, a green shaded study lamp, converted from gas to electricity, and it is being used today.

I was born in August of 1898 and was baptized Janet Marie Degraaf in the original Fourth Reformed Church that stood on the corner of 15th Street and 1st Avenue, now Washington Boulevard, along which we have tulip lanes every year in May. This was a tall, narrow, white church with a slender steeple that housed a bell, a deep-tone bell that, as I grew up, often clanged at 2:00 on Sunday afternoon, "You're late, you're late." But somehow my mother and I usually managed to get down to the third row center before the last bell tolled. The service was long and in Dutch. When I became restless, my mother would slip a peppermint into my hand. I also attended a Saturday morning catechism in Dutch, painstakingly memorizing both questions and answers every Friday night.

Through the years, I often argued about the correct spelling and pronunciation of my given name, having been called Janette the greater part of my growing years. The

woods were full of Janettes at that time. My father's name was Jan. Having no sons, he wanted me to be named for him. My uncle Fred told me years later that I was baptized Janet, but it wasn't until high school that I found my name written J-A-N-E-T in the back of the old family Bible where they checked the family records.

My mother's name was Mary Cornelia Van Lente. My grandfather, John Van Lente, came to Holland with his father, Fredrick Jan Van Lente, and his mother and six brothers and sisters in 1847, just three months after Dr. Van Raalte came on the first boat. Great-grandfather Fredrick Van Lente was _____, leader of congregational singing in the old log Van Raalte Church. This small church was located in what is now Pilgrim Home Cemetery. If you take the second 16th Street entrance and turn north into the cemetery, you will see a huge boulder on your right hand side, which marks the place where the log church was built. The boulder bears a bronze engraved plaque, which reads in part: "_____ of the first church erected by the colonists in 1847. It was 35-feet east and west, and 60-feet north and south, and did service until 1856." When you stop and think of it, that's awfully small for a church.

DVR: Very small.

JVA: Yes. This log church was the first building erected by the colonists before any of the log cabin dwellings were raised. Great-grandfather Van Lente held the post of _____ for 25 years, 9 years in the first log church and 16 years in the colonial church with the white pillars, still serving our congregation on the corner of 9th Street and College Avenue. He also organized and directed the first Van Lente choir, which was later directed by my grandfather, John Van Lente.

Grandpa Van Lente was a Civil War veteran, honorably discharged at the end of the war between the states, but broken in health from the viscous campaign years, the starvation diet, the horrors of war, and the long march home. He and another soldier, Cornelius Bouwman, came home together and Cornelius took Grandpa home with him to Fremont, where he met Jantje Bouwman, a sister to Cornelius, whom he later married. Grandma was ten years younger than my grandfather. They had six children: Mary, who later became my mother, my Aunt Annie and Aunt Jenny, and an Aunt Katie, who died when I was small. There were two sons, Fredrick and Ralph. Uncle Fred was the oldest and Uncle Ralph was the youngest son of the family. Because of his poor health and as a reward for serving his country, Grandpa was granted a small pension. With his pension and what he could earn as a gardener working for the city, my grandparents eked out a bare living. Welfare was unheard of and would never been accepted. Like all honest Dutchmen, they got along with what they had and thanked God for his loving kindness and counted their blessings. Grandpa had earned his pension. He was a humble man, but he also had a great deal of pride. You could be both humble and proud. I had heard him rebuke a newly arrived immigrant who said he was not going to learn English. The man said, "I could say in one word what it takes these people to say in a whole sentence." "Well," my grandfather replied, "I think that is true, but if you don't learn English, some day you may not be able to communicate with your grandchildren. This is our country now. They took us in when we had little more than willing hands and hope in our hearts. They granted us freedom of worship. I, for one, am proud to be an American citizen. I fought for this country and would do so again."

When the city fathers drew up plans for the town, they reserved acreage for a college and also two square blocks for a park in the center of town, which later became our Centennial Park. I have always been proud that my grandfather had a part in the planning and planting of that park. He worked under the direction of John Kooyers, head of the Park Department at that time. My grandfather helped to design and build the fountain that stands on the little knoll in the center of the park. There is an outlet from the fountain basement emerging on the south slope in a small water flow, splashing along a curved rock-lined stream bed from which it empties into a goldfish and lily pond that is still there today. The fountain does not often operate now, but one summer day, not so long ago when the fountain was working, I took great pride in taking my three grandsons to see it, explaining, "You must never forget that your great, great-grandfather Van Lente helped build this fountain and plant this park."

For some years, my grandparents lived across the street from the park on 12th Street, in a green sort of sprawling house that has long since disappeared. It had a garden and barn in the back of it. The garden had little interlocking gravel paths edged with sweet alyssum, and we were allowed to wander the paths, but only to smell the flowers. He would point and name each one: sweet William flocks, bleeding hearts, robena, sweet peas, heliotropes, and many others.

The barn had carpenter benches along one side and benches on the other. The floor became a small stage, where we would practice for the plays he wrote to be presented at city school gatherings in the summertime. Aunt Jenny and Uncle Jim lived there with my grandparents until they both bought lots and built houses on West 10th Street, which was, at that time, the west edge of town. Grandpa's house was on the north

side of the street, and Aunt Jenny's on the south side. When Grandpa died, my grandmother went to live with my Aunt Jenny. We used to go there for tea every Friday afternoon with my grandmother.

DVR: Are those houses still there?

JVA: Yes, they're still there and very nice houses, too.

DVR: Good.

JVA: After Grandpa's 10th Street house was finished, we kids always loved to go there in the evening. Our mothers took their mending, and our uncles talked politics and argued about scandal in the government, and got into fierce arguments on religion. Grandpa took us children in the summer kitchen and told us wonderful stories of crossing the ocean, of the early days in Holland, and he had a fund of other stories that went way back into the history of the Netherlands and even of England. One I clearly recall was Turn Back Dick Puddington Lord Mayor of London, impressing on our young minds that strange and wonderful could happen to us. He would end saying, "If you have the will to conquer and belief and trust in Almighty God, you can do anything."

