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## Becker, Clarence Oral History Interview: General Holland History

Don van Reken

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Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Clarence Becker

Also includes Mrs. Becker (MB)

Interviewer: Don van Reken

July 12, 1976

Abstract: Growing up in Holland on 12th Street between River Avenue and Pine Avenue; son of Christian and Clara (Koning) Becker; Ralph and Fanny Veltman's farm on 32nd Street; Holland Furnace Company; Hope College 1931 graduate; Jonker family shoe business.

DVR: It's July 12th, 1976. My name is Don van Reken. I'm at the home of Clarence Becker on East 30th Street. Mr. Becker is going to try to tell me something about his family and his business and so forth. Mr. Becker, how old are you?

CB: Sixty-six. I was born in Holland, Michigan, September 17, 1909. My father was Christian Becker. He was in the heating and air conditioning business during the latter years of his life. My mother is Clara Becker, and she was Clara Koning before she was married. I have three sisters and two brothers, all younger.

The earliest memory of my mother, I believe, is when I was probably four or five, maybe a little older, living at that time on 12th Street between River and Pine. She was a housewife. The earliest memory of my father is possibly about the same, four or five years, and I believe that because of some family pictures taken in 1913 and 1914.

The interesting things that I remember about the early years are that we lived on 12th Street and that, I believe, was before it was paved. Our home had a Michigan cellar. A large hard coal stove was in the living room. The kitchen had a wood-burning range for heating and cooking. There was no inside plumbing. We had a large dome-type chandelier over our round dining room table.

DVR: Was that electric?

CB: Not originally. The house was wired, I believe, about 1915, and that was the same year that we dug out enough room in the basement to install a Holland furnace.

Special foods that we had...I remember we bought flour by the barrel; sugar by, I think, large cloth sacks; apples and all fruits by the bushel; we had chickens and a garden. We also had a farm that provided meats for canning and so forth, and we had animals: horses, pigs occasionally, sheep, and, of course, dogs.

DVR: Did you have these animals right at the house?

CB: No, this was at the farm, which was located between 30th and 32nd Street on First Avenue, which is now, one section of it, the Jefferson School, and the block to the west was the other part.

During the early years, we would plant pickles, and we had a large blackberry patch there. It was quite sandy, and it was really not good for growing too much, unless the land was well-fertilized.

The house between 30th and 31st Street, on the west side, I built a year before we were married. The original old home on the corner was known as the Belloyan House. Thirty-second Street, at that time, was just two ruts, and you could follow that west and where the Baptist church is now was my Uncle Ralph and Aunt Fanny Veltman's farm. They had forty acres on both sides of the street. The only part that remains intact of the farm is their home, which is to the east of that church. I used to spend considerable time there during the summer.

DVR: How did you go to the farm from your house? Did you walk? Was there a horse and buggy?

CB: We had horses at the farm, and we'd have to go out and get them, and Uncle Ralph kept a horse there. But we would hitch rides in buggies; there were very few automobiles. One in particular was the grocery at 28th Street. That fellow had a fine little fast horse with a light delivery cart. He would come downtown every so often, and we would frequently hitch a ride out there. Then my father got a car in 1914, a Buick from Herm Prins, who was the original dealer, and it was, I think, the third one he sold. It was very difficult to drive out there because First Avenue wasn't paved either, so we would walk most of the time or just frog around and go back and forth.

Uncle Ralph had a milk route, and I rather enjoyed riding around with him and frequently would get up at four o'clock in order to catch him and finish the route with him. Then I would ride back out to the farm with him. The horses he had were not saddle-type, but used for work. We had one out there that could be used for both. We had an old saddle and the old-type blanket, and we used to go all through the fields, usually two on the horse, having a good time. When Uncle Ralph knew we were going to do that, he would use the horse on the milk route in the morning so it wouldn't be too frisky.

Our home was on 12th Street, although I was born on 11th Street East, the third house from the railroad tracks. Lee Kleis was born in the house next to the tracks; the Berg family, my aunt and uncle, were in the second home; and we were in the third. We lived there until I was, perhaps, three; that's when we moved to 12th Street.

We did not have running water at first, only a pump in the kitchen. The back room of the house was a wood shed. On 12th Street, we had a garden, and even though the lot was not small, almost all of the yards were fenced in in order to keep dogs from

running through the yards, because gardens were rather important. My Grandmother Becker lived with us until I was about eleven. She died in 1920.

I attended Maple Avenue School on the corner of 11th and Maple from the kindergarten through the fifth grade.

We moved to Grand Rapids in 1920, following the death of my Grandmother Becker. The one event I remember well on 12th Street was the end of World War I, when the town celebrated the victory. It was very noisy and everybody was marching. I returned to Holland again in 1927 to attend Hope College and have remained here, except for two or three years of additional study in Boston.

DVR: What did you move to Grand Rapids for?

CB: My father took over the Holland Furnace branches in Grand Rapids, Lansing, and Kalamazoo. He had set up the original branches back in about 1909, or maybe 1908, and that required him to do considerable traveling. So, he wanted to settle down some more, so he picked these three branches because they were available and A. H. Landwehr thought it would be the thing he should do. He remained with Holland Furnace until 1933 in Grand Rapids. My mother still is in Grand Rapids; I have one sister in Caledonia; one sister in...just beyond Grand Rapids—they live on Duncan Lake; and I have a brother living on the north side of Grand Rapids. I have a sister outside of Phoenix, and another brother in Holland. So the family has stayed rather close around here. He was then in Grand Rapids while he worked with Home Furnace from 1935 until he retired again in 1956. He drove back and forth daily.

We were talking about transportation. We had a horse and a buggy, and we had a great big wagon with a team of horses. I can remember helping deliver furnaces early.

The first one I was not with him was installed in the school on the way to Allegan, between Hamilton and Allegan, on the east side of the road—a big white schoolhouse—and that was the first school that had so-called “central heat”—a pipeless furnace. This furnace was put in by John Van Spyker and old Sam Schafenaar. Now, Mrs. Schafenaar just passed away about a week or so ago at the age of ninety-seven. They were the original Holland Furnace installers.

