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Ploeg, Bill Oral History Interview: Class Projects

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Interview with Bill Ploeg
Interviewed by David Lunn on 3/31/99
History 201 - Larry Wagenaar's Michigan History Class
Spring 1999 Semester

BP: I don't know what you want to ask, but in short, I was born and raised in the Netherlands. I was born in 1923.

DL: What is your mother's name?

BP: Albertien.

DL: What is your father's name?

BP: Hendrikus.

DL: Siblings?

BP: Sisters Jantje, Tini, and Roelie; and brother Roelof.

DL: Your wife's name?

BP: Grietje (Grace).

DL: Her maiden name?

BP: Van Faassen.

DL: When did you and your wife get married?

BP: 1953, February 25; we were married in the Netherlands.

DL: When did you come here?

BP: The date I do not remember, but it was in 1957 in New York. We left the Netherlands between Christmas and New Year in 1956, ten days on a boat and we arrived in January, 1957. I don't know exactly the date. It was the first week of the new year.

DL: Did you come straight to Holland?

BP: Yes, New York, took a train to Grand Rapids then to Holland.

DL: Do you have any children?

BP: We have four children, one died. Marsha was born in the Netherlands, [date removed], 1953. She's married to Lankheet. The next is a son, Henry William, born [date removed], 1957.

DL: He was born in Holland?

BP: Yes, he was born in Holland, everyone except for Marsha was born in Holland. The next one is Edward E. Ploeg, born [date removed], 1961 in Holland, Michigan. Then Renee was born June 7, 1963 and died on March 19, 1993.

DL: Do you go to church?

BP: Yes, Harderwyk Christian Reformed Church, the best church in town. You know where that is?

DL: Yes.

BP: You know where it is, you heard about it, but it is the best church in town, you know what I mean. (laughs)

DL: I go to Third Reformed.

BP: I passed that church often, you know when I was sick and in the hospital--I had four bypasses. I was once over there and I said to my wife that is a nice church inside, not that new part, I never see that, but I mean the old church, I love that church.

DL: The new part helps a lot, because we were growing out of the old, but the church the same.

BP: Comparing it with the new ones, it's so old, and big, the inside and the way it is built, I like that. I don't know many people who go over there.

DL: Schooling?

BP: That is hard to say. I don't have a high school diploma in the Netherlands, but I had a year and a half of high school and the first seven or eight grades of grade school, and then I went to night school for three years.

DL: Why did you go there?

BP: General education, drawing, arithmetic, geometry, Dutch language, algebra. I got an eight. Here, in America you have A, B, C, but in the Netherlands they go 1, 2, 3 all the way to ten. Ten is the highest, so then you can see how dumb I was and how good I was. On top of that, I went to the Police Academy for a year.

DL: So you were a police officer?

BP: Yeah, for ten years.

DL: Where have you worked?

BP: I started to work in the Netherlands at age 14 as a farm hand; I was a baker in a bakery for five years, and after that then the second World War started in the Netherlands in 1940-'41, '42, I was with four guys planning to escape to England to join Dutch army. England had all kinds of armies over there, so that was a failure because it came under Belgium order and the connection was wrong. The man who wanted to bring us to Switzerland was gone and we didn't have the address and said we could wait, but he didn't know how long one month maybe two months and we were out of money so we went back home. And from back home he found out we were planning to go to England, I mean someone was talking about it and I know who to, but that is besides the point. So they found out and the police picked up and we went to prison for four

weeks. From prison they brought us to the concentration camp and I spent four months in the concentration camp, I have a picture over there bald headed and that is taken when I came out of the concentration camp. When I went in I was 180 pounds, and when I came out I was ninety pounds, I lost exactly one-half of my weight. We could get out and you know the parents wanted to get us out of the concentration camp, and then the German police said we can get them out but you would have to go voluntarily to Germany and that is better than a concentration camp. Then I came out of the concentration camp and I went home and then I went to Germany and started to work in a bakery again. I was at the bakery for 14 months, then I went on furlough, I was able to go back to the Netherlands and this was at Christmas time. I was able to visit my parents, and I was over there for week or two weeks, then I had to go back, but I didn't. I went hiding in the Netherlands, so I was in different places in the Netherlands until the end of the war. Then it was a Liberation army and were able to work with the Canadians. I went to fight with the Canadian and I went to Indonesia. I was overseas for three years. Then I came home and became a state cop for ten years, during that time I was married. In 1957 I was sick of it and decided to come to America. What did I do over here? Here is my list, some of that is part-time too. I started in the Western Foundry, then I went to Holland Honey Cake, on 17th Street, I guess it is out of business, but the building is still there. Then I went to Hempels Pastry, back in the baking business again. Then I was a garbage man for Jacobusse, then at the big furniture company up past the high school. The west side of Quincy--Trendway. Then from Trendway I went down the hill to Padnos as a truck driver. I retired from Louis

Padnos, ten years ago, when I was 65.