When they first came from the old country, they spoke only Dutch. He said someone taught them to call a rooster a gentleman hen. He told how my great-grandfather sat under a huge cotton colored umbrella, brought with him from the Netherlands, her brood of children around her when it thundered and lightening and poured before their log cabin was built that first year.

Grandpa Van Lente carried on the musical tradition started by his father. He inherited the _____ in the 9th Street Church, and later accepted the same post in the First Reformed Church, of which he and my grandmother were charter members.

He also continued and directed the Van Lente choir, which became quite famous in a modest way. My mother and all my aunts and uncles sang in this choir, and their cousins and second cousins and friends joined the choir. There were a great many other people from around the country who gradually joined it. They sang a cappella and used a pitch pipe and tuning fork to give the singers their key and pitch.

Years passed before the first Holland church purchased an organ. A story was handed down about the sale of that first organ. The consistory was assured by the salesman that the organ could only play Psalms, and when they found out it could play the new gospel hymns as well, they were outraged and furious, but they kept the organ. (laughs)

After moving to the west side of town, Grandpa and Grandma and my mother and father joined the original Fourth Reformed Church. This congregation, too, sang only the Dutch Psalms for some time. Later, they also purchased an organ, which was played for years by Nellie Rietsma Vandermeer, who is still living.

DVR: Oh, is she?

JVA: Yes, she is living in the home on 32nd Street. Even when I was small, I loved the Psalms. They had a dignity and majesty that was like the sound of rushing water, the whole congregation swelling the tide of sound in slow, measured cadence. The services were long, but I loved the music, and I learned to find a place in the Psalm book.

Today, as I look back in time, remembering those days of my childhood, I am filled with pride when I remember what a fine man my grandfather was—so upright, forthright and courteous. That he was an ordinary laboring man, one of the common people, the so-called salt of the earth, I do know. In one story my mother used to delight

in telling us over and over through the years, bears this out. Little by little, year after year, he and my grandfather literally scraped their tax money together. You know, that was really quite a thing, because it was hard for them to do that. Some of it was saved in an old sugar bowl in the pantry; some of it was put in the bank. One year, when tax time approached, Grandpa took the money from his sugar bowl together with his deposit book, and took it to the bank and gave it to the teller. When he had received his tax receipt, Grandpa carefully counted out the few bills returned to him and said to the teller, "Haven't you made a mistake?" "Oh, no," said the teller, "we never make mistakes here." Grandpa counted again and insisted, "Well, I think you have made a mistake this time." The teller grew very indignant and said angrily, "I told you, we never make mistakes in this bank." My mother said Grandpa didn't argue anymore, but put the money in his wallet. When I first heard the story, Grandpa was there and he chuckled. And I said, "Wouldn't that be stealing, Grandpa?" He smiled and said, "I tried to make it right with all those customers standing around, and that teller made me feel like a fool. But he wouldn't listen. If the shoe had been on the other foot, I would never have been able to prove I had given him five dollars too much." Like all Dutchmen, he thought it was a good joke when he got the best of an educated fellow like the teller. The story became a family joke and gained merit in the telling. I heard it many times. Dutch humor is a bit sly at times.

DVR: I just wonder if that's the bank that closed up in Depression times.

JVA: I think it was. The Holland City State Bank.

DVR. Oh.

JVA: That's right.

DVR: Well, it couldn't be because of that, but...

JVA: Yes. Now at 77 years, I have heard many a tall tale, but I never forgot this homely story.

I have lived through four wars and five Depressions. I talked over one of the first wall telephones. I learned to sew on an old Remington sewing machine with a foot treadle. We all had a great fear of telegrams, since they almost always meant a death message, and I held our first telegram at my grandmother's house in fear and trembling, and it did announce a death in my grandmother's family. I listened in delight to records played on one of the first Victor talking machines, a square box with a horn coming out of one side. Two records I recall—Luella Lee sang an old love tune: "Someday there will be a happy honeymoon. All for you I pine, I want to call you my mine, Luella Lee." I'm old but I'm awfully tough. There was a laughing record, too, that I wish I had today. You wound up the mechanism by hand with a little crank on the side opposite the horn and used a new needle every time you put a new cylinder on the machine. At that time, the phonograph had a cylinder instead of a round disk.

As the years sped by, we did read about the wireless telephone, the Trans-Atlantic cable and airplanes. All our news came from the *Holland City News*, which came out Thursday, and *De Grondwet*, the Dutch paper that came out on Friday. We sang as we grew up many of the popular songs commemorating the advent of each new miracle. "Come away with me, Lucille, in my merry Oldsmobile. Come, Josephine, in my flying machine, in the air she goes." And "Hello, Hawaii, How Are You?" That ended in, "For I've had to pawn every little thing I own to talk from New York on the wireless telephone." I listened with friends when I was 22 to music, coming across the miles as

clear as if it was being played in the same room, from a spool wound with copper wire called a crystal set, which was the beginning of our radio.

I've watched more than one balloon ascension at the Ottawa County Fair. The fair grounds, at that time, was right across from Pilgrim Home Cemetery.

DVR: I think there is going to be a balloon ascension in Holland next year.

JVA: Is there?

DVR: I got the word from a friend in Chicago that there may be one by a Dutch balloonist, Jan Boesma.

