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## Bos, Jacob Oral History Interview: General Holland History

Don van Reken

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Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Jacob Bos

Interviewer: Don van Reken

August 3, 1976

Abstract: Jacob Bos, Province of Groningen in the Netherlands, baker, traveling across the Atlantic Ocean, trouble with English language, emigrating to America, construction at Macatawa Park, carpenter, interurban from Grand Rapids to Holland, Rusk Company, Dutch Tea Company, Holland Furnace Company, City of Holland street department, learned English language from Hope College student, living near the railroad tracks on 17th Street, traveling to California and Oregon, returning to the Netherlands via airplane to visit relatives.

DVR: This afternoon is August 3, 1976. I'm at the home of Mr. Jacob Bos on 50 East 19th Street. Mr. Bos has been living in this house for about 40-50 years.

JB: 64 years.

DVR: 64 years, alright. Now Mr. Bos, how old are you?

JB: 96 years old, the 22nd of May.

DVR: 96 years old. When did you come to America? Can you tell me something about your coming here?

JB: Oh yes, to make my life more improved. On the 22nd of May in 1880, I was born in the Province of Groningen in the Netherlands. There I grew and went through the 8th grade of the Christian school. I worked one year in my father's wood shop, which I didn't like, so my father sent me...there I start to learn the baking trade. I worked here two years for room and board, and then went on to another bakery where I could learn more and get paid for it, for the work that I did. I did this in various bakeries for 8 years. At 24 years old, I married and we rented a bakery and set up a business. We stayed in this for two years, making a living but not much \_\_\_\_\_.

In the meantime, my parents and brothers at home went to America, and my wife and I decided to follow them. After \_\_\_\_\_, my wife and I and our two

daughters boarded the train in \_\_\_\_\_ on the 23rd of May, 1907 en route to Rotterdam. There we stayed the night. While there, I had to go with a man to the boat office to put our papers in order. That was located in the harbor area and my wife was very afraid to be alone there. She was very glad to see me come home.

On the next morning, we left on the \_\_\_\_\_ with two thousand passengers. The husbands and wives occupied separate cabins. We traveled on the middle deck, which was second class. It was a hard crossing and we arrived in Brooklyn, New York, on the 4th of June. I \_\_\_\_\_ with red handkerchief in his breast pocket \_\_\_\_\_ who also wore a red handkerchief. After passing through the customs, he took us to the hotel where the Frisians wore shirts, and then to the depot to board the train for Detroit.

My wife did not speak English and our baby was crying. A kind lady soon returned with a banana for our 2-year-old daughter. Bananas were new to us, and the first one we had ever was on the boat. My wife wanted to try to talk to people to learn about the train to Grand Rapids, but no one could understand. With many hitches, \_\_\_\_\_.

When we finally got to Grand Rapids, we were met by many family members. We took a streetcar from Grand Rapids to Holland, getting off on 8th Street Station, located between College and Central Avenue. Then, we walked to 15th Street and Columbia, where my mother had an apartment over the grocery store. We stayed with her about two weeks. Then we moved into a small house on East 13th Street, which we rented for \$5 a month. Things were not so good here either. Bert, my brother, was a general contractor, and he put me to work in the building trade at Macatawa Park. That was for the summer. In late fall, I got a job on the Rusk Company on 8th<sup>th</sup> Street as a

baker, and we settled here in Holland. Two or three years later, I went to work on a second company called Dutch Tea Company. I stayed there for a few years. Then, I went to work for the Holland Furnace Company for much better wages. I soon learned to work and was promoted to night boy. I stayed there 11 years. Then I worked for the City of Holland, where I helped pave many of the streets. A number of years later, I went back to taking work in several bakeries, and did so until I retired at the age of 73.

Then my wife and I, we took a trip to visit our daughter and her husband in California, and we stayed for 4 months. We returned to our family back in Holland in the spring. I still live in the house we had built in \_\_\_\_\_ in 1912.

DVR: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

JB: I had three brothers and two sisters.

DVR: Did they all come to America?

JB: No, not one. One stayed in the Netherlands. She was one of the oldest ones, and she was married before my folks and family went here. Her husband was another contractor in the Netherlands, so he stayed there. He had it pretty good.

DVR: You didn't mention your father at all. What did your father do when he came to America?

JB: He didn't do anything. He was 66 years old, so he was on the retired side of it, and he was kind of sickly. So, my brother took care of my folks. My older brother did that.

DVR: What newspapers did you read when you came here?

JB: De Grondwet and De Wachter, which was a Christian paper.

DVR: What kind of work did you do for the Holland Furnace Company?

JB: Taking care of the \_\_\_\_\_ in the daytime, and all that stuff, \_\_\_\_\_ and all that, but usually the furnace. They would bring that and they'd clean it the next day. That was every night \_\_\_\_\_.