I was lucky, too, in the early days that on several occasions I traveled by boat from Holland to Chicago—the overnight trip on the old Graham and Morton steamship line. The interurban ran on 13th Street, directly in back of our home on 12th, from Grand Rapids to Holland to Macatawa and to Saugatuck, and we used that quite a little.

When we were kids, Jenison Park was a real fantastic place to have picnics and outings. They had a figure-eight, they had a merry-go-round, and all kinds of games that were perfect for the picnics in those days. So, you could use the interurban to get from here to there, too.

DVR: Was that school picnics or church picnics?

CB: Church picnics. Church picnics were held there. They always had a great big barrel or two of lemonade, and they had tables set up with tremendous amounts of food. That was the real place for the old-fashioned picnics. I don't know if we have any pictures of those or not; I'd have to see what my sister has kept.

I did take the train a couple of times to Chicago when I was young, and that was the Pere Marquette. An interesting thing about that is all their tickets, I believe, were printed by Poole Brothers Printing Plant on the corner of 13th and Van Raalte—it is now Kandu Industries. My Uncle Ben Wiersma was the foreman there, and he supervised the

printing of the tickets until the interurban and the PM went out to business and tickets were no longer needed. Then he went with the City of Holland as the health inspector.

The reason I went to Chicago at times as a child was to visit another tribe of the Beckers, the old Johannes Becker group, which came from Ziest and would have been a brother to my grandfather. He settled in Roseland. He, for years, was in charge of Palmer Park at Pullman. He had three sons—one a dentist; and one, Albert, who was chief deputy sheriff of Cook County for twelve years and later on the Board of Arbitration for the state of Illinois; and the youngest one was Dr. Henry Becker, who was a veterinarian and in charge of the milk supply of Chicago under Dr. Bundeson. When I called on Auntie and Uncle there, every day I usually went out with either Albert or Henry, or sometimes both, for a day or two in the city. Of course, coming from Holland and visiting that, it was just a complete eye-opener. We visited the jail, the courts, particularly the court that handles all cases that come in overnight; I don't know what you call it. They go through every minute or two with either a sentence or being freed. Then, too, I enjoyed going to the big zoo. Let's see, that was...

DVR: Lincoln Park?

CB: Lincoln Park Zoo. And the other item I remember of the first time was going to the top of the Wrigley Building. So, that was a great event. Shut it off for just a minute.

[Tape shuts off momentarily]

DVR: What about other trips that you took?

CB: My mother married John Koning. John Koning had many relatives, including the John Koning of the hardware business in Saugatuck; Charles Koning, who later had the Tara; and Albert Koning, who had the large fruit farm at Peach Belt. Peach Belt is no more but

it's at 62nd and 89. All that's left is a school. I used to enjoy spending a week, sometimes two weeks, during the summer at the farm, and particularly when I was assigned to get the mail in the morning and I could ride bareback about three quarters of a mile to the corner post office and get the mail and return. He had a large stand of second-growth that was really poor timber, on a section of his back eighty acres. It was very hilly and mounds, and it has turned out later that we did find Indian arrowheads and some things like that back there—stones that we thought were ax heads—and it has turned out that part of that it was an original Indian burying ground. That section has been taken over by the state.

Young Albert Jr., the one who is my age, still lives on the farm, having retired from a Muskegon insurance business. Tara is gone, and Charlie has sold out and moved. Of course, John the Sr., who started the hardware in Saugatuck, is gone; and his two sons, Ira and...the other one slips my mind... have also passed on and the name of the business is the only thing left of that Koning tribe in Saugatuck. But I did enjoy going to Saugatuck and going down to the old pavilion, where you could see a movie, particularly on a Venetian Night, when they had the carnival on the water as they did it between Ottawa, Macatawa, and Holland on Venetian Night. It was really spectacular the way the fireworks and the boats were all decorated and finished off. It was really fine; attracted many, many people.

Now, that's about it. Now, recreation...In the spring, that seems to be the start, but it's a little harder for me to think about spring. But, I do remember having a tricycle and a cart. I remember we played baseball. My dad was very interested in having us do that. Oh, we used to play "High, High Over the House," and we'd throw a ball over the

neighbor's house, and the one on the other side was supposed to catch it and run around and tag you. You didn't know if they caught the ball or not. If they didn't catch the ball, then they'd throw it back to you with the same sound. The only thing is our neighbors didn't like that running around the yard too much, because that was one neighbor that didn't have a fence, and it was perfect for our playing the game. We played a lot of "Run, Chief, Run," which was an old game in those days, and we started that, I think, in the spring.

When the summer came along, of course, we got too busy. We used to swim; I learned to swim when I was about five or six at what we called King's Dock. That had a very fine, sandy beach that went out quite a ways. It had a little piling left from the old basket factory, but that was King's Dock, which is now Kollen Park. We were in there most of the time. I don't recall, but I think it was far enough outside and away from the city that if you didn't have swimming suit, you would go in anyway.

Then I talked about going to my Uncle's farm, and to Saugatuck, and then we did quite a little fishing. We also would go down River Avenue to Scott Lugers and cut in back there. There was always a homemade rowboat of some kind, and my dad had one or two of them there that we could use. He didn't want us to go out alone, but it seems as though we did go fishing.

DVR: What kind of fish did you catch then? Perch?

CB: We used to catch perch and bluegills, and sometimes bass. But the bluegills were particularly fine, and when you got the knack of catching bluegills, you'd get some that were almost as big as your hand. We loved to eat those, too. That and perch, they was excellent. Of course, we did get some...what do they call those other...bull-heads. They

were in that lake, too, at that time. Those were the ones we were all scared of because of their...what would you call those things?

DVR: Feelers? Antennae?

CB: Antennae that would prick you. When we thought we were going to catch one, we always carried an old pair of pliers with us, or we took a hammer and finished them off before we took them off the hook.

Now, in the fall, my early recollection is that we enjoyed watching the football team practice. It's the Holland High team, and they had quite a collection of people. They had Cap Cappon and some of the Hills, and the Japingas and a few others.

DVR: Where did they practice?