JVA: Well, then I will have to go to see that. As a kid of nine or ten, I rode in one of the first automobiles in town. During those eventful years, when I grew from ten to twenty, so many marvels were discovered that it made your head spin. At first they were beyond comprehension, but before long, they were accepted and casual and became commonplace, a part of our everyday life. Now, I have lived to see jet planes fly so high all you can see is their vapor trail spiraling through the sky, and these last years, I have seen men walk in space and finally on the moon, and I know for sure it isn't made of green cheese. (laughs)

But I'm getting ahead of my story. I must tell about my father's family, who came from the old country to settle in Zeeland in that same decade. One story about these new settlers is worth remembrance, since it so accurately describes the caliber of the colonists who settled in this part of Michigan. I was told that these Christian people, upon alighting from the wagon that took them to their final destination, knelt down and kissed the soil on which they stood. I am sure they heard sweet freedom's song.

My grandfather De Graaf and his family may have been among those brave people. He and his family started the first rusk bakery in Zeeland. Some years later, my father started his own small bakery in Holland on West 8th Street, in the little framed building behind the tower clock, which is Lois Sinke's antique shop. My mother and father lived upstairs, and my sister was fond of saying she had been born in an antique shop. Somewhere I have a picture of my father and Uncle Fred standing in front of the bakery wearing their tall, white baker's hats. My mother and one of her sisters are sitting on the front stoop, and my sister is pushing an old-fashioned _____ with a parasol clamped to the handle. That store is still there, one of the oldest buildings in Holland.

Later, my father, who was sort of a jack-of-all-trades, built our home at 75 West 15th Street, between Pine and River Avenue. I was only 7 and my sister 14 when my father and mother were divorced, a rare thing in those days. My mother never lost her feeling of disgrace. It seems strange to me now that it meant so little to me then. My sister at 14, that sensitive age, felt it keenly and wept; and it could be that this traumatic experience had some effect on her personality. I can recall no quarrels, no harsh words. I just remember my father went south to find work and today I still do not know how it came about. My sister and I were often taunted by the neighbor children. "You haven't even got a father." And there were times when we were not invited to neighborhood parties, and not even allowed to play with other children. One neighbor girl, who disliked my sister intensely, taunted her once too often. Mama had sent Edith to VerHulst's Store on 14th Street for a pound of home rendered lard, which came packed in a little wooden boat, like the cardboard ones we buy hamburger in today. It was a hot, humid day, and as my sister came east on 15th Street from Pine, and passed Alice's house

two doors west of ours, Alice ran out on the wooden sidewalk singsonging, “You haven’t even got a father, you haven’t even got a father.” Quick as a wink, my sister tore off the brown paper wrapper from the melting lard and slammed the greasy mess upside-down on Alice’s hair. Alice had just had her long black hair washed. There were loud and angry words from Alice’s mother, and my peace-loving mother, the blessed old dear, made Edith apologize. Secretly to us, she said, “Just good for her. It was worth the pound of lard.”

I had listened to the taunting, too, and secretly waited for the chance to get even. My golden opportunity came a week later, when Alice’s family was sitting in their backyard. I think it was on a Sunday, and I went to bury the hatchet for Alice’s younger sister was my best loved playmate, but Alice’s father chased me home. I thought his anger against me completely unjustified. I had had no part in the lard incident, and as I ran, I snatched up a rotten apple from the ground—there were apple orchards in all our backyards at that time—and I threw it with all the force I owned and, quite haphazardly, it landed smack on the knee of Alice’s father’s Sunday pants. Well, did I catch it. My mother tried to make me apologize and I wouldn’t do it. I was made of sterner stuff and not lacking in temerity, even at nine years old.

Today, I am often reminded of how heroic my mother was. When she married my father, she could neither read nor write. Having been the oldest of the Van Lente children, she was taken out of school so often before she had finished the third grade that she never did catch up. Every time my grandmother had a new baby or someone was sick in the family, Mary had to stay home to help. When she was 14, she went out to work as a hired girl for ten shillings a week—which was a dollar and a quarter—which

she turned over to my grandfather. He, in turn, giving back some of the money for shoes or clothes, both in needed supply in such a large family, which was the custom at that time. She said she had never complained. “I never thought it was wrong for Pa to do this,” she said, but she never made us do it. She taught herself to read and write, both in the Dutch and the English, after she was married, with my father’s help. One time she said to me, “I loved school so much.” There were no laws then requiring parents to keep their children in school until they were 16.

The house was awarded to my mother after the divorce was granted in lieu of alimony, but my father had put a \$900 mortgage on it before he went south to find a job in order to pay some of the most pressing debts after his furniture store went in to bankruptcy. The interest payment on that mortgage haunted my mother for the rest of her life. She was so fearful of losing her home; it was all she had. With so little education and being partially deaf from a bout of typhoid fever when she was 16, and not being strong enough to take in washings, the only way for her to earn our living was to take in boarders. Women didn’t work in factories in those days, at least not women with two children, one of whom was as rambunctious as I was. And she did have a good-sized house. It was a roof over our heads and she was a fine plain cook and set a good table. And in a small way, we did share what we had, for we could always ask a friend over for Sunday night supper. I was always proud of her cakes and pies baked in a wood burning cook stove that she tested for temperature by putting her hand in the oven.

Most of the boys that came to live in our house—and I say boys, for many of them were 19 to 21-years-old—came straight from the old country. Having been sent to my mother by someone who had lived with us and married and moved away, these boys

came to Holland to work and to save so they, in turn, could send money back to the Netherlands to bring their girls to join them. We saw a few of them get married. It was amazing how fast they learned to talk English, but most of them followed a boastful pattern in talking about how much finer, how much cleaner, and how much bigger everything was in the old country. One afternoon my Aunt Jenny, visiting my mother, who had heard this boasting once too often, retorted, “And how about the bed bugs? Are they larger in the old country, too?”

