3-30-2000

Sytsma, William Oral History Interview: Class Projects

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BK: You told me you were born--earlier you told me you were born in Noordhorn?

WS: Noordhorn. That's in the province of Groenigen. That was in a cold winter, [date removed], 1941.

BK: Where about in the Netherlands is Groenigen?

WS: That's about 15 kilometers north west of the capital city of Groenigen.

BK: What was it like living there? The area you came from?

WS: Well, I was born during the beginning of the War, obviously, so you want it during the War living, or after the War?

BK: Both would be great!

WS: Both would be alright. Okay, my first memories go back to the latter part of the War. Obviously when you are born in 1941, and the war ends 1945, those are tender memories, young memories. Towards the end of the War--maybe two, three weeks before Liberation Day--I remember standing outside of the farmhouse (we lived on a farm by-the-way) and we had, it's kind of a mixture of dairy cattle and cash crops. It was one of these typical of one of these Groenigen farmhouses where the house is attached to the barn with a neck in between joining the two. And it was on, I remember, a nice sunny afternoon, and we were standing or playing I guess at that time, under a row of Linden trees that we had next to the house. All of a sudden we heard the roar of airplanes coming across at a very low level, and looking up we saw bombers diving down and
dropping their bombs about three kilometers away. The canal, a major canal that went from Friesland through Groenigen towards the German border had a lock in it about three kilometers away to keep the water level good for shipping. So, we watched those planes, they dropped the bombs, and as those bombs exploded, the ground three, four kilometers away just shook like—you know, vibrated really; like a volcano explosion really. That was one of my most vivid first memories of the War. Shortly thereafter, there was another flight of bombers. All of a sudden behind the farm, there was a major road, a major highway from Groenigen to Laywadden, we call it the _______ and there was a convoy of German military trucks and vehicles pulling back out of Friesland obviously through Groenigen towards the German border. And all of a sudden they came to a screeching halt. The people, the soldiers, they all jumped out and headed for the ditch, and moments later the bombers again bombed that convoy, and the road was blocked off for several days until it could be cleared up—the casualties could be cleared up. I never did see any casualties, but I saw some of the left over parts of vehicles and all of that. But those were some of my most vivid memories of the end of the War. Then all of a sudden on a beautiful sunny day, May 5 came around and that was Liberation Day. That was just a glorious time for all of us; even though I was just knee high to a grasshopper I still remember that very vividly, and everybody walked around with an orange sash around their middle, because we were all loyal to the House of Orange and the Queen. It was just a celebration day. So those were my first memories. What was it like living out there? Well, we lived on a farm. During the War we really never suffered any great deprivation of food or so, because we could grow our own food, even though the Germans made us
accountable for it. But you know at night they don't see things too well. We had our own meat, whether that was beef or mutton, we had our own milk, we had our own garden—vegetables and food. As a farm family we never suffered that much. We did always have people over from the city who had nothing, and were deprived, and those people came to the farm to pick up whatever extra food could be smuggled to them basically, and given to them because they were starving. Toward the end of the war there were some terrible situations. The nearest city was Groenigen, and some of those people would come down and scavenge around the farms, whether they just took whatever they could find or asked for it. It didn't matter—they just wanted to stay alive. It was survival for them. Then right after the war we had many refugees from the big cities. A strict, Rotterdam and Amsterdam, from, well, the nearest city was Groenigen would come down. They needed food, they were starving, they were dying, so the farmers I think generally speaking were very generous to share what they had. There wasn't a whole lot of extra, because anything extra was always picked up by the Germans. They needed it for their own military forces, they were starving out there too, I presume, towards the end of the war. That was part of the conditions we lived under during and after the war. During the war, there were a lot of activities in our area. Not so much military activities, but underground activities: sabotaging German activities, getting food stamps. You know the Cory Tenboom story is very typical of that. Trying to get food stamps to people who didn't have them, people who were hiding from the Germans. We always had people like that hiding on the farm. And then also towards the end of the war all of a sudden when my folks and the hired man were doing the chores at 6, 6:30 in the morning milking the cows in the barn there
was—not just a knock on the door but a pounding with guns. There was a group of German soldiers. Most of them were young, I'd say teenagers basically, (I presume the older ones had all been killed in the war already) and with an officer who was more mature. They came down and they had a list of names and they said, "We understand that these people here these people are hiding down here and we have to have them." My dad said, "Well, here's the keys to the house, the keys to everything—look around." So they scattered throughout the barn, went through the house, tore everything apart, didn't find a thing. They left rather frustrated. Then a couple of mornings later they came back again, and this was right towards the end of the war mind you, they came back again. These teenagers, they were mean critters. They still believed that the Nazis were going to win, and they just tore everything apart for the second time. Still didn't find anything but they said "We know they're down here." My dad said "Well, that's easy for you to say." Well, they said " The constable of the village just down the road a couple of kilometers gave us the names and his own son is on there too." After the fact, we as kids found out—yes indeed that was true. But they couldn't find them so these kids were saved, spared from last moment extermination basically. Because if they were found either they were shot or they were taken to, transported to Germany to work in the factories or the farm. So that was one of those experiences also that was rather devastating for the area. You know, not too far away, we know that some of the people that worked with the underground, and my dad was one of them, they were caught and a number of those were just shot right on the spot. I mean you were shot first and then they ask questions, I guess. That's the way it was. There was no mercy. It wasn't the older folks necessarily, the older people that were
in the army; it was these young kids at that time. They would shoot anybody that came into sight. Still firmly believing that the Third Reich would be victorious. Any other questions about those early years, the war years or so?

BK: I just want to clarify--The underground is kind of like our equivalent to the underground railroad?

WS: Well the underground those were freedom fighters who hid their activities on the sly, at night usually. They were guerilla fighters and civilian guerilla fighters I could call them, who were opposed to every German activity there was. And they did a lot of good for the loyal Dutch people, and they did cause a lot of damage for the Nazis. So those were the underground. Not that they lived underground, but their activities were quiet.

BK: What was it like after the War?

