

7-20-1977

Bulthuis, Klaas Oral History Interview: General Holland History

Don van Reken

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/holland_history



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#), and the [Oral History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Repository citation: van Reken, Don, "Bulthuis, Klaas Oral History Interview: General Holland History" (1977). *General Holland History*. Paper 7.

http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/holland_history/7

Published in: *General Holland History* (H03-1521), July 20, 1977. Copyright © 1977 Hope College, Holland, MI.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral History Interviews at Digital Commons @ Hope College. It has been accepted for inclusion in General Holland History by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Hope College. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@hope.edu.

Oral History Interview

Interviewee: Klaas Bulthuis

Interviewer: Don van Reken

July 20, 1977

Abstract: Klaas Bulthuis, Jurjen Bulthuis, Tannetje Van Lowe Bulthuis, Abram Bulthuis, Mrs. Gerrit De Haan (Bulthuis), Mrs. Robert (Marsha Bulthuis) Peabody, First Christian Reformed Church of Grand Haven, Julia De Jonge (teacher), Challenger Refrigerator Company, A. Peters (five and ten cent store and bazaars store owner), Dan Gale, Sarah Manting, Francis Slaghuis (Allegan, Michigan), Mr. Korkindle, Mr. Meeusen, Herpolsheimer's Store, Dave Burgess, Cornelius Teusink, Sam Schaftenaar, Doctor Nichols, Doctor Young (chiropractor), Frank Van Koeving, Home Furnace Company, Eldert Van Huis (Holland Made Washing Machine makers of washing machines and ironing machines), A. H. Landwehr, Martin DeGwiddy, Reverend Herman Hoeksema (Fourteenth Street Christian Reformed Church of Holland), James DeYoung (Home Furnace Company), Chris Becker (Home Furnace Company), Clarence Becker (Home Furnace Company), Arthur Becker (Home Furnace Company).

DVR: Today is July 20, 1977. I'm at the home of Mr. Klaas Bulthuis on 22nd Street.

KB: 19 West 22nd.

DVR: Mr. Bulthuis, how old are you?

KB: I'm 93 years old. (rest is muffled)

DVR: When and where were you born, Mr. Bulthuis?

KB: I was born at 721 Columbus Street in Grand Haven, Michigan. July the 5th, 1885.

DVR: What was your father's name?

KB: My father's name was Jurjen Bulthuis.

DVR: How do you say that first name?

KB: J-u-r-j-e-n.

DVR: J-u-r-j-e-n.

KB: Yes. It's a regular Dutch name. My father came from _____.

DVR: What trade did he have?

KB: What trade? He was a carpenter by trade.

DVR: You mean he built houses or...

KB: Yes. Yes, he built houses. He had learned that trade in the Netherlands, of course. As a carpenter, he came here.

DVR: What was your mother's name?

KB: Tannetje Van Lowe.

DVR: That was her maiden name.

KB: That was her maiden name. Tannetje. T-a-n-n-e-t-j-e.

DVR: Was she born in the United States?

KB: No, she was born in the Netherlands, I think in the province of Zeeland, but I'm not so sure as to the city.

DVR: How about brothers and sisters, did you have any?

KB: I am the older of the family and I had, that I know of... actually, I think my mother gave birth to eleven children, but they all didn't live. And, some of them, of course, were stillborn, you might say. I had one brother and three sisters that I really knew, and that I grew up with. My brother Abram passed on January 31 of this year—he was almost 83 years old. I have two sisters, Mrs. Gerrit De Haan, living at 316 W. 19th Street, and then Mrs. Robert (Marsha) Peabody living in Indio, California.

DVR: What is your earliest recollection of your home, of your mother?

KB: My mother has a hard-working woman. I remember her particularly standing over the wash with a washboard and rub-a-dub-dub the clothes on the washboard in order to get them clean. We had lived at 721 Columbus Street. We had quite a large yard back there, where the clotheslines were, where she could hang them up. We did not have any

modern conveniences when I was a boy. We had pump water and oil lamps, something you think of today as being rather ancient.

DVR: And primitive.

KB: Yes, primitive. We had an outside toilet for instance, you know. I guess we only had a two-holer. (laughs)

DVR: Where did you go to school, Mr. Bulthuis?