Again, I have gone far afield, and I must tell about my first automobile ride. Dr. _____, the town family doctor who had delivered most of the babies in Holland including myself, had a little two-seater runabout Buick. When he made a house call in our neighborhood in the summertime, all of us kids would wait until he came out of the house and back to the car and we would chorus, “Give us a ride; give us a ride.” When he had the time, he would open the right hand door and we would pile in, sometimes three deep, and he would take us west down 16th Street to the city limits and back. Dr. Blekkink of Third Reformed Church had a little electric coupe, and there were one or two other people who had electric cars—Mr. Brouwer, for one, of the Brouwer Furniture Store. There was also the interurban, which we called the streetcar, that made several trips daily to and from Grand Rapids. After supper, the loiterers would hang around the station.

DVR: Where was the station?

JVA: I was just going to tell you.

DVR: Oh, okay.

JVA: They hang around the station, which was, at that time, where Jack Dykstra's Men's Shop is today, and wait for the 7:25 to come in—young men and old men, too—and watched while the pretty girls came down the steep steps of the car. Sometimes they were rewarded with the glimpse of an ankle and even now and then a pretty leg. Then the conductor would take on waiting passengers, turn south on River to 13th Street, where it turned west to Cleveland, then turned south and west again, stopping at Jenison Park, the amusement park, where they had a figure-eight merry-go-round and all those things.

DVR: A figure-eight...you mean a roller coaster?

JVA: Yes, that was a figure-eight. And on west to Macatawa. We could and often did walk the eight blocks from our part of town to that corner of 16th and Cleveland, and ride to Jenison or Macatawa for ten cents. I've done it often, saving the 15 cents for an extra ride on the merry-go-round or the figure-eight. In the summertime, the streetcar would go beyond Jenison and turn north on a trestle to the Graham and Morton dock, where it would pick up passengers bound for Castle Park, Saugatuck Paris Crossing—which is no longer there, by the way—and Fennville.

My sister and her beau, who later became my brother-in-law, rode that streetcar to Saugatuck the summer before they were married to dance at the pavilion. My mother never found out about that. Dancing was taboo, although the young people could sit up an evening in a dark room and get _____. Before Leon came on the scene, my sister had many other beaus who used to pay me a dime to get out of the sitting room. I picked up quite a bit of ready cash hanging around until I got that dime.

I must mention an incident in which I was a principal culprit after my sister and her husband had moved to Kalamazoo to live. My mother had a cigar box in a little

cupboard of her dresser in which she hoarded pennies and nickels and dimes for the missionaries. Now, the neighbor girls often went to Charlie Dykstra's drug store on the corner of 16th and Central Avenue in the afternoon to buy a sundae or a soda. I reasoned if I could snatch a dime out of that cigar box, I could go, too.

JVA: I took a dime and went to Charlie's and had a chocolate soda. The neighbor girls saw me there at the counter and told my mother, and, in no time, my mother had wormed my secret out of me. She was horrified, not so much about my taking a dime of her money, but to think I would steal from the missionaries. That was a cardinal sin. Of course, I argued my point, saying all the missionary kids I knew had a lot more than I did. Besides, they got to travel all over the world for free, and I had never even been to Grand Rapids. I felt bad that I had taken that dime from my mother. She worked so hard. But it was a good thing I was caught; at least I never swiped another cent.

Whenever I was in trouble or had done something my mother thought particularly obtrusive, she would say, "I don't know why you have to take after your father. Why can't you take after my family?" Of course, if I won a prize or a medal in oratory, then she was proud to call me a Van Lente.

It took so long to grow up to the time when I could earn my own money, but finally there was high school. In September of my freshman year, a bunch of us walked to the 16th Street and Cleveland corner on a Saturday morning, carrying our lunch, and boarded the streetcar for Fennville to go to a farm to pick peaches for 10 cents a basket. Our ride cost us 35 cents to the Fennville station, and from there we walked about a mile

to the farm, where we picked all day. Tired but happy, we trudged back to the station about 5:00 to catch the interurban back to town, our net gain for the day being about a dollar and a stomachache from all the peaches we snatched when the straw boss wasn't looking. That was the first actual cash I ever earned.

I saw my first farm telephone when I was in high school; it hung on the kitchen wall of my Aunt Kate's farmhouse. Sophomore and junior year, I used to walk out there on Friday afternoon after school, about two and a half miles southeast of town, when my mother would let me off for the Saturday chores at home, which meant cleaning 8 or 9 lamps, washing and polishing the chimneys, washing gloves for Sunday, scrubbing the kitchen floor, and dusting—a job I hate to this day—because I had to dust every curlicue on the sewing machine and all the rungs on the chairs. If I left one spec of dust anywhere, my mother's fingers would find it.

Sometimes I didn't tell my mother I was going to the farm, but just walked along with some of the girls who lived out that way. Then I had to telephone a neighbor to get word to my mother that I was at Aunt Kate's so she wouldn't worry. Since I couldn't walk home alone in the dark, she had to let me stay all night. Sometimes I was allowed to stay the weekend, doing my share of the farm chores with Henry and Gertrude, gathering eggs, stacking wood for the big kitchen range that had a reservoir for hot water on one side, and trying to milk a cow with small success. It was fun to pet the new calf, to watch the separator as skim milk came out of one spout and cream out of the other, and to play cards in the evening.

The telephone I used was a two-part box attached to the wall of Aunt Kate's dining room. It had a mouthpiece projecting out in front and a little crank on the right

side of the upper part of the box. You had to ask the operator for your number. If someone was talking on the 5 or 6-party line, you hung up the receiver and waited. If they took too long, you yelled into the mouthpiece, "Get off the line! This is an emergency." And as you talked, you could hear click, click, click as people lifted their receivers and listened in. It was a marvelous way to hear things and a good way to spread glad tidings.

There was a small white church about two and half miles southeast of the farm called Ebenezer. When I stayed over Sunday, I went to church with the family in a surrey.

DVR: What street is Ebenezer on? Is that 32nd Street? I think it's 32nd Street, quite far east.