WS: Well, shortly after the War, our farm burned down. One of the kids that was hiding in there, he was so traumatized by these events—and his name had been on that note of paper that the Germans had when they came—he was so traumatized by it that afterwards when peace had come a few weeks later, he came to the farm and he did what he had seen the Germans do. Burned everything, slash and burn basically. He had a, I think it became a mental condition for him, and so he accidentally—or on purpose—he doesn't know which one it was, but he lit the farm on fire and the whole thing burnt down. Except for the house because there was a big firewall between the barn and the house, obviously. So that the house stood, but I remember sitting one cold morning, it was early in the morning when that whole thing started, and his dad was one of our closest friends. He was a carpenter and did a lot of work for us on the farm, and always helped out during
the war years also—you know it was back and forth, but this young fellow just was totally traumatized by the German attacks and that and lost it. So I remember seeing bright and early in the morning cloaked in some blankets in the field in front of the house and watching the barn burn. All the cows, all the cattle, all the machinery. That barn was just loaded with crops and all that stuff too, it was, well it was early spring. May, middle of May I guess it was. It was quite a fire. They tell me they could see it 20 miles away, the fire, as it lit up the early morning sky.

BK: Now, you emigrated when you were 10?

WS: Nine and a half.

BK: Do you know what prompted your family to leave?

WS: Well, at that time the farm burned down, and they re-built it back, you know about a year later, with all the emergency equipment and all that stuff and the electrical equipment that was used was of very poor quality. And then we had the very same thing repeat itself again. So, basically, the folks said well enough is enough. They looked around, there was a mass immigration from the devastation of the war. Countries like Brazil, Australia, South Africa, Canada opened their doors wide open for West European immigrants. Since the farm for a second time a year and a half later it burned down, with all the equipment and cows again, the folks said, “Hey, enough is enough. Let's look for a new start.” The Dutch government at that particular time was starting to develop with foreign funds. Their colony in Suudernaama, Dutch Guyana. There was French Guyana, British Guyana, and Dutch Guyana in South America. Farmers who were devastated as a result of the war had first crack at it, they could get large tracts of land out there. My dad
looked into that very seriously, and he said "No, I don't think I'm cut out to go a tropical
country like Dutch Guyana, Suudernama." Then relation and friend of theirs were over
from Canada. They said, "You know, if you're serious about wanting to make a change,
and getting out of this place here, out of the Netherlands, (which was totally devastated as
a result of the War, yet) we'll help you get the immigration papers together and all of
that." That was basically the start of it. The motivation was, “Look. You know,
everything is devastated here, our farm burned down twice, the Marshal Plan was not
having any effect in our area yet, after several years because it concentrated more on the
industrial areas to get cities back on its feet again.” So that in the rural areas it was more
survival of the fittest. There were five boys in the family. Good immigrant family, lot of
manpower. We didn't have any girls in the family, so my folks decided, with the
encouragement of these friends, relatives, from Canada, Yes. Let's immigrate to Canada.
It didn't take very long, all the papers were in order, our government would expedite
those kinds of things because of the opportunity of these people to better themselves. By
July of 1951 we were on the way to Canada. I remember it was the last day on the
homestead. It was a rainy, cold day. All the relatives came to say good-bye to us. It was
just an exciting time because I was only 9 1/2 and I thought, “Wow! What a great
adventure ahead of us.” For my parents, for the folks, it was a rather traumatic time.
They drove us all the next day to Rotterdam and that was an exciting time. I can still
remember the countryside, countryside that I'd never seen before because in those days
you'd never venture further away than 20, or 30 kilometers. That was a big journey. Now
it was all the way from Groenigen to Rotterdam, and I can still vividly see the village of
Rotterdam, nothing but bombed out shells, basically. The factories were bombed out, housed were bombed out, parts of walls were still standing. It was a mess yet. At least in the area we drove through to the dock. Then we came to the dock, took a few pictures and it was time to get on the boat. There were a lot of tears there. As far as my parents were concerned, as far as their parents were concerned, and all the brothers and sisters and all that, they felt, “Hey this is the last time we're ever going to see them again.”

They're going all the way to Canada, and nobody knew what it was all about, except it was the land of the free, and promise and hope for a new start. So, we had—Oh, I think it was 13 days on the old boat. And it was an old boat, literally. The S.S. Volendam. It had been used during the war, or after the war, to ship troops over to Indonesia because the Dutch government was trying to keep its colonies together and Indonesia was one of their colonies. There was a war being fought there as a result of that. They shipped troops over on those boats so it was very rudimentary, very Spartan. As a matter of fact, us boys we all slept in bunks, just bunk beds, four on top each other. And about, oh halfway through our trip, I believe it took 13 days, halfway through we hit a pretty wicked storm on sea, on the Atlantic Ocean. I think everybody was seasick. If you're really sea sick, it doesn't really matter, you just feel like dying. I think if people had the chance, if they had the strength yet they would have jumped overboard, but you know you feel absolutely rotten. I remember I was on the top bunk, being, you know the middle of the five boys, I was on the top bunk and that old boat was bouncing around so much during the night that I feel out of the bunk and hit my head on the--and had bruises and bumps all over—on the floor and it was a hard floor. There was no carpet on the floor let me assure you. But that
was our experience. For a couple of days, I don't think any of us ever had any food during the storm obviously. It was hard to keep food on the table, but also in your stomach. And finally, well, let me back up a little bit. We start from Rotterdam and went to Le Havre, that's a sea-port in France, and picked up some people down there too because France was just as devastated as a result from the war as the Netherlands were, I'm sure. Picked up a bunch of Frenchmen and then 13 days later we landed in Quebec, Quebec City. That's where we unloaded. Didn't have a clue how we would find our way around, but we had a train ticket to go from Quebec to the city of, town of St. Thomas which was right next to the city of London in Ontario. But, thank God there were people there that spoke Dutch and English, and they were able to get us on that train. So we got on that train, and that train trip was as Spartan as the boat trip was. It was not a very nice train. It was, well, it was during the hot summer days, we were for several days and nights on that train. There were no amenities on the train at all. It was dirty, dusty, hard bunks, I call it the immigrant train. And finally, at oh it was maybe 3:00 in the morning, 2:00 in the morning, we landed at the train station in St. Thomas, Ontario. And there the pastor of the local Christian Reformed Church. Reverend, I think it was John, Gritter was down there with a couple of teenagers, and they were always there to pick up immigrants because immigrants are pouring in from all over. It was just massive immigration. And they were there and they took us down to the Alemere Christian Reformed Church, where we all took a shower and had a descent breakfast and some refreshing food and drink, and then from there we went to the sponsors. Everybody had to be sponsored by somebody. And so we went to our sponsor, and that sponsor was a
Dutch speaking family that had immigrated before the war. So, they were well indigenized already. And we stayed there for a day, and then they took us down to the farmer where we were supposed to work. My dad had gotten a job there; the sponsor was responsible for getting jobs for these immigrants that they sponsored. So, this was a farm near the village of Port Stanley, oh I'd say about six miles from Port Stanley. And this was the middle of July, 1951. That was a unique experience. That little house that we stayed in was nothing but a shack. It hardly had a roof on it. The windows are rattling if you had a five miles an hour wind. For five boys there was virtually no room. It was like a one and a half bedroom house, there was no bathroom in it, it was, it had an outhouse back there, and the outhouse was a drafty as the regular house. It was located right near a gully, and so you looked out the back window of the house and you looked right down the gully. But beautiful as far as nature was concerned. Something we had never—all those trees and flowers all this stuff—something we hadn't seen in the Netherlands were it was flat country, down here it was rolling and big trees. So it was very pretty countryside, but it was very poor.