CB: As I recall, they practiced between 15th and 16th Street on River Avenue. That was also known as the Chautauqua area during the summer when Chautauqua would come to town. They'd pitch the big tent there and have the shows—you've probably heard of that. They used to play with and without helmets, and it was always a great thing to watch them because we thought they were really going at it, and I guess they did. They had a good team, basketball particularly. As fall came on and basketball—Holland has always been a good basketball town.

In the winter, we had ideal spots for using sleds; we didn't have many toboggans. We'd use the college hill in back of Carnegie Gym, before they put up the wire fence to stop us from eroding the hill. We used to use Nies' Hill.

DVR: Where was that?

CB: That's across from the hospital, and it runs over 22nd Street. That was a dandy. Old Nies of the hardware store lived there, and he was a pretty good guy. He sometimes let

us post there without any thought at all. The other thing is we liked to ice skate and we played—I don't know if you'd call this hockey, but it was on that order of a game. We made our own sticks, and we had the wooden pucks that we got from the furniture factory, and we played either off King's dock or off from Scott Lugers. We had to do our own shoveling at both places, but it seems as though the whole bunch would get together and do it.

And the other thing is, the ice fishing was usually outstanding. In the early days, we didn't have any question of warm currents in the lake, so we used sailboats a lot. We did that through 1940. We used to race cars on the lake as we followed them along South Shore Drive. Unless we would hit a hole, we'd have no problem. We frequently could make better time on the lake than we could on the road. Ice fishing was probably the big event, because you'd leave in the morning and wouldn't come home until night, and you could catch about as many as you could handle. Frequently, you saw these lightweight, older cars drive right across the lake. In fact, some people living on the other side of the lake used to just drive across the lake. They'd come out near Superior Dock, by the ice factory. They could get in there or they'd come in near King's dock.

MB: Good Morning! How are you this morning?

DVR: Good morning Mrs. Becker. Fine, happy.

MB: Good. Nice morning, isn't it?

DVR: Oh, very nice.

CB: Is this still going?

DVR: Oh, yes, it's going.

CB: Oh. Now, when we were kids, we were lucky that we had a fellow in town who was related to the ambassador from Holland—Diekema—and his name was Albert Diekema. He worked for the Holland Shoe Company. He lived across from Heinz on West 16th, and he had the finest team of horses; in fact, he had two teams. He would haul all the shoes and all the freight from that end of town to the old PM depot, the freight depot on 6th Street, and he always came down 12th Street. When we left Maple Avenue School in the afternoon, it was just about the time that he should be coming down 12th Street. So, we hooked a ride. We always went with him. See, John Towling's father owned the Holland Shoe Company—and he lived across the street from us—and we knew Albert Diekema anyway, because he knew all the kids in Holland. We'd just pile on his rig and ride down there, and on the way back, he might have a little stuff, but then every now and then he'd give us a thrill—he'd let the horses gallop a little. In the winter, it was particularly good when the snow was on the ground. He'd sometimes have...oh, he picked up every kid that came along. Then I'd drop off at our house on 12th Street, or I might ride way down with him and back, depending if I could hide to get past our house. [laughs] The interesting thing there was that my mother's cousin John Dryden, Nellie Dryden's husband, was the freight clerk at that Pere Marquette place, and he was always a good fellow. He came originally from Allegan, way back. He'd talk to us, but he wouldn't squeal that we'd been down to that freight depot too much. That was a few of the things we did.

I remember one time with him, it was quite icy. It was on 12th Street, too. The horses had unusually sharp cleats on their shoes in order to try to steady their walk, and

one slipped and fell down and broke a leg. The question was what to do. So they got the chief of police down there and, by golly...who was the veterinarian at that time?

DVR: Curtis?

CB: No, another one. I don't know who came, but one of them came there and said, "Well, there's only one thing to do, and that's to dispose of it." So they had to shoot the horse in the head and, of course, all the kids ran before they did that, but they came back after the horse was dead. Then they had to lift that thing up and get it away, and that was quite a job in those days. But, Albert lost a horse on that one trip. That was the thing that stayed with me for quite awhile, because we were all on it when that horse took the slip. But Albert knew just how to hold that other horse while the one when down. Usually you have trouble with both of them.

Now, we get into the...number 8, where is that...church activity. I was brought up in the Third Reformed Church on Pine and 12th and attended the Sunday School, CE [Christian Endeavor], and church. Sunday, in those days, was always a rather, not severe day, but a day that we had to be dressed up and rest, which sometimes was quite hard to go through.

I remember the horse barns in back of Third Church and how the people came in and would tie the horses up. They'd usually leave the rigs outside, unless the weather was bad, and just tie the horses in the stables. Two or three of the early ministers I would remember would be, one would be Dr. Blekkink, a real old-time church character who would walk past our home all the time. He married my father and mother. I got to know him pretty well. Another one was Henry Geerlings, who was a banker but also taught the Men's Sunday School for fifty something years. And John Vander Sluis, who was the

choir director, and had a dry goods store on 8th Street, and he would lead the Christmas carol singing in the winter in Centennial Park. He had that rare ability at getting a lot of people out and getting them all to sing. I think people looked forward to that, something like they look forward now to hearing the Messiah. And yet, it was participation by the people because we didn't have a facility nor probably the selection of a group of singers who could put on an oratorical like they do now, although we had some good individual singers.

Now, city life and parades...I've talked quite a little about that. I first voted in 1932. I had reached 21 a year or two before, but the elections came every two years, and I had missed one being in September maybe, so I had to wait until '32.

DVR: Do you remember who you voted for president that year?

CB: Yes. I was at the Harvard Business School and in all our teachings and in spite of the complete solid Republican backing and Hoover's things, we had... I'm sure my roommate was from Northfield, Vermont. His father was the only congressman, his grandfather before him, and his father was also president of Norwich University, which is the Little West Point. And the whole bunch voted for Roosevelt.

