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Ver Hulst, Henry Oral History Interview: General Holland History

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Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Henry Ver Hulst

Interviewer: Don van Reken

August 3, 1979

Abstract: Henry Ver Hulst, harness making, Cappon-Bertsch Tannery, Drenthe Public School, canning factory in Drenthe, Pere Marquette train station in Vriesland, Jenison Park, Jenny Kleinstecker Ver Hulst, Salem, Hamilton, harness shop, grocery store in Graafschap, Dutch Novelty wooden novelty works on North River Avenue in Holland, Fred Oldemulder, Nies Hardware Store on East 8th Street, city clerk Oscar Peterson, city clerk Clarence Grevengood,

DVR: Today is August 3, 1979. I'm at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Ver Hulst on West 18th Street. Mr. Ver Hulst is going to tell me some facts about his life. Mr. Ver Hulst, how old are you?

HVH: I am 89 years old.

DVR: When were you born?

HVH: I was born April 4, 1890.

DVR: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

HVH: Two brothers and two sisters.

DVR: Were they older or younger?

HVH: One brother was older than I am and sisters, and one brother was younger.

DVR: What kind of business was your father in?

HVH: The harness business.

DVR: What does that involve?

HVH: Well, it involves making new harness and repairing the harness for the farmers living around there.

DVR: Where did he get the materials for that?

HVH: That he got at Cappon-Bertsch Tannery in Holland, and the rest of it—the hardware and all that stuff—in Grand Rapids.

DVR: When did you start school? Or where did you go to school?

HVH: At Drenthe Public School.

DVR: And how many classrooms did they have?

HVH: Well, they had two rooms, and up to the eighth grade.

DVR: And did you go to school every year?

HVH: Yes, ever since I was six years old.

DVR: And then part of the time you worked a little bit. Did you work for your dad?

HVH: Yes. I started working for my dad in the harness shop when I was 12 years old. It was part-time before and after school.

DVR: What about summertime? Did you work for your dad then, too?

HVH: Yes. Mostly for my dad and well, we had a canning factory there. I worked in the canning factory in the summer. And then some days I worked for farmers. When they needed some help and couldn't get any other help, I'd help them out through the harvest.

DVR: When was the busiest time with the harness work?

HVH: In the spring from March 'til May, and May and June when the farmers were busy in the harvest.

DVR: Did you go to school then, or did you help your dad then?

HVH: I quit school in March and started again in November.

DVR: After you worked with your dad from March 'til when? 'Til May or June?

HVH: Yes, I suppose. During the summer, too, mostly. Just once in awhile I'd work out odd jobs.

DVR: Now, you said you worked in the canning factory. What kind of work was that involved for you? First as a boy, right?

HVH: Yes, first as a boy. I had to pile up empty cans from the floor to the ceiling. Those cans were brought in by a team of horses and wagons, and we had to pile them up. That was the start of it.

DVR: Where did they bring the cans from? You said they brought them in by team, but where from?

HVH: From the Pere Marquette station in Vriesland. That was four miles north from Drenthe.

DVR: And what happened to the cans when you were at the cannery then?

HVH: Well, it was all piled up on the second floor, and they had a slide or some kind of an elevator that we had to put the cans in. They'd go down to the first floor to the machinery, where they'd be filled with fruit and vegetables.

DVR: What kind of fruit and vegetables did they pack?

HVH: They started at peas and then tomatoes and apples and pumpkins. Cherries, pears...that's about all, I guess.

DVR: And how did they seal the cans?

HVH: They had little round lid on the top, and they soldered them with a soldering machine.

DVR: How did they sterilize that? Did they have some heat or some boilers or...?

HVH: Oh, yes. They had boilers. They had what they called a boiling room. Big vats as big as a room like this, and they put the cans all in some kind of crates, iron crates, and hoist them in those vats.

DVR: And then they would be sterile?

HVH: Yes.

DVR: Did they put labels on at this place also?

HVH: Yes, we put labels on.

DVR: Where did the labels come from? You don't remember?

HVH: No, I don't remember.

DVR: How were they shipped out again? By horse, by team?

HVH: By team.

DVR: Where they in boxes by this time?

HVH: Yes, all packed in boxes. Two dozen in a box. Two pound cans.

DVR: And you did this almost every summer then, from starting when? When you were about 12?

HVH: Twelve to about the time we got married at 26, 25.

DVR: What kind of wage did you earn?

HVH: Well, I started at a factory for three and a half cents an hour. We worked ten hours. And the most I ever got there was a dollar and a half a day.

DVR: Still for 10 hours.

HVH: Ten hours. And sometimes at night, too.

DVR: How many people work at the factory?