My dad, being a farmer worked on the farm down there. By the time all the plowing was done, the farmer generously said, "Well, thank you, but I don't need you anymore." And I think he was making right around $50 dollars a month and a free house to live in and that was about it. And you had to keep body and soul together for a family of five boys that were pretty good eaters I'm sure. So, that was a devastating blow. What do you do? Well, the very generous farmer said "you can stay in the house, but you have to pay me $50 a month rent, and you have no income and you have nothing." And my
dad, being a proud, self-supporting, self-abstaining Dutchman, he wasn't going to go to the deacons to ask for help so, we slugged it out until the end of February that year. It was a very tough winter, it was a cold winter. The wind blowing in that house. There was no insulation in it, hardly any food. We got some potatoes from some sympathizing folks about half a mile down the road. The farmer had a big bin of turnips in the barn, and so we always get some turnips out of there, so you can well imagine we had a lot of turnip soup. And that's how we stayed alive until the end of February until some friends from Chatham, Ontario came. These friends said "well, you know, things are a lot better in Chatham. And there's a lot of these big farmers are looking for share-croppers." My folks went down there to look around and they made a deal with a farmer down there. So we became share-croppers.

Before I get into the share-cropping part, let me back up. When we were living in that little shack of a house on the farm near Port Stanley, on Sundays the church was well organized. They had a couple of vans and what they would do, well none of us had cars obviously, but what they would do is they would pick up these immigrant families and bring them to the church in Alemere, and then they would have a Sunday morning service, and then they would have food for the families there in the basement of the church. And we'd have lunch there and do whatever. Then in the afternoon, early—2:00 I think it was, the second service, then after that they'd bring us home again. So that was a very nice service. In that way, there was a lot of bonding of these immigrants because a lot of them had tough going there. Then during that period of time that we lived there, from the middle of July to the middle of February, well obviously we had to go to school
as kids. And that was an unique experience in itself. We were the first immigrants in that whole school district, I think. Just a little one room country school about 2 miles away. We went down there, we couldn't speak English, we didn't know what yes meant or no meant. The first day of school, it was only half a day, and they tried to tell us. Looking back on it, it was kind of funny they tried to tell us there was no school this afternoon. Well, we had taken our sack lunch along and we didn't have a clue so we stayed there while everybody went home and nobody came back so finally we went home to about mid-afternoon. But it was tough to learn the English language. We had some struggles there, and the teacher had no patience. It was a lady teacher, see, and absolutely no patience for foreigners. I think she suffered from the disease of xenophobia. She had a dislike, a passionate dislike for foreigners, especially foreigners that couldn't speak the language. That was us. So we were sitting in the classroom down there, and her impatience! I remember, she had a yardstick and she slapped me across the fingers and across the hands and whipped me around a few times and my glasses flew off and they broke. The kids, evidently, came home with those stories, you know other kids. It was a one-room school, about 18, 19, 20 kids in that school. They came home and told those stories to their parents. Finally the parents got to the school board and the teacher and said "hey enough is enough. You can't do that to these kids. You've got to help them learn the language and all that stuff." We never got any help from her to learn the language, some of the kids there were very helpful and very kind, but not the teacher. And so, we had a bad experience there. I have very bitter memories about that first half-year in a new country school. But anyway that changed too, when we moved out of the
area to Chatham to become share-croppers.

Now share-croppers, the best way to parallel that was, you know below the Mason-Dixon line you had a lot of cotton fields down here right? And they had share-croppers there too, we were just different color. That was the only difference. But we were treated the same way basically. We had 50 acres of cucumbers, when they were done then the 20 acres of tomatoes were ready, and they were done when the first frost really hit, then after that there were 20-25 acres of sugar beets. That was a lot of work; 6:00 in the morning 'til 9, 10:00 at night. We as kids, I was 10 at that time, we slugged away at it just like my parents did. I had two younger brothers, they were in the field you know, I guess they were just floating around there or so. But my two older brothers, they worked liked slaves. As far as the crops were concerned, God had mercy on us because we had three bumper crops, just absolutely bumper crops. And even though the farmer, would liked to have...(recorder lost power)...Two years after that...(recorder error)

Anyhow, we bought the farm down there in that rural area between the villages of Grand Bend and Zurich, Dashwood, nearest town was Exciter which was about 35 miles north of London, Ontario. That's where we started our farming experience.

Now, backing up again, while we were in that Chatham, Ontario area where the share-cropping was, at that time those were not easy times for my parents either. You know, they had a family of five kids to support and during the winter time there was a lot of tobacco, barley and pure cured tobacco grew in that area also. In the wintertime, my parents worked in the tobacco factory. Shaking out those leaves, dusty, and what have you. Maybe that was the beginning of the emphysema that my dad eventually died of
when he was 84 years old. But, what else? Anyways, they worked day and night to make ends meet and to save and to save so they could the farm, which eventually we did. As kids, we helped in the field from early morning to late at night, and we did not go to school until the crops were done, which meant that the tomatoes had to be done. We did, as kids, we, I myself did not work in the harvesting the sugar beets. That was more done by the older adults. But, oh when do you get the first frost? About the middle of October or so, early October. Anyways that's, it wasn't until after the first good frost, after the tomatoes were done that I went back to, and my brothers, went back to school again. And that's the way it was because you work on the farm. It's survival for the fittest.