DVR: (laughs)

CB: I think that was the first and only time that that ever happened. It was based on being in school; they had never given up working on me for that. I think I might have been slowly the changing type, where you hope to think that you are going to pick the right guy or the right person. In our government class, we had a solid...I would say a basically sound thinker, who wanted what best for the U.S., regardless of what happened. He's the one that the school let go the following year because being professor of banking, he was

president of seven small public utilities in the New England states, and he had bonds coming due in about two years that were payable in gold. It amounted to over...his need would be for over a million dollars in gold. And what the fellow did was go to the bank and pick up all the gold he could get so he could pay those off. Low and behold, Roosevelt got in right away and said everybody had to turn the gold in, and he wouldn't do it, with the result, that he left the business school, too. He said he was one that was going to keep his word regardless of what, and the United States should do the same thing. So, we were under that kind of influence. They later gave him an honorary degree. I think he was just an old New Englander, that was completely 100%, his word was going to be that way or there wasn't go to be anything. They did get the gold away from him, however, but not until they had a court fight. So, that's what happened there.

I know in Holland when Ernie Brooks would run for an office in Lansing, I'd vote for him. I always thought Ernie had his feet on the ground, and he was honest and was a good thinker. I think a lot of people did that because you want your own, you know, in an office like that.

DVR: I'd like to go back to two things that we didn't touch on. You mentioned the church barns, the barns in back of the church.

CB: Oh, yes.

DVR: Were these allocated or were they first-come, first-serve?

CB: I think they were first-come, first-serve, and they were from Pine Avenue down 13th Street to the end of the church property, and then back to the church before the addition was on the back. You could drive the horses...you see, they didn't have a chance to get

out. There wasn't a real lot of parking place, but it was amazing how they'd fit those things in and get all the horses in. No, I don't think they were allotted.

DVR: One other question I had was, when you went to school you went to Holland High School, of course.

CB: No, I didn't go...I left Holland at the end of the fifth grade. I went to Washington School, and the interesting thing there is my kindergarten teacher was Miss Vennema. She was the daughter of the then-president of Hope College, and we always thought how nice they were and everything. Miss Whitman was the principal. Two years ago at Hope College, I had a most unusual thing happen. I was sitting across from a lady, elderly, and she said she had come in come in from California. I noticed she was eyeing me a little bit. I thought, "Now, what's going on here?" And in a little while, the talk came around, did I go to school in Holland? I said, "Yes." Then she led with a question, "Do you remember where?" I said, "Yes, I went to what was then the Maple Avenue School," and she said, "You don't remember your kindergarten teacher?" I said, "Yes, it was a Miss Vennema, and we all liked her." She said, "I'm that Miss Vennema, only married." (laughter) I just about fell under the table. I think she was 87, and she had come back for her 60th, something like that, 70th reunion. One of the old, old...

Of course, we didn't have nearly the area for play that they have now at the Washington School. We had just a small ball diamond, on the east side and that was it.

DVR: I was going to ask you about your high school sports participation, but you played in Grand Rapids.

CB: Yes. I have to detour then. From 1920 to '27, I spent a couple years at South High. I must have been in Holland through the sixth, because I finished the seventh grade at

Sheldon School; and then the eighth, ninth, and part of the tenth, I was a South High; and the last two years I was at Union High, because the family moved from Lafayette SE out on Oakley Road.

I played football there, and we would have won the state championship except the other team got a touchdown and all we did was kick a field goal. In basketball, I became ineligible because I had spent five years in high school. The superintendent thought I wouldn't make it; the principal did. I shouldn't record this probably, because I didn't know more than the principal, but they thought I did, so I only went to school half days and I spent the other half days working. I was the errand boy for the Grand Rapids Savings Bank, and I worked in the printing department. That's how I got started a little in my understanding of banking. I did that for three years. And then I started as an apprentice in the furnace business in 1924 in Grand Rapids under Roy McConnell, who worked for my dad.

Then I got through with Union, and I went to Hope. I got an AB from Hope in four years, and then spent two years in Boston at the Harvard Business School for my MBA.

DVR: When you attended Hope, did you live in the dormitory then?

CB: I started living with my grandmother on 11th Street, and we'd walk back and forth. Betty was living with her aunt and uncle on 12th Street, Sam McLean's. We'd always all meet up at Maple and 11th and it got to be quite a walk, so I took my Ford to Holland. Then my dad thought I should stay in a dorm, so I stayed in Van Vleck on the first floor, which is now a girls' dorm, you know. Two years and then the next two years I stayed at the Frater house. I went back and forth to Grand Rapids... Dimment assigned a lot of extra

jobs to me for some reason or other. I think one of the craziest things he ever did was...well, I had a Ford at school, it was a new one, a roadster with a top and a trunk. I knew Dr. Dimnent very well, and we even had coffee together when I was in college. My dad and Kleinheksel and Lokker were the same way.

[End of side one]

DVR: You were telling about your Frater house.

CB: Oh, yes. I stayed in the Frater house the last two years. We were in the college when the Dimnent Chapel was opened in 1929. The day before it opened, I had had a date. I came back into the Frater house and my bed was gone. That was not unusual—the fellows did do a lot of pranks. The next morning, about a quarter to eight, I got notice that the thing was on the new chapel platform, and Dimnent wanted me to get it removed right away. How did I know that dumb thing got there? So I got a whole bunch of the Fraters out, and we went over and we just carried it out of the back! (laughs) I found out later who had done it. He had paid dearly for it because of the things that had happened to him.

We enjoyed college; we had very good...I'd say a very good course to follow, and we had fine instructors and professors who were, in those days, very interested in an individual's development.

DVR: Who was the outstanding man that you had? They're all good, but there is always an outstanding one.

