

Oral History Interview (via telephone)  
1938 Seiche Event  
Interviewee: Isburne Ash  
Interviewer: Geoffrey Reynolds  
October 11, 2002

GR: Isburne, tell me a little about where you're from and how you came to be in Holland that day when the seiche drowned those girls.

IA: I was born in Holland. I was kind of a water rat, and I hung around the big lake and Lake Macatawa. I was on the pier that day, and I saw the wave coming and I saw the crowds on the beach. I guess some of those people almost drowned. The wave kept getting bigger and it washed right over the pier. That pier out there is probably twelve, to fifteen, maybe twenty-feet high. All the minnow buckets and the fish bowls were going in the water. I dove in and got several of them, and they gave me fifty cents.

GR: For the buckets?

IA: For the buckets and the good bowls and stuff. Then a lot of the people were running off the pier, the wave had gone over the pier already. Then the people were running to the beach. It was a clear day, and I was about sixteen years old. This girl of Fabiano I knew very well, they rescued her. She survived, as far as I know.

GR: Did you see the wave coming?

IA: I saw the wave coming...from north to south.

GR: Was it quite big?

IA: Oh, it was really gigantic. I told some of the reporters that it was a tidal wave to me, but the Coast Guard said it was something else. But it was quite unusual. I was in Holland at my 62<sup>nd</sup> high school reunion, and I asked Randy Vande Water about it, and he gave me some information. And that's how I contacted you.

GR: Did you see the wave go...?

IA: I saw the wave coming and it went right over the pier where I was standing.

GR: Is that what caused the Fabiano girls to get in trouble?

IA: That was the same wave, yes. There was only one that I know of. It was a gigantic thing. It was as big as a tidal wave, I would say.

GR: How many feet do you think it might have been?

IA: I'd dare say twenty to thirty-feet high. That's what I think.

GR: I'm surprised that it didn't take more people off the pier at that height.

IA: A lot of people were in the water, and some of them were rescued. But I was a young kid, and you know how kids are. I used to hang out at the pier quite a bit there.

GR: Did it wash people into the channel side of the pier?

IA: No, the other side...the Ottawa Beach side.

GR: You said the wave rolled from north to south?

IA: Yes, big wave.

GR: So you left the pier then?

IA: Yes, and then I went down to see where that Fabiano girl was and they were giving her CPR.

GR: So you watched that all unfold?

IA: Yes, and we stood around there quite a bit yet.

GR: And they brought her back?

IA: Yes, they brought her to again. In fact, she went to school with me. I think she lives in East Lansing now.

GR: She does, yes. Was she technically dead when they brought her ashore?

IA: No, she almost drowned. They gave her CPR and got the water out of her, you know.

GR: Was her other sister there with her when it happened?

IA: I don't remember that much. It's quite a while back, you know.

GR: Was there kind of a cheer when she revived?

IA: Oh yes, everybody was happy that she came to.

GR: Did you know about the other people that had drowned farther up the beach?

IA: Yes, well, at Tunnel Park...this doctor Westrate—I went to school with his son—and he was there with his dad at the cottage there. But Tunnel Park had quite a few drown, and I think Port Sheldon did too.

GR: You saw the wave hit. What did it look like when it hit the beach?

IA: It didn't hit the beach; it kind of went from north to south. The beach is on the east side. But it just kept getting bigger and bigger. Being young, you know, you just look, that's all.

GR: Were you kind of stunned by it when you first saw it?

IA: I wasn't afraid, but I was scared to a certain extent, because it just kept getting bigger and bigger.

GR: Were people yelling?

IA: Oh yes, and a big commotion on the beach.

GR: Did the life saving crew of the Coast Guard come out?

IA: I didn't even see any of them. I didn't see any of them at all.

GR: Were there any boats in the channel working?

IA: Not that I know of. Several times there were boats that would take rocks to fill in between the piers. We used to dive off that chain on the side of that boat. Being fourteen, sixteen-years old, you had no fear.

GR: But it always kind of stuck in your head about that day obviously.

IA: Sometimes I wonder if it was a dream, it was so long ago. I was talking to somebody about it, and they said there was an article in the paper. So then I got the paper.

GR: Did you get our article that was in the newsletter?

IA: Randy Vande Water got it to me. I knew Randy very well.

GR: If you ever need to get a hold of the Fabiano girls, we can get you their name and number.

IA: Yeah, I'd like to talk to them. There were several Italian families in Holland. There was a Verano who lived on 24<sup>th</sup> Street, and I met him at a Holland reunion, here in Anaheim one day. One thing about Holland, I went to both schools—Holland Christian and Holland High—and I was a cheerleader at both of them. The postal telegraph, I delivered that, and I delivered Western Union. So, I was all over the place.

GR: So you were one of the male cheerleaders then, when women weren't allowed to do it?

IA: Yes. We had two boys, Clifford Ontank—he's a WWII vet, he died a while back—and there's Gene Harthorn, Robert Bouwsma, and a couple other ones. It was interesting. But at that time you had to go before the assembly and they voted on you. Nowadays, it's kind of set up with a certain committee and in Redlands here, it costs \$1,000 to be a cheerleader. You've got all these expenses jackets and all that. But at that time, I'll I had was a sweater.

GR: In the '30s, you were around when some of the boat companies were active.

IA: Yes, Jesieks Boat Company.

GR: Do you remember much about the Campbell Boat Company?

IA: No, I don't.

GR: On South Shore Drive?

IA: Chris-Craft was there.

GR: Yes, and Gil Boat Company.

IA: Gil Boat, I remember him.

GR: Can you tell me a little about Gil Boat?

IA: I don't know that much about him, to tell you the truth.

GR: You remember seeing it there though?

IA: I remember seeing Gil Boats, yes.

GR: Had you ever ridden in one?

IA: No, I haven't, but I tell you something else. You've heard of the Landwehr people there?

GR: Yes.

IA: They were millionaires. The old City of Holland would come in from Chicago, and he had a speedboat—this kid of Landwehr—and he went round and round, and he got caught in the paddlewheel. I was a young kid, I went with my dad, and we went dragging for him.

GR: Did you find him?

IA: No. But I saw the boat later on. They had pulled it into Jesieks.

GR: Was it in pretty bad shape?

IA: Yes, it was. It was all crushed, you know, that paddlewheel.

GR: Was it sunk?

IA: No, they pulled it out of the water and took it to Jesieks. Jesiek was a big boy around there.

GR: Were they going to try to put it back together?

IA: No, I don't think they did. Mr. Landwehr, senior, I think he had kind of a stroke because of that. But at that time, you look in the telephone book and you'd think you were in the Netherlands. We had about 99% Dutch.

GR: Is Ash Dutch?

IA: No, my dad was English. My name is Isburne, you know, and I had a cousin who was born at the same time I was, and they named him Osburne with an e. And they named me Isburne with an e. My grandpa's name was Izsabrant Vos, so that's the Dutch part of it. So I'm named after my grandpa.

GR: When were you born, Isburne?

IA: 1922, January 19. But I've been here in California since '53. Never been sorry either. Of course, I appreciate California more than the natives do, you know.

[End of interview]