That school experience down there, there's a little town of Cherry Cross just outside of Chatham, Ontario, that was, again, an unique experience. We were still in the process of learning the language. So you always felt like an outsider. Although we never felt sorry for ourselves. We got beat up once in a while, because these Dutchies couldn't understand the language, they couldn't follow directions and all that kind of stuff, but it was alright. We caught on relatively fast and we were all put back a couple of grades you know, because the Dutch education system was quite different from the Canadian one, and not knowing the language so I lost a whole year of education as result of it--being put back couldn't catch up on that. But, our mind was not so much on the education as the hard work, I guess, and everybody working together.

We had a family bank, so to speak, anybody that made a few buck or so, that would all go into the central kitty, and if anybody needed something or so that came out of the central kitty; but I'll tell you, saving was the, saving your nickels and dimes was the
name of the game. As a result, as I mentioned earlier, the bountiful three crops that we had, three seasons, plus being as saving as possible, we were able to buy 150 acre farm out there near Grand Bend, Zurich, Dashwood, Ontario. It came to early spring, and we got started with nothing, I guess, basically. We had to get some machinery, we bought some old used machinery, and it worked out all right. The neighbors were very friendly. They said, "well, if we can be of any help, please feel free to come over, use our machinery, and all that kind of stuff." Which we did that first season to get the crops in. And we had, I think it was, 60 acres of white beans just like they have in the thumb area of Michigan down here. We had sugar beets again, just couldn't get away from those miserable things. Then we had, we got some cows too. We started with one cow, to get some fresh milk everyday, but very quickly we had a herd of twenty cows. So, we as boys, got up early in the morning and we milked the cows by hand. We did not have a milk machine the first few years. It wasn't until we had about 35 cows we finally got a surge milk machine. So, we got some pretty powerful handgrips as a result of milking cows by hand.

That first year, the neighbors, as I mentioned, were very generous and kind to let us borrow some of their machinery to get the crops in, that fall, we had all those crops in. They looked beautiful, bumper crop again. My dad went out and bought an old combine. When those beans were ready to combine—60 acres of them—we, my oldest brother did the combining, my dad, myself, and my older brother picked up acres and acres of those beans, loaded them on a wagon just like hay, and put them in the barn, in a mao, for thrashing later on in the winter time. The farmers all said, you know they stood there at
the neighbors they said, ah the Dutchman's crazy. Early in the morning 'til late at night. But I'll tell you, that crazy Dutchman had only an acre and a half of beans left and it started to rain. And you know beans can't take a lot of rain once they're ready for harvesting and all that. And so we got the last acre and half in in the rain, and couldn't combine it so they got in the barn. It never stopped raining again that whole fall. So all those neighbors had all their beans basically in the fields yet, because they were waiting for ideal weather all that stuff. And we had them all combined or in the barn for thrashing later on. As a result in that whole area, 80% I think, of the bean crop was lost, or at least the quality was so compromised that you couldn't get a good price for it. And we had just perfect beans that we sold. The price went up from, I think it was $2 a bushel to $4 a bushel to $6 a bushel. Finally my dad said sell, and so just had a—it was, again, God's blessing was there, let me tell you. So the beans were okay. But those miserable sugar beets were still in the field. And it was raining, you couldn't get—we didn't have a tractor yet. We had a small tractor an Alice-geller C (?), it was big enough to pull the little combine, but nothing else. So you couldn't get in the field with a tractor. To harvest those sugar beets you have to pull them out of the ground first. My dad bought a horse puller, we had a team of horses at that time already, so it was a horse puller, and then brought them to the driveway, and there a truck could come, and we loaded them by hand on the truck and they went to the sugar beet factory. And that was an absolute miserable fall, but we were out there with a lot of manpower and got the whole 20 acres off. Even the sugar beets not a single one was lost. And so again, we really can't complain about what happened. The poor neighbors, they stood there and wondered what in the world is
that Dutchman up to again now? But, as immigrants we had learned to work, and work hard, and work early in the morning until late at night. We got the job done. Okay, so much of that rambling. You got any other questions?

BK: When did you first come to Holland? That was later right?

WS: I was born in Holland.

BK: Holland, Michigan.

WS: Okay, now your really leap-frogging ahead, because in 1961 I went to Calvin College. At Calvin College I had heard of Holland, Michigan, but that's about it. I never went here for Tulip Time or anything. But there was a young lady that I knew, but really didn't know, and it wasn't until after college that we were at a homecoming one time that we met again, and that's the lady that I married. Then when I was dating her, that's the first time that I came to Holland, Michigan. As a matter of fact, they were living right here in the village of Graafschap, or nearby. Her stepfather had died and so they had sold the farm that they had lived on here in Graafschap and her stepmother had built a house in the village and she was teaching at that time in Holland. And that's the first time that I came to Holland, Michigan.

BK: Do you remember any of your first impressions of the area?

WS: Well, yeah, I remember one of the first impressions, when I went to church with her down here at Graafschap Christian Reformed Church. By that time, I had learned the language quite well already, since 1951, but they had their unique pronunciations down here of a number of words. For instance, instead of saying pancakes the Graafschappers down here said "panacakes." And, you know, just a number of those kind of things. And I thought,
that's kind of weird, but you know, you get used to that too, again. But it was a lovely area, very hospitable, friendly people in church and that, and so. I enjoyed visiting down here. No problem at all.

BK: Why did you decide to come to America for college?

WS: Well, that's a good question. I had not intended to go to the U.S. to a college, but the pastor of our church, we were, there were four of us who were seniors in high school. We went to high school in Exciter, Ontario, and I can tell you a lot of stories about that too. The pastor of our church had said that he had gone to Calvin College, do you know where Calvin College is in Grand Rapids? Well, none of us had ever heard of Grand Rapids and Calvin College before, but he took us down there, and we were so impressed by the professors down there at Calvin, and the students. It was just a very neat experience. We spent a whole day at the campus, the old campus, the Franklin campus, and enjoyed it very much. And not all of us, but three of us, ended up at Calvin College. That was a good experience, a wonderful experience at Calvin. One of those schools were they put their faith in practice. Integrating faith and learning, that's the old Calvinist axiom, but that was really true at Calvin and I really grew intellectually and spiritually at that school. Now I'm sure the same can be said for Hope. But I never had that experience at Hope, obviously. That was basically the motivation for coming to Calvin. Because, I had no plans to go to the U.S. for any education at all. After Calvin I went to graduate school in the U.S., and then I finally ended up in Canada again, for a number of years working for Chrysler Corporation.