DVR: How did you learn to speak English?

JB: We had a student from Hope College. And he would hear a few \_\_\_\_\_ and he went two times, two nights a week to him. He had an apartment there by Hope College. And that's where we learned English.

DVR: And he helped you learn?

JB: Yeah.

DVR: What was the city like when you came here?

JB: The city was so much different than it is now. The surrounding area was all open. There were farms and deer. We had cows and horses right back in our backyards.

DVR: Now you're on 21st Street here. Or what street is this?

JB: 19th.

DVR: This is 19th. And there was farmland here.

JB: Yeah. Here and there, up over the hills. There were here and there little houses, but otherwise it was open. You could buy lots here around that time for \$200.

DVR: That's the lot that your house is on now?

JB: That was \$300, yeah. And the street was all bare. We had two roads here, but there was no cement yet. Eighth Street was the only street that the streetcar ran on that was all brick pavement. You remember that? No. But that was all brick pavement. And the streetcar was running from Grand Rapids here to Holland, and from Holland all the way to Macatawa Park every day. When I worked in Macatawa Park, we went at 7 o'clock

and we'd stand on 13th Street and hop on the car. Then it would go from 13th up to Van Raalte and then it took another turn up to \_\_\_\_\_. There was a road to Macatawa Park.

DVR: Now when you would work in Macatawa, did you work on the hills then?

JB: Yeah. Well, at that time we'd make a running and board, walk and board. It was almost as wide as this room. The people, the farmers, they came there for the festival in the spring building it to the people there. It was all wood, we'd just nail boards on all the time, all the way over above the mountain. And later on, it was all washed out there.

DVR: It was washed out by storms?

JB: Yeah. And then later on, when that was done, they built a cement road there, and that lasted only a few years when it was broken up by storms. It used to be that when I worked there, the bath house was right down Lake Michigan. It was all blown down by big waves in the fall there. At night... we worked 9 hours a day and when work was done, then we'd have to run through the hills to get a place on the streetcar. There were lots of people working in that time, and the streetcar was just full coming back to Holland.

DVR: What did you do for recreation?

JB: Recreation? Work. We had no cars. We had a bicycle, but no car. Lots of work. We lived first on 13th Street, then we moved to 15th and we lived there two weeks, then the house was sold. We had to move again. Then we moved to 17th Street by the railroad track, and one day the freight came down from the hill and there was a wheel broken on a car, and four or five cars tumbled right over there on the crossing. We had a big boxcar land right next to the house, just laying there. From there we moved to Central Avenue,

and there we had nice neighbors. Then my wife started to like it so much better here. At first she didn't like it here, couldn't talk English. He came from Germany and Holland, on the border of Holland. He couldn't talk \_\_\_\_\_. Most people in that time, the older people, they'd talk Dutch all the time. Lots of them, they couldn't talk Dutch.

DVR: You talk Dutch in the stores?

JB: Yeah. They had a sign up: \_\_\_\_\_. Yes, sure.

DVR: What church did you attend?

JB: Ninth Street Pillar Church. We went there. My brother was there, and so we went there too. But later on, we went to Sixth Reformed.

DVR: Well, you've had a good life here in Holland, then.

JB: Yeah. The year that we came here, then McKinley, president, he was just killed or soon before he was killed, assassinated. And Teddy Roosevelt was vice president, so he was president at that time and always \_\_\_\_\_.

DVR: What about World War I? Were you called to service in World War I?

JB: No, I was not. I was in the third class at that time, and you have to come to the city hall and register and tell who you are, and find a family. So they placed me in the third class at that time, so I didn't go.

DVR: How did you get through the Depression?

JB: I worked for the city at that time. We had rainy days when we didn't get anything, but otherwise in the summer...and in the winter at that time, in 1929 when the hospital was built, we worked by the hospital making \_\_\_\_\_ pipes and all that. That was a cold winter that time. Lots of times we had days when we couldn't work on account of snow and cold \_\_\_\_\_.

DVR: What about the bank closing? Did the bank closing trouble you in 1933?

JB: Well at that time, we started a Christmas club already, and we had some savings in there too. Also, we had savings and the little bit saved was at the First National Bank there across from the hotel. The people said the bank later on paid only 80% on our savings. But the First National Bank, they paid 100% back. I'd seen people who had lots of savings, and they were crying, and crying, and crying that they lost the money. But after that, we all came back to Franklin Roosevelt. He put America back on its feet at that time.

DVR: How many children did you have?

JB: Ten children.

DVR: You had ten children.

JB: Yeah, at that time, but not in the present yet.

DVR: You brought two girls with you, and there were eight of them born in America.