HVH: We had a time that there was 80 girls and maybe 30 men, men and boys.

DVR: Where did these people come from? You had 80 girls, that's more than the population of Drenthe almost, isn't it?

HVH: They come from all over. They even come as far as Salem and Jamestown, Forest Grove, Vriesland, Oakland, Bentheim.

DVR: All the little towns there. What did you do for recreation when you were a young man?

HVH: Mostly play ball. Baseball.

DVR: With who, and what kind of a team did you have?

HVH: We had a regular country team, and we played towns like Vriesland, Jamestown, Forest Grove, Oakland, Bentheim, Zeeland.

DVR: When would you play?

HVH: Saturday afternoons.

DVR: What were the baseball fields like?

HVH: Like cow pastures. Pretty rough.

DVR: (laughs) Pretty rough. What other kinds of excitements or adventures did you have while you lived in Drenthe?

HVH: Well, in the winter, we'd go skating, and every little kid had a sled. We'd go coasting, sometimes a mile or half a mile from home, when we'd find a hill. We would go coasting and then skating. That'd be about it.

DVR: Now, later on you got interested in girls.

HVH: Some, yes.

DVR: And I understand you met your wife at Jenison Park.

HVH: That's right.

DVR: And how did you get to Jenison Park then?

HVH: We walked up the horse to Vriesland and that was two miles, and then we took the interurban to Jenison Park.

DVR: What kind of a day was it that you met your wife? Was it an outing of some kind?

HVH: Yes. It was farmer's picnic.

DVR: And farmers from where?

HVH: From all over the country here. Once a year they had a farmer's picnic from all around here.

DVR: Was it a special rates then or special picnic tables or...?

HVH: Well, special rates on the railroad.

DVR: On the railroad.

HVH: On the interurban.

DVR: And then once you met your wife...Where was she from at the time?

HVH: From Salem.

DVR: She was from Salem. And when you were visiting her or dating her, how did you manage that? How did that work out?

HVH: It worked out pretty good.

DVR: How did you go there?

HVH: Horse and buggy. Horse and cutter in the winter.

DVR: And how long would that take you?

HVH: Hour and a quarter. Seven miles.

DVR: And you did that every night?

HVH: No, once a week. Every Sunday night.

DVR: Just Sunday nights?

HVH: Yes.

DVR: No Sunday dinner?

HVH: No. I'd pick her up at her church every other Sunday night when they had services.

DVR: And how long did you go with your wife?

HVH: Four years and three months.

DVR: May I say at this stage that her maiden name was Kleinstecker. Is that right?

HVH: Jenny Kleinstecker.

DVR: How long have you been married now?

HVH: 63 years.

DVR: That's a nice long time. You got married in what year?

HVH: 1916.

DVR: And you stayed working for your father then as a harness maker? Or what happened?

HVH: Well, we come up a couple months before we got married. I bought out a harness shop in Hamilton. We took a wedding trip from Salem, where we got married, to Hamilton with a horse a buggy. That was our wedding trip.

DVR: And you bought a house there?

HVH: Yes. Well, first we rented.

DVR: And then you bought a house.

HVH: Bought a house.

DVR: Were there any other harness makers there?

HVH: No.

DVR: You had a monopoly.

HVH: Yes.

DVR: Was harness making a good business?

HVH: Very good, up to about 1925. Then it started to slack.

DVR: Why?

HVH: Automobiles, trucks, and tractors took their place.

DVR: And then there were no horses.

HVH: No, the farmers got rid of their horses and bought tractors, got rid of their driving horses and bought automobiles.

DVR: Now, how did you sell your harness? Did you go out visiting to the farmers, or did they all come to you?

HVH: They all come to me.

DVR: What kind of hours did you keep in the shop?

HVH: Well from 7 to 6, excepting two nights a week up to 9 o'clock at night.

DVR: And why did you stay open that late, 'til 9 o'clock?

HVH: Well, the farmers were busy during the day, and some of them didn't have time to come to Hamilton to trade, just at night. All the stores and everything was open those nights, Thursday and Saturday nights.

DVR: What would happen if all the merchants closed up? Wouldn't the farmers have come during the day?

HVH: Some would go to other places where they were open. Most of them would.

DVR: You mean you were there to serve the...?

HVH: Serve the public.

DVR: Serve the public, and that was the way you could do it. What was the highway like?

There's a highway that goes through Hamilton today, right below the falls of the Rabbit River. What was the highway like at that time?

HVH: Well, at first when we were there, it was sand and clay. Mostly sand and what they called the B-Line. We always called it the B-Line, that's M40 now. That'd come right through Hamilton on the way to Allegan. Mostly sand.