CB: I like Dr. Dimnent very much. I had him in economics, and one time we had an argument in class because I was going into the metal business—fabrication or finance—about the size of a pig of iron. He said they were 200 pounds, and I said they used to be but they were now 107. So, at the end of the class, he said, “Mr. Becker, would you

please have two pigs of iron in the classroom at the next meeting so we can see just how pig iron is made?" Well, that caused a problem. I had to get the pig iron, and I knew that Holland Furnace had it. So, I called my good old friend, Mr. Kola and he said, "Come over." So I did and, my golly, they just got in a whole bunch of new pig iron, carload after carload, and in those days they all unloaded it by hand. So, we went back along the tracks; boy, it was there, and it was 102 pounds—about 51 pounds in each half of the pig. So, I got two of those in my Ford, and I drove them over back of Winants Chapel—because we met in the President's office there—and I hauled them in and I put them on the floor. Then I got out. Well, the next morning our class was at seven o'clock and Dimment wanted that so he could be out by eight to have morning chapel, you know, things like that. So, we get in there, and he comes in—and he wore those specks, you know, that were half, pinched on his nose—and he looked, and he said, "Mr. Becker, would you please come here?" He said, "Well, now you pick that up." I said, "That's 102 pounds." He said, "Can you pick it up?" I said, "Yes." I picked it up and he looked and said, "Fine," and he walked away. Finally, I said, "Dr. Dimment, you didn't say 'Put it down?'" He said, "I haven't said that yet." [laughter] It seemed like I stood there a half hour and the class all laughing. This change in the weight of the pigs had come within the last year. Now, Dimment was a very knowledgeable man, and he hadn't seen this new pig. You see, when they make pigs smaller, the melt was quicker and better and sometimes they broke them so they only had the fifty pounders instead of the original hundred pounds out of the two hundred. He didn't think I could get those in there. But that wasn't so funny...he asked me to return them. So, I did.

Then we had a Dr. Nykerk. Oh, and we had the old Dr. Welmers. He was really an outstanding character, as far as a professor goes. Then we had Mrs. Durfee [telephone rings], in charge of all the women at Durfee...at the dorm there, you know.

MB: Clarence?

CB: Yes?

MB: Get the phone.

[break in the recording]

DVR: Mr. Becker, what do you know about your family coming to Holland? When did they come? How did they come? Do you know any facts about it?

CB: The one I know most about would be my Grandmother Becker. Her family, the Jonkers, came to Holland in July of 1849. They settled on 8th Street near Fairbanks. They were in the shoe business; he did shoe repair and like that. They came to Holland, apparently, looking for more religious freedom and getting away from any type of problems that were curtailing their activities in the Netherlands. Grandmother Becker was born in 1843 in Veldervonk, Netherlands. Grandfather Becker was born in Zeist, Netherlands, in May 1831.

Grandmother Koning, my mother's mother, was a Trink. She was born in Holland, I believe, about 1889... no, that isn't right...1869, I think. Her father, John Koning, was born in this country, but I don't know the date; I have it in my papers.

My father was born in Holland in April 1886. My mother was born in Holland in July—that's Holland, Michigan—July 1888.

My grandfather died in 1902, with the result that he lived with his mother and he had a sister, Alice, who was not in good health and had an allergy problem, we would call

it today; it may have been something like hay fever or asthma. She eventually lived in Evergreen, Colorado; lived there for at least sixty years.

Then he had half-brothers and sisters—like John Becker, Elias Becker, Anna Becker, Katherine Becker. Now, Aunt Katie was Mrs. Peter Berg, whose daughter, Evelyn, married Jada Koning who was on the school board in Holland for some years. Aunt Anna Becker Trumphen had three daughters—one who married Henry Poppen, a missionary in China, and Sarah Helene married...oh, what's his name, he's still alive and is an assistant at Schuller's Church in California at 81. And the third one was Margaret, whose husband was a doctor, and they lived in Marshall, and he died a few years back.

Uncle John and Aunt Anna had no children. Uncle Elias, the oldest one, I almost forgot him, had nine children. He operated the mill—in fact, the Beckers were mostly millers. Elias operated the mill at Jenison—if you remember that building along the older highway—from 1888 to 1928. They did all kinds of grinding there, and that was one thing I enjoyed.

When we lived in Grand Rapids, I would take the interurban to Jenison, the 5:15 in the morning, and walk a mile down the railroad track to where they lived. We would hunt and fish and trap, and, in general, have a good time. The only thing is, Aunt Liz would require that we had to look at our traps on Sunday and anything that had been sprung, we had to release; we couldn't touch the others. We had to go to church back to Grandville with them; they were Methodists. She was a very outstanding Christian lady. She had six sons and three daughters. Two of the sons have now passed on, so have Aunt Liz and Uncle Elias. But one of the great events there was playing in the mill. The only thing is we had to be careful we didn't go down the wrong chute. The other thing was,

when the coal came in for the boilers, we had to haul it from around the tracks, past the Jenison store to the mill, and we had a team of horses and the old-type wagon that had boards on the bottom with handles on the rear that you'd lift up to shake it to let the coal fall out. Then we'd ride back and fill it again and haul another. We used to do a hundred wagon-loads of that in the fall for fun. We had to be careful. We had a ramp built where the team would drive up, then we'd let a door swing down, and then we'd empty the wagon in it, and then we'd put it all back together. Uncle Elias always had one of his men there to be sure that we had that ramp closed—that door on the ramp closed—so we could go on it, and the big 4x4s under it. That was part of the job, but when we got it filled up to where the door wouldn't swing, then he had enough coal to run until the next loads came and the weather was better.

Then we get to my mother's family. Oh, in the Netherlands we have of my dad's group, there's only one remaining now and that is Dirk Becker, who lives in Arnham. He has been the keeper of the family tree for a long, long time. There are a lot of other young ones my age and younger that I know in Ziest and Utrecht, Wassenaar and then outside the Hague to the north. Those are the Beckers, and my Grandma Becker at Veldervonk, which is twenty miles east and a little south of Gronigen.

DVR: Do you talk Dutch, Mr. Becker?

CB: I made the mistake of not learning to talk Dutch. I understand it. When I was young and Grandma Becker lived with us, my father could read it and write it and speak it, and my mother could read it and speak it. When I would come around, they just seemed to go back to English, and my Grandmother Becker was pretty good at it. Now, I should have

learned that if it's the last thing I did. I've regretted it many, many times. I think when children have the opportunity to learn a language like that, as I did, they should do it.

DVR: I agree with you 100%. That's one of my regrets, also.