JVA: I think it's 24th.

DVR: 24th Street? Okay.

JVA: Maybe I'm wrong.

DVR: I went past it the other day, and it has a plaque in front of it. I don't know whether you knew that.

JVA: No, I think it's 32nd Street.

DVR: It has a plaque in front of it now, a historical marker.

JVA: Yes. A dignified dominie, with a massive under slung jaw, preached sermons shuck full of fire and brimstone, sometimes an hour long. There were hanging kerosene lamps that had to be pulled down to be lit, and a small pipe organ that intrigued me. When a hymn was announced, a boy from the congregation went forward, took his place behind sort of a screen, and pumped the bellows full of air while the organist played. The service was in English here. Gertrude and Henry, my cousins, always took me along in the evening

to the young people's meeting. But Henry often had a date to take some girl home, and Gertrude and I usually rode back to the farm with some boy. I rode way back to town many a starlit summer night with an Ebenezer boy, fireflies winking in the hedgerows, and all across the fields of wheat and oats and rye.

For one whole summer, a very handsome boy squired me around. Coming to town to call for me in his rubber-tired buggy, drawn by a beautiful horse he had purchased with his own hard-earned cash, I was the envy of all the Ebenezer girls. He called this equipage his ritzy rig, and he was very proud of his horse. I soon found out he was much fonder of the horse than he was of me. As summer waned into autumn and the nights grew colder, he would spread a blanket over the horse and hobble it to wait on the curb in front of my mother's house when he came in to have coffee and cake with my mother and me. The Sunday night came when he explained to us he could not keep the horse hobbled at the curb much longer without proper shelter. When he built the house, my father built a barn at the north end of the lot and it still had the two stalls he had used for his delivery wagon horses. One stall now contained hard coal for the sitting room stove, with the icy glass windows all around which let off a soft warm glow, and the other stall contained kindling and small wood for the round oak stove in the dining room and the cook stove in the kitchen. On Monday afternoon after school, I _____ and found I could stack both kindling and wood in another part of the barn, and I cleaned out that stable so beautifully there wasn't a sliver on the floor. But as often happens, when the course of true love fails to run smoothly, Johnny never came back again. He never took me to another country wedding, never took me home from young people's meeting on Sunday night. Much to the amusement of my mother and aunts and my own

chagrin, I was teased unmercifully until I began to tell the story myself, finding it had conversational value, and I learned to laugh at myself.

I recall many stories my mother told about Dutch penny-pitching, but the one I cherish most is about a country boy from Overisel, which was just a little farther southeast from Ebenezer, who took his girl to the fair. At that time, admission was charged for horse and buggy and occupants, and they drove right into the fairgrounds. While the boy and girl tried to decide what they would do first, the girl said, “My, that popcorn smells so good.” And the boy said, “Does it? I’ll drive a little closer so you can smell it a little better.” (laughs)

During my teens, I had the best times out on that Ebenezer section. There was _____ one summer in a big open field, and in winter there were sleigh ride parties. In summer, some of the parents would go square dance on the ground. We sang, “Old Man Tucker went to town; he swung the ladies all around. He swung one right and he swung one left, and he swung the one that he loved best. Get out of the way of Old Man Tucker; you’re too late to get your supper.” And that left the girl in the center of the ring to choose another Old Man Tucker. Sometimes there would be a mouth organ accompaniment and, upon a rare occasion, an accordion. Now and then, an exuberant young farmer would sing out, “He swung the ladies upside down.” And he would proceed to try to do it, your feet leaving the ground and your long skirts twirling. At winter parties, we played wink-um and spin the bottle. Also, “the Prince of Paris lost his hat, who’s to blame for all of that?” In the big sleigh, there was hay on the floor and managed to keep you warm, but you went in a cutter with a date. The boy wrapped a

bearskin around your knees and you snuggled up and listened to the sleigh bells, and were sorry when you arrived at your destination so soon.

Before I was old enough to ride in a cutter with a boy, in the autumn, the singing school parties were my delight. Often, the choir practice would be held at some farm house. We rode in a carryall, like a van, with long seats on the sides. There were no windows in it at all, and it would be dark and mysterious inside. Then you would leave this darkness to go into a warm, lamp-lit kitchen with the most delightful smells. While our parents sang, we kids would vex our brains over riddles or we played lotto around the dining room table, but not for prizes—that would have been gambling. You could peek through the dining room door into the kitchen, where a huge kettle of milk would be simmering on the back of the cook stove with a shaved bit of chocolate melting in it, which was the biggest treat for me. My mother could never afford to buy milk for us to drink, only enough for our oatmeal and a border's coffee. This beautiful stuff was not cocoa made with water, but chocolate milk. Sometimes we would even have a marshmallow floating on the top of our cup.

Summer months, when the choir met at our house, we kids could play outside until deep dusk, throwing a softball across the summer kitchen roof and shouting, "Annie, Annie, over." Then we played "Run Sheep, Run" and "Prisoner's Base". When it grew quite dark, we played "Gray Wolf," and you would shiver in your shoes when the wolf would stop to catch you and you were the gray wolf the next time.

Until I was twelve or so, the singing school spent all of the Labor Day at the Castle Park. _____ picked members and their families at some designated house and we would leave early in the morning, usually three loads drawn by teams that started out

briskly, only slowing from time to time on the soft, sandy lakeshore road. With trees overhead, laced so thickly with reed boughs, we had to push branches out of the way.

How far was that, about 15 miles from Holland?

DVR: Castle Park? About 8 or 9 miles, I think.