KB: My earliest recollections are that I went to the Christian school. It was in the Dutch at that time. Later on, we had some teaching in the English on a Friday afternoon, and then, later on, of course, as we developed, we had a little more of the English and less of the Dutch. This was held, as I recall it, in the First Christian Reformed Church basement. I have a picture of it. Would you like to see it?

DVR: Not at the present...

KB: Not at the moment, okay. Then from there on we moved, I think it was to Jackson Street in the store building that belonged to a people by the name of Peterson. Then, later on, Grand Haven had a new courthouse built and the old courthouse was moved to East Columbus Street, not far from my home, which became the Christian school and where I went until Mr. Bennink, who was the teacher at that time, said to my father, "Mr. Bulthuis, I think you better send your boy to the public school. We've gone with him as far as we go with our teaching." And with that, I was allowed to go to the public school where I did go. I entered the fifth grade, as I recall it, and had a teacher by the name of Julia De Jonge. Her name was J-o-n-g-e. She was most gracious to me because I found the studies there at the public school were all studies that I had already had. It was just simply sort of a review work for me and I told her so. She was instrumental for me to

leave the fifth grade and enter into the sixth, which I also finished. After that, I went into the seventh grade, which I did not quite finish because at that time I was about 14-years-old, and they allowed young people to go to work and not have to attend school, at the age of 14. My people were poor. My father asked me if I would be willing to help the family, earn a little money, as he knew where I could go to work. Well, I did that. Later on, I left where I was working, which was at the Challenger Refrigerator Company. I should go back in time just a little bit because my father asked me to go with him because my mother had died and he was lonesome. And then we could walk back and forth together from the house to the factory and back and be company to one another, as well as we worked together, in a sense. My father operated a planer, and I tailed him, machine, and so we saw much of one another until I had a letter from a man by the name of A. Peters. I didn't know the man, but this letter said that I had been recommended to him, and he had this five and ten cent store that he operated. He would want to know if I would be interested in learning the business and perhaps take over a store for him.

DVR: Where was Mr. Peters at the time?

KB: Mr. Peters at that time was on East 8th Street in Holland, Michigan. I responded to that letter and came over to see him and talked it over and said that I would go along with the idea. I notified my present employer, and at the end of my appointed time of employment with him, I left and went to work for A. Peters, under the management of his manager in the Grand Haven store. Now, the Grand Haven Store was on Washington Street, right next to a store run by Dan Gale. Now, Dan Gale's store was a china store, as I recall it, primarily. He might have had some more things with it. But he also had a building next to his which building Mr. Peters rented, where he had his five and ten cent

store and bazaars, it was called at that time. After about a year, or I might say two, that the manager who I worked under was Sarah Manting, a very good saleslady and one who Mr. Peters missed in his store in Holland, said he'd like to have her go back there, and therefore, he wanted me to learn the business, take over the store in Grand Haven.

DVR: Now, there's quite a time lapse in there before you went to work for Mr. Peters, of course. But I'm interested in knowing more about your relationships and your work with Mr. Peters. How long did you work for Mr. Peters in Grand Haven?

KB: As I recall, about a year. Then he wanted to open a store up in Allegan, and he asked me if I would open the store up for him. Maybe after oh, say, three or four months, I could come back again to Grand Haven.

DVR: Were you married at the time?

KB: No, I was not married. I was a single man and, of course, the idea of leaving home and getting out on your own sort of appealed to me, so I decided I would try to go along with Mr. Peters and open up the store in Allegan, which we did. Now, the date I don't recall, but it seems to me it was about 1905 or 1906, as I recall, maybe '07. If I recall correctly, I was with him at least 13 years, most of the time in Allegan. I went to Allegan as a single man and among the people that I met was a Francis Slaghuis, who had worked for Mr. Korkindle, who owned a store and, at that time, was still operating. But, he wanted to discontinue because he was going into some stomach medicine business, and he would prefer not to have the store. This is the store that Mr. Korkindle had, that he sold primary dishes—chinaware, glassware. Well, this young lady, who, at that time was working for A. H. Meyers in the music store, did not accept the offer Mr. Peters offered her, to come and work for him. But she continued to be with Mr. Peters. But, later on, she became my