BK: Can you describe some of the things—In Canada, did you have any difficulties adjusting
to living in America once you came and settled here?

WS: Oh no, the adjustment from Canada to here, to Holland, Michigan, that was no adjustment at all. All the names were Dutch names, and this stuff. Back in 1971, we came here June 21, 1971 and so that was no adjustment at all. As a matter of fact, some of the old folks as Graafschap church could speak some pigeon Dutch yet, and so that was kind of fun talking to some of them because their grandparents—well, it wasn't until 1953 that the church finally gave up Dutch services down here you see. We came in '71, so some of these old folks could still speak their Dutch; they had had their catechism classes and Sunday School classes in Dutch. So, no that was no adjustment at all. In fact, this is a very friendly environment, it was just like homecoming. I always say, you know, I come from Holland and I went to Holland. This is a wonderful, unique area.

BK: Are there any aspects between here and your home country that are really different?

You mentioned the landscaping, but anything else?

WS: Well, you know, as you look at it, The Netherlands, after the full impact of the Marshall Plan, it became very prosperous. And my uncles, they were all very conservative church going people, but as we look at it, right now, most of my cousins in the Netherlands don't go to church anymore, even though they're brought up in conservative homes. I asked them why not, they say well, it's not relevant. And so, that as immigrants we came to Canada and subsequently to the United States and all that, and most of these immigrant kids, all of our family and all of their kids and our kids, are all going to church yet and they're believers. The Netherlands is the exact opposite. I mean, that seems to be a mission field almost. Very few of my cousins and their kids, again, go to church. And
that is one of the striking differences between immigrants that came here, to Canada or the United States, and the people that stayed behind there. The spiritual climate is so different down there from here, even today, especially today. I was back there again, oh I go back quite frequently because when I travel around the world, and come back from India or so, or from Kenya and have to go through Frankfurt or Amsterdam, then I'll take off a few days and visit some cousins and some friends and all that. We talk about these kinds of things. I thoroughly enjoy visiting out there, it's a beautiful country, it's so small that you can cut across it in a couple of hours, or length-wise it won't take maybe 4-5 hours. It's such a variety in terms of history, it has such a fascinating history. In terms of culture, it has such a dominant culture. The Dutch, for as small as they were, as few people as that live in that country they had a huge empire in comparison to even the British, and the French, and the Spanish. So, relatively speaking they did very well for themselves in trade and commerce. Today, the Dutch are very multicultural, I mean, most of my cousins speak English quite fluently. A lot of them do a lot of traveling and all of this stuff. It's not for lack of prosperity, it's not for lack of money out there, they are very prosperous business people, and farmers, but spiritually it's a devastating desert. So that is a huge difference, between my experience today here, and my cousins that remained back there.

BK: Did you know many people? When you came here, you didn't know many people right? The other immigrants that you came with did they become a group or community, sort of?

WS: In Canada or here? See I always say with a twinkle in my eye, I am a stranger here within a foreign land. Do you know that hymn?
BK: I think so.

WS: Yeah, that always used to be my favorite hymn, still is because I always compare myself to that. But, no, repeat that question?

BK: The people you came with to Canada stay as a group, did you know many people?

WS: We got to know through the church, the church was a center for those people. On Sundays they got together, they talked, and these people kept on visiting each other, you know. Even later on during the week and what have you, there was a lot of bonding and a lot of friendships developed. Keep in mind that very few knew each other before hand. As a matter of fact we knew nobody before hand. But it didn't take very long. We were all in the same condition. We were all immigrants, didn't know the language and so we all kind of huddled together at first. But all with the same goal in mind--learn the new language, learn the new culture, adapt and make the most of it. That was our drive, and it didn't take very long that we learned English well enough to get by with it. Then it didn't take very long after that we learned English well enough to master it. Now my dad had a different attitude. His attitude was—I'll learn enough English I can get by with because he says if I ______ that means mutter at the cows in Dutch they might even give more milk. That was his attitude you see so as far as he was concerned on the farm he couldn't care less about becoming very proficient in English. But as far as us kids were concerned—hey we learned the language as fast as possible because we knew that if we wanted to do something in school or progress in business or so, we better know the language because that's what you need.

BK: Where were you first employed?
WS: Where was I first employed? After graduate school I started to work for Chrysler Corporation in Windsor. I was at Wayne State University Graduate School there and that was just during the big protests of the Vietnam War and all that and if I, I could have stayed in this country but then they likely would have drafted me for Vietnam. Well, they couldn't really use me down there because my eyesight is not good enough to shoot a gun. But, anyways I saw a lot of those Vietnam protestors at Wayne State, and that didn't appeal to me at all so I got a job at Chrysler Corporation in Windsor. I told them, you know because they have plants all over the world, I says I'm footloose and fancy free. I can go anyplace, wherever you want me. And so they placed me five miles across the border in Windsor and I worked there, first in personnel for about a year, and then I was supervisor of security for the plants out there because Chrysler Corp. had an assembly plant there, a foundry, a truck plant, a car plant—you name it. That was their Canadian headquarters basically. Then after that, shortly after that, after my stint in the plant security and all that, I became the program manager of a newly developed, newly established research and development program that Chrysler Canada started to get a development contract from the Canadian government. They had to develop a vehicle, it was basically research and development, a vehicle that could do wonders in terms of going in arctic conditions, swimming across as a truck, a military vehicle, swimming across a pond of water—a lake, a small lake or so, going up the mountain sides, desert conditions, and the only, you know from desert to arctic, the only thing that they would have to do is change the oil in them. The only thing, the only problem was, the specifications for hill climbing and all this stuff, or mountain climbing, were so stringent
that Dana Corporation didn't have an axle on the shelf that could handle that and so that whole project was mothballed. And that was basically the motivation at that particular time, that I, and at that time I had married my wife, and so she had come to live in Windsor. She taught in a school in Dearborn, and that was the motivation at that time to look around. We were down here in Graafschap one time and found that Holland Christian was looking for a business manager, and I volunteered, and we did that for a number of years.

BK: What other jobs have you had since you moved to Holland?