JVA: About 9 miles, yes. This was a holiday the city school families looked forward to every summer. We would even pray it would be good weather. The Castle, which was at that time only the main ivory covered tower building, had been built by a German gentleman from Chicago as a summer home for his family. I don't think he even charged us for the use of the grounds and the facilities. There were tables and benches and an old cook stove in a shed, where my grandfather made egg coffee in a big granite pot. This was his chosen job. There was a barrel of lemonade in no time, with slices of lemon floating on the top, as cold as hand-pumped well water could make it. I recall one of the men serving with a long wooden paddle, singing out, "Here's where you get your lemonade, made in the shade, by an old maid, served with a rusty spade."

After the picnic, there were games and races with prizes, and then we all trooped down to the big lake. The girls all tied their skirts and petticoats high, getting rid of shoes and stockings and racing for the water. When the lake was rough, we would get soaked in no time. Even the older men would roll up their trouser legs and wade with us in the water.

Late afternoon found us back in the wagons, tired and quiet, as we began the long, slow ride back to town in the warm, sweet dusk. Stars appeared and would be identified, then someone would begin to sing. And how they sang...

[End of side one]

DVR: Go ahead, you may start.

JVA: Then someone would begin to sing, and how they sang. “Rock to the Cradle, _____,” “My Help Cometh from the Mountains,” and “Bringing in the Sheaves,” turning each _____ in as we came rejoicing. Then “Clementine, Who Fell into the Foaming Vine,” and Annie’s favorite, “The Last Rose of Summer,” was always sung, and “Abide with Me, Fast Fall to Even Time.” Then, “Leap, Kindly Light.” My grandfather would begin “_____ tonight on the old campground, Give Us a Song to Cheer,” for he had sung this on the battlefield when they needed a song from home and the friends they loved so dear. Later, one of the older parents would begin a Psalm and the slow, measured harmonies seemed more impressive under the starlit summer sky. Now and then, all the tones deep bass could be heard, giving the fabric of the four-part music a depth we never heard in church. Somehow, we felt closer to God as darkness deepened. Then someone would sing, “Now the day is over, night is drawing now,” ending with, “Jesus give the weary calm and sweet repose.” And as we neared home, they always sang the Doxology.

We children had been taught to sing the old hundred from the time we could hold a tune. Our parents knew what it meant to praise God, these sons and daughters of the first colonists who had battled their way across the ocean to a strange land in order to worship in freedom. This thankfulness to God had been instilled in all our hearts from the time we could understand, we, the grandchildren of John Van Lente. What a heritage he gave us, this gentle, courteous, unassuming man, and I thought I was poor then. I had envied so many of my friends who had more things than I did, and I never realized how

rich I was even then, until I knew the meaning of love and laughter, of courage and adversity, of faith that conquered fear.

My beloved grandfather died in 1911. There were no hospitals then, no homes for the elderly. Grandpa, having been loved and honored by his children, was cared for in his own home. All of the uncles and aunts took turns to help my grandmother as his last days approached. He had had _____ disease and could not lie prone. My uncles cut the rockers from a wicker chair with a _____ bag and put casters on the four legs so he could recline in this chair, bolstered by pillows, and could be moved easily.

The night they sent for my mother, we were the last to arrive at my grandmother's house, and everyone was there in the sitting room, even the smaller children, kneeling or sitting on the floor beside their mothers. Grandpa had been in a coma for some days, and we could hear his labored breathing. I don't recall being afraid. My mother had explained things to me before we left home, but we children were all still and a sort of a hushed silence pervaded the room. While we waited, he opened his eyes, looked around as if he knew and was happy that we were all there with him. There was a little smile on his lips, and suddenly he raised himself in the chair and lifted his arms up high. His face was radiant and shining, and my mother, who loved her father so dearly, rushed over and knelt beside the chair and cried out, "Pa, Pa, tell us what you see. Tell us what you see." And then he was gone. I do not recall any sobbing or weeping, but it was a dramatic and soul-searching experience that is given to few adults to behold, let alone children. We never forgot of it. We spoke of it with awe and still speak of it today. My tears still fill my eyes when I think of it.

In 1911, it was still the custom to keep the death watch. Lifelong friends from the singing school came to the house at ten o'clock each evening before the day of the funeral to stay until morning while the casket lay in state in the parlor. The front door of the house was marked with a black crepe ornament to show that it was a house of sorrow. Sometimes, during the lonely watch, these two friends would be served coffee and cake by a member of the family. The day of the funeral, my mother and aunts helped each other pin black crepe veils around their hats. My grandmother was already veiled when we arrived. After a short prayer, six of the choir members from Fourth Reformed Church carried the casket down the front steps of the 10th Street house and helped to place it in the hearse, which was shining black with windows all around that could be curtained or left open.

Ruby Nibbelink Winstrom was kind enough to show me a picture of the carriages they used in that day, and they were lined up in front of the old Nibbelink funeral home on 9th Street. Those houses and carriages were all rented; they didn't own them. The pall bearers were seated in the carriage following the hearse, and both vehicles moved forward to make room for the next carriage carrying my grandmother and her youngest son, Uncle Ralph, and her brother and sister-in-law from Fremont. Then Mr. Notier, in mourning trousers and swallow-tailed coat, came to the curb with a paper in his white-gloved hand and called the names of the families in the order of their age.

Since my mother was the oldest, my sister and I were with her in the next carriage, drawn by a matched pair of white horses. Our carriage was shining black, too, with two seats facing each other, with glass windows all around, with curtains that could be closed or left open. The driver sat on a sort of a boxed seat, high in the front, and

waited for the signal from Mr. Notier to move forward. There were small carriage lamps just below the driver seat on each side, which were not lit on that bright fall afternoon.

Then Aunt Annie's family was called, then Aunt Jenny's family, and last, Uncle Fred and his family. The rubber-tired carriages made no sound. We only heard the clop, clop of the horses as they pulled the carriages around the corner on First Avenue and 10th, which is Washington and 10th today, heading south.

When the family carriages arrived at the church on the corner of 15th Street, the casket was carried into the church and in stately procession, the family followed. Dignity and protocol were important in a Dutch funeral.