wife and the mother of my children. I just throw this in for some information, because eventually, of course, we left Allegan. But during the time we were in Allegan, business was going pretty good. We had two large display windows, which we had to trim, put in the price tags and signs. Of course, that was always at least a day's worth, if not more, in order to take care of a window, because we put so much material into a window. It did function and did help make sales, because so many people would stand and look at it and see the prices and desire to have them and, of course, the sales maxim, which works is, "goods well displayed are half-sold." So, to make a good display, especially in the window, and the price, if it's attractive, does coax people into the store. It actually did with us, too. Each year, the business would grow better. I remember one time, A. Pieters asking me...now, this is after we'd been in operation for some years...apparently the week had not been too much business. Might have been _____, but at least I didn't know what was the cause of it. A. Pieters asked me why the business, last week of that particular year, wasn't as good as the same week the year prior. Well, of course, I didn't have any real answer for that because I didn't know. Maybe the year ago they'd had good weather and we'd had bad weather. Or, maybe they'd have sales—Grange store or Burrow Trip would put on big sales or age. Sherwood would put on a sale—those are three big stores in Allegan. And they would draw people from the country in. Of course, we being pretty well central as far as the town is concerned, of Allegan, we had a lot of people come in and look around, while part of the family, perhaps, is some other place attending the sale. I might say, too, this, that during that time that I was in Allegan, it was an open town with saloons. Many of these farmers, while their wives would come to maybe do some shopping, the husbands would go into these saloons and,

of course, spend their time drinking and visiting alone. Then these people would have to just wait until their husbands were ready to go home. I do know, too, that when we tried to have a drive to have a local option, they asked me to write something, but my thought was about local option. Of course, I was for it because I had seen so many of these farmers while they would be drinking away, the families would just be standing in the store, waiting for their husbands to come and pick them up. For some reason or another, it just turned me against the liquor business completely, and I am still against it, as far as that's concerned. I don't think it's a good business. I think it's one of the worst things we are allowing in our United States today. Just because they can get considerable taxes from them, they allow something that, actually, I believe, costs our country more than the return of the taxes. But that's just thrown in by way of my own personal thought.

While working in Allegan, in the store, I was visited by a man with the name of Meeusen. This Mr. Meeusen came to see me if I would come and work or take over an agency at Herpolsheimer's Store. Well, prior to this time, Dave Burgess, who had a large furniture store, came to see me and wanted to know if I would consider taking over the management of that furniture store. This looked very good to me. It meant that I'd have to think not of sales of 10 and 15 and 25 cents or possibly a dollar, but in sales of 500 and 1,000 dollars at a time. I talked it over with Mr. Peters, and he discouraged me in it. I went along with his thinking, and he told me to raise my wages a bit and I did, and I stayed with him.

Later on, the Grange store came. After the Grange store had been to see me, I talked it over again with Mr. Pieters, and he said, "Your oldest boy is now going to school." He was attending the public school at that time, and, of course, I had been

longing for my boy to be brought up in the Christian school, because I had been brought up in the Christian school, as well. He offered to have me come to work for him in Holland and have my boy go to the Christian school. For that, I had an ear, of course, and I finally decided that I would go along with the idea and come to Holland to work for Mr. Pieters. Well, we were moved to Holland.

DVR: How did you move? How was moving done in those days?

KB: We moved from Allegan to Holland by hay rack. If I recall correctly, it was Cornelius Teusink that came with a pair of horses and a hay rack, and we loaded on our belongings. We were transported, at least taken, to Holland. There, we moved in a house on Central Avenue between 13th and 14th Street on the west side. There were five brick houses in that block at the time, and I rented the middle house. From there, of course, we eventually moved, because I didn't stay on Central Avenue more than a year as I recall it. I bought a house on East 18th Street, 134 East 18th, and there we not only took our furniture, but also we tried to improve the house. At the time I bought it, there was no furnace in the house, I had the basement excavated by a Schaftenaar, brother of Sam Schaftenaar, and he dug out a Michigan cellar, and we had a number 238 home, gas furnace installed, which I presume may be still in the house.

DVR: Where was Mr. Pieters' store at that time?