WS: I was at Holland Christian for 13 and a half, almost 14 years and then I helped out at Bibles For India as executive vice president doing their marketing and their fund-raising. Then when Bibles For India merged with the Bible League, I started, with a couple of business people in Grand Rapids, World Wide Christian Schools. And we've been there ever since, at World Wide Christian Schools. That's a ministry that has a focus of working with Christian organizations, mainly in third world countries, to develop Christian schools—targeting those kids that otherwise would never have a chance to see the inside of a classroom door, basically. So that in the Dominican Republic we target the Haitian sugar-cane cutter kids. In India we target the outcast, the casuist and the outcast, the harigens, the nobodies in society in India. They're basically indentured servants most of those people. In Kenya, for instance, we target several tribal groups that live in semi-arid desert conditions. Again, no schools there at all, and so over the last 13 years we've helped develop 123 schools with about 28,000 kids in school. And I'd say about 70-75% of these kids would otherwise never see the inside of a classroom door. So not only are
they receiving an education, but they're being spiritually trained in Christian values and principles and in Bible training. So--wonderful experience.

BK: How did the move to, for you Canada, effect you and your family?

WS: Well, you know, I've always, and maybe you can help me on that, but I've always looked for a book, you know, the immigrant psychology. What impact did that have on families? Because I know my two older brothers, they were teenagers at that time, never really adapted as well as the three younger ones. They kept very heavy accents. I still have a little accent also, but I tell people that I'm from below the Mason-Dixon line you see. But, and then so that, I think in adapting to some of the different things or so, they've always had a tougher time so. I'd always like to read a very comprehensive study on the immigrant psychology and the impact of immigration, or so, on families. I've never come across a good study of that, but it definitely did have an impact on them. There is no doubt about that. And on my parents also. It took about 10 years after the war that the, that prosperity really returned to the Netherlands mainly because of the U.S.'s Marshall Plan. That was a wonderful thing, let me tell you, if it hadn't been for the U.S. and generosity I don't know where western Europe would be right now but, then my parents looked at how their brothers and sisters really became very prosperous. Most of them were all farmers and did very well for themselves, to be a big farmer in the Netherlands, you know, you're on top of the social ladder, and economic ladder, as far as I was concerned. I think my parents looked back on that after many years and said, you know, wow, they didn't have to work nearly as hard as we did and struggle and face many uncertainties that we did as immigrants, and they've prospered beyond anything. But, and
that's the antithesis of the whole thing, but in spite of all their prosperity and everything, they lost their soul you see. Now what a trade off. We thank God that us as immigrant kids, and our kids again, we all go to church and we are all committed Christians, and so. My dad died a few years ago, but in talking to him, and talking to my mother now too, would you turn the clock back and would you have preferred to stay in the Netherlands? And looking at the total picture they said “No. No, this was the best thing.” And you know, it was God's will that we went down here, and here we are. New life, new future, and no complaints.

BK: Are there any traditions that you brought from the Netherlands that you still continue today?

WS: Well, one of the traditions is, my parents were always very strong on observing birthdays and all that. Now I forget my own birthday sometimes but I mean, if I were to forget one of their birthdays, or one of my brother's birthdays I would never hear the end of it. That was one of those strong traditions simply because that pulled everybody together. You know, you get to have a birthday party and that, and that's very good for a family. Other traditions—the Santa Claus traditions, which we observe down here in Holland a little bit too. They're trying to make that a more cultural event, December 4 and 5, that's a tradition that we always kept. As a matter of fact, I played Santa Claus, the Dutch Santa Claus for South Side Christian School, because my wife teaches there, this past year. Interesting that I could talk a little Dutch at those kids. But that's one of those traditions. I think a tradition of hard work carried over. I mean, hard work was survival for us at first. But, you know that becomes so much a part of you that you never give it up. Now,
these days, even now, to work 60 hours a week or so, you don't blink an eye at. So I think that was a very strong tradition. I think a tradition of a high sense of ethics and integrity is one of those traditions. But like I said, in the Netherlands, a lot of those values have gone by the way side. So we have carried that tradition of Christian values over, down here which they lost out there basically. So, yeah, what other traditions might you say?

BK: Overall, how difficult, for you, how difficult was you transition into Canada?

WS: I think the first years, several years of learning the language and, even though we were all western Europeans, the cultural differences and all that stuff, were substantial enough that, you know, you felt like an outsider. I can very well appreciate some of the minority groups down here in Holland, Michigan. That's going to take a generation and a few years to get over that. Did we make a big deal of it? No, if somebody in school would poke fun at you or try to beat you up or something like that you hit them right back. You know, you stood your turf basically so was if difficult? No, it was frustrating sometimes to, the educational system was different enough from what we were used to, I'd had my first three and a half years in the Netherlands, was different enough to be frustrating, but could we overcome it? Absolutely, where there's a will there's a way. And that was exactly our attitude. We're going to make it and we're going to slug it out. We did, here we are.

BK: Why have you stayed in Holland?

WS: Holland, Michigan?

BK: Yeah.

WS: Well, I'll tell you, when we moved down here, this is such a beautiful community, I mean first of all, culturally I can identify with it; from Holland to Holland I always say. Church
wise this is a wonderful community. We go to Graafschap Church here, and it's been a wonderful church for us, spiritually and both in involvement in it. My wife was always involved with church activities and so was I, and so that was an important part of it. When we had children, it was our commitment to provide roots for these kids so that they could grow up, in basically one community. I recognize the fact that we immigrated and there was a certain amount of tension as a result of it, and a certain amount of dislocation in that whole immigration-immigrant experience. So we said, okay, we're going to do what's best for the kids basically and so they were born here in Holland, they were raised here in Holland. One of them went to West Point, then spent four years, five years in the Army, and now is back in the U.S. again and is pursuing a career at the University of Virginia. Another one went to Calvin College, got her degree in teaching, in education, and married an Air Force Academy fellow, who right now, is an F-15 pilot and they are living in Langly, Virginia just north of Norfolk there, and he plays around in the sky with his F-15 there. He's a neat young man, he's the grandson of Nate Saint. Did you ever hear those five missionaries that were killed in Ecuador?

BK: Yeah.