CB: Oh, my. I have here the whole set of Interfil Covers that the Netherlands cancelled—nine of them, came from my friend in Oscalpel. He's the town clerk there, and I got to know him very indirectly, you might say. His uncle was in charge of the Royal Dutch Shell Refinery, out in Surinam, and he stopped in to see Bill Wichers. Now, that was about the time of the Second World War. Wichers invited us over to meet him, and we had a nice evening. He said he had a nephew in Oscalpel who was saving stamps and would like to pen pal. So, I said, "Give him my name," and I wrote it down and we've been doing it ever since. In our travels, I've seen him twice, and on one occasion my wife was with me when we had a very pleasant day. That's in the Isle of Zeeland; you have to cross on the five new bridges to get down in there. It's about a 125 miles from Amsterdam, way in the southeast. It's very nice. Middlebury is a delightful, old town.

That's about it on my mother's tribe with the Konings. I've mentioned all of those. Then there's some Koningsbergs too, that lived—now they're dead—but they lived off Fairbanks Avenue at 7th Street, and they were my mother's second cousins. One lived on 7th Street, just to the east of Fairbanks, and the other one lived at the corner of Fairbanks and 7th, in the northwest corner. We used to see them now and then. They were, I guess, second cousins of hers.

My father, in his early years, worked in Zeeland at the brickyards. If you know where the brick yards are, the original road to Zeeland went up a hill, and at the top of the

hill are the brickyards. Now there's a new home there, and there's a fruit stand, and it's right near the five corners.

DVR: Where Paw Paw Drive comes in, just about?

CB: Yes, right there. Just about. He worked there for a little bit, and then he went into Klein lumber yard. That was on 6th Street off College Avenue East, where Elzinga and Volkens are located. There used to be a great big old structure—a house—on the sand hill there; that was the Klein Lumber Company. Then, in 1906, he became the first bookkeeper for Holland Furnace Company when they opened offices.

DVR: How did he learn bookkeeping?

CB: His schooling was through the first six grades, and I think that must have been at the one...Froebel School, that's between...

DVR: On Graves Place.

CB: Graves Place, yes, that old school. I think that's where he went through the sixth grade. Then he went to...I had to look that up, Gregman's Holland Business School. He went there and he took shorthand and typing and spelling and English. He went there nights, and that's where Gregman told him his name was Christian Becker, and I often wondered where he got the C. E. Becker. He says when you write...I knew Gregman, he lived on 14th Street when I was a kid; I knew Mr. Gregman and Mrs. Gregman. He said, "Becker," this is quoting my dad as I remembered, "C. Becker looks alright, but just think," he said, "make it C. E. Becker. That's what you ought to do." So my dad did. He was called Christian E. Becker. I asked him how he got that E; see, I couldn't find it, and on his government passport, it just shows Christian Becker, because his birth certificate is that way.

DVR: It was just a...

CB: It's an assumed "E."

DVR: For business purposes, to make it look nice.

CB: Yes, to look nice. C. Becker, Gregman said that's no good. Then, you know, they used to be on the second floor of that building where Woolworth is now. Oh, golly, he got part of his...you know where Woolworth is at 8th Street and Central?

DVR: Yes.

CB: Well, on the second floor was Gregman's Business Institute, or Holland Business Institute. They had a big stove up there that they'd fire with hard coal. They had the ashes and instead of hauling them down, they would open that back window and sail them out. The only thing is that Bosman had a tailor shop near there, and there was a bakery in the next building, and it seems as though that fly ash would go into those different places. Gregman was always getting the Sam Hill, because his students didn't do the right thing. It was easier to throw it out of the window than to carry it down. The kids did the same thing in those days, apparently, as they do today.

DVR: Easiest way.

CB: Yes. He was always reading, though; he did a lot of that. That's why when we wanted to go to school, we had no problems wherever we wanted to go, and he thought it was a good idea. We had to sometimes sell him on some things, but he went along with it, and we were fortunate that he could do that.

DVR: What about your mother's schooling?

CB: My mother went through Holland High School. She enjoyed singing and sang in the church choir, that's where I got that old picture of the original Third Church, the front end of the building, you know. That's the way I remember it as a child, too.

One thing I almost forgot... my dad, the reason why he liked us to play baseball, he pitched for the Holland Independents for a number of years. His catcher was Sprigs Te Roller, the Holland fellow. He used to have the motel right near Central Park, and his son Don Te Roller was in the heating business with us for years, now lives in St. Joe and is retired, too. They had a bunch in baseball. The Holland Independents used to play a double-header on Memorial Day, on the Fourth of July, and on Labor Day.

DVR: Who would they play? Teams from Grand Rapids?

CB: Oh, yes.

DVR: The House of David, I suppose.

CB: The House of David was one of the big drawing cards here, but they'd always get licked, you know. The House of David had really a semi-pro team. That's when Holland was really a good baseball town. The kids always made it by sneaking under that fence—we knew just how to do that. I remember when I was a kid and they played there. There's three places where the ground was not level with the fence, and the cops never did anything about it.

DVR: How did they cut lawns in those days? How did they keep fields in good condition?

CB: I know with the lawns...we used to have a little sheep or a goat...no, it was a sheep in Holland, and then we had a sickle or a sye, I know, on 12th Street. I remember some of the first lawnmowers, but not what we had before that. I remember when we lived on First Avenue on the old farm, I had two sheep, and I had to tie them up so they could

roam certain parts of the yard every day. Boy, we kept a green yard and the grass was short.

DVR: But I'm thinking like the baseball field. How would they to keep that trimmed down?

CB: That wasn't grass; that was all sand. As I recall, there wasn't any grass; if there was grass on it, they'd knock it out. They would brush it; they had a roller that they'd go over it with. Then they would line the square with the three bases. We used to roll that darn thing; boy, that was hard work. And we'd have to rake it and fill it in all the time. It seemed to me that was not clay and it wasn't gravel, but it was good, solid dirt. That was a big job to get that field ready.

DVR: Who did that? The team all participated in sharing that, I suppose.

CB: As I recall, we did it the night before the game [laughs]. Sure, we got a lot of things done that way. It was a group project, you might say.

DVR: I think they were more effective, very useful that way.