KB: It was on the corner of Central Avenue and East 8th Street, on the southeast corner. It was a three-story building at that time, and we had the first floor and the basement. Upstairs, I think, was Doctor Nichols, for one, and also Doctor Young who was a chiropractor. It seems to me there was a business college—whether that was on the second or third floor, I'm not too sure. But, anyhow, the building was occupied. My

work there was to wait on trade, to be a clerk in the common accepted sense of the word. But, also, when it was necessary and the shipments came in, to open up the boxes and containers, to unload them and to place them on shelves where they belonged. And since Mr. Pieters also had a store at Grand Haven and at Allegan, the shipments, especially the shipments that came from abroad, from Europe, with dishes and glassware and so on, they would have to be repacked and sent to the Grand Haven store or to the store in Allegan. So, this gave me quite a variety of work. Besides, there were 13 windows there to be trimmed, and this was quite a chore, for me, at least. I didn't fall naturally to doing this, although I had done it in the other stores, also. But, it became sort of a chore to me. While I was there with A. Pieters doing this work, I also had an opportunity to be visited by someone, whom I knew from my boyhood days in Grand Haven, by the name of Frank Van Koevering. Now, Frank was working for the Home Furnace Company, which was a manufacturing company, making cast iron furnaces. I talked with Frank, and he said that they had an opportunity in the office for some work, and if I'd be interested. Well, having all these windows to trim, which was not anything I relished, I paid attention and finally accepted the offer to go to work, to leave A. Pieters and to go to work at the Home Furnace Company.

DVR: Where was the Home Furnace Company at that time, and what did you do for them?

KB: Well, the Home Furnace Company was located on East 5th Street, as I recall it, right near the tracks, a little north of, at that time, the Pere Marquette office, which later on became the C&O Line. But, anyway, my work there in the office was primarily with figures. Now, I didn't mind that because I used to enjoy arithmetic and working with figures, so that was something that I could carry on quite nicely. Well, while working there for the

Home Furnace Company, there was a manufacturing company who made washing machines. It was originally started in Kalamazoo, and later on transferred to Holland. The washing machines were built in a building somewhat _____, and, locally, they were being sold by a man by the name of Eldert Van Huis, who was quite successful in selling it. He had a lady that helped him to demonstrate, not only the washing machines, but also the ironing machines.

DVR: What was the name of the washing machine?

KB: The Holland Made Washing Machine. It was a cylinder-type washing machine, wooden slats, and the sides were made of aluminum. It did a fairly good job washing, but it did have a problem with the oil leak, because the main worm ran in a bath of oil, which oil was rather difficult to keep without having it leak, the same as we experience today with automobiles.

DVR: _____ this washing machine company?

KB: Well, it was financed, I think, with money from the Holland Furnace Company—at least A. H. Landwehr was the president and Mr. Diekema was an attorney. He was also one of the board members. But we were influenced to take an agency for this washing machine. Frank Van Koevering took over the agency in Grand Rapids, and I went to Kalamazoo. There is where I discovered this problem of oil leak, particularly, which required me to have a service man on hand all the time, which I did have—a man who knew mechanics, and he was trained from the Netherlands, and he did a good job, as far as trying to keep the machines reasonably oil leak-proof, but not completely, which was impossible, in fact. While we were selling these washing machines in Kalamazoo, I was visited by a man, and here comes this Mr. Meeusen, a man by the name of William Meeusen, who, at

that time, was representing a washing machine company, and a very finely made machine. He tried to persuade me to leave the Holland Made Company and take over an agency for the Herpolsheimer Company of Grand Rapids, which I eventually did, leaving Kalamazoo and going to Grand Rapids to work there. In the meantime, my family was still in Kalamazoo, going to the Christian school. I had two boys, at that time, going to the Christian school. I would commute weekends, leaving Kalamazoo Monday mornings for Grand Rapids and coming back Saturday sometime, to spend the rest of Saturday and Sunday with my family.

DVR: How many years did you do that?

KB: Oh, I didn't do that very long. I did that comparatively a short time; I don't know how long, because while I was working at Herpolsheimers, I had a call from a Martin DeGwiddy. Now, Martin DeGwiddy had taken my place at the Home Furnace Company when I left. He had left, and he was in Grand Rapids because he had gone along with a Reverend Herman Hoeksema, who had moved from Holland, Fourteenth Street Christian Reformed Church, to Grand Rapids. Martin was quite a follower of Reverend Herman Hoeksema, so he went there and went in the ball business. Well, he called me to ask if I would be willing to go back to the Home Furnace Company. Well, I hadn't thought about that very much, but at least I did have an interview with him at his home and finally decided that after talking it over with my wife, that let's give it a whirl. So I decided to go back to work for the Home Furnace Company. This was in 1925, in July, that I went back.