WS: He's the grandson of Nate Saint. Just met his Uncle Steve down here when he spoke in Holland a few weeks ago. Anyhow, our youngest is at Calvin right now. He'll be graduating and going to med-school this year. And so that now, we have the empty nest again but we are just grateful that we could raise our family in this very solid community. Solid both in terms of values, economically solid, culturally solid, it was just a good all around experience. We're thankful that our kids are committed
Christians, that they attend church faithfully, and that they have the same values their parents do. We hope that the next generation after them will be similar so that we can pass the torch and let it shine bright.

BK: In what ways have you been involved in Holland's community?

WS: Well, yeah, I've been members of various clubs such as the Exchange Club, and Rotary, I've been member of the Chamber of Commerce, I've been involved in the United Way, on the board, I've, we've—my wife has too—done a lot of tutoring kids through the American Center. I still work with a couple of Spanish families now in terms of accounts laying, in terms of budgeting and stuff like that you know that seems to be a weakness in these two families and so that we went through the immigrant experience, we're trying to help them work through it too, even though most of these people are second or third generation but, again, the quicker they can adapt the better it is. I have very little sympathy for dual language programs in schools down here because I don't think they work. It's a waste of taxpayer money. They put these poor kids at a total disadvantage. The quicker they can learn the language, the better it is. They will be able to climb the economic and cultural ladder much faster than if they are trained in their own language, which is wonderful too. I still speak and read and write Dutch, I mean I never lost it, I was nine and a half years old when we immigrated but, I've always maintained that. But I'm in this country, it's an English speaking country, and that's the way we do it folks.

BK: You're church affiliation is Christian Reformed?

WS: Yes.

BK: What influenced your decision to go in that direction? Did you find it the closest to
what you were used to in the Netherlands?

WS: Yes, and again as I mentioned earlier in the tape, when we came to, as immigrants, off that dusty, old, dirty train, there in St. Thomas back in the middle of July 1951, the pastor that was there at the train station and helped us and just was wonderful to all of us as lonely and lost immigrants, he was from the Christian Reformed Church, and you know that was basically the sister church of where we grew up in the ________ in the Netherlands. So that became our home church, and we have loyally supported that church ever since and believe that it is as true the gospel as any of them.

BK: When you see the newer immigrants settling in Holland, particularly the Hispanic and Dutch, what are your feeling about that?

WS: Well, I think the newer immigrants are the Asians, Cambodians in particular, and as a result our activities at Graafschap Church sponsored half a dozen Cambodian families. And we work with them, and they too had that same attitude. Got to learn the language as quickly as possible. Even these adults, tough as it is for an Asian, a Cambodian to learn the pronunciation and all that stuff, they, these adults went to adults education, English as a Second Language in Holland, down here at Holland High School and really did their very best they were just hard working people and were engaged in wanting to make the best of themselves. Kind of very similar to what we experienced when we were immigrants, just coming across the pond and having to learn a new language and so that we always encourage these folks to learn the language, learn the language. You'll be way ahead of the pack if you do. That's what we say to our Spanish friends also, learn the language, stay in school, get an education. Aside from that, get involved with a church or
so because the spiritual dimension cannot be undersold, or undermined, that is eventually
the glue that holds it all together. When you lose it, you may be economically wealthy,
like in the Netherlands, but spiritually devastated and that can happen in one generation.
You know, in the Old Testament you have many examples were it says "and the next
generation knew not the Lord." And that's exactly what happened out there in the old
country. So, those are the same kinds of values that we try to share with our friends down
here, whether they be Cambodian, or whether they're Spanish, there very few new Dutch
immigrants down here. I haven't come across any in the last number or years, but it's
mostly the Spanish and the Cambodians. Hey, if they want to get ahead in life, even if
just economically, learn the language, get an education. Go for it.

BK: How do you feel about how Holland is trying to preserve the Dutch heritage and the
Dutch heritage they're preserving?

WS: I think that's very commendable. It's a unique heritage and we should never apologize for
it. I don't apologize for being a Dutch extraction, or coming from the old country. The
Spanish should never apologize for who they are either. But this town was built by the
Dutch basically, the old pioneers back in 1847, Van Raalte and company, then others
down here in Graafschap. It's a great heritage, you should never apologize for you
heritage. The Spanish and the Cambodians have to adapt. They want to take some of
their own cultural tradition along, wonderful. That's okay. We don't have to be the great
melting pot. That was, I think that was a bad way of interpreting U.S. or American
history. It's more a mosaic and these people all fit. Their cultural background and who
they are and all this stuff, they all fit into this great mosaic to form a beautiful scene of
America the Beautiful.

BK: So, what are your feelings about Tulip Time? I know some people say that it's rather culturally inaccurate.

WS: Oh, yeah, but you know culture changes too. Even though some of those things may not be exactly the way the Dutch had it a hundred years ago, but when you go back to the Netherlands right now, that is all changed also. I think most of the people don't know the difference anyways, so let them have fun doing it. I think the whole Tulip Time thing, the Tulip Time Parade and the costumes and the Klompen dancing, all of those cultural things I think are wonderful. Keep it up, expand them make this the center of Dutch culture in America for that matter. So that if people want to do some research on Dutch culture as authentic as they want it in America, they can come to Holland, Michigan, instead of to Pella, Iowa. I commend the city, all the schools, all the involvement in Tulip Time I think is marvelous. To keep a heritage alive, a tradition alive, again, never apologize for that.

BK: What are your feelings about the Cinco De Mayo Festival that the Hispanics community puts on?

WS: Oh, if they want to have it, that's fine too. Like I mentioned earlier, no culture should deny their own traditions and all that stuff. And since we do have a sizable minority of Spanish people here, that's wonderful. That's been one of the marvels of the Dutch, basically, they've always adjusted to the change of situations in the Netherlands. That's why a small country could survive and always did. If the Cambodians want to celebrate the Chinese New Year. I've gone to one of those one time, they're wonderful. What an
experience, you know.

BK: Do you feel the community celebrates your heritage well? Is your heritage well represented?