DL: Can you describe your homeland and what it was like to live there?

BP: The Netherlands, that's a good place to live. Here they speak about freedom, but in the Netherlands, you can't. It's a free country, insofar as you can go to any school you want if you have your education high enough and the government pays for most of it. But when you want to build a house, you have to have a permit saying that wall has to be that way and that wall has to be that way, you can not have bright colors, it must fit in with all of the houses around it. You cannot build a house worth \$50,000 in a neighborhood where all the houses are worth \$200,000-\$300,000. That freedom you don't have. In the Netherlands there are a lot of rules and regulations and sometimes it's hard to understand for someone who is not born and raised over there. But when you are born and raised over there, you don't know any better, it automatically goes that way, the way you live over there. I don't know if you ever been in another country?

DL: I was over in Germany and France.

BP: I don't know how you study that, but these countries are very different from America. America is the greatest country in the world, you cannot believe how free America is, you can do what you want. With education you can get anything you want to, if you want to study, you can do everything. In the Netherlands you have to have so many diplomas. I was a baker and I would have a bakery, over here I could just rent a building and have a bakery, no problem. But in the Netherlands you have to have a diploma in bookkeeping, and how to bake and what to bake, what is in every loaf of

bread; you've got to know that. That is the freedom here compared to Netherlands, maybe all of Europe, I don't know about Belgium and Germany, but you have to have many diplomas to get someplace.

DL: But you didn't know this before you came here, you didn't know this exactly before coming here. So what prompted you to come here?

BP: My sister was living over here, and they said it was good. My brother-in-law started in the Western Foundry too. Did you ever see Sybesmas Electronics store on 17th Street? Just past Ottawa Street, over there by Heinz. He started his own business. He was a butcher in the Netherlands and he took a correspondence course and got his diploma. He started with radios and finally TVs and then sold that whole thing out on his kids. But that is one example of what you can do here in America. Yeah, he got a diploma over there from the International Correspondence Schools. I got one too, but I mean that is small appliance and that is not good, I mean I started with it and I tried to get into the business. People brought in toasters and it takes you an hour to fix it. The people had to pay ten dollars, then you go to Meijers Thrifty Acres and you can buy a new toaster for ten dollars maybe even less. That is why I did not go ahead with it, there was no money in it. In the Netherlands you cannot do that kind of stuff.

DL: So, it was more like because you had family over here and they told you how good it was?

BP: And another thing was because I have a little "hey, let me try it; see how it is" in me. I was in the army and it was interesting going to places like Indonesia, I still feel sorry that I did not study that country let me make it that way. Then I came back to the

Netherlands and I was sick of that from state cop and I said, "Hey, let's go to America."

DL: Why Holland?

BP: Because my sister was living over here. And maybe you heard of Mr. Wichers? He was my sponsor, he signed for it so I could come here, because my brother-in-law was not long enough over here. He was not an American citizen yet so he couldn't do it, so he contacted somebody, then Mr. Wichers signed for the papers. (Shows family paperwork.)

DL: My Dad's doing this now, not exactly this, more like a family tree. He's gone back to the 1500s, and he was able to find, not all the branches, but like one branch he was able to get back to the 1500s.

BP: Where is he from originally? The Netherlands?

DL: No, he's from Chicago. My great-grandma; one of them was from the Netherlands, one from Germany.

BP: So did he go over there to get some information?

DL: He's over there right now. He's a professor at Hope and he's on sabbatical. So he and my mom and my younger sister are all staying in Germany. They just left yesterday for a two-week trip in which they are going to go--I don't know he listed off a bunch of names--but he is going to spend some time in the Netherlands.

BP: He wants to find out his relatives over there, or something like that?

DL: Yes. It's funny to listen to him, he has this computer and uses the Internet, there's something you can go into which will help you find this history.

BP: I would like to know that, I am too old to buy a computer. I like to hear what people can find on the Internet. It is unbelievable.

DL: What were your first impressions of Holland?

BP: It was in the winter and I didn't have a car, I had to walk from my apartment between Sixth and Seventh Street on Central Avenue, downtown just about, and I had to walk to the Foundry. So there were hard times for us. And the language you know, I've been here forty-one years and I still don't speak it one-hundred percent. Then the summer came and it was better, the weather was nice and you walk. You know some words to speak. Then I went about nine months in the Foundry and then I went to Holland Honey Cake. But, the first impressions, don't forget I was ten years state cop in the Netherlands. You know what a cop does here, I mean they do plenty, but physically, over there it was on a bike over here they sit in a car, so physically I never did any work over the last ten years, then I came here at the Western Foundry, I don't know if you know about foundry work, but otherwise you should go to one sometime, it's all heavy, hot, dusty. Then I decided to work for Holland Honey Cake, then the summer came and I bought my first car, I think it was a '58 Chevy. There were sometimes when we wanted to go back, especially working at the Western Foundry, it wasn't easy. The impression, first you had to get used to it. You went to church on Sundays and didn't know the their language. So when the minister said, "Amen," then we know we could get out, or otherwise we didn't know. But we kept Communion, I guess you are a Christian too, I mean you go to Hope College. So, we got Communion, and in the Netherlands the bread goes around and you take bread and you eat it right away, but

here you hold it until everybody has got it. So when I got my first Communion I eat it right away and people sitting around me were looking at me and I didn't know that.