DVR: What did you do at Home Furnace this time?

KB: Well, they gave me a separate room and a secretary, and they wanted me to take over to be a purchasing agent. Of course, I had done considerable purchasing with A. Pieters while I was in the five and dime bazaar business, so that purchasing was not a foreign matter to me. But, to purchase for the Home Furnace Company and to purchase pig iron and all the other items that we had to have and the sheet metal and the tin plate, was an entirely new field for me. But, I tried to apply myself and apparently it worked in _____.

[End of side one]

DVR: What else did you do besides purchasing?

KB: (sound muffled) Well, of course, purchasing did not take up my entire time, so I was also in charge of first aid. Having a foundry, of course, and a grinding room and a sheet metal department, besides a shipping room, we would have accidents occasionally. I was in charge to see that whenever they came, they came to me and we would bind up the wound, if necessary, or arrange for them to go to a doctor and be taken care of. The foundry part, of course, was the worst part, to a certain extent, because of the molten iron, and it usually would fall on their shoes, although we had real hard-toed shoes that the hot iron would not immediately affect the foot, but sometimes it would. A foot that was burned is something that you must pay close attention to otherwise it may become a serious matter. Then to the grinding room with its emery wheels and emery _____ flying around, particularly if it lands in an eye, it is a difficult item to remove. Usually we had to take them or send them to a doctor to have them remove the emery. And the sheet metal department, also, would lend itself to being cut and bruised. But, anyway, besides also taking care of the first aid, I was in charge of...well, not in charge of the

shipping room, but the materials that had to be sent out. Much of our material at that time, because it had branches and the material was bought on a consignment basis, that means that we would have an agency someplace and someone be in charge and then the furnaces and the sheet metal and the tinware and the pipes and elbows and angles and boots, and whatever else we made and they needed, would be shipped and they would sell them and then report to us. And then, also, I was in charge of the _____ inventory. Now, that was necessary in order to be able to keep a record of who had furnaces and which furnaces, because we would have a deduction if they came back with their contracts; we would reduce their stock by whatever they had on their contract, or specification sheet, particularly. This way, we could maintain somewhat of a balance of material in the various places. Of course, this involved quite a lot of money, with so much of this material laying out in the various branches, that we necessarily would have to have quite a capital, and when making a sale, would take in notes. These notes we would place with the bank, and they, again, on the strength of these notes, would allow us credit so that we could maintain and continue managing.

During the Depression, which was in the early '80s there, it was really a rough time. If it wasn't for all these notes that we had, in which we could deposit, we would have had a problem to continue functioning. But, one of the things that the Home Furnace Company did not experience, and I must give credit to Mr. James DeYoung, because I think largely it was his insight that was able to keep the Home Furnace Company maintained, and we did not have to close down nor declare ourselves bankrupt like the banks did in Holland, operating at that time.

DVR: How long did you continue working for the Home Furnace Company?

KB: Well, I continued working with them until the end of 1960. At that time, of course, I was 75 years and six months within five days, and I was one of the older people working for them at the time. I considered it very gracious of the company and particularly the Beckers, who had come in sometime in the early '30s. Chris Becker came in, later on his son Clarence, and then afterwards, later, also his son Arthur. But they were very nice and kind to me and allowed me to work until I was of this age. Since retirement, I've been home. I was a member of the Gideon Association for many, many years, in fact, I carry a veteran's membership card. That means, of course, that I'm a Gideon the rest of my life. While I was busy with it, I can't carry on all the activity anymore that is necessary in order to be a real helpful Gideon. But, while I was able, in the younger years, I did function in several of the offices and visited many schools and churches and spoke for their work in order to get the means to maintain, to have money collected in the various churches, so that we could buy the Bibles and the Testaments and place them, of course, in not only the schools, but also the penal institutions—the jails and the prisons, and on planes and trains; wherever there is traffic of human beings, we tried to have a Bible available. The Lord has blessed this Gideon work very, very much and I appreciate it. If you ever have an opportunity to do something for the Gideon's, financially, don't hesitate to do it. I think it's well done if you do it.

DVR: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Bulthuis, for this interview and for all the facts and information you have given us about your life and early life in Holland. Thank you.

[End of interview]