WS: Well, I think they do as much as possible. I think the architectural, architecturally Holland has missed the boat. Basically, they could be a little more Dutch. I think, you know there's a lot of good research being done at the Van Raalte Institute in terms of the past, and where we came from. That's good. I think the various tenants of the past culture should be accentuated. One thing I think we should have down here, just like in Williamsburg, Virginia, and authentic little town, whether that's on Windmill Island or what. I know that's being debated now and will likely come to a vote whether you have an authentic Dutch village on Windmill Island. But I think it's very important and usually when it comes to a vote it's a bunch of cynics and negative people that are against it, and it gets voted down and then city council has it's hands tied. That's unfortunate. I think City Council has been very visionary in terms of promoting those kind of things because it's through having an authentic Dutch village on Windmill Island or so, or someplace else, that you can maintain that kind of a cultural heritage. When people come from all over the country and all over the world to visit Holland, Michigan, they can see something authentic down here, instead of having to go the Netherlands. The Netherlands in a sense was transplanted to here. Especially the Graafschap people. They did not, they resisted Americanization, they were isolationist in that sense or so. The Dutch in general are not isolationist, but I think, we ought to do more in terms of promoting those kinds of cultural things, and architecturally also. Downtown Holland
should be much more architecturally Dutch than what it is. We are very pragmatic down here pragmatists, if it costs a thousand dollars more to put a Dutch gable or something like that on it, we're not going to do it. Which is unfortunate. Anyway, that's my opinion.

BK: Have you experienced any discrimination in Holland, or even when you first came to Canada?

WS: In Holland, Michigan, I've never experienced any discrimination. When I here this stuff in the paper and all this stuff, I say, folks, a lot of it is your own attitude also. It's your own attitude quite often, then you feel sorry for yourself. Sure, we were different as immigrants. We couldn't speak the language, and all that. And we were discriminated against in the little one room country school we were at first, but that's you can't languish in that, you have to move on, and move beyond that particular point because if you're starting to feel sorry for yourself, then you've lost it. And you develop, oh what should I say, a welfare type mind set.

BK: Would you encourage a friend of yours from the Netherlands to immigrate to the United States if they were debating about it?

WS: It's depends on what they're motives are. If they want to immigrate from the Netherlands for economic motives because they want to better themselves economically, I don't think you could because the Netherlands is so prosperous right now. I don't know what their per capita income is but, the Netherlands, Western Europe is very prosperous. Would I encourage it? Yeah, I think I would. I think the opportunities in this country are far greater than in Western Europe, economically. Down here if you want to start a new business, if you want to be a Bill Gates or something like that, you got the smarts or so, I
mean you can go for it. I think those kind of entrepreneurial free-enterprise opportunities are still very much alive in this country. That's been the backbone and the foundation in this country and of the American people, it still is. In that way, I think there's a lot more elbow room in this country yet than in the Netherlands.

BK: What about your children? How interested in your Dutch heritage are they? How much have they followed you Dutch tradition?

WS: Oh, my children, all three of them, Jim, Amy, and Mark are thoroughly American. I mean they were born and raised here. Their heart just skips a beat when they sing the "Star Spangled Banner." They are Americans. But they have a real love for the Dutch culture and the Dutch heritage. As a matter of fact, my oldest son, by just listening to tapes and all this stuff, he has a real knack for languages also, but learned Dutch—on his own, see. He can converse in Dutch quite well. As a matter of fact he converses in Dutch better than my dad used to converse in English. That kind of thing. Sure they have a real appreciation for that. I took these kids back to the old country because I wanted them to see where I came from, my roots and all of that stuff so they would have an understanding of that. Then I try to put it into perspective. We went to the military cemeteries. The Canadian one and the American one in ________ because I wanted these kids to see that even though they live in the land of the free right now in America, that their parents, me, were close to being exterminated by the Nazis at one time. When you look at those military cemeteries in the Netherlands and you see all of these young people that died so that we could live, I mean, you know you get all choked up when you see them, when you stand there and all that stuff; and the only thing I could say to my
kids was—kids, the price of freedom is not cheap. Look at these crosses down here. Most of these people were 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24 years old and they died there. You know, they're no more. They died so that your dad could live, we could make a new life for ourselves, and we did. And we're grateful for it. We thank God everyday for that new opportunity. But we don't want to miss that opportunity either. We owe it to God and we owe it to our obedience to him, for these blessings, see. So our kids, yeah they're Dutch. But, and that's and experience for them and they appreciate and they admire it, but they're American first of all.

BK: Well, I think that's all I have.

WS: That's all you have?

BK: That's all I have.

WS: Okay, well someday, I'm going to write my story in great detail, so this may be just the motivation for that and I could fill in a lot of detail yet of experience in school, some of the funny things that happened in that little one room country school and all that stuff. Smoking my first cigarette there in the outhouse and what have you, but when I see your draft of it, typed up or so, then maybe I'll fill in a few of those things yet. Then over the years, if I have a little spare time then I'll certainly—as a matter of fact I'm working on collecting some of that information right now to write kind of a detailed history of the whole thing. I just got through, for the Graafschap Sesquicentennial for the church, I wrote the history of the church and that's in book form right now in the Archives at Hope have a copy of that. So, I enjoy doing that, because you know, when you pass the torch, not only form me as an adult to me children, but also culturally all this stuff. These
people have to know, these kids have to know where they came from. And unless they
know, and appreciate that it'll be lost you see. That's why I'm so, I really believe what's
happening down here at Tulip Time is so important. And if the Spanish people want to
have a program I say go for it, you know. The Cambodians, go for it. You go for it.
What's your background?

BK: Dutch.

WS: Okay, so do you go Klompen dancing too?

BK: No, but I usually—my mom works at a local school and so I usually come meet the
school in the parade.

WS: Sure, that's good, that's good. It's the neatest thing to see these little Cambodians or these
little colored kids or so. I don't know if that's politically correct or not, I don't care but
when you see them with their Dutch caps on and Dutch uniforms and all that stuff. That
is just unique. But see, that's what the Great Mosaic is all about. Forget about the
melting pot, that's a bad term because you cannot deny your heritage. I cannot deny mine.
But we all fit into the bigger picture, of this beautiful mosaic of America the Beautiful.
That's what it's all about. And that's where Hope College fits in, and that's where, well
you know, we're a land of immigrants, basically. We don't have to go back that many
generations. Well, we thank you very much for out time for this, and I'm looking
forward to even adding more thought and stuff to your write up. Who transcribes these?

BK: I will transcribe it originally, then I'm not sure—time wise—

WS: Because we were jumping back and forth in time a little bit, well that's okay.

BK: And I'm thinking even for the semester I'm not sure if your edited edition, if I'll be doing
that, or if one of the people who works in the Archives will be. I'm not sure how that
works.

WS: No problem.

BK: So that's it.

WS: Good.