DVR: And when was the change made, do you remember?

HVH: Maybe in 1925, when they started to put all gravel. Later on they blacktopped it, but that was after my time.

DVR: That was after your time. When they fixed the road, or when they repaired it, how did they do that?

HVH: With the teams. One man who they called the scraper, scraped the dirt, carried the dirt from one place to another, gravel.

DVR: Who would take charge of that? Would that be the road commission?

HVH: No, highway commissioner.

DVR: The highway commissioner. And would he hire farmers from the neighborhood then, for scraping?

HVH: Yes.

DVR: How long did you stay in Hamilton with that harness shop?

HVH: 12 years.

DVR: And then what happened?

HVH: I sold out and I bought a grocery store in Graafschap.

DVR: Let's go back, one more thing. You had your family while you were in Hamilton, didn't you?

HVH: That's right.

DVR: How many children did you have?

HVH: Three. Two girls and a boy.

DVR: They're still alive?

HVH: Still alive and have nice families. They live right around Holland here, within a mile and a half from us, all of them.

DVR: And then you went to Graafschap.

HVH: Yes.

DVR: Is that considered an advance or a step backwards?

HVH: At first I thought it was an advance, a promotion. But I found out later it wasn't. I'd run into the same thing I'd run into in Hamilton.

DVR: What was that?

HVH: Chain stores in town. I was too close to Holland.

DVR: And they changed your style of merchandising.

HVH: Yes.

DVR: Just as the tractors had changed your style there.

HVH: That's right.

DVR: So how long did you keep this store in Graafschap?

HVH: 13 years.

DVR: And then you sold it?

HVH: I sold it and moved to Holland.

DVR: And what did you do then?

HVH: I worked for the Dutch novelty—there's a wooden novelty works on North River Avenue—for two years.

DVR: Who owned that?

HVH: Fred Oldemulder.

DVR: That's the man that's still alive, still doing wooden shoes.

HVH: That's right.

DVR: And why did you leave that place?

HVH: I got too busy. That was during the war, and they took a contract with the government—
so many ammunition boxes we had to make. A semi-truck load of ammunition boxes had
to be done every night. I'd run a nailing machine, and I couldn't do it. I couldn't work
against them young fellows, so I quit.

DVR: How old were you then? You must have been about 60 then.

HVH: Yes, I think I was. Maybe a little better. I don't know, around 60. '41.

DVR: You'd be in your 50s then. When you left this woodworking shop, you went to where?

HVH: Nies Hardware Store.

DVR: Where was that?

HVH: On East 8th Street.

DVR: Where just about?

HVH: Well, let's see. Right near...about next to Loker-Rutgers clothing store.

DVR: On the north side of the street.

HVH: North side of the street.

DVR: And you were a clerk, then, in this store?

HVH: Yes.

DVR: And how long did you do that?

HVH: Two years.

DVR: And then what happened?

HVH: Well, somebody talked me over to take the job as the custodian in the city hall. So I
decided to work for the city.

DVR: And that's in the city of Holland on River Avenue.

HVH: Yes.

DVR: And that's where you began to visit with the librarian and visit with the city clerk?

HVH: That's right.

DVR: Who was the city clerk at the time?

HVH: The first years I worked there is was Oscar Peterson and then Clarence Grevengood. And then they started hiring a city manager.

DVR: Who did the work before the city manager? The city clerk did most of the work?

HVH: Clerk did all of it.

DVR: You got along well with the mayor and the councilmen?

HVH: You bet, we were just like one family. It is different now. When I go in there, I don't know nothing. They don't know me.

DVR: And then you retired from city hall?

HVH: That's right.

DVR: And you've been retired for how many years now?

HVH: About 22 years ago.

DVR: And since that time you've been gardening and fishing?

HVH: That's right. And doing nothing.

DVR: That's not the way I hear it. I hear that you play shuffleboard. Is that right?

HVH: That's right.

DVR: Where do you play shuffleboard?

HVH: 24th Street, Moran Courts.

DVR: Moran Courts. How many people play there most of the time?

HVH: From 20-30.

DVR: What about in the winter time?

HVH: We play shuffleboard in the city hall.

DVR: The Civic Center?

HVH: The Civic Center, I mean.

DVR: How do you get about these days? Do you have a car?

HVH: No.

DVR: How do you get about then?

HVH: Bicycle.

DVR: And how far do you go on your bicycle?

HVH: Well, this morning I went up to Graafschap Road and 26th Street.

DVR: Over to Christ Memorial Church?

HVH: Yes. And I go to town with it, where I want to go.

DVR: It's a nice little ride.

HVH: Yes. Sure.

[End of interview]