CB: I remember definitely pulling weeds out of the field, in the long fields. That's where we used the sickle, we'd cut those down, and, in some places, we had sand burrs around here. When we had school vacation and you came back in the fall, if you didn't get sand burrs halfway up your leg you were lucky, from the playgrounds. That's one thing we could grow.

It's interesting where my father was born. He was born on 8th Street. It was a little house right across from the Holland Theatre in the old Kanter's building. It'd be just west of the Model Laundry. His father owned the Holland City Mills, which is now the co-op. I think that house was taken down about 1925, as I recall. It was just before I came to Holland again to go to school; maybe it's a little earlier, but I doubt it.

DVR: Now, you say he had the mill on 7th Street, the Holland City Mills, and then...

CB: That is now the building that is called the Holland Co-op.

DVR: Yes, right. That's a concrete building.

CB: That's right.

DVR: Then the house was on 8th Street.

CB: That's right.

DVR: Then he could just go through the back to the place.

CB: Yes.

DVR: And your grandfather learned milling in the Netherlands, then?

CB: Yes. He had the mill at Ada, just beyond the covered bridge, and the mill at Sebewa, Michigan, that's outside of Grand Ledge somewhere. That's where he died on one of his trips over there. I got that out of the photo copy of the *Holland City News*.

DVR: Where did they get the grain for milling? Was that all locally grown?

CB: All local grown. Oh, yes. They used to grow; it was tremendous here. They still get it in here, but, of course, much of it comes in now from other areas. I watch them—50,000 pounds in a truck. I still like to watch the milling.

DVR: They still mill there at the co-op?

CB: Oh, yes.

DVR: For human consumption or for animal's now?

CB: Mostly animals, just animals now. This is not flour that I know of anymore.

DVR: It's rough grinding for animal use.

CB: But they used to make the finest buckwheat flour that was made in the country. That's what they claimed anyway. Then Voight Milling in Grand Rapids took it over. That was

an excellent mill, too. The one on Ada is not much more, and I remember going to Sebewa in 1925, and you won't believe it, but a wind storm blew that old mill down. I've got two of the original sledgehammer heads—hand sledges—that were used in the mill. You know, when they pound the big pipes to get the grain to move? I've got two of those that I've had handles put in. I have one here and one at my camp up north.

I have pictures. I was wearing knickers, you know, that was the style in those days, 1925, we had knickers. We had long pants, but we had to wear knickers. I'm sitting on the fence looking at the wreck. Boy, it sure blew down. I wish I had taken some more of the things that were there, just as artifacts. Although, when we broke up the old home, we had a lot of stuff like that. My brother John was on the job. It's one of those cases...why should I bother with it, let someone else do it and they may want it or so. It was a mistake; I should have at least looked. We had some original carriage lights that my dad and I had bought in Boston at one of the old antique shops there that were used on a hearse. They had to ship them to Grand Rapids in a box full of sawdust. We had them on the barn, and they worked. We had them wired for electric. So, when they sold the place on Oakley Road, my brother John went over, and he took them off and put a couple cheap ones on, and hauled them over to his house and he's using them. [laughs] They sure look out of place, but they could easily be...see, that ran that wire right through where the wick was supposed to be and they... I imagine if you take the bulb holder off, you could turn the top of the oil can off. But they drilled a hole right through the whole thing to put the cord in. We're getting all off the subject.

DVR: You were telling me about your father. Now, what about your mother's background? Is there anything special about her's?

CB: No, I don't...

DVR: She went to high school, you said.

CB: Yes.

DVR: Did she start working at all, or did she get married soon after high school?

CB: Well, she must have worked for a year or two. She was married when she was, I think, about twenty.

DVR: Then she was a housewife from that time on, as was the tradition in that time.

CB: Oh, yes. I'm trying to think. [to wife] Is my wagon in the way?

MB: No, I'm not going. It's been called off.

CB: It has? Huh. I'm trying to think. You see that picture, that telephone operator? I have two opportunities to find out about that. One is from my Aunt Ada, who lives in Grand Rapids, that's her sister; the other one is her Aunt Belle, who lives outside of Detroit. They are the only two of the sisters remaining; both her brothers are gone. Aunt Belle or Aunt Ada could tell me from seeing that picture, which one of the girls worked in that original telephone office. That's the only way I'm going to find out whether that picture is worth anything. We have so many pictures without names on the back that we have a law now in the house that you've got to write the date and who it is on the back of the picture, even though the ball point may go through a little bit.

DVR: [laughs]

CB: I've got four boxes in the basement that I don't know, but they all come from my dad and mother.

DVR: What a tragedy.

CB: Yes. Betty has some go back to...well, the Revolution. We can find some of them, in her case, because of some of the things that have come down that have been engraved or named. But, otherwise, it's so hard to identify pictures. My Grandmother Koning and my mother, I don't think were involved in any work. I don't think they believed in...they were just the Dutch, so they were going to make a house. My mother much preferred to stay home and keep a house going and 'have it this' and 'have it that' and cook and sew and needlepoint, you know. I remember the first trip to the Netherlands when I met all the old Beckers, and there's 'Tanta this' and 'Tanta that'; some of them were ninety and some were sixty. They would knit and they would sew and they would do needlepoint; they were just home people, although George Becker and Sons in Ziest, is one of the oldest antique and furniture repair businesses in the Venelex area. They have a whole street on how to...what's the name of it...in Ziest, where they have a whole section of those little buildings—must be six or seven of them on a whole block—just full of antiques, and it's where they do their repair work. Then they have the Casa Loma, which is where they buy estates of castles and this and that. They've got some stuff there that...I know Andy Dalman was with me on one trip when we showed at the Yarborough in Utrecht, and he wanted to buy two picture frames—great big ones, we could them cheap. That was 1964. Andy was a real frame collector; he had some dandies, and here two he wanted. Well, it wasn't so much the price as the cost of getting them crated and packaged, and shipped in—there would be no import, because they were a hundred years old. But that time, Andy just didn't make up his mind. I went over a couple years later and Andy said if they're there get them for me, and they were gone. I get rambling on all this sort of stuff.