DVR: Was there embalming of the body at that time?

JVA: I don't remember; I don't think so. The east and west side pews were filled when we entered. When all was still, the minister came to the pulpit and prayed. Then, at Grandpa's last request, a quartet from the church choir sang, "It is well, it is well with my soul." And it went like this (singing): "When peace like a river attendeth my way; When sorrows like sea billows roll; Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say; It is well, it is well with my soul." And that was Grandpa's favorite hymn. I do not recall what the minister said, but I do remember that presently, all the people not in the family came quietly to the front of the church to look for a moment at my grandfather's still face.

Soon, we were all back in the carriages and turning east on 16th Street toward the cemetery. As we rounded the corner, we could hear the bell tolling out the years of Grandpa's life. The service at the cemetery is dim in my memory, too. I only recall my mother holding me close as the pall bearers placed the casket on the traps above the open grave. The casket held only a sheath of wheat and a cluster of brilliant asters from my

mother's garden. As they lowered the coffin, the minister gently grabbed a handful of sand, committing the body to the earth. After the service, we all returned to the 10th Street house, where refreshments were served by the neighbors. People had come from some distance, many lifelong friends and members of the singing school. My grandmother's relatives had a long distance to travel back to Fremont by horse and buggy.

This was not a sad gathering, neither was it a wake. It was more like a family reunion. I watched while many of these old friends came to my grandmother to hold her hand for a moment, and I heard more than one guest say, "He had just gone home, Jantje." It was some time before I realized that my grandfather's passing was a turning point in my life, that there would be no more singing school, no more trips in a carry-all to farmhouses for practice, no more picnics at Castle Park, and there were no plays written by my grandfather for me to take a part in. I had so many memories of my grandfather.

I remember the nights I was allowed to stay there for supper. In our family, the Bible was always read at the table before the final prayer, and it was a great honor to be chosen to read for a boy or girl. Sometimes a Psalm we had chosen, more often a chapter Grandpa had chosen. Sometimes he would bring out the Dutch Bible, and then it was my turn. I was the only one of the grandchildren who had learned to read the Dutch, although I did not speak it grammatically. There were times when he would choose that passage about the children sitting about the table as olive plants. "Olive plants" in Dutch is spelled "o-l-i-j-f p-l-a-n-t-e-n," but if I read it wrong, it would sound like, "o-l-i-f-a-n-t-e-n," which in English came out that children shall be as elephants around Thy table.

Time after time, he would catch me on that, and both my grandfathers would be vastly amused.

DVR: In Dutch, it would be olij planten, wouldn't it?

JVA: Yes, olijf planten. Didn't I spell it out?

DVR: Yes.

JVA: I just could not remember to read it right. As years passed, there were many holiday gatherings as a family. We went to Aunt Jenny's on the Fourth of July. We were given a stick with a spool on it, equipped with a firecracker in the open end of the spool and light it with a piece of _____ with a glowing end. Then we would watch the fireworks at night down at the lake, sitting on the ground where Kollen Park is now, and watching the rockets explode in a thousand star patterns all along the lakefront.

On Declaration Day, some of us would march in the parade, east on 8th Street to Columbia, then south to 16th Street, then east to the cemetery, where we put the flowers we had carried on the soldiers' graves. We would walk back to Aunt Annie's house for supper and had homemade ice cream. Sometimes we would get to lick the dasher. It was the most exquisite stuff, made with eggs and real cream. That was just before the time when we could buy an ice cream cone for a nickel.

On Labor Day, we would all be invited to Uncle Ralph's and Aunt Gertrude's house at Lugers Crossing, have a picnic and all play baseball with their boys in the open field.

And there were Sunday school picnics in the summer. The Third Church Sunday school picnic was always the best. We all met at the church and were given two round-trip tickets to Macatawa Park on reserved streetcars that picked us up on the corner of

13th and Pine. We would plaster our faces against the windows to catch the first glimpse of the _____ as the car careened around the bend toward the station at Mac, which was where Point West now is. We would crowd down the steps, run back away to Griswold Walk, then up an incliner until we found that path that led to the road. We would race down the sandy slope to the tables and could smell the coffee as we ran. They had a lemonade barrel, too, and we would watch the ladies cut the beautiful cakes. The Third Church ladies had the thickest ham sandwiches, the best potato salad, and if you were smart, you would, with your friends, find the best-looking cakes and choose a place at that table. One day, disaster struck. I was passed a beautiful cut layer cake to, in turn, pass it on, and it turned itself upside down in my lap—a disgrace. All my friends deserted me that day.

Up until my junior year in high school, I still went to Third Church on Sunday morning and the Fourth Reformed Church with my mother on Sunday afternoon, staying for their Sunday school. I used to storm because all the kids I knew only had to go to church once on Sunday, but it really paid off. I got to go to two Sunday school picnics every summer and two Christmas entertainments each Christmas week, which netted me two oranges and two boxes of Blum's chocolates. Oranges were a rare delicacy in my family.

Freshman year in high school, I was allowed to go to my first Christian Endeavor social, given to welcome new and returning students at Hope College. We were given scraps of colored silk, which we matched with for partners for the evening. My scrap of plaid silk matched the one held by Mark Van Alsburg, who took me home that night—my very first date. I never dreamed that one day I would come home from Detroit to

marry him. He often said, when I delighted to tell this story fondly, that, had he known, he would have run a mile.

One Christian Endeavor social in the summertime, we all met at Third Church and helped to carry boxes and baskets of food to Bender's dock, just north of the 8th Street exit to the Graham and Morton dock. Bender's dock was just east of the big dock, and we all boarded the launch that held at least 40 people. We disembarked at Ottawa Beach Hotel dock, walked around the hotel veranda, and north a short distance along the wide, beautiful, almost untouched beach with driftwood piled high. The fellows built a huge bonfire and cut long sticks from brush along the hillside to roast our wieners on. Later, we used the sticks for marshmallows, a nice, sticky first for me. There was red soda pop, horrible stuff, that fizzed in our nose. We sang songs and played games around the fire, mostly boys chasing girls and girls chasing boys along the beach.