JB: Yeah. One was born on Central Avenue and one on 13th Street, and the rest were born here.

DVR: How old is your oldest daughter, then?

JB: She's 70 years old. We just celebrated last year her 50th anniversary.

DVR: Does she live in Holland?

JB: Yes, up on Cambridge, up the hill there in Holland Heights.

DVR: Are all ten children alive yet?

JB: Yeah. One lives in Oregon. The second one that came across was only eight weeks old when we came through. She lives in Oregon. She was married, met a fellow and his folks used to live in \_\_\_\_\_. He was a mechanic, and then there was the

Depression and there was not much to do. Then he and his brothers decided to go to California. That was in '33. So they were in California and then later on in their retirement, he bought some land in Oregon, and that's where they're staying now.

DVR: What about traveling? Did you do much traveling while you were here?

JB: Well, yeah, later on. When I retired, I was 73 years old, and then we took a trip to one of my daughter was \_\_\_\_\_. We went to Denver. I had a daughter living in Denver, Colorado. We stayed there a couple weeks, and from there we went to California to see my daughter there and her husband. And then from there, we took the trip all by car to Oregon. We had some friends in Oakland, California. We stayed there for three days. They showed us Oakland and San Francisco in that time. And from there we went to Oregon, all along there, right along the coast highway.

DVR: Did you ever go back to Holland?

JB: Yes, sir. I was here just on the date six years, when my wife was two years passed away. And I always said to my wife, I knew so much about Holland and the people who are there, and coming back, I always say to my wife that I'd like to go. She was never, ever anxious to go back. She was scared for the boats and the planes, so I said I would and then she was passed away two years. So we left on the 24th of May, two days after my birthday, and my daughter that was here yesterday went along. We traveled by plane, the first plane ride that I had over the ocean. We took the plane there from Detroit to New York, and there we took the KLM to Rotterdam, and it was a beautiful ride, \_\_\_\_\_. And it took just six hours and fifty minutes to get to Rotterdam. We flew over Ireland, over England, and then it was raining in the Netherlands. When we came in Amsterdam, it was raining too; it just poured. So we took a bus with some of the families, who were

there to pick us up, from the Netherlands. We took a bus to the central station and we went by train to the northern part of the Netherlands, \_\_\_\_\_, that lays right on the north sea there.

DVR: And you went back to your hometown?

JB: Yeah.

DVR: Did you see the bakery that you had sold?

JB: Yes, sure. Then it was changed to a clothing store, but the old building was still there.

DVR: And you met your relatives?

JB: Oh yes, and we had a wonderful time. We were there for three weeks, but I could have stayed there for three weeks more to see them all. I didn't see everybody. My wife had quite a family, too, in the old country. Yes, sure, it was a wonderful, wonderful trip.

When we came back from Rotterdam to London, then we took from London \_\_\_\_\_ up to \_\_\_\_\_. That was a wonderful ride too, just real \_\_\_\_\_. When we came over Canada in the plane, the pilot brought the plane down, and we could see the whole coast of Canada there.

DVR: Very good. So you've done a lot of traveling, then.

JB: Yes, sir. I was four times in California.

DVR: Four times in California.

JB: Yeah, my wife and I, we were there three times, and then later on I went alone.

DVR: Did you ever own an automobile?

JB: Oh yeah, we bought our first automobile when I was 42 years old and it was a Chalmers. It's not in the market anymore, but it was a Chalmers, an open car with side curtains and seven passengers. Mr. Hoover, he was the boss of the Heinz pickle factory at that time,

and he had a model of 1921. That was in '22 when I had bought that from the car lot for \$850. I paid cash for it. We had that car for 6 years. You could not go past 40 miles an hour, but it was a nice car in that time.

DVR: Did you go to Grand Rapids with it?

JB: Oh yeah, quite often.

DVR: How far did you go with it? Did you go to Detroit?

JB: We went one time when my daughter's husband worked for the Holland Furnace. Then they lived in Youngstown, Ohio. He was working for Holland, installing furnaces over there in the eastern part of the state. And we went one night in the Chalmers to Youngstown and there's where we'd meet him. So we left here at midnight and we were there the next day at 11 o'clock. And we met him there, going into Youngstown, and they took us over to the place where they were living at that time, outside Youngstown.

DVR: Well, you've had a very wonderful life in America, then. I can hear that.

JB: Yeah, wonderful. I always worked hard. My wife was a wonderful mother and a good housekeeper, and we got along always. And we always worked together. When I worked in the Holland Furnace, then we'd make ends meet. You know, I made good money so we had our house paid off in no time.

DVR: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Bos, for telling me of your life and coming to America. I think it's very delightful.

[End of interview]