DL: How long did it take you to learn the language?

BP: I would said it would take me about five to ten years, but my wife was at home and she always had the radio on and she learned the language better than I did. I'm stupid I did not go to night school, on River Avenue. They had a special class for immigrants, you could go over there for free, but I never did.

DL: Why have you stayed in this area, do you just like it?

BP: Yeah, I like this area, I mean I would not go to Florida, just too hot, its hot all the time, so I would not go over there. I like the changing of the seasons. No, we stay here because it is all Dutch and we enjoy that.

DL: How are your feelings about how the Hispanic population has been coming in and the clash of two different cultures?

BP: In the first place, I got nothing against anybody. It could be a Negro, Hispanic, from Singapore or Germany, no I don't mean Germany, I mean I hate the people, I know it's not a good Christian attitude, but I hate the people. When I look at the T.V. and see a soccer game between Belgium and Germany, I hope the Belgians will win it and the Germans will lose it. It's still in me because of the concentration camps.

DL: My grandpa was in that war, WWII.

BP: An American soldier?

DL: Yes. What would you do all day in the concentration camp?

BP: You built new barracks. I was only in there for four months. In '42, and that was a

good time, well, as good as it could be in a concentration camp. '43 it was getting down and in '44 people didn't hardly have anything to eat, and '45 the liberation. It was a prison that I was in. These were the toilets we used and this is the priest and he cleaned the toilets. These stinkers did this on purpose figured he was just a no-good-for-nothing priest so let him clean the toilets. They bring the people up to the concentration and this is the hospital for the sick people. This picture is of all the dead and this is where they would burn them. That is the barber who gives you a free haircut. They had a lot of lice so this is lice hunting, when you put a lot of people together you get break-outs. That is all I got from the concentration camp.

DL: Has Holland been able to keep the Dutch heritage, and how do you feel about Tulip Time?

BP: Let me go back to the Mexicans. Personally, the Mexicans take over too much from Holland. Now you got that fountain that is coming and that's okay, I mean I don't want to fight about it, but this is a Dutch city and it is not a Mexican city. It is a Dutch city and the Mexicans forget that. Another thing is with the language when your kids go to school they do not even know the language when they are five, six years old; they don't know the English language, some of them, but most of them don't. Why does Holland High School have to have so many language teachers, Spanish teachers, how come we don't have teachers for Laos, Cambodian, Vietnam. They are all people living over here. How about Dutch? Today I saw in the mail I read it on one side in English and the other all in Spanish, now it shouldn't be that way. Those people should know the language too. I guess Holland does a great job, but to keep up...now in the

museum we've got the paintings from Rembrandt...Tulip Time is nice, it does a lot for the city, the programs. Cal Langejans of the Holland Chorale does a great job, even when they sing the Dutch National Anthem and you know it is all American people, maybe one or two Dutchmen in, but otherwise it is all American people. No, that is great. Holland High with their marching band and the wooden shoes, hey, that is great, that is what I think, that is great, you know. I guess maybe in the future it will go down a little bit, not the Tulip festival, but I think Holland will become less Dutch. You can see that in everything.

DL: Have you experienced any discrimination in Holland?

BP: Me personally? No. Some people laugh about the way I talk, but I say, "Hey man, you try and talk Dutch once." But, discrimination; no. Never. I love this country, don't forget that. I love it. Even when I'm seventy-five years old and have heart problems...this morning I was with the heart specialist, had an operation last September, four bypasses and I can't do anything anymore. All I can do is sit down and maybe do some typing, but I can't do any work anymore. That is hard for me. The last thirty-five years have been great. Good family, very Christian family, kids went to Christian school, and whatever. Basketball games: Hope vs. Calvin, always Hope, I say that is where I live so I root for them. My daughter who died went to Calvin for a year, then went to Davenport. Davenport is a great college, that is what I personally believe.

DL: Do your children speak Dutch?

BP: My oldest one who was born in Netherlands. But the others do not know it. Marsha

could write it, read it, there are a lot of words she doesn't know. When I say something to my two boys in Dutch, they normally know what I mean. In the beginning we spoke a lot of Dutch.

DL: I just want to thank you for taking time for this interview.

BP: No problem, it was my pleasure.