Presently, we were walking back along the same route to board the launch for the homeward trip. About abreast of Waukazoo, the engine gave a sickening cough and then stopped. There we were, bobbing along with the little choppy waves sending us in circles. We all thought it was an adventure. Finally, the Bender boys got the engine started again, and we arrived back at the Holland dock to find it crowded with worried parents. It was 2:30 in the morning. I walked back home with some of the other girls and found my mother out on the front sidewalk with a lantern in her hand. She never scolded or questioned; she just said, "Thank God you are safe home." She had an almost abnormal fear of the water.

The following winters, there were skating parties at the Lyceum rink on 7th Street between River and Pine. There were sleigh ride parties and class parties. The following

June of 1917, ten of our high school boys were lined up in front of the city hall, having enlisted in the First World War, bound for the induction center in Grand Rapids. The band played and the pretty girls pinned flowers on their lapels. Of these ten _____ boys, two boys came back at once, having failed their physicals. Two other boys, Willard Leenhouts, the son of Dr. Leenhouts, and Henry Walters, who used to come to some of our parties, were killed in the _____. Willard was the first casualty from Holland, and our American Legion Post in Holland bears his name.

Fall of 1918, a classmate and I were enrolled at Ferris Institute. We were wildly excited, Mae and I, going away from home to school for the first time. My father paid for my tuition and Mae's sister, Grace, paid for hers, and we were to work for our board and room by waiting on tables. How well I remember the day we _____ our trucks, she from 26th Street on Central Avenue, and I from our house to the Pere Marquette Depot and Lincoln at 8th, on borrowed express cars. The next day, we made the trip all over again, each carrying a suitcase and winter coats, and I, my cherished mandolin. Neither of us had ever boarded the train before. We had to change trains in Grand Rapids and were met by friends of Mae's family, who put us on the Big Rapids train the next day. We walked from the Big Rapids station to the college, carrying our luggage, enrolled, and then walked back to _____, where we were to stay for the next year.

We were at school in November of 1918 when the armistice was signed. Governor Ferris, the tyrannical owner and head of the college, refused to let us off to celebrate. The whole pharmacy department walked out and the rest of the student body followed. The fellows found a hay rack, I think without the farmer's _____, and we pushed and pulled that unwieldy vehicle down the streets and along the razzle-de-

dazzled Michigan Avenue, so-called because of the strings of lights stretched from store to store across that Main Street. In the _____ Square, we burned the Kaiser in effigy, laughed, and danced for joy because the war was over and our boys had made the world safe for the democrats.

That winter, Mae and I went to dancing school and went to the college dances. We were waltzing to “Beautiful Ohio,” fox trotting to “_____ and _____,” and “Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Trip Bag, and Smile, Smile, Smile.” And, of course, “Over There.” Those of us who had boyfriends or cousins or brothers in the service were glad that it was over, over there.

In 1919, I came home to my first job at the Holland Furnace Company, and after a few months, I was fired. My dad found a new job for me in Detroit through a lawyer friend of his, with a firm of attorneys in the Dime Bank Building. I soon found out how little I knew. I had to study nights to keep my job, but I did it, and I worked for the same firm for three and a half years and came home in June of that last year to marry Mark. Sometimes, I think I have had the best life of anyone I knew.

My mother never had much money, only what she earned keeping boarders at three dollars and a half a week. Through all of her hardships, through the first almost desperate days of poverty when I was small, even through the tragedy of her separation from my father, she never lost her faith in God. He was her bulwark and her strength. She was 82-years-old when she died. She owed not one cent of debt and had saved for her burial with the help of a 10 cents a week Metropolitan insurance policy, and she kept her house and willed it to my sister and later to me.

Her one great sorrow was that she could no longer read her Bible. She had memorized so many, many loved passages that she said to me one day, “I wish had learned more now that I can no longer see to read.” The day before she died, my cousin Kit and I, sitting beside her bed, were astonished to see her sit up in bed, awake and rational. She had been irrational for several days. She said, “Why, I’m home,” and she looked at us and smiled. That afternoon, she talked to us of many things that had happened in her life. Then, sitting there, she said, “I know more gospel hymns than you do by heart.” And she began to sing “Abide with Me,” and she sang in her high soprano, as true and clear as a bell, all five verses from memory.

Today, we often hear a song that tells us the best things in life are free. Oh, we do have the sun and the morning and the moon at night, and many other beautiful things, but the best things you cherish in life must be earned—happiness with a share of love, with a dignity and serenity that goes along with a good life, is not given to us lightly. No one appreciates happiness so much as a person who has known sorrow. No one learns the meaning of courage unless they have first known fear. And no one builds that firm foundation in the Lord that my grandfather had without at some time or other feeling doubt. Life is a constant struggle. One thing I do know, that I owe much to my Grandfather Van Lente, who taught his children the basic laws of life, and through them, his grandchildren as well. This gentle, kind, and courteous man, so short of stature, was a giant in so many ways. With all the love and faith he taught us, he bequeathed to us also a love of music that we will never lose.

That’s it. Well, I know I did a better job.

DVR: Well, thank you very much for this recording. I like to think of this as chapter one. Later on, we're going to have a chapter which deals with all the adventures you had in your married life, with babies and husbands and Depression and things like that.

JVA: I don't think they would have the same weight, because looking back, I think the happiest years of my life were the three and a half years when I was practically courting Mark.

(laughs)

DVR: Well, thank you, again.

JVA: All right.

[End of interview]