DVR: You've been telling me quite a bit about the city as it was. What do you remember about 8th Street when you were a boy? The interurban came through there, by my guess.

CB: Yes, right down 8th Street. In 1919, I started saving stamps and Ed Steketee's father was the old Bastian Steketee—lived on 12th Street—who had a store that the dry goods and notions were on 8th Street and the corner store wasn't his and it came out on River Avenue, where it was the meat market and grocery store. Then the railroad ticket office was right next to that, I think, if I'm not mistaken. Steketee lived on 12th Street, about the second or third house from College on the north side of the street. He started me saving stamps, and I have been doing it ever since. He was also my Sunday School teacher at Third Church. Vern Arendshorst's mother—that whole Arendshorst tribe: Vern, Bill, Dut—their mother was a Steketee, maybe you knew that.

DVR: No.

CB: Then I remember John Vander Sluis clothing store and notion store on 8th Street. I remember the old People State Bank, which is now the Four Seasons. And the corner hardware at 8th and River, that was John Vander Veen's Hardware. That was quite a store in its day. Then, too, of course, the old original Holland City State Bank was the tower clock.

DVR: And right behind that was the fire station. Were you ever involved with the fire or the police or the government, in that sense?

CB: No, right behind that, is the old Tyler-Van Landegend Plumbing Shop and Antique Shop. Now Mrs. Van Landegend...the Van Landegends's are related to us in some way because one of them married a Sinke. When I saw them...also Cornelius De Kuysers's mother was a Jonker somewhere along the line, and he was in real estate, and insurance, and bill

collecting—he was quite a character in his day. Well, now the building right in back of the tower clock is that old Tyler-Van Landegend’s Store, and that’s some way related to me, I don’t know. Then comes the old building that Essenburg owns now, and then the police station.

DVR: I just happened to think of the fire station when tried to relate you to...

CB: Well, the original fire station is where the police station is.

DVR: Yes, right.

CB: That was the number one.

DVR: Yes.

CB: I remember when old Ten Brink... you know, he’s still alive; he lives over here at Rest Haven. I see him walking around here every now and then. I stopped him one day and I said, “How are you, Mr. Ten Brink?” He said, “I know you. What’s your name?” He said, “I don’t remember anymore.” I said, “I remember when you used to run the horses.” “I sure do,” he said, “Now I remember you.” I used to sneak into those barns like all the kids did. That was a great thing. Those firemen would take you around and show you where the horses were and everything else. And I remember the old pumper they had.

DVR: Well, the town was much smaller then, and you knew everyone, or most everyone. You knew them by sight or by name or by relatives or some way.

CB: One of the great things when we were kids and living on 12th Street was that natural drain that runs from just behind the Holland Christian Schools at 19th, and it goes all around down until it gets to 14th Street and then cuts in back through the Dregman, Kollen, Browning property, and then goes out past where Bush lived on 12th Street and

then into Black Lake, which we called it then. When we were kids, and our parents didn't know it, we'd get in there just beyond the Christian schools with candles. We used to get those big plumbers candles, and we'd wear...well, we didn't have over shoes, we had those "almost to the knee" boots that the kids would wear. And we'd walk through that, almost to the lake. That was a great thing to do. Now, of course, you can't do it anymore, it's pretty well covered all over.

DVR: I think those people on 13th and 14th Streets have had those low backyards; they probably don't know what...

CB: There's a covered drain in there.

DVR: Yes, there sure is.

CB: So, we did that. What got me onto that thing?

DVR: I was asking you what the town was like, and you were telling me...

CB: Then along the shore, we had...I don't know, Superior Ice, but just beyond it we had a whole bunch of little boat houses at the end of Washington Avenue, and we owned one of those. We had a rowboat built out of redwood by \_\_\_\_\_. Old Jerry Dykstra who was the foundry man had the cupola at Home Furnace, would take me about five o'clock in an evening and we would row...we wouldn't, he did. Row me way out to the big pile, take about an hour—the way he rowed after a day's work—and we'd catch bluegills, and he'd row us back at night. He thought nothing of doing that. Finally we got a motor.

Then shortly before that, Mrs. Kollen gave Kollen Park, which was King's Dock; and that used to be a basket factory. Then we go along, we come to Western Machine Tool Works has water frontage there—we didn't get on that much—then Harrington's. Old Cap Harrington and Carl were always...they didn't like to have kids on there because

of the dangers, but they were very decent about it. Then we had the Graham and Morton Dock, which later was...the cement dock now. Then, next to it, was a Bender, had a yacht...not a yacht, but a boat that he used to haul people from there to Macatawa Park and back. It was one of those that had a steering wheel on the side, which was a stick. As you pushed it, the thing turned; and you pushed the other one and the motor would increase or decrease speed. That's behind...Everett had that.

DVR: Is that the Tuskarora?

CB: Yes, that could be. But this was on 8th Street, just this side of West Michigan Furniture, and is now Exello, and it was owned by Dick Everett. His widow is still living on 9th Street. Then we come to West Michigan, you know that's just been sold to Padnos, and then come around the bend...of course, the water has receded about a block, at least since we were kids.

DVR: And filled in.

CB: Yes. Well, filled in or receded, one or the other, then you go on around. I remember the Holland Creamery that Lokker ran. The Holland Canning Plant—the Holland Canning Factory—was in there.

DVR: What did they can?

CB: Oh, fruits.

DVR: From the Saugatuck area? From the peach belt?

CB: That whole area was pretty good. The best fruit area, you see, is just a little south of us or north, we just seem to be in...that's why they wonder why the Dutch settled here, you know. Did you ever hear of that?

DVR: Well, I have been reading about the Dutch settlement, but I never thought about the fruit end of it.

CB: Well, look, the soil, too. You get a few miles south or east of us or north of us, and its much better than right, but they wanted this waterfront because they were sailors. One of my Grandmother Becker's Jonkers, was lost at sea. My dad has something written on that somewhere; I haven't come across that. It must have been very interesting. But then on 8th Street as you went...that railroad track, I don't think we had...all we had...

[End of tape; end of interview]